

Empowering Local Communities for Better Poverty Monitoring and Planning in Sri Lanka

*Siripala T. Hettige**

Abstract

Sri Lanka has a long history of addressing poverty through a series of state interventions including food subsidies. Since Independence, various types of subsidies have been made available to the general population without the beneficiaries being subjected to a means test. However, in the mid 1970s budgetary constraints compelled the government at the time to target the food subsidies to low-income groups. In the late 1970s, food subsidies were replaced by a food stamps scheme but in the late 1980s, a poverty alleviation program known as Janasaviya was launched to gradually phase out the food stamps scheme.

In 1994, an island-wide poverty alleviation scheme known as Samurdhi was launched, the beneficiaries being all those whose income fell below a pre-determined poverty line. This program continues to this day without any significant change. Being a central government program, Samurdhi is administered under a separate line ministry and is implemented by an elaborate state bureaucracy involving a large number of functionaries operating at different levels. Local and division level officials are accountable to the central government authorities responsible for the program. In other words, decentralized administrations such as Provisional Councils and elected Local Councils have no role to play with respect to the poverty alleviation program. Local councils represent the lowest

*CBMS-Sri Lanka Co-Project Leader and Professor of Sociology, University of Colombo.

tiers of government in Sri Lanka. Yet, due to the continuing dominance of central government authorities in almost all spheres of development and welfare activities, these councils are confined to few basic functions such as the regulation of constitution activities, handling of waste disposal, maintenance of public spaces, and development of welfare activities. Collection, analysis and use of data from households are not handled by most local councils. It is the relevant line ministries and other national level institutions that gather data on these matters but they often do not share such information with decentralized administrations.

Given the above state of affairs, it is difficult to imagine how local councils can play a significant role in poverty monitoring. Moreover, it is not clear how these councils can perform a planning function with respect to development and poverty alleviation at the local level unless elected local bodies are empowered to analyze the scope of this operation to include development and welfare functions. The empowerment of local councils thus remains a major issue relating to development and governance in Sri Lanka.

Introduction

The national poverty alleviation program in Sri Lanka launched in the late 1980s has remained highly centralized in terms of resource flows and implementation. The Colombo-based Samurdhi Authority, which falls under a separate line ministry, is responsible for the management and monitoring of the program, through an extensive bureaucracy established for the purpose. A large number of village-level functionaries attached to the authority function under several tiers of officials operating at different levels. Given such an organizational structure, accountability, control and flow of information tend to operate vertically, often from "top to bottom". Lower-level functionaries are accountable to higher levels of authority and are not subject to pressures from below. On the other hand, the beneficiaries at the grassroots level are dependent on officials (and political authorities), almost like in a patronage system.

It is significant to note that the target population of the poverty alleviation program has remained virtually unchanged since the

launch of the program. In other words, there has been no systematic attempt to wean the poor away from their dependence on income support. On the other hand, the actual income support given to beneficiary families is insignificant in most cases and is widely considered no more than a supplementary source of income. The identification of families eligible for income support is not based on any rigorous means test. While the official poverty line has not been meaningfully updated for many years, if one goes by the official poverty line, the majority of current beneficiaries whose monthly income is over 5000 rupees would not be eligible.

On the other hand, poverty is not simply a matter of income. Food security and the ability to meet various other needs and demands depend on a range of circumstances that cannot be captured by income data alone. National level aggregate data on employment, income and expenditure are only gross indicators of the level of well being of a population. What is noteworthy is that even employment, income and expenditure can be quite complex in most situations, particularly in developing countries where informal markets often dominate the lives of many people, particularly at the lower end of the class hierarchy.

It is against the above background that community-level poverty analysis becomes very important. Such an analysis can provide a sound basis that may not only for monitoring the dynamics of poverty but also by identifying points of intervention that may address issues of poverty and well-being. The use of such data for monitoring and intervention, however, needs to be institutionalized at the local level, with the participation of local communities and local level institutions. In the absence of such planning and intervention strategies, survey data would usually provide a basis for macro analysis at the national level and for centralized poverty alleviation programs but may not necessarily address the complex issues of poverty manifested at the grassroots level.

This became quite evident from the community-based monitoring system (CBMS) surveys conducted in urban and rural

locations in Sri Lanka. The survey data showed that the profiles of the poor while sharing common characteristics, can vary widely across communities depending on various circumstances. Comparative data drawn from two communities are presented and discussed in the next section to illustrate the implications to poverty analysis and policy interventions.

Comparative poverty profiles

The two communities surveyed, though located in two very different parts of the country, share, as mentioned earlier, some common characteristics albeit also having certain significant differences. The urban settlement, located in a suburban area adjacent to the city of Colombo, consists of shanty dwellers that were removed from their habitats in Colombo and resettled in their present location as a state-sponsored resettlement program. They were given land and some other support to settle down in the new habitat. These settlers have lived there for nearly two decades now. They have by and large adapted to the new environment in terms of finding sources of livelihood and access to various social infrastructure facilities such as schools, health clinics, hospitals, water and markets.

The rural community surveyed, meanwhile, is located in the Hambantota district in the Southern Province. The villagers have been living there for generations and are, therefore, socially and culturally rooted in the local context. Unlike the inhabitants in the urban settlement, the families in the rural community are heavily dependent on local natural resources for their livelihoods.

Tables 1 and 2 provide some comparative demographic data on the two communities. As indicated in Table 1, the rural community is almost totally a Sinhalese village whereas the urban settlement is heterogeneous in terms of ethnic background. In the latter, the Sinhalese community constitutes only 60 percent of the total population. Others belong to Tamil and Muslim communities. In terms of marital status, Table 2 shows that the two populations do not differ very much. In the urban community, the proportion of single people

Table 1. Population by ethnicity

Ethnicity	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Sinhalese	60.3	99.7
Sri Lankan Tamil	27.9	-
Indian Tamil	0.8	0.3
Muslims	10.5	-
Malay	0.2	-
Burger	0.2	-
Others	0.1	-
	(N=1820) 100.00	(N=1239) 100.00

Table 2. Population by marital status

Marital Status	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Single	47.7	49.8
Married	50.9	45.4
Divorced	0.2	-
Separated	0.1	1.1
Widowed	1.2	3.6
Total	(N=1820) 100.00	(N=1239) 100.00

is somewhat lower in comparison to the rural location. The reason for this can be diverse.

In terms of literacy and educational attainment, the differences between the two locations are quite significant. Only 4 percent of the rural community is illiterate in comparison to almost 16 percent in the urban community. This picture seems to conform to the general pattern in the country where illiteracy is more prevalent in disadvantaged urban communities than in rural areas despite the fact that educational facilities are better in urban areas. On the other hand, very high literacy rates in rural communities in general are a reflection of the easy access to educational institutions in rural Sri Lanka. This pattern becomes more evident when looking at educational attainment at higher levels.

As Table 3 shows, the proportion of the respondents who have reached higher levels of educational attainment is much higher in the rural location than in the urban one. For instance, the proportion of

the respondents with G.C.E. (O/L) or G.C.E. (A/L) qualifications in the urban location is about 6 percent while in the rural community, it is 27 percent. In the latter, 2.6 percent of the respondents have university education while there is almost nobody in the urban location with a university degree.

It is well known that education is very much associated with upward social mobility in Sri Lanka. In other words, lower levels of educational attainment are usually associated with poorer employment and poverty, and people with little or no education usually end up in irregular unstable employment. It is thus not surprising that over 30 percent of the population in the urban location are engaged in temporary employment while only 15 percent are in the rural settlement. On the other hand, seasonal employment is higher in the rural location, indicating the seasonality of agricultural work that predominates in rural areas. It is also significant that the proportion of the respondents with skills in the urban location is lower (47%) than in the rural settlement (61%) as gleaned in Table 4.

Table 3. Educational attainment

	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
No Schooling	16.9	11.9
Grade 1-5	16.2	11.0
Grade 6-9	34.4	15.9
Up to G.C.E (O/L)	22.9	29.9
G.C.E.(O/L) pass	2.3	8.0
Up to G.C.E (A/L)	2.8	10.2
G.C.E (A/L) pass	1.5	9.2
University Degree	0.1	2.6
Other	2.9	0.8
Total	100	100

Table 4. Any skills among persons over 15 years old

	Urban (%)	Rural(%)
Skilled	47.1	61.0
Unskilled	52.9	39.0

When the two communities are compared in terms of livelihood structure (Table 5), it is significant that there are important similarities despite some structural differences. For instance, in the rural settlement, agriculture is, as expected, the biggest source of livelihood with 23 percent of the economically active people engaged in it while in the urban community, wage labor is the largest source (29%) followed by small business (18%). On the other hand, many other income sources are similar in both settlements, a reflection of the economic changes that have taken place in the country over the last several decades which have affected both urban and rural people.

Table 5. Livelihood structures

Type	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Public service (electricity, etc.)	-	7.4
Security service	1.2	2.1
Dress designing	1.2	1.4
Housemaid	9.4	-
Pensioner	0.9	5.5
Housemaid (overseas)	3.0	3.0
Advertising	2.4	0.9
Office work	1.7	-
Clerical	2.4	6.7
Mason	4.8	0.5
Small business	18.0	10.2
Three wheel driver	7.0	0.2
Room Renting	0.3	-
Laborer	29.1	7.9
Tinker/ painters	2.3	-
Garment factory worker	4.4	7.6
Driver	3.5	5.8
Daily wage worker	2.0	10.6
Gardner	0.5	0.2
Self employment	4.8	3.2
Plumbing	0.3	-
Hair dresser	0.2	-
Electrician	0.6	-
Farming	-	23.6
Fishing	-	1.2
Total	100.00	

(N =660)

There is no major difference between the two settlements, meanwhile, in terms of income distribution. The families with an income of 5000 rupees or less constitute nearly 38 percent in the urban settlement and about 34 percent in the rural community. On the other hand, those who earn 3000 rupees or less comprise about 9 percent in the urban settlement but the corresponding proportion in the rural settlement is much higher at 16 percent. Another significant difference between the two communities is that the proportion of families earning 10,000 rupees or more per month is much higher in the urban location (about 22%) whereas only about 8 percent of the rural families report such higher incomes. In other words, income inequality is greater in the urban settlement (Table 6).

Over one third of the families in both communities report that their last month's income was inadequate to meet the family needs (Table 7). It is significant that even a much higher percentage of families in the two communities report that they have no savings. The proportion is nearly 48% in the rural settlement (Table 8).

In terms of income support from the state, it is significant to note that the proportion of families receiving such is much lower in the urban community (24%) than in the rural location (38%).

Table 6. Distribution of monthly earnings

	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
<3000	8.9	15.8
3001-5000	28.8	18.3
5001-10000	34.2	37.8
10001-15000	9.8	4.9
15000>	12.0	3.5

Table 7. Last month's income adequate?

	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Yes	37.8	34.2
No	61.9	63.4
No info	0.3	2.5
(N=388)	100	(N=284)

The fact that nearly two thirds of the families in both settlements report inadequate income, as shown in Table 7, needs to be explained at least partly in terms of substantial expenditure incurred on education and health, both of which are theoretically provided free of cost. In both communities these expenses are substantial, often eating into relatively low incomes of the vast majority of families (Table 9). The significance of the expenditure on health and education becomes clear when certain other indicators such as housing, household assets, sanitary facilities, and others are looked at. Clearly, these point to the fact that poverty is not simply a matter of low income.

The survey data show that most families in the two communities live in their own houses. About 10 percent of the families in the urban settlement live in rented houses while a minority of families in the rural community have shared accommodation, usually with close relatives such as parents. Some families have access to common toilets often shared with neighbors. Only a handful of families in the rural settlement do not have access to sanitary toilets. It is also significant that about 75 percent of the families in both settlements have their

Table 8. Savings

	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Yes	56.0	52.1
No	43.5	47.5
No info	0.5	0.4

N=386 (284)

Table 9. Expenditure on education and health

Amount (Rs)	Education*		Health**	
	Urban (%)	Rural (%)	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
<100	13.8	15.6		
1-500	20.7	73.6	55.1	36.1
501-1000	5.2	15.5	15.3	29.3
>1000	5.4	11.0	14.9	18.9

**(N-121)*

***Among respondents who have incurred health expenditures*

own television sets. The same proportion in the rural settlement also owns radio sets. On the other hand, telephone ownership is confined to a minority of both rural and urban families (16.2% and 14.5%, respectively).

An important dimension of the well-being of the poor is the quality of the environmental and physical resources that they have access to. The survey data highlight the fact that urban and rural communities relate to their physical environment in different ways (Table 10). Settlers in the urban community are adversely affected by the polluted environment. They point to mosquito infestation, polluted water bodies, lack of proper disposal of garbage, air pollution due to dust, among as others, as critical problems. On the other hand, members of the rural community highlight environmental issues that have a bearing on their livelihoods such as floods, drought and other forms of bad weather that affect their crops and other sources of livelihood. In other words, rural inhabitants' livelihoods are directly dependent on environmental resources while environmental problems impinge on the quality of life of urban dwellers.

Table 10. Environmental resources and problems

	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Mosquito Problems	25.9	
Blocked drainage	30.3	
Damaged Road	1.6	
Flooding/ drought	0.3	3.2
Garbage	1.0	
Dust	7.8	
Polluted lake	18.1	
No play ground	0.5	
Inability to go for fishing due to bad weather		2.8
Crop failure due to bad weather		31.0
Reduced income due to bad weather		1.8
Other	1.7	
No info	12.4	

(N-386)

Meanwhile, with regard to community participation, nature and extent of intra-community cooperation and conflict, and the sense of security or insecurity felt by community members, the survey data indicate that there are significant similarities and differences between the two communities.

In both communities, only a minority of respondents report that they take part in community organizations. Membership in community organizations is much less in the urban community (10%) than in the rural settlement (21%) as seen in Table 11. In other words, about 90 percent of the respondents in the former are not involved in local level organizations dealing with common issues. When informal inter-household and neighborhood relationships are looked at, they are less important and intense in the urban location than in the rural community.

Labor exchange is a very common mode of inter-family and neighborhood relations in the rural community, with nearly 50 percent of rural respondents referring it. This is understandable given the fact that agriculture is a major economic activity in the village. And the villagers tend to exchange labor to do their cultivation work. Even in the urban settlement, nearly 26 percent of the respondents mention labor exchange as a form of inter-family and neighborhood relations. This appears to be largely linked to house construction and maintenance. Other important areas of cooperation and exchange are food, child care and personal advice (Table 12).

When it comes to intra-community tension and conflict, the picture is mixed (Table 13) in both communities. While 55 percent of the respondents in the rural community report that the community is

Table 11. Membership in community organizations

	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Yes	10.1	21.2
No	89.9	78.8

peaceful, 43 percent of the respondents mention that there is some tension. On the other hand, nearly 50 percent of the urban respondents say that there are some tensions and disputes in the settlement while nearly 48 percent of the respondents there felt that the community is peaceful. In both communities, only a handful of respondents describe the situation in the communities as highly tense and conflictual.

What is significant to note is that the tensions and conflicts in the two communities are attributed to many different factors. For instance, the main sources of tension in the rural community are land and income distribution, and to a certain extent, educational inequality. On the other hand, in the urban community, educational inequality figures prominently as a source of tension and conflict followed by drug abuse (Table 14).

The extent to which a community is perceived to be peaceful or conflictual may have a bearing on the sense of security that the people feel in their day-to-day lives. Respondents were asked as to how secure they were from criminals at home as well as in the locality. It

Table 12. Nature and extent of inter-family and neighborhood relations

	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
No relationship	6.2	2.2
Occasionally	34.7	16.9
When needed	18.7	10.8
I give advise when needed	6.7	7.2
Exchange of food etc	4.9	3.6
Childcare	0.8	9.5
Labor exchange	25.9	49.6

Table 13. Intra-community tension and conflict

	Urban (%)	Rural(%)
Peaceful	47.9	55.0
Some tensions/disputes	49.0	43.2
Highly tense and conflicted	1.6	1.8
Other	0.3	

Table 14. Bases of tensions and conflict

	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Educational Inequalities	36.5	13.0
Inequality in land ownership	2.8	29.6
Income inequality	3.4	15.2
Gender Inequality	0.5	0.4
Generation gap	2.6	0.7
Early and new settlers	1.3	0.7
Political party rivalries	2.1	0.7
Religious beliefs	0.3	-
Income sources	3.1	-
Drug abuse	15.8	-

is noteworthy that the people's sense of security is much higher in the rural community than in the urban settlement. Only about 8 percent of the rural respondents felt insecure at home as against 37 percent of urban respondents. In the urban community, 16 percent of respondents felt highly insecure in the locality as against 6.8 percent of the respondents in the rural settlement. By contrast, only 8 percent of the urban respondents felt highly secure in their locality while nearly 23 percent of the rural respondents felt so.

Poverty and well-being: multiple dimensions

So far, this paper has attempted to provide a comparative profile of the two communities surveyed. The profile covered both economic as well as non-economic aspects. The two communities have considerable commonalities in terms of income and poverty but diverge considerably in other ways. The latter include literacy and educational attainment, environmental conditions, social networks, and sense of security. In other words, the specific local conditions cannot be ignored in any attempt to either understand or deal with key components of poverty and well-being. National level poverty alleviation programs do not or cannot deal with these specific local conditions. Hence, the need for community-level interventions that can both address local issues and mobilize community participation on a continuing and sustainable basis.

What is evident from the two community profiles is that poverty monitoring cannot concentrate on a few economic indicators such as income, employment and indebtedness. In fact, such indicators are very much intertwined with a range of non-economic factors that are equally critical for poverty and well-being. These non-economic factors are highly location-specific and cannot be easily aggregated to construct macro-level indicators to be dealt with at the national level. In other words, these conditions need to be monitored at the community level through local-level initiatives. However, as mentioned at the outset of this paper, national policies and programs in Sri Lanka over the last several decades have discouraged local-level interventions.

Local-level interventions: problems and prospects

As the discussion in the present paper has indicated, issues of poverty at community-level are complex and vary widely across localities. Some of the non-economic problems such as vulnerability and insecurity, contribute to poverty but are rarely discussed or addressed in the context of national policies or programs on poverty. This is understandable in view of the fact that such problems usually manifest at the community level and cannot be meaningfully or effectively dealt with at the national level. A case in point is the local environmental quality that affects livelihoods, health and quality of life.

Even though Sri Lanka has a devolved political system, with three levels of elected government, namely, central, provincial and local, central government institutions and functionaries have continued to be dominant, leading to the marginalization of local-level institutions and initiatives. For instance, elected local councils have had little or nothing to do with national level programs that target local communities in areas such as poverty alleviation, healthcare, education, environmental protection, housing and public transport. Resources allocated to these and other areas are channeled through national level institutions or the centralized state bureaucracy, by-

passing elected local councils, which struggle to finance even the limited activities coming under their purview. And yet, these institutions are strategically well-situated to address a range of problems faced by local communities, provided their organizational capacities are enhanced and adequate resources are allocated. This requires a deliberate policy decision that would give effect to the subsidiarity principle that usually guides the functioning of devolved political systems.

As international experience shows, well-functioning, and popularly-elected local councils can provide an institutional framework at the grassroots level that would catalyze people's participation in the management of local affairs. They can also curb bureaucratic domination over the local population by bringing public officials under the purview of elected local bodies. By establishing people's committees at the village/neighborhood level, local people can be brought in to the local planning process. The potential of local government to provide an effective institutional framework to mobilize human and national resources in addressing human problems at the community level is well-illustrated by the very encouraging experience in West Bengal in India.

In view of the above, it is reasonable to assume that the CBMS process can be effectively institutionalized with the framework of local government. The development of a comprehensive database with the participation of local communities can provide the groundwork for the formation of community-level development plans dealing with wide-ranging issues, including poverty. Resources needed for the implementation of such plans could perhaps be mobilized from multiple sources such as the central government, the private sector, non-governmental organizations and foreign donors. The formulation and implementation of local-level development plans could also help bring about better coordination of various projects and programs at the community level to avoid wastage, ineffectiveness, duplication and inefficiency that often characterize state and non-state interventions today.

Conclusion

What is outlined above can materialize only if a concerted effort is made to change the status quo. Since the status quo serves certain vested interests, the latter at best would not have any incentive to change it. For one, centralized systems bestow powers and privileges upon leaders, both political and bureaucratic. As such, they are unlikely to feel the need to give up their powers and privileges unless they are persuaded to do so.

Secondly, the understanding of poverty dynamics can also determine the approaches to poverty analysis and poverty alleviation that may be advocated. To rely on macroeconomic interventions, an overly economic view of poverty should exist while to adopt a multi-pronged approach to address the complex issues of poverty, a more comprehensive view of poverty should prevail. For this, several major challenges before have to be overcome.