
The Political Ecology of Violence in Eastern Sri Lanka

Hans-Georg Bohle and Hartmut Fünfgeld

ABSTRACT

In political ecology, violence is usually associated with conflicts over the control of natural resources. Up to now, political ecology has lacked a sound conceptual approach for analysing how violence that has its origin in political conflict induces environmental and social change. This article examines how the environment serves as an arena for exerting power, by using different forms of violence, affecting both ecosystems and the entitlements of the people who are dependent on natural resources. After a brief description of the role of violence in political ecology research, a conceptual framework for a political ecology of violence is laid out. In this framework, the notion of 'violent environments' introduced by Nancy Peluso and Michael Watts is blended with new approaches in livelihood research in which the political dimension of livelihood processes is emphasized. Case study material from eastern Sri Lanka, an area affected by prolonged violence and protracted conflict, is presented. This illustrates how violent struggles over environmental entitlements and the politicization of resource-based livelihoods created alternative systems of power and control over natural resources and triggered new processes of disempowerment and social vulnerability.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980s, political ecology has been a highly influential area of research at the confluence of the social and the environmental sciences. Its scope, however, has remained fuzzy, and what political ecology exactly comprises has largely depended on the individual interpretation and disciplinary background of those who have taken it on as a frame for research. Over the past decade, the criticism of being too vague in scope and too eclectic in theory has been met by an increasing reflection and discussion on the epistemologies that form the basis of political ecology, and on the development of an appropriate body of theory for its diverse applications (see, for example, Peluso and Watts, 2001: 24).

In political ecology, violence has always been a cross-cutting issue. However, the concept of violence is usually associated with conflicts over the

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control of resources (for instance with regard to enclosures in conservation areas), and protest movements directed against state authorities, private firms or social elites and the appropriation of communally held environmental assets. So far, political ecology has not developed a sound understanding of how violence that stems from political conflict induces and catalyses processes of environmental and social change.

Violence has also played a rather marginal role in livelihood research. Recently, more critical accounts of livelihood research have addressed a number of issues that point to new and innovative ways in which political ecology and new frontiers in livelihood research may be combined to help understand the interaction between violent processes, on the one hand, and environmental and social change on the other. In their stimulating analysis, de Haan and Zoomers (2005) raise two main lines of critique concerning conventional livelihood analysis. Firstly, they point out that structural features are generally down-played in livelihood research, in particular property relations and configurations of power. Secondly, they argue that human agency is severely under-theorized, with perceptions, valuations, decision-making processes, negotiations and strategic behaviour of the livelihood actors being widely neglected. Therefore, livelihood research needs to be deepened and conceptualized in such a way that it can capture this politicization of livelihoods and integrate agency-oriented perspectives, including the notions of different forms of violence. Such a conceptualization provides a sound base for blending livelihood research with political ecology in order to further our understanding of violence as a crucial factor in the relationship between the environment and associated livelihoods.

This article attempts to conceptualize the role that different forms of violence play in nature–society relationships in countries affected by protracted violent conflict and civil war, focusing on the livelihood outcomes of violence-affected marginal groups of society that are dependent on natural resources for their living. We will briefly discuss the different stages in the development of political ecology, before expanding on existing references to violence and protracted conflict within the research field. We then propose a conceptual framework for a political ecology of violence, using fieldwork material from the war-affected east of Sri Lanka to substantiate our point. In conclusion, we argue that new frontiers in livelihood research may be creatively blended with a political ecology of violence by focusing research on contested entitlements and politicized livelihoods in the context of violence.

POLITICAL ECOLOGY: ORIGINS AND NEW DIRECTIONS

First Generation Political Ecology (1980s): Society–Resource Dialectics

The phrase ‘political ecology’ combines the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy. Together this encompasses the constantly shifting dialectic between society

and land-based resources, and also within classes and groups within society itself. (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987: 17)

This programmatic definition of what may be called the first generation of political ecology of the 1980s addressed three key propositions. First, environmental problems are social, economic and political in origin: access to and control over natural resources stand at the heart of environmental problems in developing countries. Second, the relationship between society and natural resources is of an iterative, dialectical and contradictory nature. Poverty and environmental degradation are connected in a relationship of mutual causality, where poverty can induce, via poor management, environmental degradation, which itself deepens poverty. Third, the focus lies on social actors, mainly on the poor and marginalized, who are seen in their historical, economic and political context, with an emphasis on the role of the state (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987: 48; Peet and Watts, 1996: 3).

In the words of Peet and Watts, in the second edition of their 1996 book, ‘Collectively, this body of work punched a huge hole in the “pressure of population on resources” view, and the market distortion or mismanagement explanation of environmental degradation’ (Peet and Watts, 2004: 10). While this first generation of political ecology gained wide attention from development geographers, it was also criticized for its imprecise conception of political economy and for its underdeveloped sense of politics. The political ecology of the 1980s was critically perceived as being radically pluralist, with little concern for politics and little sensitivity to class interest and social struggle (Peet and Watts, 2004; Peluso and Watts, 2001). Questions of violence and conflict in relation to environmental issues were not addressed at all in the political ecology of the 1980s.

Second Generation Political Ecology (1990s): Politicized Environments and Environmental Entitlements

The second generation of political ecology in the 1990s, therefore, started to treat politics, power relations, institutions of civil society, and issues of environmental regulation more seriously (Peet and Watts, 2004: 12–14). While questions of resource access and control remained high on the agenda, there was a new emphasis on the means by which environmental control, access and property rights were defined in the context of social relations, and on how they were negotiated and contested within the political arenas of the household, the work-place and the state. As political-ecological research became grounded in struggles over resources and livelihoods, a new interest in the relationship between environmental conflict and power relations emerged.

While issues of violence remained widely unaddressed, the notion of a ‘politicized environment’ (Bryant and Bailey, 1997: 27–49) became a new centre of attention in the political ecology of the 1990s. From this perspective, access to and control over resources, in general, and environmental conflicts,

in particular, can be viewed as a manifestation of power relations. Power, then, is the key concept to be analysed in order to specify the ‘topography’ of a politicized environment (*ibid.*: 39).

In the late 1990s, the environmental entitlements approach (Leach et al., 1999) emerged as yet another concept that explored the politicized and conflicting nature of environmental relations. The environmental entitlements approach seeks to constitute an extended form of entitlement analysis by explaining how differently positioned social actors command environmental goods and services that are instrumental to their well-being (Bohle et al., 2000: 43). It can be regarded as an ideal starting point for a political ecology of violence, as it grants priority to how entitlements with regard to natural resources are distributed and reproduced, negotiated and fought over, lost and won in violent environments (Peluso and Watts, 2001: 5).

Third Generation Political Ecology (2000s): Liberation Ecologies and Violent Environments

The political ecology of the 2000s has moved forward along a number of key fronts, with a new focus on liberation ecologies and on the relation between environment, geopolitics and violence, for example in the field of environmental security (Dalby, 2002). Closely linked to this is a new interest in environmental conflicts, based on the idea that environmental change and scarcity of resources can cause war and violence (Collier, 2000; Collier and Hoeffler, 2000; Homer-Dixon, 1999). These works have been harshly criticized on the grounds of their ‘simplistic linkages’ between environmental scarcity, environmental migration and weakened states which, collectively, are claimed to ‘cause’ conflicts and violence (Peluso and Watts, 2001: 5; see also Ballentine and Sherman, 2003; Berdal, 2005). However, the debate on environmental security also raised important issues — violence and mass conflict — on which political ecology had until then been ‘remarkably silent’ (Peet and Watts, 2004: 29). The notion of ‘violent environments’ elaborated by Peluso and Watts (2001) can serve as an entry point to address alternative ways of understanding the relations between the environment and violence from the perspective of political ecology.

TOWARDS A POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF VIOLENCE: THE CONCEPT OF VIOLENT ENVIRONMENTS

In ‘violent environments’ the environment is viewed as an arena of contested entitlements in which conflicts and claims over property, assets, labour, and the politics of recognition are played out (Peluso and Watts, 2001: 25). This approach looks at violence as a site-specific phenomenon rooted in environmental histories and social relations, particularly in power relations. Like the notion of ‘liberation ecologies’, the concept of a ‘violent environment’

is also focused on political action. It accounts for the full range of differentiated actors, and for the ways in which these actors operate in historically and culturally constituted fields of power and in political practice, ranging from discursive struggles to mass violence (ibid.: 25).

According to Peluso and Watts (ibid.: 6), the political ecology of violence is based on three propositions. First, instabilities and transformations in the conditions of the environment and natural resources generate a shift in the power positions of resource users. Second, the role of different actors in a specific moment of violence can only be understood with reference to their respective positions within fields of power. The dynamics of violence thus need to be viewed against the background of the actors' shifting power-bases with regard to the environment. And third, environmental violence has to be explored in relation to other forms of social struggle. All these propositions are highly relevant for our case study on violent environments in Sri Lanka.

Broadly speaking, violence is to harm or hurt somebody, by physical and/or verbal means (Galtung, 2003). Besides direct physical violence, Galtung (ibid.: 3) suggests two more types: structural and cultural violence. Structural violence imposes economic and political forms of deprivation on people through the strategic manipulation of the economic structures and power relations of a society. The term cultural violence then describes those aspects of any culture that legitimize direct or structural forms of violence (Galtung, 1990). As part of a refined political ecology of violence, these distinctive representations of violence are crucial, and the ways in which the different forms figure in struggles over control of and access to the environment have to be scrutinized in detail. This requires careful analysis of the broader logic of protracted violence in which violence that is linked to the environment is embedded.

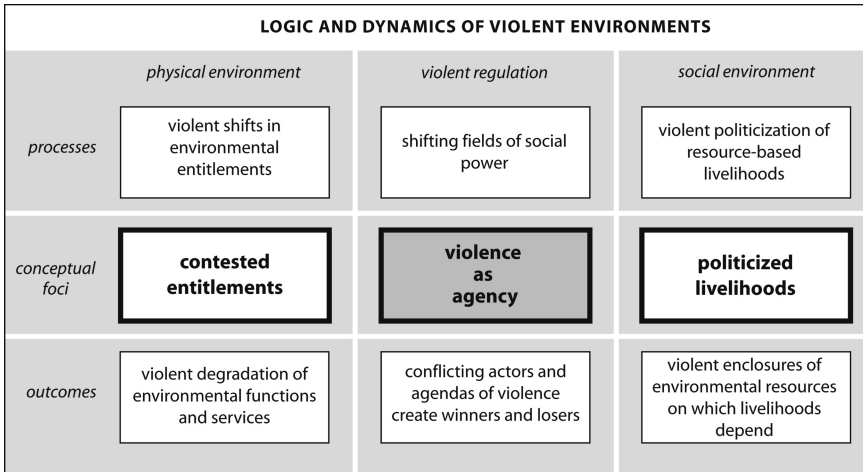
If the environment constitutes an arena of contested entitlements, the livelihoods, and livelihood systems, of populations who live in violent environments are prone to politicization. Each of the elements which constitute livelihood systems — see, for example, the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) of DFID (2001) — can become politicized. The capabilities, assets and activities required to sustain a living, which comprise a livelihood, are controlled and restricted according to the political agendas and economic objectives of violent actors; the components of livelihood systems are subjugated to and determined by the logics and dynamics of violence. The 'vulnerability context', which constitutes the first component of the SLF, is dominated by the ebbs and flows of violence. Within this context, access to and control over 'livelihood assets' (the second component, including natural assets or natural capital) become a matter of shifting power relations, with physical destruction of assets, on the one hand, and transfers of assets from the powerless to the more powerful actors, on the other (Le Billon, 2000: 4). The prevailing social, economic, political and institutional environment (called 'transforming structures and processes' in the SLF) through which livelihood assets gain their meaning and value is subordinated to the

logic of power that is exercised by violence. De Haan and Zoomers (2005: 35) underline such a conceptual perspective and suggest that the political arena of livelihoods should be analysed through the working of institutions, keeping an eye on conflicting interests in organizing livelihoods. The entire component of 'transforming structures and processes' is blamed as being mechanical and a-political, not addressing power relations, thus avoiding taking the analytical step from institutions to power (ibid.).

Violent environments also influence 'livelihood actions' or 'strategies' — the fourth component of the SLF indicating the ways of using and combining assets to make a livelihood. In this context, new frontiers in livelihood research also raise important questions about the conventional view on agency and behaviour in the livelihood approach. It is argued that intra-household differentials, multi-local livelihoods, non-deliberate livelihood actions and ex-ante and ex-post livelihood activities should receive more attention. Such a focus on agency also seems important in the context of violent environments. Here, livelihood strategies are characterized by retreat into subsistence and barter economies, dependence on social and political resources, informality, and a delicate balance between low-risk and high-risk (and often illegal) activities to make a livelihood. Finally, the 'livelihood outcomes' (the last component of the SLF), as the result of the livelihood actions, are again reflections of violent environments, characterized by economic scarcities, social disparities, political dependencies, and psychological distress, pessimism and trauma.

A refined political ecology of violence that incorporates a more political understanding of livelihoods specifically explores the production, enactments, and representations of violence against humans in relation to the environment — not environmental scarcity or environmental greed *per se*. This poses the question of how the analytical connections between environment and violence can be sharpened. Peluso and Watts (2001: 26) suggest focusing on these connections along four dimensions: environmental degradation (associated with non-renewable resource extraction); environmental change (human transformation of renewable resources); environmental enclosure (associated with living space and territory); and environmental rehabilitation, conservation and preservation. The second and third dimensions are of particular relevance to the Sri Lanka case study. However, they require further refinement of the environment–violence interface. With regard to the transformation of renewable natural resources, the case study shows that environmental change can occur as a consequence of violence, specifically through violent action that may not at all be triggered by environmental concerns *per se*. Violence and its social consequences can have direct or indirect adverse impacts on environmental resources and their livelihood functions and services. The third dimension (the enclosure of environmental resources) is also a crucial element in most situations of protracted conflict and violence. In Sri Lanka, regimes of access and control shifted temporarily or permanently as a result of violent processes, as living space became subject

Figure 1. The Political Ecology of Violence



Note: Figure 1 shows a conceptual framework for actor-oriented analyses of violent environments, suggesting three conceptual foci: *violence as agency* as central theme, *contested entitlements*, and *politicized livelihoods*. The physical and the social environment are conceptualized as being interlinked by processes and outcomes of violent regulation; violence is thus seen as having agency.

to conflicting territorial claims. This had profound implications for existing entitlement relations and the transformation of resource-based livelihoods.

Based on these central processes of violent transformations of environmental resources and the shifts in resource access and control, Figure 1 offers a conceptual framework for the analysis of the political ecology of violence. The framework proposes that violent environments consist of two coupled elements: a physical environment that provides a resource system on which livelihoods can be based, and a social environment in which the environmental entitlements derived from the resource system are contested by powerful actors (resource users) and differing agendas. The livelihoods of resource users are prone to politicization by the agendas of actors with differential power. Violent action, then, can become a means of regulating the relationship between the physical and the social environment. The impact of violence is manifold: on the one hand, violence leads to the transformation of resource systems, which in turn impacts upon associated livelihood systems through processes of socio-environmental transformation. On the other hand, the constitutive components of livelihood systems become subjugated to and restricted by the dynamics of violence. The impacts of violence on resource and livelihood systems are closely intertwined, and they can be mutually reinforcing.

It follows from this discussion that such a conceptual perspective on the political ecology of violence needs to understand the agendas of power, the

actors and actions involved, the resource systems affected, and the arenas in which the dynamics of violence are actually happening. From this perspective, the concept of violent environments is not just about struggles over environments and resources: natural resources neither finance nor motivate conflict, and violence is not linked to the scarcity or abundance of natural resources (Le Billon, 2001: 561). ‘Violent environments’ rather refers to the transformation of resource systems under the impact of violence, to the shifts in environmental entitlements, to the politicization of livelihoods, and to the new vulnerabilities created during these processes, including the exposure, sensitivities and coping capabilities of vulnerable people. These dynamics will be illustrated in the following section, using case study material from eastern Sri Lanka, an area that has been heavily affected by protracted violence since the beginning of the armed conflict in the area in the 1980s.

EASTERN SRI LANKA: CONTESTED ENVIRONMENTAL ENTITLEMENTS AND POLITICIZED LIVELIHOODS

The discussion of the environment–violence interface presented here is based on empirical data collected by the authors from 1999 to 2001 (Bohle, forthcoming) and from 2003 to 2005 (Fünfgeld, 2007) in the Batticaloa District, Sri Lanka. The first study period (1999–2001) took place during ongoing violence, whereas the second period (2003–4) occurred during a time of continuous, albeit highly unstable ceasefire, which allowed for detailed case studies in previously inaccessible areas. Conducting empirical social research in violence-affected areas brings up ethical dilemmas (Goodhand, 2000), such as the sensitivity of information, the psycho-social consequences of empirical investigation, and the need for protecting the security of research participants while also trying to generate reliable and verifiable information. Associated with these problems are methodological difficulties. In this study, these considerations have led to a focus on qualitative, individual-based livelihoods research techniques, while also drawing on quantitative, village-based surveys for basic information on livelihood strategies.

The Logics and Dynamics of Violence in Eastern Sri Lanka

Violence in eastern Sri Lanka has been closely linked to the ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority that has shaken the northern and eastern parts of the island since 1983 (Bohle, 2004). In Sri Lanka, direct violence has reportedly killed nearly 100,000 people, 70 per cent of whom were civilians (Bandara, 2002: 573). In February 2002, the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) signed a ceasefire agreement. The ceasefire was fragile right from its inception: in 2004 and, more severely, in early 2006 continuing provocations of

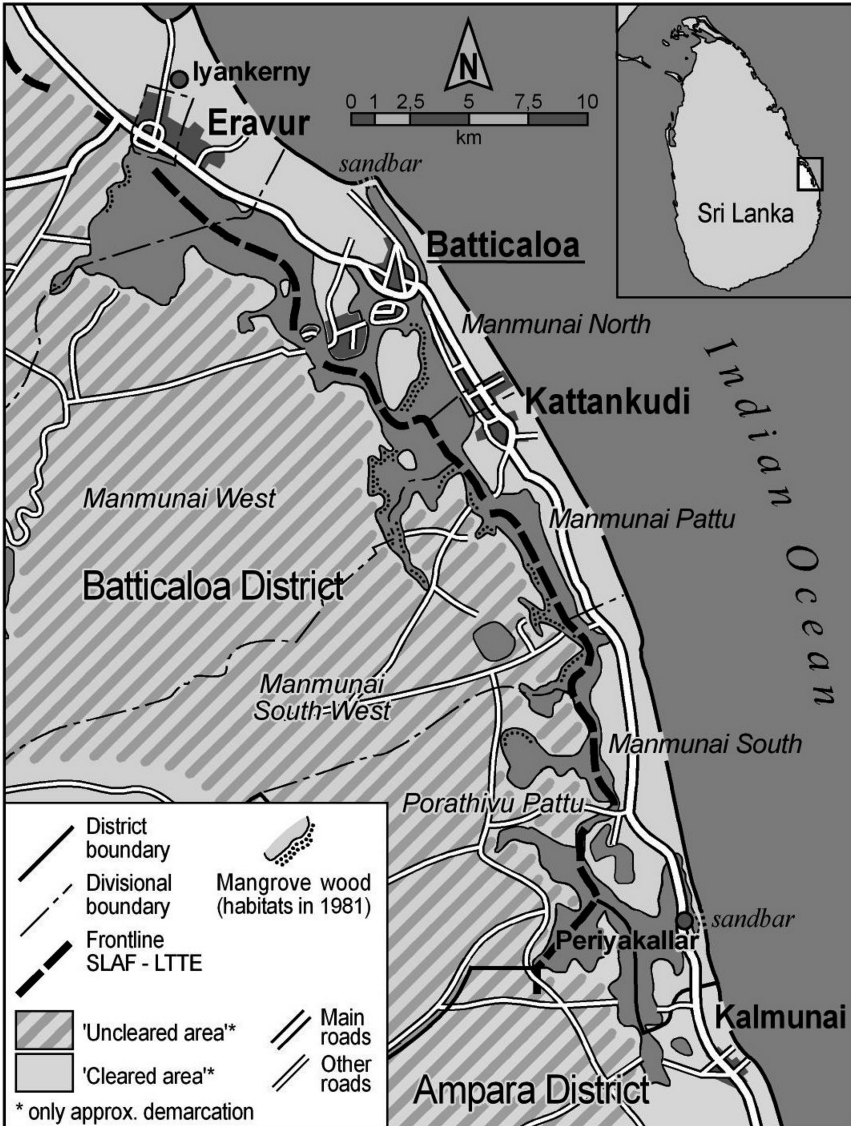
the conflicting parties led to a resurgence in open military violence and to a *de facto* breakdown of the ceasefire. Since May 2006, most of the island's northeastern population has lived in a state of war. Despite official statements from both the government and the LTTE who keep proclaiming their continued interest in a peaceful settlement of the political conflict, refugee numbers have increased dramatically, and civilians are widely exposed to direct violence.

In addition to decades of such direct violence, Sri Lankans experienced structural forms of violence long before the ethno-political conflict erupted in 1983, and have continued to suffer from these since the 2002 ceasefire. Access to higher education, for example, is still far from equal for Sinhalese and Tamil students, as most university programmes in Sri Lanka are conducted in Sinhala or in English, making it harder for Tamils to acquire tertiary-level degrees. In Sri Lanka, cultural violence was widely exerted through the strategic instrumentalization of religion, language, historicity and territoriality by all the parties involved in the war (Bohle, 2004; Rösel, 1997).

Our case study focuses on the political ecology of violence in the Batticaloa District, located in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka (see Figure 2). In Batticaloa all three forms of violence as defined above coincide, causing continuous political and social instability. The resulting 'geographies of violence' (Watts, 2000) can be explored and interpreted as time- and space-specific reflections of the dynamics and logic of violence itself. The agenda of violence in eastern Sri Lanka revolves around the demand of the Tamil Tigers to create an independent Tamil homeland in the north and east of the island. Violent agendas have been translated into violent actions (killings, bombings, fighting, torturing, so-called ethnic cleansings) by violent actors (army troops, liberation fronts, guerrillas, war entrepreneurs). The main arena of such actions in the Batticaloa District has been the frontline between the so-called 'cleared area' — the coastal strip with a mixture of Tamil and Muslim urban centres and fishing communities controlled by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF) — and the rural hinterland with peasant communities occupied by the Tamil liberation movement, led by the LTTE (the 'uncleared area'; see Bohle, forthcoming: Fig. 3). The local dynamics of violence in eastern Sri Lanka have created surges in the intensity of the violence and spatial shifts in its occurrence. For example, the 'times of terror' of 1987 to 1990 were succeeded by relatively peaceful periods of intermittent ceasefires, and occasional shifts in frontlines reflected the changing powers of the actors involved. The geographies of security and insecurity in Batticaloa District have changed constantly as frontlines and areas of control have shifted back and forth.

The areas most prone to violence and most politically unstable were those with more than one single protection regime, often referred to as 'grey areas'. As Goodhand et al. (2000) showed in their detailed account of the political economy of violence in Sri Lanka, the almost random ebb and flow of

Figure 2. Batticaloa Lagoon



Cartography: N. Harm / H. Fünfgeld 2006.

violence was particularly apparent in the grey areas, where political and military control was contested and political stability was lacking. Where Tamil and Muslim communities live in close proximity to each other, as was the case in the coastal strip of Batticaloa, villagers and urban populations are subject to overlapping regimes of control. Here, violence and terror have been

most acute, leading to a hardening of existing ethnic fault lines (Fünfgeld, 2006). The ethnic geography of Batticaloa District has been redrawn with an increasing proportion of the population living in segregated ethnic enclaves. All along the coastal strip of Batticaloa District, violent events have become part of the social memory of the villagers and defining events in their individual life histories and collective memories. The propensity for violent behaviour at different levels of society seems to have been greatest in such areas of shifting and overlapping security regimes.

Violent Environments: The Transformation of the Batticaloa Lagoon System

Stretching over 54 km along the east coast of Sri Lanka, the Batticaloa Lagoon (Figure 2) is a resource system which provides livelihoods for approximately 10,000 families of lagoon fishermen. With its brackish water, the lagoon is famous for the abundance of high quality fish, crustaceans and prawns. Over the past two decades, the Batticaloa Lagoon has been a particularly contested space of warfare, since the main frontline between the areas controlled by the SLAF and the LTTE cuts straight through the lagoon system, from north to south. As the two parties struggled to gain access to the lagoon and to control movements along its shores, the entire coastal zone between the lagoon and the seashore was subjected to strict systems of spatial control exercised by the SLAF and the LTTE. The SLAF, for example, developed a closely knit control system over the north and northeast of Sri Lanka, consisting of zones of restriction, supervision, no-entry and high security (Rösel, 1997). In the 'uncleared' areas, the LTTE established its own regimes of security and civilian control, including taxation, administration, education and justice (Bohle, 2004: 25).

The drastic measures undertaken by the SLAF and the LTTE to ensure control over the Batticaloa Lagoon on their respective sides had severe impacts on the lagoon environment and the associated natural resources. The SLAF established innumerable checkpoints, roadblocks, bunker systems and minefields along the eastern shorelines of the lagoon. It also disrupted the natural cycle of opening and closing of the lagoon mouth (Korf and Fünfgeld, 2006; Fünfgeld, 2007). The lagoon has two sand bars that constitute natural divides between the lagoon waters and the open sea; the northern bar was permanently held open by the SLAF during most of the 1990s in order to artificially keep the water table of the lagoon low. This was deemed necessary to prevent flooding of the SLAF's bunker system and to provide access to the open sea for their naval transport services. The delicate seasonal rhythm of opening and closing of the sand bars, however, is a vital process within the lagoon system. During the rainy season, the fresh water influx from the western hinterlands naturally triggers the opening of the sand bars, and lagoon water is discharged into the open sea. This process 'flushes' accumulated pollutants out of the lagoon. It also enables marine fish and crustaceans to

enter the lagoon as part of their seasonal migratory patterns. Young prawns, for example, return to the nutrient-rich lagoon for feeding as part of their life cycle. When the sand bar naturally closes again after the monsoon period, it acts as a barrier against saltwater intrusion, keeping salinity in the lagoon constant and providing an ideal brackish water habitat for a diverse range of fish and prawn populations.

When the northern sand bar of the Batticaloa Lagoon was kept open, the habitat functions of the northern part of the lagoon system were adversely affected. Lagoon ecology was further disturbed through artificial dams within the lagoon so that the 'sea tigers', the LTTE's marine cadre, could not enter with their high-speed power boats to attack the Sri Lankan military. This impacted on the natural rhythm of flooding and drainage in the lagoon and hampered seasonal migration of fish and crustaceans. Due to increasing salinization of the lagoon water, paddy farmers along the western shore of the lagoon suffered from high salinity levels in agricultural wells, which they used for irrigating rice fields. The fresh water table that was normally re-filled during the rainy season dropped, thus affecting drinking water supply at wells in villages neighbouring the lagoon. Conversely, in the southern part of the lagoon, the bar mouth remained permanently closed due to increased water discharge from the lagoon through the northern bar mouth. As a result, the monsoonal freshwater flush with its important cleansing and regenerative potential came to a halt. In the southern part of the lagoon, the annual flush effect is vital for the health of the lagoon system, which is heavily burdened with eutrophication, chemical pollutants and pollution through solid waste. During the dry season, when the lagoon waters stagnate and temperatures increase, high levels of water pollution promote mosquito breeding and vector-borne diseases that affect the health of residents in the area.¹ This example of tampering with the bar mouth cycle shows the mechanisms by which environmental or livelihood concerns are overruled by military interests. The use of violence, or the threat thereof, affected the security needs of military actors; their response resulted in severe changes to environmental resources and in hardship for those in the vicinity of the Batticaloa Lagoon.

The destruction of vast stretches of mangroves along the eastern, government-controlled shores of the Batticaloa Lagoon provides another example of the severe impact which the violence has had on lagoon ecology (Fünfgeld, 2004, 2007). For the SLAF, the thick mangrove belt posed a security threat because it was used by the LTTE as a cover to infiltrate into government-controlled areas during the night, and to attack army camps and bunkers. Special task forces of the Sri Lankan army therefore cleared all the mangroves along the coastal roads, around army camps and at other strategic points. This had immediate effects on the lagoon's ecology. Apart from

1. However, the annual discharge of pollutants into the sea is an issue of environmental concern in itself, which points to the need for integrated environmental management that views the lagoon as part of the larger coastal and marine ecosystems.

providing nursery grounds for lagoon fish and crustaceans, mangroves also fulfil important hydro-morphological functions, such as consolidating sediment, immobilizing and detoxifying water pollutants, and protecting the shore from coastal erosion. They also provide readily available sources of firewood and construction material for local populations. Earlier extraction of wood had already affected mangrove growth adversely in some areas of Batticaloa Lagoon.² The destruction of mangroves put additional stress on the fishery resources of the lagoon, resulting in decreasing fish catches that began to threaten the livelihoods of lagoon fishermen. Environmental destruction, as a consequence of violence in the area, thus has also led to structural violence in the form of livelihood insecurity through a process of declining environmental entitlements among the already marginalized lagoon fishermen.

The fishery resources of the Batticaloa Lagoon were also adversely affected by increasing competition between lagoon fishermen and other social actors who had started to engage in lagoon fishing. These included paddy farm labourers, who had lost access to the farms in the uncleared area because of violence, and urban residents who had turned to fishing to supplement their food supply, which had declined because of the war economy. Increased competition for limited resources resulted in the use of illegal and ecologically unsustainable fishing methods, such as small-meshed fishing nets. Lagoon fishermen from different areas observed that, besides an overall decline in species diversity, the stocks of fish and prawn in the lagoon system had dramatically decreased in the wake of violence and continuing ethno-political conflict. All these impacts of violence on the lagoon system — the disruption of the sand bar cycle, the destruction of mangroves, the intensification of lagoon fishing, and increasing competition among fishermen — had major implications for the entitlements and livelihoods of thousands of directly resource-dependent lagoon fishermen and their families.

Contested Entitlements: Decline in Environmental Goods and Services

Being mostly a 'grey' area where neither of the two parties in the conflict had the upper hand militarily, the Batticaloa Lagoon became an arena of intense fighting and violence throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. As the lines of control frequently shifted back and forth, the civilian populations of the coastal strip were often caught between these fronts. Fighting was particularly intense because of the lagoon's strategic position as a major area of infiltration for the LTTE into the government-controlled coastal strip of the Batticaloa District. This situation resulted in restrictions and control

2. The disastrous effects that the total clearing of the mangroves had on the coastal ecosystem became apparent when the December 2004 tsunami hit eastern Sri Lanka. Those villages bordering the exposed fringe of the lagoon that were no longer protected by mangrove belts were fully exposed to the tsunami waves and were totally destroyed.

mechanisms that drastically curtailed the environmental entitlements of the affected fishermen. In this section, we will illustrate these changes by exploring the dynamics of entitlement relations in two villages in the ‘cleared’ area: Iyankerny, a Muslim settlement near the north-eastern shore of the Batticaloa Lagoon, which is home to socially and economically marginalized full-time lagoon fishermen; and Periyakallar, a comparatively wealthy Tamil lagoon and sea fishing village on the coastal highway, near the southern end of the lagoon (see Figure 2).

In the war-affected northeast of Sri Lanka, the fabric of entitlement relations through which individuals, households and communities gain and lose access to environmental goods, services and resources has been profoundly changed by the logic and dynamics of violence. These changes have led to increasing social disparities between actors with unequal power, which often follow ethno-political lines (see also Bohle, forthcoming; Korf, 2003; Korf et al., 2001). In the Batticaloa lagoon fishery sector, a number of processes affected the environmental entitlements of fishermen and other groups of the local population.

Movement and mobility were controlled and access to resources was restricted by the warring parties, with direct and negative consequences for the fishermen’s set of entitlements. Along the eastern shore of the lagoon, road blocks and police posts were set up by the SLAF, and pedestrians, bus passengers and truck cargoes were strictly controlled. This included lagoon fishermen and fish traders who tried to sell their catches on the lagoon shores and at nearby local markets. The checks regularly resulted in long delays during transport, which in turn reduced the quality of the fish, often to the extent that the fish perished and were unsaleable.

At the same time, the LTTE also exercised numerous informal, and thus largely hidden, control mechanisms and enforced these by means of threats. This led to a general sense of suspicion and distrust. Young men were particularly at risk of being arrested by either the LTTE or by the SLAF on the grounds that they allegedly supported the other side in the war. Furthermore, Tamil youth feared forceful recruitment by the LTTE, which was common practice in the organization. Due to the particularly frequent incidences of arrest and harassment, lagoon fishing was avoided by younger fishermen; young men tried to stay at home and keep a low profile. This meant that older men had to increase their fishing efforts, and women had to increase their activities and their mobility: they crossed roadblocks, went to the market, registered at police posts and maintained contacts with local officeholders.

Periyakallar: The Impact of Violence on a Tamil Fishing Village

During most of the 1990s, access to the open sea was restricted to a five-mile security zone, night fishing in the lagoons was completely prohibited, and the horse-power of mechanized boats used for sea fishing was limited due

to security regulations. The situation in the village of Periyakallar, in the army-controlled coastal strip, provides an illustration of the impact of such restrictions. As in other places, the security measures of the SLAF forced all local fishermen to land their boats in specially demarcated areas, near the local army and police camps, where they had to sign in and out before and after their fishing trips. Fishermen were occasionally arrested on the suspicion of collaborating with the LTTE, held in custody, beaten up, and some were even taken to army concentration camps for weeks or months. The LTTE, on the other hand, had a known record for coercive conscription, their main target group for recruitment being poor and marginalized youths such as those from lagoon fishing families. For many families, sending one of their sons to the LTTE became a strategy to minimize compulsory financial contributions, secure access to special services provided by the LTTE, and gain a minimum level of protection for the rest of the family during times of acute fighting. Becoming part of the violent network, then, provided a minimum level of entitlements for marginalized and war-affected Tamil fishing families.

Tamil fishermen in Periyakallar and other villages in the cleared areas thus found themselves in a politically complicated situation. They had to constantly negotiate their loyalties to the LTTE, while trying to keep a low political profile towards the SLAF, whose intelligence units often raided villages on suspicion of collaboration with the LTTE. Their political position also had severe impacts on the livelihood opportunities of the fishermen, since access to the lagoon was rigorously controlled by the SLAF. It was common practice of the SLAF to deny access on the basis of alleged or actual LTTE co-operation. During times of heavy fighting, the fishermen were in fear of harassment, abduction, and killing and thus abandoned fishing altogether. Fishing activities ceased completely during such periods, which lasted up to several months.

Until the 2002 ceasefire, the local security situation in the Batticaloa District was highly volatile, changing rapidly as violent incidents took place in the area frequently and often without warning. These dynamics made it difficult for fishermen to react adequately and in timely way; for instance, when violence broke out in the village, they might be away on a fishing trip. In Periyakallar, fishermen repeatedly got caught in crossfire while fishing on the lagoon. The majority of lagoon fishing families lost one or more male family members due to violence, and thus became increasingly cautious in their fishing activities. Thus, both formal access restrictions to the lagoon fishing grounds and informal limitations to movements on and around the lagoon, which were the result of a highly volatile security situation, impinged negatively on the environmental entitlements of the fishermen.

A second process with negative impact on entitlement relations involved the market-based entitlements of the fishermen. As a result of interrupted transportation and disrupted transport infrastructure, the destruction of cooling houses, unsafe conditions at local market places, and limited or barred

access to the lucrative Colombo market, the income earned from fish trading decreased considerably. During times of particularly severe violence, the local fish market in Periyakallar did not operate at all, as people were afraid to leave their homes. On top of that, fish traders — like all business owners in the area — were forced to pay protection levies to the LTTE, which further diminished their share of revenue. As local incomes dropped and purchasing power decreased, prices for fish also declined.

A third, parallel, process affected the institutional entitlements of the fishermen (Watts and Bohle, 2003: 69) that were guaranteed through membership in social networks and civic associations. For the Tamil fishermen, lagoon fishing had always been a largely unregulated activity with a high degree of individualization. Under violent circumstances, any intra-communal linkages of the Tamil lagoon fishermen disintegrated even further, as individuals tried to keep a low profile and avoid taking up any communal responsibility, fearing being exposed to harassment or sanctions by the warring parties. The operations of the Fishermen's Co-operative Society (FCS) in Periyakallar, for example, came to a almost complete halt in 1990, and efforts to reactivate it since have had little success. The fishermen were no longer able, or willing, to pay the monthly contributions, since the FCS was no longer in a position to provide support to them due to weak leadership and political differences among the office holders. With continuing violence, community organizations like the FCS in Periyakallar were increasingly prone to political instrumentalization that often resulted in local violence. The LTTE frequently extorted money from community organizations, which were forced to support the LTTE's armed struggle. At the same time, government support to the co-operatives through the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources ceased, as a result of under-funding from the Sinhalese-dominated government and a chronic shortage in qualified staff in the war-affected districts. In short, previously held institutional entitlements were curtailed, and frequently politicized and exploited by Tamil guerrilla groups.

Iyankerny: Violent Transformation of Muslim Fishery Livelihoods

The role of institutional entitlements was particularly apparent in Muslim communities, where institutional linkages became more important for lagoon fishermen. Muslim fishermen faced less threat from the army but feared the LTTE. Disagreements between regional Muslim leaders and the LTTE culminated in 1990, when hundreds of Muslims were killed by the LTTE in massacres all over the Batticaloa District. Throughout the 1990s, violent assaults by the LTTE on Muslim fishermen and their fishing gear continued. In Iyankerny, these recurring periods of violence resulted in the displacement or permanent dislocation of many fishing families, worsening their already marginal socio-economic status within Muslim society. The fear of harassment and attack confined the movements of most Muslim fishermen

to the near-shore area on the eastern side of the lagoon, in the vicinity of the urban and peri-urban Muslim settlements of Kattankudy and Eravur, and to Batticaloa town.

In Iyankerny, lagoon fishermen reported growing competition for limited lagoon resources, decreasing fish catches and continuing socio-economic polarization between Muslim and Tamil fishermen in the lagoon. However, the strong intra-communal networks of the Muslim lagoon fishers which traditionally linked lagoon fishing and trading activities provided additional entitlements in times of violence. In the case of Iyankerny, the trading communities organized the marketing of fish in local and urban market networks, and they also provided market outlets for domestic production carried out by Muslim women (cleaning and roasting cashew nuts, mat weaving, food preparation). Typically, the products were then sold through retail businesses owned by members of the extended family. Also, the Muslim community, through its trading linkages and political organizations, had comparatively better access to the political elite in the capital of Colombo, which became increasingly important for voicing Muslim interests and taking them to higher political levels. These networks reached even further and extended to the Arab peninsula, where young Muslim women used existing contacts for temporary labour migration.

Illegal entitlements also became part of violent environments, including risky activities such as fishing at night, entering restricted zones, smuggling, or even petty thefts, thus balancing increased personal risks against support to household survival. It is important to note that the notion of legal/illegal activities is far from clear-cut in the Batticaloa District, since different legal spaces overlap and, in some places and during some times, co-exist. Such hybrid spaces provided economic opportunities for those with relevant linkages to the military actors. During periods of violence, for instance, Tamil fishermen earned an income by conveying messages and transporting goods and people across the lagoon. Likewise, some Muslim fishermen were known to collaborate with the SLAF, which offered military protection in return. Such activities had serious consequences for the fishermen and resulted in raids and executions by both the LTTE and the SLAF on those suspected of supporting the opposing side. Illegal entitlements vested in violent environments thus provided financially lucrative but extremely risky opportunities in times when other livelihood strategies had become increasingly restricted.

The entire set of direct, market-based, institutional and illegal entitlements thus changed profoundly and adapted to the logic and dynamics of violence. As a consequence of violence, the scenario of environmental entitlements in Batticaloa was characterized by the following conditions (Le Billon, 2000: 11):

- a general situation of scarcity and destruction with shortages of food, environmental goods, and fishing equipment;

- the collapse of economic regulation and terms of exchange, resulting in greater uncertainty, lower levels of trust, and a tendency for economic activities to shift towards low-risk transactions including subsistence and barter;
- biased price structures and exchange rates, often manipulated by military forces;
- declining food production and consumption, falling incomes;
- geographical and economic fragmentation;
- increasing social and economic disparities and unequal power relations;
- pessimism, resulting in low levels of investments, sale of assets by vulnerable groups and short-term opportunistic behaviour.

Under these circumstances, the environment became an arena of contested entitlements, a theatre in which claims over resources were continuously negotiated, won and lost (Peluso and Watts, 2001: 25). Violence in the Batticaloa Lagoon was first and foremost expressed through the subjugation of the rights of people to determine the use of their environment to make a livelihood (Le Billon, 2001: 561).

Politicized Livelihoods

In Batticaloa District, the politicization of livelihoods can be illustrated by three different types of political economies that emerged as a result of prolonged violence in the northeast (Goodhand et al., 2000): a war economy (controlled by conflict entrepreneurs); a speculative economy (engineered by armed forces and conflict profiteers); and a survival economy (involving the vast majority of the population).

While war and violence generally restricted economic opportunities, leading to stagnation, economic depression and precarious livelihoods for the majority of the population, war entrepreneurs and conflict profiteers did extremely well (Goodhand et al., 2000: 400). One of their strategies was rent-seeking behaviour at various levels, stretching from pay-offs on arm contracts to issuing identity papers, from taxation of traders, goods and bus passengers at check-points to the violent seizure of fish catches from the fishermen. Another strategy was to systematically control market networks and price formation. The war economy and the speculative economy of Batticaloa became protectionist, dependent upon maintaining and exploiting price differences between Colombo and the Eastern provinces, and between the cleared and uncleared areas within the region.

Regional and social disparities in Batticaloa have increased enormously during the violent conflict. An overt discourse on grievance was overlaid by a silent discourse of greed by those 'doing well out of war' (Collier, 2000). Conversely, narrowing economic opportunities, sharp competition for scarce resources, and increasing poverty created vulnerabilities for the poor who had

to fall back on survival economies (for a detailed village account of survival economies in Batticaloa, see Bohle, forthcoming). The overall agenda for the lagoon fishermen of Batticaloa has been the search for security — in personal, material and social terms — and the attempt to avoid violent impacts or at least to recover from them as quickly as possible. As Korf (2004: 288) has pointed out, it has been mainly social and political resources that have provided the means for coping with violence and searching for security. The contention by Goodhand et al. (2000: 392) holds true: violence does not just imply destruction of social and political capital and it does not lead to mere social breakdown. In Batticaloa, violence has been less about social breakdown than about the creation of new forms of social, political and economic relations and networks. Social networks that constitute social capital have played a major role for the livelihood agendas of war-affected fishing communities.³

In his analysis of livelihoods and vulnerability in four villages of Trincomalee District, on the east coast of Sri Lanka to the north of Batticaloa, Korf (2004) identified three ‘pillars’ of household strategies under violence: managing personal risks and security; adjusting household economies for survival; and accessing external support. All three types of strategy have been employed by the war-affected lagoon fishermen of Batticaloa. With regard to the last, residents of Periyakallar managed to access support from international and local non-governmental organizations that predominantly work in the army-controlled coastal district. The location of Periyakallar in the cleared area along the coastal highway guaranteed a minimum of security to international organizations, and the road provided easy access. Thus, several rehabilitation organizations began their work in Periyakallar in the 1990s. Iyankerny, on the other hand, is located inland, further from the main road, in a densely populated Muslim–Tamil border area that was badly affected by violence during the 1990s. Officially considered a cleared area, its status frequently shifted towards a ‘grey area’ where control was violently contested. Iyankerny thus received relatively little external support and has largely used intra-communal networks and labour migration to sustain its livelihoods. Periyakallar and Iyankerny show how the specific geographies of violence vary across time and space, and how security regimes and the associated impacts of violence are highly dynamic phenomena.

In both Iyankerny and Periyakallar, all constitutive elements of the fishermen’s livelihoods have become highly politicized. Violence negatively affected the lagoon environment and thus the natural resources used by the fishermen for their living. Violence profoundly altered mobility patterns, social relations and family compositions. Household decision-making processes were forced to become political, in order to manage individual risks, security and survival. While risk exposure and coping mechanisms in violent environments differ widely across ethnic groups and geographical areas,

3. For an analysis of thirteen such networks in a lagoon village, see Bohle (2006).

lagoon fishermen as a marginal social group with high levels of vulnerability were particularly burdened with the diverse impacts of violence. The tsunami of December 2004, which destroyed many coastal villages like Periyakallar, has further dimmed the prospects for future livelihood security. In mid-2006, open military violence erupted once again, and thousands of civilians in the northeast have been displaced. With the prospect of a non-violent settlement to the conflict dimming, the livelihoods of lagoon fishermen and other occupational groups continue to be highly insecure.

The politicization of livelihoods in Batticaloa is thus a reflection of the political ecology of violence. It has created alternative systems of control, profit and power, on the one hand, and produced processes of disempowerment, disentitlement and exploitation, on the other.

CONCLUSION: BLENDING THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF VIOLENCE WITH LIVELIHOOD RESEARCH

This case study has illustrated the processes by which the regime of violence created by political conflict determines and reinforces both environmental and livelihood change. These direct and indirect impacts of different forms of violence can be analysed within the framework of a political ecology of violence that connects existing work on political ecology with a politically deepened and actor-oriented livelihoods research.

The exhortation of de Haan and Zoomers (2005) to explore new frontiers in livelihood research dovetails very closely with our account of a political ecology of violence in eastern Sri Lanka. They claim, for example, that livelihood activities are not neutral, but highly political, engendered by processes of inclusion and exclusion, where some people exclude others from access to resources with the objective of maximizing their own returns. While such processes were observed in eastern Sri Lanka, our understanding of a political ecology of violence is intended to dig deeper, by taking the political causes of environmental change into account. Direct violence, as it becomes part of day-to-day life in war zones, results in different forms of structural violence through changing and highly contested entitlement relations. As in the case of the Batticaloa Lagoon, environmental change induced by direct violence impacts upon existing patterns of resource use and connected livelihood strategies, leading to structural social change and the politicization of livelihoods, with newly emerging patterns of livelihood insecurity and vulnerability.

In conclusion, we argue that new frontiers in livelihood research might be creatively blended with a political ecology of violence by focusing on contested entitlements and politicized livelihoods in violent contexts. In the Batticaloa Lagoon system, the protracted conflict caused the entire fabric of entitlement relations — by which the fishing communities gain and lose access to environmental goods and services — to become subjugated to the

logic and dynamic of violence. As a consequence of restrictions on movement and mobility, violent displacements and limited access to resources, markets and social networks, the environment became an arena of contested entitlements, where claims over resources were constantly negotiated and fought over, lost and won. At the same time, livelihoods became highly politicized. While violence implied economic depression and precarious livelihoods for the majority of the population, there were also war entrepreneurs and profiteers who did extremely well due to the war, by controlling resource access, market networks and movement of goods. Both regional and social disparities grew enormously during the violent conflict. Under these circumstances, struggles over environmental entitlements and the politicization of resource-based livelihoods created alternative systems of power and control over the environment, and induced new processes of disempowerment and social vulnerability. This, in our view, is the essential finding, conceptualized here in a framework which blends a political ecology of violence with new frontiers in livelihood research.

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Hans-Georg Bohle is a Professor in the Department of Geography, University of Bonn, Meckenheimer Allee 166, 53115 Bonn, Germany. His research interests include the political ecology of health, and food and water in megacities (such as Chennai and Dhaka) and in peripheral regions (such as Orissa) of South Asia. He is the author of many works, including 'Sustainable Livelihood Security: Evolution and Application', in H. G. Brauch et al. (eds) *Facing Global Environmental Change: Environmental, Human, Energy, Food, Health and Water Security Concepts* (Springer, forthcoming 2008).

Hartmut Fünfgeld recently completed his PhD at the Department of Geography, South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, Im Neuenheimer Feld 330, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany. His research interests focus on social vulnerability, peace and conflict research, and disaster risk management, particularly in South Asia. His publications include *Fishing in Muddy Waters: Socio-Environmental Relations under the Impact of Violence* (Verlag für Entwicklungspolitik, forthcoming 2007) and 'War and the Commons: Assessing the Changing Politics of Violence, Access and Entitlements in Sri Lanka', with B. Korf (*Geoforum* 37.3, 2006).

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