

Community-Based Peacebuilding and Sustainable Livelihoods: A Study of Development Practices in the Malayaga Community in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study explores how community-based peacebuilding initiatives contribute to sustainable livelihoods among the Malayaga Tamil community in Sri Lanka. Historically marginalized and socio-economically excluded, the Malayaga community—descendants of Indian plantation labourers brought during British colonial rule—faces persistent inequalities in access to education, land, and political participation. This research adopts a qualitative approach to examine how localized peacebuilding and development practices enhance social cohesion, gender equity, and economic empowerment. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted in Malayaga Community. The findings reveal that community-based organizations (CBOs), including women's cooperatives and youth development groups, have become critical agents of peace and sustainable change. These initiatives foster trust across ethnic and class divisions, promote participatory decision-making, and support livelihood diversification. However, structural barriers such as gender discrimination, limited institutional support, and economic dependency continue to hinder equitable development. The study argues that sustainable peacebuilding must be rooted in local agency, ethical governance, and inclusive policy frameworks that prioritize the social justice concerns of plantation communities. By integrating peacebuilding into sustainable development planning, this research highlights pathways to build resilience, reduce marginalization, and strengthen inter-community harmony in post-war Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Sustainable development, Peacebuilding, Malayaga Tamil community, Community participation, Livelihoods

1 Introduction

Sustainable peace and development are deeply intertwined, particularly in post-conflict societies where economic inequalities and social exclusion continue to shape community experiences. In the Sri Lankan context, although significant attention has been devoted to the Northern and Eastern Provinces in the aftermath of the civil war, comparatively little focus has been placed on the Malayaga Tamil community—settled primarily in the central highlands—who remain among the most marginalized social groups (Uyangoda, 2007). Their historical roots in the colonial plantation system have perpetuated generational

poverty, restricted land ownership, and limited access to education and political participation, thereby reinforcing cycles of exclusion and dependency (Kurian, 2020).

Moreover, while state-led development initiatives have sought to promote post-war reconciliation, they have often overlooked the unique socio-economic realities of the Malayaga Tamils. Against this backdrop, peacebuilding, when approached through a community-based lens, offers a transformative pathway for fostering local empowerment, reconciliation, and participatory governance (Lederach, 1997). Such an approach emphasizes dialogue, trust-building, and collective action as essential mechanisms for addressing in-



equalities and promoting inclusive development. In this regard, community-based development organizations in the Malayaga region have emerged as crucial actors that link livelihood enhancement with social cohesion. Therefore, this research investigates how these grassroots peacebuilding practices—anchored in sustainable livelihood programs—contribute to socio-economic transformation and collective resilience. By examining local development models and evaluating their broader impact on equity and empowerment, the study ultimately underscores the potential of inclusive, community-led strategies for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within Sri Lanka’s plantation regions.

2 Literature Review

The intersection of peacebuilding and sustainable development has received growing attention in both academic and policy-oriented discourse, particularly within post-conflict and developing societies. According to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2016b), peace and sustainability are mutually reinforcing processes, wherein sustainable development cannot be achieved without peace, and peace cannot be sustained without addressing inequality, poverty, and injustice. This reciprocal relationship underscores the importance of adopting holistic approaches that integrate social, economic, and political dimensions of development.

In the global discussions on participatory development, the theories of participatory development provide the foundation for understanding the local aspects of peacebuilding. Chambers (1997) argues that true development requires the disempowered and marginalized to be in a position to articulate their own needs and priorities and take ownership of development. “Putting the last first” means that the last and the least, the communities that have no voice in the planning and decision-making processes, should take the lead in forming and shaping the development outcomes. Likewise, Lederach (1997) who proposed the concept of conflict transformation, argues that peacebuilding is more than dispute resolution; it is the fostering of relationship, trust, and reconciliation at and between the social-community levels. These two approaches illus-

trate that the peace that is sustainable comes from the local rather than the imposed.

In the South Asian context, however, development interventions have often been characterized by hierarchical and centralized planning mechanisms that tend to reproduce structural inequalities rather than dismantle them. Uyangoda (2012) argues that in Sri Lanka, top-down development strategies have systematically marginalized minority and plantation communities, resulting in dependency, political alienation, and social fragmentation. This critique aligns with broader observations that post-war reconstruction efforts, while successful in improving infrastructure, have largely failed to address deep-rooted socio-economic disparities.

Empirical research from Sri Lanka further demonstrates how gender and class inequalities intersect with these broader structural issues. CENWOR (2019) and Kurian (2020) state that Malayaga Tamil women, although they are the economically the backbone of the plantation economy, continue to be politically and leadership excluded. Such exclusion further strengthens the community’s patriarchal structure and, thus, the community’s ability to actively participate in the construction of peace and development is undermined. Therefore, the lack of women’s equity is, to some extent, an issue of justice. However, it is also an issue of a lack of sustainable peace. In light of the prevailing circumstances, community-based organizations (CBOs) are becoming valuable tools for local empowerment and local reconciliation. De Silva (2021) describes how grassroots initiatives focused on various ethnic groups in the different regions of Sri Lanka positively changed local social trust, civic engagement, and inter-group dialogue. In a similar vein, CENWOR (2019) interprets the experiences of Malayaga Tamil women’s cooperatives as sites of economically motivated collective advocacy and community integration. Initiatives of these types are important in closing social gaps and fostering development. Still, Heidegger (2005) reports such networks lacking institutional support and funding will be destined to remain self-absorbed and open to political plays.

Overall, the literature review shows considerable gaps. While a lot of work has been done on economic deprivation and gender inequities in

the plantation sector, a systems analysis of the extent to which community-based peacebuilding has been incorporated in anchored studies of the region's sustainable livelihoods and socio-cultural integration in the Malayaga Tamil context remains a critical gap. Thus, the focus of this research is on integrating local peacebuilding activism with sustainable development. This will help in understanding the bottom-up perspective on the development of marginalized communities, particularly how local participation and empowerment will help in achieving peace and development in Sri Lanka after so many years.

3 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in participatory and interpretive paradigms. Data were collected from key Malayaga community in the Badulla District and nuwara eliya District, representing diverse socio-economic settings within the Malayaga Tamil community.

Primary data included 3 semi-structured interviews with community leaders, women's cooperative members, youth representatives, and local government officers. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted to capture collective perspectives on peacebuilding and livelihood practices. Thematic analysis was used to code and categorize narratives around empowerment, participation, and community resilience.

Secondary sources, including reports from NGOs, policy documents, and scholarly works, were used to triangulate findings. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' voices. This qualitative approach allowed for in-depth understanding of how local actors conceptualize peacebuilding and development, highlighting both structural constraints and transformative potentials.

4 Results and Discussions

4.1 Community-Based Organizations as Agents of Transformation

The findings of this study indicate that community-based organizations (CBOs) function

as important agents of social and economic transformation within the Malayaga Tamil community. Evidence from interviews and focus group discussions demonstrates that women's cooperatives, micro-credit associations, and community development societies play significant roles in strengthening livelihoods and promoting peacebuilding initiatives. These grassroots organizations create opportunities for income generation, encourage savings practices, and support entrepreneurship among women and low-income families. In addition, they foster collective action, mutual trust, and cooperation among community members. By bringing together people from different caste and estate backgrounds, CBOs help reduce divisions and strengthen social cohesion. Their participatory nature also enables marginalized groups, especially women, to engage in local decision-making processes. Therefore, CBOs emerge as key institutions for inclusive development and long-term community resilience.

4.2 Women's Empowerment and Participatory Leadership

A major outcome of the study is the empowerment of women through leadership roles in self-help groups and savings collectives. Economic independence has increased women's capacity to participate in community governance and advocate for their rights. This shift aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), promoting gender equality and empowerment (Kurian, 2020). The emergence of women leaders signals a transformation in patriarchal norms and contributes to more inclusive development planning.

4.3 Structural Challenges and Institutional Limitations

Despite notable progress in community development and grassroots mobilization, several structural challenges continue to hinder sustainable transformation within the Malayaga Tamil community. Many households remain affected by insecure land tenure, which limits their ability to invest in housing, agriculture, and long-term economic advancement. Low wages in plantation sectors, irregular employment opportunities, and rising living costs further deepen economic vulnerability and household insecurity. In addi-

tion, poor access to quality education, vocational training, and digital resources restricts upward social mobility, particularly for women and youth. Political patronage networks and party-based control also weaken the independence of community-based organizations (CBOs), often influencing resource allocation and leadership selection. Institutional neglect, inadequate state services, and weak policy implementation reduce the sustainability of local initiatives. Furthermore, bureaucratic barriers and limited financial support constrain community innovation and participation. These systemic inequalities demonstrate that peacebuilding cannot be separated from socio-economic justice. As noted by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2016b), inclusive and integrated policy frameworks are essential to connect peacebuilding efforts with equity, dignity, and long-term development outcomes.

4.4 Youth Initiatives and Intercultural Peacebuilding

The most recent study reveals the increased importance of youth organizations in promoting interethnic relations through culture, sports, and the arts. These initiatives develop social interactions, mutual respect, and a sense belonging for the different communities in the prism of social cohesion and harmony. Youth initiatives show substantial potential for sustainable peace and social growth when the younger generations are engaged as active catalysts for transformation.

4.5 Education and Awareness for Sustainable Peace

Education emerged as a central and recurring theme in community narratives regarding social progress and long-term peacebuilding. Participants consistently emphasized that education plays a vital role in breaking cycles of intergenerational poverty and creating pathways for upward mobility. Access to quality schooling, vocational training, and higher education was viewed as essential for empowering younger generations with knowledge, confidence, and economic opportunities. Respondents also highlighted that education develops critical thinking, tolerance, and awareness of rights and responsibilities within a

democratic society. Through classroom interaction and exposure to diverse perspectives, young people learn the values of mutual respect, coexistence, and non-violent conflict resolution. Civic engagement initiatives linked to education, such as youth clubs and community discussions, were also seen as important in strengthening leadership skills and social responsibility. Increased educational opportunities therefore equip younger individuals with the tools needed for active democratic participation and for contributing to more peaceful, inclusive, and resilient communities in the future.

4.6 Economic Resilience through Collective Action

By creating cooperative entrepreneurship and pooling resources, community-based organizations (CBOs) help build economic resilience. Livelihoods are improved and self-sufficiency is achieved through collective farming, small enterprises, savings groups, and reduced dependence on estate management. Such community initiatives are an explicit contribution to SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth.

4.7 Social Cohesion and Cultural Revival

Community projects have also contributed to cultural renewal, strengthening shared identity and inter-group relations. Traditional festivals, cooperative activities, and local arts initiatives have revived cultural pride while promoting coexistence among ethnically diverse residents of plantation settlements.

4.8 Governance and Policy Engagement

The growing civic awareness has led people in the communities to get involved with local governance bodies. While some people noted improvements in accountability and representation, most highlighted the need for more robust institutional assistance and clear development actions at the division and district levels.

4.9 Ethical Governance and Inclusive Development

The research underscores that for lasting peace to be possible, ethical governance and transparency are crucial. Peacebuilding becomes more inclusive and sustainable when government agencies work with communities in participatory planning and fair resource distribution.

4.10 Lessons for Replication and Long-Term Impact

The Malayaga Tamil experience offers valuable lessons for replication in other marginalized contexts of Sri Lanka. Locally rooted, ethically guided, and gender-responsive peacebuilding approaches not only enhance livelihoods but also build collective resilience. Integrating these insights into national development strategies can contribute to a more equitable and peaceful Sri Lanka.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that community-based peacebuilding serves as a vital and effective mechanism for advancing sustainable livelihoods and enduring peace within marginalized plantation communities in Sri Lanka. The experiences of the Malayaga Tamil community demonstrate that genuine transformation occurs when local ownership, participatory decision-making, and social equity form the foundation of development practice. In this context, peacebuilding is not a separate political project but an integrated social process that interlinks empowerment, justice, and sustainability.

5.1 Role of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)

Community-based organizations orchestrate socio-economic progress. CBOs focus on micro-finance, women's cooperatives, and youth-led cultural dialogues, which increase household income and savings and foster inter-group solidarity. These local initiatives enhance social cohesion, women's leadership and trust among diverse community members. Nonetheless,

progress remains constrained by structural inequalities like insecure land tenure, low education, and wage gaps. Weak political support, absence of institutional support, and political interference limits the grassroots initiatives' sustainable socio-economic development. (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2016b).

5.2 Addressing Structural Barriers

It is critical to incorporate peacebuilding approaches into national and regional development planning. The specific socio-economic profile of development plantation areas should inform the construction of development agendas. Enhancing the local governance structures of Divisional Secretariats, Pradeshiya Sabhas, and community development committees will lead to greater participatory opportunities, making governance more responsive to community needs. Sequentially addressing the enhancement of livelihoods and social reconciliation will reduce social inequalities and strengthen trust in the institutions.

5.3 Empowering Local Leadership and Women's Representation

All development and peacebuilding initiatives should continue to prioritize the increased participation and leadership of women. Leadership, negotiation, and peace education training programs will empower women and youth to become effective local change agents. Increasing the capacity of local councils and community leaders through collaborative planning and developing leadership will foster inclusivity and transparency in the decision-making process. These initiatives will help to change the power relations that have been traditionally limiting, especially for women plantation workers.

5.4 Policy and Institutional Recommendations

1. Integrate Peacebuilding into National Development Policies

Peacebuilding objectives should be incorporated into national development strategies to connect reconciliation efforts with poverty reduction, employment, housing, and social welfare goals.

2. **Strengthen Local Governance Structures**

Local government institutions should be reformed to become more transparent, accountable, and responsive to the specific concerns of plantation communities.

3. **Ensure Inclusive Representation**

Marginalized groups, including women, youth, and estate workers, should be given meaningful representation in local and regional decision-making bodies.

4. **Increase Financial Support for CBOs**

Greater public and donor funding should be allocated to community-based organizations (CBOs) to expand grassroots development and peacebuilding activities.

5. **Provide Technical Capacity Building**

Training in leadership, management, financial planning, and project implementation should be offered to strengthen the effectiveness of local organizations.

6. **Promote Gender Equity through Quotas**

Gender quotas should be introduced in local councils and development committees to increase women's participation and leadership.

7. **Leadership Training for Women**

Special mentoring and leadership development programs should be created to empower women in governance and community institutions.

8. **Improve Educational and Vocational Access**

Policies should expand access to education, skills training, and digital literacy for youth and women in plantation areas.

9. **Establish Monitoring and Evaluation Systems**

Independent monitoring mechanisms should assess the impact of peacebuilding and development programs while identifying implementation gaps.

10. **Encourage Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships**

Collaboration among government agencies, NGOs, private sectors, and local communities is necessary for sustainable and inclusive development.

5.5 **Ethical and Practical Contributions**

The main contribution of the study is to show that sustainable peace is ethical, socio-economic, and primarily the result of community self-organization rather than imposed from the outside. It offers clear proof that community-led initiatives, when coupled with development reconciliation and inclusive governance with equitable resource distribution, foster development and reconciliation.

5.6 **Concluding Reflections**

Ultimately, this research reiterates the deep interconnection and mutual reinforcement between peacebuilding and sustainable development. Peace cannot be understood merely as the absence of violence, nor can development be reduced to economic growth alone. Rather, both processes depend on justice, inclusion, participation, and equal access to opportunities. Through the lived experiences of the Malayaga Tamil community, this study demonstrates that historically marginalized groups seek not only material advancement, but also dignity, recognition, and a meaningful voice in shaping their futures.

The findings reveal that peacebuilding becomes most effective when it is rooted in everyday realities and community participation. Grassroots organizations, women's leadership, youth engagement, and collective action illustrate how local communities actively create peace through cooperation, dialogue, and social solidarity. These practices challenge exclusionary power structures and show that reconciliation is strongest when linked to livelihood security, education, and social empowerment.

Sustaining livelihoods with dignity and equity, supported by ethical and accountable governance, offers a pathway not only to prosperity but also to long-term peace and resilience in Sri Lanka. Development that ignores inequality risks reproducing conflict, while peacebuilding that neglects economic justice remains incomplete. Therefore, integrating peacebuilding principles into development practice represents a broader commitment to social justice, recognition, and respect for all citizens. In this sense, the future of a peaceful Sri Lanka depends on building institutions and policies that value diversity,

protect rights, and ensure that no community remains invisible or excluded.

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