

Greed, grievance, and the displacement of identity: Courses of community conflict in the Mahaweli resettlement scheme in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study investigates the interplay of greed, grievance, and identity displacement as drivers of community conflict within the Mahaweli Resettlement Scheme in Sri Lanka. The main objective of this research was to identify the central drivers of conflict that arose within the resettled Vedda community. The main research question explores how resource competition and socio-political marginalization shape inter-group tensions among the resettled and Indigenous population. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study draws on archival research, semi-structured interviews with 35 community members and local officials, and non-participant observation in Hennanigala, Mahaweli C zones. Further, surveys are used for data collection. Thematic analysis revealed that social, economic, political, and environmental factors were the primary contributors to conflict. The findings indicate that within these main drivers, factors such as cultural issues, social adaptability, land use patterns, traditional ways of life, poverty, modern development practices, macro-level policy design, weak implementation, the intervention of powerful political groups, administrative patterns, resource scarcity, land and forest encroachment, overconsumption of common pool resources, and resource abundance were identified as key leverage points. Further, while competition over land and water (greed) initially triggered disputes, deeper grievances related to perceived inequalities in state resource allocation and cultural marginalization intensified hostilities. Resettled Sinhalese farmers, often favored by state policies, were viewed with suspicion by the Vedda community, leading to identity-based polarization. Furthermore, the forced reconfiguration of traditional settlement patterns disrupted longstanding social networks, exacerbating mistrust and reducing avenues for conflict resolution. This study contributes to scholarship on internal displacement and postcolonial development by highlighting how top-down resettlement projects, even when framed as economic development, can produce long-term socio-fragmentation. It underscores the importance of inclusive planning and culturally sensitive governance in multi-cultural rural transformation programs.

Introduction

Large-scale forced displacement and resettlement present a significant challenge to humanity in the modern world. It disrupts regional, national, and local economies and fractures communities and families (Hitchcock, 2012). Various countries implement resettlement programs to provide housing, livelihood opportunities, and



essential services such as education, healthcare, and sanitation to displaced populations in new areas. Nevertheless, studies indicate that many resettlement programs encounter implementation difficulties and lack an understanding of the socio-cultural context in which livelihood initiatives are carried out (Seto et al., 2023).

The economic impact of resettlement due to development projects is multifaceted and often detrimental to the affected populations. Studies across various regions highlight a consistent pattern of economic challenges faced by resettled communities (Griffiths, 2023; Kahsay, 2020; Uzodinma & Agbagwa, 2023). Negative impacts, including the disruption of economic activities, loss of livelihoods, loss of fertile lands, and limited access to livelihood resources, have been identified (Naab et al., 2016; Yankson et al., 2017). The disruption of economic activities due to resettlement has serious adverse effects on all aspects of the lives of the affected population.

Resettlement schemes are increasingly recognized as a dynamic strategy for addressing the needs of displaced populations (Drolet et al., 2017). Four main causes can be identified for considerable forced displacement and resettlement: natural disasters (such as floods and earthquakes), persecution (based on ethnicity or religion), development programs (such as dam construction, infrastructure projects, and urban development), and violent conflicts (Schulz & Taylor, 2018). Studies conducted in post-conflict resettlement scenarios have mainly focused on the consequences of displacement and resettlement (Setiowati et al., 2023; Uzodinma & Agbagwa, 2023). Conflict-induced resettlement often leads to destruction and displacement (Harris-Brandts & Sichinava, 2024; Teves, 2024). Reconstruction and resettlement are crucial in urban areas affected by war, presenting additional challenges for residents (Hemer, 2015). These studies have highlighted the challenges faced by IDPs in rebuilding their lives and communities, as well as the impact of the conflict on social cohesion and economic development. Additionally, research has examined the role of international aid and humanitarian assistance in supporting the reintegration of IDPs and promoting peace and stability in conflict-affected areas. Overall, these studies have shed light on the complex and multifaceted nature of post-conflict recovery and the importance of addressing the needs of IDPs in order to achieve sustainable peace and development (Mehrab et al., 2024; Suhardiman, 2022). These studies mainly explore the challenges and prospects in the resettlement and reintegration of IDPs.

Some studies have shown that displaced or resettled communities experience various negative impacts, including loss of identity, artifacts, traditional homes, ancestral places of worship, grave sites, social cohesion, and neglect of chieftaincy issues (Mamude & Alemu, 2021; Naab et al., 2016; Yankson et al., 2017). Displacing individuals with deep cultural and spiritual connections to their land in developing countries can have a profoundly adverse impact on their mental well-being. Many people in these areas have strong emotional attachments to their ancestors, heritage, and ancient dwelling places. Moving children away from these cherished places can damage their sense of identity and belonging, causing psychological suffering (Mamude & Alemu, 2021; Ogaboh et al., 2010; Yeboah et al., 2020).

Another group of studies gives evidence for the environmental issues caused by relocation. These studies highlight the adverse environmental consequences of resettlement, including deforestation, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem disruption. They also highlight the difficulties of managing garbage and pollution in resettlement zones. These studies emphasize the need to employ sustainable and environmentally friendly techniques throughout the relocation process (Connell & Lutkehaus, 2017; Guilherme & Aguiar, 2017).

These studies provide valuable insights into the effects of resettlement schemes, highlighting potential socio-cultural, economic, and environmental impacts. Even when studies have aimed to investigate the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental impacts of resettlement schemes, they have frequently been narrow in scope, examining only specific aspects of the issue. For example, some researchers have sought to assess the impact of resettlements on economic factors like livelihood sustainability (Naab et al., 2016; Yankson et al., 2017), socio-cultural issues (Atindana et al., 2015; Obour et al., 2016; Ogaboh et al., 2010), and environmental issues (Forsyth & Peiser, 2021; Obour et al., 2016).

These types of impact assessment may lead to a limited understanding of the actual effects of resettlement schemes on the resettled individuals and their social lives. For example, studies that focus solely on livelihood issues may overlook evidence of conflicts within the settlement scheme, which are crucial for the sustainability of planned resettlement programs and the well-being of settlers in the post-resettlement phase. When considering Indigenous peoples, it becomes even more critical to assess the impact of resettlement schemes on their social structures and cultural practices (Korah et al., 2019). The current body of research primarily focuses on conflict-induced displacement, resettlement, and its impact on the resettlement process (Emmanuel et al., 2020; Fiala, 2015; Setiowati et al., 2023). Although some studies have investigated the social, economic, and

cultural impacts of resettlement schemes, there has been a lesser focus on conflicts within these schemes (Emmanuel et al., 2020, Setiowati et al., 2023).

From a conflict perspective, investigating the social drivers of conflicts in resettlement communities would offer valuable insights for conflict management and resolution interventions in the country. In this study, the aim is to explore the sociocultural, political, and environmental factors that contribute to conflicts and examine how these drivers escalate community conflicts and hinder social cohesion, particularly in the Vedda community in Sri Lanka. This study contributes to scholarship on internal displacement and postcolonial development by highlighting how top-down resettlement projects, even when framed as economic development, can produce long-term socio-fragmentation.

This qualitative research study investigates the drivers and pathways of conflict in resettlement schemes. The main objective of this research was to identify the central drivers of conflict that arose within the resettled Vedda community. The main research question explores how resource competition and socio-political marginalization shape inter-group tensions among the resettled and Indigenous population. The Greed and Grievances theory was used to understand the background of conflict drivers in the area. The theory has been linked with drivers of conflicts and how they can become leverage points for resettlement schemes. By doing so, this research aims to enhance the understanding of the influence of drivers on conflicts in resettlement schemes and encourage further research on conflict resolution strategies in these schemes.

Theoretical background

Greed and grievances theory

The Greed and Grievances Theory, developed by political scientist Paul Collier, offers insights into the root causes of civil wars and conflicts. This theory posits that conflicts can stem from two primary factors: greed, which involves economic or material interests, and grievances, which relate to perceived injustices or inequalities. To understand the conflict within the resettled community in Hennanigala, it is essential to examine the economic incentives and social or political grievances that may be contributing to the tensions.

The rational choice paradigm explains conflicts arising from decisions made by individuals or groups. Literature on rational choice and conflict suggests a strong link between greed and grievances in recent conflicts over natural resources (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). According to Paul Collier and Hoeffler, conflicts driven by greed are often disguised as collective grievances but are actually rooted in elite competition for valuable natural resources. Economic, political, and social inequalities are considered insignificant in this context, as these grievances are common in all societies.

The greed and grievances theory explains how economic interests can lead to conflicts over natural resources. In the Mahaweli resettlement area, conflicting interests in land ownership, water rights, and resource access often spark disputes. According to this theory, conflicts stem from a combination of factors, including a desire for resources and grievances resulting from perceived injustices or inequalities. In the context of natural resource conflicts in the Mahaweli resettlement area, competition for limited resources such as land, water, and forests can trigger tensions among different groups. Additionally, grievances related to displacement, loss of livelihoods, unstable livelihoods, and unequal resource distribution can further escalate conflict and strain relations among communities in the area.

In the case of the Vedda community in Hennanigala, greed could manifest in the form of competition over valuable resources, land, or access to economic opportunities. The Vedda community, often engaged in traditional subsistence farming, may face pressure from external actors, such as government policies, land grabs by corporations, or local elites seeking to profit from land use or development projects. If the Vedda community were deprived of their ancestral lands or resources without adequate compensation or participation in decision-making processes, this could create a material incentive for conflict. Additionally, if certain groups within the Vedda community, such as leaders or wealthy individuals, view the conflict as an opportunity to gain economic advantages, they may fuel or exacerbate tensions to consolidate their power or control over resources.

Additionally, grievances arise from the Vedda community's sense of historical injustice, marginalization, and exclusion. The Veddas, as an Indigenous group, have a long history of discrimination, land displacement, and neglect by state authorities or mainstream society. If their rights to land, culture, or political participation are systematically denied, it could lead to a collective sense of grievance. This perception of inequality—whether related to access to healthcare, education, political representation, or legal rights—may intensify resentment and lead to mobilization against perceived oppressors. Furthermore, if the Veddas are excluded from peace-

building efforts or from sharing the benefits of any development in the region, the community may feel further disenfranchised, leading to a deeper grievance against the government or other powerful groups.

The interplay between greed and grievances in the Vedda community's conflict can lead to a volatile situation. Those driven by greed may exploit existing grievances, such as historical marginalization or social inequalities, to further their agenda or incite unrest. Conversely, deep-seated grievances can make the community more susceptible to exploitation, with conflict used as a means to address longstanding injustices.

Applying the Greed and Grievances Theory to the Vedda community in Hennanigala involves understanding how material interests and social grievances intersect to drive the conflict. Economic motivations, such as land, resources, or political power, coupled with the community's frustrations over exclusion and marginalization, create a complex backdrop for the ongoing tensions. Addressing both the material and social dimensions of the conflict is essential for resolving disputes and fostering lasting peace.

Methods

Description of the Maduru Oya project under the Mahaweli Development Project and resettlement

The Mahaweli Development Project (MDP), initiated in the 1970s, is Sri Lanka's largest irrigation-based multipurpose development program and one of the world's largest agriculture-related programs. It was primarily implemented in Sri Lanka's North Central region, which covers a significant portion of the country's arid zone. The project aimed to reduce rural unemployment, alleviate population pressure in the Wet Zone, allocate land to landless farmers, achieve self-sufficiency in rice production, alleviate poverty, and generate hydropower.

The MDP, which was expedited, is Sri Lanka's most extensive development initiative. Its goal was to utilize the 335-kilometer-long Mahaweli River for hydropower generation and artificial irrigation. The project aimed to cultivate 640,000 acres of previously uncultivated agricultural land ([Ranaweera & Ratnayake, 2020](#)). It focused on three main components: constructing the headworks of the Victoria Dam, implementing downstream engineering works, and developing irrigation systems in downstream districts (*ibid*). The project was accelerated in the 1980s and moved nearly 14,000 families, providing them with irrigated low-lying regions for farming and personal gardens ([Ranaweera & Ratnayake, 2017](#)). The initiative turned forested areas previously inhabited by Indigenous populations into catchment areas and wildlife reserves, dividing the former "Veddas' Country" alphabetically ([Takesada et al., 2008](#)). The government also intended to establish a network of national parks that would extend from the newly acquired regions to the eastern shore, forming a series of interconnected sanctuaries. The Maduru Oya National Park, which covers roughly 51,468 hectares, was established on November 9, 1983, as the Vedda's ancestral territory. The Park is currently managed by the Mahaweli Development Authority ([Ranaweera & Ratnayake, 2020](#)). The Vedda community, who resided in the forest, were displaced within a very short period without prior notice.

The Vedda people's traditional methods of sustenance were hunting and gathering, but these were abruptly deemed illegal by the legal system. Poachers are descendants of ancient hunters and gatherers. Stripped of their primary means of survival, they sought help from the government ([Geekiyanage & Pushpakumara, 2013](#)). As part of the expedited Mahaweli Project, a policy decision was made in 1983 to remove the Indigenous people of Kandeganvila, a Dabana hamlet in the Maduru Oya forest ([Blundell, 2013](#)). The Indigenous people were relocated to the village of Henanigala (South) in Mahaweli System C. The process involved converting the remaining piece of tropical forest, previously inhabited by Indigenous people in Sri Lanka, into colonies and catchment areas for a wildlife reserve ([Ranasinghe & Cheng, 2017](#)). A total of 5300 members of the Vedda community, including men, women, and children, were forcibly relocated to remote places, destroying their tightly knit social structure. The relocation lands are located beyond the forest in rice-growing regions new to the Vedda people and incompatible with their customary small-scale agricultural practices. As a result, the Veddas began to see other people as intruders into their own forest ([Blundell, 2013](#)).

The study site

The Vedda community is a unique social group with social characteristics that differ from the dominant social norms ([Setiowati et al., 2023](#)). For a long time, they lived in the forest and were known for sustaining themselves through Chena cultivation and hunting, using a simple production strategy ([Stirrat, 2006](#)). The Vedda group was forcibly relocated to Hennanigala as part of the MDP, the largest development initiative in Sri Lanka.

The research was conducted in Hennenigala South Village in the Dehiaththakandiya Divisional Secretariat area of Sri Lanka. The target population consisted of 1085 resettlers who belonged to the Vedda community that was resettled due to the Maduru Oya reservation MDP in 1985.

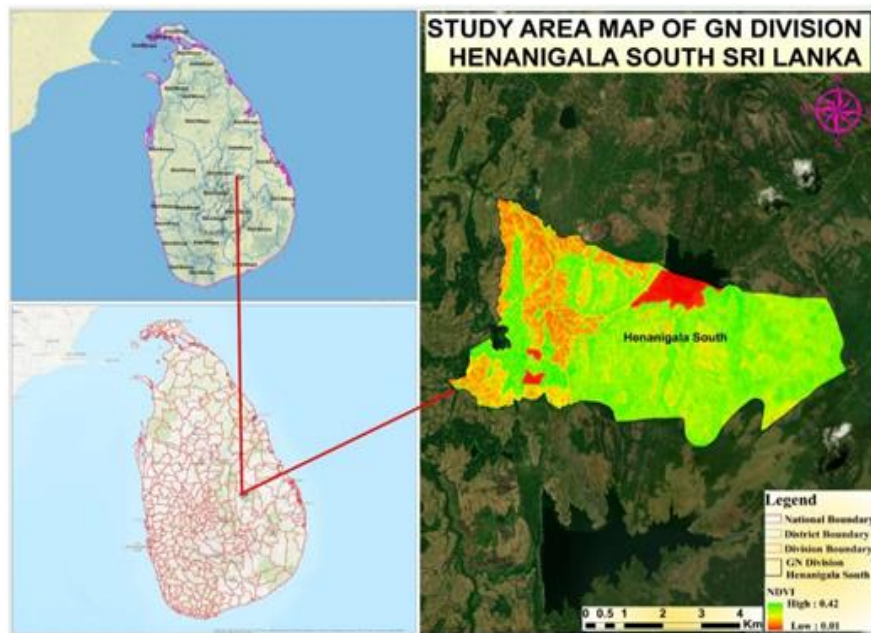


Figure 1. The study area map

Natural resources in the study area

The study site is a resource-rich area, as shown in Figure 2, which illustrates the natural resource diversification of the area. Respondents were asked to indicate which of the following resources were crucial to sustaining their livelihoods. Figure 2 presents the percentage of respondents who indicate that the resources were crucial.

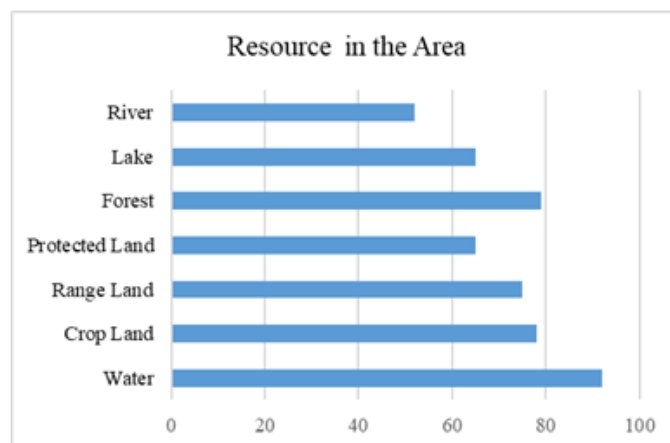


Figure 2. Important and usage of resources in the study area

Source: (Dehiaththakandiya Divisional Secretariat Office)

As illustrated in Chart 2, certain resources are crucial for the livelihoods of residents living in resettlement schemes. Water, at 92%, emerges as a crucial natural resource in the study area. The increasing demand for freshwater resources is driven by factors such as population growth, pollution, contamination, and watershed degradation. The forest, at 79%, is the second most important resource, providing herbal plants, bee honey, wood, timber, and shrubs for the community's daily needs. Crop land and range land are nearly equal at 78% and 75%, respectively, ranking as the third and fourth most vital resources for the resettlers. These lands are essential to the livelihoods of the majority of the population. Fisheries resources are also significant, particularly in relation to the rivers, lakes, and streams in the area, such as Maduru Oya and Hennenigala Lake.

Sample and data collection

Data were collected through a mixed-methods approach, using both qualitative and quantitative methods to capture depth and statistical information on the phenomenon. Primary methods included focus groups,

interviews, and surveys. Tools comprised unstructured interviews with settlers, key informant interviews with community leaders and government officials, questionnaires, and non-participant observations, whereby the researcher observed activities as an outsider. Respondents were selected with the support of key informants to ensure generational representation, using stratified sampling techniques. The researcher lived with local host families in various parts of the village during fieldwork, which enabled observation of seasonal variations in livelihoods and resources, and facilitated interviews on conflict drivers and resettlement schemes. A total of 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted.

Table 1. Interviewee breakdown

| Women | Men | Age Range | 1 st Generation | 2 nd Generation | 3 rd Generation |
|-------|-----|-----------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 13 | 22 | 25-75 | 17 | 10 | 8 |

Source: (Field Research, 2023)

The semi-structured interviews addressed the resettlement process, hardships and opportunities in the new settlement, daily activities, division of household labor, water collection and allocation, resource usage, cultural perceptions, resettlement impacts, land allocation, support from responsible parties, and external interventions for resources.

Observation guides examined the drivers and nature of resource use, perceived as sources of conflict. The study also held three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) on conflict drivers, involving women's groups, fishermen, and men who hunt, gather honey, and collect wild meat in forest areas. Each FGD included 8 to 10 respondents. Key Informant (KI) interviews were also conducted.

A total of six key informant interviews were conducted with government officials, including the Mahaweli Unit Manager, Forest Officer, and Village Officer (Grama Niladhari). Additionally, three leaders of the community association in the area were interviewed. Thirty-five in-depth interviews were conducted. Overall, both men (n = 20) and women (n = 15) participated in the study, representing diverse socio-demographic backgrounds and different generations as indicated in Table 2. Table 3 presents the themes identified through the analysis, along with their corresponding descriptors. The narratives provided include insights from KI, SI with community members, and FGD with fisheries groups and hunters.

Table 2. Demographic information of respondents

| Index | Sex | Age | Civil Status | Highest Educational Qualification | Mode of Employment |
|--|--------|-----|--------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| SI interviews with community members (II) | | | | | |
| 01 | Female | 41 | Married | 8 th Grade | Housewife |
| 02 | Male | 55 | Married | No Schooling | Hunting/Fishing/Bee Honey collecting/Shaman |
| 03 | Male | 26 | Unmarried | G.C.E.(O/L) | Cultivation/Yak Guru |
| 04 | Male | 57 | Married | No Schooling | Cultivation |
| 05 | Female | 50 | Married | No Schooling | Cultivation/ Fishing |
| 06 | Female | 32 | Married | Grade 11 | Pre-School Teacher |
| 07 | Male | 60 | Married | No Schooling | Cultivation |
| 08 | Male | 60 | Married | No Schooling | Cultivation/Fishing |
| 09 | Male | 40 | Married | Grade 5 | Cultivation |
| 10 | Male | 26 | Unmarried | Grade 8 | Cultivation/Musician |
| 11 | Male | 53 | Married | No Schooling | President Vedi Society/Shaman |
| 12 | Female | 32 | Married | Grade 11 | Housewife |
| 13 | Male | 34 | Married | Grade 11 | Soldier in the Army |
| 14 | Male | 36 | Married | Grade 5 | Farming |

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------|----|-----------|--------------|---|
| 15 | Female | 42 | Married | Grade 11 | Provincial Council Member |
| 16 | Female | 42 | Married | Grade 8 | Cultivation |
| 17 | Male | 39 | Married | G.C.E.(O/L) | Retired Army Soldier/Provincial Council Candidate |
| 18 | Male | 65 | Married | No Schooling | No Employment/ Hired Worker/Fishing |
| 19 | Male | 68 | Married | No Schooling | Cultivation/ Bee Honey Collecting |
| 20 | Male | 62 | Married | No Schooling | Cultivation |
| 21 | Female | 59 | Married | Grade 8 | Housewife |
| 22 | Female | 32 | Married | First Degree | Teaching |
| 23 | Male | 65 | Married | No Schooling | Cultivation |
| 24 | Male | 67 | Married | No Schooling | Leader of the Indigenous Community in Henanigala |
| 25 | Female | 40 | Married | Grade 8 | Housewife/Cultivation |
| 26 | Female | 24 | Married | Grade 11 | Housewife |
| 27 | Female | 39 | Married | Grade 5 | Housewife |
| 28 | Female | 38 | Married | Grade 8 | Housewife |
| 29 | Female | 27 | Married | Grade 8 | Housewife |
| 30 | Male | 31 | Married | G.C.E. (O/L) | Civil Security Soldier/ Hakme Shaman |
| 31 | Female | 63 | Married | No Schooling | Housewife |
| 32 | Male | 65 | Married | No Schooling | Leader Secondary level/ Cultivation |
| 33 | Male | 30 | Unmarried | First Degree | Teaching/Announcer |
| 34 | Male | | Unmarried | Grade 09 | Ex-Soldier |
| 35 | Male | 35 | Married | No Schooling | Hired Labour/ Fishing |
| Key Informant Interviews (KI) | | | | | |
| 1 | Male | 45 | Married | GCE A/L | Village Officer |
| 2 | Male | 47 | Married | Graduate | Mahaweli Unit Manager |
| 3 | Male | 52 | Married | GCE A/L | Forest Officer |
| 4 | Male | 62 | Married | Grade 10 | Farmer (Chairman of Farmer Association) |
| 5 | Male | 55 | Married | No Schooling | Fisherman (Chairman of Fishery Association) |
| 6 | Female | 42 | Married | GCE)/L | Unemployment (Chairman of water Association) |

Source: (Field Data, 2023)

Table 2 presents demographic and background data from interviews conducted for a study on community conflict in the Mahaweli Resettlement Scheme in Sri Lanka. SI with 35 community members and KI with 6 local leaders. The in-depth interview participants are predominantly married males, with a wide age range (26–68 years), and most have low or no formal education. Their primary modes of employment include cultivation, fishing, beekeeping, housework, and traditional roles such as shamans or local leaders. A few hold positions of community authority, such as Provincial Council Members or leaders of local societies. In contrast, key informants include village officers, forest officers, leaders of farmers' associations, and unit managers, most of whom possess GCE A/L or higher educational qualifications and hold formal leadership roles. The chart illustrates the socio-economic diversity of the resettled population and the complex leadership structure that influences local conflict dynamics

Qualitative codes and themes for the study can be developed by categorizing interview and observational data into four core themes: social, economic, political, and environmental drivers of conflict. Codes such as cultural

adaptability, land use patterns, poverty, policy weakness, and resource scarcity could be derived from recurring participant narratives. These codes are then grouped into broader themes such as Social Drivers of Conflicts (e.g., clash between traditional lifestyles and modern development), Economic Factors (e.g., inequitable access to commercial opportunities), Political Drivers (e.g., politicized administration and weak governance), and Environmental Drivers (e.g., competition over scarce common resources). This thematic structure facilitated the interpretation of how systemic and identity-based grievances are constructed and sustained within the resettlement context.

Results and discussion

The following table shows the themes and descriptors that was generated by the interview

Table 3. Themes and descriptors

| Theme | Descriptor |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Social Drivers of Conflicts | Cultural factors and social adoptability |
| | Land deviation and usage patterns |
| | Traditional way of life |
| Economic Factors | Modernised economic development pressure and dialectics of development |
| | Poverty |
| | Lack of funds for increase resource capacity of resources development |
| Political Drivers | Connection with commercial industry |
| | Adhering two different administrative pattern within same social body |
| | Macro level policy designing and weak of implementation |
| Environmental Drivers | Intervention of political group and their political strategy |
| | Environments resource Scarcity |
| | Common pool resources |

Social drivers of the conflicts in the resettlement schemes

Figure 3 summarizes the social drivers of the conflict in the area. It identifies three major drivers: Cultural factors and social adoptability, land deviation and usage, and traditional way of life.

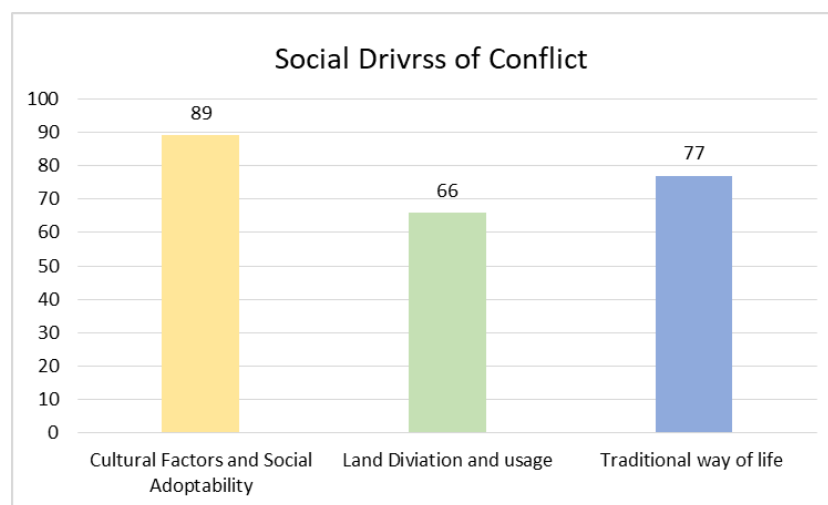


Figure 3. Percentage of responses of social drivers of conflict in the resettlement scheme
Source: (Field Research, 2023)

The Vedda community views certain elements of the natural environment, such as forests and water sources, as having divine or supernatural importance based on their religious and cultural beliefs. Their behavior reflects

a commitment to preserving these resources in a sustainable manner, thereby maintaining their way of life. This situation highlights the importance of understanding and respecting the cultural and historical ties that Indigenous communities have to their environment.

Figure 3 "Social Drivers of Conflict" presents three key factors contributing to community tensions within the Mahaweli Resettlement Scheme, based on their frequency or intensity as identified through qualitative research. The highest reported factor is "Cultural Factors and Social Adoptability", with a score of 89%, indicating that differences in cultural practices, values, and challenges in mutual social integration are the most significant sources of conflict. This suggests that resettled communities face significant challenges in adapting to one another's traditions, norms, and social expectations, particularly in ethnically and culturally diverse settings.

The "Traditional Way of Life" follows closely with a score of 77%, underscoring the role of disrupted livelihoods, identity, and heritage as a major grievance. This reflects the tension between modern development initiatives and long-standing socio-cultural systems, where community members perceive resettlement as a threat to their historical practices and communal identity.

"We have resettled here in order to adapt to an agricultural life setting for 35 years. Still, we were unable to properly adapt to the agricultural setup. We had a strong bond with the Environment. Environment and our culture were not two. It was the same. After resettlement, we had to adhere to agricultural practices that we had never used before. There is a dilemma between livelihood and social adaptability, as we lack proper behavior to adapt to the new environment. Due to this reason, there is a conflict with the Mahaweli Officers and us." (Male, 72 years old, II).

Finally, "Land Deviation and Usage", scoring 66%, also emerges as a critical factor, highlighting disputes over land allocation, ownership, and access. Such issues often arise from the redistribution process in state-led resettlement programs, creating competition and resentment among groups. Because the Mahaweli Development Authority (MDA) has neither planned nor distributed land for second and third generations, and has instead allocated range land for separate purposes, the allocation of land for later generations has not been made. The land resources have been primarily allocated for agricultural practices in the area, with the remainder allocated for residential use. The lack of land for future generations and its improper use have been a violation of the MDA rules and policies, and have become a cause for conflict. The following statement explains how land becomes a driver for the conflict in the area.

"We have two acres of farmland and half an acre of land. We are now in the third generation, and we do not have enough land to divide among all family members. We have requested land for the second and third generations multiple times, but no action has been taken. Despite not having land to allocate to us, some land has been allocated to large-scale farm companies." (Male, 75 years old, II).

Further, the Mahaweli Unit Manager supports this.

"When the MDA distributed land, they (resettles) were made aware of the rules and regulations regarding these lands. However, they are now violating these rules and have been using the Mahaweli lands illegally. Several issues have arisen regarding Mahaweli lands due to changes in land use patterns." (Male, 45 years old KI).

Collectively, this reveals that social dimensions—especially cultural integration, preservation of tradition, and land-related grievances—are central to understanding the roots of conflict in this context, illustrating how identity displacement intertwines with broader development challenges.

These individuals must utilize their own and shared lands to survive, resulting in shifts in land-use patterns. Conflicts arise from changes in land consumption and allocation. While the community may use the land, ownership remains with the MDA. Agrarian problems include challenges faced by smallholder agriculture, such as low productivity, low income, crop failures, indebtedness, and landlessness (Silva, 2023). The shift of agricultural lands from farming to residential use by later generations, as well as other non-agricultural uses, has contributed to conflicts between generations, the community, and the MDA.

Economic drivers of conflict in the resettlement scheme

The summary status of economic drivers of conflict in the resettlement scheme is depicted in **Figure 4**. The four main economic drivers that have impacted conflict in the scheme are modernized economic development pressure and the dialectics of development, poverty, lack of funds to expand resource capacity, and connections with the commercial industry.

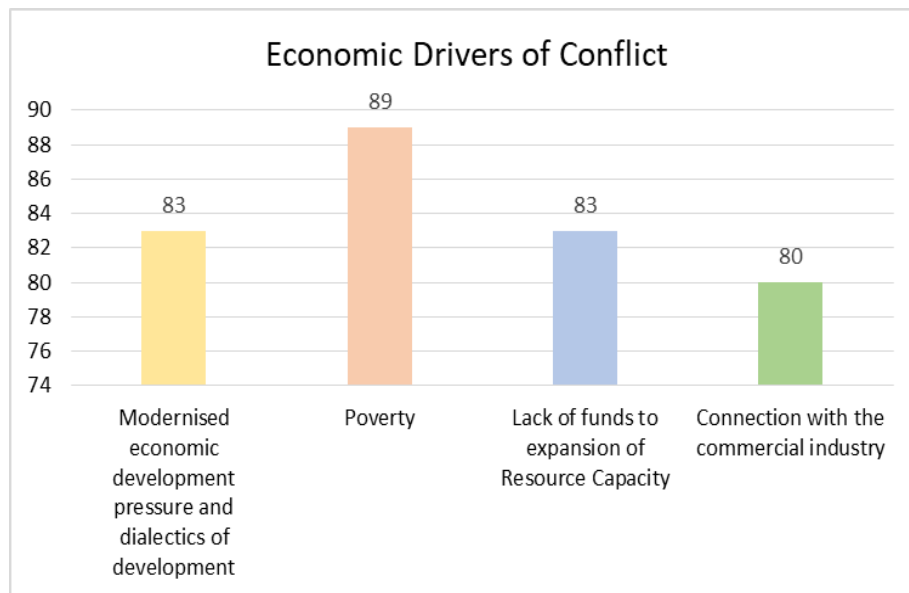


Figure 4. Economic drivers of conflict in the resettlement scheme
Source: (Field Research, 2023)

The primary economic activities of the community included Chena cultivation, hunting, gathering beehives, and harvesting traditional herbs, which led to a self-sufficient status. However, resettlement brought significant changes to their way of life. They were prohibited from accessing the familiar forest, leading to conflicts with forest officers when they attempted to enter the forest for hunting. In the resettlement schemes, their economic status was measured differently from their self-sufficient status prior to relocation. They were now evaluated based on new criteria of progress, categorizing them as economically poor and underdeveloped. This dilemma highlights how modernized development has led to economic challenges for the community, creating conflicting conditions.

“The forest was a rich area with abundant resources, but the government selected the Dry Zone for its development projects, forcing us to leave the forest in the name of progress. In the forest, we led a self-sufficient lifestyle, with everything we needed. However, in our new location, we lack money as most people struggle to meet their daily needs. We are not familiar with modernized agriculture, and the transition has been challenging for us. Since leaving the forest, we have encountered numerous hardships, leading to conflicts with various parties.” (Male, 65 years old, II).

Economic poverty, affecting 89% of the population, is the primary driver of conflict in the region. Many individuals engage in illegal activities in the forest to generate income due to their impoverished conditions. The community has shifted towards a consumerist culture, moving away from its traditional way of life. This shift has led to conflicts over the exploitation of environmental resources essential for their survival, resulting in tensions between forest officers and the community. The forest officers support addressing this issue. When they don’t have enough money in a legal way, they resort to illegal activities to support their families. Engagement in illegal activities, such as exploiting environmental resources, creates conflict.

“Although the community is not allowed to enter the forest without a license, some individuals still enter illegally. When caught, they are fined a significant amount of money. However, once they pay the fine, they often return to illegal foresting because they lack the economic means to meet their daily needs.” (Male, 52 years old KI).

The lack of funds to increase resource capacity for resource development (83%) has led to resource conflicts. This has resulted in a decrease in the quantity and quality of resources, such as the reconstruction of water sources, which in turn affects the distribution of resources. Grama Niladhari (Village Officer) has highlighted this issue.

“In the past, MDA provided funds for development activities in the area, including expanding resources such as irrigation canals and cleaning and expanding the lake. However, funding has not been allocated recently, leading to a severe issue. The lake is now overrun with invasive plants, hindering fishing activities. Unfortunately, we lack the necessary resources to remove these plants.” (Male, 47 years old).

Political drivers of conflict in resettlement scheme

Figure 5 summarizes the political drivers of conflict in the resettlement schemes as reported by the respondents.

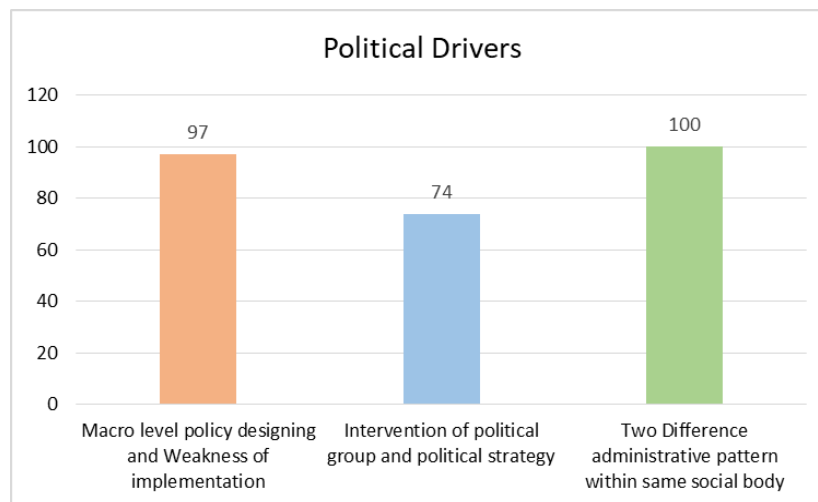


Figure 5. Political drivers of conflict on resettlement scheme

Source: (Field Research, 2023)

The figure highlights the importance of macro-level policy design, the challenges in its implementation, and the influence of political groups and their strategies on administrative patterns within a society. The adherence to two different administrative systems within the same social body has emerged as a major driver (100%) of conflict. Modern administrative systems often reflect contemporary societal norms, whereas Indigenous structures are rooted in cultural values, resulting in significant disparities between the two. This discrepancy has led to disorganization within the traditional social framework as it adapts to the new administrative framework. This disorganization can contribute to conflicts between the traditional and contemporary administrative systems. When a community adopts two different administrative structures, conflicts can arise among community members and stakeholders. This situation is further elaborated in the following statement.

“Before resettling here, we were completely obedient to our leader, “Thisahami.” Then we followed the leader of our group, Rahe. After resettlement, we had to adhere to the rules of the Mahaweli office and also follow our leader. This created internal conflicts within our group.” (The leader of the Vedda community).

Due to unequal social conditions, the community faced numerous conflicts. A top-down decision-making approach was implemented through the new administrative system, which hindered public participation and transparency, and this remains a persistent issue stemming from such an approach. When communities are not adequately engaged in natural resource decision-making, they are more likely to oppose related decisions and outcomes.

“We have two governing systems: our traditional system and a new administrative process. For centuries, we followed traditional leadership, but with the shift to modern administration, we have lost our traditional governing body. In the past, we had access to the forest, but now we do not. As a result, we are now struggling to navigate the new administrative procedures to reclaim our rights.” (Male, 56 years old, II).

The lack of effective implementation of macro-level policies (97%) is the second most significant factor contributing to conflict in the area. The socio-economic and religious development of this community has not aligned with the broader cultural and political evolution of Sri Lanka. The planning of the MDP has overlooked the needs of minority populations, leading to a reduced ability to address the specific demands of these social groups (Paranage, 2018). These factors have further exacerbated conflicts within these communities. The development policies implemented have not effectively included the Indigenous community. This condition can be identified through the following statement.

“We were self-sufficient economically in our previous location. However, upon resettlement, we lost this self-sufficiency, and the government did not consider how to maintain our traditional lifestyle in the new area. Our children are required to attend formal education, despite struggling to adapt to the new

environment. We are not allowed to access the forest. When developing and implementing policies, authorities should consider our unique needs as a distinct group.” (Female, 57 years old, II).

Contemporary education systems have evolved significantly from traditional practices. However, children in certain communities are still required to adhere to traditional methods, creating a disconnect between their school learning and real-world application. Policy makers often overlook the diverse needs of communities when implementing education policies, leading to conflicts within and between communities.

Political intervention, accounting for 74% of conflicts, plays a significant role in exacerbating tensions. Land use and rights are governed by a mix of statutory, customary, and formal rules, but external influences have introduced informal regulations through powerful political figures. Illegal activities, such as forest encroachment and deforestation by criminal groups, further escalate conflicts by crossing settlement boundaries and impacting natural resources. The community often faces discriminatory policies, rights, and laws that marginalize certain resource-user groups. In this case, powerful individuals outside the community exploit forest resources while the local community is banned from entering the forest. This unequal distribution of benefits leads to negative feelings and tensions within the community.

“Outsiders have encroached upon our lands illegally, leveraging the political power of regional leaders. They disregard government instructions and interventions. These resources belong to us, so how can they use them in an illegal manner?” (Female, 47 years old, II).

Environmental drivers of conflict in the resettlement scheme

The primary environmental drivers of conflict in the area are resource scarcity (100%) and the management of common-pool environmental resources (86%). [Figure 6](#) illustrates the frequency of these factors contributing to conflict in the resettlement scheme.

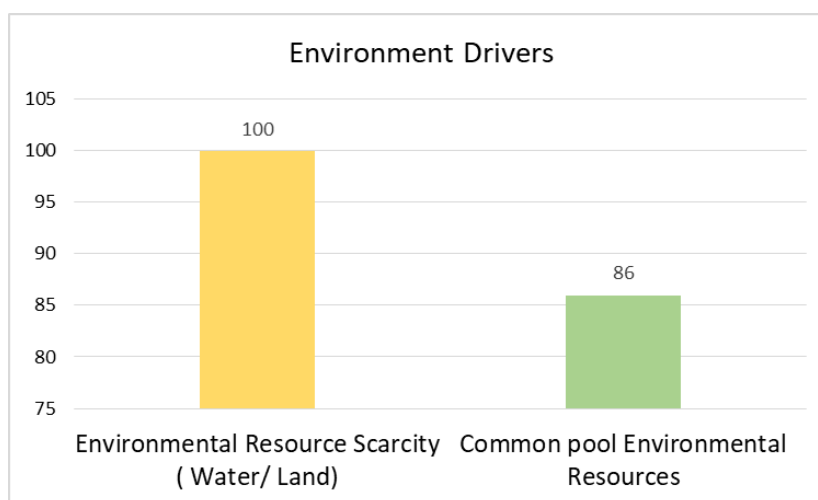


Figure 6. Environmental drivers of conflict in the resettlement scheme

Source: (Field Research, 2023)

Resource scarcity is the primary environmental driver of conflict in the area. This scarcity manifests in various ways, including demand-induced scarcity, supply-induced scarcity, and structural scarcity in the area. Demand-induced scarcity occurs when the demand for a resource exceeds the available supply in the system. Water and land fall into this category as the scarcest resources. Initially, there were sufficient resources for the resettlement, but as the population grew, consumption and demand increased while resources decreased. Water scarcity is a significant factor leading to conflicts and impacting various aspects of human security ([Harris, 2002](#)). Communities in the dry zone, who rely on agriculture as their primary source of income, face significant water scarcity ([Fernando et al., 2021](#)).

“The land was sufficient for the first generation, but now there is a lack of land for the second and third generations. We have raised this issue with the responsible parties, but no solution has been provided. Our second and third-generation families require more land.” (Male, 72 years old, II).

Supply-induced scarcity occurs when the total supply of resources in an area is reduced ([Alao, 2007](#)). Water supply, fisheries, and land resources are the main sources that can lead to supply-induced scarcity in the area. A reduction in the availability of these resources can threaten the livelihoods and lives of the people, leading

to competition among users. This competition has resulted in conflicts among communities and responsible parties. The chairman of the water association supports this initiative.

“We are all facing a serious issue with access to clean drinking water. The Sri Lanka Navy has set up a water purification system in the area, but it is not sufficient to meet the needs of everyone. To address this, we are collecting funds to maintain the purification system. However, the distribution of water has become complicated and has led to conflicts.” (Female, 42 years old, KI).

The limited resources in the resettlement scheme can lead to conflicts in the area. There is no mechanism in place to increase these resources, so when outsiders intervene, competition arises between insiders and outsiders, resulting in conflict

“Some abandoned lands that belong to the MDA have been grabbed by outsiders, while resettled communities are continuously requesting and fighting for lands for their second and third generations. These outsiders are consuming these lands without any barriers. Some settlers leave home early in the morning and return in the evening. They wait at the Mahaweli office to report their grievances regarding lands. Despite leaving the office without hope, they returned the next day with renewed hope for acquiring lands. (An observation narration)

Common-pool environmental resources and resource abundance (86%) have become important environmental drivers for conflict. Communities need to collectively utilize natural resources in nearby areas to maintain their livelihoods. However, as the population and number of families increase in the second and third generations, resources become scarce. Maduruoya and Hennenigala Lake serve as common-pool resource grounds for fishing, supporting the livelihood of the Vedda community. The community has developed its own mechanism to allocate scarce resources, but conflicts arise when using community-driven mechanisms for common-pool resources to sustain their livelihoods. The chairman of the Fishery Association supports this approach.

“We established a fishery association to support the livelihood of fisherfolk. Initially, there was insufficient fish population to sustain all fishing families. To address this, we decided to artificially breed fish and formed the association, collecting funds for this purpose. We implemented rules stating that only association members could fish in the lake, as non-members did not contribute to fish breeding efforts. This has become a contentious issue.” (Male, 55 years old, KI).

Applying the Greed and Grievance theory to explain the motivations behind conflict in Sri Lanka’s Mahaweli Resettlement Scheme reveals how both material desires (greed) and perceived injustices (grievances) intersect across social, economic, political, and environmental dimensions.

Social tensions in the resettlement schemes are primarily driven by grievances. Cultural incompatibilities, struggles over social adoptability, and disruptions to traditional ways of life have caused deep resentment among resettled and Indigenous communities. These groups perceive the resettlement process as culturally insensitive and socially disruptive, marginalizing their identities and undermining communal harmony. The inability to preserve traditional customs and social structures creates a sense of loss and exclusion, fueling grievances rather than opportunistic gain.

Economic conflict drivers manifest through both greed and grievance. On one hand, limited access to economic resources—such as land, employment, and commercial opportunities—produces grievance among groups who feel neglected or bypassed by the state and market systems. On the other hand, some actors may be motivated by greed, seeking to capture economic advantages from the redistribution of resources or market connections enabled by resettlement. This dual dynamic fosters competition and resentment, particularly when resource allocation is perceived as unjust or corrupt.

The political dimension is largely driven by grievances. Conflicts arise due to perceptions of biased policy implementation, weak governance, and the manipulation of local administrative structures. Marginalized groups often feel politically excluded, especially when administrative patterns favor certain ethnic or political communities. The intervention of political actors for electoral or power-consolidation purposes deepens these grievances, leading to mistrust in institutions and political alienation among affected populations.

Environmental drivers, such as resource scarcity and competition over common-pool resources, tend to originate from greed but often produce widespread grievances. As water, forest, and land resources become limited or degraded, individuals and groups may attempt to monopolize access for economic gain—often through illegal or exclusionary practices. This greed-driven behavior triggers grievances among those who

lose access to essential environmental resources, further intensifying conflict. The lack of equitable environmental management becomes both a symptom and a catalyst of deeper social and economic tensions.

Finally, the greed and grievance framework reveals that while some conflicts in the Mahaweli Scheme are driven by opportunistic motivations (greed), the more persistent and deep-rooted sources of conflict stem from collective grievances related to identity, inequality, and exclusion.

Overall, these four domains of drivers collectively contribute to the prevalence and increased incidence of conflict in the resettlement scheme (Figure 7).

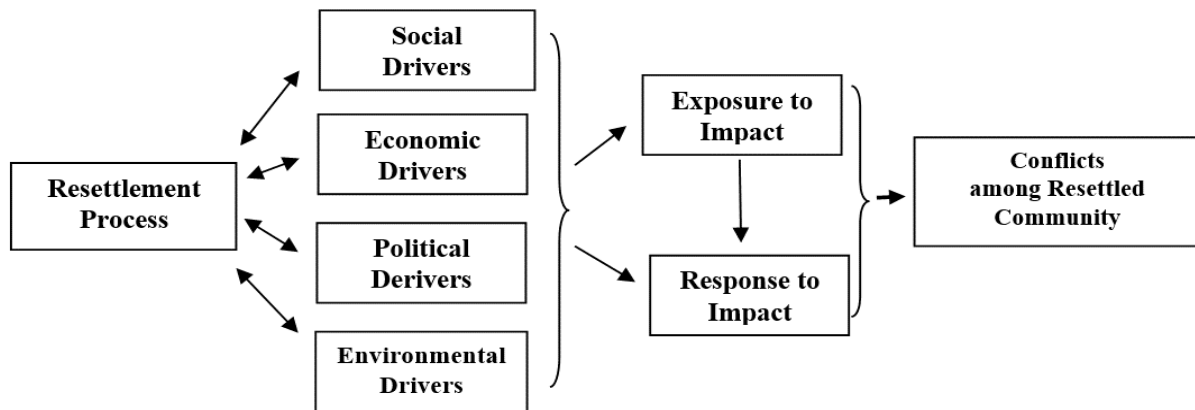


Figure 7. Driver domains contributing to the conflict in the resettlement Scheme

Source: (Developed by the Researchers based on results)

The article examines the factors that drive conflict within the resettled Vedda community in Sri Lanka. These conflicts stem from a combination of social, economic, political, and environmental issues. Cultural differences, challenges in social integration, changes in land use practices, disruptions to traditional lifestyles, poverty, conflicting development strategies, ineffective policy implementation, interference from influential political entities, varying administrative structures, resource scarcity, encroachment on land and forests, excessive exploitation of shared resources, and abundance of resources all contribute to conflict within the community.

Due to the forced resettlement of a community with a unique cultural and traditional way of life, its members have had to make various efforts to preserve their culture while adapting to the newly developed society (Collier & Hoeffler, 2005). Conflicts in the area have arisen due to a dilemma between traditional ways of life and adaptation to the newly developed society. The lack of necessary infrastructure for adapting to the new lifestyle and practical difficulties in the new development models have heightened these conflicts.

Land is a crucial factor for the community, as their livelihoods depend primarily on agricultural activities (Hitchcock, 2012). Changes in land ownership and land use have led to conflicts among various parties and within the same communities (Humphreys, 2005). Conflicts have escalated due to the displacement and deprivation of the second and third generations of the community from their lands. Modernity, new consumption patterns, and challenges in adapting to modern development measures have created and intensified conflict situations in this area.

Political factors have played a significant role in fueling conflicts in the resettlement area (Wick & Bulte, 2008). The implementation of macro-level policy plans has led to conflicts in settlement areas, as they often fail to align with the community's needs and aspirations. Additionally, conflicts arise from contradictions between traditional leadership and legal frameworks and the new policies introduced through development processes. These conflicting factors contribute to tensions within the community (Martinez-Alier, 1995). The exclusion of the Indigenous community from the policy preparation and documentation process, as well as their marginalization in mainstream development initiatives, have contributed to this situation.

The negative impact of institutional political conditions has also contributed to driving conflicts (Mikesell & Raymond, 2020). The overconsumption and illegal encroachment of resources by outsider communities with political allegiances have intensified community and local conflicts (Painter, 2004). The involvement of external parties and political influences has exacerbated the conflict situation in the area. The lack of a proper system for resource distribution, outdated traditional methods of resource allocation, and inadequate resource management have further fueled the conflicts.

Common-pool resources are susceptible to the tragedy of the commons, where individuals, motivated by self-interest, tend to overexploit the resource, leading to its depletion for all (Djanibekov et al., 2015). In the resettlement area, settlers commonly use some natural resources collectively. These resources include fishing grounds, pastures, irrigation systems, and forests. It is challenging to restrict access to these resources, but their utilization may lead to depletion (Stedman, 2005). As they commonly use these limited resources, disputes can arise due to their attitudes and behavior. Natural resources are integral to the collective identity of a community or group (Seto et al., 2023). Individuals develop a deep emotional bond with resources they have invested effort and hard work in, often passing down this connection through generations (Budruk et al., 2011). Scarcity is linked to conflict through two mechanisms: demand and supply scarcity (Stedman, 2005). This exclusionary behavior can perpetuate inequality and limit opportunities for marginalized communities. It is essential to address these power dynamics and work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society (Sa'at & Lin, 2018).

The lack of alignment between contemporary development requirements and the customary needs of Indigenous communities has disrupted the social equilibrium. Conflicts have arisen due to the Indigenous people's declining satisfaction with the failure to implement development ambitions and policies that respect their cultural and traditional values.

Further research is needed to explore the conflicts present in resettlement areas, with a specific focus on Indigenous minority communities. As a developing country, it is crucial to consider the protection of minority communities and their traditional way of life when implementing Western-centered modernized development practices.

Conclusion

This study of Greed, Grievance, and the Displacement of Identity in Sri Lanka's Mahaweli Resettlement Scheme reveals that community conflict arises not merely from resource competition, but from a deeper entanglement of cultural dislocation, economic marginalization, and political reasons. By applying the framework of greed and grievance across social, economic, political, and environmental domains, the study demonstrates that identity displacement and perceived injustices are central to understanding intergroup tensions.

Policy implications point to the urgent need for a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to resettlement and development planning. Policymakers must move beyond infrastructure and resource allocation to address the intangible but critical dimensions of community identity, heritage, and trust. This includes integrating culturally informed social impact assessments into resettlement planning and ensuring equitable access to land and livelihood opportunities. Particularly for Indigenous communities, who are disproportionately affected.

This paper's key contribution lies in its multi-dimensional analysis of conflict drivers, combining grounded qualitative data with theoretical framing to uncover how structural inequalities and cultural displacement intersect to fuel community tensions. Unlike previous studies that often prioritize material factors alone, this research underscores the salience of identity-based grievances and the importance of historical context in post-resettlement dynamics.

The increased prevalence and escalation of conflict in resettlement schemes in rural areas of Sri Lanka are primarily caused by a lack of concern for conflict resolution and the neglect of minority and affected communities. This lack of attention can be attributed to various factors, including Social, Economic, Political, and Environmental drivers within the resettlement schemes. It is crucial to identify these conflict drivers and potential leverage points to address and prevent conflicts effectively. Currently, there is no established mechanism to prevent conflicts in the area, highlighting the urgent need for intervention. To address these conflict drivers, it is essential to consider the cultural and historical context of Sri Lanka's Indigenous people and strive for equitable solutions. Sustainable peace and harmony can be achieved by focusing on issues such as resource management, land rights, and community participation in decision-making processes, incorporating Indigenous knowledge. Furthermore, it is vital to address both underlying grievances and root causes of greed to effectively manage and resolve conflicts in the Mahaweli resettlement area. By implementing strategies that promote inclusivity, respect for diversity, and equitable resource distribution, lasting peace and stability can be fostered in the community.

To support sustainable peace building, the paper recommends conflict resolution mechanisms tailored to Indigenous and marginalized communities, including community-led dialogue platforms to mediate land and

resource disputes with cultural sensitivity, legal recognition of Indigenous land use rights and traditional governance practices, inclusion of Indigenous representatives in resettlement and development decision-making bodies, ensuring that policies reflect lived realities rather than top-down assumptions, long-term psychosocial support and cultural preservation programs that affirm community identity and restore social cohesion. Ultimately, resolving conflict in the Mahaweli resettlement context requires more than technocratic fixes—it demands a justice-oriented, participatory approach that restores dignity, voice, and agency to those most affected.

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Statement of originality and plagiarism-free

The author declares that this article is an original work that has not been published elsewhere and is free from plagiarism. All references and citations have been properly acknowledged in accordance with the applicable standards.

Declaration of conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this research, authorship, or publication.

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