

PERCEPTIONS OF THE POOR
Poverty Consultations in Four Districts in Sri Lanka

Final Report

September 2001

FOREWORD

This study presents the results of a series of poverty consultations that were carried out in rural Sri Lanka from July to September 2000. Four districts were chosen to represent the range of sociocultural, political, and economic differences typical of the development challenges faced by Sri Lanka. These districts are Moneragala (Southeast), Hambantota (South), Badulla (Central), and Trincomalee (Northeast).

The consultations were intended to help ADB gain a deeper and more meaningful appreciation of the scope and breadth of poverty in Sri Lanka based on the perceptions of the poor. In turn, the process also helped ADB better understand Sri Lanka's development needs and priorities as perceived by the poor. The most appropriate sectors to which ADB support can be channeled toward sustainable poverty reduction were also identified.

Five key poverty challenges in Sri Lanka were highlighted by the poor who were consulted. They are: (i) developing infrastructure; (ii) redressing regional disparities; (iii) ending the civil conflict; (iv) creating income and employment opportunities; and (v) improving education and skills training. All of these issues have been incorporated into ADB's poverty strategy for Sri Lanka.

There is much to be gained by listening to the poor. Consultations such as these help ADB to identify and understand the nonincome manifestations of poverty by giving statistics face and depth. The poor have valuable insights as to what works and what does not and their observations are extremely useful to both project and policy design. Moreover, the poor tend to perceive poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon and are likely to speak of *how* they are poor rather than *why* they are poor.

This study was managed by Mariam S. Pal, Economist (Social Development), Operations and Policy Coordination Unit, Office of the Director, Programs Department (West) of ADB with the support of Nireka Weeratunga, Anthropologist, Poverty Impact Monitoring Unit, Colombo, Sri Lanka. Valuable assistance and support was provided by Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, Azra Jafferjee, and Shakeela Jabbar. Sultan Hafeez Rahman, Manager, Division 1, Programs West Department and John R. Cooney, Resident Representative, ADB Sri Lanka Resident Mission, provided overall guidance.



Yoshihiro Iwasaki, Director
Programs West Department

ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
DS	divisional secretariat
BMI	body mass index
GN	grama niladhari (village officer)
HIES	Household Income and Expenditure Survey
HH	household
IDP	internally displaced person
IFSP	Integrated Food Security Programme
IRDP	Integrated Rural Development Programme
JTF	Janasaviya Trust Fund
JVP	People's Liberation Front
LTTE	Liberation Tamil Tigers Eelam
NGO	nongovernment organization
PIMU	Poverty Impact Monitoring Unit
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
SLR	Sri Lanka rupee
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
Foreword	iii
Abbreviations	iv
Acknowledgments	ix
Executive Summary	xiii
1. Introduction	1
Background	1
Objectives of the Poverty Consultations	1
Concerns and Priorities of the Poor	2
2. Methodology	7
Conceptual Framework	7
Methods	8
3. Poverty Profiles of the Four Districts	11
Trincomalee District	13
Moneragala District	21
Badulla District	24
Hambantota District	30
4. Perceptions of the Poor: The Participatory Poverty Assessments	39
Defining Poverty: Local interpretations	39
Differentiating the “Poor” and the “Rich”	42
Dimensions of Poverty	48
Spatial-infrastructure dimensions	48
Political-economic dimensions	50
Environmental dimensions	54
Sociocultural dimensions	57
Gender dimensions	63

	<i>Page</i>
Dynamics of Poverty	67
Causes of poverty	67
Processes leading to poverty	70
Processes of change: Interpreting “improvement”/“development”	75
Poverty Alleviation Strategies	78
Self-help/coping strategies	78
Assistance from kin/community	79
Assistance from the Government and NGOs	80
Needs, Priorities, and Aspirations of the Poor	88
Infrastructural-spatial dimensions	88
Political-economic dimensions	90
Environmental dimensions	94
Sociocultural dimensions	94
Gender dimensions	96
5. Key Poverty Challenges in Sri Lanka	99
Prevention of Poverty	99
Culminating the armed conflict	99
Redressing regional disparities	100
Developing infrastructure to reach the poor	100
Creating income and employment opportunities	101
Improving education and skills-training	101
Conserving the natural resource base	102
Social Protection of the Poor and Governance	102
Increasing health/disability/elderly service options	102
Healing the psychological scars of armed conflict	102
Increasing accountability and effectiveness of both government and NGO poverty alleviation efforts	103
Ensuring through an institutional mechanism that the poor contribute to decision-making processes that result in poverty policies	103
Supporting an independent institutional framework to monitor poverty and impacts of poverty alleviation programs/projects	104

	<i>Page</i>
6. Key Issues to be Monitored	105
Targeting the "Poor"	105
The Impacts of Pro-Growth vs. Social Welfare Programs/Projects on the Poor	105
Gender Implications of Poverty	106
The Contradictions between the Rhetoric and Practice of "Empowering" the Poor	106
The Effectiveness and Accountability of Government and NGO Poverty Alleviation Programs/Projects	107
7. Conclusion	109
References	111
Glossary	114

LIST OF TABLES

<i>Table 1</i>	Incidence of Consumption and Human Poverty In Moneragala, Badulla, and Hambantota Districts	12
<i>Table 2</i>	Percentage of Income Received by the Lowest 40 Percent of Households in Four Districts	12
<i>Table 3</i>	Average Household Income and Expenditure in Moneragala District, 1995/96	21
<i>Table 4</i>	Dimensions of Human Poverty in Moneragala District, 1994	22
<i>Table 5</i>	Average Household Income and Expenditure in Badulla District, 1995/96	25
<i>Table 6</i>	Dimensions of Human Poverty in Badulla District, 1994	28
<i>Table 7</i>	Average Household Income and Expenditure in Hambantota District, 1995/96	31
<i>Table 8</i>	Dimensions of Human Poverty in Hambantota District, 1994	32
<i>Table 9</i>	Self-Description of Status by Respondents in Household Interviews	43

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Table 10</i> Causes of Poverty: Perceptions of the Poor Who Participated in Focus Groups	68
<i>Table 11</i> Needs and Priorities to Overcome Poverty, as Identified by Focus Groups	89

LIST OF BOXES

<i>Case Study 1</i>	I have lost everything including my limb	14
<i>Case Study 2</i>	How long can we live like this?	16
<i>Case Study 3</i>	We need to create unity and work as a group	22
<i>Case Study 4</i>	When the children grow up our problems will be solved	26
<i>Case Study 5</i>	I am the only breadwinner	28
<i>Case Study 6</i>	We live in the wind	32
<i>Case Study 7</i>	We don't need anybody's help	34

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people in the four districts, as well as in Colombo, helped us in different ways to make this report possible. For sharing both the sorrowful and joyful aspects of their lives with us, we would like, first of all, to express our heartfelt gratitude to the people of:

Badulla district: Amunugoda, Dadayampola, Ellanda, Hangiliella, Lower Wiharagala, and Roeberry Estate.

Hambantota district: Godavaya, Kariyamaditta, Mahaluthgammara, Murrey Road, and Uddakandara.

Moneragala district: Konkatiya, Kotagoda, Kotiyagala, Papolagama, and Ritigahawatte.

Trincomalee district: Eechilampattai, Nalloor, Paranamadawachiya, Periyakulam, Rhalkudi/Navaladi, and Nilaveli, Town and Gravets refugee camps.

All names of people quoted in this report are, however, pseudonyms to protect the identity of the individuals concerned, as very private and sometimes painful information has been revealed in some cases, while sentiments that may have political repercussions were expressed in other cases.

A number of people helped us with local-level data, the selection of villages, and in showing us around their villages/neighborhoods. In Badulla district, special thanks are due to the officers at the Haldummulla, Migahakivula, and Uva Paranagama divisional secretariats, in particular to Mr. Jayakody Mohandiram, Asst. Director of Planning, Migahakivula and Mr. J.N. Wijeratne, Social Services Officer, Uva Paranagama. Mr. K.M.D. Kulatunge, Project Director and Ms. Leela Ramyawathi, Statistical Officer of the Integrated Rural Development Program, Badulla, as well as Mr. L.P. Ketawatta, Statistical Officer, Provincial Planning Unit, Badulla, were very helpful. For their hospitality and assistance, we thank Mr. M.T. Omar, Manager of Roeberry Estate, Mr. Aruna Boteju, Manager and Mr. Tuan Packeer Ali, Asst. Manager of Pitaratmalie Estate. Ms. Chitra Senadiraja of the Plantation Health and Welfare Trust Fund, Hingurugama Complex, Badulla was of great help as well. Special thanks to Mr. D.M. Siriwardena, Chairman of the Integrated Community Organizations, Ellanda, Ms. W.D. Nandawathi, small group leader and Mr. Nishantha Namal, Samurdhi mobilizer of Hangiliella, as well as Ms. Geetha, Welfare Officer at Roeberry Estate.

In Hambantota district, our thanks go out to the officers at the Agunukolapelessa, Hambantota, Lunugamvehera, and Tissamaharama divisional secretariats, especially to Mr. W.A. Ariyaratne, Divisional Secretary and Ms. M.M. Daya, Asst. Secretary, Planning at Agunukolapelessa, Ms. A. Handunetti, Asst. Secretary, Planning, Tissamaharama, and Mr. Amarasena, Planning Officer, Hambantota. Special thanks are due to Mr. K.G.R. Ananda, Statistical Officer, Planning Secretariat, Southern Province in Galle. Ms. Ramina Slasa, small group leader in Murrey Road, Ms. Jayawathi Gamage, the World Vision mobilizer at Mahaluthgammara, and Ms. Somawathi Wickremasinghe, President of the Samurdhi Society at Kariyamaditta, were of immense help to us.

In Moneragala district, we greatly appreciated the assistance of officers at the Badalkumbura, Buttala, Madulla and Siyambalanduwa divisional secretariats, in particular of Mr. Sena Jayasuriya, Divisional Secretary, Siyambalanduwa and Mr. K. Udawatta, Grama Niladhari Kotagoda. Mr. R.M. Wijatatileka, a teacher, helped us a great deal in Kotagoda.

In Trincomalee district, thanks are due to the officers of the Trincomalee Town and Gravets, Kuchaveli, Padavisiripura, Eechchilampattai and Muthur divisional secretariats, especially to Mr. M. Velummylam, Divisional Secretary, Town and Gravets. Our sincere appreciation to the staff of the Integrated Food Security Project, who provided both institutional and logistical support to work within a limited time frame in a conflict area, especially Dr. Ines Reinhard, Nutritionist, Ms. Rohini Singarayar and Ms. Vasanthi Dayanandajothi. Ms. M.T. Thomas and Mr. M. Indrasooriyan were able translators.

In Colombo, our special thanks to Mr. Faiz Mohideen, Director General of the Department of External Resources and Mr. John R. Cooney, Resident Representative, ADB Sri Lanka Resident Mission for facilitating this study. We are grateful to Mr. S. M. J. Bandara, Project Director and Mr. Sunil de Alwis, Deputy Director, both of the Plantation Reform Project for arranging the field visits to the plantations in Badulla district.

We greatly benefited from discussions on the poverty situation in Sri Lanka with Ramani Gunatilaka, Independent Consultant, Tudor Silva, Professor of Sociology, and Nimal Sanderatne, Visiting Senior Fellow, both at Peradeniya University. For their comments and support, special thanks to Stephen Tabor, Director, EMSI, Netherlands and Seneka Abeyratne, Chief Executive Officer, National Agribusiness Council, Sri Lanka who jointly undertook the Sri Lanka Poverty Analysis for ADB. Soomnam Oh, Economist at ADB, Manila gave us constructive feedback, as well as participated in the first Poverty Consultation in Badulla District.

Our thanks also go out to Lorenzo Ramos, photographer of ADB, who became a friend to all the children in the villages of Badulla district, during the first poverty consultation.

Many thanks to Christoph Feyen, Team Leader, Project Impact Monitoring Unit for his contribution to and wholehearted support of this process. Finally, this report would not have been possible without Mariam Pal, Economist (Social Development) of ADB, whose brainchild this project was. Our deep appreciation to her for her continuous commitment and unfailing enthusiasm, and for braving the steep mountain paths of Badulla district during the first poverty consultation.

The views and opinions expressed in this report are of the poor in the four districts but the responsibility for their interpretation in the consolidated findings and for the recommendations rests with the authors.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Objectives of the Poverty Consultations

The poverty consultations were carried out by the Poverty Impact Monitoring Unit (PIMU) on behalf of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to complement its poverty analysis for Sri Lanka. These consultations in four selected districts were expected to ensure that the views and perspectives of the poor are incorporated at the High Level Forum between the Government and ADB. The results would also help supplement the existing database on poverty in Sri Lanka by providing qualitative data.

It was envisaged that the process would provide an enhanced appreciation of poverty issues and the development needs/priorities as perceived by the poorest people in Sri Lanka, identify key poverty challenges for ADB's poverty partnership agreement with the Government, identify issues to be monitored for future comparison of changes in Sri Lankan poverty levels, and provide input to ADB's economic and sector work, country programming, and country assistance plan/country strategy program formulation.

The Concerns and Priorities of the Poor

Poor people in the four selected districts, Badulla, Hambantota, Moneragala, and Trincomalee explained their poverty in terms of the following:

- Lack of access to infrastructure (roads, electricity, water supply, transport);
- Prevalence of armed conflict and violence;
- Lack of income/employment opportunities;
- Lack of capital/tools/assets to carry out livelihoods;
- Scarcity of natural resources (water, land, fish);
- Crop loss due to wild animals (elephants, wild boar);
- Lack of housing and sanitation;
- Lack of quality education and skills-training;
- Vulnerability due to sickness, disability, old age, and death (of income earner);

- Vulnerability to market fluctuations
- Scarcity of food
- Neglect by the state
- Political/ethnic bias in the delivery of poverty assistance; and
- Lack of unity/togetherness within the community.

Methodology

The poverty consultations were carried out in the form of participatory poverty assessments with members of poor communities, by a team comprising two anthropologists, an economist, a research assistant, and two translators. As there is no consensus on which of Sri Lanka's districts are the "poorest", these assessments were done in four "poorer" districts in Sri Lanka to obtain a qualitative overview of poverty in the country. Thus, four districts—Moneragala, Hambantota, Badulla, and Trincomalee—were selected to cover the diverse sociocultural/ethnic and political dimensions, as well as the economic sectors, of the country.

The identification of the poorer sectors of society needed to be done relatively fast due to the short time period. Silva's (1998) framework of marginalized groups and communities was used for this purpose. This structural approach to identifying *pockets of poverty* in Sri Lanka reveals several types of communities marginalized from mainstream society on the basis of economic, political, sociocultural, and spatial dimensions. These communities include urban low-income communities of slum dwellers, village expansion colonies, social outcasts (from minority "depressed" castes), squatter settlements, marginal irrigation settlements, fishing communities, plantation communities, steep hill farming communities, and displaced/refugee settlements.

Data from the Census Department, provincial planning units, district secretariats, and divisional secretariats were used to select districts, divisions, and eventually villages and urban units. The "poorer" divisions were identified by using indicators such as housing conditions, access to electricity, landownership, and unemployment. In Trincomalee district, due to the paucity of official data, the information was cross-checked against the Nutrition Baseline Survey of the German Integrated Food Security Project of the most vulnerable divisions of the Trincomalee district.

The participatory poverty assessments included both household interviews as well as focus group discussions, based on rapid rural appraisal methods. A loosely-structured, open-ended questionnaire which

could respond to the specific conditions and priorities of the poor in that region and ensured the participatory nature of the exercise was used. Altogether 160 households were interviewed and 10 focus group meetings involving 20–50 people were held. At the outset it should be made clear that the data obtained through qualitative participatory assessments are *not representative* of all poor households in these districts, or the island as a whole, but much rather are *indicative* of the problems, concerns, and priorities of poor households.

Poverty Profiles of the Four Districts

The poverty situation in Sri Lanka varies according to the criteria and indicators used. The national statistics on human and consumption poverty levels are incomplete in the absence of statistics from the districts of the North and East, where poverty levels are estimated to have reached critical proportions in comparison to the rest of the country, due to the armed conflict that has prevailed since 1983. Thus, the inclusion of the North and East would substantially increase the national poverty level in the country and erode the gains in poverty reduction claimed since 1985/86.

There are striking regional disparities in poverty, even in the districts, which are not within the conflict zone. Of the four selected districts, a quantitative analysis of Trincomalee is not possible due to the lack of data since 1986/87. However, according to consumption poverty lines and the human poverty index, all three of the other districts are low-performing districts, with Hambantota closest to the national average, yet far from high-performing districts such as Colombo and Gampaha.

Although district-level longitudinal statistics are not available, it can be extrapolated from provincial level statistics that consumption poverty levels declined in all three districts between 1985/86 and 1990/91 and increased between 1990/91 and 1995/96. However, relative incomes have increased for the lowest 40 percent households in Moneragala and Hambantota districts over the 1985/86–1995/96 period while decreasing for Badulla district. The proportion of income received by the lowest 40 percent households in the four districts remains very low, pointing both to the unequal distribution of wealth in the country and the persistence of poverty.

The overwhelming cause of poverty in the Trincomalee district was perceived to be the armed conflict. Poor people have been most affected by the disruption and/or destruction of their livelihoods and the lack of

security and mobility. The pass system and restriction of movement along the border, as well as in and out of the major towns, severely inhibit access to markets. The depth of poverty and vulnerability in the uncleared areas is due to the military ban on the transport of basic construction items and restrictions on essential food items, as well as the Liberation Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE) taxation system. All of the people interviewed in five divisions had been displaced at some point in the last 10 years. In Trincomalee district, given the long-term nature of the conflict and displacement, poverty alleviation has been based on a relief approach. Income generation is a risky business when the military and paramilitary groups control the movement of persons and goods via a shadow economy. As poverty is closely linked to conflict and violence, there is a need to incorporate approaches to deal with psychological trauma and peace building.

In Moneragala district, lack of infrastructure, lack of water, lack of employment and income, and lack of access to markets were seen as the primary causes of poverty. Access to cultivable land and titles, housing, medical care, and education were also major concerns. One of the border villages had undergone a traumatic attack by the LTTE. Although all five villages had small groups under the Samurdhi program, many of them were not functioning. Only one village had been reached by a nongovernment organization (NGO), and the only village with a funeral assistance society was the one that had been attacked by the LTTE. More than in any of the other districts, the poor in Moneragala felt that they were neglected by the state and that most forms of assistance, whether by the state or NGOs, bypassed them.

In Badulla district, poverty was associated with lack of infrastructure, water, employment, and income. Housing, crop damage by wild animals, education, and health were other concerns. In this district, which had been exposed to considerable social mobilization efforts through the Integrated Rural Development Program, there was a higher degree of participation in community organizations. In both estates there were a number of households that had suffered violence and losses during the 1983 ethnic riots elsewhere and had moved there in search of security. Two of the villages were affected by the violence associated with the People's Liberation Front (JVP) uprising in 1988/89. In this district, many of the poor felt they had been excluded from state poverty alleviation programs and development efforts due to their political or ethnic affiliation. The social mobilization activities in the district have yet to seriously erode the welfare mentality and dependency syndrome in many of the poor.

In Hambantota district, lack of income, employment, and water were the main concerns among the poor. Inadequate housing and health services were also mentioned. Many government and NGO poverty alleviation programs have been implemented in Hambantota district, mostly due to political reasons, i.e., the potential unrest of its youth. There is considerable improvement in the life of coastal fishing households. However, many benefits have been distributed according to party affiliation. In the interior villages largely dependent on rainfed crops, the poverty situation is as bad as in Moneragala district. All four rural communities visited had experienced violence associated with the JVP uprising of 1988/89. Although many communities in the district have been socially mobilized, they are under the control of either the local elite or radical youth. The poor in Hambantota district have very little faith either in government or NGO efforts to assist them, although they do not express the same degree of exclusion voiced by the poor in Moneragala or Badulla districts.

Perceptions of the Poor: The Participatory Poverty Assessments

Defining poverty

In defining themselves, the “poor” do not always want to be considered as “poor”—*duppath* in Sinhalese meaning “suffering” and *warumai* in Tamil meaning “fated”. While considerable shame is attached to the term “poor”, many poor people have got accustomed to calling themselves poor in anticipation that some benefits will accrue to those categorized as “the poor”. The seasonality of the experience of poverty and the vulnerability faced by the poor due to fluctuating means of livelihood was also pointed out.

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 by the poor, revealing the multiple dimensions of their understanding of poverty. This conforms to Amartya Sen’s (1999) perspective 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.

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.

Differentiating the “poor” and the “rich”

In focus group meetings that 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”. 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 individual household interviews, respondents differentiated between poor, average and rich, while avoiding the term “poorest” except in the case of Trincomalee district. The majority categorized themselves as “poor” or living in a “difficult” situation, while a minority considered themselves “average” or “very poor.” Around 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. Households that described themselves as “average” also received Samurdhi payments. 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, attributed to political/ethnic bias.

A considerable number explained that they were the same as everybody else in their communities by referring to similar means of earning a living as wage laborers or similar living conditions. Differences among people expressed ranged from categorical distinctions to proportional distinctions, based on the assets of each group. 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 to differentiate households. Ownership of economic assets/means of production, which differed across communities, the ability to eat three meals per day, employment in the Middle East or a skilled occupation, and the number of workers in the family were additional criteria. 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

Poverty has spatial-infrastructure, political-economic, environmental, sociocultural, and gender dimensions. Both lack of infrastructure such as roads, electricity and irrigation/water supply schemes, as well as lack of access due to pricing policies, were considered problems. Lack of infrastructure was linked to lack of income and employment, access to education, health services, and communication. This lack was not merely an inconvenience but in cases of emergency, could mean the difference between life and death.

The political system, patron-client relations, the armed conflict, land and sea tenure issues, market prices for agricultural produce, and debt were seen to have enormous economic consequences that maintain and exacerbate poverty. The poor 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.

Lack or scarcity of water, crop damage by wild animals, and seasonality/scarcity of fish were important environmental dimensions of poverty. These 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.

The inability to eat three meals a day was an important cultural definition of poverty. Almost all the poor households interviewed suffered seasonal scarcity of food, while the "poorest" went without at least one meal every day. Most households rarely partook of a balanced meal. The food situation was particularly bad for the urban "poorest" as they did not have access to gardens, fields, and forests to forage. Food scarcity was worst in the "uncleared" areas of Trincomalee district.

Poor housing conditions were the most often used yardstick to define the poverty of both households and of the community as a whole. Distance to school, shortage of teachers, the poor quality of the teaching, corporal punishment, bad conditions of the school buildings, and poor facilities are some of the issues voiced by poor people in all four districts. 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.

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, their housing conditions poorer on average than their higher caste neighbors and their children had less years of education.

The social marginalization of the poor 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 majority lacked external linkages and mobility outside their communities.

In terms of gender, there was a discrepancy between male and female wages in agriculture and mining in all four districts, the average female wage being 66 percent of the male wage. The lower wage rates made households where women were sole breadwinners (rather than female-headed households per se), dependent on agricultural labor, particularly vulnerable. One of the consequences of the armed conflict is the creation of widows all over the country. At the same time, women might 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.

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, in conflict areas the mobility of young women and girls are restricted for fear of bodily harm by soldiers or armed groups, and girls are being kept away from school. Domestic violence was evident in all the villages, although there was a reluctance to talk about it to strangers. However, the testimonies of a few women and a teenage girl were sufficient to indicate the depth of its existence. With the striking changes in gender ratio in all four districts, the gender dimensions of poverty are going to be increasingly significant.

Dynamics 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.

Some, who considered themselves "average", attributed the poverty of their neighbors to laziness. Others pointed to the lack of unity or togetherness. This lack was attributed both to class differentiation within the village and rivalries among the poor themselves. Many of the poor,

however, provided multiple reasons for their poverty, revealing quite clearly the links among infrastructural, economic, political, and sociocultural dimensions. In Trincomalee district and the border villages of Moneragala poverty was linked directly to the armed conflict. Violence was considered the primary cause of poverty.

Several processes leading to poverty were identified. Some considered poverty to be a permanent feature of their life, like those who had inherited no assets from their ancestors. For others, the spiral of poverty is precipitated by circumstances that are specific to each individual household's life cycle, such as illness, disability, old age and death of an income earner. Worse affected were those who lost husbands or sons to the various civil conflicts, as they suffered psychological trauma, in addition to the considerable time and resources spent on determining the status/situation of their deaths.

The ethnic riots of 1983 and the ongoing armed conflict have reduced people to poverty and maintained them in this situation. 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. Mistrust between the ethnic communities has grown and had impact on the economy.

In assessing change some poor people saw positive signs either in their communities or within their households in terms of schools, better paths/roads, electricity, and better housing. However, most said the "improvement" was limited and often confined to a few households. To many improvement was a process linked to the life cycle with better conditions once the children grew up. Others perceived improvement in terms of sociocultural change, and linkages to a wider social network outside the village. Yet 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. A good part of the poor saw their life as unchanging. 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.

Poverty alleviation strategies

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

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

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

Traditional community labor mobilization systems such as *attam* (exchange labor), mutual help in life transition ceremonies associated with birth, marriage, and death, including death donation societies, existed in many communities but often excluded the poor who did not own land or because they could not keep up with the monthly payments. Informal reciprocity, involving food and money to cope with poverty, was even more valued than formalized relations of reciprocity, such as exchange labor. 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.

Of the households interviewed, beneficiaries of the state poverty alleviation program, Samurdhi, ranged from 38 percent in Badulla to 75 percent in Moneragala. Non-beneficiaries 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. Government assistance in general was 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. A small minority of poor people said they wanted to be responsible for their own lives and were not interested in obtaining government assistance.

The poor also had no confidence in the effectiveness and accountability of bilateral and NGO projects which were considered as transient, without any lasting commitment or benefits to them. Many doubted the intentions and purposes of NGOs. The manner in which outside assistance is hijacked by the politically powerful and more vocal groups and the lack of awareness by these organizations was criticized. 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.

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.

Needs were expressed in infrastructural-spatial, political-economic, environmental, sociocultural, and gender terms. The economic and social consequences of receiving infrastructure (roads, electricity, and water supply) were clearly expressed.

While an end to war and an era of peace was the most often voiced aspiration by poor people in all four districts, regardless of ethnic origin, they were also critical of the nature of politics and did not expect anything positive from their politicians. They voiced a need for a life without fear and insecurity, and a return to mobility within and outside their communities.

A good many of the poor wanted the Government to concentrate on creating employment opportunities, bringing down the cost-of-living, being accountable with the resources available to the country, and ruling wisely for the benefit of all. 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. Sufficient water for irrigation and domestic consumption was an often expressed need.

A better house and lifestyle was a clear aspiration, with not many certain that these could be achieved within their lifetime. For refugees in Trincomalee district, the aspiration was simply to be able to move out of the refugee camp and start a new life.

Everywhere, whether farming, fishing, or estate households, poor people did not want their children to continue with their way of making a living. Education and better jobs (including industrial jobs) for their children were desired. Others were doubtful about the benefits of education and did not want to invest in something where they did not see any returns.

Among women there was an awareness that gender roles were changing and women were in the forefront of not only the private but also the public sphere. 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 to be educated and have employment. More households expect to move out of agriculture to overcome poverty and many parents are relying on their daughters, rather than their sons, to help them transcend their current situation.

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 levels, expressed their needs in terms of prevention of poverty and governance issues, rather than social protection. 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 is to work on poverty reduction while continuing to wage an armed conflict, which is a major drain on the country's budget.

The following challenges come under the **prevention of poverty**:

- Culminating the armed conflict;
- Redressing regional disparities;
- Developing infrastructure to reach the poor;
- Creating employment and income opportunities;
- Improving education and skills-training; and
- Conserving the natural resource base.

The following challenges come under the rubric of **social protection of the poor** and **governance**:

- Increasing health/disability/elderly service options;
- Healing the psychological scars of armed conflict;
- Increasing accountability and effectiveness of both government and NGO poverty alleviation efforts;
- Ensuring through an institutional mechanism that the poor contribute to the decision-making processes that result in poverty policies; and
- Supporting an independent institutional framework to monitor poverty and impacts of poverty alleviation programs/projects in the country.

Key Issues to be Monitored

The following issues need to be monitored to improve the delivery of poverty alleviation programs and to ensure that changes in the poverty situation in the country are accompanied by appropriate policy responses.

- Targeting the “poor”;
- The impacts of pro-growth vs. social welfare programs/projects on the poor;
- Gender implications of poverty;
- The contradictions between the rhetoric and practice of “empowering” the poor; and
- The effectiveness and accountability of government and NGO poverty alleviation programs/projects.

Conclusion

The poverty consultations conducted by the Project Impact Monitoring Unit on behalf of ADB reveal clearly that the poor express a range of views on the conditions and causes of poverty, on differentiating the poor, on poverty alleviation strategies, and on their needs, priorities, and aspirations. The team has conveyed the perceptions of poor people in four districts in Sri Lanka in their own words and idiom.

The views expressed here are consistent with findings from all over the world, whenever the poor have been given an opportunity to express themselves, such as in the World Bank’s poverty consultations in 50 countries. The process reveals that structural dimensions of poverty are similar everywhere, and are not solely the result of activities of any particular government or organization.

The Sri Lankan state together with multilateral and bilateral agencies and NGOs expend large sums of money on poverty alleviation efforts, which are of doubtful value to the poor. The macro-level statistics reveal the persistence of poverty in a quarter of the population and the vulnerability to poverty of a larger section of the population. Thus, there is a need to rethink the strategies of poverty alleviation at the policy, design, and implementation levels.

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

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

Wijepala, agricultural laborer/small farmer, Moneragala district

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

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

Objectives of the Poverty Consultations

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

2 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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

Concerns and Priorities of the Poor

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 Perceptions of the Poor

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6 Perceptions of the Poor

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

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

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

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

2. METHODOLOGY

Conceptual Framework

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

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

8 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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

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

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

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

Methods

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

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

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

3. POVERTY PROFILES OF THE FOUR DISTRICTS

The poverty situation in Sri Lanka varies according to the criteria and indicators used. According to the *National Human Development Report* (UNDP 1998), 27 percent of the population of Sri Lanka is poor, based on the Human Poverty Index. According to the Department of Census and Statistics (1995/96), 22.9 percent of the population is poor using a lower consumption poverty line (SLRs791 per person per month), while 25.9 percent is poor using a higher consumption poverty line (SLRs950 per person per month).

Neither the UNDP Report nor the Department of Census and Statistics data includes the districts of the North and the East where poverty levels are estimated to have reached critical proportions in comparison to the rest of the country, due to the armed conflict that has prevailed since 1983. Thus, the inclusion of the North and East would substantially increase the national poverty level in the country and erode the gains in poverty reduction claimed since 1985/86 with the available statistics.¹

In addition, there are striking regional disparities in poverty, even in the districts, which are not within the conflict zone. There is some correlation between human and consumption poverty at provincial level. Thus, Uva Province has both the highest human (27 percent) and consumption poverty (55 percent for the higher poverty line) levels, while Western province has both the lowest human (14 percent) and consumption poverty (23 percent for the higher poverty line) levels in the island. However, the correlation between human and consumption poverty at district level is not as clear, except for Moneragala and Ratnapura at the higher end, and Colombo and Gampaha at the lower end.

Of the four selected districts, we are unable to provide a quantitative analysis of Trincomalee due to the lack of data since 1986/87. However, according to consumption poverty lines and the Human Poverty Index, all three of the other districts are low-performing districts, with

¹ The Department of Census and Statistics *Household Income and Expenditure Survey 1995/96*, the UNDP *Human Development Report 1998*, and the recent World Bank *Country Report* have failed to indicate that the national poverty levels and poverty indices computed for Sri Lanka as a whole do not include the Northern and Eastern provinces. As these lowest-performing provinces are excluded from the national statistics, it is reasonable to assume that the poverty situation in the country is far worse than currently projected.

12 Perceptions of the Poor

Hambantota closest to the national average, yet far from high-performing districts such as Colombo and Gampaha (Table 1).

Table 1: Incidence of Consumption and Human Poverty in Moneragala, Badulla, and Hambantota Districts (percent)

District	Households under Lower Consumption Poverty Line, 1995/96	Households under Higher Consumption Poverty Line, 1995/96	Households under Human Poverty Index, 1994
Moneragala	49	66	29
Badulla	30	48	27
Hambantota	27	43	23
Sri Lanka	23	26	18

Sources: *Household Income and Expenditure Survey 1995/96*, Department of Census and Statistics; *National Human Development Report 1998*.

Although district-level longitudinal statistics are not available, it can be extrapolated from provincial level statistics that consumption poverty levels declined in all three districts between 1985/86 and 1990/91 and increased between 1990/91 and 1995/96. However, relative incomes have increased for the lowest 40 percent of households in Moneragala and Hambantota districts over the 1985/1986-1995/1996 period while decreasing for Badulla district (Table 2).

Table 2: Percentage of Income Received by the Lowest 40 Percent of Households in Four Districts

District	1985/86	1990/91	1995/96
Moneragala	15.8	18.9	18.9
Badulla	16.9	16.5	15.9
Hambantota	14.9	14.8	15.2
Trincomalee	18.0	n.a.	n.a.
Sri Lanka	14.6	14.8	15.2

n.a. = not applicable.

Source: *Household Income and Expenditure Survey 1995/96*, Department of Census and Statistics.

The proportion of income received by the lowest 40 percent households in the four districts remains very low, pointing both to the unequal distribution of wealth in the country and the persistence of poverty.

Trincomalee District

Trincomalee district is part of the Eastern Province. It is in the Dry Zone and the land is generally arid, while groundwater in many coastal communities is saline or brackish. The land is rain-fed from October to January during the northeast monsoon season. Many low-lying coastal communities experience floods and food scarcity due to transport difficulties during this time of the year. Between June and September most areas that are not accessible to tanks experience water scarcity. Cultivation is usually in the Maha season and since the war many fields have been abandoned, with only those close to the homestead being cultivated. Agriculture and fisheries are the most important income sources. The security situation and military ban on fishing between 6 pm and 6 am restricts fishing activities and limits access to fields.

Trincomalee district is located in one of three core conflict affected provinces in the island. It is a district with a history of contested land settlements in the postcolonial period. Gerrymandering has been an issue. Trincomalee harbor is a key natural port. The Kantalai tank is a major irrigation settlement and rice bowl. The district is also the linking district between the minority Tamil-dominated Northern and Eastern provinces, which the Liberation Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE) wants merged and the Sri Lankan Government resists. Its strategic importance has been a cause for competitive land colonization/settlement during various development projects in the postcolonial years, ensuing dramatic shifts in the ethnic demographics—one of the reasons for the high levels of violence and displacement visible in the district. In recent time settler communities have been targeted and experienced bloody massacres. Among older ethnically mixed border communities there is growing mistrust between former neighbors—Tamils, Sinhalese, and Muslims. Complex multiethnic trading networks and the local division of labor have been destroyed due to the conflict, with serious consequences for the local economy.

Case Study 1

I have lost everything including my limb

Ramalingam is a 25-year-old disabled fisherman and father of two children in “uncleared” Nallur in the Trincomalee district. The people of his village were displaced several times during the armed conflict. They have suffered serious shelling attacks in the past and continue to be under threat of bombing. He lives with his 18-year-old wife, his 5-year-old son and 8-month-old daughter in a wattle-and-daub hut with a cadjan roof and the sand for a floor.

He was displaced in 1990 at the age of 15 when he fled into the jungle with his parents, brother, and sister and suffered acute hunger. They then lived in Veeramanagar and Paattalipuram, and returned only two years later to Nallur. “I have been running from place to place.” When they came back half of their livestock had disappeared and they sold the rest for a very low price. He got married and had two children but disaster struck in July 2000 when he lost his limb due to a land mine explosion when he was herding cows near the Malaimuntham camp. Since then the household lives mainly by gathering *kananthi* (a type of green) and selling it in the market. Ramalingam is dependent on his father to make ends meet. He cannot go fishing and they have no access to the family land of 3 acres due to the fighting. “I have lost everything including my limb.”

The household barely eats two meals per day. Usually they have plain tea in the morning and eat rice with spinach for lunch, consuming any leftovers at night. From October to January during the rainy season until the harvest in Thoppur, which is difficult to reach because the road is closed, his family faces food scarcity, as there is no work available. He does not receive Samurdhi stamps as he and his wife became a separate household only in 1995 and they live in an “uncleared” area.

He hopes that his village will have access to transport and education, and people would be able to travel and fish without restrictions. He believes that he can overcome their poverty by regaining access to their paddy fields, receiving barbed wire and capital for cultivation, and by livestock rearing. He hopes that there would be a healthy learning environment for his children and their school would have sufficient teachers. He wishes for peace and harmony everywhere in the country, that everybody should be able to go anywhere and that there would be plenty of work opportunities for all.

Parts of the district are controlled by the LTTE while a skeletal state administration is functioning in these areas, which are termed “uncleared”. In the last Census in 1981, its population was estimated to be 255,948 with a male-female ratio of 100:86. Its ethnic composition comprised 36.4 percent Tamils, 33.4 percent Sinhalese, 29.3 percent Moors, 0.5 percent Burghers, and 0.3 percent Malays. The most recent *Statistical Handbook of Trincomalee District* (District Planning Secretariat 2000) estimates that in 2000 the population was 355,706 and the ethnic composition of the district was 39 percent Muslim, 32 percent Tamil, 29 percent Sinhala, and 0.5 percent others. The male-female ratio is 100:103. The changed ethnic demographics over the last 20 years are clearly worthy of analysis. What is also striking is the change in the gender pattern of the population with women becoming a majority, a trend to be anticipated with an ongoing war, but marked in the case of Trincomalee district, which had an extremely unbalanced gender ratio in the past.

The *Statistical Handbook of Trincomalee 2000* estimates that out of a total of 83,829 families that comprise the population of the district, 40,437 families were displaced during the armed conflict in the 1990s, while 30,960 houses or over a third of homes in the district were damaged or destroyed.² These displacement figures do not include very short term displacement due to conflict. The Trincomalee Town and Gravets Divisional Secretary estimated that over 80 percent of the district had been briefly displaced when the second Eelam war commenced in 1990.

The Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Program as at August 2000 estimated that there were 13 welfare centers for displaced persons with 3,025 families, or 11,713 individuals living in camps. Another 2,576 families or 11,631 individuals were displaced and living outside camps. Over 5 percent of the population of the district is currently internally displaced. A total of 1,948 families whether in camps, outside, or resettled receive dry ration stamps. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there are 10 welfare centers as of April 2000 with a total of 3,581 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Trincomalee district (*UNHCR Trincomalee Welfare Centre Profile*). This document also notes the lack of birth certificates among women which restricts access to schooling, and the high level of school dropouts. In Alas Graden Camp school dropouts were 85 percent and in the Paddy Marketing Board Welfare Centre, 32.35 percent.

The team visited villages/urban units and refugee camps in five DS areas—Trincomalee Town and Gravets, Kuchchveli, Muthur,

² The Integrated Food Security Programme (IFSP) report puts this number at over 50,000.

16 *Perceptions of the Poor*

Eechchilampattai, and Padavisiripura, including one camp for displaced persons in Nilaveli, 8 kilometers (km) from Trincomalee town. A planned visit to the Gomarankadawela division was cancelled due to denial of security clearance after an LTTE attack and return fire by the military overnight. While this team was in the field in Muthur, a fleet of civilian fishing vessels were mistakenly bombed, four boats and fishing equipment were destroyed, and the injured were taken to Trincomalee hospital.

The residents of Paranamadawachiya in the Padavisiripura division, which is inland and tank-fed, and predominantly Sinhala, had repeatedly experienced LTTE attacks. Over 70 percent had been displaced to Jayanpathipura school and were resettled or relocated in the same year, 1994. Some still slept in the forests at night for fear of attack, others said that they could not cultivate their fields due to the security situation. Out of 211 families (945 individuals), there were 12 government employ-

Case Study 2

How long can we live like this?

Swarnamali is a 46-year-old widow and refugee, who lives with her six children in the Nilaveli camp in Trincomalee district. They live in a *cadjan* (palm thatch) hut in the camp with 108 other refugee families. Swarnamali came to Kanniya near Trincomalee from Kandy in 1974 with her parents. Subsequently she married a tinker from Gampola who had also settled in Kanniya. He was killed in February 1997 in Killinochchi.

Her eldest daughter married a man she had met in the camp one year ago, when she was only 16 years old and has a child. Her 16-year-old son does wage labor when he can get it. Her 15-year-old second daughter dropped out of fifth grade and is a preschool aide, earning a monthly allowance of SLRs1,000. Swarnamali herself has passed the "O" level but lost her certificate when her house was burned, and laments that she is unable to get work that is appropriate to her education level.

They are poor because they were displaced, left their homes, her husband was killed, and they have no jobs, she says. In the refugee camp, almost everybody is poor, there are many widows with big families and they eat sufficiently only when they can find work, she explains. People get married very young because of the troubles and the fear of recruitment by armed groups.

ees (teachers, GN, Samurdhi, and other services including agriculture). There were 6 carpenters, 22 in the armed forces (mostly in the police), and 44 home guards who earned SLRs4,600 a month. Three women were currently in the Middle East. Approximately 15 families had electricity, and 35 had latrines. Sarvodaya worked here and one small group had saved SLRs5,000 through cultivation projects. There were 30 Samurdhi groups and 20 Sarvodaya small groups.

About 20 percent of the village had cement and tiled houses. The bus terminal was at the village center and ran three times a day. Several people said that they could not access their fields due to the security situation, the village had been much wealthier before the conflict and displacement. There was a greater range of poor-wealthy in the village than in uncleared areas. Malaria was a recurrent concern. The poorest families in the village manage on three meals a day.

Their lives have not seen any great change. The security situation is slightly better than before. "Earlier we were very frightened and were frightened of the army. Now there is not so much trouble and uncertainty." Food is difficult and it is rarely that they eat more than two meals per day—mostly roti and bread, sometimes rice or *pittu* (noodles) with a vegetable. They receive food rations from the World Food Programme but sometimes they do not receive these on time in which case they only have tea. "How long can we live like this?"

Swarnamali is indebted to many people because the family's earnings are low. She was in a *sittu* (revolving credit) group and bought some jewellery but all that has been pawned. Life in the camp is insecure. There is drunkenness among young boys and young girls get pregnant, she says. She could go to the Middle East but she does not want to because she is scared about what would happen to her daughters.

Her 14-year-old son is in the eighth grade and her two younger daughters are in primary school. She hopes that they can continue their education, that all her children will have work and they would look after her when she is old. "If not the girls, at least, the boys. Otherwise, I'll have to go to a home for the elders." Swarnamali who comes from a mixed Sinhalese/Tamil family background wishes that there would be peace in the country and that people would live with each other in harmony, "because we lived as friends and relatives in the past."

18 *Perceptions of the Poor*

In Jaya Naga in the Kuchchveli division, which is a Muslim coastal village that had experienced bombing from the sea in 1990, 8 people had gone missing, and 63 families remained displaced. All the families had been displaced for four years in a camp in Horowapothana, and slowly as the security situation improved the people trickled back. All the families were eligible for Samurdhi and resettlement loans from the Government. Most families had not taken loans because once they took them, their relief/rations (SLRs336 worth of food stamps) would stop. Ten men had gone to the Middle East. The village once had electricity but the infrastructure had been destroyed. From the ruins and the big church that has been taken over as an army camp it was clear that this had been a relatively wealthy area and even a little town in the past before the conflict. Over 50 percent of cultivable village land was in uncleared areas and they had no access due to military restrictions. Likewise those dependent on fishing were restricted by the official ban and a 3-mile radius. Still the shops had a few weeks dry food stocks. Oxfam had given assistance for micro projects.

The team also spent four days in the LTTE-held or “uncleared” areas in Eachchilampattai and Muthur. The depth and magnitude of poverty in the uncleared areas appeared far greater than in the government-held areas of the district. In the uncleared areas many children were visibly malnourished and a majority of the women and some men interviewed complained of fainting and lack of energy and inability to work, also indicating malnutrition.³ Fifty percent said they did not have

³ This observation is broadly corroborated by the IFSP report, which included the uncleared areas of this study. As the authors note, if **stunting** (height-for-age) is applied as an overall indicator of the long-term health and nutrition situation of a population, 27 percent of the children under five were stunted, 42 percent in uncleared areas and 34 percent among the Tamil children in cleared areas. The comparison of *findings in the survey area with national prevalence of malnutrition* (children 3–59 months) shows very unfavorable results for all three nutritional indicators. Prevalence of stunting is 28 percent compared to 16 percent, prevalence of wasting 27 percent compared to 13 percent, prevalence of underweight 51 percent compared to 31 percent. Data on national level (*Demographic Health Survey 1995/96*) did not include the North-Eastern Province. The highest prevalence of low birth weight was found among the children in uncleared areas (38 percent), whereas in the other communities 16–20 percent of the children weighed less than 2,500 grams. Prevalence of wasting (low weight-for-height, indicator for acute malnutrition) is extremely high among all three ethnic groups (26 percent, children 0–59 months). This compares very unfavorably to national data from 1995/96 (13 percent wasting), which exclude the North-Eastern Province. **The nutritional status of women** in the survey area is also very serious; 48 percent of the women are malnourished (BMI <18.5), half of them severely malnourished (BMI <17). Similar to the findings concerning children’s nutritional status, malnutrition among Tamil mothers is worst (50 percent, in uncleared areas 77 percent). About 48 percent of the women in uncleared areas are even severely malnourished, which is extremely high. Among the Muslim and Sinhalese communities malnutrition of women is lower, but still 29–40 percent are affected.

three meals a day. Rice, fish, and green leaves were consumed. All had been displaced between 1990 and 1997. Houses, livestock, and tools had been destroyed. There was no electricity and no motor vehicles. Traders used bicycles or bullock carts while many people trekked miles for provisions or to the cooperative in the cleared areas. Over 75 percent of people in Nalloor, Navaladi, and Rahlkuli lived in refugee-like makeshift *cadjan* huts. Over 90 percent were eligible for Samurdhi. In Nalloor out of 107 families, 15 were women-headed and there were 7 orphans. School was irregular. Most women over 20 had no education or had studied up to grade four. Shops were usually located in one-room makeshift *cadjan* huts or shells of houses that doubled as a home for the owner, with barely any dry food stocks. The roads were practically impassable due to years of lack of maintenance, potholes, and erosion during floods also caused by breakage of small tanks, mines, and shelling. Lack of drinking water due to brackishness/saltiness was also a problem in the coastal areas.

The depth of poverty and vulnerability in the uncleared areas is arguably due to the ban on the transport of basic construction items such as cement, brick, and other construction materials to maintain infrastructure as well as the ban on fertilizer, fuel, petrol, kerosene, gas, and diesel, and restrictions on essential food items as well as soap and other household items imposed by the Sri Lankan military. On the other hand the LTTE taxes people who go to collect firewood, honey, and other products from the forests and conscripts youthful labor and children who have completed grade eight. Nearly half of the households in uncleared areas did not have adequate drinking water throughout the year whereas a third in the cleared areas also mentioned water shortages during the months of June to September. In uncleared areas less than 5 percent of families had latrines.

Aside from the displaced, farmers and fishing communities have been most affected by the disruption and/or destruction of their livelihoods in the conflict and the ongoing security situation. Landless people who depend on wage labor have been affected by the poor security and mobility situation. The pass system and restriction of movement along the border, as well as in and out of the major towns, severely inhibit access to markets and produce often goes bad due to poor storage and transportation facilities.

One hundred percent of the people interviewed for the Trincomalee District poverty consultations in five divisions, Eechilampattai, Kuchachveli, Muthur, Padavisiripura, Trincomalee town and Gravets, had had to flee

20 *Perceptions of the Poor*

their homes at some point in the last 10 years.⁴ Homes, home gardens, crops, tools, equipment, and seeds were all destroyed when the people were displaced. In Nalloor there were just three houses that had cement floors, and these too were still badly damaged from the shelling in the early nineties. We saw several bombed out cement structures. The larger houses and most permanent structures had all been destroyed during the shelling and bombing. All the others lived in shacks with *cadjan* roofs, with sand floors and coconut thatch walls. Most families have just one tiny room to sleep, cook, and live in. The conditions were that of some of the worst refugee camps, shelter being made of coconut leaves that had been knitted together—the roof as well as the walls. During the rainy season (October-December) when there were floods and everything went under water, people gathered at the school buildings. The only school-teacher at Nalloor travelled to the village daily. School attendance was poor since the children had nothing to do.

The disruption to education and mobility that displacement and restriction to camps entail results in the frustration of the best and brightest youth. The pass system and restrictions on mobility particularly affects young women who fear being body searched. The Government, working with NGOs, attempts when possible to accommodate displaced children in government schools in their host communities, but many children in camps simply do not have access to schooling.

In Trincomalee district, given the long-term nature of the conflict and displacement, poverty alleviation has been based on a relief approach. Income generation is a risky business and has limited value when the military and paramilitary groups control the movement of persons and goods via a shadow economy. As poverty is closely linked to conflict and violence, there is a need to incorporate approaches to deal with psychological trauma and peace building.

⁴ The LTTE and the military have quite cynically used displaced persons as security shields or buffers during military campaigns. Some still slept in the jungles for fear of attack in the night. Others could not access their fields due to mines and or fear of shelling or due to the fact that they had become jungle and fear of elephant attack. Most had been displaced during 1990 when the second Eelam war started with others being displaced in 1995. Many had been cyclically displaced. Some were still in refugee or relief centers. The Trincomalee Divisional Secretary estimated that over 80 percent of the entire district have been displaced in the course of conflict, with many being repeatedly displaced during operations.

Moneragala District

Moneragala district, located in the south-eastern part of the country, is part of the Uva Province. Its population was estimated at 403,935 in 1999, with a male-female ratio of 100:97 (Uva Provincial Council 2000). Moneragala's ethnic composition was 95.5 percent Sinhalese, 3 percent Tamils, 1.5 percent Moors, 0.03 percent Burghers, and 0.01 percent Malays in 1995. The district is predominantly rural, with 73.4 percent of its labor force in agriculture (Census and Statistics 2000b), its farmers cultivating paddy, sugarcane and *chena* crops such as maize, finger millet, cowpea, and mung bean in the Dry Zone. Part of its population inhabiting the Intermediate Zone is employed in rubber, coffee and tea cultivation, as well as gem mining. Whether it is income, consumption, or human poverty levels at stake, Moneragala district emerges as the poorest district in Sri Lanka, when the North and East are excluded.

Table 3: Average Household Income and Expenditure in Moneragala District 1995/96

	Average Monthly Income per Household (SLRs)	Average Monthly Expenditure per Household (SLRs)	Food Ratio (%)	Households Receiving Samurdhi/JTF (%)
Moneragala	4,231	4,288	65.8	64.6
Sri Lanka	6,476	6,525	54.4	39.1

Source: HIES 1995/96, Department of Census and Statistics.

Moneragala has recorded the second lowest average household income in the country, and the lowest average household expenditure (Table 3). It has the highest food ratio in the country. The food ratio is a good indicator of how much money a household has left over to spend on other needs. Moneragala ties with Hambantota district for the highest percentage of Samurdhi/JTF recipients in the country.

Moneragala is well below the national average in terms of a number of human poverty indicators, and has the highest rates in the country for population without access to electricity and safe sanitation (Table 4). The team visited five GN divisions in four DS areas—Kotagoda, Kotiyagala (Siyambalanduwa), Ritigahawatte (Madulla), Papolagama (Badalkumbura),

22 Perceptions of the Poor

Table 4: Dimensions of Human Poverty in Moneragala District, 1994 (percent)

	Adult Illiteracy	No Access to Safe Water	Births Outside Institutions	No Access to Electricity	No Access to Safe Sanitation	Landless 1997 ^a	Unemployed 1997 ^b
Moneragala	15.9	47.3	31.1	83.2	39.0	10.9	7.6
Sri Lanka	8.9	27.9	15.9	56.2	23.8	n.a.	10.5

n.a. = not applicable.

Sources: *National Human Development Report 1998*, UNDP;

^a Uva Provincial Council, 1997;

^b *Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey, and Fourth Quarter 1999*, Department of Census and Statistics.

Case Study 3

We need to create unity and work as a group

Kamalasiri is a 48-year-old farmer in Ritigahawatta in the Moneragala district. Farmers in his village cultivate rainfed cereal crops and sugarcane. He is a father of five children. His wife, two sons, and one daughter live with him in a wattle-and-daub house with an *illuk* grass roof on four acres of highland. Their main crop is sugarcane but they also grow finger millet, maize, banana, and manioc.

He and his oldest son have not gone to school beyond first grade. His wife has a fourth grade education. His other children have had 6–9 years of schooling, except for a 21 year-old son who is still studying in the ninth grade. The oldest daughter is married and works in a garment factory in Bibile.

Kamalasiri says his village is mostly jungle and has not improved much. Some houses have tiled roofs and there is at least a cart track, where there was only a footpath not long ago. "The people who have, have something. The people who don't, work for the ones who have and survive. If we receive a good price for our crops, we will be rich." He sells a ton of sugarcane to the local trader for SLRs500, which is sold in turn to the Pelwatte sugar factory for SLRs1,050 per ton. They have no other option other than to sell their crops to the trader because none of the cultivators owns a tractor to transport the cane to a more lucrative market.

and Konkatiya (Buttala). The size of villages ranged from 100 to 367 households, 95—100 percent engaged in farming/agricultural labor. Two of the villages were cultivating mixed paddy and *chena* crops, two of them predominantly dependent on rainfed crops in their home gardens/*chenas* and the other comprised rubber estate workers who also provided labor for gem mines operating in the area. The latter was a mixed Sinhalese/Tamil settlement while the other four villages were Sinhalese, two of which were border villages adjacent to Amparai district.

The predominant form of housing in these villages was wattle-and-daub huts, thatched with *illuk* grass. Of the five villages, the two villages that combined paddy with *chena* cultivation, the village of the rubber estate workers, and one of the villages that relied solely on *chena* cultivation and home garden crops, had a certain measure of food security.

Several years ago, Kamalasiri went with his sons to Buththama, a town 4 miles away, to start a business to improve their life. He rented a small store for a monthly rent of SLRs6,500, making a downpayment of SLRs35,000 in advance. He invested around SLRs100,000 to start his grocery store by using his savings of SLRs35,000 as well as by pawning his wife's and daughters' jewellery. He also borrowed goods from wholesale traders on credit. Business was not as good as he had expected because he did not know how to run a store. Yet he tried his best for nearly a year and became heavily indebted. Eventually he realized he could not survive in the business and came back to the village to once again cultivate sugarcane.

The household suffers from malaria and dizzy spells periodically, as well as occasional snakebites. At least one member goes to the Buththama hospital, 4 miles on foot, once or twice a week for medical treatment.

Kamalasiri laments that there is not enough *ekamuthukama* (unity) in his village. "The rich do not like the poor to go up because then they would have nobody to work for them." He believes that the only way to overcome poverty is by creating unity among the villagers and working as a group. If cultivators get together, buy tractors, and sell the sugarcane to the Pelwatte sugar factory directly they could earn a better income. He believes the potential is there since villagers are gradually working in small groups established by NGOs and Samurdhi. Most of all, he wants to eat and drink well and "live like a human being."

24 *Perceptions of the Poor*

Poor households subsisted on rice and/or finger millet and maize. However, the village in which rainfed crops were grown in their home gardens suffered from food scarcity as the harvests were insufficient to store for later use. All four farming villages experienced crop losses due to elephant damage.

One of the villages in the Siyambalanduwa division had been attacked by the LTTE and 25 lives and around a fourth of the houses. Another border village had not been attacked but people lived in constant fear that they would be the next target. In the village that had formed around rubber estate workers in Badalkumbura division, urban Tamil traders from Moneragala town who had lost their properties in the 1983 riots had settled and were now working as wage laborers in the gem mines. While their living standard had deteriorated substantially they felt more secure in this remote, rural, mixed Sinhalese/Tamil environment. Two villages were affected by the violence surrounding the uprising of 1988/89 by the radical JVP. Its relative isolation makes its population particularly vulnerable to attacks and terror by armed groups.

In Moneragala district lack of infrastructure, lack of water, lack of employment and income, and lack of access to markets were seen as the primary causes of poverty. Access to cultivable land and titles, housing, medical care, and education were also major concerns. Although all five villages had small groups under the Samurdhi program, many of them were not functioning and mainly confined to strengthening already existing exchange labor relations. Only one village had been reached by an NGO, and the only village with a funeral assistance society was the one that had been attacked by the LTTE. More than in any of the other districts, the poor in Moneragala felt that they were neglected by the state and that most forms of assistance, whether by the state or NGOs, bypassed them.

Badulla District

Located in the drier Eastern part of the central hill-country, Badulla district belongs to the Uva Province. Its population was estimated at 779,238 in 1999 with a male-female ratio of 100:102 (Uva Provincial Council 2000). Its ethnic composition was 74.3 percent Sinhalese, 20.4 percent Tamils, 5 percent Moors, 0.1 percent Malays and 0.08 percent Burghers. The district has 74.1 percent of its labor force engaged in agriculture (Census and Statistics 2000b). Its southern mountainous part belongs to the Intermediate Zone and is predominantly covered with tea

plantations, mixed paddy and up-country vegetable cultivation, and forest plantations. Its northern lower part is in the Dry Zone, partially irrigated by the Mahaweli river system with farmers engaging in paddy and *chena* cultivation. Badulla records very high levels of human poverty and intermediate levels of consumption poverty (Table 1). However, income poverty in Badulla is the highest in the country—50 percent of households receive less than SLRs2,340 per month (HIES 1995/96).

Badulla records the lowest average monthly household income in the country and the third lowest average monthly household expenditure (Table 5). Its food ratio is only slightly lower than Moneragala's. Yet the percentage of Samurdhi/JTF recipients in Badulla is lower than the national average of 39.1 with only Polonnaruwa, Nuwara Eliya, and Colombo having lower levels.

Table 5: Average Household Income and Expenditure in Badulla District, 1995/96

	Average Monthly Income per Household (SLRs)	Average Monthly Expenditure per Household (SLRs)	Food Ratio (%)	Households Receiving Samurdhi/JTF (%)
Badulla	3,702	4,783	64.1	33.1
Sri Lanka	6,476	6,525	54.4	39.1

Source: HIES 1995/96, Department of Census and Statistics.

Badulla is well below national averages in most human poverty indicators. It has the second highest levels of adult illiteracy, non-access to safe water and births outside institutions (Table 6). The team visited four villages and two tea estates in five divisional secretariat areas—Ellanda (Migahakivula), Hangiliella (Uva-Paranagama), Amunugoda (Welimada), Dadayampola, Lower Wiharagala (Haldummulla), and Roeberry (Migahakivula/Passara).

Two of the villages were engaged in paddy and up-country vegetable cultivation, one inhabited by Sinhalese (one part of the village comprised a depressed caste group) and the other by Moslems (Moors). In the other two villages, inhabited by Sinhalese (one by a depressed caste), households cultivated paddy and rainfed crops—sugarcane and pepper in one case, and rainfed *chena* crops (maize, finger millet, manioc, banana)

Case Study 4

When the children grow up our problems will be solved

Karunawathi is a 42-year-old *jak* seller who lives in Ellanda in Badulla district. To reach her village one walks up a steep footpath, past boulders and waterfalls, 4 miles from the motorable road. The village has some paddyfields but most of its land is under rainfed crops maize, tobacco, banana, and vegetables. She lives in a wattle-and-daub hut, the roof covered with disintegrating old tiles. She complains that the only reason she was not given any new tiles by the Government, unlike some of her neighbors, was that she is a supporter of the opposition United National Party.

She is a mother of seven children. Her older son who is 19 years old is a laborer in the gem mines and her 22-year-old second daughter stays at her older daughter's house. Three other children, all boys, aged between 8 and 15 attend the village school while her youngest son who is just three years old stays at home with her husband, Nimal. He used to be a carpenter earning an income between SLRs3,000–3,500 per month, which they considered adequate six years back. Now he has got arthritis, cannot use his hands, and is unable to practise his trade. Therefore, the family burden has fallen on Karunawathi's shoulders.

She and her son gather young and mature *jak* from the village gardens and forests and sell them in Meegahakivula town thrice a week, walking from house to house. As she cannot carry them alone she makes the children take turns to stay back from school for the day to accompany her. She and one of the children walk 5 miles each way as they earn only around SLRs40-45 per day and thus cannot waste money on the lorry fare which is SLRs13 one way for each of them. With these meager daily earnings she has to feed

in the other. Of the tea estates, one was a large state-owned estate plantation managed by a major private company while the other one was a small privately owned and managed estate. Both had a predominantly Tamil labor force.

The number of households in the villages ranged from 30 to 285, and 80–100 percent were engaged in farming. The number of households in the estates ranged from 70 to 952, with around 80 percent engaged in estate wage labor. Three of the four villages and one estate had 3–17 persons employed in the armed forces. Three of the villages and one estate had 1–25 persons who were or had been employed in the Middle

the family, buy exercise books for the children, and medicine for her husband.

The staple food of their household is *jak*. They have a number of *jak* trees in their garden and that is their only marketable crop as well. During the rainy seasons the trees are slippery and no one can climb them, so Karunawathi's family encounters both food and money shortages. Once on a heavy rainy day in January this year the whole family starved because the boys could not climb the trees.

Karunawathi has attended school until the fifth grade but her husband and two daughters are illiterate as they have never gone to school. The oldest son has studied up to grade 4. Her other three sons are in the village school where the teaching is considered by her to be not of a good standard. Usually in Sri Lankan state schools there should be eight periods of study with a 15-minute interval during the school day. In the Ellanda primary school, she points out, the interval is 1-1½ hours and teachers come to class at any time they please and teach as long as they want. There are only three handling five grades, which means that at any given time two classes of children are not doing anything.

Karunawathi considers 90 percent of the households in her village to be poor. She sees some improvement in her village. Earlier they had a jungle path to walk on whereas now the path is wider and easier and buses come nearer to them than they did 20 years ago. There are also several village stores close by and some of the villagers have managed to build houses. Karunawathi's biggest hope for her village is that a road will come there so that she could transport her crops more easily to Migahakivula. She also is waiting for her children to grow up and be able to sharecrop a paddy field and cultivate their one-acre piece of highland as a *chena*, and thus ease her family burden.

East. Three of the villages and both estates had 2–15 persons working in industrial jobs and 1–22 skilled crafts people. Both estates had members of the household working as domestics and shop assistants in the city. The distance to the nearest health center ranged from 3 to 11 miles, and to the nearest bus stand from 1/4 mile to 2 miles.

Three of the villages and one estate had no access to electricity. In the other village and estate 50–64 percent of houses had electricity. In the three Sinhalese villages 20–25 percent households had latrines, while in the Moor village and the estates 70–95 percent of households had latrines. The estates households had received assistance to construct self-help latrines.

**Table 6: Dimensions of Human Poverty in
Badulla District, 1994
(percent)**

	Adult Illiteracy	No Access to Safe Water	Births Outside Institutions	No Access to Electricity	No Access to Safe Sanitation	Landless (1997) ^a	Unemployed 1997 ^b
Badulla	18.3	54.3	41.1	63.7	29.2	21.1	7.9
Sri Lanka	8.9	27.9	15.9	56.2	23.8	n.a.	10.5

n.a. = not applicable.

Sources: *National Human Development Report 1998*, UNDP;

^a Uva Provincial Council, 1997

^b *Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey 1999*, Department of Census and Statistics.

Case Study 5

I am the only breadwinner

Zareena is a 40-year-old widow, employed on a casual basis as a tea plucker in the gardens of small teaholders in Amunugoda in Badulla district. Her village is located on the slopes alongside a small valley occupied by paddy and vegetable fields. She lives in a wattle-and-daub house with her two daughters aged 17 and 14, and her 70-year-old mother. They live on Zareena's sister's land, which is around a quarter of an acre and grow beans, pumpkins, cabbage, and chillies for subsistence.

Zareena's husband Farook, who was an agricultural laborer, died 16 years ago when her younger daughter was just 2 months old. Then Zareena joined her mother to work as a tea plucker. Ten years back her mother got sick and had to stop working. Therefore, Zareena emerged as the sole breadwinner of her household. She does not get more than 3–4 days of work per week and her wage ranges from SLRs40 to 75 per day. She has to run the household with this money and feed four people. She considers herself to be very poor, in a village where she says around 90 percent of the people are wage laborers and poor.

Although around 40 women have gone to the Middle East from her village and some have constructed good houses, she points out that things

The health situation in Badulla was better than Moneragala. In the more remote estate, the incidence of asthma, TB, and coughs was high. In one village there was a relatively high number of disabled people due to falls from *kitul* (fish-tail palm trees) and *jak* (jackfruit) trees. Two of the villages had access to a primary school between 1/2 and 2 miles, one to a junior secondary school within 2 miles and one to a senior secondary school within 1-1/2 miles. The estates had access to a primary school and junior secondary school, respectively, between 1 and 2 miles. The majority of children did not go beyond junior secondary level.

In two of the villages the predominant form of housing was wattle-and-daub with tile or *talipot* palm leaves. In two villages most houses were made of unbaked bricks and had tiled roofs. However, the poorest people had houses made of mud with *talipot* or tin roofing. Estate housing

have been bad for them since her husband's death and that they could not build a house. "See the state of our house," she comments. They receive a SLRs500 worth Samurdhi stamp, which is of help, she admits. But she complains that she has to go for meetings, sit there and come back, otherwise their Samurdhi would be cut.

Her mother has asthma so she needs frequent medical attention. They buy medicine privately in Welimada town. The closest hospital is Boralanda but they do not go there because they do not get cured from the medicine that they receive there, she says.

Neither Zareena nor her mother has been to school. Her elder daughter was asked by the principal to leave school in the fourth grade because she is retarded. Her younger daughter dropped out of school in the sixth grade, as Zareena could not bear the expenses of continuing to keep her in school.

Zareena has no idea how to overcome the problem of poverty. She would like to build a house with cement blocks, obtain electricity, construct a latrine, and buy a TV and cassette recorder. She would like her village to be reached conveniently by bus, to have a road and a public well and be "developed like Welimada town." Her mother believes that if Zareena goes to the Middle East their situation could change. However, Zareena does not want to go to the Middle East because her mother is old and nobody is there to take care of her mother and daughters.

30 *Perceptions of the Poor*

was in the form of "lines", made of stone, unbaked bricks, or mud with tin roofing. In the two villages, which combined paddy cultivation with *chena* crops, although only two meals were generally eaten, there was food security for most of the year. However, in the other two villages where the poor relied on vegetable cultivation and wage labor and in the two estates, there was food scarcity in the dry season. In three of the villages, which were located next to jungle, farmers complained of heavy crop damage due to elephants, wild boar, porcupine, and monkeys. In the fourth village, the main damage was reported to be by insect pests.

In both estates there were a number of households that had suffered violence and losses during the 1983 ethnic riots elsewhere and had moved there in search of security. In the larger estate three shops were burnt. Two of the villages were affected by the violence associated with the JVP uprising in 1988/89.

In Badulla district, poverty was associated with lack of infrastructure, water, employment, and income. Housing, crop damage by wild animals, education, and health were other concerns. In Badulla, which had been exposed to considerable social mobilization efforts through the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), there was a higher degree of participation in community organizations. Three of the villages had funeral assistance societies, farmers' societies, and village development societies. All four had functioning Samurdhi small groups and two had IRDP/NGO small groups as well. The two estates had funeral assistance societies, and the larger estate had an NGO program to start small groups but these were not functioning yet. In Badulla district, many of the poor felt they had been excluded from state poverty alleviation programs and development efforts due to their political or ethnic affiliation. Social mobilization activities in the district have yet to seriously erode the welfare mentality and dependency syndrome in many of the poor.

Hambantota District

Hambantota district is in the southeastern corner of the Southern province. Its population was estimated at 563,000 in 1998 with a male-female ratio of 100:101 (Planning Secretariat, Southern Provincial Council 2000). Ethnically the district is predominantly Sinhalese (98.4 percent) with 0.94 percent Malays, 0.5 percent Moors, and 0.16 percent Tamils. The Hambantota district is located in the Dry Zone, with interior communities engaging in paddy and *chena* farming, coconut, cinnamon, pepper and cashew cultivation, and inland fisheries, while coastal communities

are engaged in fisheries, trade, and tourism. Around 95.8 percent of its population was estimated to be rural with 57.4 percent of the labor force engaged in agriculture (Census and Statistics 2000b). Industrialization is low with around 9.2 percent of the labor force employed in manufacturing by 1999. However, the service sector has grown and makes up the rest of the labor force. Hambantota reveals intermediate levels of human poverty and consumption poverty levels.

Hambantota records average monthly household income and expenditure levels below the national average but substantially higher than Moneragala or Badulla (Table 7). Its food ratio is close to the national average as well. Yet the percentage of Samurdhi/JTF recipients in Hambantota is substantially higher than the national average, and very much higher than Badulla district.

Table 7: Average Household Income and Expenditure in Hambantota District, 1995/96

	Average Monthly Income per Household (SLRs)	Average Monthly Expenditure per Household (SLRs)	Food Ratio (%)	Households Receiving Samurdhi/JTF (%)
Hambantota	4,397	5,563	59	64.8
Sri Lanka	6,476	6,525	54.4	39.1

Source: HIES 1995/96, Department of Census and Statistics.

Hambantota is around the national average in most human poverty indicators (Table 8). However, its illiteracy rate is substantially higher and its electrification level substantially lower than the national average. It records one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. Although district level statistics are not available, the Southern province has made considerable gains in reducing poverty since 1985/86. From poverty levels close to Uva and Sabaragamuwa Provinces in 1985/86 it had the lowest poverty incidence after Western Province by 1995/96.

The team visited four villages and one urban unit in four divisional secretariat areas—Mahaluthgammara (Lunugamwehera), Kariyamaditta (Agunakolapelessa), Uddakandara (Tissamaharama), Godavaya (Hambantota), and Murrey Road (Hambantota). One village was a minor irrigation resettlement, with paddy and *chena* (finger millet, maize, mung,

Case Study 6***We live in the wind***

Vansa is a 48-year-old widow and mother of six children from the urban low-income neighborhood of Murrey Road in Hambantota town. Her husband was a fisherman. She and her three sons live in a wattle-and-daub house with a *cadjan* (palm thatch) roof, right on the beach. "We live in the wind. The life of a fishing family is hard and uncertain. If we go fishing in the sea, one day there is fish, another day there isn't. We have work for six months and none for the next six months," she says.

Her older two sons aged 23 and 20 years are fishermen, and her 15 year-old younger son is in the eighth grade. Her three daughters are married and live elsewhere. Vansa went to the Middle East seven years ago to earn enough to build their house, but her husband contested the election and lost all the money. One year back he became sick and Vansa had to pawn her jewellery to cope with the medical expenses. He died five months ago. It was only then that her sons started going out to sea. Even though the boys inherited a small fiberglass boat, they find it difficult to obtain a good catch because they are new to the trade. The income of the fishing families, she says, depends on the weather. When the weather is fair the boys earn around SLRs5,000 per month, but when the sea is rough they cannot even cover the fuel costs. During the fishing season, the boys go out twice a day, in the night for reef fish and in the morning for small fish.

Table 8: Dimensions of Human Poverty in Hambantota District, 1994
(percent)

	Adult Illiteracy	No Access to Safe Water	Births Outside Institutions	No Access to Electricity	No Access to Safe Sanitation	Landless (1997) ^a	Unemployed (1997) ^b
Hambantota	13.1	28.3	15.9	74.4	24.5	n.a.	14.0
Sri Lanka	8.9	27.9	15.9	56.2	23.8	n.a.	10.5

Sources: *National Human Development Report 1998*, UNDP;

^a Uva Provincial Council, 1997; and

^b Southern Provincial Council, 1997; *Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey 1999*, Department of Census and Statistics.

She considers herself very poor and regards 50–60 percent of households in her community to be average. Her neighborhood has improved within the last 20 years, she says, and now has electricity, water, and roads, but not her part of the beach. Many women have gone to the Middle East and have built brick houses. Earlier they all lived in *cadjan* huts. However, fishing does not bring returns. “It is useless fishing. It is because of the women working abroad that there is an improvement here.”

Her troubles started when her daughters got married, she complains. Vansa’s family lived in a brick house on the main street in Hambantota town 10 years back. When the eldest daughter got married, as was customary among Malays, her husband demanded a house. Vansa, her husband, and the rest of the children gave up their house and moved to the beach. Now the youngest daughter’s husband also demands a house and they cannot give away their present hut as they have no other place to move. Thus, the eldest daughter has gone to the Middle East to earn enough money to build a house for her sister.

Vansa, who dropped out in the fifth grade, tries hard to educate her youngest son so that he would have a job and make her happy. She says that the life of the mother of a fisherman is hard. The sea is harsh and cruel, she cannot bear the anxiety and her heart pounds whenever her sons return late from the sea. She hopes that the country would develop, that everyone would live together without fighting, as the children of one mother. “Even if we cut up each other, everyone has the same blood, in the end.”

cowpea, sesame, peanuts, *meneri*, and *thana*) cultivation. In the second interior village, people were dependent on *chena* and home garden crops (finger millet, mung, cowpea, peanuts, coconut, cashew, mango, *jak*). A third was a mixed *chena* farming (mung, cowpea, sesame, chillies, finger millet) and inland fisheries village on the banks of the Yoda Wewa. The fourth village and the urban unit were largely fisheries-centered communities, which had expanded to include other households. In the fishing village, the poorest households were those of agricultural laborers and saltern workers. In the urban unit, households were made up of poor municipal laborers (predominantly Tamil), coconut pluckers, and informal sector workers (predominantly Sinhalese) in addition to fishermen and their families (predominantly Malay). The four villages (entirely Sinhalese) had households ranging from 107 to 426. The urban unit had

Case Study 7

We don't need anybody's help

Sumanaratne is a 28-year-old fisherman living by the banks of the Yoda Wewa tank in Uddakandara in the Hambantota district. His one-room hut built of unbaked bricks with a *cadjan* roof and a cow-dung floor is right at the water's edge and does not contain more than a kerosene lamp, a small radio, a couple of mats, and a few cooking utensils. "Two pots and a coconut grater," he shows, with a wide grin on his weather-beaten face. His small wooden outrigger boat stands alongside his hut.

His family has been fishermen for generations. His fishing partner is his 22-year old brother-in-law Sunil who lives in the hut with him since his wife 23 year-old Priyanthi left to work as a maid in Jordan. His 7-year old daughter lives with his in-laws in Pallemalala, another fishing village one hour away. He sees his daughter thrice a month. His 1-1/2-year-old son lives with his mother and he has contact with him regularly since his mother lives in the same village.

Sumanaratne says he is poor because he did not go to school beyond Grade 3, he has no job, and he does not know any other work except that of an inland fisherman. Not that it matters much, he points out, since even the university students from his village eventually end up catching fish in the tank to make money. More than 80 percent of households in his village are poor, he says. Those who farm also live with difficulty and when they cannot grow anything, which is half of the year, they fish in the tank as well. His people, on the other hand, are always in the water. The rich in his village are the traders (*mudalalila*) who make up around 2 percent of the households. "The traders are not like us," he explains, "they always earn."

He says his village has developed since his childhood. In those days everyone lived in *cadjan* huts. Now almost everybody has a house with a tiled roof—even if they had built it with a fisheries loan. But development has not happened for him and his family. "We've always lived like this. If we don't go to the tank, we have nothing." In the past there were around 45 fishing families. Now there are over 100 families. Everybody is fishing whether they are fishing households or not. So there is less fish and it is difficult for everyone. Only 35 outriggers should be allowed in the tank but now there are 90. Twenty years ago his father would cast his net and get 100–200 fishes per day but that does not happen now. There is enough demand for the fish he catches but not enough fish in the tank.

He sells a kilo of fish for SLRs20. The traders sell it for SLRs60 in the market. He points out that the traders themselves tell the fishermen that they bought their vans thanks to their catch. In the dry season between June and August food is difficult for him as the water in the tank recedes. Then he barely manages two meals. He has a piece of bread and jaggery (sweets) for breakfast, skips lunch, and has rice and fish for dinner. On days he does not catch fish, he eats rice, *dhal* (lentils), and a vegetable. If he is hungry and does not have money in his hands, he tries to catch a fish or takes credit from the village shop. As his father is dead, he needs to help his mother as well.

He is a member of the Fisheries Committee in the village. The only advantage in that he says is that one could get a loan. He took a loan for SLRs3,000 to buy a net and had to pay back SLRs6,000. It was not worth it, he points out. He managed to pay it off with the first remittance of SLRs20,000 his wife sent from Jordan. He believes that it is better to earn one's own keep. To get government assistance they have to waste time at meetings. They lose SLRs100 per day just to get SLRs200 per month. He does not go to meet any government officials. "I don't need any credit. I have to pay back 10 times more. There's more trouble with credit than without. We don't need anybody's help." His wife decided to go to Jordan to get enough money to build a house and to buy a motorbike so that he can sell the fish himself and keep the profit that now goes to the traders.

During the troubles of 1988/89 a lot of people got killed in his village—both JVPers and army people. He does not get involved in politics, except to vote for the party in opposition every time. "Last time I voted for Chandrika, this time I will vote for Sajith." The main thing is that one group does not stay in power for too long a time, he points out. "Whoever rules is the same. They earn, eat, sit around and do nothing for us. If only they would do something for our small ones."

He does not know whether they can get out of poverty that easily. "You have to win a sweep ticket. Otherwise we just have to keep on fishing. A bike would help because we can trade fish ourselves." They would be happy if their village develops. If everybody has a house, then they could live somehow. He has opened savings books for his children and deposited SLRs2,000 for each of them from the money his wife sent and hopes that they will live better than him. "What else can we hope for? We also don't like going to the tank but we have no alternative. If they follow in their father's footsteps nothing will change. But I don't know whether they will study."

36 *Perceptions of the Poor*

113 households. In two villages 80–98 percent of households were engaged in farming, while in one coastal village and in the urban unit 75–92 percent of households were engaged in fishing. In the remaining village, households comprised those that were solely engaged in farming or fishing, and those that combined the two livelihoods. The four villages had 1–5 persons and the urban unit around 50 persons who were or had been employed in the Middle East. Three villages and the urban unit had 1–6 persons employed in the Armed Forces. The four villages and the urban unit had 3–20 persons engaged in industrial employment, mostly garment factories, and 3–10 persons engaged in skilled craftwork.

One village had no access to electricity, in two villages 7–21 percent of households were electrified, and in the two coastal fishing communities 70–96 percent of households had electricity connections. The distance to the nearest health center was $\frac{1}{4}$ – $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles for three villages and the urban unit while it was 12 miles for one village. The nearest bus stand was $\frac{1}{2}$ –2 miles away for all five units. Three of the interior villages were vulnerable to malaria. However, although relatively isolated these had better access to health care than the villages in Moneragala. Inland fishermen complained of sores on their feet from accumulated reservoir water in their outriggers. Two of the villages had access to primary schools within 2 miles, two had access to junior secondary schools within 2 miles, and the urban unit had access to several senior secondary schools within a mile. In Hambantota too, the majority of the poor did not deviate from the pattern of not having more than a junior secondary level of education.

In two of the interior farming villages, the predominant form of housing was wattle-and-daub with tiles or *cadjan/talipot* leaves for roofing. In the other interior village and the two fishing communities most houses were made of unbaked bricks with tiled roofs. However, the huts of the poorest were wattle-and-daub with *cadjan* or entirely made of *cadjan/talipot* leaves, with the sand for a floor. In two of the villages that grew finger millet, this was the staple midday meal, and they had food security until the millet lasted. However, in the coastal fishing communities, especially in the urban neighborhood, food was scarce during the *warakang* (off-season) period. Seasonal food shortages were reported also in the inland fisheries-cum-farming community. In the three interior villages crop losses from wild animals including elephants were a concern; in one village stray cattle and buffaloes were also a problem, and there was tension between owners of cattle and other farmers.

In Hambantota district, except for the urban community all four rural communities had experienced violence associated with the JVP

uprising of 1988/89. Several poor households reported family members being picked up on the way to the fields or while they were having their family meal or while they were sleeping on the veranda and tortured by the security forces. Some were returned while others disappeared without a trace. Yet others reported seeing fellow villagers burnt to death on tires. Many were intimidated, forced to participate in rallies, and then disappeared into the jungle for shelter, fleeing from threats made by both sides.

Lack of income, employment, and water were the main concerns among the poor in Hambantota district. Inadequate housing and health services were also mentioned. Many government and NGO poverty alleviation programs have been implemented in

Hambantota district, mostly due to political reasons, i.e., the potential unrest of its youth. There is considerable improvement in the life of coastal fishing households. However, many benefits have been distributed according to party affiliation. In the interior villages largely dependent on rainfed crops, the poverty situation is as bad as in Moneragala district. Although many communities in the district have been socially mobilized, they are under the control of either the local elite or radical youth who consider fellow villagers to be "ignorant" and therefore do not give a chance to the poorest to voice their concerns in group settings. The poor in Hambantota district have very little faith either in the government or NGO efforts to assist them in overcoming poverty, although they do not express the same degree of exclusion voiced by the poor in Moneragala or Badulla districts.

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*

40 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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

42 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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

44 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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

46 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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

50 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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.

52 Perceptions of the Poor

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

54 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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

58 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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.

60 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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

62 Perceptions of the Poor

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

64 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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 10th 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.

66 Perceptions of the Poor

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
Infrastructure/resources				
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
Political/economic				
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		
Social/cultural				
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

70 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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:

72 Perceptions of the Poor

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

74 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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

76 Perceptions of the Poor

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

82 Perceptions of the Poor

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.

84 Perceptions of the Poor

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

86 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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

88 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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
Infrastructure/Resources				
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
Economic Needs				
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			
Political Needs				
Elimination of ethnic conflict/racism			X	
Sociocultural Needs				
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			

90 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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.

92 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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

94 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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.

96 Perceptions of the Poor

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:

98 *Perceptions of the Poor*

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.

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.

7. CONCLUSION

The poverty consultations conducted by PIMU on behalf of ADB reveal clearly that the poor express a range of views on the conditions and causes of poverty, on differentiating the poor, on poverty alleviation strategies, and on their needs, priorities, and aspirations. The task the team set out to accomplish was to convey the perceptions of poor people in four districts in Sri Lanka in their own words and idiom.

The views expressed here are consistent with findings from all over the world, whenever the poor have been given an opportunity to express themselves, such as in the World Bank's poverty consultations in 50 countries, represented in the "Voices of the Poor" series. The process reveals that structural dimensions of poverty are similar everywhere, and are not solely the result of activities of any particular government or organization.

The Sri Lankan state together with multilateral and bilateral agencies and NGOs expend large sums of money on poverty alleviation efforts which are of doubtful value to the poor. The macro-level statistics reveal the persistence of poverty in a quarter of the population and the vulnerability to poverty of a larger section of the population. If statistics were available for the Northern and Eastern provinces, it is reasonable to assume that the current incidence of poverty at national level would be even higher, and the claims of reducing poverty between 1985/86 and 1994/95 is at best questionable.

Thus, there is a need to rethink the strategies of poverty alleviation by government, multilateral, bilateral, and NGO programs/projects at the policy, design, and implementation levels. The poor understand poverty as a multidimensional problem and have expressed the need for investment in infrastructure, employment, peace, water resources, health, and education. Incorporating the concerns and priorities of the poor into the policy-making process and ensuring their participation in the monitoring of programs aimed at their welfare will bring much needed improvement to these programs.

The key poverty challenges for Sri Lanka are to culminate the war, redress regional disparities, develop infrastructure to reach the poor, increase employment and income opportunities, conserve the resource base, improve education and skills-training, increase health/disability/elderly service options, heal the psychological dimensions of conflict and violence, increase the effectiveness/accountability of poverty alleviation

programs, ensure the contribution of the poor in decision-making regarding poverty alleviation, and support an independent institutional framework to monitor the poverty situation and poverty impacts of all development programs and projects.

Among the key issues to be monitored in moving towards poverty reduction are differentiating the poor for effective targeting, the differential poverty impact of pro-growth and social welfare/safety net approaches, the poverty impact of the changing gender trends in demography, employment, education and wages, the contradictions between the rhetoric and practice of "empowering" the poor, and the effectiveness/accountability of poverty alleviation programs.

REFERENCES

Department of Census and Statistics. 2000a. *Household Income and Expenditure Survey 1995/96*. Final Report. Colombo.

_____. 2000b. *Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey: Fourth Quarter 1999*.

_____. 2000c. *Statistical Abstract of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka*. Colombo.

_____. *Household Income and Expenditure Survey 1990/91*. Final Report. Colombo.

Department of Census and Statistics. *Household Income and Expenditure Survey 1985/86*. Final Report. Colombo.

Department of External Resources. 2000. *A Framework for Poverty Reduction in Sri Lanka* (Draft Final Report). Colombo. May 2000.

Dunham, D. and C. Edwards. 1997. *Rural Poverty and an Agrarian Crisis in Sri Lanka, 1985-95: Making Sense of the Picture*. Colombo: Institute of Policy Studies.

Gunatilaka, R. 1997. *Credit-based, Participatory Poverty Alleviation Strategies in Sri Lanka: What Have We learned?* Colombo: Institute of Policy Studies.

Gunatilaka, R. and R. Salih. 1999. *How Successful is Samurdhi's Savings and Credit Programme in Reaching the Poor in Sri Lanka?* Colombo: Institute of Policy Studies.

Gunatilaka, R. and T. Williams. 1999. *The Integrated Rural Development Programme in Sri Lanka: Lessons of Experience for Poverty Reduction*. Colombo: Institute of Policy Studies.

Nanayakkara, A.G.W. 2000. *Future Priorities in Poverty Monitoring*. Paper presented at the Workshop on the Framework for Poverty Reduction in Sri Lanka. Kandalama. May 2000.

112 *Perceptions of the Poor*

Narayan, D. 2000. *Can Anyone Hear Us? Voices of the Poor*. New York: World Bank/Oxford University Press.

Parker, B. and K.T. Silva. 2000. "People's Perceptions of Poverty: Social Issues in Sri Lankan Poverty." Report prepared for the World Bank based on the preliminary findings of the SLIS qualitative survey, 1999-2000.

Reinhard, I. and D. Kraemer. 1999. "Baseline Survey of Health and Nutrition." Integrated Food Security Programme, Trincomalee.

Sanderatne, Nimal. 2000. *Why Poverty Persists*. Paper presented at the Open Forum on Poverty, Poverty Impact Monitoring Unit, Colombo. September 2000.

Sen, A. K. 1999. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Knopf Press.

Silva, K. T. 1998. "Sociological Perspectives relating to Selected Aspects of Poverty in Sri Lanka." Paper presented to the Consultative Group, Poverty Alleviation Project, Ministry of Finance and Planning, Colombo. December 1998.

Silva, K.T., C.R., Abayasekara, M.W.A. de Silva, and V. Nanayakkara. 1996. "Approaches to Poverty Alleviation in Sri Lanka." Centre for Intersectoral Community Health Studies, Peradeniya. Report submitted to the GTZ Working Group on "Self-Help Promotion and Organisational Development in Sri Lanka". April 1996.

United Nations Development Programme. 1998. "National Human Development Report 1998: Regional Dimensions of Human Development." Colombo.

World Bank. 2000. "Sri Lanka: Recapturing Missed Opportunities." World Bank Country Report.

World Bank/Department for International Development 1999. "Vietnam: Voices of the Poor. Synthesis of Participatory Poverty Assessments." November 1999.

GLOSSARY

S = Sinhala

T = Tamil

SE = Sri Lankan English

ahinsaka (S)	- harmless, innocent
anduwe rassavak athi aya (S)	- those with a government job
anthima pahathayi (S)	- totally low
asarana (S)	- without refuge
attam (S)	- exchange labor
batgama (S)	- palanquin bearer caste
berava (S)	- drummer caste
cadjan (SE)	- palm thatch
chena (SE)	- swidden cultivation
dhanapathi (S)	- capitalists
diyunuyi (S)	- improved, developed
diyunuwa (S)	- improvement, progress, development
duka (S)	- sorrow, suffering
duppath (S)	- poor, suffering
durvala (S)	- weak
dushakara (S)	- difficult, remote
dilindu (S)	- poor, suffering
eda vela hoyaganna beri aya (S)	- those who cannot find the day's meal
ekamuthukama (S)	- togetherness, unity
genikaraya (S)	- fruitseller
gevaldoraval athi aya (S)	- those with houses and doors
grama sevaka/niladhari (S)	- village servant/officer (lowest level state official)
idakadam athi aya (S)	- those with land/space
illuk (S)	- grass species, <i>Imperata arundinacea</i> <i>Cyrill</i>
jak	- jackfruit
kashtam (T)	- difficult, remote
kananthi (T)	- a leaf used for flavoring food
kitul (S)	- fish-tail palm, <i>Caryota urens</i>
kotahata (S)	- for a share (tenant fishing)

114 *Perceptions of the Poor*

kuli veda karana aya (S)	- those who do wage labor
kurakkan (S)	- finger millet, <i>Eleusina coracana</i>
meneri (S)	- species of millet
mudalalila (S)	- traders, moneyed people
mung (S)	- mung bean
neti beri (S)	- have-not, cannot
nimmadiyahaha waala mudhiyadu (T)	- living without relief
oluva ussanna beri aya (S)	- those who cannot lift their heads
padum mosam (T)	- totally bad
pasi thahattinai vadukirain (T)	- withering without food and water
pinpadi (S)	- public assistance, "merit wages"
pittu (S)	- rice or flour-based food
posath (S)	- rich
prapathaye (S)	- in the precipice
sallikarayo (S)	- moneyed people
samanya (S)	- average
samurdhi kaella (S)	- piece of samurdhi (public assistance stamp)
sepapahasukam athi aya (S)	- those with luxuries and facilities
sittu (S)	- revolving credit
talipot (SE)	- palm species used for thatching, <i>Corypha umbraculifera</i>
thana (S)	- species of millet
thovil (S)	- healing ceremony for demonic possession
thukkatai anubavikkirain (T)	- undergoing suffering
verdh (T)	- honey-collector caste
warakang (S/T)	- windy season (off-season for fishing)
warumai (T)	- poor, ill-fated