

Living with violence II: Rural livelihoods and struggle for territory in post-war Sri Lanka

Summary/Zusammenfassung

The proposed research is an extension of research previously conducted in Nepal on the differentiated impacts of various forms of violence, coercion and control on rural livelihoods in Mid-Western Nepal during and after the People's War.[1] In the second phase of this research (the proposed project), we shift our attention to a second research site, Sri Lanka's Northeast, where we seek to examine how settlement schemes have produced different forms of violence, and contested claims over space before, during and after the civil war, that started in 1983 and ended in 2009 with the total annihilation of one of the conflict parties, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). We hereby build on the insights from our previous research in Nepal that processes of territorialization – negotiations over political claims to space and natural resources - are some of the most contentious issues over which (ethnic) conflict breaks out, but also over which struggles continue even after wars have ended.

The aim of this research is to gain a better understanding of the geographies of violence that underpin processes of contentious territorialization. More specifically, with a view to our Sri Lanka case study, we seek to a) understand the historical genealogy of the "colonization" schemes, including: how political contestation emerged over these sites, how different political and military actors utilized settlers as political tools in this territorialization strategy, and b) explore the current situation in these contentious settlement sites after the ending of the civil war – looking at both Sinhalese as well as Tamil and Muslim perspectives, their everyday practices, livelihood strategies, and c) to link these practices and strategies to the political space within which these re-settlements take place. Field work will be conducted in a specific colonization site, Wel Oya, which has been highly contested as it was a militarized settlement scheme, designed to bring Sinhalese farmers into the predominantly Tamil inhabited Northeast as a kind of buffer to the predominantly Sinhalese inhabited central and southern parts of the island. In the field work, we will investigate the struggles over claims to land from both, a Sinhalese and Tamil and Muslim perspective, conducting field work in Sinhalese as well as Tamil and Muslim inhabited sites.

The research makes the following contributions: On an empirical level, it will provide an in-depth case study of the violent territorialization process in Sri Lanka's Northeast. On a generic level, through a comparison of the Sri Lanka and the Nepal case, conducted in the first phase, the research will allow a comparative assessment of territorialization dynamics in two post-war transition phases in South Asia, thereby contributing to a typology of post-war territorialization processes. On a policy level, this research will provide important knowledge to review present land use and resettlement policies and programmes in the Northeast of Sri Lanka.

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