

Changing Local Economies *due to* "Internally Displaced Persons" (IDPs)¹ in the Puttalam/ Mundel estuarine system, North-western province of Sri Lanka

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The IDPs migrated from the northern and the eastern provinces due to civil disturbances have settled down in four Divisional Secretariats of Puttalam district, Kalpitiya, Mundel, Puttalam, and Wanathawilluwa. The influx of IDPs has resulted in socio-economic and resource user problems in the study area. A total of 8,698 IDP households consist of 11,686 people were reported from the Puttalam/Mundel area. Of these 44% used to be employed in the agriculture sector while 37 and 13% of the remaining had been on fishery and trade related activities respectively. Though they have been receiving government subsidies along with the assistance from the other Non-Governmental Organizations they strongly desired to be on the previous occupations resulting in conflicts with the local community and resource users introducing substantial alterations to the local economy. The implication of the above is that the higher average natural rate of population growth coupled with substantial immigration where undiversified economy is likely to place substantial demands over coastal environment of the study area. In the Puttalam/Mundel estuarine system the existing stress on the coastal environment is already evident. The data was collected using secondary information, group discussions with IDPs, and also via the interviews held with key informants, relevant officials etc. For this exercise four IDPs camps were selected erratically from four Divisional Secretariats, Alankuda, Kadayamotai, Thillaiyadi and Ismailpuram.

As a whole, the economic affairs of the study area were determined to a great extent upon the geography. The local economy is much different and is dominated by the natural resource-based activities such as fishing and also to a lesser extent by the activities such as aquaculture and production of salt. In addition to that cultivation of coconut, banana, small-scale irrigated vegetables and animal husbandry also made substantial contribution to the economic process. A small lime industry, wholesale and retail trade and the local sea transportation were the other

¹ Most people know that the term "refugee" refers to a person who flees his/her own country due to persecution or violence. The term "internally displaced person" (IDP), however, remains unfamiliar to many. The 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention clearly defines refugees and demands that they are protected, but there is no international instrument or treaty that defines internally displaced persons nor provides for their protection (<http://www.refugees.org/world/idps.htm>)

economic activities in existence. The communities, in which the economies were dependent upon the fisheries' related activities, were in fact heterogeneous in terms of socioeconomic activities. The depletion of fisheries resources was identified as one of the major issues in the study area. Unemployment, shortage of fresh water and unregulated disposal of garbage were found to be the other environmental issues needing substantial attention.

The influx of IDPs into the Puttalam district had affected the local economy in many ways. The above created substantial pressure over the local population. The largest number of IDPs was found residing in the Kalpitiya Divisional Secretariats which was around 60,000. The contribution of IDPs to the local labour market has resulted in low wage rate in the local economies. The local workers and also the poor were adversely affected by the sudden expansion of the labour force where the displaced women have become one of the cheapest sources of labour. In addition, the influx of IDPs also exerted substantial pressure over the infrastructure in the study area. Defragmentation of lands (the lands especially used for coconut cultivation), conflicts with the local fishing community on account of using non selective fishing gears inside the lagoon which also substantially contributed towards the depletion of fishery resources and destruction of natural habitats, environmental pollution, increased demand for fire wood were found to be the most influential factors in terms of the alterations that have taken place in the local economies.