

Peripheral Backwardness in Rapidly Developing Regions: A Case Study in Gampaha District in Sri Lanka

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Regional disparity of development has been the focus in many discussions on development issues in the third world during the past three decades. The economic growth and modernization are skewed in favour of metropolitan core area in the Western Province of Sri Lanka due to numerous historical and geographical factors. The more developed and highly urbanized Colombo Metropolitan Region (CMR) that approximates the Western Province of the island has emerged as the centre of gravity in the national economy. This region had a population of over 5.3 million in 2001 (27.89 per cent of total population of the country) concentrated into 5 per cent of the total land area. The counter forces of polarisation, such as spread effects have not been so vital even within the immediate peripheries of the core area. The widening inequalities at local levels caused disintegration of socio-economic systems even within the fast changing areas like Gampaha district of Sri Lanka. The present paper is an analysis of the prevailing spatial inequality of the development in the district and an exploration into causes and consequences of underdevelopment of peripheral rural areas. The Western coastal belt of the district enjoyed benefits of the recent developments in the metropolitan economy, through expanding physical infrastructure, industrialisation and employment generation. According to the explanations of National Human Development Report (1998), as well as different authors like O'Hare and Barrett (1996) and Moor (1985), Gampaha is identified as the most developed district of Western Province as well as in Sri Lanka. However, according to the Gini coefficient of income and percentage of income received by the poorest 40% of household, Gampaha district indicates an unsatisfactory situation of development.

The weakening of the agricultural base in the district as a whole was experienced during the last few decades, although the dependence on small farm sector by the majority of households in these areas have been major characteristics of this region. Weak backward linkages of modern industrial economy with rural periphery, insufficient services and infrastructure facilities are seen as key issues related to this backwardness, according to the survey. This study closely observed micro-level variations in development in the selected divisions of the district, with special reference to spatial patterns of poverty and migration and employment structure that are related to the peripheral backwardness. Land use changes associated with industrialization and suburban growth and concentration of services into few centres are among key areas of the discussion. Validity of available theoretical and empirical knowledge in explaining ongoing spatial changes in the district is evaluated in the conclusion.

Key Words: Development, Backwardness; Peripheral; Rural areas;

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