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## Moving Beyond Conflict in Sri Lanka: The Economic Rights Dimension

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## Moving Beyond Conflict in Sri Lanka: The Economic Rights Dimension

### Abstract

Much of the literature on transitional justice underplays the role of economic rights in shoring up peace. The case of Sri Lanka demonstrates the urgency of addressing them. Until a month ago, Sri Lanka was the country with Asia's longest running civil war. Since independence in 1947, the island nation has been wracked by conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority—a conflict that has eroded political stability and aggravated internal inequalities. The struggle was marked not only by inter-ethnic and religious tensions but also by a fight for control over land and resources.

### Keywords

Human rights, Sri Lanka, Civil war, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Peace, Reconciliation

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## **Moving Beyond Conflict in Sri Lanka: The Economic Rights Dimension**

by Shareen Hertel

Much of the literature on transitional justice underplays the role of economic rights in shoring up peace. The case of Sri Lanka demonstrates the urgency of addressing them. Until a month ago, Sri Lanka was the country with Asia's longest running civil war. Since independence in 1947, the island nation has been wracked by conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority—a conflict that has eroded political stability and aggravated internal inequalities. The struggle was marked not only by inter-ethnic and religious tensions but also by a fight for control over land and resources.

In May 2009, Sri Lankan Government troops routed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), pushing the guerilla fighters who at one time controlled nearly a quarter of the country's territory into a corner of the island barely a few miles wide. The final months of fighting were so horrific that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has since called for a formal international inquiry to “establish the facts” of reported human rights violations and violations of the laws of war on both sides. [See Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, statement 5/26/09, [available electronically](#).]

Contributors to this Roundtable will likely focus on gross violations of human rights and the erosion of civil liberties. But I want to focus on the economic rights challenges endemic to ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka: the struggle for land and control of natural resources undergirds many inter-ethnic conflicts, pushing states deeper into poverty and eroding civil society's ability to act as a catalyst for just and sustainable development.

Why were people worldwide moved to send billions of dollars in donations to victims of the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami in Sri Lanka and elsewhere—but not moved to collectively express outrage when thousands of civilians and combatants were killed in Sri Lanka over decades? The world seems unmoved by the carnage. It's a far-away place, in a region (Asia) that still has no regional human rights institutions. Many Asian governments remain suspicious of “Western” intervention in their affairs in the name of human rights. And the lure of trading relationships and regional security arrangements in a nuclear neighborhood means most Western states are unwilling to push too hard to make rights matter.

Perhaps we feel we can aid victims of natural disasters, but not help staunch ethnic conflict in places far away. Yet the same impulse to help in the wake of the tsunami could be harnessed to re-build the social and economic fabric of Sri Lanka in the aftermath of decades of civil war. As Amantha Perera points out, the Sri Lankan Government's top priorities must include resettling the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people from the north of the country, while at the same time restoring all civil liberties suspended during the war. None of this comes cheap. It means re-building homes, schools, infrastructure, and legal systems, while at the same time healing the physical and psychological scars of war endured by literally hundreds of thousands of people. All of this takes money—much of which must come from within Sri Lanka, but which the international community can augment through bilateral contributions, multilateral donor assistance, and contributions from people who support humanitarian, development and human rights organizations working with local partners in Sri Lanka.

Over the long term, the country must forge institutional reforms that will allow for meaningful “power-sharing” arrangements aimed at diminishing inter-ethnic tensions and fostering a higher

level of social inclusion for historically marginalized groups. These must address land reform and control over natural resources—central to the grievances that gave rise to rebellion by the Tamils in the first place. [As one Sri Lankan citizen observed](#), “the road to Jaffna” (a major region controlled by the LTTE) “was blocked, so the economy there stagnated. Now that the war is over, the government needs to develop Jaffna economically. If it does that, there won’t be any problems.” The downside of ignoring economic rights is ongoing civil conflict and continued underdevelopment.

The international community—not only governments but also civil society organizations—can help by supporting Sri Lankan citizens’ groups to strengthen domestic human rights institutions and move toward the creation of robust regional human rights mechanisms. Though the focus in Sri Lanka and elsewhere is often on the political aspects of the transition to democracy, this is but one hurdle. Creating the conditions for sustainable and equitable economic development is just as important.

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