

*Every month someone comes here from the university, the government or foreign agencies to ask us questions and call us for meetings. The last time we lost three days of work drawing a map of our village— every tree was in there. What have we got from answering questions? Don't bother to come here.*

*No one has come to see us before. Not the NGOs. Not the government. They only visit those near the road. No one even tells them that we are here. You are the only people from outside we've seen here. Even if you can't help us, at least our voice will be heard at last.*

Wijepala, agricultural laborer/small farmer, Moneragala district

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## Background

The poverty consultations were carried out by the Poverty Impact Monitoring Unit (PIMU) on behalf of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to complement its poverty analysis for Sri Lanka. While the Government's Poverty Reduction Framework and the first Integrated Household Survey, as well as the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) provide an overview of the depth and characteristics of poverty in the country, these were not a result of a participatory process involving solely the poor. The poverty consultations in four selected districts were expected to ensure that the views and perspectives of the poor are incorporated at the High Level Forum between the Government and ADB. It is hoped that the results of these consultations will also help supplement the existing database on poverty and provide qualitative data on the situation of the poor in Sri Lanka.

## Objectives of the Poverty Consultations

- An enhanced appreciation of poverty issues and the development needs and priorities of the poorest people in Sri Lanka as perceived by them;

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- Identification of key poverty challenges in Sri Lanka for ADB's poverty analysis and partnership agreement with the Government;
- Identification of issues to be monitored for future comparison of changes in Sri Lankan poverty levels; and
- Input into ADB's economic and sector work, country programming, and country assistance plan/country strategy and program formulation.

### **Concerns and Priorities of the Poor**

Poor people in the four districts explained their poverty in terms of the following:

- Lack of access to infrastructure (roads, electricity, water supply, transport);
- Prevalence of armed conflict and violence;
- Lack of income/employment opportunities;
- Lack of capital/tools/assets to carry out livelihoods;
- Scarcity of natural resources (water, land, fish);
- Crop loss due to wild animals (elephants, wild boar);
- Lack of housing and sanitation;
- Lack of quality education and skills-training;
- Vulnerability due to sickness, disability, old age, and death (of income earner);
- Vulnerability to market fluctuations;
- Scarcity of food;
- Neglect by the state;
- Political/ethnic bias in the delivery of poverty assistance; and
- Lack of unity/togetherness within the community.

Respondents in all four districts unanimously identified **infrastructure**, in the form of connecting roads, electricity, and irrigation systems/water supply, as a priority need. Thus, although previous development activities had centered on infrastructure, there are pockets that have not been reached by these efforts. This has resulted in a feeling of frustration and powerlessness within these communities, where members perceive themselves as having been left behind while other communities around them have "improved" or "developed". Many explained their plight as due to lack of political patronage or neglect by the state. Where some households have received access to electricity and water supply, the poor

complained that installation charges were beyond their means. Thus, exclusion through both location and pricing are concerns. Lack of access to transport and the low frequency of the public transport available were considered as reinforcing their isolation. Lack of or lack of access to infrastructure was very clearly linked to employment, income, politics, education, and health related poverty factors. In Trincomalee district, the armed conflict was identified as the major reason for the destruction of existing infrastructure, as well as the lack of new investment in infrastructure.

The **armed conflict** and the ensuing violence were considered the overwhelming cause of poverty in Trincomalee district. All members of poor households had been displaced at some point during the last 20 years. Others continued to live in refugee camps. All forms of livelihood, whether cultivation or fishing, could not be pursued because of the ongoing war. Refugee populations imposed a strain on the resources of host populations and negatively impacted the poor households of the host population by driving wage rates down. The conflict was also a matter of concern for most of the poor in the other districts, especially border villagers in Moneragala district and Tamil plantation workers, whose mobility was restricted and who lived in anxiety or fear because of conflict-related repercussions. In addition, the 1983 riots had resulted in loss of homes and property for some plantation Tamils who had overcome their poverty previously by moving to urban areas but who later resettled in rural estate areas where they felt more secure but where they had become downwardly mobile. Many poor people in the other three districts expressed the view that the war was diverting resources that could be better used to provide them with services and help them improve their lives. Even members of those households in these districts who had benefited materially from the conflict through regular incomes from the Armed Forces, did not consider it a worthy livelihood. They pointed out that it was only their poverty that had induced their sons to join the army, that they lived in constant fear of a family member being killed, and money could not compensate for the loss of a life. In their hopes and aspirations for the future of the country, the singular desire expressed by the majority of poor in all four districts was an end to the conflict and for a life of peace.

The lack of infrastructure was seen as one reason for the **paucity of income and employment opportunities**. Without a road there was no incentive to produce for the market, or to commute daily for a more lucrative job. Many poor people also pointed out that although they would be glad to have an industrial job, private investment in the form of

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factories had not come to their area. Thus, an increase in incomes through better marketing access for current products, as well as new supplementary avenues of earning a living were identified as needs. Additionally, state, industrial, and self-employment opportunities for youth with some education were desired. Lack of boats, nets, motorcycles, agricultural tools, and other **means of production** were also a concern, while most credit schemes to obtain such assets were perceived as ineffective and useless, given the fluctuating nature of their incomes.

The **lack of sufficient water** at sources, especially during the dry season, lack of cultivable land, and the lack of fish in inland tanks because of overfishing, were natural resource constraints that were identified. Poor households in Moneragala, Badulla, and Hambantota districts considered the lack/scarcity of potable and irrigation water, and the long (and sometimes expensive) journeys made to fulfil their water needs as a major factor in their poverty. In all four districts poor households in rural areas pointed out that a substantial part of their *chena* (swidden cultivation), paddy and home garden crops were lost to wild animals, elephants being considered the most formidable pest. However, wild boar and monkeys were also identified as causing major damage. The lack of firearms and electricity to control these pests was perceived as hampering their efforts to protect crops.

The condition of **housing** was the most often used measure of both poverty and development in all four districts. Although many poor people wished for assistance from the Government or nongovernment organizations (NGOs) in constructing houses and some were willing to repay housing loans, they complained that aid (in the form of building materials or money) was not given to the needy but those who already “have” or lived near the roads. Vulnerability to heavy rains, floods, or elephant damage was experienced by all those who lived in temporary huts made of wattle-and-daub and/or *cadjan* (palm thatch). Poor households also referred to the lack of a **latrine** as a measure of their poverty; this was particularly true for the urban poor in Hambantota.

Poor people complained of the distances to schools, the shortage of facilities and teachers, the **low quality of education** that prevented their children from passing competitive examinations, and the lack of employment opportunities when their children managed to pass these examinations. The quality of education was considered particularly poor in the estate schools in Badulla district and village schools in the Moneragala district. Thus the minority of parents who thought their children deserved a better education incurred considerable costs to send their children to nonstate schools in Badulla district. In Trincomalee district, poor parents

complained of difficulties in sending children to school due to the destruction of buildings/lack of facilities, as well as potential conscription by armed groups and fear of bodily violence to female children. The vulnerability of girls was also mentioned as a factor in border villages in the Moneragala district. In addition, poor households everywhere were concerned about the lack of skills-training opportunities that would better prepare their older children for employment.

**Sickness, disability, old age, and death of an income earner** were regarded as precipitating causes of poverty. The free state health service was considered inadequate by many of the poor who spent whatever money they had in hand or borrowed on credit to buy medicine privately, often from the very same state medical practitioners. The monthly payments from the state to the disabled, widows, and the aged were regarded as entirely insufficient. While war widows in the Southern districts get some sort of compensation, other widows, as well as war widows in the Trincomalee district, do not receive the same kind of assistance. Households where women have become sole breadwinners were particularly vulnerable as wage rates for women (except in the estate sector) are generally around 66 percent of male wages.

The **fluctuating prices** of agricultural crops and fish, the seasonality of their occupation, and the lack of direct access to markets were considered important factors for their poverty by both farmers and fishermen in Moneragala, Badulla, and Hambantota districts. **Scarcity of food** was reported to be most acute in the “uncleared” areas of Trincomalee district largely due to military restrictions on the transport of food items, and the taxation of traders by armed groups. Traders therefore only stocked limited amounts of food in their shops and when rain cut off roads connected to cleared areas, people had no option except to starve. Moreover, most poor people in the other three districts also experienced seasonal scarcity of food, either in the dry season, rainy season, or the windy season. These shortages ranged from two to six months depending on the agro-ecological zone, their crops, and the relative degree of poverty of the household. Very poor, landless, rural, and urban households managed to eat only 1–2 meals a day for a good part of the year and went without food on days when wage work was unavailable or when they had no access to garden products such as *jak* (jackfruit) and coconut.

Both in Badulla and Moneragala districts poor people from villages that were not conveniently accessible complained that they were **neglected by the state**, including their own *grama niladhari* (village officers), who if at all bothered only to visit the houses nearest to the road. The team visited households who claimed that no government official or NGO

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officer had stepped into their huts located in the margins of their villages, let alone spend time to ask about their problems.

In all four districts, members of poor households complained that they were **not receiving Samurdhi assistance** or were receiving lower amounts because they were registered originally with Janasaviya Trust Fund (JTF), although other households who were better-off than them received stamps. This was particularly true for the Badulla district where more than half of the households interviewed did not receive Samurdhi payments. This was perceived as political victimization due to their political affiliation. Tamil plantation workers pointed out that they did not receive Samurdhi assistance even when they were unemployed or sick or old because they were poor Tamils, whereas Sinhalese villagers and politically powerful, rich Tamil shopowners in their estates received Samurdhi benefits.

In Moneragala district, some of the poor expressed the view that they were in part to blame for their poverty because of the **lack of unity/togetherness** (*ekamuthukama*) within their communities. The persistence of petty quarrels and jealousies, the inability to come together to do something for the village, and the benefit to some in maintaining the rich/poor divide were considered factors hindering them from overcoming poverty. In all four districts, in villages where social mobilization efforts had occurred, however, many of the poor were critical of the purpose and activities of these programs, including the formation of small groups, and regarded them as not serving their interests or a sheer waste of time. In a minority of cases poor people gave a positive assessment of social mobilization efforts or government/NGO assistance. However, many villages and one of the estates wished to have community centers, for both social and cultural purposes, and children's playgrounds.

In the participatory assessments, the poor expressed a range of responses to their situation, from frustration with their condition of deprivation and anger at the injustices that they experienced to matter-of-fact acceptance of their lot in life. A small part of the better educated poor was engaged in political activism to change their situation. Another part of the poor was no longer interested in waiting for the state, NGOs, or alternative political parties to assist them, and had come up with some sort of household-level strategy to overcome their poverty. The most commonly used one was migration to the city or the Middle East. The Armed Forces were an option decided upon by youth often without the consent of their families. The vast majority had aspirations that their children would live better than they and that they would manage to build a house in their lifetime, but were otherwise occupied with their day-to-day battle with survival.