

Applied Research Partnerships with Developing and Transition Countries

Swiss Universities of Applied Sciences and Universities of Teacher Education

Project title

Coastal livelihoods and post-tsunami resettlement in Sri Lanka

Thematic focus

Post-disaster reconstruction, resettlement, livelihoods

Year

2008/9

Project location

Hambantota and Ampara District, Sri Lanka



Swiss Institution

Dr. Jennifer Duyn Barenstein (jennifer.duyn@supsi.ch),
World Habitat Research Centre (www.worldhabitat.supsi.ch),
University of Applied Sciences of Southern Switzerland

Partner Institution

Prof. P. Wickramagamage (wickramagg@yahoo.com)
Centre for Environmental Studies, Department of Geography,
Peradeniya University, Kandy, Sri Lanka

Description

Following the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 all affected countries expressed their determination to reduce the vulnerability of affected populations by relocating them to a safe distance from the sea. In particular in the case of Sri Lanka this resulted in the resettlement of thousands of people. With the aim of gaining a better understanding of spatial, ecological and social factors affecting the relocation outcome the project addressed the following research question:

- What impact did relocation have on people's livelihoods?
- What is the influence of age, gender and occupation on relocation outcomes?

- How do spatial factors such as distance of the relocation site from the place of origin, services and markets affect people's coping capacity?

- How did relocation affect communities' social capital and cohesion?

The research aimed at seeking answers to these questions through empirical research in a sample of twenty relocated villages in Hambantota and Ampara district. It was found that in most cases people enjoyed better housing conditions than prior to relocation. The research findings confirmed, however, that resettlement in most cases had a negative impact on livelihoods, access to food, education and on social cohesion.

Development relevance

There is a growing recognition that resettlement often has negative social impacts and accordingly should be avoided as much as possible. However, due to the increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters resettlement is often unavoidable. This calls for the need to better understand how the potential negative impacts of resettlement can be minimized or mitigated.

The research aimed at contributing to enhance knowledge on the factors that determine positive or negative outcomes of relocation. Such knowledge is of crucial importance for an informed management of resettlement and for preventing avoidable human suffering.



A graduate student from Peradeniya University conducting a household survey



A signboard advertising a resettlement site in Hambantota district

Main features of the project

Research findings

After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the government of Sri Lanka announced that no reconstruction would be allowed within a 200-meter buffer zone along the water. As a result, thousands of households had to be resettled. Our research conducted in 2008 in twenty relocation sites in Hambantota and Ampara district found that, while 96% of the households considered their new houses similar or superior in quality to their pre-tsunami houses, resettlement generally had had a severely negative impact on their livelihoods. This was due to several factors. First, in their pre-tsunami homes, many of the families had goats, cattle, and poultry; homestead gardens; and coconut trees (a staple food in Sri Lanka). They also enjoyed access to free fish. Livestock and poultry provided food security and constituted critical assets in case of financial emergencies. This changed dramatically in the relocation sites, where people were not allowed to keep animals. The number of animals owned by a random sample of 211 households decreased from more than 6,400 before the tsunami to only 107 after the tsunami. People reported that they were consuming less fish, vegetables, and fruits than before the tsunami. Second, relocation led to a dramatic reduction in earning opportunities, in particular for women and the poor. The lack of markets in the relocation sites meant that the small incomes generated from micro-businesses in their homes such as food processing, were now not sufficient to cover the transport expenses from their new homes to the market. As a result, there was a 59% decrease in the number of family members who were earning anything among the 211 households in the sample. Because most people had not relinquished their pre-tsunami property to government, especially after the buffer zone was later reduced, it is not surprising that many people have moved back to their original housing sites. Houses that were built outside the buffer zone by international nongovernmental organizations for tsunami-affected communities have ended up being given to non-affected households. In Hambantota, for example, resettlement sites have been used to house people who have been displaced by the construction of a new port. As of mid-2009, only 63% of houses in the 17 resettlement sites analyzed were occupied by tsunami victims.

Policy implications

The findings of this research project had a strong influence on the World Bank Handbook for reconstruction after natural disasters (Jha, A, J. Duyn Barenstein, P. Phelps, D. Pittet, S. Sena (2010). Safer Homes, Stronger Communities. A Handbook for Reconstructing after Natural Disasters. Washington DC: the World Bank [www.housingreconstruction.com]).

Sri Lanka's post-tsunami resettlement experience provided empirical evidence that allowed us to make the following recommendations:

1. Avoid relocation if at all possible. Especially avoid relocation to distant sites. Work hard to keep communities together.
2. If relocation is being considered, carry out a detailed participatory assessment of the environmental, social, and economic risks of relocation and of the cost of risk mitigation strategies for alternative sites.
3. Governments should not only avoid relocation in their own housing programs but should also regulate relocation in the reconstruction projects of nongovernmental agencies (private corporations and nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]), which often opt for relocation to gain visibility and for managerial convenience.
4. If relocation is unavoidable, involve the community in the decision-making processes by creating a community relocation committee, among other means.
5. The technical, financial, and institutional feasibility of providing basic services such as water, electricity, health services, schools, markets, policing, and public transport in the relocation site must be demonstrated during project planning, and all arrangements put in place in advance of the relocation.
6. Plan for the relocation of individual or collective cultural properties.
7. Assess and mitigate the impact of relocation on the hosting community, and be prepared to prevent social conflicts and problems of crime, delinquency, and secondary displacement.



Fuel and coconuts (a staple food in Sri Lanka) are important resources to which people had less access in relocation sites



An abandoned relocation site in Hambantota district. Due to lack of services and distance from employment opportunities tsunami-affected communities refused to relocate