Poverty on the rise in Sri Lanka

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Recent reports issued by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) reveal the scale of poverty and social inequality in Sri Lanka.

According to the 1998 UNICEF report, "The Annual State of the World's Children", 50 percent of 15- to 18-year-old Sri Lankan children drop out of the school system annually, and 12 percent of 5 to 14 year olds never attend school. In low-income areas the rate of children not attending school is as high as 30 percent.

Professor Swarna Jayaweera, head of the Centre for Women's Research in Sri Lanka, has pointed out the relationship between the lack of education and the growth of poverty. At a recent seminar she said: "This situation leads to the perpetuation of poverty because such children will have no access to jobs and will acquire no skills." Despite government claims of a 90 percent literacy rate in Sri Lanka, Professor Jayaweera said that according to the UN Human Development report "the rate of functional literacy ... was only 50 percent".

The UNICEF report notes that 45 percent of students leave schools after the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level), the main secondary examination in Sri Lanka. Only 25 percent of those who have been originally enrolled at the schools complete the studies for the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level). Others drop out along the way. The total number of students admitted to university is only 2 percent of the potentially eligible student population.

The national human development report on Sri Lanka for 1998, presented by the UNDP, was prepared by a group of six scholars led by Dr. Harsha Athurupana, a lecturer in the Department of Economics of the University of Colombo. This is the first time that the UNDP has presented a country-specific report on Sri Lanka using the criteria of "the dimension of human development in poverty". According to the report's criteria, the value of the human development index in Sri Lanka is 0.771. For the so-called developing countries the average value of this index is 0.576. For the least developed countries it is 0.336 and for industrial countries it is 0.911.

This index ranks Sri Lanka at 91 out of 175 countries. The variables taken into consideration in calculating the human development index are life expectancy at birth, the adult literacy rate, the combined value of the enrolment ratio at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education and the real GDP per capita.

According to the UNDP report the poverty rate in Sri Lanka is 18 percent. This index is calculated by taking into consideration only the proportion of the population dying before reaching the age of 40. Other indicators of poverty--the number of illiterate adults, the proportion of children not enrolled in primary and junior secondary schooling, the proportion of the population without access to safe sanitation, the number of child births outside formal medical institutions, the section of the population lacking access to electricity, and the number of children who have not been immunised--are not taken into account.

The UNDP report notes: "Sri Lanka has achieved a higher level of social development than economic growth", but it does not provide a picture of the overall social conditions in Sri Lanka. In calculating poverty rates, this report has arbitrarily excluded the northern and eastern provinces of the country. These provinces have a large presence of displaced Tamil families as a result of the ongoing racist war in the country.

According to the UNDP report the highest rate of poverty, 30.02 percent, is in Nuwara Eliya district where the majority of the population are plantation workers. Monaragala district, which is inhabited by plantation workers as well as poor peasants, has a poverty rate of 29 percent. The rate of poverty in

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Polonnaruwa district is 28 percent and in Badulla it is 27 percent. Many districts have a poverty rate above 18 percent.

Access to safe drinking water is out of the reach of 27.91 percent of the population in Sri Lanka, leading to the rapid spread of diarrhoea, cholera and other diseases. 23.84 percent of the population do not have access to proper lavatories and sanitation. The rate of births taking place outside of proper medical institutions is 15.92 percent. Sri Lanka also has the highest suicide rate in the world.

Most Sri Lankan workers and oppressed people suffer from poor health conditions directly related to unsanitary living conditions. The UNDP report estimates that the highest rate for children who have not been fully immunised against childhood and other diseases is in the Colombo district, where it is 37.25 percent. Twenty-four percent of children in Colombo district who should be enrolled in grades 1 through 9 are not.

The proportion of the population who live without access to electricity is as high as 56 percent. In districts such as Nuwara Eliya, Monaragala, Kurunegala and Matara, 80 percent of the population have no access to electricity.

According to a recent report issued by the Department of Census and Statistics in Sri Lanka, 40 percent of the country's population live in poverty. Seventy percent of the population earn less than the 5,019 rupees estimated as the amount needed to maintain basic living conditions. While the poorest 10 percent of the population earn an average monthly income of 1,199 rupees, the richest 10 percent enjoy monthly earnings of 30,496 rupees. According to the *Lanka Monthly Digest*, a leading business magazine in Sri Lanka, the combined profits of the country's top 50 companies have increased 66 percent over the last fiscal year.

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