

5. KEY POVERTY CHALLENGES IN SRI LANKA

The perceptions of the poor on their conditions of poverty and their needs to overcome poverty can be broadly categorized into policy concerns that would address the prevention of poverty, as well as the social protection of the poor and governance issues. Many of the poor, both at household and focus group level, expressed their needs in terms of prevention of poverty and governance issues, rather than social protection. Thus, there appears to be a sentiment that aspires to move away from attitudes of dependency that have been fostered in Sri Lanka, by long years of maintaining a welfare state. This might contrast with many other developing countries, where dependency might not be as extensive. On the other hand, there is also no reason to believe that the dependency syndrome will be overcome overnight, as much of the criticism of government and NGO poverty alleviation programs was based on the perception that these had not delivered as promised or anticipated. Thus, it would remain a challenge to work on prevention of poverty while maintaining social protection for the deserving, in a country like Sri Lanka where citizens are accustomed to considering handouts as their right. The other major challenge for Sri Lanka is to work on poverty reduction while continuing to wage an armed conflict, which is a major drain on its budget. It is quite apparent that resources that could be better used for poverty reduction, especially prevention of poverty, are now being diverted to the war. Thus, poverty reduction policies need to address the issue of the conflict more effectively than in the past.

Prevention of Poverty

Culminating the armed conflict

*However much we might cut up each other,
everyone has the same blood in the end*

The major poverty challenge for Sri Lanka is to end the armed conflict and resume a life of peace. When asked what their hope for the country was, two thirds of households interviewed wanted an end to the war. Some were explicit that that this entailed a negotiation process. In

Trincomalee and Moneragala districts, the havoc created in the lives of the poor in terms of livelihood, security, and mobility was immeasurable. In other districts, the poor understood very clearly that resources better spent on their welfare and the country's development were being diverted to the war. Moreover, those households in the South who provided soldiers for the war did not express any gratitude to the State for providing their sons with employment but condemned the country for using their children as cannon fodder.

In moving towards peace, more effort has to be made towards providing security for people to pursue their livelihoods in the conflict-affected areas. The restrictions on the movement of people and goods including fishing restrictions and lack of access to fields, poor transport facilities, and taxes imposed by armed groups on the transport of produce and profits of entrepreneurs, all contribute to the serious poverty situation in conflict areas, such as Trincomalee district.

Redressing regional disparities

Nobody wants to come to Moneragala because there are no Yala Parks and beaches.

The development of peripheral and conflict-torn regions is another poverty challenge. The poor felt that some regions were being marginalized and left behind while other regions in the country developed. This was especially true for the Moneragala district where they perceived both foreign development agencies and NGOs neglecting their district as it did not have any recreational or cultural attractions. Most state employees who were appointed to the district stayed there long enough to arrange a transfer elsewhere. Thus, the region languished while neighboring regions like Hambantota were making progress. In the case of Trincomalee, the armed conflict has kept the district out of reach of any national development efforts. The information lacuna on the poverty situation in the Northern and Eastern provinces needs to be overcome to address regional development issues at the national level.

Developing infrastructure to reach the poor

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

Providing roads, transport, electricity, and water supply/irrigation schemes so that the poor can improve their opportunities to make a living, as well as their quality of life, is a key poverty challenge. This is a concern voiced over and over by the poor in all four districts. Apart from reasons of spatial remoteness, the social reasons for the maintenance of pockets of poverty need to be further understood. Ethnicity, caste, and political affiliations are some reasons while particular communities are excluded or not prioritized in the supply of infrastructure. In addition to location, pricing policies that exclude the poor need to be examined and modified.

Creating employment and income opportunities

We don't even have a garment factory to send our children to.

The majority of the children of the poor are not interested in working as farmers, agricultural laborers, fishermen, and plantation workers. They all aspire to “off-farm” employment, whether industrial jobs, state employment or self-employment in nonagricultural fields. Thus, a key poverty challenge is to move from the ideological commitment to farming and maintaining people in rural areas, to policies that encourage investment in industries, including agro-industries, that will induce the poor to commute/migrate to more remunerative work. With better infrastructure and integration of markets, as well as less pressure on the land and water, income opportunities of the poor who chose to remain in agriculture and fisheries should improve.

Improving education and skills-training

Our children go to school just to sit there and come home.

Improving both access to education among the poor and the quality and relevance of education available to the poor is a poverty challenge. At present, the poor receive at most a junior secondary level education in institutions where buildings are in poor condition, facilities such as water, electricity and toilets are not available, and poorly trained teachers do not come regularly to teach or when they do they teach several grades simultaneously. The state has to ensure that changes in the education curriculum made at the center towards a problem-solving orientation reach the poor in the periphery. In addition, nonformal education in the form of relevant skills-training courses to prepare the youth for both industrial and self-employment need to be made available to the poor.

Conserving the natural resource base

We need first of all water.

Conserving the natural resource base on which the poor depend for their livelihoods is a major poverty challenge. Water resources for both irrigation and drinking seem to be reaching their limits in many marginal communities. Thus, the State will either have to invest in infrastructure to convey water from areas where it is still plentiful or move people to water-rich areas, as some of the poor themselves suggest. It will also have to look at competition in water use between irrigation and domestic use. In addition, maintaining fish stock in inland reservoirs, ensuring that fish spawning bans are followed by all groups, and monitoring the availability of aquatic resources are some areas to be looked into.

Social Protection of the Poor and Governance

Increasing health/disability/elderly service options

If somebody is sick he can't pay his credit.

Delivering adequate health, disability, and elderly services to the poor is a key poverty challenge. Illness, disability, and ageing are precipitating conditions of poverty. The poor pay considerable sums of money presently on health care and get into debt although the state health service is considered to be free. The war has increased the proportion of disabled people in the country. Sri Lanka's demography has been shifting towards a considerable increase in the elderly population. Thus, a more efficient way of delivering health and old age care needs to be examined. A monthly insurance scheme would not be realistic as incomes are highly variable. However, a lump sum paid annually at harvest time or in the middle of the fishing season might be attractive to the poor.

Healing the psychological scars of armed conflict

I was assaulted four times on suspicion.

Dealing with the psychological dimension of armed conflict will prove to be a bigger challenge than with the economic dimension. Exposure to physical abuse, bombing, shelling, displacement, loss of loved

ones, house, and property has caused enormous individual trauma and social suffering. War has attenuated communities rich in cultural and social capital, and bred helplessness, anxiety, despair, trauma, and violence. Violence has become a way of life, especially to the younger generation, and a cultural coping mechanism. To reverse this trend devising and integrating creative cultural and recreational programs into rehabilitation and reconstruction work is a priority for the conflict-affected poor. Such programs should integrate multiculturalism with psychological healing to foster both peace building and alleviate psycho-social trauma. Some parts of the country provide living examples of peaceful co-existence among poor people from the various ethnic groups. In Moneragala, Badulla, and Hambantota districts the team witnessed such examples of neighborly co-existence. The capacities and experiences of the poor of these communities should serve as examples for peace-building efforts in the conflict-affected regions.

Increasing accountability and effectiveness of both government and NGO poverty alleviation efforts

Samurdhi is like cutting meat on the wildboar's head. Nobody knows where they came from, why they came and why they left.

Increasing accountability and effectiveness of both government and NGO poverty alleviation programs is a fundamental poverty challenge. The Sri Lankan state spends an enormous sum of money in programs such as Samurdhi. There are international and local NGOs expending money on projects that are targeted specifically at the poor. However, despite all their good intentions, these projects and programs are rated as ineffective, nonbeneficial or deceptive by the poor. If a decade of "participating" and "empowering" the poor has not led to any substantial improvement in the lives of the poor, a rethinking of the approaches practiced so far is necessary. In addition, more efforts have to be made to design and deliver poverty reduction programs in the conflict areas, incorporating healing of trauma and peace-building, in order to address the enormity of the need, as well as to de-escalate the conflict situation.

Ensuring through an institutional mechanism that the poor contribute to the decision-making processes that result in poverty policies

Even if you can't help us, our voice will be heard at last.

The ADB poverty consultations clearly demonstrated the wide range of views and feelings that the poor in the four districts can express on their conditions of poverty, on the manner in which they, the State, and NGOs deal with poverty, and their needs, priorities, and aspirations. For more effective poverty alleviation policies to be implemented, the realities and perceptions of the poor need to be taken into account. Thus, an institutional mechanism has to be devised to incorporate the poor, not only of these four districts but the entire country, into the decision-making process, to clarify both the effectiveness of current policies, as well as changes necessary in the design of new policies.

Supporting an independent institutional framework to monitor poverty and impacts of poverty alleviation programs/projects

*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.*

Better monitoring of the poverty situation and poverty alleviation efforts is a key poverty challenge. The poor do not yet feel entitled to ask questions of the government or NGOs because they do not feel ownership of the projects that are intended to assist them and are afraid of the consequences of asking too many questions. Therefore, they need the support of an independent institutional framework to cooperate with in monitoring the resources and programs/projects that are intended for their welfare and ensure that these have a positive impact on their lives. In addition, special parameters for monitoring poverty reduction interventions in conflict areas need to be developed, given the circumstances of insecurity and risk confronting the poor, including restrictions in mobility and the taxes imposed by armed groups. The viability of income generation and micro-credit approaches, as well as the necessity of different criteria to evaluate and monitor such efforts in conflict areas, are concerns that might have to be addressed.

6. KEY ISSUES TO BE MONITORED

Targeting the “Poor”

A major frustration expressed by the poor in all four districts was the manner in which households are selected for assistance both by the state and NGOs. The limitations of the targeting of the Samurdhi program, especially in terms of political bias, have been corroborated by several independent studies (Gunatilaka 1997; Parker and Perera 2000). However, less has been written about the targeting of NGOs, but these programs appear to suffer from roadside bias and hijacking by local elites/ethnic majorities. In any case there is a need to use better targeting strategies by developing better methodologies of differentiating the “poor”. Rather than relying solely on income cut-off points or households with small children (thus excluding equally deserving households with dependent elderly members) or some other external criteria alone, the need to combine “local” definitions of poverty and categorization processes with external criteria becomes obvious.

The Impacts of Pro-Growth vs. Social Welfare Programs/Projects on the Poor

Although the need for infrastructure and employment/income opportunities were voiced by the majority of the poor, there was also a desire for better health and education programs, as well as income support for the sick, the disabled, and the elderly. The current and future impacts on the poor of programs focusing on economic opportunities on the one hand, and social welfare/safety nets on the other hand, need to be monitored to ensure the kind of approaches that are effective in relation to different poverty groups. Additionally a regional perspective needs to be adopted to deal with the rehabilitation/reconstruction needs and/or the economically peripheral nature of some districts.

Gender Implications of Poverty

In three of the districts (with the sole exception of Moneragala) the overall demography has shifted in favor of women within the last two decades. This is particularly marked for Trincomalee. Even in Moneragala there has been a considerable shift in the male-female ratio from 100:83 in 1981 to 100:97 in 1998. There is good reason to believe that Moneragala will “catch up” with the other districts within the next decade. The armed conflict, the structural conditions of the global economy, the higher value placed on education by girls resulting in them staying longer in school than boys, all contribute to the fact that women are emerging increasingly as the breadwinners of their households. In the absence of men, they are also becoming the main decision-makers in their families. However, their wage rates are lower at an average than that of men. The implications on poverty of the increase in the female population in the country with the changing gender trends in education, employment, and wages need to be monitored.

The Contradictions between the Rhetoric and Practice of “Empowering” the Poor

After two decades of “participating” and “being empowered”, the majority of the poor are nowhere near empowered and are expressing increasing frustration at the manner in which they have been enticed to participate in other people’s projects. The poor are still enmeshed in dependency relationships with either the rich and powerful in their communities, the state, NGOs, or radical political groups who act as their saviors. On one hand, the poor realize the limitations of these relationships. On the other hand, the welfare mentality and dependency syndrome are strong enough for the majority to wait for external “aid” and complain when they do not receive it. Most efforts at mobilizing the poor have not gone beyond gathering the poor for meetings, talking with them, dividing them into small groups, distributing something, and sending them back to their homes. At the most, small groups have strengthened and systematized existing exchange labor relations within communities. At the least, they have been conduits for social mobilizers to give orders and distribute handouts. A key issue to be monitored is that “empowerment” does not merely remain another slogan to continue “business as usual”. If empowerment were a goal new approaches that focus on providing choices and encouraging the poor to make their own decisions

need to be developed. The quality of both formal and informal education/skills training available to the poor need to be monitored to ensure that poor children/youth are provided opportunities to ask questions and solve problems, rather than fetch water and firewood for their teachers.

The Effectiveness and Accountability of Government and NGO Poverty Alleviation Programs/Projects

Most poverty alleviation programs are rated as ineffective or insufficient by the poor. This is corroborated by macro-studies that reveal that poverty has stayed virtually at the same levels within the decade between 1985/86 and 1994/95, except in the Western, Southern, and Sabaragamuwa Provinces. Thus, there is a need to monitor the accountability and effectiveness of poverty alleviation programs by involving the poor with the support of an independent institutional framework. The political, ethnic, and gender biases in the design and implementation of such programs, the extent to which the needs and priorities of the poor are incorporated, and the extent to which resources and services allocated to the poor actually reach them are fundamental issues to be monitored. The relationship between the government and NGO programs at the local level, duplication of functions and lack of coordination, and the extent to which such programs create social conflicts and hamper local-level initiative and entrepreneurship need to be monitored as well.