

## 4. PERCEPTIONS OF THE POOR: THE PARTICIPATORY POVERTY ASSESSMENTS

### Defining Poverty: Local Interpretations

The “poor” do not always want to be considered as “poor”—*duppath* in Sinhalese meaning “suffering” and *warumai* in Tamil meaning “fated”. There is a certain extent of fatalism implied in both terms, with suffering in Buddhist discourses being linked to past deeds, and fate in Hindu discourses linked to both past deeds, as well as the will of the deities. There was, however, not a single poor person interviewed who said that their poverty was due to past *karma* or the will of the deities. On the one hand, considerable shame is attached to the term “poor” that prevents some people from referring to themselves as poor. On the other hand, since the Janasaviya program era, many poor people have got accustomed to calling themselves poor in anticipation that some benefits will accrue to those categorized as “the poor”. Thus, both reluctance to categorize themselves as “*duppath*” by using one of the other terms discussed below, as well as a matter-of-fact acceptance in calling themselves “poor” were experienced, when respondents were asked to describe their living situation.

*We are poor. Can't you see?*

Sumanaratne, inland fisherman, Hambantota district

*We are utterly poor.*

Karunawathi, wage laborer, Badulla district

Other terms such as *dushakara* (extremely difficult), *dilindu* (suffering), *ahinsaka* (harmless/innocent), *asarana* (without refuge), *durvala* (weak), *duka* (suffering), and *netiberi* (“have not and cannot”; “without assets and capabilities”) were used to describe the condition of being poor or living in poverty. The last term gained popularity during the Janasaviya era and was connected to the slogan “from those who have and can, to those who have not and cannot. However, it has gained wider currency since then and both those considering themselves “poor” and “average” used the term to refer to the “poor”. In some instances, the terms *anthima*

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*pahathayi* (totally low) and *prapathaye* (in the precipice) were used by “very poor” people. Poor people were characterized by themselves and others as *oluva ussanna beri aya* (those who cannot lift their heads), *kuli veda karana aya* (those who do wage labor), and *eda vela hoyaganna beri aya* (those who cannot find the day’s meal).

In Tamil the most commonly used term was *kashtam* (extremely difficult), the equivalent of the Sinhalese *dushakara*, as well as *padum mosam* (totally bad). The expression *thukkatai anubavikkirain* (undergoing suffering) was also mentioned. In the conflict area, the term *pasi thahattinai vadukirain* (withering without food and water) was used to describe extreme deprivation. Their living situation was characterized as *nimmadiyaha wala mudiyadhu* (living without relief) by some plantation Tamils.

The subjective nature of the categorization process, the stigma attached to poverty, the ambiguity toward it and the desire to overcome it was described by one respondent, father of five children, living in a wattle-and-daub hut with an *illuk* grass thatched roof thus:

*Although we are poor, we don’t think that we are. We believe we are rich, although we are the poorest. If we believe we are poor, we’ll always be poor.*

Karunasiri, chena farmer and wage laborer, Moneragala District

The seasonality of the experience of poverty and the vulnerability faced by the poor due to fluctuating means of livelihood was also pointed out by a fisherman’s wife living in a *cadjan* hut on the beach, with the sand for a floor.

*We are like everybody else here. If we have something in our hands, we’re rich. Otherwise, we’re poor.*

Ummu, wife of fisherman, Hambantota District

*When we cut the sugarcane and sell it we are “improved” (diyunuyi). When all the money is gone we are poor again.*

Kamalsiri, agricultural worker, Moneragala district

Poverty was defined often in terms of a **lack** of something—lack of employment, sufficient income, infrastructure, housing, land, water, and food. Economic, social, political and environmental assets were often integrated in these definitions. This conforms to the perspective, espoused by Amartya Sen, that poverty is a general **state of deprivation**, having more to do with entitlement and capacity, rather than merely

income or nutrition levels, the conventional indicators used in estimating absolute poverty levels.

*Poverty is being at a very low economic level, not having a house necessary to live in, not having drinking water and a nutritious meal, not having money, getting the crops damaged by animals, not having a job, and not having water facilities.*

Farmer, Badulla district

*We are poor because we don't have a proper job, a proper house or a latrine. People here are often hungry. The prices are so high—five people cannot live on our earnings.*

Mallika, farmer, Hambantota district

*Our life is difficult because there is no other source of income except fishing. We fish in other people's boats. If the fish harvest is good, life is good. Otherwise we live on credit. We have no permanent jobs, no boats, no proper house—you can see the cadjan roof.*

Priyantha, fisherman, Hambantota district

*We are utterly poor. We have hardly any land. My husband's illness and operation was an enormous expense. Since then we don't have a principal income earner.*

Karunawathi, agricultural wage laborer, Badulla district

*Life is only suffering for us. This is no way of life. Even when we cultivate there is not enough water. Cultivation just doesn't amount to anything here.*

Leela, farmer, Hambantota district

*Our situation is difficult right now. We eat only if there is money. There isn't sufficient leaf in our estate now and we have barely 2–3 days of work every week.*

Meena, tea plucker, Badulla district

*We have no way of improving. We live by farming. A lot of fields can't be cultivated because of the lack of water. Because the forest is close by we lose a good part of our crops to animals—elephants, monkeys. There's no road to the village. We have no permanent jobs. We don't have a school; not even a preschool. We haven't learnt anything much.*

Sudu Banda, farmer, Badulla district

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*Poverty is not having food, clothes and a house, not having a job, not cultivating vegetables that have the vitamins necessary for the body and not having employment in the village that would give money.*  
School boy, Badulla district

*Poverty is being at a very low economic level, having unbearable expenses, earning a very small amount of money, and not being able to support a family with this money.*  
Farmer, Badulla district

In Trincomalee district, most aspects of poverty were intrinsically linked to the armed conflict and its consequences. In addition to the material dimensions, the lack of freedom was also pointed out as a condition of poverty.

*We don't have enough employment opportunities, no transport. Our economy is affected. It is difficult to go fishing in the sea because of the shelling. Roads haven't been repaired. We need electricity. Our area was affected by the conflict. Our properties were destroyed during army attacks. As our area now is not under military control, many economic restrictions have been enforced.*  
Sundaram, displaced fisherman, Trincomalee district

*Poverty means no food, clothes, employment, and freedom.*  
Displaced person, Trincomalee district

What is evident in their statements is the way the poor go back and forth from the economic and social aspects of their lives, to reveal the multiple dimensions that characterize their understanding of poverty. Although the poor in the four districts are of different ethnic backgrounds, speak different languages, have different means of earning their livelihoods and live in different ecological zones, the commonality they share in their experience of being poor emerge clearly in their statements.

### **Differentiating the "Poor" and the "Rich"**

In focus group meetings which were mixed or comprised predominantly of women, and responses were anonymous, respondents characterized 25–100 percent of the households in their communities as "poor" or "very poor"/"poorest". Up to 25 percent of people in their communities

were characterized as “rich” and up to 75 percent as “average” by the various respondents. Men were more likely to define a larger proportion of households as “poor” and a smaller segment as “average” while women and the “poorest” people (both men and women) were more likely to differentiate between “average”, “poor” and “very poor”, with up to 25 percent of houses described as “very poor”. In the tea plantations, workers used the terms “rich” (*posath*), “capitalists” (*dhanapathi*), and “moneyed people” (*sallikarayo*) to denote owners of land, plantation managers, and traders. Sinhalese villagers in Badulla and Moneragala districts were more likely to use the word “average” (*samanya*) in opposition to the term “poor”, pointing out that there were no real “rich” in their communities, while in coastal Hambantota, the terms “rich” or “moneyed people” were used more often. Other ways of characterizing the better-off were *gevaldorawal athi aya* (“those with houses and doors”), *anduwe rassavak athi aya* (“those with a government job”), *idakadam athi aya* (“those with land/space”), *sepapahasukam athi aya* (“those with luxuries and facilities”) and *mudalalila* (the term for traders/shopowners, also meaning “moneyed”).

In individual household interviews, respondents were more prepared to differentiate between poor, average, and rich, while avoiding the term “poorest”, except in the Trincomalee district, where a majority described themselves as “very poor”. The majority elsewhere categorized themselves as “poor” or living in a “difficult” situation, while a minority considered themselves “average” or “very poor”.

**Table 9: Self-Description of Status by Respondents in Household Interviews (percent)**

District	Very Poor	Poor	Average	Others	Total Samurdhi/JTF
Moneragala					
T = 43 HHs	16.3	67.4	16.3	—	
Percent Samurdhi/JTF	100.0	82.8	57.1	—	74.7
Badulla					
T = 50 HHs	26.0	52.0	10.0	6.0	
Percent Samurdhi/JTF	38.5	34.6	40.0	50.0	38.0
Hambantota					
T = 42 HHs	14.3	59.5	19.0	7.1	
Percent Samurdhi/JTF	83.3	80.0	62.5	66.7	73.8
Trincomalee					
T = 25 HHs	60.0	20.0	12.0	8.0	
Percent Samurdhi	60.0	40.0	66.7	0.0	52.0

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As we had attempted to identify the “poorest” villages in the four districts and the poor households within these villages, it was hardly surprising that 74–83 percent of households interviewed described themselves as “poor” or “very poor”. There was a correlation between this self-description and households receiving Samurdhi payments in Moneragala and Hambantota districts, but this was not the case in Badulla and Trincomalee districts. In all four districts, households that described themselves as “average” also received Samurdhi payments, as much as 57 percent, 63 percent, and 67 percent in Moneragala, Hambantota, and Trincomalee districts, respectively, and 40 percent in Badulla district. However, in Badulla district the percentage of houses receiving Samurdhi was somewhat higher among those categorizing themselves “average” than among the “poor” or “poorest”. Therefore, it is clear why there was a perception that the deserving did not receive assistance from the state. In Trincomalee district too the percentage receiving stamps was substantially higher among the “average” than among the “poor”. However, in that district, households not receiving Samurdhi were receiving other assistance such as dry rations from both the state and bilateral agencies/NGOs, so they did not feel discriminated against as in Badulla district. To explain the lower levels of assistance being given to “poor” and “very poor” households in Badulla district, ethnicity and political affiliation have to be taken into account.

People explained their sameness in the following statements:

*We are all like one here. Everybody is poor here.*

Farmers and fishers, Badulla, Monaregala, Trincomalee, and Hambantota districts.

*We are all in the same condition. We earn our living by wage labor. Nobody here has any luxuries and facilities. There is nobody with a government job.*

Daniel, wage laborer, Moneragala district

*Everybody is the same. Even those who have built their houses live by wage labor and cultivating chenas. They might have houses like manors but they don't have anything to eat and drink. They have built their houses with a lot of effort from their hard-earned money. Otherwise, they have no permanent employment.*

Hemapala, carpenter, Hambantota district

On one hand, people preferred not to differentiate themselves in front of outsiders. In one village in Hambantota district, a student of a technical college disrupted a focus group meeting and prevented people from assessing the differences within their community. He pointed out to the participants that there was no need to differentiate between each other as everybody was the same, and that they should respond as a group, and told the team privately that they were “ignorant” people and could not accomplish such a task. On the other hand, many respondents were quite prepared to talk about the differences among people in their communities, ranging from categorical distinctions to proportional distinctions, based on the assets of each group.

*There are those who have and those who haven't.*  
Saraswathi, laborer, Hambantota district

*Most people have gone abroad for work. They are not “have-nots/cannots” like us.*  
Somapala, coconut plucker, Hambantota district

*We are average. There are other people like us who cannot lift their heads up.*  
Kamalawathi, farmer, Hambantota district

*The left bank people are poorer than the right bank people. We are down in the precipice. We don't have the strength to lift our heads.*  
Lucia, farmer, Hambantota district

*There are only two or three families like us. Most people are well off. They have something to eat. Somehow or the other they have managed to build a house. Our situation is totally difficult.*  
Magilinhamy, elderly widow, Hambantota district

*There are better off-families where you have three or four income earners. We only have the two of us. We just live from day to day.*  
Murugesan, plantation worker, Badulla district

*There are not many moneyed people here, about 10 percent of the households own several boats or a rice mill. More than 50 percent live with great difficulty on wage labor and fishing in other people's boats. The rest are average with one boat and a net.*  
Piyal, fisherman, Hambantota district

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*About 60 percent of people here are those who have—they have something— jobs. houses. About 40 percent are “have-not, cannot” people. They are poor, without any refuge. They live on wage labor.*  
Maggihamy, laborer, Hambantota district

*Of the 30 or so families here, two are rich because they have TVs, they have gone abroad to work or have jobs in garment factories. About five are average because they grow pepper, their houses are plastered with cement and better than most. The rest are poor like us and live in small huts.*

Premalatha, farmer, Badulla district

*The 20 percent or so paddy owners live o.k. The other 80 percent are agricultural laborers. They are poor.*

Kamalawathi, wife of agricultural laborer, Badulla district

*About 10 percent are moneyed people. About 80 percent are average poor. About 10 percent live with great difficulty.*

Karupai, tea plucker, Badulla district

*Some people are in a better situation because they have shops and livestock— maybe around 40 percent. The rest don’t own anything. The people who have work are average. Those who don’t, have a difficult situation.*

Seelawathi, wife of migrant plantation worker, Badulla district

*There are 25 families who eat only one meal out of three and don’t have a roof when it rains. About 10–15 families have 2 rooms and a temporary roof. About 10 families have a house with a permanent roof.*

Kumararatne, farmer, Badulla district

*Of 30 families, 2 are doing well because they came here long ago and have land from which they earned something. Now these are uncultivated. The rest are all in the same position whether they are Sinhalese or Tamils.*

Soysahami, agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

*About 5 percent are rich. They are traders who own sugar mills or some business. They are not really rich people but they are when compared to us. About 9 percent are average. They have tiled roofs, some coconut trees, a cart and they don't do wage labor. The rest are all poor like us. We do wage labor to live.*

Ranseela, agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

*About 25 percent are rich because they have money, good houses and are not short of anything. About 50 percent are average because they have paddy, finger millet and maize in their homes. The remaining 25 percent are poor because they have to live on wage labor.*

Pinwathi, agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

*Those who have sugar mills and grocery shops are o.k. They are about 10 percent. It is very difficult for the other 90 percent.*

Ratnasekera, farmer, Moneragala district

There were both similarities and differences in the manner in which the poor differentiated between social groups in their communities. In all four districts, the condition and size of the house and the possession/lack of a secure, preferably "state" job, were the most-often mentioned criteria. Thus, somebody with a big house or a state job was often classified as "rich" or at least "average". Ownership of economic assets/ means of production was an additional criterion to differentiate households.

In Hambantota district, in fishing villages the "rich" were considered to be those who owned one or more large fiberglass boat/s and nets, and didn't go out to sea, or pull the nets themselves. Rice mill-owners were also considered as rich. The "average" people were those who owned a small fiberglass boat or outrigger, their own nets, and went out to sea. The "poor" were those without outriggers, boats, or nets and worked for other people by going out to sea or mending nets. In the urban neighborhood, those who had a household member employed in the Middle East were also considered "rich" or "average".

In a *chena*-cultivating village in Badulla district, the "average" were categorized as those owning a tobacco barn or some enterprise, "good" houses (cement floor, tiled roof, plastered walls) having an "average" income, although it was relatively high according to village standards. The "middle" people had "average" houses, some sort of income per month, and ate 2-3 meals per day. The "very poor" had no "proper" houses, no latrines, no proper income, and were unable to eat three meals a day.

In tea estates in the Badulla district the rich were considered those who owned grocery stores or some other business and livestock. Plantation managers fell into this category. Sometimes households with four or more workers were also categorized as “rich”. When people had work or had one or two workers in the household, or had a skilled occupation (such as carpentry/masonry), this was regarded as an “average” household. The “poor” were considered those without work or had only one worker in the household.

In Moneragala district, the “rich” were regarded as those who owned grocery stores, rice or sugarcane mills, and had big houses. The “average” were those who cultivated the land they owned and had mid-dling houses. The “poor” were considered to be wage laborers, who didn’t own land, and lived in *illuk* grass-thatched houses.

These rule-of-thumb yardsticks influenced the way people thought about who was worthy to receive assistance or not, or why some people in similar situations had received something from the state or NGOs when others had not. Thus, local concepts of poverty and differentiation of people within communities are complex and have to be taken into account in both poverty alleviation programs and policy making.

## **Dimensions of Poverty**

### **Spatial-infrastructure dimensions**

Most of the villages the team visited simply lacked infrastructure such as roads, electricity, and irrigation/water supply schemes. However, in one urban area in Hambantota district, a small tea estate and a Moslem village in Badulla district, the problem was a lack of access to the infrastructure because of pricing policies, based on rates of return, conditionally imposed by multilateral agencies. This affected public standpipes (which were removed when bill collection was considered inconvenient) and private connections, as well as electricity connections, which were unaffordable to the poor. The team encountered several poor households who were compelled to pay arbitrary sums of money to their neighbors who had private connections in order to obtain water. In the case of the larger tea estate, the lack of access to electricity was a result of ethnic/political discrimination, where an electrification scheme approved for the estate was diverted to the neighboring village by a local politician. In one minor irrigation resettlement scheme, 30 percent of the anticipated acreage was being cultivated and 30 percent of the original number of house-

holds granted land remained idle due to the lack of water for cultivation and drinking. Poor people understood clearly the links between infrastructure and other dimensions of poverty.

*We have no relief here. No road. No water. No electricity. There's no hospital or shop close by. We have to walk 1-1/2 miles just to get a bus. There is no proper work here to make a living. We can only cultivate three months to feed ourselves for the rest of the year.*  
Kusumawathi, farmer, Moneragala district

While many poor people referred to the lack of road, water, and electricity as their major concern, others highlighted one issue as primary, in this case, water systems.

*We have no tap. They removed the public tap. I have to ask my neighbor for drinking water. We go to the Walawe River for our baths. It's a SLRs10 bus ride back and forth.*  
Gnanawathi, wife of coconut plucker, Hambantota district

*We have no permanent irrigation system for cultivation. We can only cultivate with the rain. We have money in our hands only if we cultivate something. Otherwise we have to do wage labor. We don't even have a drinking water supply.*  
Vasanthi, farmer/agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

*The biggest problem is that we don't have water. The sun is so hot it destroys the crops. If we have water we'll be the richest mudalalis in Moneragala. If the Kumbukkan oya is diverted and brought through the mountains, all the land here can be irrigated. Lakhs of people will benefit.*  
Premawathi, farmer, Moneragala district

While the lack of a road was a problem for marketing of products, its absence was considered even more critical in the case of illness and emergency situations.

*We don't have a road. It is difficult to take a serious patient to the hospital. We have to carry the patient 2 miles to the junction. Think of the difficulty of getting a pregnant mother to the hospital.*  
Nilmini, young wife of farmer, Badulla district

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*As there is no road our daughter-in-law died while giving birth. We couldn't take her to the hospital on time.*

Heenpuncha, elderly agricultural laborer/small farmer, Moneragala district

Lack of infrastructure is thus linked to other dimensions of poverty such as lack of income and employment, access to education, health services, and communication. To most poor communities lack of infrastructure was not merely an inconvenience but could mean the difference between life and death.

### **Political-economic dimensions**

The political system and patron-client relations came in for bitter criticism by the poor. Politicians were seen on one hand as people who came to the village just before an election, promised many things and disappeared without ever fulfilling one of their promises. On the other hand, politicians were also resented for providing benefits only to one part of the community. In many villages, former Janasaviya recipients, whether they still received the lower amount of Samurdhi or not, were deeply critical of the process of allocating Samurdhi. In the estates, workers showed the team piles of metal rock intended for repairing roads and posts to install electricity, brought by politicians from the ruling coalition, who said that these would be taken away if people failed to vote for them.

*Politician X has brought some electricity poles promising to give electricity to the estate because of the forthcoming election. If he doesn't get a good number of votes from here, he will just take them back.*

Sinniah, rubber estate laborer, Moneragala district

*Everything, tiles and other assistance to build houses, is given to those who live by the side of the main road because when Chandrika [the President] passes by this way, she can see them. We are not given anything because we live in the interior of the village and no one can see us.*

Sunil, farmer, Moneragala district

The poor also admitted that a section of them willingly submitted to a relationship of dependency with politicians in the hope of tangible returns in the future.

*The PA wants us to go canvassing for them. Lots of people work without food or water in the hope of getting a scooter, a job, a bicycle, a housing loan. Each strong supporter can get help for 10 of his friends or relatives.*

Gnanapala, fisherman, Hambantota district

In addition to politicians, plantation workers had very little confidence in their unions, pointing out that dues were deducted from their pay package with no benefit to them.

*The Union says we will speak on behalf of you. We strike and lose 10 days of work. That's all the union does for us.*

Sathyanathan, tea estate worker, Badulla district

The armed conflict between the state and LTTE has enormous economic consequences that maintain and exacerbate poverty.

*I was displaced from my house in 1990 and fled to the jungle with the help of my family and lived there for two years, eating, not eating, starving. I returned to my destroyed and looted house in 1992. We had goats, cows but everything was lost during the violence. The security forces ate up all my livestock in 1990. Earlier we were doing all right. I cultivated 4 acres of paddy. Now everything is gone. We can't go to our fields because the road is closed.*

Shanthapillai, elderly displaced person, Trincomalee district

*Earlier during the drought period we got drought relief from the state. Now we don't because all the money is spent on the war.*

Kamal, farmer, Moneragala district

*From the day Chandrika won the election, she says that she will build us a port in Hambantota. She still says this but has done nothing. Although she always says the same thing, the money is wasted on the war.*

Gnanapala, fisherman, Hambantota district

However, in addition to the political and economic aspects, the psychological state it has induced among the poor is even more problematic and leaves scars that are difficult to heal.

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*My aunt, uncles, and brothers were killed by the Tigers. Even those who were in the house were killed. My sister was raped by them. They put a bottle inside her. Then they thought that she was dead and left her there. She regained consciousness and was later hospitalized. We left this house and went away and came back only after a year. When we hear a gunshot or even noise of firecrackers, we get scared. Then we don't sleep until morning.*

Kamalawathi, wife of mason/wage laborer, Moneragala district

*I was assaulted four times on suspicion. I was caught and assaulted.*

Jeevan, honey-gatherer, Trincomalee district

*My husband was shot dead. My son was arrested on his way to the hospital and taken to Minneriya for a month.*

Devi, widow, Trincomalee district

*Our women were harassed in 1990 and 1992.*

Ramalingam, disabled, displaced person, Trincomalee district

In many villages land tenure issues emerged as a problem because poor people did not have deeds or even permits to cultivate the land. However, although many complained that promises to provide them with deeds had not materialized, they were also confident that they would eventually get rights to the land they occupied due to usufruct. Some poor people suffered from feudal land tenure arrangements. Landlords, such as this Buddhist monk, exacted both labor and money from his clients.

*We live on temple lands. All this belongs to the monk. We don't even own this soil. We have to pay him SLRs500 to cut a tree. The monk asks us to work in the temple. If we refuse we would be chased away. He is leading a good life with our money.*

Kusumalatha, sugarcane worker, Moneragala district

In contrast, in Trincomalee district, some landless people, like members of the *verdh* (honey collector) caste have obtained land in the uncleared areas because most people who were relatively wealthy and could settle elsewhere have left the region.

In addition to land tenure issues, there were also sea tenure issues. Many poor fishermen worked for a "share", which meant that they had very little earnings at the end of the day. They are referred to as *genikaraya*

(fruit sellers) or *gediya* by the owners, and considered “without refuge”. The shares vary depending on the type of fish caught and the type of craft.

*I work for a “share” (kotahata) in someone else’s boat. The owner gets half plus 15 percent engine payment. The rest is shared equally among the two hired hands.*

Priyantha, fisherman, Hambantota district

The agricultural policies pursued by the state, especially the lack of price controls, came in for criticism.

*Five years before people had a better life here. But these days people are in a difficult situation as we don’t get a good price for our crops, especially potatoes. This Government has begun to import potatoes from India. We belong to farming families. We are solely dependent on agriculture. We are getting poorer day by day because of this Government.*

Fatima, farmer, Badulla district

Both farmers and fishermen considered the prices they received for their crops/catch from traders as insufficient. On one hand, traders (*mudalalila*) were regarded as deceivers, who turned them into debtors, lived off them, and entangled them in a dependency relationship. On the other hand, they were perceived to be the only people who had the means to market their products and could be relied on for obtaining loans without red tape. Thus, traders emerged as a necessary evil to many poor people.

*There is nobody here to buy our fish at a good price. We have taken a SLRs25,000 loan from a mudalali to get electricity. So we have to sell our fish to him at whatever price he offers. We sell kiralavo for SLRs55 per kilo to him when the going price that day is SLRs75–100. Now no other mudalali comes to the beach because everyone has taken loans from him and has to sell to him.*

Siripala, fisherman, Hambantota district

*We sell our sugarcane to the mudalali in the village for SLRs500 per ton. He sells it to the Pelwatte sugar company for SLRs1,050 per ton. We don’t know the gentlemen at Pelwatte and we have no tractors to take them there.*

Kamalasiri, farmer, Moneragala district

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*We give the fish for SLRs20 per kilo. The mudalalis sell it for SLRs60 per kilo. They themselves tell us that they bought their vans because of what we catch. We are always in the water. The mudalalis are not like that. They always earn.*

Sumanaratne, inland fisherman, Hambantota district

The political and economic aspects of poverty are clearly interlinked and the poor understood some of these linkages. They perceived themselves as tied to these relationships of dependency resulting in a sense of powerlessness they could express but did not know how to overcome.

### **Environmental dimensions**

Lack or scarcity of water was a frequent complaint of the poor. Although this was often presented as a case of lack of hardware/technology to get convenient access to water, more detailed investigation would reveal that there were problems at sources, and water supply schemes that had been built already had no water flowing in them. Thus, in many communities water resources appear to be strained to the limits, in some cases for drinking or for irrigation, and in other cases for both.

*The worst is the water situation. Although there is land here there is no water.*

Leelawathi, farmer, Badulla district

*People live here by farming. A lot of fields can't be cultivated because of the water problem. Because the jungle is close by we also have problems with wild animals, elephants, and monkeys.*

Sudu Banda, farmer, Badulla district

When water is scarce, as in a minor irrigation settlement in Hambantota district, where a bowser delivers in the dry season, the poorest households at the margins of the village at least a mile away can be further excluded.

*The bowser comes with the water and beeps the horn. By the time we get there, the bowser is gone.*

Karunadasa, small farmer, Hambantota district

Crop damage by wild animals—elephants, wild boar, monkeys—was also a concern. Poor people claimed they lost up to three fourths of their crop to pests and they had no effective methods to deal with these pests. Firecrackers were used against monkeys with mixed results. Children were instructed to chase pests but since most attended school this was not very effective as well. In Moneragala, villagers had a ladder next to the closest tree to their huts so that they could rush up the tree when they heard the elephants coming. Some complained that the state was more concerned with the protection of wild animals and forest resources than with their livelihoods. They acknowledged that the reason elephants were attacking crops was because their habitat has been reduced, but often found big corporations such as the Pelwatte sugar factory responsible for reducing this habitat rather than themselves. In addition, the factory could protect its land with electric fences, which they could not because of the lack of electricity, in the first place, and the expense involved, in the second place.

*We are fighting with elephants every day. Nobody is there to ask questions if 10 people are killed by elephants but if one elephant is killed we are fined or put in prison. If we cut a stick to tie for the roof we are fined but people cut ebony illegally and nobody is there to question. It is harmless and poor people like us who are always questioned.*

Magilin Nona, elderly agricultural laborer, Moneragala District

*We have no land to cultivate. If we go and cultivate in the jungle, others go to the police and inform on us. The police have prohibited us to clear jungle land. The fine is SLRs10,000 per acre. My father sat in prison for one year because we had no money. So now we don't go to the jungle.*

Seelawathi, agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

The climatic constraints of fishing and the seasonal nature of their livelihood were often highlighted by fishermen.

*The sea is rough from April to September and we have no livelihood. For six months we can live it up and six months we are poor.*

Tuan, fisherman, Hambantota district

But this situation was exacerbated by the type of craft and engine owned. Although fishing was difficult in the off-season, it was not impossible

in larger fiberglass boats with good engines. However, those with outriggers found it difficult to risk the weather. In addition larger boats were able to go out farther and therefore had a better catch. Fishermen reported catches from nothing at all on bad days to 200 kilograms on very good days. Their earnings also varied considerably depending on the fluctuating prices.

While some sea fishermen also complained of the scarcity of fish (estimated as up to 80 percent less), this was more serious in the case of inland fishermen, who pointed out that the main problem was overfishing and the scarcity of fish in tanks. Both fishermen and fishermen-cum-farmers fished in the tanks. The lack of control of the number of outriggers, and permitting those people who were not full-time fishermen to fish, in the face of scarcity, were complaints voiced by poor fishermen.

*There is enough demand for our fish now but not enough fish in the tank. The tank is meant for 35 outriggers but there are 90 now. In those days there were 45 fishing families, now they are about 100. Everyone is fishing, not only fishing families.*

Sumanaratne, inland fisherman, Hambantota district

Lobster fishing is a lucrative livelihood and accessible to those without boats/outriggers, as they can take their own nets in someone else's craft, leave it on the rocks and recover the net the next day. However, fishermen felt that in implementing the conservation legislation, the Government was partial to big private companies.

*The Government imposes a ban on lobster fishing when the lobsters are spawning, for a month, twice a year. We are not against that. We were among the first to ask for such a ban. But the big companies are still catching and buying lobsters and managing to get it through customs even when it is forbidden. So the lobster ban only applies to the small, poor fishermen.*

Nimal, fisherman, Hambantota district

The environmental aspects of poverty are tied to population growth and the scarcity of natural resources, as well as the distribution of these resources among the various social groups. The poor understand that some resources are getting scarce because of population pressure but point out that they have to bear a disproportionate share of the burden.

## **Sociocultural dimensions**

### ***Food and hunger***

The inability to eat three meals a day was an important cultural definition of poverty. In some households answering questions about the food they ate was an experience that caused shame and embarrassment. In the Trincomalee district, translators were even reluctant to ask these questions. However, the majority of poor people in the other three districts were forthcoming about the food situation in their households. This issue is particularly important as it is often claimed that there is no real hunger or destitution in Sri Lanka, unlike in neighboring countries.

Almost all the poor households interviewed suffered seasonal scarcity of food, while the “poorest” went without at least one meal every day. On days when no wage labor was available some households went without food altogether. In Badulla district some villages mentioned the rainy season as a difficult time to find both food and work, while in other villages in Badulla, Hambantota, and Moneragala districts, the dry or windy season was considered worse, as nothing grew at that time. Individual households mentioned periods of time ranging from a month to six months, depending on landownership, employment opportunities, and the geoclimatic zone. The situation was generally worse for Dry Zone villages than those in the Intermediate Zone. Some households said that their food situation had deteriorated since childhood because they did not own as much land as their parents did or because the harvests were not as good as before, so that they were not able to store crops for difficult times. Others said their situation has improved now because they could borrow from stores on credit during difficult times whereas in the past they did not even have a store to borrow from.

Most households, however, rarely partook of a balanced meal. On most days, household meals comprised combinations of starchy food, with hardly any protein or vitamins. Many fishing households ate only rice and fish. The food situation was particularly bad for the urban “poorest” as they did not have access to gardens, fields, and forests to forage. Plantation workers said that the only “good” meal they had was on the day after they received their wages.

*On days we don't have money, we drink a cup of tea and sleep. We have borrowed SLRs14,000 and there isn't anybody else from whom we can borrow anymore.*

Rasamma, road sweeper, Hambantota district

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*We always try to find something. Even if we go hungry, we feed the children.*

Hemapala, carpenter, Hambantota district

*We eat three meals. For the most part, we don't eat, we just lick. We eat to satisfy our hunger. We don't eat a nutritious meal.*

Hemanthi, wife of fisherman/agricultural laborer, Hambantota district

Food scarcity was worst in the "uncleared" areas of Trincomalee district. Here people said they were "withering away without food and drink". But even in the "cleared" areas food was difficult.

*We had difficulties with food even before. But now because of the violence we are afraid to go out. There is shelling from the sea. Two months ago the Kafir planes bombed our fields. So it is very difficult for us to eat.*

Jeyanthi, farmer, "uncleared" area, Trincomalee district

*We can't be sure of having even two meals a day. We drink plain tea in the morning. We cook rice and curry for lunch and eat the leftovers in the night if there are any. Food is scarce in the rainy season from October to January when we are cut off. The harvest in Thoppur will be in January or February. Until then there won't be enough work for us.*

Ramalingam, displaced person, "uncleared" area, Trincomalee district

*If we don't get [World Food Program] rations we only have tea. We have not yet received the rations for this month. Sometimes it is delayed though they try to give them on time. There are times when we don't have a cent.*

Swarnamali, widow, refugee camp, Trincomalee district

*We don't have enough food during the rainy season. From October to February the sea is rough and it rains. There are times when we go without food for two days.*

Mohammed, fisherman, "cleared" area, Trincomalee district

### ***Housing***

Housing was the most often used yardstick to define poverty and wealth of both households and of the community as a whole. The change

from a hut to a house was an indication of upward social mobility in all four districts. Assets such as furniture also mattered.

*We are poor because we have no proper house. We just have a cadjan roof. We don't have anything important that should be in a house like a chair or table or bed.*

Jayawathi Menike, farmer, Moneragala district

*We would like to live like other people. We don't want to be rich or poor—just average. We must have a proper home with plastered walls and electricity. Then we can eat with the money that we earn daily.*

Suleiha, agricultural laborer, Badulla district

*In those days we all lived in cadjan huts. Now almost everybody except us has tiled roofs. Even if they have built them with fisheries loans.*

Sumanaratne, inland fisherman, Hambantota district

*We lived in a hut before. Now we have built this house. Earlier we were poor. Now we are in an average situation. We built this home for our children.*

Karunaratne, farmer, Moneragala district

Improvement or development of a family or village was measured in terms of the housing conditions. The ability to build a house meant the transcending of one's food needs.

*Some families have developed with their own effort, can hold their heads up now and have made houses. Otherwise, the Government hasn't done anything to improve this village. Our family has not improved much except to start on our new house.*

Hemalatha, farmer, Hambantota district

*We are unable to build a house because all our daily wages go to food and medicine. Some people in our village have improved since they went to the Middle East. They have built houses with electricity.*

Fauzia, agricultural laborer, Badulla district

Refugees and displaced persons in Trincomalee lacked any place that they could call home.

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*We are poor because we are displaced. We had to leave our homes.*  
Swarnamali, widow and refugee, Trincomalee district

*Our life has got worse because we lost our home during the violence.*  
Sunderalingam, displaced fisherman, Trincomalee district

A “proper” house of their own was a cherished dream for many of the poor. Many development projects/programs continue to think of improvement done to housing by the poor with their hard-earned money as nonproductive. However, underlying the desire for a house, the poor convey the emotional and social security that is provided by a home and the respect they anticipate from other members of the community.

### ***Education***

Distance to school, shortage of teachers, the poor quality of the teaching, corporal punishment, bad conditions of school buildings, and poor facilities are some of the issues voiced by poor people in all four districts. What was most frustrating for the poor was that their children had gained nothing from going to school.

*Our village is remote. The road is bad. When it rains it is slippery and our children can fall down the precipice at the big boulder. It is difficult for the children to go to school.*  
Kamalawathi, farmer, Badulla district

*Our children go to school just to sit there and come home. They don't teach or learn anything there. Children in Grade 7 can't yet write the word “mother”. Some parents send their children to Passara—those who have money.*  
Krishnan, tea estate laborer, Badulla district

*The elder children stopped schooling to look after the younger ones. Now the younger ones also don't want to go to school because the teachers have asked them to pay SLRs60 each. We can't pay this money. We can't afford to buy exercise books. Anyway, if they go to school, the teachers make them cut fodder, bring firewood to their quarters. They don't teach them more than one day per week. The rest of the time they make children work for them.*  
Meena, tea plucker, Badulla district

*The schoolteachers don't teach properly. They read newspapers. Nobody comes to inspect the schools. In those days managers came here but now nobody comes.*

Muthusamy, tea estate laborer, Badulla district

*The children here don't get a good education. My son is in Grade 6 but he can't read or write his name and address. The teachers don't bother to teach the children. They are only volunteer teachers. Some have not studied even up to Grade 10, others only to Grade 5 or 6. When they themselves are not educated, how can they teach our children?*

Sathyanathan, tea estate laborer, Badulla district

### **Health**

Poor people were critical of the services that they received from the state health centers and the lack of sensitivity to their problems and needs. With rare exceptions, they had very few positive things to say about doctors from the state health system, accusing them of taking away the good drugs from the outpatient department (OPD) and selling it to them at a higher price when they visited them privately.

*The medicine we get at the OPD doesn't cure us. It is only when we pay that our illnesses go away. They don't treat us very well at the hospital anyway.*

Sudumenike, elderly agricultural laborer/farmer, Badulla district

*The lady doctor at the Migahakivula hospital is good. We don't have to go to her privately. We went there yesterday and my son is already feeling better.*

Seelawathi, agricultural laborer, Badulla district

*We don't go to the hospital because we don't want to stand in queues. So we go to private doctors or to the pharmacy.*

Hemanthi, wife of fisherman/agricultural laborer, Hambantota district

*If pregnant mothers go to the hospital a month or week before, they are sent back saying they have more time to deliver the baby. We have a very poor road. How can a mother travel by tractor in her last month? Some even deliver on the way back. Some deliver before the day of delivery given by the doctor. We have two midwives in the*

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*village and 90 percent of women deliver their babies at home. If there are complications we try to take them to hospital but they mostly die on the way. Within the last two years 17 babies and 3 mothers have died during delivery.*

Jayawathi Menike, farmer, Moneragala district

In another village in Badulla district, which also had accessibility problems, pregnant women were taken to hospital well before the delivery and there were no complaints that doctors sent them back. Thus, the problem in Moneragala district might have been either due to the insensitivity of the staff in that particular health center or because of discrimination meted out to patients from this village, inhabited by a depressed caste.

Some diseases were widespread in the marginalized villages of the Dry Zone, and the services received by poor people were inadequate to deal with them.

*Malaria is our biggest problem. We get malaria twice a month. We can't do any work or anything because we are so weak from the fever.*

Sumanadasa, farmer, Moneragala district

When state medical services are absent or too far away to access, poor people resort to alternative means which are not necessarily cheaper.

*For any kind of disease, people here have learnt to chant with oil and tie a thread. It often takes 2—3 times of chanting per month to be cured. It costs SLRs50 each time. People get cured because of their belief.*

Kamalsiri, agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

In addition, in the remote border villages of Moneragala and Badulla, poor people were also susceptible to repeated attacks of spirit possession. Healing ceremonies were expensive and households got indebted, relying on loans from traders who charged 20 percent interest.

*My husband and I both get demons' illness about twice a year. The medicine from the hospital doesn't help us. So we have to get the healer. Once the demons get you they don't leave you alone. They are close to you and keep coming back. I was sick for two years from eating bewitched honey from the jungle. The healer comes and we have to feed the demons meat, fish, and bananas. A thovil [healing*

*ceremony] costs SLRs3,000. Here the jungle is everywhere, so there's lots of demons.*

Chandrapala, farmer, Moneragala district

### ***Caste***

Caste was a hidden social dimension of poverty in Sri Lanka, as not even the poor from depressed castes wanted to talk about it. However, the team visited villages that were occupied by the *batgama* (palanquin-bearer) and *berava* (drummer) castes. They lived in abject poverty in isolated villages in the middle of the jungle or at the margins of higher caste villages. Their housing conditions were poorer on average than their higher caste neighbors, their children had less years of education, and there are good reasons to believe that they were discriminated against in finding employment and in the access to health services. In one isolated *berava* village in the Moneragala district, people intermarried among themselves (possibly because there were no other *berava* villages close by), resulting in very high rates of congenital disorders. The caste aspects of poverty need more detailed and long-term study, rather than denying the relevance of caste in the Sri Lankan context, as is often done in many poverty studies.

The social-cultural dimensions of poverty, especially their housing conditions, were very important to the poor in defining their situation. Their social marginalization was often explained in terms of what they lacked compared to other people. However, this marginalization was also confirmed by examining their social networks and communication links, which revealed that most of the poor were limited to their villages, estates, and neighborhoods at worst, and to their own district at best. The only exception was Moneragala district where many people had come from elsewhere and kept in touch with kin in their natal villages. The majority of the poor interviewed did not have any communication with or visit people in other districts. Only a few wrote letters. Even less had used a telephone. Thus, while poverty meant dense linkages within their communities, it also meant the lack of external linkages and mobility outside their communities.

### **Gender dimensions**

In all the villages, there was a discrepancy between male and female wages in agriculture and mining. While male wages ranged from

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SLRs75 to SLRs150 per day, female wages ranged from SLRs50 to SLRs100 per day. Thus the average female wage was 66 percent of the male wage. In the tea estates male and female daily wages were equivalent, but men worked less time per day at certain tasks, such as pruning. Women were usually critical about the lower wage rates but men claimed that this was justified since women could not do as much work as they could.

*We do the same work as men but we get a lower wage.*  
Nilmini, female farmer/gem miner, Badulla district

The lower female wage rates made households where women were sole breadwinners, dependent on agricultural labor, particularly vulnerable. Thus, the problem was not necessarily for female-headed households per se as often claimed, but female-headed households with no male income earners.

*My husband died five years ago of chest pain. They never found out why. I haven't still received my pinpadi [public assistance]. I get SLRs50 per day from wage labor. How can we live on it? I have money only if I work. I don't get more than 10 days of work a month. I have to send three children to school, clothe them and feed five people in all. When I need medicine I take credit from people, promising to do wage labor for them at a later date.*  
Seelawathi, agricultural laborer/widow, Badulla district

One of the consequences of the armed conflict is the creation of widows all over the country. While widows of soldiers in the South receive compensation, this is not the case necessarily for other women who have lost their husbands in conflict-related violence. The problem is most acute in Trincomalee district, where there is a growing number of war widows who have to sustain their families without the support of their menfolk, but are supported by extended family structures and/or neighbors. The conflict has generated ambiguous social transformations. On one hand, women have the financial burden of supporting a family. On the other hand, some women who have suffered the trauma of losing husbands, fathers, and brothers, have also taken on new roles because of the violence. As men are likely to be conscripted to the paramilitaries, women are called upon to go out and negotiate with local authorities. Women have gained greater authority in their communities and families as they are increasingly forced to take on the role of household head and principal income earner. Thus, changes to the gender status quo that war has

brought about have benefited women whose choices were restricted by traditional morality and convention in peace time, even as it has placed new burdens on them. Long-term conflict and displacement have, ironically, provided windows of opportunity for greater personal and group autonomy, for leadership and creation of new identities for women.

In Trincomalee district, people were marrying earlier to avoid conscription by paramilitaries. Girls married and had children at a very young age. In Nalloor, the team encountered a grandmother whose granddaughter had grandchildren, indicating the early age of marriage in the village for generations. This tendency has been exacerbated by the conflict.

In access to education, there was no gender discrimination in general within poor households about who goes to school. On the contrary, more girls than boys are enrolled in school and girls often drop out later than boys. However, there were exceptions in two of the remote villages in Moneragala.

*When an 18-year old girl was walking back from school, a drunken man raped her on the way. She had to be hospitalized. So our parents stopped us from going to school after we became big [reached puberty]. The man belonged to a rich family. Although the girl's family went to the police they didn't take any action against the man. It is a waste of money educating daughters because when they attain age their schooling is stopped. They need to study at least until the 10<sup>th</sup> grade to get a job. Since this is a jungle, most girls do not study once they become "big girls".*

Jayawathi Menike, farmer, Moneragala district

The mobility of young women and girls were restricted in these villages because parents feared that their daughters would be raped by drunken men when they were walking alone on jungle paths. In the border villages in Moneragala district, women feared being raped by LTTE cadres.

In Trincomalee both boys and girls were kept away from school due to fears by parents of their recruitment to the LTTE. Girls were also kept away because of fear of abuse and rape by soldiers.

Domestic violence was evident in all the villages, although there was a reluctance to talk about it to strangers. Instead the tendency was to claim that it did not affect them personally but their neighbors or people in neighboring villages experienced wife beating. However, there were a few women and a teenaged girl, who provided sufficient information to indicate the depth of its existence.

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*Everyday we 10 children and our mother live in fear, thinking today father might come home drunk and beat everybody. He beats mother, breaks things in the house, burns our books and clothes. As a result our mental state has gone down. Mother is sometimes hospitalized due to the beatings; she has broken hands and nerve injuries. Sometimes mother goes to the police and sends father to prison but again she goes there and releases him. When a father beats a mother, the children live without refuge.*

Suranga, schoolgirl, daughter of agricultural laborers, Hambantota district

*My husband gets drunk and hits me. I went to the police recently and they mediated. I have to put up with a lot. I told them after 12 years now I don't want my husband. I told him I was going to leave.*

Mala, agricultural laborer and small farmer, Moneragala district

*There is a man nearby who gets drunk and beats his woman. He burns the clothes too. Every month she goes home to her parents with their eight kids but comes back when he comes in a 3-wheeler to bring her back. She comes back even though he ties her to a tree and beats her. He begs her to return and buys her new clothes. Nobody interferes because he has such a foul mouth. Sometimes she goes to the police to make a complaint, promises that she won't come back to him. But she keeps coming back and taking back the complaint. The police don't take her seriously any more.*

Rani, wife of agricultural laborer, Hambantota district

In some villages neighbors intervened when domestic violence took place. In others they avoided doing anything. In both cases, they did not want to get entangled with the police.

*We don't go where there are fights. If we go, we have to become witnesses. We have to go to the police. We have to bear expenses. For 42 years I've never gone to the police. We close our doors and mind our own business.*

Ramakrishnan, tea estate laborer, Badulla district

*If there are fights we try to settle those here. When we see the police, we get diarrhea.*

Ummu, wife of fisherman, Hambantota district

With the striking changes in gender ratio in all four districts, the gender dimensions of poverty are going to be increasingly significant. The question remains whether more households are likely to get poorer as women became principal breadwinners, or more households are able to overcome poverty as women gain decision-making powers within the household, and are likely to save more and waste less on alcohol and tobacco.

## **Dynamics of Poverty**

### **Causes of poverty**

In identifying causes of poverty, respondents could not often distinguish between the conditions and causes of poverty. Thus, being poor was often explained in terms of a lack. The cause of poverty was also identified as this lack or scarcity. From focus group meetings, we can give some indication of the primary causes of poverty, as mentioned by the poor, even if the cause-effect relationship is not clear from their perceptions. This breakdown does not represent all the villages or units visited in the district, as focus groups were held only when enough people were free, could access a central place in the village conveniently, and/or thought it was worthwhile to spend their time at such a meeting. The table is indicative of what poor people who participated, considered as the main reasons behind their poverty, in a collective context. In individual household interviews some of the causes not mentioned in the group setting, such as lack of market linkages and crop damage by animals, also emerged as equally important in Moneragala and Badulla districts.

Some, who considered themselves "average", attributed the poverty of their neighbors to laziness of the people themselves.

*It's their own making that people live like this here. They are lazy, earn their wages, and then just wait around.*

Jayanthi, wife of gem miner, Moneragala district

Others, among the poor, pointed out that people were not united or together (*ekamuthu*). The lack of social cohesion was attributed both to class differentiation within the village and rivalries among the poor themselves.

**Table 10: Causes of Poverty: Perceptions of the Poor Who Participated in Focus Groups (percent)**

Cause of Poverty	Moneragala N = 29	Badulla N = 95	Hambantota N = 114	Trincomalee N = 72
<b>Infrastructure/resources</b>				
Lack of road/transport	55.2	38.8		44.4
Lack of water supply	89.7	61.2	55.2	10.5
Lack of electricity	20.7	33.0	48.6	19.4
Lack of/access to land	74.1	38.9	14.8	3
Lack of facilities		5.3	23.6	28
<b>Political/economic</b>				
Conflict/violence/terrorism	44.8			72
Lack of employment/work	27.6	51.2	67.1	86.7
Lack of income	51.7	59.3	76.9	43.1
Lack of capital	31.0	30.2	5.4	21.8
Lack of markets		8.3		
Crop damage by wild animals		13.5		
Debt		2.6		
Lack of a creche		7.0		
<b>Social/cultural</b>				
Inadequate/lack of housing	86.2	54.9	52.7	10.3
Scarcity of food		26.9	12.4	30
Lack of/access to education	65.5	39.4	25.7	17.5
Lack of health services/illness	17.2	21.7	49.4	18.5

*The village is not united. The rich do not like the poor to go up because they would not have people to do wage labor. They buy maize from us at SLRs2 per kilo and sell it at SLRs10 per kilo.*

Kamalsiri, agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

*Everyone is poor here because people are jealous of one another. They are even jealous of people who live by doing wage labor. There is no cooperation/unity in this village.*

Seelawathi, agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

Many of the poor people interviewed however provided multiple reasons for their poverty, revealing quite clearly the links among infrastructural, economic, political and sociocultural dimensions.

*As we have no road, we cannot take what we cultivate to the market conveniently. Two thirds of our income from the crops is wasted on transportation. We have been living here from generation to generation and we have nowhere else to go. It is difficult to send the children to school because they have to walk 4–5 miles through the jungle. Because they have no proper education they will not get any government jobs.*

Jayawathi Menike, farmer, Moneragala district

*We are farmers. During harvest time the prices go down. As a result, we do not even get back the money we invest.*

Sammy, farmer, Badulla district

*Father wastes money on moonshine. He drinks everyday. Our parents do not have permanent work. My brothers don't have a good education to be able to get jobs.*

Suranga, schoolgirl, daughter of agricultural laborers, Hambantota district

*We are poor because we have a very low economic situation. We don't have sufficient water to grow crops. We do not get proper harvests from the crops we grow because of damage by animals. We don't have transport facilities. We don't have enough land to cultivate. We don't have enough money to cultivate.*

Farmer, Badulla district

*We are poor because we don't have permanent jobs, our crops are damaged by animals, we have no water, this is a village without a road, and we don't have clothes.*

Farmer, Badulla district

In Trincomalee district and the border villages of Moneragala poverty was linked directly to the armed conflict. The war has created a situation where people had to abandon their homes and livelihoods and move to a new location, merely contributing to the scarcity of resources in the host community.

*The main reason for our poverty is the lack of land for cultivation. The reason for this is that we had to abandon our land as a result of the Tiger terror. Now we don't have a house of our own. We live with our parents and we have lots of problems. There are only about 10*

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*percent of people who have government jobs here. Everyone else here is without refuge. We have to build tanks and ponds and cultivate the paddy-fields to solve our problems. We don't have proper jobs. We cannot cultivate all the time. If we cultivate the Yala, we cannot cultivate the Maha. If we cultivate the Maha, we cannot cultivate the Yala. We live in a hut which is thatched with illuk. Our crops are damaged by animals. We have no electricity, no proper road, no water facilities. These are the reasons for our poverty.*  
Samantha Kumari, displaced border farmer, Moneragala district

*We are poor because we got displaced, left our homes, my husband was killed, and there are no jobs.*  
Swarnamali, displaced widow, Trincomalee district

*The reason for poverty is terrorism.*  
Kandiah, internally displaced person, Trincomalee district

*Violence is poverty.*  
Mahendran, internally displaced person, Trincomalee district

Mahendran's statement identifying war and violence not as the outcome of poverty, but the reason for poverty, reversed the increasingly conventional understanding of poverty as a form of violence and suffering. What he expressed is a direct relationship between conflict and poverty, with war, displacement and loss of home and livelihood being seen as the primary cause of poverty. Mahendran's perception was buttressed in different ways by all members of poor households interviewed in the Trincomalee district who said that their standard of living had deteriorated in the last 20 years primarily due to the violence/terrorism that had engulfed the region.

### **Processes leading to poverty**

Some of the poor considered poverty to be a permanent feature of their life, as something constant and persisting for those who had inherited no assets from their ancestors.

*About 10 percent of households are doing well. They inherited things from their ancestors. They have lots of land so they are doing well. But 90 percent of us are doing badly because things have been that way for generations.*

Heenpuncha, elderly agricultural laborer/small farmer, Moneragala district

For others, the spiral of poverty is precipitated by circumstances that are specific to each individual household's life cycle. Illness and disability are the two factors that exacerbate their situation and are dreaded by the poor.

*We can't improve our lives by cultivating chenas. The daily wage is SLR75 if someone helps. The kilo price for maize is SLRs7. Where is the profit? If somebody falls sick, he cannot pay back his credit.*

Premaratne, farmer/trade/mason/agricultural laborer, Badulla district

Even with the availability of a free health service, sickness costs people in terms of time spent at health centers as they are dependent on a daily wage, transport costs to and from the health centers, and medicine that is most often unavailable at state centers.

When the illness is complicated it could mean an unrecoverable loss of the household's already meager assets, and an inability to return to their former livelihood.

*I conceived a baby in my fallopian tube and was very sick. I had to be hospitalized for two months. We had to pawn our paddy-field for SLRs5,000 to pay for everything. So we don't have land to cultivate now. Every month I have to go to Badulla for treatment. My son also has an eye problem because of a lack of vitamins. Whatever we earn is spent on medicine. We have no savings. We can't even release the mortgage on our paddy-field.*

Nanda, agricultural laborer, Badulla district

Illness is compounded by the stage of the life cycle the household is in and the size of the household. For this woman in her fifties with an older husband and a young son who were both ill, and three school-going children to support, life was an eternal struggle:

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*Our four older children married and left. We don't have any help from them. My husband injured his knee—it is swollen and paralyzed. There are five more children at home. Only the eldest is out of school. One son is disabled. I am the only income earner now. I have to do wage labor and look after the family. I spend all the money I earn on medicine. His life [the disabled son's] is neither finished nor is it getting better. I am without refuge because of his illness.*

Ranseela, agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

Death of an income earner also precipitated and intensified the poverty of some households. The situation was worse for those who lost husbands or sons to the various civil conflicts, as they suffered psychological trauma, in addition to the considerable time and resources on determining the status/situation of their deaths.

*My husband died when my sons were small. I brought them up with my sweat and effort. I wanted to see them grow up doing well with their lives. But now they are lost. I lost them during the disturbances; one was 18 and the other 20 years old. I went everywhere to places where I could get information about them. I spent every cent I had for this. All my efforts were useless. Now I live all alone in a cadjan house. All I have is a memory full of sorrow.*

Karunawathi, elderly agricultural laborer, Hambantota district

The death of a mother exacerbated the life chances of this girl, who was compelled to shoulder the burden of her natal family. Her marriage to a man who was prone to illness did not improve her situation and she was contemplating on the Middle East strategy once again, although her first experience as a maid was negative.

*My mother died when I was 10 years old. I had to stop schooling and look after my sister who was then 2 years old. I have been working from the age of 10 years. I have worked in houses, fields, and estates. When I was 16, I went to Dubai to work as a maid. The work was very hard. They didn't even pay me my wages and bought me only a return ticket home. My father is old and sick. I have to buy him medicine. My sister is now 12 years old and I want to educate her. It is my responsibility. My husband is a shop assistant. He can't do hard work because he is sick. Now I am pregnant. I don't know what awaits me in the future. All I can say is that day by day my life is becoming harder. Once I deliver my child I would like to go back to*

*the Middle East to build our house and take care of my sister and father.*

Suleiha, agricultural laborer, Badulla district

Lack of insurance for old age is a serious problem, as there is no pension scheme for the poor who work in the informal sector on a casual basis. A cultural orientation that does not give priority to the concept of saving increases this vulnerability.

*We made our situation difficult. When we worked in the gem mines we earned a lot but we didn't save when we had money. We hadn't invested anything to use when we need the money—like now. My husband is old, he has no job, he can't do any mining, he can't cultivate. So we don't have enough food. He bought me jewelry earlier but now these are all pawned. Our daughter stopped her education because we couldn't buy her books. Now we have no income. We have to do hard wage labor in the fields.*

Saraswati, agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

The ethnic riots of 1983 and the ongoing armed conflict have reduced people to poverty and maintained them in this situation.

*I was born in this estate. I moved to Moneragala town and did business in the fair. I started my business with SLRs11,000 and bought land, built a 7-room house, bought a car. In the 1983 riots our house was burned. We had a lot of things in our house, property worth SLRs125,000. Everything was burned. Some things were looted. We had cattle and goats which were stolen. We went and informed the police and M.P. The M.P. asked us whether we had the vote and I said: "Yes". Then he said: "I can't do anything because this is due to the ethnic conflict." So we sold our 3/4 acres of land to a Sinhalese for SLRs25,000 and came here. I have been trying to get a loan from Samurdhi to cultivate paddy here but we have not been given anything. My wife works in the rubber plantation and I work in the chena. Once we are fallen, we are fallen.*

Raman, farmer, Moneragala district

*I was displaced in 1990 at the age of 15 years. I fled to the jungle with my parents, brother, and sister. I lived in the jungle and elsewhere. We came back in 1992. I lost my limb in a mine explosion when I was herding cattle near the Malaimanthal Army Camp. So I can't go*

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*to work. There is no employment here. We pluck kananthi and sell it to earn a living. My father supports me, and also my wife and two children. We have lost everything. We cannot use the land due to the violence.*

Ramalingam, disabled, displaced person, Trincomalee district

In addition, there was a sense of ethnic competition and a perception that one ethnic group had benefited from the conflict while the other lacked political representation. Thus, some displaced poor in Trincomalee district said that all the jobs were given to those who had political connections and the Muslims. Mistrust between the ethnic communities has grown and had impact on the economy, where previously an ethnic division of labor in trade had existed. The movement of Muslim traders out of neighboring villages has made some people poorer, as they have no one to sell their produce.

The dynamic nature of poverty and the combination of economic, political and sociocultural factors that influence change can be seen in the fluctuating fortunes of this fishing household, occupying a wattle-and-daub house with a cadjan roof on the beach in Hambantota district:

*My husband worked very hard. First, he worked in other people's boats and through his own effort bought a small outrigger, then another one, finally a small fiberglass boat. I have three sons and three daughters. The trouble started when our eldest daughter got married. Her husband demanded our family house in the town. So we had to give that house and move here. Then I went to the Middle East to earn some money to renovate this house. But my husband contested the election and spent all the money I earned. He died five months ago. After that my two older sons started to go out to sea. They use his boat. But they are new to the work and unable to earn much. Now my youngest daughter's husband is also demanding a house, so my eldest daughter has gone abroad to earn money to build them a house.*

Vasna, widow of fisherman, Hambantota district

The main income earner in this family, a fisherman, managed to obtain the means of earning his livelihood and improved the family situation. They had a house in a poor neighborhood in the main street of the town. Malay custom demands that daughters be provided with houses. Thus, the family lost a valuable asset at the eldest daughter's marriage. However, they squatted on the beach and decided on the Middle East

option to improve their situation. Unfortunately, the fisherman gambled on a political career and lost this money, so the household was back to square one. Soon afterwards he died leaving the household without a primary income-earner, and not having trained his two sons adequately in his occupation. Thus, the household was at a very vulnerable stage, compounded by the eldest daughter's absence in order to improve the situation of her youngest sister. The intertwining of economic, social, cultural, and political dimensions are evident in evaluating the dynamic aspects of the poverty situation of this household.

**Processes of change: Interpreting "improvement"/  
"development"**

In assessing change some poor people saw some positive change either in their communities or within their households. Schools, better paths/roads, electricity, better housing were the improvements often mentioned. However, most said the "improvement" was limited and often confined to a few households. Many poor people felt that life had improved or will improve when the children got bigger and had jobs or got married and left, while they were poorer when they married and the children were little. Thus, improvement was a process linked to the life cycle.

A middle-aged woman, mother of 7 children, who lived in a wattle-and-daub hut with a talipot palm thatched roof, had this to say about her life:

*Since I got married our life is a little better. We moved here from Middeniya. The paddy-fields here are fertile. Our kurakkan harvest was good last year. The older children have grown up and are working in Colombo. They earn something and send to us. We try to educate the younger children.*

Lucia, farmer, Hambantota district

*Our village has developed a lot in the last 20 years. In those days there weren't as many houses and people lived in cadjan huts. Now we have electricity, water, roads, even a telephone at a neighbor's. Our own family's situation has not improved much. I had an outrigger from childhood. I bought a small fiberglass boat three years ago but I am so indebted that I don't feel there has been any improvement. We lived in a small brick house with a cadjan roof earlier. Now we live in a better house with tiles. We started building this eight years ago but it is still not completed.*

Ranjith, fisherman, Hambantota district

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*We have improved in that we are now saved from cadjan thatched houses. We have no water yet but some of us have electricity. We have to pay back SLRs70,500 though the connection costs SLRs7,500. Crime and armed robberies have increased. Our social system is wrong. For 30 years my father did tenant farming and wage labor and brought us up—six children. We bring up two children with the same amount of suffering. We try to educate our children more.*

Hemanthi, wife of fisherman/agricultural laborer, Hambantota district

*For us there has been no “improvement” (diyunuwa) but our children have improved. They have some education and got jobs [in garment factories] so we are living off them. They bring clothes and money. If not for their jobs we would be in great difficulty.*

Heenpuncha, agricultural laborer/ farmer, Moneragala district

Most often the poor saw “improvement” or “development” in terms of better infrastructure. However, others like this Buddhist “Sunday” school teacher-cum-farmer perceived improvement in terms of sociocultural change, and linkages to a wider social network outside the village.

*People here now know how to speak better. The language is better than before. Earlier they talked in Vedda language. People are also cleaner now. They have more contacts both within and outside the village. They bring brides from and give brides outside the village.*

Karunatileke, Sunday school teacher/farmer, Moneragala district

*There has been some improvement here. Now there is a Buddhist monk in the temple in the nearby village.*

Sudu Menike, elderly widow, Badulla district

Others said that things had become worse for both their communities and their households in the last 20 years. This was especially marked for those of the poor who had been affected by the armed conflict. They experienced a deterioration of their life conditions.

*I could go fishing in the sea anytime. I could go anywhere in search of work. We had plenty of livestock. Now everything is gone. We lost everything including my limb. I am disabled now.*

Ramalingam, disabled, displaced person, Trincomalee district

Some of the poor saw “development” in terms of change in political power, and the lack of access to the spoils of clientilism by particular groups.

*After the Front (PA) came to power, they don't treat the UNP people well. They give everything only to PA supporters. The village went back after the Front came.*

Malini, farmer/agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

However, a good part of the poor saw their life as unchanging, and were silent about any improvements. Many said the situation had remained the same for them all their lives.

*It is eternally the same here.*

Heenmenike, elderly farmer, Badulla district

*We have always lived this way. From childhood it was like this. Now our children live like this. From birth to our grave we live in difficulty and sorrow. My father gave us this line room. Now he, a brother and sister live in the sister's line room. But he is telling us now to move out. We both have work. But from where can we get a home?*

Rajan, estate laborer, Badulla district

*Then we lived in sorrow. Now we live in sorrow. This was the way our parents brought us up too.*

Chandrasiri, farmer/agricultural laborer, Badulla district

In Moneragala district, some people saw an increase in unity in the communities and attributed this to the social mobilization efforts by both government and NGOs. Their increased ability to come together and accomplish tasks was valorized. One person even offered it as an example to be emulated by the State.

Thus, improvements were also conceptualized in multidimensional terms, incorporating infrastructure, political, sociocultural, and economic aspects.

## Poverty Alleviation Strategies

### Self-help/coping strategies

When respondents were asked what they do in situations where they have no money and food in their hands, several typical patterns emerged. Many of the poor said they would go in search of the work they were used to doing. Thus, sea fishermen said, "We'll go out to sea," while inland fishermen said, "We'll go to the tank." Coconut pluckers said, "We'll climb a tree" and agricultural laborers said, "We'll go in search of wage labor."

In the Intermediate Zone in both Badulla and Moneragala districts where the poor owned or had access to home gardens and forest fragments, they said they survived on *jak* and/or bread fruit during difficult periods. However, during the rainy season this was dangerous as the trees were too slippery to climb. The team interviewed several handicapped men in one such village who had suffered injuries from falling off trees. In both Dry Zone and Intermediate Zone, the poor also depended on manioc or yams they had cultivated in their gardens. Some of the poorest villagers in Dry Zone Hambantota had millet varieties such as *meneri* and *thana* in their lofts, in addition to *kurakkan* which was their mainstay.

Most poor households in all four districts said they borrowed on credit from their local grocery stores when they had no food or money. Their monthly debt at these stores ranged from SLRs125 to SLRs3,000, with villagers at the lower end and the estate workers at the higher end. A minority said they could not borrow because nobody would give them credit since they had no way of paying it back. Others said they simply went hungry on the days they could find no wage labor.

In the long term, some households sent out members to work in urban areas as maids, garment factory workers, shop assistants. But not everyone was willing to let family members move out of their home communities to better their life chances.

*We hope our children will get jobs after going to school. We cannot send them to garment factories far away. We are scared to send our children to Colombo. In our area there are no factories.*

Hemawathi, agricultural laborer, Hambantota district

Thus, the poor were resourceful and relied on a number of strategies to cope with their poverty. In the short term, they resorted to working harder at their livelihoods, hunting/gathering "free goods", and borrow-

ing money. In the long term, they were likely to send household members out of their communities in search of more lucrative employment.

### **Assistance from kin/community**

Many poor households were part of a social network incorporating kin and neighbors, who understood their situation and who could be relied on to help them in times of difficulty and trouble.

*When we don't have enough food or money we borrow rice from neighbors and repay after the harvest. Everyone here is in the same situation. We exchange goods, money. Everyone cooperates with one another.*

Premalatha, farmer, Moneragala district

*If we have rice, the next door neighbors will give us hodi [sauce].*

Ummu, wife of fishermen, Hambantota district

However, these networks are often strained by the lack of resources and many poor people point out that they are all in the same situation and therefore are careful about asking for help.

*They are just as poor as we are. We can't trouble them.*

Kusumawathi, agricultural laborer, Hambantota district

*How can we ask them? It's difficult enough for them.*

Marimuttu, retired estate worker, Badulla district

*We have plenty of relatives but they don't have the means to help us. In an emergency we can get SLRs100 from a neighbor if they have it on them.*

Chandrasiri, agricultural laborer, Badulla district

Yet in unforeseen circumstances, kin and neighbors are resourceful.

*Against all expectations I had twins five months ago. I ask my mother for both money and food when I have nothing, and return it later when my husband earns something. My uncle's family also helps if any of the children are sick. My neighbors brought food when I had the babies. They brought new rice from their fields and helped me with the housework.*

Kamalawathi, wife of agricultural laborer, Badulla district

To deal with the security situation and the lack of mobility in Trincomalee district, many women coordinated and scheduled travel out of the village for provisions, as well as to sell their produce, in groups.

Reciprocal relations among kin and neighbors in times of hardship were strongest among urban Malay fishing households in Hambantota, as well as Sinhalese farming households in remote villages in the Hambantota and Moneragala districts. They were weakest among displaced/refugee Tamils in Trincomalee district, as well as estate households in the Badulla district.

In many villages, traditional community labor mobilization systems such as *attam* (exchange labor) groups are functioning among the land-owning poor. In addition, kin and neighbors help each other in life transition ceremonies associated with birth, marriage, and death. Many of the communities visited by the team had death donation societies. However, some of the poorest households did not belong to or had left the death donation society because they could not keep up with the monthly payments. Some cases of malpractice by office-holders of death donation societies were reported, for example of a president who had used up all the money collected for a funeral in his own family and then disbanded the entire society.

Reciprocal exchange relations among kin and neighbors were very important to poor people in coping with poverty. Reliance on kin and neighbors among households interviewed was 35 percent in Trincomalee district, 50 percent in Badulla district, 63 percent in Moneragala district and 79 percent in Hambantota district. Informal reciprocity, involving food and money, was even more valued than more formalized relations of reciprocity, such as exchange labor.

### **Assistance from the Government and NGOs**

The state poverty alleviation program, Samurdhi, was operational in all the communities visited. Of the households interviewed, Samurdhi beneficiaries ranged from 38 percent in Badulla to 75 percent in Moneragala. Nonbeneficiaries were critical about the methods of selection employed, particularly at the local level. Beneficiaries were critical about the size of the assistance, and the time and red tape involved in obtaining the assistance.

*Although we are poor we don't get Samurdhi. Samurdhi stamps are given to the Mudalali's friends and the relatives of the Samurdhi mobilizer, not to us.*

Nilmini, farmer/gem miner, Badulla district

*Other villages get help but we don't get anything. We got tiles from Janasaviya but nothing from this Government. We can't earn anything from what we grow.*

Ranpanikka, farmer, Moneragala district

*Getting Samurdhi is like cutting meat on the wildboar's head. We have to attend meetings to get the Samurdhi. Then we have to waste two visits to the cooperative store to get the goods. We waste as much money to get the Samurdhi as the SLRs250 we eventually receive.*

Dharmadasa, farmer, Moneragala district

*Samurdhi is like giving the oxen away and threshing the paddy. We have to pay this, deposit that to get our stamps. Otherwise, they threaten to cut us off.*

Hemapala, carpenter, Hambantota district

*All we get from the Government is the Samurdhi piece (kelle). After all, the Government is in enough [financial] difficulties as it is.*

Kaluheeniya, farmer, Badulla district

In addition to Samurdhi, government assistance in general, as well as specific forms such as fisheries loans, were perceived as misappropriated, or promised and undelivered. Many poor people felt that funds meant for them did not reach them due to corruption or because these were intercepted by the politically powerful members of their communities.

*You come and do these studies and work hard, but I know you can't influence how the assistance will be spent. Your report goes to God knows whom. Ultimately the money goes to the Government—first to the Parliament, then to the district secretariat, then to the divisional secretariat, then the grama sevaka. And then it doesn't reach the poor. During elections they come and promise everything but after that they forget us. You need a foreign CID (Central Investigations Department) to find out what happens to the money. The Sri Lankan CID won't do.*

Soysahami, farmer/agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

*The Provincial Council member told us to build the foundation of the house and promised to give fisheries housing loans of SLRs25,000. So people pawned everything they had and built foundations, even walls*

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*out of unbaked bricks, but no roofs. None of the loans came through. The houses were washed away by the rain with all the things in them. If those politicians come here again we'll scold them and chase them away. From the big man to the small one, all they do is lie.*  
Gnanapala, tenant fisherman, Hambantota district

*Twenty of us young fishermen are not members of the fisheries society. All the subsidies and assistance go to the office holders and older members. We don't get anything useful so we don't join. Everything is done for money. If we apply for something our forms are put at the bottom.*  
Priyantha, fisherman, Hambantota district

A small minority of poor people, as this young fisherman living in a *cadjan* hut, said they wanted to be responsible for their own lives and were not interested in obtaining government assistance.

*It's better to earn our own keep. To get government assistance we have to waste time at meetings. We lose SLRs100 everyday to get SLRs250 per month. I don't want any credit. I have to pay back 10 times as much. There's more trouble with credit than without. My wife has gone to the Middle East so that we can buy our own bike to sell the fish I catch. We don't need any help from any one.*  
Sumanaratne, inland fisherman, Hambantota district

If the poor had no confidence in the effectiveness and accountability of government programs, the bilateral and NGO projects did not fare any better. NGOs and bilateral projects were considered as transient organizations that moved in and out of their lives without any lasting commitment or benefits to them.

*We don't know where they come from. We are told to come to a meeting so we go. They put us into groups and promise us that they would give us this and that—wells, latrines, tiles, assistance. They will be here for two, three, four months and then they vanish. Nobody knows where they came from, why they came, and why they left. Our village hasn't certainly benefited from them.*  
Ranseela, agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

*NGOs only talk. They have meetings. They don't do anything. They promise to start self-employment schemes. They have written down our needs but it seems to take them forever to get anything approved. NGO Y was here and left. All they did was a lie. I worked so many hours for them without getting paid. They brought some tools for the village that have all disappeared now. I kept my tools because they didn't pay me.*

Hemapala, carpenter, Hambantota district

*We got 300 pepper plants from the IRDP but that was no use. They gave it during the dry season so they all died.*

Chandrasiri, agricultural laborer, Badulla district

Many doubted the intentions and purposes of NGOs. Two impoverished families, both with seven children, living in wattle-and-daub houses with *talipot* thatched roofs on the margins of a minor irrigation settlement, said they had been approached by a religious organization, who photographed their children and promised to help them if they became Christians.

*Some gentlemen from a Christian organization came here some months ago. We don't know the name. They took photographs of the children and said if we convert to Christianity they would help us. We were suspicious about them. We don't want to change our religion for money.*

Karunadasa, small farmer/agricultural laborer, Hambantota district

*We have a sick child. NGO X came and took photos of him. They took around 15 photos—of the child alone, the child with my wife, and a family photo. They interviewed us also around 15 times. It's two years now and they have done nothing.*

Ramanathan, gem miner, Moneragala district

The manner in which outside assistance is hijacked by the politically powerful and more vocal groups within or outside their communities, and the lack of awareness by these organizations to what was going on, came in for criticism. The poor felt marginalized and voiceless in dealing with these outsiders.

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*Those who come from NGO X do not allow us to talk. We just have to listen to what the others say so we don't go now for meetings because it is pointless. NGO X has a group in the village. Those people do not allow us to tell our problems. Even if we ask them to tell our problems they do not let us. So we are not in the group. What is the use?*

Radakrishnan, gem miner, Moneragala district

*Agency A has helped our neighboring village but not ours. Those who can talk get all the benefits. Those who are quiet and poor are ignored.*

Chandran, gem miner, Moneragala district

A young woman narrated her experience with one NGO, revealing the organization's process of involvement in her community. Although she herself had gained something, she felt that the organization did not assess the conditions and needs of the poor efficiently or fairly.

*At the beginning NGO X was good. Twenty households got housing construction materials worth SLRs25,000 through the women's organization. Other people who were in the same situation as ours were promised this assistance if they put money in the organization and built the foundation. They did this by getting indebted everywhere but they didn't get the assistance. They have cheated us. The food assistance we get because of the children is good but we don't know how long it will continue. Without the assistance of the women's organization and NGO X we couldn't have built our house but there are others just as needy as we are.*

Hemalatha, farmer, Hambantota district

In Trincomalee, refugees were dissatisfied with dry food rations, which had replaced cash payments, under a multilateral program. They preferred cash since they could choose what they wanted. In addition, many NGOs have initiated income-generating projects without adequate analysis of the local resource base, market and transportation facilities, and sustainability of the project given the existing security situation. The restrictions on the movements of people and goods, poor transport facilities that inhibit access to markets, as well as taxes imposed by armed groups on successful entrepreneurs and the transport of produce remain major obstacles to income generation efforts.

Some of the poor did not differentiate between the state, bilateral agencies, and NGOs. They were all perceived to be of benefit only to the better-off in their communities.

*If something is given, it will always be divided among those who already have. Nothing will be given to people like us.*

Suleiha, agricultural laborer, Badulla district

In a minority of cases, both the pros and cons of state and NGO programs/projects were expressed. The unity that was created through their involvement was appreciated.

*The problem with the Government is that they only look after their own people. In the towns they don't differentiate between people. But here people say he's with this party or that and stop them from helping you. There is more unity in the village than before. This started when the government and NGO X started societies and groups and got us to work together. They taught us new things and the advantage of getting together. This happened only after Samurdhi. My wife is in a small group of NGO X. She takes loans for farming. At least they have learnt that they can work together. I am in a Samurdhi small group. They gave seeds and plants but it is difficult to grow because there's no water. They told us about new techniques but these require time and money. We have to then go to meetings and we don't have time.*

Chandrasekera, farmer, Moneragala district

Many programs work with the assumption that time is an abundant resource of the poor. The reality is that the poor are the least able to afford to forego a day of work. Thus, there were many of the "poorest" who said they did not have time to waste at meetings when the returns were negligible.

The small group concept, which has been the core of social mobilization efforts in all four districts, also came in for criticism, partly because of the time involved, partly because attendance was mandatory in order to receive benefits, and partly because the groups were considered exclusive.

*I don't go for meetings. It's a waste of time. I can work and earn something.*

Hameed, agricultural laborer, Badulla district

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*I just go for the meetings, sit there and come back. That's all. If we don't go for the meetings our Samurdhi will be cut.*

Abdul, son of tea plucker, Badulla district

*Groups are only for those who have a SLRs500 Samurdhi stamp.*

Latifa, farmer, Badulla district

Many poor people questioned the credit orientation of small groups, pointing out that it was impossible for them to come up with monthly payments with their fluctuating incomes.

*All these societies with their small groups want to make us into debtors.*

Hemanthi, wife of fisherman/agricultural laborer, Hambantota district

*I am a member of a small group. We can get loans but we don't take any because we can't pay them back.*

Karunawathi, farmer, Badulla district

*We will never take a loan. Only a few rupees from a shop. We don't want to take loans from the government banks because if we can't repay we have to go to courts. I can't deal with such problems.*

Heenpuncha, farmer/agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

Only a few people said that they benefited from small groups. These usually came from the upper-levels of the poor and middle-income group. Exchange labor for agricultural activities mainly benefited those who had land. Some were also able to participate in *sittu* (revolving credit) groups, involving cash or kind.

*I am in an NGO Z small group. We can get credit up to SLRs3,000. We also have a rice sittu, which is helpful. We also get together to help members in their cultivation.*

Kamalawathi, farmer/agricultural laborer, Badulla district

In many cases, all what small groups had accomplished was to strengthen and formalize pre-existing exchange labor relations or revolving credit arrangements within the community. The "poorest" often ended up in groups with people like themselves who couldn't keep up with the payments and these groups were then labelled as "nonfunctioning" or "unsuccessful" which did not help them with maintaining their self-respect.

Otherwise, they were part of a group in which better-off members were the majority and they were dropped at some point because they couldn't keep up with the payments. This only reinforced their exclusion and sometimes even resulted in ostracism.

*I'm in the women's group from NGO X. We have taken a loan but are not able to pay it back. So we don't want to take any more loans. We have no time to participate in meetings. I have to go out and do wage labor everyday.*

Seelawathi, agricultural laborer, Hambantota district

In many cases the "empowerment" aspects of small groups were negligible. They mainly served as conduits for passing down orders from social mobilizers and distributing handouts, and were perceived as such by the poor.

*I am in a small group with 8 members. We get together to help each other in our gardens and fields. We were given 32 coconut plants each by the social mobilizer. She had asked everyone to dig 32 holes beforehand. Not everyone who dug the holes got the plants and others who didn't got them instead. Now we are supposed to be getting plants for our home gardens. We were not informed about the meeting to get water to our gardens. We were told we have to have land. We have land. The social mobilizer says we don't. I asked her "Are we living on rocks"? People who should be getting things don't get them.*

Premaratne, farmer/mason/wage laborer, Badulla district

After two decades of mobilizing the poor, the extent to which they have become "empowered" is clear from the following statements.

*The Government made the road and then broke parts of it. We didn't ask why because they who made the road have the right to damage the road.*

Premalatha, farmer, Moneragala district

*If we make any proposals to overcome poverty, we would be hanged.*  
Ummu, wife of fisherman, Hambantota district

However, even if the poor are not "empowered", they are angry and frustrated. The state, bilateral agencies, and NGOs will have to tread

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cautiously in the future. Poor people are tired of attending meetings and seeing no tangible changes in their living conditions. The driver of our vehicle was asked whether we were from NGO X in a village in Hambantota. When he replied in the negative, he was told:

*We are waiting for the officers from NGO X to get here. We are going to send them home with their pants down. All they did was deceive us.*

### **Needs, Priorities, and Aspirations of the Poor**

All the poor people interviewed wanted to better their lot in life but did not always know how or expect that anything would change for them. Many voiced the limitations they faced.

*I want to help my children go forward. I have it in my mind but not in my hand.*

Rajan, gem miner, Moneragala district

*We will have to somehow survive, otherwise we'll just end up in the grave. These days everything is so expensive.*

Ranpanikka, elderly farmer, Moneragala district

In focus group meetings in all four districts, the needs and priorities of the village, estate or urban unit to overcome poverty were collectively voiced and listed in flip charts. However, additional needs and priorities emerged at the household level.

### **Infrastructural-spatial dimensions**

The need for roads, electricity, and water supply was voiced recurrently by the poor in all four districts.

*I would like to see a road, electricity, and water. The water is the most difficult for us. We need first of all water. If we need to go to a hospital in an emergency we need a road. We need lights so that our children can study in the evening. It's difficult for them to study with kerosene lamps.*

Dayawathi, farmer, Badulla district

**Table 11: Needs and Priorities to Overcome Poverty, as Identified by Focus Groups**

Need/Priority	Badulla District	Moneragala District	Trincomalee District	Hambantota District
<b>Infrastructure/Resources</b>				
Road	X	X		X
Repair road			X	
Drains for flood water				X
Transport facilities	X	X	X	
Water supply	X	X	X	X
Rehabilitation/construction of tank		X	X	X
Electricity	X	X		X
Access to electricity	X		X	X
Land	X		X	X
<b>Economic Needs</b>				
Employment	X		X	X
Permanent jobs	X			X
Self-employment	X	X	X	X
Agricultural assistance	X		X	X
Control of animal pests	X			X
Fisheries assistance			X	
Animal husbandry	X		X	X
Loan facilities	X	X	X	
Market				X
Crèche	X			
<b>Political Needs</b>				
Elimination of ethnic conflict/racism			X	
<b>Sociocultural Needs</b>				
Nutritious food	X			
Housing scheme		X		
Houses	X	X	X	X
Property deeds				X
Latrines	X	X		X
Community hall	X			X
Playground	X			X
Sub-post office	X			
Burial grounds				X
Preschool	X			X
School	X		X	X
School teachers		X	X	
Access to education	X		X	X
Library facilities				X
Hospital	X	X	X	X
Doctors		X		
Ayurvedic medical center	X			

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*Our main hope for the future is electricity so that the elephant problem will be solved. We are not being given electricity because we might destroy the elephants. We need a proper irrigation system for cultivation. We need a road so that my son and daughter can go to work. If there was a garment factory she could get a job there.*

Emmaline Nona, elderly agricultural laborer, Moneragala District

*If a road comes it would be the starting point in the development of our village.*

Sudumenike, elderly farmer, Badulla district

*If we have water and transport that is all we need. How can we stay without bathing every day? By the time we come back from the tank one mile away, we are drenched in sweat again. It is as if we had no bath at all.*

Chandrawathi, farmer, Hambantota district

The economic and social consequences of receiving infrastructure were clearly expressed. Many poor people believed that their aspirations for infrastructure would be fulfilled within their lifetime. They pointed out that neighboring villages did not have some of this infrastructure even five years ago but they did now and there was no reason for them not to receive it as well.

### **Political-economic dimensions**

Many poor people were very vocal about their hopes for the country. While an end to war and an era of peace was the most often voiced concern, the poor were also critical of the nature of politics and did not expect anything positive from their politicians. A Malay woman pointed poignantly to the common humanity of the groups fighting each other and the necessity to stop the war in order for the country to develop.

*We hope the country would develop somehow, that people would live without fighting and quarreling. Everyone should live together as the children of one mother. However much we might cut up each other, everyone has the same blood in the end.*

Vansa, widow of fisherman, Hambantota district

Poor people in all four districts expressed a very similar desire for peace, regardless of their ethnic origin. They voiced a need for a life

without fear and insecurity, and a return to mobility within and outside their communities.

*We want to live together in peace with all the other communities.*  
Mahendran, displaced person/agricultural laborer, Trincomalee district

*We don't want a threat to our security. Everybody should be able to move freely.*  
Geetha, widow, Trincomalee district

*We want peace so that people live with each other in harmony. Sinhalese and Tamils, we lived as friends and relatives in the past.*  
Swarnamali, widow, Trincomalee district

*All should be given equal rights.*  
Sunderam, fisherman, Trincomalee district

*Everyone should live together without troubles, without racial divisions. If the country develops it is also good for us.*  
Saraswati, urban laborer, Hambantota district

*All we wish for is peace for the country. Although we are not in Jaffna, we also live with the same fear.*  
Premalatha, farmer/agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

*If we are free of the Tigers and have a situation where we are able to walk on the road, that would be good.*  
Kusumalatha, farmer, Moneragala district

*We want our children to live well not like us in poverty and for the troubles to end. We want to live like we do in the village without racial divisions. When we are out we get stopped for the smallest thing. The other day someone who does wiring went to a shop and left his roll of wire there while he ran to the neighboring shop to buy something else. He was grilled by the police who said he was assembling a bomb.*  
Muttiah, gem miner, Moneragala district

Several poor people said that the solution to the conflict was a political one and politicians should be prepared to talk rather than fight. The war also put a burden on poor people who had to pay for the higher prices.

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*The country should develop systematically, the war should end, politically or otherwise, and we should all live as one.*

Chandrawathi, farmer, Moneragala district

*If the country develops we can also live well. For the war to end both sides have to talk. By fighting we will never end this war.*

Soysahami, agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

*If there is peace it is as if the country is already developed. We need better politicians so that people will benefit.*

Daniel, agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

*The war should end soon. Prices are going up everyday because of the war. We can't bear the cost of living.*

Rasamma, tea plucker, Badulla district

Many of the poorest people despite their grinding poverty did not want their children to join the army. Some who lost their loved ones insisted that their children did not go to fight for the country and that they did not care what happened to a country where the poor have to fight only because of their poverty. It was a sacrifice made by the youth on behalf of their families, when they felt helpless because they had no other way of making a living. Most new recruits joined without the consent of their parents.

*Those who go to the army don't go there for the country. They go there to die. I will never send my children. They only bring back dead bodies. I don't even want that money.*

Mala, agricultural laborer/small farmer, Moneragala district

*My son wanted to join the army. He wasn't earning enough as an apprentice in Colombo. He filled all the forms and wanted my signature. I told him, "You can kill me before you go."*

Lucia, farmer, Hambantota district

*My son did not go to the army to protect the country, but because of our "have-not, cannot" situation. The last time he came home he told his sister, "Even if I die, my parents would have something to eat. They will eat something even while they are crying." It is only our children who go, not the children of well-to-do families. It doesn't matter to me what happens to the country, if we can live peacefully.*

Lucia Nona, mother of missing soldier, Moneragala district

A good many of the poor wanted the Government to concentrate on creating employment opportunities, on taking measures to bring down the cost-of-living, on being accountable with the resources available to the country, and on ruling wisely for the benefit of all. Many were not confident that the Government would be able to accomplish any of these tasks. Minority communities such as estate Tamils felt they were discriminated against by the Government. A few of the poor wanted to help the Government to develop, the same way they were working together within their communities.

*The country should prosper so that we can prosper.*  
Mohideen, fisherman, Trincomalee district

*Our feeling is that the things will get worse in the next two years. Bus fares are increasing, the cost-of-living is increasing. Even if we farm, the prices that we get are not the ones announced on the radio. When we tell the mudalali [trader], he says then go and sell to the radio. The rich will be o.k. But for the poor it will get worse. Even kerosene is so costly and a bottle doesn't last us a week.*  
Ajith, farmer, Moneragala district

*What can you buy from the SLRs375 you get from Samurdhi? We can't even live for one day on that. We don't want assistance. We don't want to be dependent on it, eat from it. All we need is a proper job.*  
Hemanthi, wife of fisherman/agricultural laborer, Hambantota district

*We would like to see the country develop but it is difficult to see this happening. Each day, the country gets worse. It's the fault of the politicians, They are only filling their pockets. They don't care about us poor people. If we get foreign aid we see only a small part. If we are being given SLRs3,000 aid, we don't even get Rs500.*  
Gunasekera, farmer, Moneragala district

The Government helps only their people—the Sinhalese, not us. No loans are given to us. If this Government will be in power for the next 10 years, things will become worse. The blue color is for famine, the green for prosperity.  
Sellamma, elderly tea plucker, Badulla district

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*Just as we want to work with the Government, the Government must work with us to develop the country. The same way our small group is developed by working together, the Government should work with us.*

Chandrasekera, farmer/agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

However, if the Government was not doing its job there was a minority of the educated poor, especially in Hambantota district, who wanted to take matters into their own hands. Although this team did not take up their invitation, an increasing number of poor might do just that if the concerns of the poor are not addressed.

*Our social system is wrong. We have to change it. Instead of doing these surveys why don't you join our party and work for our campaign?*

Hemanthi, wife of fisherman/agricultural laborer, Hambantota district

### **Environmental dimensions**

The need for sufficient water for irrigation and clean water for drinking and bathing was a repeatedly stated aspiration.

*If we get water, it'll be a great relief for us. Then we'll be able to cultivate during both seasons without depending on the rain. During the dry season, the water level in the tank goes down. Then we can only take a bath once a week. For that too we have to walk two miles in the sun. In the dry season we hardly have any drinking water. A bowser comes and fills up the only well in the village.*

Piyawathi, farmer, Hambantota district

*If we can be resettled in a place where there is water, whether it is far or near, that would be good.*

Chandrasiri, agricultural laborer, Badulla district

Some poor people who perceived their water resources to be diminishing and insufficient were even prepared to move out of their villages if they could have water security.

### **Sociocultural dimensions**

A better house was the aspiration of the majority of the poor, and a better lifestyle. Not all of them were certain that it could be achieved

within their lifetime. Some felt their situation was hopeless and predicted an apocalyptic turn of events.

*We don't want to build palaces, just a better house with a tiled roof. To eat and dress better, these are our hopes.*

Hemanath, agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

*I wish my children a good life. That my son will be circumcised, that we save some money so that even if I die my children will not face problems, that we can build a home so that they will have a place to live.*

Thasim, butcher, Hambantota district

*It is difficult to say anything about my hopes for the country because I don't know whether I'll be alive. If people have enough to eat and drink that is the most important thing. The most noble thing.*

Somapala, coconut plucker, Hambantota district

*What can we do? We have no hopes. We would like to live well like other people. But we have no hopes that it will be so.*

Ummu, wife of fisherman, Hambantota district

*We don't understand what will happen. In another five years a big drought is supposed to come. We don't even know whether we'll survive that.*

Lucia, farmer, Hambantota district

For refugees in Trincomalee district, the aspiration was simply to be able to move out of the refugee camp and start a new life.

*Firstly we should leave the refugee camp and settle somewhere of our own.*

Murugesan, "A" level student, Trincomalee district

Everywhere, whether farming, fishing or estate households, poor people did not want their children to continue with their way of making a living. Many desired education for their children so that they could do a better job. Although the state sector was preferred, many were happy with an industrial job such as in a garment factory.

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*I try to educate my youngest son. If he can find a job I will be happy. The life of a fisherman's mother is very hard. The sea is harsh and cruel. I don't like this sea life. I was so worried when my son got delayed yesterday. I cannot bear this anxiety. My heart pounds thinking about whether my son will return.*

Vansa, widow of fisherman, Hambantota district

*The teaching in the estate is bad. We don't want our children to be like us. It is a big expense for us but even if we have less to eat, we send them to Passara Central. They go early morning and come back in the evening. Sometimes the bus won't get here until night. If there is no bus they have to stay with relatives somewhere on the way. We don't want them ever to work in the estate. The Passara school is 100 percent good.*

Ramakrishnan, tea estate worker, Badulla district

However, others were doubtful about the benefits of education and did not want to invest in something where they did not see any returns.

*It is difficult to send the children to school. People learn but there are no jobs, apart from garments and the army. We feel there's no point in educating our children when there are no jobs.*

Ajith, farmer, Moneragala district

In expressing their sociocultural needs, a recurrent theme among the poor was their aspiration to be like everybody else in society, to have a life without deprivation, as described by Kamalsiri in Moneragala district, "to live like a human being".

### **Gender dimensions**

Among women there was an awareness that gender roles were changing and women were at the forefront of not only the private but also the public sphere.

*It is women now who do most things. They attend Samurdhi meetings, school societies, Buddhist ("Sunday") school societies, death donation societies, savings and credit societies. Women work and shoulder the family burden. They are the ones who are responsible for the family.*

Karunawathi, agricultural laborer, Hambantota district

Yet this reality of participation and responsibility in family and community affairs was not translated into aspirations that were specifically related to women. However, women expressed hopes and desires for their daughters.

*If we get a grant instead of a loan and we get an opportunity for self-employment, we might be able to overcome our situation. Otherwise by chena cultivation we can't do that ever. I want my daughters to learn well and have a job.*

Hemalatha, farmer (mother of 2 daughters), Hambantota district

*We can't expect a government job for our daughter because she has studied only up to Grade 7. If a garment factory comes up nearby she can work there.*

Lucia Nona, mother of missing soldier, Moneragala district

For many poor women who aspired to improve their household's situation, going to the Middle East was the most often voiced option.

*I had hoped to go to the Middle East—to build a house, save some money in the children's names, buy a tractor to transport village products to the town, build a small tank near the house so that we can cultivate during both seasons. Everything failed because I was rejected at the medical test. I still have the same hopes and will try again to go to the Middle East.*

Rathnalatha, agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

Yet others were wary about the difficulties that they or their daughters would face and preferred to stay at home amidst hardship.

*My daughter doesn't want to go abroad for work. I don't want her to go either. It's better to stay together in the same place even if we don't have enough to eat.*

Lucia, farmer, Hambantota district

However, increasingly parents expected something more out of their daughters' education than their sons'. A farmer whose two sons had dropped out of school, while his two daughters were continuing with their schooling, pointed out:

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*We hope that at least our daughters will study and get jobs. The sons of course can't do much. Here we have to depend on farming.*  
Chandrasekera, farmer/agricultural laborer, Moneragala district

Thus, there is a latent understanding that more households will have to move out of agriculture in order to overcome poverty and those who have an education, those who have off-farm employment, will be the means of accomplishing this aspiration. Many parents are relying on their daughters to help them overcome their current situation.