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Voluntary or involuntary relocation of underserved settlers in the city of Colombo as a Flood Risk Reduction Strategy: A Case Study of Three Relocation Projects

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Abstract

This paper examines the long term outcomes of involuntary or voluntary relocation by citing three relocation projects that commenced in 1990's Colombo, Sri Lanka. Poor and marginalized families living in unauthorized underserved settlements in flood prone areas around Colombo were relocated as a flood risk reduction strategy to rebuild their lives in secure locations. The Sri Lankan experience suggests that relocation projects have been guided by project specific guidelines as opposed to common guidelines which have produced both successes and failures. These outcomes, no doubt, stress the need for having specific guidelines for the three main stages of the relocation process: prior to displacement (pre-relocation), immediately after relocation and two years after relocation. This paper stresses the need to formulate people centric relocation policy guidelines based on the household surveys in select relocation settlements and key informant interviews with government officials and community leaders. Thereafter the implementation of such policies should be considered as a relocation process with emphasis on securing their livelihoods which in turn will assist them to move out of poverty.

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1. Introduction

Resettlement/relocation has been so poorly planned, designed, inadequately financed, incompletely implemented and administered that these projects generally end up being “DEVELOPMENT DISASTERS” (Oliver Smith, 2009). Therefore, it is vital to secure the livelihoods of the relocated poor to make development more sustainable. It is against the above background this paper examines long term outcomes of involuntary or voluntary relocation exemplified by three relocation projects implemented from 1990’s in Colombo city, Sri Lanka. Poor and marginalized families living in unauthorized underserved settlements in flood prone areas around the city of Colombo have been relocated as a flood risk reduction strategy and as an opportunity to rebuild their lives in secure locations. The paper has three parts: introduction and research methodology (adopted for the study), part one- discussion on characteristics of urban poor in Colombo and the impact of floods, part two- discussion on the main features of the selected relocation projects (on issues and problems where relocatees have major difficulties of coping) and finally the summary and conclusion.

1.1. Colombo City, Urban Poor and Floods

Sri Lanka’s total population is about 20,277,597 and 28.8 percent of them live in the Western Province (Census, 2013). Over two million inhabitants live in Colombo and Gampaha districts. Relatively higher annual population growth rates were reported from Gampaha and Kalutara districts mainly due to migrants opting to settle down in these districts when compared to Colombo.

According to the 2011 Census only 18.3 percent of the population lives in urban areas (See Table 1) which enumerate Municipal (23) and Urban (47) Council areas indicating very low urbanization. Prior to 1987 Municipal, Urban, and Town Councils were considered urban areas but thereafter, Town Councils were merged (87 TCs) with Rural Councils (Pradeshiya Sabahas) which miss calibrates the urban population of Sri Lanka. The dense population living in urban centers such as Homagama, Beruwala, Weligama are Pradeshiya Sabhas (PS) which do not identify as urban areas. This significantly reduces the urban population figures but in reality Sri Lanka’s urban population share could be as high as 48% (Ministry of Megapolis and Western Region Development, 2016).

Table 1: Urban population (1963-2011)

Year	Urban Population (%)
1963	17.15
1971	19.51
1981	18.62
1989	17.36
2001	15.59
2011	18.3

Source: Census and Statistic Department, 2013

Colombo city has the highest population of 555,031 (CMC, 2014) with a population of 5.8 million in the Colombo metropolitan region and Sri Lanka’s commercial hub has the highest urbanization rate in the country (World Bank, 2012). This means that 28% of total the population occupies 6% of the country’s landmass. Moreover, 61% of the urban population lives in the Western Province which generates much of the capital, human resources, services and technology that contributes to economic growth and job creation.

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