

Challenges in Governing Fisher Mobility: a Case Study from Post-War Sri Lanka

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Seasonal migration is one of the livelihood strategies of small-scale fishers in Sri Lanka. Such migrants come to share fishing space with local fishers, creating a complex governing arrangement. This paper investigates the governability of migrant fisheries in the post-war zone of Northern Sri Lanka, where substantial resettlement has recently taken place. Sinhala fishers from the Southern region gather seasonally from October to April (during the South-east monsoon), facing competition from resettled Muslim and Tamil fishers, but also from trawl fishers from India who are illegally trespass the international maritime boundary line. The governing system prevailing for fisheries in this region is multi-layered, fragmented (horizontally and vertically), and insufficiently geared to the practices of migration by different fisheries communities. We describe the conflicts that are occurring and analyze them in relation to the characteristics of the governing system. Research was conducted in South Bar, Silavathurei, Thalei-Mannar, and Mannar in Northern Sri Lanka. Information was gleaned through six focus group discussions employing participatory rural appraisal techniques, and in-depth interviews (n=16) with key informants. Conflicts in the region are multi-scalar extending from local to international spheres. Trans-boundary conflict between India and Sri Lanka over trawling issue is an overt conflict at international level. Illegal fishing depicts national level conflicts. Restriction on seasonal migration and social exclusion are latent conflicts erupt locally. Societal heterogeneity exacerbates the situation thus social networks are malfunctioning. We conclude by emphasizing the importance of a participatory and communicative governing system to resolve the multi-faceted conflicts among all the stakeholders (state, fisheries co-operatives, fishers, international organizations, local fisheries associations, and migrant fisher organizations) assuring its governability over the plural legal systems to ensure community harmony and societal wellbeing.

Keywords: conflicts; governing systems; post war resettlement; seasonal migration