

# Sri Lanka: Development with disaster in Uva

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The geography of the Uva highlands is the product of the plantation political economy whose basic systems of extraction in relation to nature and labour have remained largely unchanged since the late 1800s. The imagination in Sri Lanka is now conditioned into accepting the 'estate' as spatially distinct, socially and politically, from both the 'rural' and the 'urban'. The tying together of four key vectors of disadvantage—caste, class, gender, and ethno-national identity—with the rule of the company-state has thus been normalised.

In reality, one of Sri Lanka's most significant foreign exchange earning sectors is effectively subsidised by one of its poorest and most vulnerable peoples—the Up-Country Tamil estate workers. This is a reflection of the nature of market integration ushered in by plantation-centred development. In Meeriyabedda and elsewhere in the estate country, chronic deprivation and disaster is far closer than development.

## Education, housing and livelihoods in crisis

Several teachers and community members we spoke to underlined the dire crisis in access to quality schooling. For instance, Haldumulla and Haputale DS Divisions have no High Schools that offer A-level science while in Badulla district there are only 5 out of 34 high schools offering A-level science in Tamil despite the Tamil speaking population (Up-Country Tamil and Muslim) accounting for nearly 27 per cent of the population. While schooling is ostensibly free, parents we spoke to in different locations observed that on an average they spend around \$40 a year on each child, a huge burden on already impoverished families.

Moreover teachers and parents noted that distribution of existing schools was uneven, which coupled with poor but expensive transport links compounded the obstacles to accessing education. A fundamental issue raised by several people we spoke to, teachers and parents alike, was the concern that even on completing their A/L there was little by way of employment or opportunities for higher education on offer.

The housing crisis continues to be most acute. As one estate worker told us "we still live in line room structures built by the white man". The 'house' is essentially one 10 feet by 10 feet room, with some self-built extensions, around half the size, in the front. In one of the lines we visited, we encountered three families living in one such structure. There was criticism of recent housing projects, which apart from being far too few were seen as creating an additional burden with already limited assistance coming too slowly and in phases leading to construction dragging on for years and poor

quality.

Almost all estate workers we met spoke about the lack of sustained jobs in the plantations, the drought this year proving an additional constraint, and the closure of several tea factories making the situation worse.

Available work is physically demanding and very poorly remunerated. The Collective Agreement of 2013 provides for a daily wage of \$3.50 and a daily attendance incentive of one dollar to those whose attendance is at least 75% and over the number of days work offered per month. Even one day less and wages will be computed at the rate of \$3.50 per day, which is the rate almost all the workers we met seemed to be getting.

It is no surprise that indebtedness is a pervasive problem with workers borrowing from the management or buying food and essentials on credit. Such loans or dues are often deducted directly from the salary along with EPF and ETF contributions and several other deductions. In one case, a worker received just over \$15 even though her total gross salary amounted to almost \$70 for the month. Another worker told us she had in fact received only \$6 the previous month after various statutory and credit related-dues were deducted.

The crisis of livelihoods in the estate political economy has also resulted in many young men and women migrating to cities like Colombo or even abroad to work in hotels, stores, on construction sites or as domestic workers. The precariousness of the estates is thus being exported. The estates have always been integrated into the global economy, first through colonialism and now through a complex network of global trade in commodities, investment capital, and supply of cheap labour.

The incidence of all these pressures is most acutely manifested in the struggles of women and girls, who make up for a vast majority of those employed on the plantations. Hardly visible in anything other than the most basic role—tea plucking—they bear the full burden of the system of extraction while being subject to multiple exclusions and vulnerabilities.

## **The ecological crisis**

The Meeriyabedda landslide is yet another portent of the ecological crises that mark the plantation economy. It is notable that landslide occurred on a slope that appeared abandoned for sometime. It appears no remedial work was undertaken to restore slope stability following decades of cultivation. In fact all around the area, including on roads leading up to Haldumulla and especially from Beragala Junction to Meeriyabedda, there was ample evidence of slope erosion and instability including damage to previously undertaken remedial work.

That unsustainable practices on plantations in the Uva highlands have led to significant losses of topsoil is well known. The density of bushes per hectare appears to have steadily declined over the years and in the absence of effective replanting or filling in for removed bushes, there is bound to be higher levels of erosion, which in turn negatively affects the soil lowering productivity and quality. Trying to compensate for depleting soil quality with chemical fertilisers—a common practice—has further long-term deleterious impacts. Absent significant investment in soil conservation, the results can only be disastrous.

This ecological crisis is however inextricable from the broader political economy of agriculture and especially tea in the area. The nationalisation of plantations in the mid-70s followed by moves towards privatisation in the early-90s have both generally tended to militate against long term investment in communities or the environment but have led instead to a focus on maximising

extraction. In the early 80s, significant amounts of land were also used to grow sugarcane to feed the sugar factory in Pelwatte, leading to further environmental depletion.

### **Seeds of hope in a disaster?**

It is in this context that the many different unions operate within the estates. Almost all the workers we spoke too, though formally aligned to different unions, were critical of their functioning. Many noted that they gained little substantive return for the monthly salary-deductible contribution to the unions. The leadership is male-dominated and in some cases family led and tied into the country's political elite and not ideologically invested in building a distinct transformative politics of class.

The shortcomings of the Up-Country unions have to be seen in the light of their integration into a broader system of political patronage and ethnic politics and the shrinking of transformative unionism and social movements. That the interventions of most unions are either personalised or, as many people we met noted, resolved on the basis of a calculus based on delivering votes and distributing patronage, is in keeping with the dominant political culture.

Nevertheless, it is important to also view the widespread scepticism of the workers regarding the unions as signalling the potential and readiness for a more progressive politics rather than mere political cynicism. While returning we encountered a demonstration of school students in support of a remembrance rally, in which people marched carrying white flags rather than union banners. To paraphrase what one of the local teachers present said, in the tragedy of Meeriyabedda there is hope for change. "We can't expect much from our politicians or unions. The change has to really come from the community, from the people," he said.

### **Survivors of the landslide: Trapped in uncertainty**

At the time of writing, families directly affected by the landslide of 29<sup>th</sup> October were housed in two schools in Koslanda and Poonagala respectively. While temporary shelter, food and healthcare were assured, survivors clearly need sustained psychosocial support, especially children and older people.

Apart from loss of loved ones, the psychological impact of the destruction of an entire habitat that was home for generations cannot be underestimated. Survivors also recounted the shock from the destruction of the village temple, a locus of faith widely venerated in the area.

Some of those affected have moved in with relatives living on other estates and efforts need to be made to locate and extend support to them and the families sheltering them. A relative of an affected family we met on another estate complained that accessing his relatives housed in one of the schools was very difficult. The military has secured and runs the relief centres; while safety of the affected persons is a valid concern, freedom to move and receive visitors must be ensured.

The affected community must be meaningfully involved in decision-making pertaining to resettlement or return, including planning new and safer housing. Affected persons we spoke with reported that they were not involved in on-going discussions on provision of new housing. Civilian institutions, state and non-state, are best placed to facilitate this such that it helps rebuild cohesion and enhances well being. Nevertheless, the military's role in clearing the area and recovering bodies is also crucial, including to help survivors achieve closure.

Collective for Economic Democratisation in Sri Lanka

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\*<http://economicdemocratisation.org/?q=content%2Fdevelopment-disaster-uva-reflections-visit-meer-iyabedda>

Written following a solidarity visit by members of the Collective for Economic Democratisation in Sri Lanka on 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of November 2014.