

INTRA-REGIONAL LAG-EFFECTS OF  
IRRIGATED SETTLEMENT IN THE DRY ZONE

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Since early 1930s successive governments of Sri Lanka have sought in irrigated settlement a policy instrument to alleviate landlessness and poverty conditions of more densely settled regions of the island. Increasingly, since mid 1960s, these projects are seen as the focii of rapid growth in domestic food crop production as well as modernisation of the food producing sector. As nodes of concentration of public sector investment, increasingly, these settlements were expected through their economic growth process to generate beneficial effects not only among their own settler populations but also on the economies of their encompassing regions as well. Their resident settler communities were to be symbols of the rural prosperity that could be attained through active state interaction.

Nevertheless, a large number of surveys on agricultural progress and living conditions of the people in rural areas conducted in recent years reveal that regions which harbour the bulk of irrigated settlements also show symptoms of acute poverty conditions. In this context a relevant question would be: Is there a causal link between the settlement projects and the incidence of poverty in regions which harbour settlements? Specifically, have irrigated settlement projects established as harbingers of rural regional development, in some way, instead assumed a catalytic role in generating poverty, deepening pre-existing poverty conditions and causing the emergence of new causalities of poverty, in rural areas of the dry zone?

The proposed paper seeks answers to these questions in a tentative way through a synthesis of empirical evidence pertaining to settlement-initiated economic development in the dry zone.