

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# Between the sea and the land: small-scale fishers and multiple vulnerabilities in Sri Lanka

Fazeeha Azmi Ibrahim\*

*Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.*

**Abstract:** The small-scale fisheries sector plays a crucial role in the livelihoods, food security and nutritional needs of a large population in Sri Lanka. In the overall fisheries sector, the contribution of coastal fisheries, which is primarily generated by small-scale fishers (SSFs), has been continuously high. However, in recent years, it has started to decline. Changes occurring at local, national and global scales in the economic, political and policy spheres have impacted Sri Lankan SSFs differently, increasing their vulnerabilities. Drawing on a comprehensive review of the literature, this study examines the multiple vulnerabilities faced by SSFs in Sri Lanka, relating to four major themes: (1) Palk Bay geopolitics; (2) the war; (3) the tsunami and post-tsunami recovery; (4) post-war development and policy priorities. This paper builds a case for understanding these vulnerabilities and the way in which they continue, re-emerge and threaten SSFs and their future livelihoods. It argues that, in the wake of new threats and opportunities created by post-war development, policy changes and geopolitical constraints, greater attention must be paid to SSFs. The paper concludes by summarising the discussion and recommending that SSFs should be meaningfully incorporated into the post-war development agenda and “blue economy” policy reforms.

**Keywords:** Small-scale fishers, vulnerabilities, policy, war, post-war, tsunami

## INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka has an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of 517,000 km<sup>2</sup> and a continental shelf of 30,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Marine fishing is practiced in 15 administrative districts.

The Sri Lankan fisheries sector employs 2.7 million people who are directly and indirectly involved in fishing and fishing-related livelihoods. In 2016, the number of marine fishing households in Sri Lanka was 188,690. In the same year, the contribution of fisheries to the GDP was 1.4 percent and the marine fisheries sector, alone, contributed 1.3 percent (Sri Lanka, Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development, 2016). The overall fisheries sector is classified into marine, inland and aquaculture units. The marine fisheries sector is further divided into two subsectors: coastal and offshore / deep sea. The inland and aquaculture sector is divided into three subsectors: inland capture, aquaculture and shrimp farming.

In the marine fisheries sector, coastal fisheries contributed more than deep-sea fisheries in the period 2014-2018. In 2018, marine fish production contributed 86.7 percent of the total fish catch (Table 1). However, it is pertinent to note that, over these years, deep-sea fisheries increased markedly than coastal fisheries. The majority of the people involved in coastal fisheries in Sri Lanka are SSFs. These SSFs use small, traditional fishing crafts; employ family labor; migrate during the fishing season; connect mainly to local markets; are financially dependent on money lenders or intermediaries; have low capital; use low technology; are segregated from other communities; and are organised according to caste and ethnicity.

\*Corresponding author (fazeehaazmi@gmail.com;  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5272-2043>)



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**Table 1:** Fish production in Sri Lanka, 2014-2018 (metric tons)

Fishing subsector	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018 (Jan– March)	Percentage share (2018)
Offshore/deep sea	180,450	183,870	182,830	189,720	53,380	40.3
Coastal	278,850	269,020	274,160	259,720	61,420	46.3
Total marine	459,300	452,890	456,990	449,440	114,800	86.7
Inland capture	68,820	57,060	58,410	68,500	13,850	10.5
Inland culture	1,780	3,150	9,490	870	1,280	1.0
Shrimp farming	5,150	7,090	6,030	4,630	2,550	1.9
Total inland	75,750	67,300	73,930	81,870	17,680	13.3
Total	535,050	520,190	530,920	531,310	132,480	100

Source: Sri Lanka, Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development (2017).

The causes and consequences of the trends given in Table 1 could not be analysed in narrow terms. Sri Lanka's fisheries sector has undergone tremendous changes since the nation's independence. These changes are marked by motorisation, mechanisation, Palk Bay geopolitics, war, tsunami and post-war development, providing both opportunities and creating vulnerability conditions for different types of fishing sectors. At the same time, the fishers are not a homogeneous group. They vary in terms of geographical location, caste, class, ethnicity, language, political affiliation and, more importantly, their pre-, during- and post-war/tsunami histories. Hence, their ability to withstand challenges varies. This has been highlighted in research conducted from geopolitical (Bavinck, 2015; Stirrat, 2018), post-war (Lokuge & Munas, 2011; Soosai Siluvaithasan & Stokke, 2006), governance (Wickramasinghe & Bavinck, 2015) and political ecological perspectives (Ajit *et al.*, 2016). All these studies prove that the livelihoods of SSFs in Sri Lanka are embedded in complex contexts and multiple vulnerabilities. Contemporary SSFs in Sri Lanka are forced to practice fisheries-based livelihoods within the vulnerable contexts briefly identified above. In order to capture the challenges faced by the SSFs, this article draws on the concept of vulnerability. Early research on vulnerability mainly focused on aspects of physical exposure, particularly environmental issues (Blaikie *et al.*, 2014; Cutter, 1996). However, with the understanding that environmental issues do not exist without a human dimension, research on vulnerability came to focus on both physical and non-physical exposures that contribute to vulnerability (Bennett *et al.*, 2015; O'Brien & Leichenko, 2000). Focusing on social and ecological systems, Adger (2006: p. 268) theorises that vulnerability is,

“the state of susceptibility to harm from exposure to stresses associated with environmental and social change and from the absence of capacity to adapt ... [the] concept of vulnerability has been a powerful analytical tool for describing states of susceptibility to harm, powerlessness, and marginality of both physical and social systems.”

This definition shows the multidimensional aspects of vulnerability.

This article, which engages in a discussion of the literature, focuses on vulnerability mainly in terms of exposure and how such exposure might affect SSFs. Thus, vulnerabilities are understood as pre-existing conditions that are likely to influence SSFs' capacity to respond to changes. The article does not engage in a vulnerability assessment exercise, as such; rather, it aims at highlighting the vulnerability context in which SSFs live, particularly in war-affected areas. In order to achieve this aim, the article addresses the questions: what processes or conditions have created (and continue to create) vulnerabilities and how do such processes make SSFs vulnerable?

Drawing on a comprehensive review of the literature, this study examines multiple vulnerabilities faced by SSFs in Sri Lanka, relating to four themes: (1) Palk Bay geopolitics; (2) the war; (3) tsunami and post-tsunami recovery; (4) post-war development and policy priorities. The paper builds a case for understanding these vulnerabilities and the way in which they continue, re-emerge and threaten SSFs and their future livelihoods. These themes must be viewed in connection to one another, as they all work in concert to create, recreate and

sustain multiple vulnerabilities. The paper is structured as follows. After Research Methods, each of the four themes are discussed separately, with evidence presented. The final section concludes the paper.

## RESEARCH METHODS

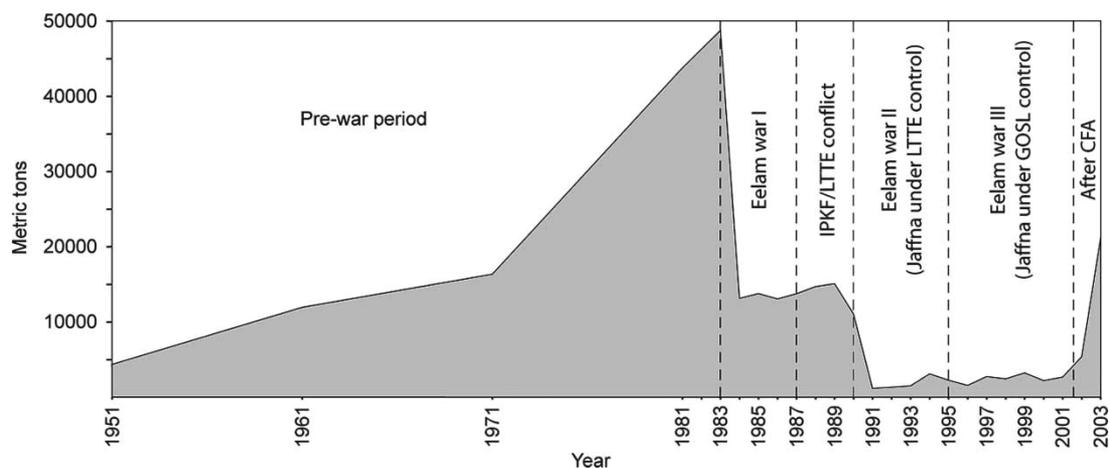
Document analysis was the main method used to derive information and data. The document analysis was initially done for a project on “Gender, migration and fisheries in Asia”, in which the author researched gender and migration in South India and the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka and engaged with fisheries policy related to Cambodia, India and Sri Lanka. The documents collected for the project included government policies, published journal articles, reports, books, web pages and conference proceedings. This article largely benefited from these collected documents.

The collected information was arranged according to themes guided by the objectives of this paper, and analysis was conducted through the creation of data tables and corresponding discussions. The analysis produced divergent views on the issues. Social science research conducted on SSFs in Sri Lanka from the perspectives employed in this paper has geographically focused on the fisheries districts in the north and east of the country. Such research has highlighted the issues of war, the tsunami and the Palk Bay conflict from political economy (Scholtens *et al.*, 2012; Soosai Siluvaiathan & Stokke, 2006) and political ecological perspectives (Ajit *et al.*, 2016; Bohle & Fünfgeld, 2007). Fisheries research conducted in other parts of Sri Lanka have mainly focused on conservation, management and governance (Amarasinghe & Bavinck, 2011; Wickramasinghe &

Bavinck, 2015). Hence, the document analysis used to support the present research skews mostly towards examples from the north and east. However, information from the rest of the country is also used to support the arguments made in the article.

## PALK BAY GEOPOLITICS

The Palk Bay region, lying between the south-southeastern parts of Tamil Nadu (India) and northern Sri Lanka, has historically been an economically and politically important region for both India and Sri Lanka. Its fish resources have long ensured the livelihoods of Sri Lankan and Indian SSFs. Due to its rich fish resources, it has been a contested fishing territory, in terms of both access and use of its resources. A large volume of research has focused on the contested Palk Bay territory and its effect on the fishing communities in both nations (Ajit *et al.*, 2016; Bavinck, 2015; Hettiarachchi, 2007; Scholtens *et al.*, 2012; Stirrat, 2018). Kadirgamar & Scholtens (2015) locate this conflict within the context of overcapacity, the inappropriate technology of the Indian trawler and the civil war in Sri Lanka, which provided space for Indian trawlers to freely operate in Sri Lankan waters. In particular, they identify this conflict as an issue between Indian trawl fishers and the Sri Lankan Navy during the war. When discussing the controversies over Palk Bay fishing, Scholtens *et al.* (2012) show the impact of the rapid growth in Indian trawl fleets relative to Sri Lankan fisheries. They note that, while the Sri Lankan fisheries sector showed growth before the war (Figure 1), during the war – and in the Palk Bay region – that growth was taken over by India. The resulting exploitation affected Sri Lankan SSFs severely, and their economic base started to shatter after 1983.



**Figure 1:** Fish catch trends in Jaffna district, 1951–2003

Source: Soosai Siluvaiathan & Stokke (2006)

The dispute over Palk Bay fishing started with the expansion of trawlers used by Tamil Nadu fishers, which resulted in the exploitation of fish resources in the Sri Lankan side of the internationally agreed maritime boundary between Sri Lanka and India. When discussing the fishers' issue between India and Sri Lanka, Manoharan & Deshpande (2018) highlight some fundamental facts responsible for the Palk Bay conflict related to geography, language, free movement of goods across the Palk Bay and shared colonial past. Stirrat (2018) explains how the global demand for shrimps, called 'pink gold rush' between the years 1965-1980, resulted in increasing number of trawlers in the Palk Bay area, especially in the Indian side. The Indian fishers operated in Sri Lankan waters without a license, using illegal fishing methods. In order to cater to the global demand for shrimps, the Tamil Nadu state government and the Indian government supported the necessary infrastructural development. As a result, a 'Blue Revolution' took place in the Indian fisheries sector, characterised by expansion of trawler fleets, motorised boats and modern nets. Fishers were also provided with financial support in the forms of subsidies and loans. The fast development in the fisheries sector attracted investors from non-fishing sectors also, despite of the caste identity associated with fishing. Further, as noted by Manoharan & Deshpande (2018: p. 64), the processes of speciation, extinction and immigration have influenced the easy movement of marine life in the Palk Bay area which does not have any strong currents. These marine geographical conditions also allowed the Indian fishers to cross boundaries when such resources were depleted in their own fishing territory. The geographical proximity supported Indian trawlers to exploit the fisheries resources in the Sri Lankan waters.

A research conducted by Dodangoda (2017), in the northern districts of Mannar and Jaffna, on transboundary fishing issues, documents that a large proportion of northern fishers, who are already affected by the war and the tsunami, have also been severely affected by illegal Indian poachers. The findings of the above research show that nearly 22% of fishers have lost their livelihoods permanently due to illegal fishing activities by the Indian poachers. Because of the heavy presence of Indian trawler boats in the Sri Lankan waters, the fishers avoid fishing on Mondays, Wednesday and Saturdays, as they fear their boats might get damaged. The heavy presence of Indian trawlers not only contributed to the exploitation of fisheries resources in Sri Lankan waters, but also threatened the livelihoods of Sri Lankan SSFs as they lost their regular access and hence their incomes.

A maritime boundary between India and Sri Lanka was agreed between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil Nadu, in order to resolve the conflict. The initial

agreement was in 1974, and a second agreement was made in 1976. These agreements demarcated the legal rights for both parties and had the unfortunate effect of leading Sri Lanka to lose its productive fishing grounds, creating vulnerabilities for SSFs (Hettiarachchi, 2007). Adding to this, the war created new vulnerabilities for SSFs who depended on the Palk Bay. For security reasons, during the war, the Sri Lankan government controlled access to the Sri Lankan section of the Palk Bay (Hettiarachchi, 2007). With the commencement of the war, in order to prevent the illegal smuggling of weapons, the Sri Lankan government declared a High Security Zone (HSZ) closer to the northern territory. Hence Sri Lankan fishers had very limited access to the fishing areas. They were allowed to fish only within permitted corridors, within 3 kilometers of the coast and only between the hours of 6.00 pm to 6.00 am (Stirrat, 2018). As a consequence of this militarisation, fishers from the north and east coasts and migrant fishers on the west and south coasts were denied access. The Palk Bay region was also controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). During the war, the LTTE did not allow fishers to access the region; as a result, Indian trawl fishers enjoyed a monopoly, while the Sri Lankan fishers were denied access to the sea. The situation had the worst impact on the local SSFs, who at that time were already facing issues related to displacement.

It is important to note that the Sri Lankan security situation provided more opportunities for Tamil Nadu fishers, who began to serve the rising demand for shrimp in the global market. With the end of the war, most of the displaced fishers returned to their villages. Although fishing resumed in the former war-affected areas, some of the vulnerabilities the fishers had faced continued. When northern fishers resumed fishing, bottom trawling by Indian fishing fleets became a new threat to their livelihoods, along with the seasonal migration of fishers from Sri Lanka's south and west coasts. Following a longitudinal study, Bavinck (2015) identified and discussed the challenges faced by northern fishers in Sri Lanka; in particular, the invasion of Indian trawlers, the arrival of diving companies from southern Sri Lanka and new challenges created by squid-jiggers were considered major contemporary difficulties faced by local fishers living in Kokilai, Nayaru, South Bay, Thalai Mannar and Mullaitivu.

Within the context of Palk Bay geopolitics, SSFs are vulnerable due to their marginalised socio-economic position, which reduces their power to negotiate. Exploring the governability problems associated with trans-boundary fishing between India and Sri Lanka, Scholtens (2015) identifies the power imbalance between Sri Lankan and Indian fishers, the politicisation of

fisheries issues into ethnic and geopolitical conflicts and the high level of institutional fragmentation, as negative processes working against Sri Lankan SSFs. At the same time, southern SSFs who migrate to northern and northeastern fishing grounds also face challenges from local and Indian fishers. With the end of the war, fishers from the south and west coasts resumed their migratory fishing in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Scholtens *et al.* (2012: p. 87) criticise the governance response to the conflict and relate the failure to solve it to India's misunderstanding of the conflict and Sri Lanka's failure to bring fishers and government together to solve it.

Caught between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil Nadu politicians, the majority of SSFs are losing fishing rights, and this is creating economic and environmental challenges (Bavinck, 2015). At the same time, in July 2017, the Sri Lankan parliament amended the Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act of 1996 to completely ban bottom trawling. According to the new regulation, bottom trawling and all other illegal fishing methods (e.g. dynamite fishing and use of stake nets) are prohibited in Sri Lankan waters for both local and foreign fishers, as such activities have become major threats to fishing communities who are dependent on fishing for their livelihoods (Soosai Siluvaithasan, 2015). In order to prevent the Indian fishing vessels intruding into Sri Lankan waters, an Act was introduced to amend the Fisheries-Regulation of Foreign Fishing Boats in 2018. The amended Act has introduced and/or revised measures to prevent illegal fishing in territorial

waters and EEZ of Sri Lanka. The introduction of legal measures, such as increased fines for illegally intruding boats, imprisonment and the seizure of foreign vessels might bring positive impacts on the SSFs. However, effective monitoring of south Indian bottom trawlers is dependent on political power in the region, and this increases the vulnerability of Sri Lankan SSFs.

## DURING THE WAR

Another vulnerability for SSFs in Sri Lanka relates to the war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, between 1983 and 2009. This war had multiple impacts on the fisheries sector, as illustrated by Figure 1, which shows the fish catch statistics from Jaffna in the pre-war and wartime periods.

During the war, fishers in the Northern and Eastern Provinces lost their fishing rights due to military and terrorist operations. Amidst this, in 2004, when the war was at its peak, a tsunami severely destroyed Sri Lankan fisheries infrastructure. Among the sectors that were affected by the war and tsunami, the fisheries sector took the worst hit. The tsunami caused severe damages to 12 out of 15 coastal fisheries, as well as the coastal ecosystem and fisheries infrastructure (De Silva & Yamao, 2007), forcing many SSFs to abandon their traditional source of livelihood.

The war-affected northern and eastern coasts cover nearly 60 percent of Sri Lanka's coastal belt. Prior to

**Table 2:** Marine sector fish production in Sri Lanka (metric tons) by fisheries district, 1995 to 2009

Fisheries district	1995	2000	2005	2007	2008	2009
Negambo	30,570	34,540	16,940	35,710	35,820	37,490
Colombo	2,550	3,130	560	510	1,030	830
Kalutara	28,910	33,140	11,560	39,950	33,100	43,360
Galle	21,430	27,830	11,210	17,820	14,800	24,930
Matara	29,930	35,480	17,090	48,460	47,810	44,180
Tangalle	23,260	33,470	6,220	20,990	20,170	26,830
Kalmunai	7,290	9,210	7,940	12,810	22,050	16,260
Batticaloa	8,360	9,860	7,650	11,710	21,850	24,530
Trincomalee	9,130	13,540	6,790	8,150	17,980	27,690
Mullaitivu	400	500	780	360	260	N/A
Kilinochchi	N/A	N/A	1460	590	360	N/A
Jaffna	3,400	6,400	12,790	5,130	5,830	13,080
Mannar	700	1,200	8,380	9,170	7,390	8,130
Puttalam	27,020	29,730	11,670	17,130	16,960	20,010
Chilaw	24,550	25,650	9,360	24,180	22,060	21,950

Source: Sri Lanka, Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development (2017)

the war, a large number of SSFs lived in this coastal belt and depended on fishing for their livelihoods. During the war, they lost full access to the fishing grounds and were forced to withdraw from fisheries-related livelihoods. At the same time, SSFs in the south and west continued to engage in fishing in the remainder of the country's coastal belt. However, most of these SSFs, who were involved in seasonal migration to fishing grounds in the fish rich north and east, also lost access to fishing during the war. These fishers were also affected by multiple displacements, loss of livelihoods, damaged fishing related infrastructure such as landing sites, storage facilities, markets, finance and roads (Munas & Lokuge, 2016).

A longitudinal analysis of fisheries production by fisheries districts during the war shows marginal growth in many districts in the north and east (Table 2). However, data are not available for some districts during certain years (Sri Lanka, Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development, 2017).

Table 2 shows the contribution of individual marine fisheries districts (in terms of fish production) during the war. Batticaloa and Trincomalee show comparatively higher growth in production after 2007. This could be related to the defeat of LTTE in the east by the Sri Lanka Armed Forces in 2007. The post-war situation gave rise to new fisheries in the east. In Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi, the war continued until 2009; thus, fishing communities in these districts bore the most severe brunt of war.

With the eruption of war between the LTTE and Sri Lanka Armed Forces, the resource-rich northern and eastern coastal areas became contested territories. For security reasons, fishing was restricted or banned in lagoons and the sea; however, the government allowed limited fishing in the northern, northeastern and eastern sea through the implementation of a pass system, enabling some access to lagoons and the sea. The LTTE, on their part, controlled fishing in their areas by taxing fishers. Bohle & Fünfgeld (2007), from a political ecology perspective, critically analyse how the prolonged violence in eastern Sri Lanka affected natural resource-based (agriculture and fishing) livelihoods, creating issues relating to resource access and social vulnerability. They also highlight how lagoon fishing became competitive due to new entries during the war period. Farmers, who could not use their land due to security operations, and others who had lost their livelihoods due to war, entered lagoon fishing. The situation not only created competition in lagoon fisheries but it also increased the vulnerability of SSFs, as overfishing resulted in a severe decline and damage of the lagoon ecosystem.

In his study of war, livelihood and vulnerability in the district of Trincomalee, Korf (2004) identified how

a fishing village was caught between the LTTE and Sri Lanka Armed Forces, and how the local SSFs withdrew from fishing due to security reasons. Furthermore, Soosai Siluvaithasan & Stokke (2006) examined the negative impacts of war on fisheries-related livelihoods in the northern district of Jaffna, where fishing had previously served as one of the main livelihood activities. During the war, however, access to fishing grounds was denied for security reasons by the warring parties, and SSFs were forced to either engage in fishing on an irregular basis or withdraw from fishing altogether.

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## TSUNAMI AND POST-TSUNAMI RECOVERY

The impact of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami on coastal fisheries has been well documented in the post-tsunami literature related to Sri Lanka (De Silva & Yamao, 2007; Harris, 2005). The fisheries sector was the most affected economic sector, suffering from severe damage to the coastal ecosystem and fisheries infrastructure. Many fishers lost their boats, nets, houses and equipment (Sri Lanka, Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, 2005). Beyond this, fishing ports, ice storage units and fish landing sites were badly damaged. The Eastern Province was considered the worst affected, even after having already suffered from three decades of war (Uyangoda, 2005). SSFs from the north and east were thereby doubly marginalised by the war and the tsunami. In the south, heavy damage was recorded in Galle and Hambantota—coastal areas in which the majority of residents were SSFs.

The preliminary damage assessment conducted by Asian Development Bank, Japan Bank of International Cooperation and the World Bank in 2005 revealed that the estimated loss to fisheries due to the tsunami was \$97 million USD (Asian Development Bank, Japan Bank of International Cooperation & World Bank, 2005). Approximately, 27,000 fishers died, among whom 20,000 lived in Northern and Eastern Provinces. In addition, the tsunami displaced approximately 90,000 fisher families. Fishing infrastructure was also badly affected. Sixty-five percent of fishing fleets were fully or partially damaged, and loss and damage of traditional non-motorised boats was very high; 10,520 traditional boats were destroyed, and this severely affected the livelihoods of SSFs, pushing them into poverty (Asian Development Bank, Japan Bank of International Cooperation & World Bank, 2005). Many fish labourers on modern multiday boats also lost their livelihoods.

Similar to the tsunami, the post-tsunami recovery processes also created vulnerabilities for SSFs. The tsunami aid distribution was criticised for creating social tension and increasing social inequality among the affected, who were mainly SSFs (de Silva, 2009;

**Table 3:** Comparison of pre- and post-tsunami fishing fleets in all fishing districts in Sri Lanka

Boat type	2004	2006	% Change
IMUL	1,581	2,618	66%
IDAY	1,493	1,157	-23%
OFRP	11,559	17,835	54%
MTRB	674	1,854	175%
NTRB	15,260	18,206	19%
NBSB	1,052	1,008	-4%
Total	31,619	42,678	35%

Note: IMUL in-board multiday boats; IDAY: in-board single day boats; OFRP: out-board engine fiberglass reinforced plastic boats; MTRB: motorised traditional boats; NTRB: non-motorised traditional boats; NBSB: non-motorised beach seine crafts.

Source: Sri Lanka, Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (2006)

Hyndman, 2007). The post-tsunami rebuilding of the fisheries sector resulted in the increase of fishing gear and crafts. Table 3 provides a comparison of pre- and post-tsunami fishing fleets in Sri Lanka.

According to Table 3, total fishing fleet has increased by 35% compared to pre-tsunami period. This increase has not been geographically equal or actually benefitted the affected SSFs. Silva (2009) notes how Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (MFAR) and Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (DFAR) fear that the oversupply of fishing crafts—exceeding actual demand in the Eastern Province (one of the worst affected)—might result in overfishing. It is pertinent to note that most SSFs failed to benefit from craft distribution, as they were not registered with fisheries cooperatives prior to the tsunami, and this was the essential criterion for aid eligibility. Deprived of fishing vessels or provided with substandard fishing boats, they either ended up in other livelihoods or worked on other boats as labourers (Silva, 2009). The poor coordination, management and supervision of tsunami aid relief has been identified as one of the major weaknesses of the post-tsunami aid distribution, as it favored large-scale fishers and non-fishers and overlooked many SSFs, increasing their vulnerability.

Uyangoda (2005) criticises the ethnic and political dimensions of the tsunami recovery, which created significant tension among the affected populations and recovery agencies. Due to a lack of coordination and increased competition between agencies, there were

considerable overlaps in aid distribution (Gaasbeek, 2013), resulting in a failure to reach the majority of needy people. The haphazard nature of the aid distribution created a number of concerns among fishing communities. Some boats that were donated by NGOs and INGOs were unsuitable for rocky coastal areas. Further, some fishers received boats but no nets, so they sold their boats, as they could not fish with them. Finally, in some affected areas, more boats were provided than actually required (Bauman *et al.*, 2007).

The aid coordination between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government also affected fishers. Although there was a large expectation by the international community and civil organisations that post-tsunami reconstruction might link efforts with the peace process, neither party agreed to joint work (Uyangoda, 2005). Instead, the conflict between parties impacted victims in the north and east, who were largely dependent on fishing, as aid distribution was caught in a power struggle (Bauman *et al.*, 2007). Although post-tsunami reconstruction and development activities commenced in the southern parts of Sri Lanka immediately after the disaster, the war and disagreement over the coordination of post-tsunami aid distribution by the LTTE hampered the development and reconstruction of fisheries in the north and east (Silva, 2009). Until the terrorist activities were fully controlled in the east (2007) and north (with the military victory in 2009), the government could not formally initiate large-scale development projects targeting fisheries.

Apart from the post-war aid distribution havoc, the government buffer zone policy in coastal areas also increased the vulnerability of SSFs in these districts. In the aftermath of the tsunami and war, the Sri Lankan government introduced a number of measures to accelerate development. As Sri Lanka had not experienced a disaster similar to a tsunami before and had not received massive aid packages from international and private donors, the tsunami recovery projects and programs created huge disarray. Ingram *et al.* (2006) criticise the short-lived, still unclear post-tsunami coastal buffer zone policy, which made the livelihoods of millions of SSFs vulnerable. This policy affected many poor fishers, as they were forced to move from the lands they occupied in coastal areas. In order to obtain houses through the government housing scheme, they had to move to settlements located far from their original villages. After they moved from their original land, the vacant property was taken over by wealthy hoteliers (Ingram *et al.*, 2006). Hyndman (2007) locates the different lengths of the declared buffer zones in the southern and eastern coastal areas (100 meters for the south and 200 meters for the east) immediately after the tsunami, using an ethno-political perspective. She notes that these differences increased fear, insecurity and communal tension in the east. Silva (2009) discloses that some critics believe that the buffer zone policy was motivated by a neoliberal push to open eastern coastal areas for tourism.

At the same time, researchers have also pointed out that post-tsunami recovery activities lacked community participation and hence failed to address social recovery in the long run. This is confirmed by Harris (2005), who describes the post-tsunami livelihoods of fishers five months after the tsunami. He notes that, following the tsunami, the vulnerability of fishers increased due to their inability to negotiate with bureaucratic structures and increased competition resulting from ad hoc asset distribution among fishers with no consideration of the long-term sustainability of their livelihoods. He warns about the bleak future related to sustainable livelihoods in tsunami-affected areas. Soosai Siluvaithasan & Stokke (2006) identify that, while post-tsunami reconstruction and aid replaced a significant proportion of damaged fishing vessels and equipment, it failed to replace the institutional capacity of fisheries.

Although the unorganised aid distribution and hastily formed buffer zone policy could be viewed from different angles, in relation to the north or south, the end result is that many SSFs were ripped from their fisheries-based livelihoods and traditional lifestyles. Most remain displaced and migrate daily to fishing sites from their resettlements, while others have built temporary

structures to use for their work (A. Raj 2018, personal communication, 05 February). It is clear that the post-tsunami recovery, in terms of aid distribution, policy and resettlement, negatively impacted SSFs, increasing their already existing vulnerabilities.

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## POST-WAR DEVELOPMENT AND POLICY PRIORITIES

The post-war situation provided Sri Lanka with many opportunities to develop its fisheries sector. However, these opportunities varied, both geographically and temporally, according to changing political priorities. Despite these opportunities, the post-war situation also created new challenges for SSFs in the marine sector, across the island. The post-war development activities carried out by former president Mahinda Rajapakse took a neoliberal development approach to reconstruction (Ruwanpura, 2016) and required land for development close to the sea. These projects had a disproportionate impact on SSFs. During the former president Mahinda Rajapakse's regime (2005–2015), two large-scale development projects, Eastern Awakening and Northern Spring, were carried out to rebuild the infrastructure that had been damaged during the war in the east and north, respectively. In parallel with these projects, other massive development projects were executed in the west and south. Harbors, airports, highways and hotels were constructed to accelerate development and attract foreign investment. Many of the development projects were carried out in coastal areas and threatened the livelihoods of SSFs.

The post-war economic reforms aimed at bringing back missed opportunities by capitalising on the peace dividend. During the immediate post-war years (2009–2011), the Sri Lankan economy recorded its highest growth trends, due to a construction boom. As a result of the peaceful environment in the country's private banks, the real estate and stock markets also attracted a lot of capital. The post-war economy became more outward-oriented, targeting global markets and attracting foreign direct investment. Kadirgamar (2013a) identifies the post-war period as Sri Lanka's second wave of neoliberalism, which paved the path to the inflow of multilateral and bilateral aid. However, he signals that this second wave of neoliberalism, which connected Sri Lanka with global markets and increased financing and urbanisation, resulted in new forms of social exclusion and conflict, as the supporting infrastructure for these activities was mainly erected in coastal areas, threatening the livelihood of SSFs.

### Increasing fishing households in former war-affected areas

With the end of the war in 2009 and the resumption of normalcy in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, previous fishers re-entered their former fisheries-related livelihoods and previously unemployed people entered fishing for the first time. In the north, which suffered from significant unemployment during the war, both fishing and agricultural households sought employment as labourers in post-war reconstruction activities (Kadirgamar, 2013b). After the construction projects were completed, however, these labourers lacked other employment opportunities; they either returned to agriculture or to fishing. As the enactment of a high security zone blocked access to agricultural land after the war, poor and unemployed people began to seek opportunities in fishing. At the same time, pre-war SSFs returned to fishing, despite the vulnerabilities it entailed. Hence, the unavailability of other employment opportunities forced many people to enter and re-enter fishing. As a result, despite the existing and continuing vulnerabilities in small-scale fishing, the number of fishing households in the former war-affected fisheries

districts grew, while growth slowed or declined in other fisheries districts (Table 4).

Table 4 shows that the total number of households involved in fisheries increased in the war-affected districts of Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Mannar, Jaffna and Batticaloa, but not in Kalmunai and Trincomalee. At the same time, the total number of households involved in fisheries in the districts of Chilaw, Puttalam, Tangalle, Negombo, Colombo and Kalutara decreased, though there was very slow growth in the districts of Galle and Matara—perhaps due to the increased mechanisation and investment in off-shore fisheries, which is not affordable for SSFs. During the 10-year period between 1989 and 1999, the number of fishing households in all war-affected districts in the north declined. In the district of Jaffna, a large number of fishers were internally displaced. During 2004, in all northern war-affected districts, the number of fishing households increased. This trend could be related to the short-term peace situation between 2002 and 2004. At the same time, it should be highlighted that the number of fishing households in the district of Mullaitivu drastically declined in 2008, relative to 2004, due to the tsunami.

**Table 4:** Fishing households in Sri Lanka by district (marine fisheries), 1989 to 2016

Fisheries district	1989	1996	1999	2004	2008	2012	2014	2016
Negombo	6,396	8,158	11,210	12,900	11,360	9,180	9,380	9,050
Colombo	1,451	1,878	2,412	2,300	1,520	1,630	1,910	1,880
Kalutara	2,366	3,334	3,602	3,500	4,230	5,910	6,050	4,790
Galle	2,871	4,398	5,253	6,700	5,510	6,720	7,240	9,430
Matara	3,341	4,263	4,796	6,900	7,280	11,310	11,760	12,250
Tangalle	2,712	4,068	5,385	6,100	5,720	10,460	10,710	9,390
Kalmunai	9,328	12,342	13,265	15,100	16,450	22,940	22,920	18,740
Batticaloa	12,044	6,668	13,762	16,700	19,870	25,780	25,260	26,980
Trincomalee	5,675	N/A	8,123	12,300	17,420	32,660	32,570	31,270
Mullaitivu	2,798	N/A	864	3,100	1,500	2,130	2,520	4,730
Kilinochchi	1,047	N/A	400	3,400	2,100	2,970	3,660	4,120
Jaffna	22,568	N/A	6,922	16,100	17,100	19,480	20,190	21,800
Mannar	5,127	N/A	4,175	7,300	10,230	15,440	14,980	15,030
Puttalam	3,759	7,907	10,124	11,400	12,680	12,890	12,370	10,790
Chilaw	6,325	6,684	8,264	8,800	8,970	8,980	9,260	8,440
Total	87,808	97,133	97,133	132,600	141,940	188,480	190,780	188,690

Source: Sri Lanka, Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development (2017).

Although the number of fishing households in war-affected areas fluctuated during the war, since the war ended, the number of fishing households has steadily grown. This growth confirms the relative stagnation and lack of opportunities in other economic activities in these areas. While more people have entered fisheries livelihoods in war-affected districts, more people have moved out of fisheries livelihoods in other districts. These trends reflect different vulnerability contexts faced by the majority of SSFs in the context of post-war development.

### The new development vision

The government that came into power in 2015 spelled out its future development path in 2017 through a program named “Vision 2025” (Sri Lanka, Ministry of National Policies and Economic Affairs, 2017). In this program, the government identified two specific fisheries-related projects: the “Northern Province Sustainable Fisheries Development Project” and the “Aquaculture Industrial Zone” (in the district of Batticaloa). In the “Vision 2025” document, under the section on agriculture and sustainable development, the government outlined its development strategy for fisheries, which aimed at achieving sustainability by promoting the quality of fish and increasing productivity. The government explicitly encouraged private sector involvement in harbor, business and aquaculture development and the erection of a new mega fisheries zone. It also called for private sector investment in deep-sea fishing through relaxation of restriction on foreign investment. This priority given to the commercialisation of fishing and private sector involvement could negatively affect SSFs, as they lack or have limited access to livelihood resources (especially financial resources) with which to compete.

### Tourism

According to the Ministry of Tourism, since the end of the war, tourism has continued to grow. Sri Lanka, Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Affairs (2016) claims that, in 2016, 2 million tourists arrived in Sri Lanka, generating a revenue of 3.5 billion USD. Taking advantage of the post-war peace dividend, the ministry has targeted coastal areas, making them hot investment spots for tourism. One of the initiatives undertaken by the Sri Lanka Tourism Board was to declare tourism promotion zones in many coastal areas. The Board of Investment also supports tourism activities by providing tax holidays and additional incentives for tourism development in war-affected areas (Buultjens *et al.*, 2016). The result is that SSFs have been denied access to fishing grounds and forced to leave their traditional livelihoods. Ratnayake & Hapugoda (2017) argue that forceful land acquisition for tourism in former war- and

tsunami-affected areas has negatively impacted local lives. They further stress that the lack of transparency in development plans has created economic inequality. In the areas targeted for development, many people depend on fishing for their livelihoods. Ratnayake & Hapugoda (2017) also note that the high commercial appeal of tourism precludes the potential benefits of livelihood opportunities for local residents.

Amarasinghe (2005) notes that SSFs have lost access to their traditional craft landing and beach seining sites as a consequence of the expanding tourism industry. Fonseka & Raheem (2009) discuss how the government imposed high security zone, which overlaps with the government proposed special economic zone covering a large stretch of coast in Trincomalee district, has threatened the livelihoods of displaced families, who largely depend on fisheries. CNS/Ecosocialist Horizons (2014) claims that the Passikuda tourism promotion zone has affected local SSFs, who are powerless to negotiate with powerful political forces. They further point out that SSFs are affected by the new tourism initiatives on the west coast and warn that the proposed leasing of coastal land in Kalpitiya to private foreign investors could prevent a large fisher population from accessing their customary fishing grounds, making their livelihoods vulnerable. As tourism in coastal areas depends mostly on coastal and near sea resources (similar to SSFs), tourism promotion zones could prevent SSFs from accessing fisheries resources and thereby deprive them of their livelihoods, making them vulnerable to poverty. A very good example is the Passikuda Development Plan in the east coast, which has denied access to fishing sites for many SSFs, who had already been affected by the war (CNS/Ecosocialist Horizons, 2014). The fishing site left for them is a small area, where many SSFs have to compete, which eventually could lead to overfishing in the near sea areas. Similar type of land grabbing is taking place in the west coast as well due to tourism development and continuing legacy of ‘pink gold rush’.

### Fisheries sector policies

Wijayaratne & Maldeniya (2003) identify that, since Sri Lanka achieved independence, its national policies related to fisheries have undergone dramatic changes in accordance with political power changes. It is pertinent to note that, from 1994 to 2017, fisheries policies were not continuous or well-organised, due to regime changes and war/post-war situations. During the period, fisheries policies focused more on commercial, large-scale export-oriented fishing. In 2015, with the change in political power, Sri Lanka stepped into a new development path with the hopes of bringing economic development, peace, reconciliation, good governance and inclusive

and equitable growth and development. With the change of power, a new fisheries policy was introduced in early 2018 to tackle the new challenges faced by the fisheries sector.

Before the new fisheries policy was introduced in early 2018, the “Ten-Year Development Policy Framework of the Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Sector, 2007–2016” influenced the fisheries sector. This policy set a vision and mission for Sri Lanka to become a leader in South Asia in the sustainable use of fisheries and aquatic resources. The policy supported an export-oriented development strategy in fisheries (Sri Lanka, Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development, 2016), prioritising deep sea and inland fisheries; however, coastal fisheries continued to enjoy dominance and make large contributions in terms of fish production. The Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development (MFARD) supported inland fisheries projects with the help of other institutions. At the same time, large-scale aquaculture activities were operated and funded by the private sector, targeting global markets. The resulting aquaculture farms operating on the west coast have since challenged the livelihoods of SSFs (CNS/Ecosocialist Horizons, 2014).

In order to promote export-oriented fishing and increase the contribution of the fishing industry to the GDP, MFARD improved deep sea fishing by providing loans for the purchase of modern boats, providing satellite technology for deep sea vessels, constructing

harbors to accommodate modern large fishing fleets and erecting new fish landing sites. It also encouraged private investment by foreign companies. The MFARD’s outward-oriented development strategies had a negative consequence on the lives of SSFs, who occupied the bottom of the export-oriented market chain. Many of them could not compete with large investors, who had deep financial pockets. Adding to this, SSFs were battling with rich fishers and non-fishing business executives over land and sea tenure issues. The promotion of deep-sea fishing resulted in an increased number of deep sea fishing vessels. Table 5 shows the different types of modern fishing boats that were used in various fisheries districts in 2016.

Table 5 shows that the districts of Negombo, Matara, Kalutara, Tangalle, Puttalam and Chilaw owned more modern fishing boats in 2016 than the districts of Batticaloa, Jaffna, Mannar, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Trincomalee. In the latter districts, NTRBs and NBSBs dominated. At the same time, the low number of traditional boats in the former districts, while showing a pattern of increased modernisation, also raises the question: What happened to the fishers who had previously been using NTRB and NBSB boats? Table 6, shows the product of marine fish catch in all fisheries districts after the war. An increasing pattern is obvious in all but a few districts. However, it is important to note that, in all former war-affected districts except for Batticaloa, marine fish catch has declined.

**Table 5:** Operating fishing boats in Sri Lanka by fisheries district, 2016

Fisheries district	IMUL	IDAY	OFRP	MTRB	NTRB	NBSB	Total boats
Negombo	568	35	2,776	5	1,231	28	4,643
Colombo	30	39	663	1	274	102	1,109
Kalutara	221	1	546	0	244	103	1,147
Galle	347	14	581	250	253	50	1,495
Matara	1351	105	908	241	969	17	3,591
Tangalle	512	29	710	141	698	107	2,470
Kalmunai	116	156	1348	191	1,097	200	2,470
Batticaloa	356	72	2,808	14	4,390	272	6,452
Trincomalee	175	26	676	27	1,640	288	4,964
Mullaitivu	0	0	517	4	653	78	1,411
Kilinochchi	2	0	3712	51	257	0	827
Jaffna	73	210	2386	352	2,186	143	6,676
Mannar	26	99	3128	390	1118	19	4,038
Puttalam	86	0	2540	169	1,510	202	5,095
Chilaw	133	0	2540	3	1,333	272	4,281
Total	3,996	786		1,839	17,853	1,913	50,669

Source: Sri Lanka, Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development (2017).

**Table 6:** Marine sector fish catch in the post-war years in Sri Lanka, by fisheries district, 2010 to 2016

Fisheries district	2010	2012	2014	2016
Negombo	28,250	35,990	38,030	31,150
Colombo	1,990	2,970	7,110	6,310
Kalutara	43,360	52,610	40,180	46,090
Galle	21,830	27,410	51,550	56,890
Matara	38,970	48,380	42,370	30,550
Tangalle	20,170	27,320	58,870	62,510
Kalmunai	16,380	23,410	21,660	20,180
Batticaloa	39,610	35,690	31,720	28,500
Trincomalee	36,250	36,410	22,340	23,780
Mullaitivu	1,360	6,790	8,930	11,140
Kilinochchi	560	6,700	15,780	14,560
Jaffna	20,890	32,400	25,890	32,260
Mannar	10,790	13,450	22,130	17,510
Puttalam	24,830	31,540	38,280	41,890
Chilaw	27,020	36,150	34,460	33,670

Source: Sri Lanka, Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development (2017).

In the districts of Negombo, Puttalam and Chilaw, the declining or slow growth in fish catch could be related to increased aquaculture, especially shrimp farms. It is also important to note that, on the west coast, the rapid development in shrimp farms destroyed a large proportion of mangrove forests and created many other environmental havocs that negatively affected SSFs. Harkes *et al.* (2015) discuss the negative environmental consequences of shrimp farming in Puttalam, which is carried out by wealthy elite investors. Further, they note that the large-scale removal of coastal mangroves has effectively removed the habitats of marine life. These types of activities, which have occurred in other coastal areas in addition to Puttalam, have risked the livelihoods of millions of SSFs (who depend on near sea fishing) and created new vulnerabilities. However, Sri Lanka's outward-oriented post-war economic policies have focused on benefiting from the commercialisation of fishing.

### The 2018 Fisheries Policy

The Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development (MFARD) of Sri Lanka launched its new fisheries policy in early 2018, aiming at tapping the demand created by domestic and international markets for fish and fisheries products. The new (2018) fisheries policy was drafted with the input of Norwegian technical expertise. It went through a comprehensive stakeholder consultation process aimed at ensuring sustainable fisheries and the aquaculture industry, building confidence in local and foreign investors and tapping the potential of

local and foreign markets—all within the framework of regionally and internationally accepted conservation and management treaties.

This policy aims at providing a conducive environment for local and foreign investors to invest in the sector with confidence. The ultimate expectation of the policy is that the fisheries and the aquaculture sector will be transformed into a knowledge-based, sustainable and modern industry that will benefit all stakeholders. The new policy is influenced by the global policy discussion on the “Blue Economy” (BE), recognising multiple actors operating in marine and coastal areas. When different actors with different powers try to access and control a common pool resource, the most powerful actors tend to get easy access. As SSFs' position in the power hierarchy is low, they may face multiple vulnerabilities.

The 2018 fisheries policy focuses on five focus areas: marine fisheries, aquaculture and inland fisheries, consumers and markets, the blue economy, and other areas. Within this policy, various activities are planned for the period 2018–2025. A striking feature of the policy is the incorporation of the blue economy (BE) concept. Although the concept is in its infancy in the Sri Lankan policy arena, it has already generated wide discussion at the global level. The BE concept was forwarded by international organisations, national governments and the academic community, emphasising the transformative potential of “blue growth” and endorsing the international commitment to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Barbesgaard, 2018).

Sri Lanka's current fishery policy calls for identifying new ways to exploit and benefit from vast opportunities and resources relating to the ocean and coastal areas that are not tied to fisheries, alone. In this way, under the BE initiative, the policy aims at promoting the establishment of new marine industries using living marine resources, regulating access to marine bio resources with equitable benefits, promoting recreational fisheries, establishing marine-based tourism, applying the green harbor concept to manage and develop fisheries harbors and promoting and conserving the marine and coastal environment. Within this perspective, the MFARD calls for incorporating the concept of BE towards the aim of sustainable economic development (Sri Lanka, Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development and Rural Economy, 2018; Ranawaka, 2018). To this end, fisheries and nutrient cycling, marine tourism, sea transportation, ocean energy, waste management and carbon dioxide capture and storage have been identified as potential sectors for development.

Although coastal fishing has been a main occupation for many coastal dwellers in Sri Lanka for years, a competing interest over coastal and marine space by various actors started to challenge the livelihoods of millions of SSFs across the island even before the BE concept was endorsed. Hence, the economic values of the sea and coastal areas have been rapidly changing, altering access to these common pool resources and making SSFs more vulnerable. As the ocean is an open access resource, BE projects could increase the number of actors on the scene with varying interests.

## CONCLUSION

The above analysis traces the way in which Palk Bay geopolitics, the war, the tsunami, the post-war situation and the new development agenda have resulted in creating multiple vulnerabilities for SSFs. The discussion highlighted that the small-scale fisheries sector, which enjoys a unique position in the Sri Lankan coastal landscape, has continuously been threatened by processes occurring outside and inside fisheries, worsening the situation of SSFs and pushing them towards greater vulnerability. As Sri Lankan fishers from the north are technologically, ethnically and politically marginalised in terms of handling this issue, their access to traditional fishing rights has continuously been violated and the situation has gone purposely unnoticed by Northern Tamil political representatives. During the entirety of the war (1983–2009), the fishing sector was affected, with varying intensity. Furthermore, the tsunami wiped out the fishing infrastructure of 60 percent of coastal areas; and while the post-tsunami recovery processes created opportunities for some fishers and non-fishers, it

created multiple vulnerabilities for the majority of SSFs. Finally, the post-war condition enabled the Sri Lankan government to revitalise its fisheries sector, which was severely affected during the war.

The above discussion shows that the post-war transition in fisheries was not smooth for SSFs. Since 2009, Sri Lanka's SSFs have had to face a new set of vulnerabilities, while also inheriting old ones. This paper has also noted that the geopolitics of the Palk Bay fishing conflict took a new form after the war, when the focus of the conflict became an issue between Sri Lankan and Indian fishers, rather than between Indian fishers and the Sri Lankan Navy. The conflict also became entangled with politics and economics, with Sri Lanka placed in a lower position; hence, the livelihoods of Sri Lankan SSFs became very complicated in the Palk Bay.

Furthermore, tourism sector development programs targeting coastal areas have already started to grab coastal lands in which SSFs have traditionally enjoyed the right to fishing. The higher priority given by the government to tourism, which has become an increasingly important source of foreign exchange, could potentially push SSFs to the brink of poverty and vulnerability. Adding to this, the government's thrust to incorporate BE strategies could further marginalise SSFs if they are not given adequate attention. As discussion of BE is beginning to enter Sri Lanka's development discourse and policy discussions, it is important that the potentials of BE are sought without undermining the livelihoods and future of SSFs with low decision-making power. Sri Lanka is emerging from war, and BE could bring significant benefits, in terms of the job creation, foreign direct investment and increased export revenues. However, it is important not to underestimate the potential impact of BE on SSFs, who largely depend on coastal fisheries for their livelihoods. As the BE approach will increase the number of actors on the scene, the influence of different governing bodies and institutions could make competition more complex; hence, a comprehensive policy approach is required.

Since the new political regime in 2015, which adopted the economic development aim of a "knowledge-based highly competitive social market economy", the challenges faced by SSFs have followed a variety of new paths. Fisheries development based on deep-sea fishing, including the construction of fishing harbors (especially in war-affected coastal regions) are likely to continue to affect SSFs unless they are meaningfully absorbed into the proposed development programs. Failure to do so might ultimately benefit powerful actors such as (local/foreign) large-scale private investors and politicians, but exacerbate the challenges faced by SSFs, who cannot

compete with these powerful hierarchies. As a result, they will have to either leave their livelihoods or work as labourers in deep-sea fishing.

By identifying different vulnerabilities that SSFs faced and continue to face, relating to Palk Bay geopolitics; the war; the tsunami and post-tsunami recovery; post-war development and policy priorities of the government, this article highlighted the vulnerability contexts of SSFs livelihoods. The combined impacts of the above identified themes has led to increased uncertainty and vulnerability among SSFs, and forced many SSFs to compromise their short-term needs, threatening the long-term sustainability of fisheries resources. At the same time, fishers who cannot continue their fishing activities due to these vulnerabilities, might move away from fishing, seeking alternative livelihoods or become more marginalised, vulnerable and poor. When SSFs have restricted access to resources, lack the capacity to negotiate with the institutions that mediate their access to resources, are cut-off from decision-making and have little capacity to talk about their problems, their vulnerabilities increase. Hence, it is important for the government and policy makers to understand the different vulnerabilities experienced by SSFs, as small-scale fisheries provide livelihoods for millions of fishers and offer an important source of food security. Within the context of limited alternatives outside fishing, the government has a major role to play in reducing the multiple vulnerabilities that were exposed in this article.

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