

2. METHODOLOGY

Conceptual Framework

The poverty consultations were carried out in the form of participatory poverty assessments with members of poor communities by a team comprising two anthropologists, an economist, a research assistant, and two translators. As there is no consensus on which of Sri Lanka's districts are the "poorest", the assessments were done in four "poorer" districts in Sri Lanka to obtain a qualitative overview of poverty in the country. Thus, four districts—Moneragala, Hambantota, Badulla, and Trincomalee—were selected to cover the diverse sociocultural and political dimensions, as well as the economic sectors, of the country. Moneragala, considered one of the poorest districts by any criteria, provided data on relatively isolated Dry Zone farming settlements and border villages affected by the conflict. Hambantota revealed the poverty situation of inland and coastal fishing communities, as well as marginal irrigation/rain-fed settlements. Badulla covered the plantation sector, hill-country steep slope farming villages, as well as Dry Zone villages. Trincomalee provided much needed data on the poverty situation in a conflict area, including refugee and displaced populations. Moreover, Hambantota town revealed urban poverty concerns as well. Four ethnic groups, Sinhalese, Tamils, Moors, and Malays, are represented within these four districts. Moneragala exemplifies a district with persistent poverty over the last decade. Badulla has made some gains in poverty reduction. Hambantota is a district with considerable gains in poverty reduction. The poverty trends in Trincomalee are difficult to assess due to the lack of data but it is assumed that poverty levels have risen considerably due to the war.

As the poverty assessments had to be done within the short time period of two months, the identification of the poorer sectors of society needed to be done relatively fast. Silva's (1998) framework of marginalized groups and communities was used for this purpose. This is a structural approach to identifying pockets of poverty in Sri Lanka. Social research on poverty has revealed several types of communities that are marginalized from the mainstream of society on the basis of sociocultural identity, neighborhood characteristics, and lifestyle. Their marginalization or social exclusion has economic, political, sociocultural, and spatial dimensions. These communities include

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- Urban low-income communities of slum dwellers;
- Village expansion colonies;
- Social outcasts (from minority “depressed” castes);
- Squatter settlements;
- Marginal irrigation settlements;
- Fishing communities;
- Plantation communities;
- Hill farming communities cultivating on steep slopes; and
- Displaced/refugee settlements.

The study team targeted such communities for participatory poverty assessments and solicited the perceptions of the poor on the following issues and questions:

- Defining poverty: local interpretations;
- Differentiating the poor and the rich;
- Dimensions of poverty;
- Dynamics of poverty;
- Poverty alleviation strategies as assessed by the poor; and
- Poor people’s needs and priorities.

This was used as a flexible framework for the poverty assessments. The topics were kept broad on purpose, so that the research team could be as open as possible to the concerns and perceptions of the poor. The results from the poverty assessments formed the basis for identifying key poverty challenges, as well as key issues that need to be monitored to assess changes in the poverty situation of poor communities.

Methods

The study team first consulted the current macro-level data (*National Human Development Report 1998; Household Income and Expenditure Survey 1995/96; Report on Consumer Finances and Socio-Economic Survey, Sri Lanka 1996/97*) to obtain a comprehensive picture of poverty and poverty trends in Sri Lanka as a whole, as well as at provincial and district levels. The four districts were selected on the basis of the macro-level data to represent the economic, political, and sociocultural diversity of the country, as well as different degrees of and changes in the levels of poverty in the last 20 years.

In each district, the study team visited district secretariats and provincial planning units to obtain data on the poverty situation in the various administrative divisions of the district. The “poorer” divisions were identified by using indicators such as landownership, employment, access to electricity, and housing conditions. In some cases, in order to obtain ethnic or economic diversity “richer” divisions were also included. Then several divisional secretariats (DSs) were visited to identify “the poorest” villages/estates/urban units within these divisions, in consultation with Development, Social Services, Planning, and Samurdhi officers. The indicators used varied for the various areas, according to the data available at district, DS, and *grama niladhari* (village officer) levels. In Trincomalee district, due to the paucity of official data, the divisions, location, and categories of the poor/vulnerable in the district were identified in consultation with the Government Agent’s office, Samurdhi personnel in Trincomalee, and with the relevant divisional secretaries and when possible, *grama niladhari*. The information was cross-checked against the German Development Agency—Integrated Food Security Project Nutrition Baseline Survey of the most vulnerable divisions of the Trincomalee district, and NGOs/humanitarian agencies operating in the field.

The rural and urban units identified were contacted directly, or through social and NGO mobilizers working in the community. The participatory poverty assessments included both household interviews as well as focus group discussions, based on rapid rural appraisal methods. A loosely-structured, open-ended questionnaire that could respond to the specific conditions and priorities of the poor in that region and ensured the participatory nature of the exercise was used. A 2-member study team spent an average of 10 days and visited 5–6 units in each district. The team carried out comprehensive interviews in 8–10 households in each village/estate/unit depending on the distance between houses, covering a total of 160 households in the four districts. Ten focus group meetings involving 20–50 people were conducted altogether. As most of the consultations took place during the general election campaign, the political dimensions of poverty and poor people’s perceptions of politicians and the political process might have received more attention than otherwise. At the outset it should be made clear that the data obtained through qualitative participatory assessments are *not representative* of all poor households in these districts, or the island as a whole, but much rather are *indicative* of the problems, concerns, and priorities of poor households.