

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.