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Small-scale fisher migration, conflict and wellbeing

A case study from Sri Lanka

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Resource-based conflicts involving multiple stakeholders are drawing increasing attention in science and policy debates (Fisher et al. 2018; Bavinck et al. 2014; Derkyi 2012). Marine fisheries are no exception (Coulthard et al. 2011). Fisher communities are exposed to multiple resource-based and livelihood conflicts. Within fisher communities and households, wellbeing perceptions and priorities differ, leading to different economic strategies and outlooks, at times based on gender. Conflicts between migrant and local fishers are likely to rise in the near future (Wanyonyi et al. 2016a) due to declining resource pools, poor governance and implementation of policies and regulations, and the lack of attention to the issue at national forums (Wanyonyi et al. 2016b; Crona and Rosendo 2011). Conflicts between local and migrant fishers are fueled by inequalities in technology, political power and differences between supporting organizations (Amarasinghe 2013, 2011). Yet, migration in fisheries continues as it offers better livelihood opportunities (Njock and Westlund 2010; Bennett 2005; Delauney 1991). This study looks beyond the livelihood sustenance argument to understand how migrant fisher communities strive for wellbeing within a conflictive environment. It examines a case study on small-scale migrant fishers in northwestern Sri Lanka during the post-war period. Similar cases exist in natural resource dependent communities susceptible for climatological factors and resource scarcity. Therefore, the findings of this study extrapolate to the global migrating/nomadic rural communities, vulnerable to resource-based conflicts and stresses on livelihood sustainability and wellbeing. This chapter presents the justification of the underlying research (see 1.2), the research questions (see 1.3), a short description of the case study (see 1.4), and the overall structure of the thesis (see 1.5).

1.2 Justification of the study

This study positions itself on three major academic debates namely; small-scale fisher migration and place making, resource conflicts, and wellbeing (see Chapter 2). This is against a background of globally declining fish stocks and resource degradation, where small-scale fisheries are critically important for local livelihoods, particularly in developing countries (Béné 2003).

1.2.1 Small-scale fisheries

Small-scale marine fisheries are an important sector in developing economies because: (i) 90 percent of the fisheries workforce (total marine labour force is 120 million) employ in small-scale fisheries (World Bank 2012); (ii) 97 percent of the workforce in small-scale fisheries (i.e. approximately 116 million people) is from developing countries (*ibid.*); (iii) fish supplies contribute to local food security (Peramunagama and Dinushika 2017); (iv) fishing provides a safety net for vulnerable and poor coastal households (World Bank 2012); (v) 46 percent of the marine fisheries labour force is made up of women (Kleiber et al. 2014); and (vi) the workforce is characterized by low income households operating at subsistence level with marginal surpluses being brought to the market (FAO 2016).

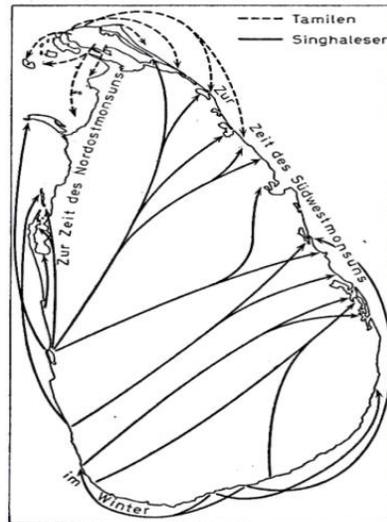
Data records a continuous decline in fish stocks from 90 percent in 1974 to 68.6 percent in 2013, indicating that fishing is largely at biologically unsustainable levels (FAO 2015). Most of the high value fish species have been fished to an extent that limits any potential to increase their population in the near future (FAO 2016). Too many fishers chase too few fish and make too little incomes (Sumaila et al. 2008). The situation is critical in South and Southeast Asian fisheries due to increasing fisheries conflicts (Pomeroy et al. 2007;

Salayo et al. 2006; Bavinck 2005). Since socio-ecological systems are closely intertwined (Pomeroy et al. 2016; Armitage et al. 2012; Coulthard et al. 2011), the competition for fishing leads to discrimination and poverty in small-scale fisheries with decreasing fish catches (Nayak et al. 2014). Increasingly, small-scale fisheries are becoming synonymous with poverty as economic and biological aspects combine to lower the income and marginalize fishing communities (Béné et al. 2011; Béné 2003) and relative wealth (Eide et al. 2011). Therefore, small-scale fishers are increasingly referred in the broader literature and media as “backward, informal, and marginal economic actors” (Platteau 1989: 522) or the poorest of the poor (Li et al. 1998) and subsequently, get neglected in decision-making forums at local, national and international levels (Sneddon and Fox 2007).

This interdependence between ecosystem degradation and poverty (White et al. 2012; MEA 2005) makes small-scale marine fishers victims of what is recognized as a fisheries crisis (Sumaila et al. 2008). In addition, other environmental pressures such as pollution, climate change, coral bleaching, ocean acidification, and natural disasters (FAO 2016; Seggel and De Young 2016; Watson and Pauly 2013; Sumaila et al. 2011; Allison et al. 2009) adversely affect fishers, making them further vulnerable to food insecurity, loss of livelihood (Bavinck et al. 2014; Sowman and Wynberg 2014), inadequate nutritional intake (Pomeroy et al. 2016), low levels of wellbeing and future prospects. Social exclusion (Béné and Friend 2011), poor documentation of policies and development programmes (Pomeroy et al. 2007), long-standing unresolved livelihood issues, vulnerability to idiosyncratic and covariate shocks (Koralagama 2009), the effects of competition among fishers over access to resources (Sowman and Wynberg 2014) and the lack of rights (Bavinck 2005; Charles 1992; Schlager and Ostrom 1992) are threatening the lives and livelihoods of small-scale fishing communities in developing countries.

1.2.2 Small-scale fisheries in Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan fisheries sector is predominantly small-scale by nature. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4 of this thesis. Small-scale fisheries contribute 60 percent to the total marine fish production, and this is the livelihood of 218,830 fishers (male and female) supporting 188,690 households, spread along the coast. This amounts to 12 percent of the total working population (MFARD 2018a). As a tropical country, the fisheries sector in Sri Lanka is characterized by seasonality, influenced by the monsoon wind patterns. Consequently, small-scale fishers along the southern and western coasts have been migrating seasonally to northern and eastern coasts and vice versa, at least since the 1800s (Stirrat 1988; Bartz 1959). Previous analysis of fisher migration shows that the Mannar region, the northeast coast of the Jaffna peninsula, the Mullaitivu area, and Pulmoddai were long-standing migration sites in the Northern Province (Bartz 1959) –see Figure 1.1. Contemporary sources indicate that such fisher migration continues to date (Lokuge 2017; Bavinck 2015; Amarasinghe 2011; Stirrat 1988). This study focuses on small-scale fishers on the west coast having a tradition of seasonal migration to the northwestern coast of the island.

Figure 1.1 Small-scale fisher migratory routes in the 1950s

Source: Bartz 1959

1.2.3 Migration and place-making of small-scale fishers

Migrant fishers strive to continue their livelihood and identity as fishers, even though it is not necessarily profitable or viable. Fishing is more than a source of income for them (Van Ginkel 2001). It is a way of life (Coulthard 2012:361; Brookfield et al. 2005:56; McGoodwin 2001:256). Many fishing communities experience unemployment or disguised unemployment, out-migration, or are forced to search for alternative economic activities besides fishing due to seasonality, climate change, population growth (Pomeroy et al. 2007), and over-exploitation (Syems and Phillipson 2009). Being an integral part of a livelihood strategy in fisheries dependent communities, migration can ensure household and community wellbeing (Binet et al. 2012; Nunan 2010; Glaesel 2000).

Although biological impacts (Worm et al. 2006; Pauly and Watson 2003), economic impacts (World Bank 2012), and environmental impacts (FAO 2016; Seggel and De Young 2016; Watson and Pauly 2013; Sumaila et al. 2011) of marine fisheries have been extensively studied and debated (FAO 2016), fisher migration is still poorly recognized in the scholarly literature (Coulthard 2012). Consequently, migrant fisher challenges are also less discussed in policies, especially in relation to coastal fishing in developing countries (Black and Sward 2009; Jobbins 2008). Yet, migration is a common phenomenon among small-scale fishers in developing countries (Kraan 2009; Randall 2005). Recognizing the importance of fisher migration in the 1980s, the FAO initiated research on this phenomenon in West and East Africa (Wanyoni 2016 a, b; Randall 2005; Delauney 1991). Countries such as Ghana, Senegal, Malawi, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique provide evidence of internal migration (Wanyoni et al. 2016a; Binet et al. 2012; Njock and Westlund 2010; Kraan 2009; Overa 2001; Delauney 1991) as well as to neighbouring countries (transboundary migration). Internal migration across political-administrative boundaries is common among small-scale fishers as their high mobility is the inherent trait of their livelihood patterns (Crona and Rosendo 2011). In respect of Sri Lanka, studies on migrant fishers in post-war context are still lacking (Weeratunge et al. 2016).

Scholars argue that the continuation of fisher migration and related conflicts depend on the resource base (Jorion 1988), but also on the degree of social acceptance in a place (Acott and Urquhart 2014). The social aspects of small-scale fisher migration, such as fisher-place bonding and local conflicts have not been adequately explored (Urquhart and Acott 2013). Hence, this study adopts an integrated approach, unpacking place attachment through a multi-dimensional wellbeing lens that helps to understand how economic and place attachment motivations alternate or combine to explain the migratory behaviour of small-scale fishers (see 1.3).

1.2.4 Resource-based conflicts

Fisher migration frequently increases fishing efforts, sometimes leading to over-exploitation and ecosystem unsustainability, and often resulting in conflict with local fishers (Bavinck et al. 2014; Islam and Chuenpagdee 2013; Pomeroy et al. 2007; Salayo et al. 2006; Homer-Dixon 1999; Percival and Homer-Dixon 1998; Charles 1992). Eventually, catch-per-unit-effort¹ (CPUE) may decline, wellbeing may deteriorate, and new conflicts or disputes among different fisher groups may arise. This raises challenges to governance and institutional arrangements addressing fisher mobility (Crona and Rosendo 2011). Resource-based conflicts affect the population, ecosystem, economy, (perceived) legitimacy of institutions and management structures, and resource allocation mechanisms directly and indirectly (Nagoli et al. 2016), gradually posing threats to fishers [e.g. pollution, over fishing, habitat degradation, and harmful practices (FAO 2016)] on several fronts simultaneously (Munang et al. 2011; Homer-Dixon 1999). Furthermore, fisher conflicts can lead to habitat degradation, undermining of environmental programmes, and environmental pollution (Nayak et al. 2014; Mathew et al. 2002). In fact, resource-based conflicts and degradation have a two-way relationship, without an exact starting point and are exacerbated by factors, such as the lack of property rights (Charles 1992; Schlager and Ostrom 1992), inefficient resource allocation (Pahl-Wostl 2009), differing objectives of stakeholders (Hilborn 2007), and powerlessness (Nagoli et al. 2016). The recurring conflicts batter the economic, social, and environmental wellbeing of small-scale fishers irrespective of their root causes, so that eventually, unsatisfied and unmet wellbeing aspirations contribute to a new set of conflicts (Denulin and McGregor 2009). When the balance between human wellbeing and ecosystem health is upset, resource-based conflicts may erupt in one way or another. This competition between fisher groups and its repercussions on wellbeing have not been intensively studied in the Social Sciences (McGregor et al. 2015; Coulthard et al. 2011). The next section examines the small-scale fisheries situation through a wellbeing lens.

1.2.5 Wellbeing approach

From the 1990s, international development policies aimed at improving human security, alleviating poverty, and increasing ecological sustainability, framed within the concept of sustainable development (Gupta 2014). In 2015, the global community of nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNGA 2015) with 169 targets and implementation measures to promote economic, social, and environmental dimensions of human development (UNDP 2017). However, since trade-offs are often made in favour of economic aspects, the SDGs also built on ideas of inclusive development (Chatterjee 2005; Sachs 2004) and stakeholder participation in local to international arenas (UNDP 2017). Inclusive development is a relatively new concept defined as “development that includes marginalized people, sectors

¹ Catch per unit effort (CPUE) is a calculated value based on the quantity of target fish species (fish catch) and the effort that indirectly measures the abundance of the fish stock (Gulland 1969).

and countries in social, political and economic processes for increased human well-being, social and environmental sustainability, and empowerment. Inclusive development is an adaptive learning process, which responds to change and new risks of exclusion and marginalization” (Gupta et al. 2015:546). The social sustainability component emphasizes human wellbeing as the ultimate objective of development (McGregor 2009; McGregor et al. 2009; White 2009). Human wellbeing theory conceptualizes the human being as a social being, for whom social relationships and identity are important (Pouw and McGregor 2014; McGregor 2007). Human wellbeing also has a subjective dimension, apart from the material and relational. Such a comprehensive approach enables the understanding of people’s resource needs and priorities, as well as the complex trade-offs made or enforced between economic, social, political and ecological dimensions. Chatterjee (2005) argues in favour of proactive policy engagement of all stakeholders to ensure greater inclusiveness of the most marginalized people.

Small-scale migrant fishers and their wellbeing

Fisheries issues need to be addressed through a holistic interdisciplinary approach, rather than through a narrow mono-disciplinary analysis (Charles et al. 2012) or a single-issue analysis such as poverty, vulnerability, or resource degradation to understand the complex relation between human wellbeing and ecosystem services. A wellbeing approach is useful in this regard, as it brings together the complex social-economic and subjective phenomena into one framework (Coulthard et al. 2011; White 2009; 2010; McGregor 2007). After all, conflicts over marine fisheries have a great bearing on human wellbeing (Weeratunge 2009). Wellbeing provides insight into conflicts, trade-off between livelihoods and migration, and stakeholder priorities for governance by adopting a broader multi-dimensional perspective (Weeratunge et al. 2014). Such an approach would enable a proper assessment of socially inclusive and ecologically sustainable fisheries policy alternatives (Gupta et al. 2015). Many scholars have studied the small-scale fisheries conflicts from different angles, including conservation (Redpath et al. 2013), governance (Bavinck and Vivekanandan 2011), legal pluralism (Bavinck 2005), conflicts between migrant fishers and local fishers (Wanyonyi et al. 2016b), resource allocation and management mechanisms (Salayo et al. 2006; Charles 1992), technological change (Pomeroy et al. 2007; Zerner 2003), institutions (Wanyonyi et al. 2016a; Binet et al. 2012; Crona and Rosendo 2011; Bennett et al. 2001), and stakeholder interests (Hilborn 2007). However, none of these studies has explored the relationship with human wellbeing.

In addition, the literature has discussed the social, cultural, political, and economic differences between men and women in small-scale fisheries (Thorpe et al. 2014, 2013; Weeratunge et al. 2010; Kabeer 2001). Although the importance of gender differences in the human wellbeing framework has been recognized (Britton 2012), noticeable gender gaps in wellbeing research and indicators still prevail (Klasen 2007). Thus, more explicit wellbeing perspectives would entail a gender analysis to capture the internal socio-economic dynamics of the fishing communities (Weeratunge et al. 2014).

1.3 Research questions

The main research question is as follows:

How is the wellbeing of migrant fisher households and communities affected by fisheries conflicts and what context-specific wellbeing indicators can be formulated to inform inclusive development policies?

This leads to the following research sub-questions:

- a) How can small-scale fishing and fisher migration in northwestern Sri Lanka be characterized? (Chapter 4)
- b) What are the multi-scalar fisheries conflicts that affect the household and community wellbeing of migrant fishers in northwestern Sri Lanka? (Chapter 5)
- c) What are the multiple legal systems applied in the region that have affected fisheries conflicts as well as the household and community wellbeing of migrant fishers? (Chapter 5)
- d) How is wellbeing perceived and pursued by migrant fishermen and women? (Chapter 6)
- e) What induces northwestern small-scale migrant fishers to select the same place even amidst multiple conflicts and the impact on the household and community wellbeing? (Chapter 7)
- f) What are the important wellbeing priorities that could feed into inclusive development in fisheries? (Chapter 8)

1.4 The case study

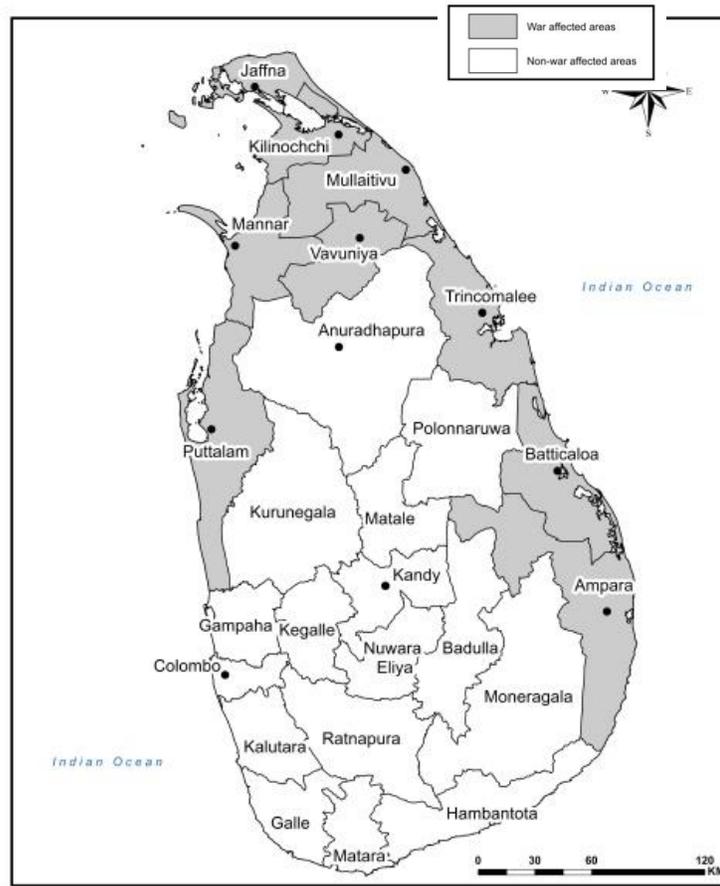
This thesis is a part of a larger project entitled REINCORPFISH- *Re-incorporating the excluded: Providing space for small-scale fishers in the sustainable development of fisheries of South Africa and South Asia* funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (2010–2016). Three countries– South Africa, India and Sri Lanka– have been researched in the project in relation to two main themes; 1) to understand the factors causing and characterizing fisheries conflicts in South Asia and South Africa; and 2) to mediate fair and sustainable fisheries management options in both regions. In South Asia, the project focused on the incursions of Indian trawl fleets into the grounds used by small-scale fishers in Sri Lanka. My thesis contributes to the first theme by focusing on small-scale migrant fisher communities in northwestern Sri Lanka. The perspectives and living experiences of the host communities are crucial for impartial judgements, calling for additional research work, which is beyond the scope of this study.

1.4.1 Legacy of war on small-scale fisheries

The conflict between the Tamil minority and Sinhalese majority erupted as a civil war in 1983 due to the marginalization of the Tamils (Venugopal 2011) in political, economic, and cultural spheres (Somasundaram and Sivayokan 2013) and ended in 2009 with a military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The direct and severe impacts of war were felt especially in Northwestern, Northern, and Eastern regions of Sri Lanka (see Figure 1.2).

In the aftermath of the war, the ruptured ethnic cohesion and historical relationship between the Tamils and Sinhalese resulted not only in the loss of life but in the polarization and segregation of the population. Societal harmony gradually disappeared (Wijayathilake 2004). Tamil politicians appeared to be only concerned about the Tamil people and criticized the Sinhalese and *vice versa*. Political and economic marginalization and deprivation affected the powerless Tamil minorities (Venugopal 2011). Diminished income earning opportunities forced the affected households to flee to other areas threatening their historical livelihoods of fishing (Vivekanandan 2011), farming, marketing, transportation, and other industries (Somasundaram and Sivayokan 2013; Wanasundera 2006).

Figure 1.2 War-affected areas in Sri Lanka



Source: Ministry of Defense 2009

Fishing was also affected by the frequently imposed restrictions and bans on fishing operations by both sides (the LTTE and Sri Lanka Navy), closed and banned areas around military bases (high security zones), banned usage of Out Board Motor (OBM) engines exceeding 10 hp, unavailability of fuel, destruction of fishing equipment, displacement of communities or sometimes villages who were forced to flee as refugees (mostly to India) (Hettiarachchi 2011; Siluvaithasan and Stokke 2006). To earn a livelihood, the women

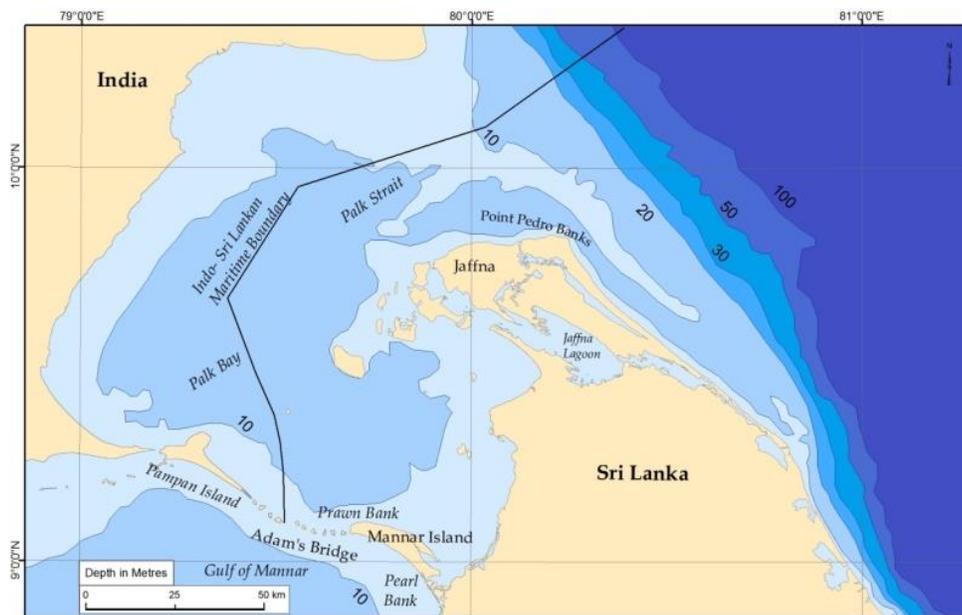
(often widows) go to the beach before dawn to remove fish from nets, sort fish, clean and mend nets. During day time, they help other fisher wives with dried fish processing by cleaning, gutting, salting, and drying. In return, they would get money and fish, both in small quantities. Generally, they keep a portion for their home consumption and sell the rest for an extra income (Wanasundera 2006).

Post-war reconciliation and rehabilitation programmes have targeted the war-affected minority– the Tamils in North and East Provinces– whose livelihoods, assets, and relationships were badly affected (Somasundarm and Sivayokan 2013). However, development programmes have not engaged other victimized smaller fisher groups, such as seasonal migrants. This has given rise to multiple conflicts, imposing restrictions on their migration (Peramunagama et al. 2017).

1.4.2 Fisheries conflicts in northwestern Sri Lanka

The conflicts that permeate the fisheries industry of northwestern Sri Lanka are exacerbated by trespassing Indian trawler fishers who cross the Maritime Boundary Line (MBL). They do so because: i) the waters of the Palk Bay are limited in size; ii) the Indian government safeguards its population of small-scale fishers by requiring trawlers to operate beyond three nautical miles from the TamilNadu coast (Vivekanandan 2011); iii) fish resources are diminishing on the Indian side of Palk Bay, and iv) the Sri Lankan side of the Palk Bay was mostly unused during the conflict years. The shrinking fishing grounds, an increase in the number of trawlers, and the declining fish catch in Indian waters have forced Indian fishers to engage in cross-border fishing in Sri Lankan waters, although it is illegal and risky (Menon et al. 2016).

Figure 1.3 Oceanographic map of north and northwestern sea



Source: NARA 2017

Previous research has highlighted the reasons why Indian trawl fishers engage in such transboundary fishing (Stephen 2014), and the impacts of such transgressions on small-scale fishers in the Northern Province

(Scholtens et al. 2012). Scholtens (2016) has also investigated the factors that induce or prevent small-scale fishers from engaging in collective action (also see Bavinck 2015). Nevertheless, there are other issues than transboundary fishing that affects small-scale fishers, which this thesis will explore.

The above calls attention to the migratory fisher communities, who sometimes may be responsible for, but also vulnerable to, these conflicts. My study was undertaken in two regions in Sri Lanka, each containing two research sites: Negombo and Chilaw along the western coast (the home region), and SouthBar and Silavathurai on Mannar Island along the northwestern coast (the host region). I focus primarily on the fisheries situation (and thus the conflicts) occurring on Mannar Island, and concentrate on the position of migrant fishers themselves. The resident fisher communities are thereby not included directly in the study. Many of the fishers in Negombo and Chilaw routinely migrate to Mannar and have done so for several decades (Stirrat 1988; Bartz 1959). Their situation thus invites further investigation.

1.5 Thesis outline

The thesis is organized in nine chapters following three broad sections of study. Chapters 1-3 introduce the research objectives, conceptual and theoretical framing, context, methodology and questions used to conduct the research *in-situ* and *ex-situ*. Chapters 4-8 discuss the empirical findings of the research focusing on migrant fishing practices, fisheries policies, multi-scalar fisheries conflicts, place selection and attachment, wellbeing, and development issues. Chapter 9 concludes and reflects on the theoretical and methodological findings of the study and discusses the policy and research recommendations.

Chapter 2 describes the theoretical background of the key concepts; multi-dimensional wellbeing, migration and place attachment, resource-based conflicts, and gender. It critically reviews the definition of wellbeing, evolution and the relevance of the concept in fisheries research and development. The conceptual model at the end of the chapter brings the different theoretical departure points into one framework for a comprehensive analysis of the relationships between the wellbeing of small-scale migrant fishers, the multi-scalar resource conflicts, and development priorities for more inclusive policies in the sector. Chapter 3 explains the literature review (see 3.2), research design (see 3.3), and the methodology adopted for data collection, and the data analysis procedures. Content analysis is used to evaluate the existing fisheries policies and strategy documents.

Chapter 4 reviews the secondary literature and national databases for an overview of the fishing locations (Negombo and Chilaw), fishing practices, governing institutions, and legal systems. The historical background of the communities and migration process is explored and participatory historical profiles developed, enabling an understanding of past and present migration patterns.

Chapter 5 employs the findings of the qualitative primary data on resource conflicts in relation to small-scale fisheries migration and institutional involvement. Conflict typologies of Charles (1992) and Bennett et al. (2001) are used to comprehend resource-based conflicts.

Chapter 6 analyses the wellbeing of fisher households and communities, and breaks this down by gender. Gendered wellbeing indicators are extracted and discussed in relation to the identity of women and men, roles, and relationships within the tightly knit fisheries community. Chapter 7 considers the drivers of seasonal migration that enhance the wellbeing of the fisherfolk in relation to their place-making behaviour.

Wellbeing indicators presented in Chapter 6 (see 6.3) are then used for the index development explored in Chapter 8. This chapter identifies fisheries relevant wellbeing indicators in the case study of the fishing communities and households. The last section reviews development policies in Sri Lanka to unravel mismatches between fisheries development and policy priority areas (based on section 4.4) and strategic directions. Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by recapitulating and expanding upon the findings to answer the main research question. Furthermore, the chapter reflects on whether and how the knowledge gaps listed in Chapter 1 have been addressed and what theoretical and methodological reflections can be derived. Finally, the chapter makes grounded policy and research recommendations and extrapolates to the global debate on migrating/nomadic communities, whose movements are inter-linked with natural resource availability and access.