



Aswesuma: Relief or Deception?

Strengthening Sri Lanka's Social Safety Nets:
A Comprehensive Analysis and Path Forward

Right to Life Human Rights Centre

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Table of Contents

Forward	4
Introduction	5
Chapter 1: Theoretical Foundations of Social Welfare	8
Chapter 2: History of Social Welfare in Sri Lanka	13
Chapter 3: Case Study - The Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme	16
Chapter 4: Introduction to the Survey Conducted by the Right to Life Human Rights Center on Social Safety Nets	21
Chapter 5: Challenges in Sri Lanka's Social Safety Nets	24
Chapter 6: Strategies for Improvement	32
Chapter 6: Policy Recommendations	37

Forward

Sri Lanka, a nation rich in cultural heritage and resilience, has long recognized the importance of social safety nets in supporting its vulnerable populations. Over the years, various programs have been implemented to alleviate poverty and provide a safety buffer against economic hardships. However, despite these efforts, challenges such as inaccurate targeting, inefficiencies in administration, and a culture of dependency have persisted, necessitating a critical examination and overhaul of the existing systems.

This book, "Strengthening Sri Lanka's Social Safety Nets: A Comprehensive Analysis and Path Forward," is a timely and essential contribution to the discourse on social welfare in Sri Lanka. It offers a detailed exploration of the theoretical foundations of social welfare, the historical evolution of Sri Lanka's social safety nets, and an in-depth case study of the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme. Through rigorous analysis and comprehensive data, this book identifies the key challenges facing Sri Lanka's social safety net programs and provides strategic recommendations for improvement.

The primary goal of this book is to advocate for accurate targeting of beneficiaries, implement effective poverty alleviation programs, and ultimately change the prevailing culture of dependency. It underscores the significance of social safety nets in upholding human rights and promoting social justice, aligning with international frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Drawing on extensive research, including baseline surveys and focused group discussions, the book presents practical strategies for enhancing the efficiency and impact of social welfare programs. It emphasizes the need for data-driven approaches, technological innovation, and community engagement to ensure that social safety nets are both effective and equitable.

The insights and recommendations presented in this book are not just theoretical but are grounded in the lived experiences of Sri Lanka's citizens. The narratives and feedback from beneficiaries provide a poignant reminder of the human aspect of social welfare programs and the urgent need for reforms that truly address the needs of the most vulnerable.

As Sri Lanka navigates its path towards economic stability and social equity, this book serves as a crucial guide for policymakers, social workers, and stakeholders involved in social welfare. It offers a clear vision for a more resilient and self-sufficient population, underpinned by robust and transparent social safety nets.

I commend the authors for their meticulous research and dedication to this critical issue. Their work not only sheds light on the current state of social welfare in Sri Lanka but also paves the way for meaningful change and sustainable development. I hope that this book will inspire and inform efforts to strengthen Sri Lanka's social safety nets, ensuring a brighter and more equitable future for all Sri Lankans.

Philip Dissanayake
Executive Director,
Right to Life Human Rights Center

Introduction

Purpose and Objectives

Sri Lanka has a rich history of social safety net programmes designed to uplift its vulnerable populations and provide a buffer against economic hardships. However, these programmes have faced numerous challenges, including issues of targeting, efficiency, and long-term sustainability. Additionally, unsystematic social welfare schemes have fostered a dependency culture. This report aims to address these challenges through a detailed examination of Sri Lanka's social safety network, providing a roadmap for future improvements.

Advocate for Accurate Targeting of Beneficiaries

One of the primary goals of this book is to advocate for the accurate targeting of beneficiaries. Reports and our studies indicate significant errors in the inclusion and exclusion of recipients in existing programmes, such as the Samurdhi and Aswesuma schemes. For instance, a study found that only 40% of the 1.7 million families receiving Samurdhi cash transfers were actually poor according to the national poverty line. Such discrepancies highlight the need for refined mechanisms to ensure that aid reaches those who truly need it.

Implement Effective Poverty Alleviation Programmes

The effectiveness of poverty alleviation programmes is critical in transforming the lives of the poor. The Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme, which was introduced as a successor to the Samurdhi programme, aims to provide targeted financial assistance to vulnerable populations. Despite its objectives, initial findings reveal significant challenges, including a high number of appeals and objections regarding beneficiary selection. This report will explore strategies to enhance these programmes' effectiveness, ensuring that they not only provide immediate relief but also support sustainable development.

Change the Culture of Dependency

Another crucial objective is to change the prevailing culture of dependency. While social safety nets are essential for providing immediate relief, they should also empower beneficiaries to achieve self-sufficiency. Programmes like Samurdhi and Aswesuma have been pivotal in providing financial aid, but they must also incorporate and develop components that promote economic empowerment, such as skills training and entrepreneurial support. This book will delve into ways to redesign these programmes to foster independence and resilience among beneficiaries.

1. "Only 40% Poor Among 1.7 Million Samurdhi Beneficiaries: LIRNEasia." *Daily FT*, 1 June 2023, www.ft.lk/news/Only-40-poor-among-1-7-million-Samurdhi-beneficiaries-LIRNEasia/56-749244.

Poverty in Sri Lanka; Comparison of World Bank and LIRNEasia Data

World Bank and LIRNEasia, regional think tank that conducted a nationally representative survey, provide a comprehensive view of the worsening poverty situation in Sri Lanka, emphasizing the need for effective social safety nets and targeted economic reforms.

Here is a comparison of the World Bank and LIRNEasia data on poverty in Sri Lanka:

Aspect	World Bank Data	LIRNEasia Data
Poverty Rate	25.6% in 2022	31% in 2023
Increase in Poverty	Nearly doubled from 13.1% in 2021 to 25.6% in 2022	Increased by 4 million people from 2019 to 2023
Total Population in Poverty	Approximately 2.7 million additional people in poverty within one year	Total of 7 million people in poverty in 2023
Urban vs Rural Poverty	Urban poverty rates tripled to 15%; 80% of the poor live in rural areas	Urban poverty tripled from 6% to 18%; rural poverty doubled from 15% to 32%
Estate Sector Poverty	More than half of the population in estate areas are below the poverty line	More than half of those in estate communities living in poverty
Social Safety Nets	Expanded cash transfer programs, yet inadequate in fully cushioning incomes	Only 31% of the poorest tenth receive Samurdhi benefits; 4% of the richest tenth do

Key Insights

- **Poverty Increase:** Both sources indicate a significant rise in poverty, but the LIRNEasia data suggests a higher rate of 31% compared to the World Bank's 25.6%.
- **Urban and Rural Disparities:** Both datasets show an increase in urban poverty, with rural areas still housing the majority of the poor.
- **Estate Sector:** Both datasets agree that the estate sector is heavily impacted, with more than half the population living in poverty.
- **Effectiveness of Social Safety Nets:** LIRNEasia highlights inefficiencies in the distribution of social assistance, while the World Bank points to the expansion of these programs but acknowledges their inadequacy.

(Sources: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/srilanka> and <https://lirneasia.net/>)

Significance of Social Safety Nets

Importance in the Context of Economic and Social Development

Social safety nets are indispensable tools for promoting economic and social development. They provide a safety buffer for the most vulnerable, enabling them to withstand economic shocks and maintain a basic standard of living. In Sri Lanka, the significance of these programmes has been underscored by recent crises. During the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis, emergency cash assistance programmes were critical in supporting millions of Sri Lankans. By preventing extreme poverty and facilitating access to essential services, social safety nets contribute to broader economic stability and growth.

Role in Human Rights and Social Justice

Beyond economic considerations, social safety nets play a vital role in upholding human rights and promoting social justice. The right to social security is enshrined in various international human rights instruments, emphasizing the state's obligation to ensure that all citizens can live with dignity. In Sri Lanka, programmes like the Thripasha nutritional supplement for pregnant women and allowances for persons with disabilities, elderly, and chronic kidney patients are essential in safeguarding these rights. This book argues that strengthening social safety nets is not merely a matter of policy efficiency but a fundamental commitment to human dignity and equity.

social safety nets are not just economic tools but fundamental instruments for realizing human rights and social justice. They are integral to achieving the SDGs by ensuring that all individuals can live with dignity and have access to the resources and opportunities they need to thrive. Through comprehensive and well-implemented social safety nets, states can fulfill their human rights obligations and build more equitable and resilient societies.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Foundations of Social Welfare

1. Introduction to Social Welfare

Definitions and Scope

Social welfare encompasses a wide range of public policies and services designed to ensure the well-being of individuals and communities. It includes programmes that provide financial assistance, healthcare, education, and housing support to those in need. The primary goal of social welfare is to enhance the quality of life for all members of society, particularly the most vulnerable, by reducing poverty, inequality, and social injustice.

Social welfare systems are typically implemented through government interventions but can also involve non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, and community-based initiatives. The scope of social welfare extends beyond mere economic support; it aims to promote social inclusion, ensure equitable access to resources, and foster overall societal well-being.

2. Theoretical Perspectives

Liberalism

Liberalism emphasizes individual freedoms and rights while recognizing the need for a social safety net to protect vulnerable members of society. From a liberal perspective, social welfare programmes aim to provide a basic level of support, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate fully in society. This includes access to healthcare, education, and income support, which are seen as essential for maintaining individual freedom and social justice (Locke; Rawls).

Neo liberalism

Neoliberalism prioritizes market-driven approaches and individual responsibility, often advocating for the reduction of state intervention in economic affairs. However, it also acknowledges the necessity of social safety nets to mitigate the adverse effects of market fluctuations on vulnerable populations. From a neoliberal standpoint, social welfare programs are designed to be minimal and targeted, providing temporary assistance to encourage self-sufficiency and economic participation. These programs often emphasize privatization and public-private partnerships, with a focus on cost-effectiveness and efficiency. Access to healthcare, education, and income support is considered important, but the emphasis is placed on creating conditions that promote individual enterprise and market solutions as primary drivers of social welfare (Hayek; Friedman).

Social democracy

Social democracy emphasizes balancing individual freedoms with collective welfare, advocating for

a robust social safety net to ensure equality and social justice. From a social democratic perspective, social welfare programs are designed to provide comprehensive support, ensuring that all members of society have equal opportunities to thrive. This includes universal access to healthcare, education, and income support, which are considered fundamental rights rather than privileges. Social democrats believe that the state plays a crucial role in regulating markets and redistributing wealth to reduce inequality and promote social cohesion. (Keynes; Bernstein).

Marxist Theory

Marxist theory, based on the ideas of Karl Marx, emphasizes the need to address class struggle and the exploitation of the working class. From a Marxist perspective, social welfare programmes are steps toward a more equitable distribution of wealth and the eventual establishment of a classless society (Marx; Engels).

Human Rights Perspective

International documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which asserts that everyone has the right to social security and an adequate standard of living. Modern frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) further support this perspective, specifically Goal 1 (No Poverty) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which advocate for inclusive social protection systems. Social welfare programmes are essential to safeguarding these rights, ensuring that all individuals can live with dignity and equity, and contributing to sustainable development and social justice on a global scale.

3. Historical Evolution of Social Welfare

Global Perspectives

The concept of social welfare has evolved significantly over time and across different cultures. In ancient civilizations, mutual aid and communal support were common. Families, clans, and religious organisations often assisted those in need. During the Middle Ages, charitable activities were primarily organized by religious institutions, with monasteries and churches playing a central role in providing relief to the poor and vulnerable (Trattner).

The Renaissance period saw the emergence of more structured forms of social assistance, with European cities establishing public almshouses and hospitals to care for the poor, sick, and elderly. The Industrial Revolution brought significant social changes, leading to the development of social reform movements and the establishment of social insurance programmes in Europe, such as Germany's comprehensive social insurance system under Otto von Bismarck (Hennock).

In the 20th century, social welfare systems expanded significantly, particularly in the aftermath of World War II. The introduction of the Beveridge Report in the United Kingdom laid the foundation for the modern welfare state, providing comprehensive social services, healthcare, and unemployment benefits. International organisations like the United Nations have also promoted social welfare as a fundamental human right, with initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals emphasizing the importance of social protection and welfare (Beveridge; United Nations).

Sample Social Welfare Schemes in Several Countries

United States

The United States' social welfare system primarily evolved during the Great Depression with the introduction of the Social Security Act of 1935. This act established programmes like Social Security, which provides retirement, disability, and survivors' benefits. Additionally, the U.S. has programmes such as Medicaid and Medicare, offering healthcare to low-income individuals and the elderly, respectively, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which provides financial assistance to families with children.

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom's social welfare system was significantly shaped by the Beveridge Report of 1942, which laid the foundation for the modern welfare state. The report proposed comprehensive social insurance covering unemployment, sickness, and retirement benefits. The National Health Service (NHS), established in 1948, offers free healthcare at the point of use, ensuring universal health coverage. Additionally, the UK provides various forms of social assistance, including housing benefits and child allowances.

Sweden

Sweden, representing the Nordic model, is renowned for its extensive welfare state, which emphasizes universal coverage and equality. The Swedish welfare system includes comprehensive healthcare, generous parental leave, free education, and substantial unemployment benefits. Social security in Sweden is characterized by universal pension schemes and income support programmes, all funded through high taxation, ensuring a high standard of living and minimal poverty rates.

India

India's social welfare system comprises a mix of targeted and universal programmes aimed at alleviating poverty and supporting vulnerable populations. Key initiatives include the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which guarantees 100 days of wage employment per year to rural households, and the Public Distribution System (PDS), which provides subsidized food grains to low-income families. Additionally, the National Health Mission (NHM) and the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) focus on healthcare and financial inclusion, respectively.

South Africa

South Africa's social welfare system is designed to address the significant social and economic disparities resulting from its apartheid history. The government provides various grants, including the Child Support Grant, Old Age Pension, and Disability Grant. These programmes aim to support the most vulnerable populations, including children, the elderly, and disabled individuals. Additionally, South Africa has initiatives like the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) to improve housing and basic services for low-income communities.

Sri Lanka's Historical Context

Sri Lanka's history of social welfare reflects a combination of traditional community-based support systems and the development of formal social welfare policies over time. In ancient and medieval periods, Sri Lanka had strong community and family structures that provided support to those in need, with monasteries and temples playing a significant role in charitable activities (Jayawardena).

During the colonial era, Sri Lanka experienced various waves of European colonization, each influencing the island's social and economic structures. Christian missionaries introduced elements of formal education and healthcare, but traditional support systems remained crucial for many

communities (Pieris).

The 19th and early 20th centuries saw the emergence of social and labor movements in Sri Lanka, leading to the establishment of trade unions and laying the foundation for future social welfare initiatives. After gaining independence in 1948, Sri Lanka introduced various social welfare programmes and policies, with successive governments taking a more active role in providing healthcare, education, and social services (Peiris).

Significant reforms during the 20th century included the nationalization of key industries, land reforms, and the establishment of free education and healthcare. Programmes such as Janasaviya and Samurdhi were introduced to address poverty and improve living conditions. In recent years, Sri Lanka has continued to grapple with economic challenges, natural disasters, and the impact of global crises, emphasizing the need for robust social safety nets to support its population (Abeyratne).

By understanding the theoretical foundations and historical evolution of social welfare, we can better appreciate the complexities and importance of these programmes in promoting social justice and economic stability.

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Chapter 2

History of Social Welfare in Sri Lanka

1. Colonial Era Influences

Introduction of Formal Education and Healthcare

The colonial era in Sri Lanka, spanning from the 16th century to the mid-20th century, was marked by the rule of three major European powers: the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British. Each of these colonial rulers left a distinct imprint on the island's social and economic structures, significantly influencing the development of formal education and healthcare systems.

Portuguese and Dutch Periods

During the Portuguese (1505-1658) and Dutch (1658-1796) periods, the primary focus was on establishing control over trade routes and resources. While their impact on social welfare was limited, they did lay the groundwork for future developments. The Portuguese introduced Christianity, establishing churches and schools mainly for converting locals, which inadvertently led to some rudimentary educational opportunities. The Dutch continued this trend, creating a more structured system of primary education, albeit still limited to specific communities, particularly those converting to Christianity (Pieris 45-67).

British Colonial Period

The most significant transformations in social welfare occurred during the British colonial period (1796-1948). The British administration introduced a more formal and widespread system of education and healthcare, which laid the foundation for modern social welfare systems in Sri Lanka.

Education

The British colonial government, understanding the necessity of an educated populace for effective administration and commerce, introduced significant reforms to Sri Lanka's education system. In 1836, the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission's recommendations led to the creation of a state-funded education system, establishing new schools and providing financial support for missionary schools. The Department of Public Instruction was established in 1869 to supervise schools and formalize education, making it more accessible. Despite the lack of proper supervision and administration initially, the large number of Christian schools prompted Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim organisations to establish their own schools. By the early 20th century, the British had significantly expanded educational opportunities laying a solid foundation for Sri Lanka's modern education system.

Healthcare

Healthcare during the British period also saw substantial advancements. The British introduced Western medical practices, establishing hospitals and clinics throughout the island. The Colombo

Medical School, founded in 1870, played a pivotal role in training local medical practitioners in Western medicine. Public health initiatives, such as vaccination campaigns against smallpox and efforts to control malaria, were also implemented. These measures significantly improved the overall health and life expectancy of the population (Peiris 89-102).

Impact on Social Welfare

The introduction of formal education and healthcare during the colonial period had lasting impacts on Sri Lankan society. These systems not only improved literacy rates and public health but also laid the groundwork for the development of a more structured and comprehensive social welfare system post-independence. The colonial education system produced a cadre of educated Sri Lankans who would later play crucial roles in the country's governance and social reforms. Similarly, the healthcare infrastructure established by the British provided a foundation upon which post-independence governments could build (Wickramasinghe 213-229).

Despite its exploitative aspects, the colonial era inadvertently contributed to the social welfare framework of modern Sri Lanka by institutionalizing key elements of education and healthcare. These developments were instrumental in shaping the country's subsequent approaches to social welfare and public policy. Post-independence, Sri Lanka was able to leverage these systems to expand social services, ultimately leading to significant advancements in human development indicators. The legacy of colonial reforms in education and healthcare underscores the complex interplay between colonial history and contemporary social welfare policies, highlighting the importance of building on historical foundations to achieve modern development goals (Wickramasinghe 213-229).

Evolution of Social Welfare and Safety Nets in Post-Independence Sri Lanka

Early Post-Independence Era: The Ration System

Following independence in 1948, Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon, sustained the wartime rationing system to ensure food security and equitable distribution of essential commodities. Citizens were issued ration books, which allowed them to purchase fixed quantities of rice, sugar, and flour at subsidized prices. This system aimed to support the nutritional needs of the population and mitigate food shortages.

Economic Crisis of the 1970s

The 1970s brought significant economic challenges, including a global oil crisis and deteriorating terms of trade for key exports like tea and rubber. These factors, combined with domestic inflation, strained Sri Lanka's economy, exacerbating food shortages and increasing reliance on the ration system. The government struggled to maintain consistent supply and quality of rationed goods, leading to widespread public dissatisfaction.

Transition to Food Stamps: J.R. Jayawardena's Reforms

The election of J.R. Jayawardena in 1977 marked a shift towards economic liberalization. In 1978, his government abolished the ration system, replacing it with a food stamp program. This new system aimed to reduce administrative costs and improve efficiency by providing targeted assistance to low-income families. Beneficiaries could use food stamps to purchase essential items at market prices, partially subsidized by the government, allowing for greater consumer choice and flexibility.

The Janasaviya Program

Introduced in 1989, the Janasaviya program sought to alleviate poverty and promote economic self-sufficiency among low-income families. It offered financial grants, vocational training, and support for small-scale income-generating activities. A compulsory savings scheme was also introduced along with financial grants. At the end of the program, the beneficiaries had the ability to use the amount saved as capital.

The Samurdhi Program

In 1995, the Samurdhi program replaced Janasaviya, offering a more comprehensive approach to poverty alleviation. Samurdhi combined financial assistance with savings and credit schemes and community development projects to uplift the socio-economic status of beneficiaries. While it became a cornerstone of Sri Lanka's social welfare efforts, the program also encountered issues such as politicization and inefficiencies in targeting.

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Chapter 3

Case Study - The Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme

1. Background and Objectives

Transition from Samurdhi to Aswesuma

The Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme was introduced by the Sri Lankan government as a successor to the Samurdhi Programme, which had been the primary social welfare initiative aimed at poverty alleviation since its inception in 1995. Despite its widespread reach, the Samurdhi Programme faced criticism over the years due to issues such as political influences, inefficiency, poor targeting, and the inability to effectively lift beneficiaries out of poverty. The need for a more streamlined and effective welfare programme led to the development of the Aswesuma Scheme, which aims to rectify the shortcomings of its predecessor by providing more targeted financial assistance to vulnerable populations.

The primary objective of the Aswesuma Scheme is to enhance the accuracy of beneficiary selection, ensuring that financial aid reaches those most in need. By leveraging more robust data collection and analysis methods, the programme seeks to minimize exclusion and inclusion errors that plagued the Samurdhi Program. Additionally, Aswesuma aims to support sustainable poverty alleviation through integrated development initiatives that promote economic self-sufficiency among beneficiaries.

"Anyone can tell you about my situation. I am 31 years old and have a fully disabled daughter and infant twin boys. My husband works as a hired fisherman, and my younger son works at the post office but does not have a stable job yet. Because my son works at the post office, we lost all our Samurdhi benefits and other entitlements. I used to receive Rs. 3,500 in Samurdhi aid, but it was later discontinued. I applied for Aswesuma, but my applications were rejected. I have appealed, but to this day, I have not received any response."

Vineetha, Godawaya, a housewife

I am a widow and a mother of four children, all of whom are married. I make a living by selling green leaves. My Samurdhi benefits were cut off because my late husband owned a hand tractor. I appealed for Aswesuma but did not receive it.

*Hinnihaami (name changed),
Green leaves seller, Akuressa*

Transition to a Digitalized Social Safety Net System in Sri Lanka

The previous process of obtaining social safety net benefits in Sri Lanka primarily involved applying through Samurdhi Development Officers or Grama Niladharis. This system was heavily politicized and bureaucratic, with benefits distributed manually through Samurdhi banks or post offices. For example, Samurdhi benefits were distributed via Samurdhi banks, which was an inefficient process that consumed significant time and money.

A survey by LIRNEasia revealed that 25% of the allocations for Sri Lanka's social safety nets were spent on the operational costs of the Samurdhi Department and Authority. To address these inefficiencies, the Welfare Benefit Board, with assistance from the World Bank, initiated a programme to digitize and enhance the efficiency of the social safety net system in Sri Lanka. One key objective was to establish a transparent Integrated Welfare Management Central Database, later known as the Welfare Benefit Information System (WBIB).

The WBIB uses a multi-dimensional poverty assessment to evaluate poverty through a deprivation score system. The questionnaire for this assessment was reportedly designed by the Census and Statistics Department. This shift towards a digital system aims to streamline the application and distribution processes, reduce operational costs, and ensure that benefits reach the most deserving individuals in a timely and efficient manner.

2. Implementation and Key Features

Eligibility Criteria and Benefits

The Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme is designed with specific eligibility criteria to ensure that only the most deserving individuals and families receive support. Applicants are assessed based on a combination of socio-economic indicators, including household income, family size, employment status, and other factors that contribute to economic vulnerability. The program's comprehensive assessment process aims to provide a more accurate picture of an applicant's financial status, thereby improving the targeting of benefits.

Selection Process

The selection process for the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme is detailed and data-driven, designed to ensure that only those genuinely in need receive benefits. The process employs a comprehensive set of criteria and indicators to assess the eligibility of applicants. Here are the main aspects of the selection process:

1. **Criteria and Indicators:** The scheme uses six primary criteria, each with specific indicators to measure deprivation levels. These criteria include education, health, economic level, assets, housing condition, and family demography. Each criterion is scored.
 - **Education:** Indicators include the highest education level of family members and whether children aged 5-16 are attending school.
 - **Health:** Indicators assess whether family members suffer from long-term chronic diseases or disabilities.
 - **Economic Level:** Indicators measure monthly per capita income and expenditure, as well as electricity consumption.

- **Assets:** This criterion evaluates ownership of housing, land, vehicles, and other assets related to mobility, economic activity, and livelihood.
 - **Housing Condition:** Indicators include the type of housing, materials used for construction, total floor area, and access to utilities like clean drinking water and sanitation.
 - **Family Demography:** This assesses the dependency ratio and whether the family is a single-parent household.
2. **Calculation Method:** Each indicator is scored, with a higher score indicating higher deprivation. The total deprivation score is calculated by summing the weighted scores of all indicators. This weighted deprivation score ranges from 0 to 1, where score 1 indicates higher level of deprivation.
 3. **Selection Cut-off:** The cut-off point for selection is set at the district level, based on the proportion of deprived families identified through the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES). This ensures that the distribution of benefits is consistent with the national pattern of deprivation.
 4. **Eligibility for Specific Programmes:** The scheme encompasses various welfare programmes, including support for families, persons over 70 years of age, persons with disabilities, and individuals suffering from chronic kidney disease. Eligibility for these programmes is determined based on the calculated deprivation score and specific criteria related to each program.
 - **Families:** Benefits are provided based on the number of family members, with different amounts for families of various sizes.
 - **Elderly:** Individuals over 70 years of age receive monthly payments.
 - **Persons with Disabilities:** Eligibility requires visible disability or certification by a medical doctor, with monthly payments provided.
 - **Chronic Kidney Disease Patients:** Certified CKDu patients receive a monthly stipend.

Implementation and Monitoring

The Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme emphasizes continuous monitoring and evaluation to ensure effectiveness and transparency. This includes regular reviews of the criteria and indicators based on updated data from the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), and adjustments to the selection cut-off points as necessary. Feedback mechanisms are also integrated to gather insights from beneficiaries and address any issues promptly.

Introduction to the Welfare Benefits Board and Its Functions

The Welfare Benefits Board (WBB) of Sri Lanka was established in July 2016 under the Welfare Benefits Act No. 24 of 2002. This act, which came into operation again in February 2016, provides the legal framework for the payment of welfare benefits and ensures a transparent process for identifying recipients and terminating benefits when necessary.

Mission and Objectives

The mission of the WBB is to develop and implement a coherent welfare benefits management system that ensures transparency and equity in selecting beneficiaries for various targeted benefits

schemes. The primary objectives of the WBB include:

1. **Providing a Legal Framework:** Establishing a structured system for the payment of welfare benefits.
2. **Transparent Recipient Identification:** Implementing processes to identify eligible recipients of benefits fairly and transparently.
3. **Benefit Termination Provisions:** Creating clear guidelines for the termination of benefits when necessary.

Core Functions

To achieve its objectives, the WBB performs several key functions, including:

1. **Implementation of Welfare Benefit Schemes:** Establishing and managing various welfare programmes such as the Samurdhi, Elderly Allowance, Disability Allowance, and Allowance for Chronic Kidney Disease Patients.
2. **Delegation of Powers:** Delegating specific powers, duties, and functions to District Secretaries, Divisional Secretaries, Grama Niladharis, or other public officers.
3. **Development of Eligibility Criteria:** Creating and enforcing criteria to determine eligibility for welfare benefits.
4. **Financial Allocations:** Specifying financial allocations for different schemes, ensuring funds are distributed efficiently and effectively.
5. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Continuously monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of welfare programmes to enhance their impact and reduce errors in beneficiary selection.

Overview and Impact

The establishment of the WBB was a significant step toward improving the equity, efficiency, and transparency of welfare programmes in Sri Lanka. By developing the Integrated Welfare Management System (IWMS), the WBB aims to address inclusion and exclusion errors in welfare distribution, particularly in the Samurdhi programme, and to improve the accessibility and responsiveness of social welfare services. Through these initiatives, the WBB seeks to build a more robust and transparent welfare system that better addresses the needs of low-income communities and isolated regions in Sri Lanka.

Effectiveness and Challenges

The Aswesuma Scheme has shown promise in improving the targeting of welfare benefits and addressing some of the inefficiencies of the Samurdhi Program. However, the programme also faces significant challenges. One of the primary issues is the high number of appeals and objections regarding beneficiary selection. Since its inception, the programme has received 1,028,885 appeals and 134,540 objections, indicating potential flaws in the initial selection process. Additionally, there are sentiments about discrepancies in the categorization of benefits, with a large number of families appealing to be placed under a higher benefit category.

These challenges highlight the need for continuous refinement of the beneficiary assessment and selection process. Ensuring transparency and accuracy in data collection and analysis is crucial to improving the program's overall effectiveness.

Feedback from Beneficiaries

In the Right to Life Human Rights Center's baseline survey, the feedback from beneficiaries provides valuable insights into the impact of the social safety nets in Sri Lanka. A significant portion of beneficiaries (35%) expressed dissatisfaction with the programme, citing issues such as inadequate benefits and bureaucratic hurdles. Conversely, 17.9% reported being quite satisfied, and 3.6% were completely satisfied with the assistance received, noting improvements in their living standards due to the financial aid provided.

The mixed feedback indicates that while the social safety net schemes have positively impacted many beneficiaries, there is still room for enhancement. Addressing the concerns raised by dissatisfied beneficiaries, such as increasing the benefit amounts and streamlining the application process, will be critical for the new Aswesuma program's success.

The Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme represents a significant step forward in Sri Lanka's efforts to improve social welfare and poverty alleviation. By focusing on accurate targeting and comprehensive support, the programme aims to build a more resilient and self-sufficient population. However, ongoing assessments and refinements are necessary to overcome existing challenges and ensure the programme meets its objectives effectively.

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Chapter 4

Introduction to the Survey Conducted by the Right to Life Human Rights Center on Social Safety Nets

The Right to Life Human Rights Center (R2L) undertook a comprehensive baseline survey on social safety nets in Sri Lanka to address the multifaceted crisis exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and inequalities in the country. Conducted in late 2023, the survey aimed to provide a detailed assessment of the range, eligibility criteria, adequacy, and effectiveness of social safety nets in the context of the severe economic crisis that Sri Lanka faced.

The primary objectives of the R2L survey included identifying gaps and shortcomings in the existing social safety net system, collecting data on the needs and experiences of beneficiaries, and informing the development of recommendations for improving these safety nets to ensure they effectively address the needs of vulnerable populations. The survey's findings were intended to support evidence-based policy formulation and programme enhancement, contributing to a more just and equitable society.

Conducted in the third quarter of 2023 across 17 districts and 74 Divisional Secretariats, the survey included a representative sample of 1,092 individuals (who have, at some point, been beneficiaries of major social safety net programs such as Janasaviya, Samurdhi, and Aswesuma), utilizing a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were gathered through structured questionnaires, while qualitative insights were obtained from semi-structured interviews and focused group discussions. This robust methodology aimed to capture a comprehensive understanding of the current state and effectiveness of social safety nets in Sri Lanka, providing a foundation for actionable policy recommendations.

This survey sought to evaluate the range, eligibility criteria, adequacy, and impact of these programmes on vulnerable populations amidst an ongoing economic crisis.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

- The survey included 1,092 participants from 17 districts and 74 Divisional Secretariats, representing a diverse cross-section of Sri Lanka's population.
- The majority of respondents were female (62.3%) and the predominant age group was 35-65 years old.
- Ethnic composition showed that 67.3% were Sinhala, 24.4% Tamil, and 8.1% Muslim, with a majority identifying as Buddhist (64.3%).
- The average number of family members is 5.

Key Findings

1. *Economic Status and Source of Income*

- A significant portion of the respondents (70.4%) reported a monthly income between Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 20,000, indicating a low-income demographic.
- The primary sources of income included daily wages (58.1%) and self-employment (20.7%).

2. *Nature of Residences*

- A substantial portion of the respondents (32.1%) reside on their own land, indicating secure land tenure for this segment of the population.
- Another 20.4% live on land with government licenses, reflecting reliance on state-issued permits for land occupancy but lacking full ownership rights.
- A notable 11.3% of respondents live on land without valid documentation, highlighting vulnerability to eviction and lack of legal security.
- A significant portion of the respondents (58.6%) reported living in a single-family house, indicating that the majority of the population has access to individual housing units. Another 29% of respondents live in houses shared by two families, suggesting a notable segment of the population resides in multi-family households, which may indicate housing shortages or economic constraints leading to shared living arrangements.

3. *Ownership of a vehicle*

- 30.4% of the population reported that they own a vehicle, while the remaining 69.6% indicated that they do not own a vehicle.
- Among vehicle owners, 51.2% of participants own motorcycles, making it the most common type of vehicle owned in the community. Additionally, 22.5% own bicycles, and 21.7% own three-wheelers.

4. *Bank accounts*

- 86% of the sample reported that they have a bank account.
- Only 30.6% reported that they have savings in the bank or other forms of savings.
- 85.1% of those with savings stated that their savings are in the range of Rs. 10,000 or less.
- 13.2% reported having savings in the range of Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 100,000.
- 1.1% stated that their savings are in the range of Rs. 100,000 to Rs. 1,000,000.

5. *The period the poverty relief received*

- 23.2% of the sample has been receiving government subsidies for more than 10 years.
- 11% of the sample stated that they have not received any government subsidies.
- On average, 69.2% of the sample stated that they received COVID-19 pandemic relief (Rs. 5,000 or dry rations for quarantining families).

6. *Current Subsidies Received by the Survey Sample*

- 33.7% of the survey sample are currently receiving the Samurdhi benefit.
- 33.3% of the sample are currently receiving the Aswesuma subsidy (both schemes were operational during the time the survey was conducted).
- 19.4% are receiving the elderly subsidy.
- 3.6% are receiving the Disabled subsidy.
- 4% are receiving the chronic illnesses subsidy.
- 2.1% stated they are not receiving any subsidies.

7. *Application to the Aswesuma Program*

- A large portion of the sample, 83.7% , applied for the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Program.
- 9.1% of the sample reported that they did not apply for the programme, which is a relatively small percentage compared to those who applied.
- Remarkably, 7.2% of the sample stated that they were unaware of the subsidy program.

8. *Beneficiary Satisfaction*

- 29.2% stated that there has been not much progress in their living standards.
- 28.9% reported no progress at all in their living standards.
- 2.1% reported significant progress in their living standards.

Conclusion

The baseline survey highlighted critical areas where the Social Safety Net programmes need improvement to better serve Sri Lanka's vulnerable populations.

"My family has 10 members. We have eight children, the eldest is 19 years old and the youngest is two years old. None of us have jobs. My husband, who has a low intellectual level, works as a casual laborer. I cannot work because I need to care for the children. We are extremely poor and live in inadequate housing. We have never received Samurdhi benefits and did not apply for Aswesuma because no one informed us about it. We don't have a radio or TV at home."

Amarawathi (name changed), housewife, Matara

Chapter 5

Challenges in Sri Lanka's Social Safety Nets

1. Coverage and Targeting Issues

Inclusion and Exclusion Errors

One of the most significant challenges facing Sri Lanka's social safety net programmes is the issue of inclusion and exclusion errors. These errors occur when eligible individuals and families are mistakenly excluded from receiving benefits (exclusion errors) or when ineligible individuals receive benefits (inclusion errors). For instance, the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme, despite its aim to improve targeting, has reported substantial inclusion and exclusion errors. A high number of appeals and objections highlight these issues, with many beneficiaries arguing that they were wrongly classified or excluded from higher benefit categories. These errors undermine the effectiveness of social welfare programmes by failing to support those in genuine need and wasting resources on those who do not qualify.

During the Baseline Survey, as well as focused group and deliberative discussions conducted by the Right to Life Human Rights Center, many respondents expressed misunderstandings about the application process. They reported not knowing about the need to apply and cited suspicions such as officials not visiting their houses and incorrect information being recorded by enumerators during the census.

Language barriers were also noted, particularly among Tamil-speaking communities, raising concerns about the accuracy and effectiveness of data collection. Initially, the lists of beneficiaries were published in English, and many people complained that they could not read the lists to find their names.

Some individuals stated that they did not want to file objections regarding the selections, regardless of whether they were correct or not; they simply wanted to be included in the beneficiary list as they believed they were eligible.

Geographic and Demographic Disparities

Geographic and demographic disparities further complicate the coverage and targeting of social safety nets in Sri Lanka. Rural and remote areas often face significant challenges in accessing social welfare programmes due to logistical barriers, lack of infrastructure, and limited outreach. Additionally, certain demographic groups, such as ethnic minorities and female-headed households, may face systemic biases that hinder their access to welfare benefits.

During the baseline survey of the Right to Life Human Rights Center, 7.2% of the sample stated that they were unaware of the subsidy program. Despite the government's efforts to spread awareness about the Aswesuma programme, research indicates that not all those in need of benefits may have registered.

"For the first time, I went to a communication center to download the application to apply for Aswesuma from an internet cafe. They charged Rs. 50 for that. We don't have smartphones. However, when the list was published online, the daughter in the family next door helped me find my name on the internet. Their family members work abroad and they know these technical things."

- *Ms. Anoma (name changed),
housewife from*

Despite a multi-pronged communication strategy, many individuals depend on government officials to inform them about such programmes and provide the necessary application forms. In some instances, officials even fill out forms on behalf of potential beneficiaries. Those with good relationships with these officials were more likely to apply for Aswesuma, while those lacking adequate social capital were either unaware of the programme or did not know how to apply.

Misinformation about eligibility criteria also prevented some from registering. Some

individuals believed they were ineligible based on incorrect information they had received.

Additionally, individuals who had been unsuccessful in previous attempts to register for benefits were reluctant to apply again, believing their efforts would be futile.

Welfare Benefits Act (No. 24 of 2002)

Sect 21

Offences by public officers

21. Any public officer who in the exercise, performance or discharge of his powers, duties or functions under this Act, knowingly and willingly, acts on any information which is false or incorrect, shall be guilty of an offence and shall on conviction after summary trial before a Magistrate be liable to a fine not exceeding ten thousand rupees or to imprisonment to a term not exceeding one year or to both such fine and imprisonment.

Sect 22

Recovery in case of incorrect payments

22. On the failure of any officer of the Board or member of any Selection Committee to ascertain the genuineness of any statement contained in a document forwarded to such officer or member which results in the making of an incorrect welfare benefit payment such amount shall be recovered from such officer or member as a debt due to the state.

Addressing these disparities is crucial for ensuring equitable access to social safety nets across all regions and population groups in Sri Lanka.

2. Efficiency and Administration

Bureaucratic Hurdles

Bureaucratic hurdles pose a significant challenge to the efficient administration of social safety net programmes in Sri Lanka. Poor communication, complex application processes, lengthy survey and approval times, and the requirement for multiple documentation often deter eligible individuals from applying for benefits. Furthermore, the lack of streamlined procedures can result in delays and inefficiencies in the disbursement of benefits. Simplifying administrative procedures and improving the efficiency of service delivery are essential steps toward enhancing the effectiveness of social welfare programmes.

Shanmugam, a former plantation worker from Ragala, passed away on August 12, 2023. His wife, Sivamani, has been trying to transfer the account into her name. Despite her efforts, she has faced significant difficulties and, as of December 19, has not succeeded. In her quest to access the Rs. 5000, she has had to make approximately ten trips to various offices, highlighting the bureaucratic challenges she encountered.

The Welfare Benefits Act (No. 24 of 2002), particularly Sections 21 and 22, has led to significant unrest among Grama Niladharis and Samurdhi Development Officers. Section 21 makes public officers liable to a fine or imprisonment for knowingly acting on false information, while Section 22 holds them financially accountable for incorrect payments due to failure to verify document genuineness. In protest, the trade unions of Grama Niladharis and Samurdhi Development Officers boycotted their duties related to the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Programme, severely impacting the communication between the government and the public. This boycott disrupted assistance to vulnerable communities, fueled the spread of misinformation, and led to protests and political manipulation. In response, the government recruited temporary enumerators and conducted the necessary census using a mobile application. However, this new process, unfamiliar to the public and lacking explanation from Grama Niladharis and Samurdhi Development Officers, led to widespread mistrust and anger within society. This situation underscores the critical need for clear communication and reliable implementation of welfare programmes to maintain public trust and effective service delivery.

The purpose of this project is excellent. It is timely to remove politics from it. Politics had been deeply embedded in the Janasaviya and Samurdhi programs, and selections were based on that foundation. The fact that Aswesuma has been freed from political influence is truly commendable.

However, in the end, this new project has entirely fallen under the influence of officials. The best example of this is the conflict between the Grama Niladharis and the government during the implementation of this program. This is a well-known issue in the country, so it does not need further explanation here.

As a result, both we and other field officers have withdrawn from this program. The young people hired by the government to replace us lacked knowledge of village environments and the criteria of the program. The sanctions imposed on Grama Niladharis in the gazette notification did not affect these individuals.

A Grama Niladhari, Galle District

Corruption and Mismanagement

Corruption and mismanagement within the administration of social safety net programmes further exacerbate inefficiencies and hinder their effectiveness. Instances of bribery, favoritism, and embezzlement of funds have been reported, leading to the misallocation of resources and undermining public trust in these programmes. The mismanagement of funds intended for social welfare not only deprives deserving beneficiaries of critical support but also erodes confidence in the government's ability to administer these programmes fairly and effectively. Strengthening oversight mechanisms, enhancing transparency, and implementing stringent anti-corruption measures are crucial for addressing these issues and ensuring that social safety nets function as intended (LIRNEasia 36-45).

"One day, when I went to the Samurdhi Bank to obtain my allowance, the officer at the counter informed me that I had not paid back a loan. I had never taken such a loan, but the officer insisted that I had obtained it some time ago and had been making payments on it. I do not understand what happened."

Ms. Lechchami (name changed), Samurdhi recipient, Gampola

"I recently migrated to this district from Colombo. My husband has a house there. We are not separated and we are building a house here. My house is half-built and has no electricity and water facilities. I don't work because my kids are small. I applied for Aswesuma and a young boy visited my house and collected data. I am paid Rs. 15,000 from Aswesuma benefits. After hearing about the Act, I am afraid if I will be an offender of submitting false information."

Ms. Amitha (name changed), a housewife from Southern Province

Public Perception on Aswesuma

The public perception of the Aswesuma programme has been shaped by several issues and misunderstandings that have emerged during its implementation. Despite receiving 3.7 million applications, key messages about the need for everyone, whether already receiving social safety nets or not, to apply for Aswesuma did not reach certain vulnerable communities. As a result, some eligible individuals did not apply for the benefits.

Those who applied received a QR code for the census, which caused panic and agitation among others who did not receive the code. This unrest was manipulated by political elements to gain political mileage. Although no direct political influence was identified during the survey conducted by Right to Life Human Rights Center, many people in deliberative discussions accused the process of being politicized.

The striking Grama Niladharis and Samurdhi Development Officers did not explain the process to the people, and they themselves were often unaware of the details. The use of temporary enumerators and a mobile app exacerbated the situation, leading to confusion and distrust among the public. Many people reported seeing individuals with multi-story houses and vehicles receiving Aswesuma benefits, while they, who felt equally or more deserving, were not granted the same support.

"The government could have resolved the issue with the Grama Niladhari trade unions by amending Sections 21 and 22 of the 2002 No. 24 Welfare Benefit Act. However, the authorities were inflexible. Most of the errors related to the selection process occurred due to the lack of knowledge and experience of the temporary enumerators. Unscrupulous individuals exploited this situation and submitted false information to obtain Aswesuma benefits. Consequently, many needy people missed the opportunity for support. If the Grama Niladharis had conducted the census, they would have had a better understanding of the residents in their areas. However, errors could still occur unintentionally because we only have knowledge of the economic data within our domain. Residents may have property and other assets outside our jurisdiction. Some people use vehicles registered under open papers, allowing them to claim they are not the owners, even though they are. Punishing officials in such a complex situation is unfair. This is why we boycotted Aswesuma duties."

Mr. Ananda (name changed), an official of a Grama Niladhari trade union.

There were also significant misunderstandings regarding the payment amounts. Many beneficiaries did not know that the maximum amount of Rs. 15,000 for the extremely poor was only applicable to families with four or more members. Consequently, some complained about receiving only half of what they believed they were entitled to. Furthermore, there was confusion between household and family-based payments, with many thinking that welfare benefits were distributed per household rather than per family.

The Right to Life Human Rights Center's survey indicated that 42.4% of houses had more than one family living in them, which added to the complexity and confusion of the distribution process. This misunderstanding led to complaints from those who felt they were unfairly compensated or excluded from the programme altogether.

In summary, the public perception of Aswesuma has been marred by communication failures, political exploitation, and logistical challenges, resulting in widespread dissatisfaction and mistrust in the program's fairness and effectiveness.

"We were temporary enumerators. We received training to gather data through the mobile application. Although the system was updated several times, we did not notice significant changes in the questions. We faced challenges such as internet connectivity issues and system errors. However, we entered the information provided by people accurately. Unfortunately, we could not record our observations. Before submitting the data, we had to certify that the information was accurate and acknowledge that we were liable to punishment under the Act if we knowingly entered inaccurate data."

*Mr. Thilak (name changed),
temporary enumerator, Matugama*

"Applications were distributed at the end of 2021, and we assumed they were for Samurdhi. We were unaware of the Aswesuma program. In 2022, enumerators conducted the selection process. I believed I would be automatically selected due to my position as a group leader, so I did not apply for Aswesuma."

Ramanathan, St. Leonard Estate, Ragala, Samurdhi group leader

In this interview, we speak with a Development Assistant from a Divisional Secretariat in the Southern Province. As a temporary enumerator for the Aswesuma survey, she shares insights into the data collection process, the challenges faced, and her personal experiences during the survey.

Q: Could you introduce yourself and your role?

A: I participated as a temporary enumerator for the Aswesuma survey, conducting a complete survey in a Grama Niladhari division within the Southern Province, along with two other officials from my institution. For each household survey, I received Rs. 300.

Q: What criteria did you follow during the survey?

A: We had to follow specific criteria. Only the enumerator knew how to score, which involved details like name, age, home ownership, occupation, and assets.

Q: How did you handle surveys when multiple families lived in one household?

A: When multiple families live in one household, we asked how many families lived there. If each family had a separate head, we counted them as separate families. If the head of the family lived with their children, where the son or daughter earned a monthly income, it was considered family income.

Q: What did you do to a house where the son was registered as a separate family, but the parents lived in the same house?

A: In such cases, if the parents had no ownership of any property, it was advantageous for them. There is a provision to attach a photograph of the house to the application, indicating ownership. It was left to the enumerator's discretion to decide if the application was accurate. My personal view is that around 50%-60% of the Aswesuma data was accurate. If Grama Niladharis had conducted the survey, it would have been more successful as they knew the residents better.

Q: You mentioned you went with two others. Who were they?

A: The other two were the Chief Community Development Officer and the Enterprise Development Officer from our Divisional Secretariat office.

Q: Were the enumerators you worked with as knowledgeable as you? Did they work under your supervision?

A: No, they worked independently. Since the questionnaire was standardized, the only difference was the sensitivity and awareness of the government officials and the temporary enumerators.

Q: There are claims that some enumerators filled out forms without visiting houses. Is this possible?

A: No, the GPS function in the app required us to visit the location and turn on the GPS before filling out the forms.

Q: What about claims that enumerators visited one house but filled out forms for another?

A: If the enumerator didn't visit a house, they couldn't fill out the form accurately.

Q: What is your personal opinion on the survey's effectiveness?

A: I believe the survey was more effective than the selection process of previous Samurdhi scheme, but there were definitely shortcomings.

Q: Did you face any issues when collecting information from households without a clear head of the family?

A: No, any family member could provide information, which was then verified and signed off by the QR code holder.

Q: What did you do when there was nobody in the houses?

A: If no one was home, it would be impossible to collect accurate information. Sometimes we took photographs to prove we visited, but if the house was empty, we couldn't gather data.

Q: Is taking a photo with the QR code mandatory?

A: Yes, skipping this step is not allowed. It ensures the data's integrity.

Question: What about those without QR codes?

Development Assistant: We had no authority beyond gathering responses to the set questions from the given families.

3. Dependency Culture

Long-term Dependency on Welfare

Another significant challenge facing Sri Lanka's social safety net programmes is the culture of long-term dependency that can develop among beneficiaries. While social safety nets are designed to provide immediate relief to vulnerable populations, there is a risk that prolonged reliance on welfare benefits can lead to dependency, reducing beneficiaries' motivation to seek employment or improve their economic situation. This dependency culture can undermine the goals of social welfare programmes, which aim not only to provide temporary relief but also to empower individuals to achieve self-sufficiency.

Of the participants of the survey of the Right to Life Human Rights Center, 23.2% of the has been

"I have taken loans from Samurdhi through small groups. Both Samurdhi beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries can take these loans. We form groups of five and can take loans ranging from Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 100,000 at interest rates of 1% to 2%. However, if one member defaults, the rest of us cannot take new loans. I have previously taken loans for house repairs and agriculture, which were repaid with interest. Officials target both Aswesuma beneficiaries and non-Samurdhi beneficiaries for loans to sustain the bank's profits."

Renuka (name changed), farmer, Hambanthota

receiving government subsidies for more than 10 years. The previous Samurdhi social safety scheme included various elements such as livelihood support, skills training, and savings and loan schemes. Many beneficiaries reported that these components were beneficial, particularly when they needed investment for crop cultivation and harvesting. Sources from the Welfare Benefit Board indicate that Aswesuma aims to include similar parallel programmes, although these have yet to materialize.

Impact on Motivation and Self-Sufficiency

The impact of long-term dependency on motivation and self-sufficiency is a critical concern. Beneficiaries who rely on welfare benefits for extended periods may become disengaged from the labor market and less inclined to pursue opportunities for personal and economic development. This situation can create a cycle of dependency that is difficult to break. For instance, feedback from beneficiaries of the Aswesuma Scheme indicated that while the financial assistance was helpful, it did not necessarily translate into long-term improvements in their economic conditions or self-sufficiency. To counteract this, social safety net programmes need to incorporate elements that promote skill development, employment opportunities, and entrepreneurship, encouraging beneficiaries to transition from welfare dependence to economic independence.

Addressing these challenges is crucial for the success and sustainability of Sri Lanka's social safety net programmes. By improving targeting accuracy, enhancing

"I am a journalist. Recently, the Freda Corea Foundation held a competition for writing stories about women small entrepreneurs. If the story is selected, Rs. 400,000 is awarded to the woman entrepreneur and Rs. 200,000 to the journalist. I found an exceptional micro-entrepreneur and asked her permission to write her story. However, when she heard about the prize money, she refused because she was afraid that receiving the gift might result in her being removed from the Aswesuma welfare benefits."

*Kanthi (name changed),
a journalist from Kurunegala*

administrative efficiency, combating corruption, and promoting economic self-sufficiency among beneficiaries, Sri Lanka can strengthen its social welfare system and ensure that it effectively supports the most vulnerable members of society.

"Social welfare benefits often discourage people of working age from seeking employment. Some individuals spend more time obtaining benefits than looking for work. Providing jobs to people of working age is more important than welfare benefits. Additionally, the income of those working in the informal sector is not accurately reported in any survey."

Ms. Navamini (name changed), estate midwife, Nuwara Eliya

Second phase of Aswesuma

The Aswesuma welfare benefit program in Sri Lanka has seen an influx of 450,000 new applications in the second phase, highlighting the significant demand for social assistance. The Welfare Benefits Board has initiated a comprehensive data collection process, expected to conclude by the end of July, 2024.

The program still faces communication challenges, including limited mobile phone access and digital literacy among the poorest communities. Details of the census process was published in newspapers, but the low readership of newspapers among the target population poses a communication barrier. Notifications about the enumerator's visits are sent via SMS, but many families may not receive them. They are expected to stay at home until the enumerator's visit. All adult family members must present National Identity Cards and various documents, such as land deeds, bank passbooks and medical records, for verification. The accuracy of the collected data will be reviewed and signed by the participants.

After data collection, a committee will scrutinize the applications, addressing objections and ensuring only eligible candidates receive benefits.

The program also aims to update the data of 1.8 million beneficiaries from its first phase. Yet, the implementation of Aswesuma is hampered by ongoing protests from Grama Niladhari officers and Samurdhi development officers, who have withdrawn their support. Administrative officers at Divisional Secretariat offices demand allowances for their involvement in the program, reflecting the broader challenges of ensuring effective administration and support for social safety nets in Sri Lanka.

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Chapter 6

Strategies for Improvement

1. Accurate Targeting of Beneficiaries

Data-driven Approaches

To improve the accuracy of targeting beneficiaries, it is crucial to adopt data-driven approaches. Utilizing comprehensive data collection and analysis can help identify the most vulnerable populations and ensure that social safety nets reach those who need them the most. Incorporating advanced data analytics and machine learning algorithms can enhance the precision of beneficiary selection by analyzing various socio-economic indicators, such as income levels, employment status, family size, and geographic location. By creating a centralized database that integrates data from different government departments and agencies, the targeting process can be more systematic and transparent.

Aadhaar is a 12-digit individual identification number issued by the Unique Identification Authority of India on behalf of the Government of India. Any individual, irrespective of age and gender, who is a resident in India and satisfies the verification process laid down by the UIDAI can enroll for Aadhaar.

Individuals need to enroll only once and enrolment is free of cost for all the residents of India. Aadhaar number is unique for each individual and will remain valid for life time. Aadhaar number will help the residents to avail various services provided by banking, mobile phone connections and other services in due course.

India has made substantial progress in digitalizing its social safety nets through the Aadhaar system. Aadhaar has been linked to the Public Distribution System (PDS), ensuring that subsidies for food and other essentials are distributed accurately. Beneficiaries use their Aadhaar numbers to authenticate their identity at distribution points.

Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) transfers subsidies directly into the bank accounts of beneficiaries, reducing leakage and ensuring timely payments. Aadhaar-enabled payments have made the process more transparent and efficient.

Digitalization of land and vehicle registration, along with taxation processes, can significantly enhance the implementation and effectiveness of social safety nets. By ensuring accurate and transparent records, digitalization helps in better targeting of beneficiaries, reducing fraud, and ensuring that resources are allocated to those who need them the most. India's successful implementation of digital systems provides valuable insights into how Sri Lanka can leverage these technologies.

For example, Karnataka's Bhoomi project has digitized land records, making them easily accessible online. This has reduced land disputes and made it easier to identify rightful owners. Accurate land records have helped in better targeting of agricultural subsidies and other rural development programmes. Farmers with genuine land holdings can easily avail of benefits without bureaucratic delays.

Regular Monitoring and Evaluation

Regular monitoring and evaluation are essential to maintain the integrity and effectiveness of social safety net programmes. Implementing a robust monitoring system that tracks the progress of beneficiaries and the impact of the programmes can provide valuable insights into their effectiveness. Periodic evaluations should be conducted to assess whether the programmes are meeting their objectives and to identify areas for improvement. Feedback mechanisms, such as beneficiary surveys and community consultations, should be integrated into the monitoring process to gather real-time data and ensure continuous improvement.

2. Enhancing Programme Efficiency

Streamlining Administrative Processes

Streamlining administrative processes is key to improving the efficiency of social safety net programmes. Simplifying application procedures, reducing paperwork, and minimizing bureaucratic hurdles can make it easier for eligible individuals to access benefits. Introducing a single-window system where applicants can submit their information and documents once, and the system disseminates this information to all relevant departments, can significantly reduce the time and effort required to process applications. Additionally, training administrative staff to handle applications more efficiently and sensitively can enhance the overall experience for beneficiaries.

Leveraging Technology

Leveraging technology can play a transformative role in enhancing the efficiency of social welfare programmes. Implementing digital platforms for application submission, processing, and tracking has already streamlined operations and reduced administrative costs. Mobile applications and online portals can be further improved to provide beneficiaries with easy access to information about their application status, benefit disbursements, and programme updates.

Improving Access to Banking for Social Welfare Benefits; a success story

In the 2023 budget speech, the government announced its intention to channel benefit payments through banks. A survey by LIRNEasia highlighted that 60% of adults living in poverty owned bank accounts, either with government or private banks. Additionally, the Right to Life Human Rights Center's survey indicated that 86% of the sample reported having a bank account, including those with non-regulated banks, although only 30.6% reported having savings in these accounts or other forms of savings.

However, the initial implementation of direct cash transfers faced several challenges. The Presidential Secretariat announced in October 2023, that due to the improper opening of bank accounts, payments could not be made to 156,261 Aswesuma beneficiaries. For applicants who could not open bank accounts due to the lack of a National Identity Card, the Bank of Ceylon, National Savings Bank, and Regional Development Bank provided an opportunity to open accounts with a six-month condition to submit their National Identity Card.

"We used to visit the Samurdhi Bank to withdraw our benefits, which took a lot of time and money to travel. I did not have a bank account. After being selected for Aswesuma, I had to open a bank account. This is the first time in my life I have opened a bank account."

Ms. Rani (name changed), tea-plucker, Badulla

During the initial phase, all branches of People's Bank, National Savings Bank, and Bank of Ceylon were open on Poya days to facilitate Aswesuma payments. Despite these efforts, a portion of the beneficiaries still did not have bank accounts. Many of them had accounts in Samurdhi Banks, which were not recognized as they were not regulated by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka. Initially, there were long queues as people rushed to open accounts. The government directed state-owned banks to allow people to open accounts without initial deposits, which significantly increased the number of people with bank accounts in a short period.

3. Promoting Economic Empowerment

Linking Welfare to Skills Development and Employment

To break the cycle of dependency and promote long-term economic empowerment, social safety net programmes should be linked to skills development and employment opportunities. Providing beneficiaries with access to vocational training, education, and job placement services can equip them with the skills needed to secure stable employment. Programmes like the Aswesuma Scheme can incorporate partnerships with local businesses, vocational training institutes, and employment agencies to create a pathway from welfare dependency to economic independence.

Encouraging Entrepreneurship

Encouraging entrepreneurship among beneficiaries can also foster economic self-sufficiency. Social welfare programmes can offer microfinance opportunities, micro-entrepreneurship, self-employment and business development training, and mentorship to help individuals start and sustain micro and small businesses. By providing interest-free loans or grants for entrepreneurial ventures, programmes can support the creation of new businesses, stimulate local economies, and reduce unemployment. Additionally, fostering a supportive environment for entrepreneurship through policies and community initiatives can further encourage beneficiaries to take up entrepreneurial activities.

"The dependency mentality does not suit our country and must be eradicated. Despite having land, some people do not engage in cultivation. The government should provide low-interest loans for cultivation and create opportunities for self-employment. There are people who make products from foods like jackfruit and breadfruit but lack space and support. The government should help them to become self-sufficient instead of penalising them with fines for unpaid debts. Increasing opportunities for small entrepreneurs is essential, but currently, they are often hindered rather than helped."

*Ms. Mallika, housewife,
Kamburupitya*

"After a severe flood a few years back, I acquired a water pump, hoses, and other equipment to start a mobile service for cleaning water wells. Over time, I further developed the business and now have a network of clients, including companies, providing regular work throughout the year. I have also employed a few assistants. My business is now managed through my mobile phone."

Gamini (name changed), Gampaha, former Samurdhi beneficiary.

4. Community Engagement and Awareness

Role of Public Awareness Programmes

Public awareness programmes play a critical role in ensuring the success of social safety net initiatives. Educating the public about the availability of welfare programmes, eligibility criteria, and application processes can increase programme uptake and ensure that benefits reach those in need.

Information campaigns through various media channels, including radio, television, social media, and community outreach, can effectively disseminate information. Furthermore, involving community leaders and local organisations in these awareness efforts can enhance their credibility and reach.

Building Community Support Structures

Building robust community support structures can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of social safety net programmes. Community-based organisations (CBOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can act as intermediaries between the government and beneficiaries, providing support with applications, facilitating access to services, and monitoring programme implementation. Establishing local welfare committees that include representatives from various community groups can ensure that the programmes are responsive to local needs and contexts. Engaging communities in the design and implementation of welfare programmes can also foster a sense of ownership and accountability, leading to better outcomes.

Implementing these strategies can significantly enhance the effectiveness and impact of Sri Lanka's social safety nets. By adopting data-driven approaches, streamlining administrative processes, promoting economic empowerment, and engaging communities, the government can ensure that social welfare programmes effectively address the needs of the most vulnerable populations and contribute to sustainable poverty alleviation.

5. The State of Samurdhi Programme Now

Introduction of Aswesuma Welfare Program and Impact on Samurdhi Officers

With the introduction of the Aswesuma welfare benefit program in July 2023, the longstanding Samurdhi program was suspended, leaving approximately 18,000 Samurdhi Development Officers without work. The Joint Federation of Samurdhi Trade Unions highlights the dire situation these officers now face.

History and Function of Samurdhi Banks

Since 1995, the Samurdhi movement has established 1,097 Samurdhi Banks across Sri Lanka, which played a crucial role in providing financial support to low-income families. These banks, funded through mandatory savings schemes from Samurdhi aid recipients, offered loans at concessionary rates and managed welfare activities, including housing lotteries.

Financial Challenges During COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government withdrew Rs. 47 billion from Samurdhi Banks to provide emergency relief of Rs. 5000 to low-income earners. This amount was never returned, exacerbating the financial difficulties faced by these banks.

Distribution of Samurdhi Aid

Samurdhi Development Officers were primarily responsible for distributing aid, which ranged from Rs. 350 to Rs. 3500 per family. However, a significant portion of the allocated funds—approximately 25%—was spent on maintaining the institutions and paying the officers' salaries.

Aid Distribution Statistics

As of September 1, 2020, 1,784,082 families received Samurdhi aid, categorized as follows:

Aid Amount	Number of Families
Rs. 420.00	83,551
Rs. 1,500.00	636,445
Rs. 2,500.00	350,278
Rs. 3,500.00	713,808
Total	1,784,082

Source: Parliament Website

Political Influence and Program Ineffectiveness

Despite a decrease in beneficiaries from 1,960,664 in 2005 to 1,384,021 in 2018, the number surged to 1,784,082 in 2019 due to political selections by the good governance government. About 25% of these beneficiaries received aid as a political favor during the 2019 Presidential election.

Attempts at Reform

The Welfare Benefits Board Act, intended to depoliticize and streamline the Samurdhi program, was introduced in 2002 but only began practical implementation in 2022.

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Chapter 7

Policy Recommendations

1. Short-term Interventions

Immediate Policy Adjustments

To address the immediate challenges faced by Sri Lanka's social safety net programmes, several policy adjustments are necessary. First, improving the accuracy of beneficiary targeting can be achieved by refining data collection methods and using updated socio-economic indicators. Implementing rapid assessment tools can help identify the most vulnerable populations more efficiently. Additionally, simplifying application processes by reducing bureaucratic hurdles and enhancing support services for applicants can increase programme accessibility. For instance, deploying mobile units in remote areas can assist with registrations and queries, ensuring that no eligible individual is left out due to logistical constraints.

Enhancing Existing Programmes

Enhancing the existing social safety net programmes involves increasing the benefits provided and ensuring timely disbursement of funds. The monthly cash transfers under programmes like the Aswesuma Scheme should be adjusted regularly to keep pace with inflation and the rising cost of living. Strengthening the monitoring and evaluation frameworks can also ensure that the benefits reach the intended recipients without delays or corruption. Additionally, integrating complementary services such as healthcare, education, and nutrition support can provide a more holistic approach to poverty alleviation. For example, linking cash transfers with school feeding programmes and healthcare subsidies can enhance the overall well-being of beneficiaries.

2. Long-term Reforms

Comprehensive Policy Overhaul

In the long term, a comprehensive policy overhaul is required to build a more robust and sustainable social welfare system. This involves revisiting and revising existing policies to address systemic inefficiencies and gaps. Developing a unified social welfare framework that consolidates various programmes under a single administrative body can improve coordination and reduce redundancy. Introducing progressive social policies that focus on reducing inequality and promoting social justice is essential. Policies should be designed to be inclusive, ensuring that marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities, women, and disabled individuals are adequately represented and supported (LIRNEasia 36-45).

Integrating Welfare with Broader Economic Policies

Integrating social welfare with broader economic policies can create a synergistic effect, promoting both economic growth and social equity. Social welfare programmes should be aligned with national

economic development plans to ensure that they contribute to overall economic stability and growth. For example, linking welfare programmes with initiatives aimed at job creation, skills development, and entrepreneurship can facilitate the transition of beneficiaries from welfare dependency to economic self-sufficiency. Encouraging public-private partnerships can also leverage additional resources and expertise, enhancing the effectiveness and reach of social welfare programmes.

3. Role of Government and Non-Governmental Organisations

Effective Collaboration and Partnerships

Effective collaboration between the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is crucial for the successful implementation of social safety net programmes. NGOs can play a significant role in identifying vulnerable populations, delivering services, and monitoring programme implementation. Establishing formal partnerships with NGOs can enhance the reach and impact of social welfare programmes. For instance, NGOs with grassroots networks can provide valuable insights and facilitate community engagement, ensuring that programmes are tailored to the specific needs of different communities. Regular dialogue and coordination between government agencies and NGOs can foster a collaborative environment, leading to more effective and responsive social welfare interventions.

Case Studies of Successful Interventions

Examining case studies of successful interventions can provide valuable lessons and best practices that can be replicated or adapted in Sri Lanka. For example, the Bolsa Família programme in Brazil, which combines cash transfers with health and education requirements, has been successful in reducing poverty and improving social indicators. Similarly, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in India, which guarantees 100 days of employment to rural households, has helped reduce rural poverty and create durable assets. By studying these and other successful models, Sri Lanka can identify strategies that are applicable to its context and implement similar programmes to enhance its social safety nets (LIRNEasia 36-45).

Implementing these policy recommendations can significantly strengthen Sri Lanka's social welfare system, making it more efficient, equitable, and sustainable. By addressing both immediate challenges and long-term structural issues, the government can ensure that social safety nets effectively support the most vulnerable populations and contribute to overall social and economic development.

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