

ANNEX 2

A Review

Relief efforts in the Colombo district to low-income families, daily waged workers and vulnerable communities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka

Background to the Covid-19 Response in Sri Lanka

On the 11th of March 2020 the World Health Organisation (WHO) responding to the rapidly spreading COVID-19 virus declared the outbreak of the disease a pandemic. As with all countries across the globe Sri Lanka responded with special and extraordinary measures. These included restrictions to movement through a strictly enforced curfew resulting in an island-wide lockdown to prevent the spread of infection.

Sri Lanka recorded its first COVID-19 infections on the 27th January 2020. By the first week of March there were 16 individuals under observation. On the 2nd of March Parliament was dissolved with the expectation of elections in the third week of April and a period of nominations was specified from the 12th to the 19th of March. Sri Lanka's concerted response to the COVID-19 pandemic commenced following the close of nominations with a curfew-imposed lockdown on 20th March and elections were postponed.

In the absence of a sitting Parliament, the COVID-19 response was led by Presidential directive. Army Commander Shavendra Siva was tasked to head the 'National Operation Centre for the Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak' to 'coordinate preventive and management measures to ensure that healthcare and other services are well geared to serve the general public'. In addition, a Presidential Task Force was established on the 26th of March under extraordinary gazette notification headed by the President's brother, Mr. Basil Rajapakse. Its remit was to 'direct, coordinate and monitor the delivery of continuous services for the sustenance of overall community life, including the supply of food provisions produced in rural areas and producers direct to consumers giving priority to the Districts of Colombo, Kalutara, Gampaha, Puttalam, Jaffna, Mannar, Kilinochchi, Vavuniya and Mullaitivu. In April 2020, this Task Force was replaced by the Presidential Task Force on Economic Revival and Poverty Eradication with extraordinary powers to steer economic revival and poverty alleviation in the face of global and local shocks from the COVID-19 pandemic. It will direct a range of State institutions and agencies and monitor their activities. It is chaired by Mr. Basil Rajapaksa.

This review and the policy recommendations that follow are concerned with the impact of the COVID-19 response on urban poor and low income communities in Colombo and will also discuss the interventions and needs of some vulnerable groups in general. The comments will centre primarily on socio-economic concerns and will not delve into the public health response vis a vis these communities. However, we wish to state at the outset that the pandemic, the nature of the responses to it and the consequences of those responses affected low income and poor communities very differently and unequally. The

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overview given here and the recommendations that follow are a reflection of these differences that are the result of deep-seated systemic and structural inequalities.

As in many parts of the world urban poor lack good infrastructure and services and are compelled to live in crowded communities which make the idea of social distancing completely infeasible. In the time of acute contagion these communities face additional health risks which are compounded by existing vulnerabilities. In addition to this a paramount concern with the lockdown was the loss of income which translated into very real spikes in poverty with more vulnerable sectors in marginalized communities falling into poverty. With this came the added insecurities of food, nutrition and basic health. For some, particularly women and children, the constricted environment of the home also added the threat of violence and abuse. All of these factors have to be taken into consideration by the continued State response.

Following a strict lockdown of over 50 days and the slow transition from the lockdown, the State response must now strengthen social and economic measures to support the urban poor and vulnerable low income communities, including women, children, the elderly and the disabled. The recovery must take into account new vulnerabilities faced by poverty-stricken communities such as financial instabilities due to the loss of jobs and access to income generating work, added health risks, food and nutrition insecurities, exacerbated poverty and indebtedness.

Status of low income communities in the Colombo District

The urban poor in Colombo city comprise of various categories of persons and amount to over a half million persons¹, taking Urban Development Authority figures into consideration. While spread out through the city comparatively large communities of people inhabit areas such as Dematagoda, Wanathamulla, Kotahena, Kirulapone in which the population density is greater than other localities. After the end of the war in May 2009, Colombo was to be transformed into a 'world class city' through the Urban Regeneration Project (URP) of the Urban Development Authority (UDA). The UDA was functioning under the (then) newly created Ministry of Defense and Urban Development and the URP sought to move around 65,000 working class poor families, around half a million people, from their homes in central Colombo (mainly in the areas of Kompanyaveediya, Torrington, Narahenpita) to government built high rise complexes in the outskirts of the City – Dematagoda, Henamulla, Salamulla. A significant proportion of urban poor were thus compelled to move from familiar locations and communities and livelihood access and adapt to new living conditions and environments. People thus relocated face tremendous difficulties and hardships ranging from security issues, debt, breakdown of care and kinship networks, lack of space and privacy, loss of livelihoods and income generation and women are disproportionately affected by all this.

The categories of urban poor are also many and diverse and range from the self employed to the daily waged and casual labour. The lockdown imposed restrictions also failed to take into account the numbers of migrant workers, renters and homeless people who do not have access to kitchens and were reliant on eateries or people providing them with food. Nor were the special needs of the disabled, aged, sick and single men and women with no care support taken into account.

¹CPA, April 2014, Forced evictions in Colombo: The ugly price of beautification <https://www.cpalanka.org/forced-evictions-in-colombo-the-ugly-price-of-beautification/>

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The lockdown also surfaced other factors of vulnerability that must be dealt with in the post-lockdown transition. Economic vulnerabilities have been identified among occupation groups such as domestic workers, food vendors, those working in eateries and small enterprises. Also adversely affected were workers such as tailors, barbers, drivers and those engaged in the transport sector, hospitality sector, restaurant sector, construction sector, food and goods retailing and so on which provided work to a large segment of Colombo's low income dwellers. These workers were not categorized among the urban poor and were not entitled to welfare benefits such as Samurdhi.

The diversity of daily wage work, the precarious lives people lead, the sudden and abrupt loss of livelihood and income were unfortunately not taken into adequate consideration when Sri Lanka went into lockdown. In addition, the public health response to the pandemic which required social distancing and heightened levels of sanitation were almost impossible in over-crowded and under resourced localities in which the urban poor are compelled to live.

Overnight, people who were able to live manageable and fairly comfortable lives because of their daily wage work or whatever informal livelihood activity that they were engaged in, were unable to cope.

The pandemic and the response to it increased the vulnerability of the poor and threw low income households in the city into further debt dependence as they fought for survival. While a debt moratorium was offered by the Central Bank to buffer and support private enterprise this benefit overlooked microfinance² and the poor, many of whom are in the informal sector and whose incomes often outstrip their basic expenditure and whose debt is at unsustainable levels. They are further challenged by the lack of social security and services and are expected to deal individually with their debt burden.

Relief Measures

During the lockdown, those among the urban poor assisted relatively quickly were Samurdhi recipients. In addition, a further sum of Rs.5000/- was allocated to low income groups, particularly those who lost their livelihoods or had no access to formal or informal sector employment. Under this scheme it was estimated that approximately 1.9 million families were eligible for assistance.³ Among them were teachers, private bus drivers, conductors, the Ayurveda medicine council, laborers, small scale tea estate owners, provincial reporters, three-wheel drivers, lottery sellers all of whom were subject to eligibility criteria. Also eligible for this assistance were senior citizens, disabled persons and kidney patients from low income families. The allowance was announced on the 30th of March and was primarily for those who lost their livelihood and income due to the lockdown.⁴ The government circular announcing the payment promised this as a monthly stipend. A registration process required potential recipients to

² <http://www.cadtm.org/Tackle-the-Household-Debt-Pandemic-Cancel-Debt-Create-Common-Credit>

³ Circular, April 15th, 2020, Providing a 5000/- Rupee allowance, under the funding scheme, to those affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Prime Ministers Office

http://www.pmooffice.gov.lk/download/press/D00000000009_EN.pdf

⁴ Circular, Presidential Secretariat, March 30th, 2020, Relief measures to low-income families and individuals who are vulnerable to COVID-19 <https://www.presidentsoffice.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/circular192020-sinhala.pdf>



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provide sufficient information to meet eligibility criteria. Those whose employment was affected had to obtain a recommendation from the village society which in turn needed to be verified by their respective Divisional Secretaries which were then presented to their respective committees formed under the Grama Niladhari. All committee members had to collectively approve each recipient of the 5000 rupees allowance. The committee had to include at least 5 members, including a local government council member, the Grama Niladhari, a family health worker, economic development officer and Samurdhi officer.

Challenges Posed by the Lockdown

Within days of the curfew low income and poor households in Colombo were running out of food since they had no surplus and families began cutting back on meals compromising on nutrition.

The restrictions also did not take into consideration the sheer number of the disabled, sick, elderly, migrant workers, renters or homeless. Financial anxieties increased with expenses such as rent payments, utility bills, mortgage and loan repayments, school fees, and monthly prescription medicine. These accumulated financial expenses continue to be a burden post the lockdown, particularly for those unable to resume their accustomed livelihoods.

Those who were Samurdhi beneficiaries were the first to receive any kind of payment. In some areas this was well organised and functioned efficiently. In others however the Samurdhi payments were accessed with difficulty with a lot of waiting at Grama Niladhari offices, and back and forth visits. Accessing the payment of Rs.5000/- was also fraught with problems as there were no set guidelines on eligibility made available to the public with many people having no access to official channels of information. Among the ineligible were those living on rent. Households with more than one nuclear family living together (as is the case with many families in working class poor communities) were entitled to only one payment. In many instances people lacked the required documents to fulfil eligibility criteria and many spent a lot of time writing appeal letters. The Rs.5000/- payment was expected to be paid monthly (the lockdown lasted over 50 days and was extended in parts of Colombo) yet only one payment was received and the payment for May was not made in most areas. The payment itself although welcome was inadequate considering the expenses people face every month, but it did at least ensure some ability to buy food and dry rations.

With the loss of income poor families were compelled to use their savings for food and essential provisions. Those with no savings or whose savings were exhausted borrowed from families or communities and many turned to moneylenders adding the burden of debt repayment to daily economic anxieties. Women bore the burden of food provision disproportionately. They had to pay multiple visits to the Grama Niladhari or co-operatives while also being responsible for cooking, cleaning and care work within the household and they had to keep children occupied and fed.

Gender discrimination

Census and other official documents invariably designate the male resident, head of household. As a consequence it is men who are officially recognized as recipients of relief grants, particularly those of a monetary nature. With the introduction of the Rs.5000/- payment there were allegations that in some cases only male heads of the household were allowed to register for the grant. While this was not widely

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practiced, some women did find Grama Niladharies making the payment directly to men. Many women attest that when the men receive such allowances, they become the sole beneficiary of the money. Men who are prone to substance abuse tend to spend much of the allowance on alcohol, drugs or tobacco, while abusive men refuse to share the funds on family needs. We also came across women who had no access to maintenance payments because their husbands were defaulting or absconding and they had no recourse to the courts because these were not functioning.

Gender violence

It was observed that living in close proximity and in lockdown often had detrimental psycho-social effects on families. A significant incidence of domestic violence was reported with women bearing the brunt of the abuse while in some instances, children, the elderly and those at risk within LGBTQI communities were also forced to endure domestic abuse. For women in existing situations of domestic abuse, the home and the lockdown which compelled her to remain within its confines exacerbated the danger and no adequate solutions were available. While helplines were established women often had no way of accessing them. Many poor women have no means or the privacy to do so. There was no established community support that provided alternate shelters. They couldn't leave their homes because children/elderly had to be cared for. During curfew, some women did not want to report their husbands for fear they would be remanded with an increased risk of contracting the covid-19 virus. For households where the abusive man was the sole income earner making a complaint put the entire household at risk.

At-risk Communities

The elderly and the disabled

The on-going pandemic presents increased risks for the elderly and people with disabilities. Increased health risks, displacement, further dependency, disrupted access to assistance, restricted mobility and limited provisions are some of their major concerns. Considering that the safety and wellbeing of the elderly and the differently abled during lockdown were of immediate concern the government released specific guidelines for staying at home during the pandemic. As part of the government's urgent grant scheme a sum of Rs.5000 was provided to senior citizens who were eligible for a standard government allowance. The disabled and special needs population was also provided with similar assistance. According to the National Secretariat for the elderly 3.1 million elders over the age of 70 had been provided with the allowance during the lockdown.

For the low-income elderly the Public Welfare Assistance Allowance (PAMA), the Elderly Assistance Programme (EAP) and the Samurdhi subsidy provides an allowance to households with a monthly income below the minimum amount. The PAMA allowance is also provided to young and vulnerable individuals with disabilities or chronic illnesses. While the PAMA allowances range from LKR 250 – 3000 to eligible households, the EAP allowance ranges from LKR 1000 – 2000. In 2018 the government also introduced a payment scheme of LKR 2000 for the elderly over 70 years of age with an income of less than LKR 3000.

The allowance programmes available for the low-income elderly is at a minimum and while the one time grant is a vital support it may not be sufficient to sustain their needs throughout the course of the

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pandemic. It is also known that elderly women tend to face higher risk of poverty than men due to the existing income inequalities, low wage earnings over the years, longevity and family responsibilities. Therefore the existing allowances don't fully meet the needs of older women.

The LGBTIQ+ community and Sex workers

UNAIDS and the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) released a joint appeal for countries to take immediate action to protect the health and rights of sex workers whose livelihood is affected by the ongoing pandemic. Due to discriminatory laws and social stigma sex workers have been left unprotected and unsupported during this pandemic. The lack of a government response to support sex workers and their loss of income has put the community increasingly at risk and under tremendous stress. The few customers they have been getting during this time leave sex workers vulnerable to contracting the virus and breaking curfew protocols. This in turn puts them at risk of infection on the one hand and arrest on the other. They are also at risk of coming into contact with authorities who abuse or discriminate against them. They are also further stigmatized through accusations of spreading the virus. The community based support they received is not sustainable and not a substitute for government relief. Given their risks of contracting COVID-19, monetary relief would preclude this risk and keep them secure economically and from infection.

Further beach boys, nachchi and jogi dancers and LGBTIQ+ community members living in low income settlements of urban Colombo have also been deeply affected. The needy among this population is expanding as income loss and resultant shortage of food and nutrition becomes more widespread. In addition, many within the low waged LGBTIQ+ community, particularly those employed in economically vulnerable enterprises and NGO run projects which cannot be conducted online are experiencing economic stress and hardship meeting daily food and non-food needs.

Members of SOGIESC communities are trapped at their temporary residences located in urban areas where they have migrated for employment without the means to pay for rent due to unemployment and limited funds because many such persons are daily wage earners or are in the informal sector and therefore have no access to workers' rights. They risk prosecution if they were to register for relief as they also face additional security risks on the sole basis that they identify as LGBTIQ+. Some among them have been forced to return to unsupportive/abusive families. Other than the scarcity of material needs, isolated individuals are at a risk of emotional distress and require mental health support.

Compiled by Women and Media Collective in consultation with a group of activists and practitioners working with urban low income and poor communities and other vulnerable groups in Colombo

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