

# Field Report

## Perceptions of Social Stratification and Well-being in Refugee Communities in North-Western Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

This paper reports findings of a study that was undertaken as a part of a wider programme of research and capacity building in Sri Lanka. The analysis of individual aspects of well-being and how they had been affected by displacement provides a basis for the planning of interventions by helping agencies, and for training people who work with refugees.

### Key words

participatory rural appraisal; refugees; well-being

### Introduction

Muslims accounted, at the last census in 2001, for about 8.5 % of Sri Lanka's total population of 18.7 million (Meyer, 2006). They are descendents of immigrants to the island from Arab countries, South India and Java, who first arrived there in the 13th century (Dewaraja, 1994; Meyer, 2006; Pieris, 2008). Generally they are engaged in petty trade or employed in small sales centres in many regions of the country, but in certain parts of the country subsistence agriculture and fishing have been important as their sources of livelihoods (Hasbullah, 2004). For a very long time, Sri Lankan Muslims have 'enjoyed peaceful co-existence with other cultures and communities' (Hasbullah, 2004 p222).

In October 1990, nearly 75,000 Muslims living in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka were forcibly evicted with 48 hours notice by the militant separatist group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), with orders to leave behind their belongings and properties (Hasbullah, 2004). A majority of those evicted ended up in the Puttalam district in the North-Western Province (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2006). Initially, they were housed in refugee camps ('welfare centres'), but since then some have moved away or bought their own property in the district to live in 'settlements' (Brun, 2002 p154). Currently, about 65,000 Muslim refugees live in the Puttalam district (Hasbullah, 2004; Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2006). They are all Tamil-speaking, although a few speak Sinhala

too. The 'host community' among whom they live are mainly Muslims (75%), the majority of whom speak both Sinhala and Tamil. The others are ethnic Sinhalese (21%) or ethnic Tamil (4%). It should be noted that, although their first language is Tamil, Sri Lankan Muslims are not regarded as 'ethnic Tamils' (Gunaratne, 2002; Meyer, 2006).

### The study

Research was conducted among two groups of refugees living in the Kalpitiya peninsula in the North-Western province of Sri Lanka: first, families living in refugee camps - 'camp refugees' - and second, families who have moved out of camps to live in settlements on private land which they have purchased - 'settled refugees'. The study used participatory methodologies derived and adapted from Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA):

*a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions and to plan, act, monitor and evaluate*  
(Chambers, 1997 p102).

### Method

The approach was **emic**, trying to elicit the insiders' views on particular phenomena. The findings are largely qualitative. Each category of refugees was represented by a men's group and a women's group, each comprising 15

people. The groups of participants were selected to include persons who:

- had been expelled from their homes in the north
- were living together in one single location at the time of the study, and
- represented both adults and young people, and the different socio-economic groups in the community.

A local non-governmental agency (NGO) that was well-respected by the refugees helped in selecting the participants (in accordance with criteria set down by the researchers) and introduced the researchers to them. The duration of each group consultation was one full day, with lunch and refreshments served during breaks.

The key tools (exercises) adopted in this study were Wealth-Ranking and Well-being Ranking (Chambers, 1997). The former was used primarily to identify and understand the social stratification in the study communities as perceived and defined by the participants in the study. The latter was devised to understand community perceptions of well-being, translated into Tamil literally as 'having a good life', and how this perceived well-being had been affected by displacement. The results of the two exercises were later linked together to analyse the effects of displacement on the well-being of different socio-economic categories.

The PRA exercises were conducted both in small groups and in plenary sessions. All discussions were facilitated by a trained researcher. Visuals prepared with large brown paper sheets, flash cards, marker pens, etc were used to document, analyse and present the study outcomes. As well as using visuals for documentation, detailed notes of the group discussions were taken by a member of the research team. The first language of participants was Tamil. Since it was difficult to find Tamil-speaking researchers who had the necessary skills and competence in participatory methodologies, facilitation was carried out by a team of Sinhala-speaking researchers helped by translators.

### Wealth ranking

The wealth-ranking exercise described in the literature of PRA (Chambers, 1992, 1997; Mukherjee, 1995; Wilde &

Vainio-Mattila, 1995) was simplified and adapted to suit the context and the time available. It consisted of the following steps.

- Brainstorming with participants on how they would categorise the households in their community, based on their relative socio-economic positions. All possible categorisations were listed on flipchart paper.
- Discussion to reach consensus among participants on the most realistic number of categories into which the households could be categorised. At each session, the categories identified were written on flipchart paper (in Tamil) on the horizontal axis.
- Brainstorming with participants on how they would divide and allocate the total number of households into each of the socio-economic categories. Once the numbers that should go into different categories had been identified and agreed, they were written against each socio-economic category.
- Discussion with participants to list the various characteristics associated with each socio-economic category. The characteristics identified were written on flipchart paper under each category.
- Once the exercise had been completed, the final outcome of the exercise (what was written on the flipcharts) was read out to the participants for further refining and reaching consensus.

### Well-being ranking

The following steps were followed in the conduct of well-being ranking.

- The Tamil term *Nannilai* (synonymous with 'good quality life') written on a colour-coded card was displayed to the participants. While the card was being displayed, participants were asked by the facilitator whether they had ever come across this term or whether they understood what was meant by it.
- Brainstorming with participants on what they really understood by the term *Nannilai*. All responses were noted on flipchart paper in Tamil (for viewing by the participants).

- Discussion with participants to reach agreement on the conditions or criteria that they thought should be in place if a community desires to reach a higher state of well-being. Once all participants agreed on these criteria/conditions, each criterion/condition was written on a colour-coded card. Thereafter, the cards were pasted one after the other in a vertical axis (no prioritisation) in the centre of a large brown paper sheet. It was then placed on the floor so that participants sitting around the visual could see what had been constructed.
- The participants (15 in each group) were divided into two sub-groups, each being provided with a set of well-being criteria/conditions pasted on a brown paper sheet. Each sub-group was then asked to think about, discuss and assess their level of well-being **before** and **after** displacement in terms of each criterion/condition listed. In order to indicate their level of well-being, participants were asked to score each criterion out of 10. Scoring was done in both groups concurrently for both situations (before and after displacement). Scoring by two groups was useful for triangulation purposes.
- Once the scoring by the two groups was completed, each group was asked to read out the scores given by them for each criterion. Similarities and dissimilarities in group scoring were discussed with participants, and a consolidated score was obtained in respect of each criterion, taking the average numbers.
- The consolidation of scoring was followed by a facilitated discussion on (a) reasons behind different scoring, and (b) socio-economic categories affected by reduced well-being.

## Results

### Socio-economic differences

*Tables 1* and *2*, overleaf, present the socio-economic differentiation within camp refugees and settled refugees.

Camp refugees identified three socio-economic groups within the camp population. The middle/average families constituted around 18% of the camp families, poor families who lived on a day-to-day basis comprised 55% of the camp families, and another 27% of the families

were considered very poor. Similar categorisation was observed among settled refugees, except that they identified the best-off category as making up 10% of the total as rich families, 52% were identified as average/middle level and 38% were considered poor.

There were significant differences between the camp refugees and the settled refugees in their perceptions of their respective communities.

- Among settled refugee families, men rather than women had engaged in casual labour work or migrated to Middle East countries, while among camp refugees women were involved in both casual labour work and Middle East employment.
- Settled refugee families had access to land, either taken on lease or purchased outright, which they used for cultivation, but camp families did not have such sources of land.
- Children of the camp refugee families engaged in casual labour after school hours or at the weekends, whereas the children from the settled refugee families did not do this; instead most of them attended private tuition classes after school hours.
- Most settled refugee families were able to speak Sinhala, so they had been able to build up networks with Sinhalese people in the area, as well as with outside agencies and organisations. Camp families hardly spoke Sinhala and had only a few connections with people outside the camps.
- A sense of unity among families was more evident among the camp families than it was among settled refugee families.

### Perceptions of well-being

All the groups agreed that they knew the term *Nannilai*, which they interpreted in terms of living happily, having sufficient cash for living, having good houses, vehicles, etc, having a good education and living well. In the discussions that ensued, it emerged that their perceptions of well-being were multidimensional and that they had suffered a substantial decrease in well-being as a result of displacement.

**Table 1**

Social stratification of camp refugees

Middle/average – 18%	Living on a day-to-day basis – 55%	Very poor – 27%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Houses are covered with thatched leaves and only the floor area is cemented</li> <li>• Own vehicles – trishaws, hand tractors, motor bicycles</li> <li>• Run retail groceries</li> <li>• Own land outside the Camp</li> <li>• Cultivate their land located outside the Camp</li> <li>• Rent out houses built on this outside land</li> <li>• Engage in self-employment e.g. fish trade, milk collection, dress-making</li> <li>• Family members work in Middle East countries (both men and women)</li> <li>• Family size is less than five members</li> <li>• Number of dependents is smaller</li> <li>• Their children pursue higher education</li> <li>• They can afford to get medicine from private dispensaries</li> <li>• Their houses have private toilets</li> <li>• Have political connections</li> <li>• Have knowledge of social affairs</li> <li>• There is unity among family members</li> <li>• The head of the household directs the family affairs and others respect his decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Houses are covered with thatched leaves</li> <li>• They have only a push bicycle</li> <li>• Dependent on casual labour work (men are paid Rs.500/- per day and women are paid Rs.200/- per day)</li> <li>• Children engage in casual labour work after school hours and during weekends</li> <li>• Educational achievements of children are low</li> <li>• Family size is in the range of 5-10 members</li> <li>• Number of dependents in their families is large</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Their houses are mostly temporary huts</li> <li>• Dependent on aid/subsidies</li> <li>• Children abandon schooling and engage in labour work</li> <li>• Number of dependents in their families is high</li> <li>• There are disabled family members (disabilities caused by war or inability to provide proper treatment)</li> <li>• They do not receive the attention of government and non-governmental agencies</li> <li>• Family members live in boredom and lethargy because of the shock of losing their assets in the original land</li> </ul>

*Tables 3* and *4* (pp52-53) present the criteria used by the camp refugees and settled refugees to define their well-being and indications (scores) of their (perceived) well-being before and after displacement. Although it is difficult to separate the different aspects of well-being as they are interrelated

and complementary, for purposes of clarity and analysis we have categorised people's perceptions of well-being into four categories covering material advancement, social aspirations, sense of security, and health experienced as physical, mental and moral dimensions.

**Table 2**

Social stratification of settled refugees

Rich – 10%	Average – 52%	Poor – 38%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Own vehicles – trishaws, hand tractors, motor bicycles</li> <li>• Have land for cultivation, or cultivate land taken on lease or purchased outright</li> <li>• Houses are constructed of brick</li> <li>• Own TVs, radios, etc</li> <li>• Family members are engaged in technical jobs</li> <li>• They hire vehicles such as trishaws</li> <li>• Men work in Middle East countries</li> <li>• Run small businesses e.g. tea kiosks, bakeries, retail groceries</li> <li>• Their children attend private tuition classes</li> <li>• Number of family members is smaller</li> <li>• They can afford to get medicine from private dispensaries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They have only a push bicycle</li> <li>• Houses are covered with thatched leaves and only the floor area is cemented</li> <li>• Only men engage in casual labour work (women stay at home as the number of family members is high)</li> <li>• Some find work outside their area</li> <li>• Monthly income is in the range of Rs.10, 000–12,000</li> <li>• They are able to find their day’s meals even though they do not have a stable source of income</li> <li>• Number of family members ranges between 5 and 11</li> <li>• In illnesses, they take medicine from government hospitals</li> <li>• Educational achievements of children are low</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Houses are covered with thatched leaves and the floor area is applied with clay</li> <li>• Dependent on aid/subsidies (they are also helped by religious organisations during festivals)</li> <li>• Some families have only a single member</li> <li>• Number of dependents is high</li> <li>• Mostly widows (some have lost husbands in the war, while others have been deserted by their husbands)</li> <li>• Children are not engaged in any productive activity</li> <li>• Unable to send children to school</li> <li>• There are disabled members in their families</li> <li>• Have two meals a day (neighbours help them to find their food)</li> <li>• Monthly income is less than Rs.2000/</li> <li>• They try to hide from the rest of society</li> </ul>

Aspects of perceived well-being are now discussed one at a time.

**Material advancement**

Refugee families saw having sufficient cash incomes, access to one’s own land and a permanent house as key elements of well-being.

While in their original homes they had cultivated their own land or else been engaged in fishing, animal husbandry or small businesses, none of these occupations was now possible. Fishing in the sea was restricted to the host communities; ‘intruders’ were hardly ever allowed to fish. Any casual labour work available was irregular and generally available for

women only, since it was restricted to activities such as tending vegetable plots. However, the women’s group observed that one of the reasons for insufficient cash income was the relatively high prevalence of alcohol/drug use among men in the new settlements compared with what it had been in their original villages. In their original villages, they had lived in good houses, but the conditions of their present houses were poor, and people did not have the money to improve their housing conditions.

**Social aspirations**

Well-being for refugee communities included their aspiration to provide a good education for children and bring them up in a good environment, having unity and

**Table 3**

Perceived well-being of camp refugees before and after displacement

Level of well-being before displacement(scoring)		Well-being criteria/conditions	Level of well-being after displacement (scoring)	
Men	Women		Men	Women
9	9	Having good health	3	1
8	9	Having adequate money/cash (women), having a good income (men)	2	3
	7	Living without being a burden to others		3
	8	Having unity within the community		8
	7	Having security in the community		3
	8	Mental happiness within family		2
9	8	Having a good educational standard	6	6
9		Having a free environment	4	
9		Living with a light mind	3	
9		Having an independent life	7	
9		Having nutritious meals	3	

co-operation within their community, and improved infrastructure and other facilities.

The women from camps felt that their children's education had been hindered by several factors after their displacement. First, the staff-pupil ratio in schools in Puttalam district was lower than that in schools in their original villages. Second, their children had to engage in income-generating activities, thereby neglecting or even abandoning their studies. Third, children were corrupted by alcohol and drugs abuse in the settled area. Fourth, older children were sometimes asked to look after their younger siblings because their mothers had gone abroad for work. All these problems particularly affected the poor and the

very poor families. Although women from the camps did not see any major disharmony in their communities, the men's group of camp refugees felt that living close to each other had deprived them of privacy. Women in settled refugee families observed escalation of conflicts in the community and particularly between neighbours, attributing this situation to the close proximity of the houses, which triggered conflicts between neighbours.

The only instance where a group recognised an improvement in conditions that affected well-being was in the men's group of settled refugees. Here, they felt that facilities for recreation and transport were better in the new settlements than in their homes in the north. For

**Table 4**

Perceived well-being of settled refugees before and after displacement

Level of well-being before displacement (scoring)		Well-being criteria/conditions	Level of well-being after displacement (scoring)	
Men	Women		Men	Women
	10	Having good health		5
8	7	Having adequate money/cash (women), having stable income (men)	3	3
	8	Good behaviour		3
	10	Having good co-operation with neighbours		4
6	9	Having security within the community (women), having a secure environment (men)	4	5
7	10	Having a good family environment (women), having a good family life (men)	4	4
	8	Having self-initiative and courage		6
5		Having education and knowledge	2	
8		Health and sanitation	1	
4		Having recreation and enjoyment	7	
8		Having one's own house	4	
9		Having adequate land	2	
2		Having transport facilities and improved roads	5	

example, they now had a playground and sports equipment given by aid agencies, better access to electricity and much better transport facilities.

**Sense of security**

All participants felt that having a secure environment so they could live without fear and outside threats was an important aspect of well-being.

Men and women of both groups recognised a reduction in the sense of security compared with that felt in their original homes. In the north, they had lived among people connected to each other by family ties, but this was not the case in their new environment. The settled refugee women stated that people did not come together to resolve problems as they had done in their original villages, and they had lost the sense of solidarity, which

they recalled as having existed in the north. Men from settled refugee families stated that women and female children were subjected to harassment by certain groups in the community and that they needed extra protection.

### Health – physical, mental and moral dimensions

Living in a clean environment and without illnesses, peace of mind and harmonious relationships within the family were all aspects of well-being. Women participants listed 'living without being a burden to others' and 'having a good moral life' as important elements of well-being.

All participants were of the view that their health had deteriorated considerably after displacement, because of a lack of nutritious food and clean water. The women's groups complained of inability to explain their illnesses to the physicians in the hospitals, as most of them are Sinhalese and hardly understand Tamil. The women from the camps reported a drastic reduction in their 'mental happiness' after displacement. They felt discriminated against by the host community. Their children were marginalised in the beginning and labeled as 'refugee children'; school sessions had been conducted separately for the children of the host community (in the morning) and the children of the refugee families (in the afternoon). Although this practice was later changed, they still felt they were not accepted. The women from settled families reported that, in their original villages, it was the men who worked in the fields, while women stayed at home and looked after the household chores or they both worked together in the fields and shared the work. But now, women do casual labour jobs, while men spend most of their time at home. The men, having free time, tend to use alcohol or else enter into extra-marital relations with women in the neighbourhood, both of which eventually lead to family disputes, disharmony within families and general lowering of moral behaviour.

### Social stratification and well-being

The Muslim refugees we studied had all arrived in the Puttalam district with no significant material assets in their possession. However, definite social differences had arisen among them during their stay in Puttalam. Among the factors that influenced these differences were the entrepreneurial knowledge and skills that they brought with them, the social networks that they had with their

friends and kinsmen, and the ability to communicate in the language that local people spoke (Sinhala). Possibly, also, the state of mind that some individuals developed after losing their belongings and assets may have played a part in determining social differentiation. For example, we heard that some of the male members of the refugee families had become frustrated and unconcerned about their future, not wanting to engage in any productive activities; instead, they spent time with peers, drinking alcohol or using drugs and watching movies. Families who possessed relatively more and better human and social assets had been able to elevate their families to a better position, while the families with less and low-quality assets remained poor and vulnerable. Thus the distinct socio-economic categories that we observed within the refugee communities were largely a construction of the human and social assets that refugee communities had inherited and brought along with them to their new settlements since the time of their expulsion.

### Discussion

PRA tools are powerful means of eliciting information about community perceptions, but there are several limitations. There can be elements of bias resulting from the way the problem or issue is presented, how the communities (respondents) perceive the external research teams and react to them, how data are elicited and interpreted, and how conclusions are drawn. There may well be misunderstanding of what is observed or heard, and errors may be committed by facilitators because of their own preconceptions. However, it should be noted that PRA is a process and not a one-off activity; it requires lengthy interactions with communities, understanding their socio-political contexts and facilitating communities to define their own problems and issues. Some of the limitations of PRA were minimised in our study by careful training of facilitators and building trust and confidence in the communities through a local facilitator organisation, Research and Action Forum for Social Development (RAAF).

The full PRA process involves spending a great deal of time with study communities. Our study used a shortened process. The concept of *Nannilai* was introduced, rather than being derived by the participants, but it should be noted that all participants understood the concept and agreed with its use. Another limitation to our study was



that dialogue and interaction with study participants were dependent on translations. However, notwithstanding limitations, the study revealed important findings.

Well-being at a personal level is a positive state of affairs brought about by satisfaction of personal, relational and collective needs (Prilleltensky *et al*, 2001). When we access community perceptions of well-being, these individual components are added to by 'the synergy created by all of them together' (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005 p56). In our study, well-being encompassed a number of different dimensions subsumed (for the purposes of description) within the categories denoting material advancement, social aspirations, sense of security, and health seen as physical, mental and moral dimensions. But all these categories, covering both subjective feelings and external circumstances, were experienced as a 'whole' - 'holistically' - and not as separate 'factors'. The perception of well-being and how it had changed - usually for the worse - since their displacement provides a clear indication of the sorts of intervention that may be planned for improving well-being. If a community development approach is taken to such planning, similar exercises to the one reported here will be required.

It emerged in the study that much of the reduction of well-being was related to the change of roles and relationships within families resulting from migration. Before migration, women either stayed at home looking after the children and other household chores, or shared the work in the fields with their husbands. But in the camps or new settlements women were induced to engage in paid work, in most cases as casual labourers or sometimes outside the country. In their view, working outside the home had brought about adverse effects on family relationships. Older daughters had sometimes been kept away from school so that they could look after their younger siblings. Women who worked outside the home had to cook meals after returning from a day's hard work. Sometimes working women became victims of their drunkard husbands who would demand money to pay for their entertainment during the day, or physically abuse them. Some women reported hearing stories of their husbands having extra-marital relations. All these findings are in keeping with those of an earlier study of Muslim refugees in the Puttalam by Brun (2002).

As in the case of women, men's roles too have undergone significant changes since their migration to Puttalam. Men who were used to cultivating their own land in the North have now been forced to work for others as labourers - something also reported by Brun (2002) - resulting in an adverse effect on their self-esteem. Some men, particularly the young men, had migrated to other cities in the south of Sri Lanka or to Middle East countries in search of employment, resulting in adverse effects on family life. A section of the male refugee population had become inactive and frustrated, avoiding any productive work and resorting to drinking liquor, using drugs or engaging in extra-marital relations.

The children of refugee families, particularly those from the poor families, were vulnerable to deprivation and neglect. Some had abandoned their education to look after their younger siblings or sacrificed their leisure and/or studies in order to earn money to support their families by doing casual labour. With the rapid spread of alcohol, drugs and prostitution within refugee communities, children had become vulnerable to deviant practices. All this meant that the well-being of refugee children was affected adversely in many ways.

Both camp refugees and settled refugees felt hampered by living too close to others in their (refugee) communities, both in camps and in settlements. In the north, houses had been situated quite far from one another and thus secured the privacy of individual families and their interactions with each other. Physical separation between households was better in the settlements than in the camps, but settled refugees also found that they were living too close to each other - something that affected their well-being.

Both groups of refugees we studied felt insecure and uncomfortable living among people they referred to as 'outsiders' - and who they felt treated them as such. The communities in the north, where the Muslim refugees had lived for many years, had been composed largely of kinship networks, thus providing a sense of security to their inhabitants in times of need. Although (in the north) they lived among Tamils (who were not Muslims), they had cordial relationships with them. Both in the camps and settlements, the degree of unity and mutual support that existed in their northern communities no longer existed. It emerged, however, that the sense of unity

within camp families was relatively higher than that within (settled) families living on private land; it may be that life in camps induced a sense of togetherness that was lost when families moved out to buy their own property. The only common identity that bonded together the refugees in our study seemed to derive from their origins in the north; for example, the camp refugees had named their camps after the original locations of their homes in the north. Clearly they all pined for something they felt they had lost; in general they all felt that they were not accepted by the host communities.

## Conclusions

Although Muslim refugees came to Puttalam district with minimal possessions, some families have been able to elevate their socio-economic positions, and two distinct social groups have emerged – the refugees still living in camps and those who have managed to buy property in the vicinity. The differences are created by a variety of circumstances and possibly individual differences in the way people respond to circumstances. Both groups of refugees remain frustrated, insecure and unhappy even after 18 years of residence in the Puttalam district. Community perceptions of well-being among them are largely determined by the particular social settings in which communities find themselves, and processes influencing their community and family lives. As communities, they feel a serious lack of opportunity to pursue their livelihoods, and serious problems have emerged – for example, drug and alcohol abuse among men and even among children. This emic study of social stratification and well-being is a start in evaluating their needs for the purpose of providing assistance and help, and for developing training material for professionals working with these communities in the future.

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