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Sri Lanka's inequalities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic, the brunt of which was faced by the most vulnerable communities across Sri Lanka, exposed the structural inequalities and challenges faced by the country. Despite Sri Lanka having one of the best public health care systems in Asia, which was able to respond to, and manage the health challenges during the early part of the pandemic, inequalities appeared in many other spheres, particularly for vulnerable communities. Sri Lanka's social protection programs proved to be inadequate in the face of existing and new challenges with many sections of society dependent on assistance to meet basic needs. This article points to some of the structural inequalities exposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need for a comprehensive review of social protection programs so that urgent reforms and new initiatives that address the hardships faced by vulnerable communities in Sri Lanka can be established.

KEYWORDS:

Structural inequalities, vulnerable communities, social protection, assistance, pandemic

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it unprecedented challenges in a multitude of spheres, from the immediate health dimension to the political, including the areas of governance, rights, and the economy (Peiris, 2021). Daily reports in Sri Lanka highlighted an increase in those who tested positive and a rise in the number of deaths, a reminder of the continuous challenges as a result of the pandemic. It was also a reminder that behind the numbers were the daily struggles faced by citizens, with human stories and lived realities that could often be forgotten amidst the fast-moving news cycle and competing developments.

The pandemic and its response must be viewed against Sri Lanka's past which witnessed decades of violence and natural disasters, the impact of which was felt in diverse ways by Sri Lankans. The near three-decade long civil war witnessed death, devastation, displacement, and the breakdown of social networks with long term implications in the areas of identity politics, human security, development, and socio-economic indicators among others. The 2004 Tsunami further devastated a war-ravaged country, reinforcing many of its existing inequalities and reminding of its long list of challenges. Nevertheless, responses to past crises and disasters resulted in the introduction of various frameworks. As a result, Sri Lanka boasts of multiple structures, laws, and policies that are meant to address both immediate and long terms needs as well as mitigate and prevent future disasters (CPA, 2021). One such area is Sri Lanka's social protection programs, meant to address the needs of vulnerable populations. However, despite Sri Lanka's experience with both man-made and natural disasters, and the decades of work that have gone into preparedness and service delivery, the gaps in social protection and inequalities are worrying. These gaps were reinforced during the pandemic pointing to the need for structural and other reforms.

This article, based on desk research of academic literature and policy frameworks, examines some of the inequalities exposed by the pandemic, gaps in the present social protection structures in Sri Lanka, and challenges that continue to plague a significant section of the population. Whilst 2020 and 2021 witnessed several new initiatives aimed at addressing the challenges faced by particular communities as a direct result of the pandemic, many of them were short-term stop-gap measures with no comprehensive plan to address structural inequalities. For example, initiatives on virtual learning for students failed to factor in that sections of the population had limited, or no access to computers, smartphones, and the internet. Whilst many in urban areas managed to access online learning, the disparities were pronounced in rural areas.

The pandemic and the challenges faced by communities

Sri Lanka is at present facing an unprecedented health and economic crisis. At the time of writing, over 15,000 persons have died due to COVID-19. Publicly available reports also highlight how COVID-19 has affected all sections of society (Peiris, 2021; Fonseka et al., 2021). The pandemic stretched Sri Lanka's robust health sector, with fears mounting that a new wave of cases may exacerbate existing challenges, pushing it to a breaking point. Sri Lanka has free healthcare with a strong public health system that was

able to respond to the health crisis in a manner that mitigated a surge in positive cases and prevented a complete collapse of the system unlike in other contexts (Arambepola et al., 2021; Hettiarachchi, 2020). It also has a free education system and a high literacy rate that assisted with awareness-raising and dissemination of information on preventative steps such as the use of face masks, hygiene measures, and social distancing (Hettiarachchi, 2020; Senaratne, 2021). Thus, the public health, education and other sectors were able to mitigate, with comprehensive preventative and outreach work, some of the impacts of the pandemic.

Despite these robust systems, Sri Lanka currently faces unprecedented economic challenges with daily reports of shortages of essential items including milk powder, rice, sugar, gas, fuel, and medicines. Given Sri Lanka's debt and foreign currency crisis, and no viable plan to address the economic crisis, these challenges are likely to worsen in 2022 and beyond. This is against the background of 74% of the population living on less than Rs. 613 per day (UN, 2020). It is highly likely that those falling within the poverty bracket will increase, with higher numbers of people driven to poverty due to the shocks of recent years (IPS, 2020).

The impact of the pandemic was felt across communities with the lockdowns in 2020 dealing a direct blow on people's livelihoods and reinforcing societal fault lines and structural inequalities (Peiris, 2021). The lockdowns and resulting restrictions on movement impacted daily wage earners who were unable to travel to work for several months. Over 66% of Sri Lanka's labor force includes informal workers whose livelihoods were hard hit by the restrictions (UN, 2020). Informal workers often have no employment benefits such as paid leave or medical insurance which makes them more vulnerable to new shocks. Pandemic related developments in 2020 and 2021 also witnessed other groups such as Free Trade Zone (FTZ) workers, migrant workers, and the estate community facing multiple challenges ranging from deplorable work and living conditions to being stranded in foreign countries and unable to return home (CPA, 2021; Peiris, 2021).

Among those affected, women have faced new challenges during the pandemic. A surge of cases of domestic violence was reported during the lockdowns as a result of the restrictions imposed on movement, limited access to law enforcement and other services, and economic and other challenges (Fonseka, 2021; UNICEF, 2020). Sri Lanka has a high percentage (25%) of women headed households (WHH), and these women face the burden of being the breadwinner and primary caregiver (Ratwatte, 2021). Many WHH are engaged in informal employment or are daily wage earners who faced hardships with the pandemic and its restrictions. Adding to these problems was the fact that many are in debt due to microfinance loans (Madugamuwa, 2021).

In addition, certain social groups such as the elderly and persons with disabilities and chronic illnesses were vulnerable to new challenges with many of them not having access to pensions and other welfare schemes (ILO, 2020). Problems of access to health and other services due to restricted mobility created new challenges for these groups during the months long first lockdown in the first part of 2020 and during the second lockdown later in 2020.

The closure of schools during the lockdowns also compelled the transition to online learning. Students were expected to take classes using computers, smart devices, and the internet. Whilst this was possible for many in urban areas, many in rural areas struggled to access these facilities. Moreover, in large families, one device was shared by several members. In a survey conducted by the Social Indicator in 2021, respondents stated that access to online learning was a challenge (Social Indicator, 2021, p. 17). One-half of the survey's population (52.8%) indicated that they either did not have enough devices to access online learning, or are not engaged in any form of online learning. Nearly one-third of the respondents (31.4%) indicated that they share devices with other members of their household, whilst approximately 6% of the respondents claimed that they had to borrow devices from others. Of those who claimed they did not engage in online learning, most respondents were from rural areas (nearly 16%) in comparison to those from the urban population (6%) who reported the same. The survey also asked respondents about access to the internet (Social Indicator, 2021, p.18). Whilst 43% stated that they do have access to the internet but with very weak connectivity, around 4% stated that they do not have access to the internet. In terms of location, nearly half of the survey respondents (48.9%) from the rural areas reported that they had very weak internet connectivity, in comparison to the 25.9% among the urban population which held this view. It is noteworthy that a significant proportion of the urban population (72%) claimed to have very good internet connectivity (Social Indicator, 2021, p.17).

Furthermore, on a national level, 61.3% of respondents stated that they found it difficult to spend on internet connectivity for online learning. Nearly 66% of these respondents were from the rural population. Such figures are indicative of the difficulties faced by many across Sri Lanka, demonstrating also, the urban-rural divide. While it appears that some face no problems with connectivity and the availability of devices, others cannot afford them or have no access to devices. This divide was succinctly captured by images that went viral showing students in rural settings having to climb trees to get connectivity, struggling to keep balance while attempting to learn, and in some instances having to share devices. Thus, online learning and its associated challenges during the pandemic were amongst the many areas that highlighted inequalities within society.

Ethno-religious tensions and discrimination faced by some communities were also evident during the pandemic with the Muslim community particularly victimized by policies and practices (Mihlar, 2019; Saroor, 2021). One discriminatory policy, in particular, was the mandatory cremation of bodies of persons who died, or were suspected to have died of COVID-19. This was introduced by Gazette Extraordinary No. 2170/8 of 11 April 2020 (CPA, 2021). The move was widely criticized nationally and internationally with several United Nations experts calling the mandatory cremation policy a human rights violation as it prevented Muslims and Catholics from adhering to their religious practice of burying their dead (OHCHR, 2021). After months of widespread opposition, the government amended the regulations in 2021 to allow burials. This ad-hoc policy that had no scientific basis was one among a string of attempts by the authorities to create new divisions within, and amongst ethnic communities in Sri Lanka.

Inequalities were also evident in the initial rollout of the vaccines. The rollout commenced in January 2021 prioritizing, for the first dose, front-line defenders including health sector workers. Despite this, reports soon emerged of gaps in the rollout linked to political interference and lack of proper planning. For example, despite claims of the health sector being prioritized, the General Secretary of the All Ceylon Nurses Union stated that as of May 2021 nurses were yet to receive the vaccine (News First, 2021). There were also reports of political interference in the rollout (Dewasiri, 2021; Sangakkara, 2021) with questions raised with procurement and governance issues (Gunatilleke 2021; Ranasinghe, 2021)

Social protection programs

Social protection includes welfare programs, insurance schemes, and other forms of assistance to the vulnerable. They are meant to better manage risks and prevent people from experiencing poverty. Sri Lanka has several social protection programs that provide assistance and attempt to absorb certain shocks that come with disasters, crisis, and other developments.

Some of these programs and schemes are briefly flagged below:

- Samurdhi: This program has a wide reach across Sri Lanka and provides monthly cash payments ranging from Rs 400-3500 depending on the household size. According to reports, the Samurdhi program covered around 1.8 million families with around Rs. 44.7 billion disbursed in 2019 (IPS, 2020, p. 106).
- Senior Citizen Allowance: This is a monthly allowance of Rs. 2000 to those over 70 years whose family earned a monthly income of less than Rs. 6000.
- Disability Allowance: This provides Rs 5000 to identified individuals with disabilities who are living in poverty.
- Employment Provident Fund (EPF) and Employment Trust Fund (ETF): These Funds provide financial benefits for those either retiring or leaving their permanent employment based on financial contributions made during employment.
- Pensions: The pension scheme for public servants and armed force personnel entail retirement benefits for those in the public service and armed personnel and provide benefits to their widows.

(ILO, 2020)

Despite such schemes, the pandemic exposed shortcomings. Gaps in their reach and effectiveness raised doubts as to whether they could absorb present day shocks including those experienced as a result of the pandemic. Some of the problems included the very low amounts provided as cash benefits that did not address current needs including the rise in prices for essential goods. Additionally, there was concern that many who needed assistance did not fall within the existing schemes and that no recent assessment had been done to monitor the beneficiary lists. There was also concern that some who did not require assistance remained beneficiaries while duplication of assistance also occurred (IPS, 2020). Further, concern was raised that pension schemes target those who are retiring with no

comprehensive scheme to address current challenges faced by those in the formal labor market (ILO, 2020). Whilst the existing social protection schemes provided some benefits and assistance during the pandemic, no such assistance was available for those in the informal sector and daily wage earners (IPS, 2020).

Responses and continuing concerns

Several initiatives were introduced by the Sri Lankan government in response to COVID-19 including the cash payment of Rs. 5000 per household and in-kind assistance. According to reports (ILO, 2020; IPS, 2020), existing social protection programs such as Samurdhi, the Senior Citizen Allowance, and the Disability Allowance were expanded to include new recipients (ILO, 2020). In addition, local officials such as the Grama Niladhari, Public Health Inspectors, Samurdhi Officers, and District Secretaries were used to identify at-risk populations such as daily wage earners and FTZ workers who fell into the low-income groups affected by the pandemic towards making them beneficiaries for assistance including dry rations (ILO, 2020). There were also initiatives to address debt by delaying loan payments of those such as trishaw drivers and other self-employed individuals.

The payment of Rs. 5000 during the first wave reportedly saw an expansion of the existing social protection program (IPS, 2020). Whilst this was necessary assistance for many during the lockdown, reports also highlighted gaps in implementation including delays and discrepancies (IPS, 2020). This was largely attributed to not having a comprehensive and efficient system to assist the needy while beneficiary lists were outdated. Reports also indicated the interference of political influence and patronage politics and concerns were raised that assistance provided during the first wave in 2020 was used to influence the parliamentary elections of August 2020. Further, concerns were raised that the Rs. 5000 handout was insufficient to address the financial needs of affected communities.

The pandemic also witnessed a heavy response from the Executive branch of government with multiple task forces appointed that side-lined existing structures and subject matter experts. Despite Sri Lanka's past experiences in handling disasters, existing frameworks and expertise, these were ignored. Instead, the President appointed several task forces in 2020 and 2021 with prominence given to former and present military officials ignoring experienced civil servants or health professionals (CPA 2020; Fonseka, 2020). Sri Lanka also witnessed a heavily militarized approach to contact tracing, forcible transportation of persons to quarantine centers, and vaccination drives, raising fears that health officials were side-lined in the response to a health crisis. The militarized approach resulted in displacing established administrative structures that were previously used for service provision, and the government officials who worked at the local level and were the most well versed on the needs of affected communities in the area.

Lessons to be learned

COVID-19 exposed deep structural inequalities in Sri Lanka with sections of its population continuing to struggle with the multiple challenges linked to the pandemic. This was despite Sri Lanka having a robust public health system that was able to mitigate some

of the chaos seen in other countries, and high literacy among the public that assisted in the dissemination of information regarding preventative measures which helped curb the spread of the virus.

As highlighted previously, some sectors such as education where online learning was expected of students during the lockdown periods demonstrated inequalities which pointed to a clear urban-rural divide. Despite the media capturing images of students struggling to follow online classes, limited attention has been paid to addressing challenges to connectivity and the availability of low-cost devices. Focusing on new spheres such as online learning is essential to ensure that all students have access to education and other services, but this must also be coupled with the necessary assistance to ensure that no one is left behind.

Sri Lanka's experiences with numerous crises and disasters have provided frameworks and made communities resilient in the face of numerous challenges. Yet, the pandemic posed new ones and exposed continuing gaps. These are presently compounded by the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. While this article highlighted a few challenges in some sectors, a comprehensive review is required to understand the overall impact the pandemic has had on Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans. More work is also needed to ensure that systems are more adaptable to new challenges, are equitable and conflict-sensitive, and are designed and implemented in adherence to good governance principles. It is also key that initiatives go beyond short-term needs to those that account for long-term rebuilding.

The programs introduced in 2020 and 2021 were largely responses to absorbing the shocks of the first two years of the pandemic and mitigating its risks. 2022 is the third year of the pandemic with hardships compounded by the economic crisis facing Sri Lanka. In such a context, urgent attention is needed for expanding and updating social security programs and other initiatives targeting the country's vulnerable populations.

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