

Policy Recommendations for Post COVID-19 Lockdown Relief and Recovery: Low-income families, daily waged workers and vulnerable communities in Colombo district

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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.

The policy recommendations that follow relate to the impact of the COVID-19 response on urban poor and low-income communities in Colombo and also highlight possible interventions in relation to other vulnerable groups such as the disabled, elderly, LGBTIQ+ community and Sex workers living in urban low-income communities.

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

Recommendations

Low-income families in the Colombo district

Short term

1. Aid must not be politicized and all assistance from the President's Fund or any cabinet approved funding must be distributed equitably irrespective of people's political affiliations. Assistance provided by the State must not be attributed to any political party and State resources must not be abused in the run up to the Parliamentary elections.
2. Targeted livelihood restoration schemes should be introduced to meet the needs of all informal sector workers and the daily waged. Daily waged workers should be supported for a minimum six months (April to September 2020), with a monthly stipend, so that they can restart their livelihoods without incurring further debt.
3. Monthly rent payments should be cancelled for those living in the UDA high-rise apartment buildings along with utility bill payments for six months (March to August 2020). These amounts should be paid directly to the UDA.
4. A plan should be drawn up to cover the cost of rent for those living in low income settlements, by paying the landlords directly from March to August 2020. This is because landlords depend

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on rent money for their own expenses and many people may face eviction, making women renters more vulnerable due to their inability to pay.

5. Establish community-based groups, through the Colombo Municipality with a gender, ethnic and religious balance to assist with decision making and distribution of relief at the local level.
6. Consult women local councilors and community based women's groups in relief efforts, so that gendered needs are identified and met when relief is distributed to communities.
7. The Colombo Municipal Council and other state institutions must invest in more infrastructure in low income communities and public spaces in the city to enable people to better access water and hand washing facilities.
8. Implement a special programme to ensure the supply of essential nutritious food to low income communities and the urban poor whose nutrition may be compromised due to the loss of income during the lockdown and the transition out of it.

Long term

1. Strengthen social and community networks that operate at the ground level and provide them with reliable information for immediate community transmission, to reach communities that do not have easy access to government information sources.
2. Revisit existing social protection mechanisms such as the current Samurdhi scheme and a) update the criteria for beneficiaries and b) ensure the monthly assistance is adequate and based on the cost of living.
3. Provide seed grants for low income earners to start self-employment initiatives with government assistance and help create a market for their products. Those interested should be given vocational training for a trade that suits their respective environments.
4. Adequate and affordable shelter must be constructed and made available to daily wage workers and homeless persons in the city. This would enable them to have access to water and sanitation, but also make them less vulnerable to spread of infections, have the ability to socially distance or quarantine when necessary.
5. Rethink housing projects for the urban poor such as the Urban Regeneration Project building of the high-rise complexes, as the current model is does not adequately meet the requirements of the communities. The design of the apartment complexes and relocation process disproportionately affect women some of who are worse off after being moved. New designs must look at increasing apartment size, more green public spaces, more access to public hand washing facilities and sustainable energy friendly buildings.
6. Establish free/subsidized day care centres for low-income families, to support women in returning to employment. This can be managed by Community Based Organisations and resourced by the state.

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7. Develop a gender and ethnic balance in the various existing mechanisms and those that may be created to design and implement COVID-19 recovery programmes.
8. Strengthen the co-operative movement (consumer co-ops, credit co-ops, producer co-ops and service co-ops) so that it can play a more efficient and effective role in times of crisis as well as in the process of long term recovery.

Violence Against Women

1. Introduce government assisted shelters for at-risk women and children who are in danger of domestic or intimate partner violence, have sustained injuries, have made formal complaints or requested protection or relocation, particularly in the context of a spike in violence during the lockdown. These shelters can be run by professional CSOs in conjunction with local government authorities.
2. Guarantee rapid police response for all reports and emergencies involving violence against women and children, both for protection and the provision of health care.
3. Ensure the well-being of children from orphanages or homes who have been placed with relatives by having social workers or community-workers conduct follow ups to confirm that the children are not being abused or neglected.
4. Ensure that police guidelines are prepared and police at all police stations are directed to respond immediately in situations of domestic violence, particularly in times of emergency.
5. Enable the health sector to mobilise existing grassroots healthcare staff (Public Health Midwives, Public Health Nursing Sisters) to access hard-to-reach and high-risk households with prevention messages and practical information on accessing services and support.

At-risk Communities

The elderly and the disabled

Short Term

1. Extend the allowance of Rs.5000 for the elderly and disabled belonging to low-income families for six months from March 2020. This is so that they are able to attend to their medical and other needs without burdening family members where income is affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Provide the necessary assistance such as delivering medical and food supplies, home consultations and emergency transportation for the elderly and disabled of low-income families, with special needs and compromised medical conditions until the risk of the pandemic is minimized.

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3. Ensure there is no bias or discrimination against the elderly or the disabled. Be inclusive of invisible disabilities such as psychiatric disabilities, epilepsy, HIV to name a few that cannot be conventionally verified, ensuring that such groups of persons with such disabilities are also considered eligible for the allowance.

Long Term

1. Introduce a grant scheme that will recognize and support elderly women of low-income families in a time of crisis considering their vulnerabilities during situations such as lockdowns and other emergency responses.
2. Implement the increase of the monthly allowance in the Elderly Assistance Programme to Rs.2500 as proposed in the “SaubhagyayeDekma”.
3. Introduce the subsidy scheme that will allow the elderly above the age of 65 to purchase prescribed medicines as recommended in the “SaubhagyayeDekma”.

The LGBTIQ+ community and Sex workers

1. Provide at-risk communities with the option of legitimate but safe registration through NGOs or community-based organizations, they trust and are authorized to process such registrations so that relief and other assistance can reach these marginalized communities.
2. Prepare comprehensive anti-discriminatory guidelines that should be followed by all government officials.
3. Ensure the confidentiality of all personal information gathered through registration processes so that at-risk populations are not subject to persecution.

Attachments:

ANNEX 1 - Gendered Impact of the COVID-19 Response: Daily Wage Workers and Low-Income Families in Colombo during Covid-19 lockdown period, Vraie Balthazaar

ANNEX 2 – Review and recommendations

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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