

COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates Sri Lanka's high child poverty rate

Yasara Sooriyanayaka
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A United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) report titled *Investing in the future: A universal benefit for Sri Lanka's children* has revealed some of the dire conditions facing children and their families across the island, and exposed the inadequacy of currently existing social security programs.

Released in November on World Children's Day, the report calls for a "Universal Child Benefit." This measure, it states, will be "a vital step to reduce the poverty and vulnerability faced by families and children in Sri Lanka, which for many has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic."

An earlier UNICEF survey in May, noted that in Sri Lanka, "30 percent of families surveyed have reduced their food consumption.... Given that before COVID-19, 39 percent of children did not consume any iron rich foods, this change of diet is likely to worsen rates of malnutrition among vulnerable children, with potential life-long consequences."

The *Investing in the future* report reveals that most Sri Lankan families do not have adequate incomes and confront many hardships in raising their children.

While the national poverty rate would indicate that fewer children are living in poverty, the report notes, "in reality, the poverty line is set at a very low level and is no longer appropriate for Sri Lanka's current status as a middle-income country."

While high-income families spend, on average, less than 15 percent of their earnings on food, over 70 percent of families spend more than 40 percent on food, reducing their ability to spend on other essential goods and services because of their highly insecure incomes.

Seventy-four percent of children in Sri Lanka live on 506 rupees (\$US2.78) per day, while 36 percent live on less than a trifle, 278 rupees per day. Families with at

least three children face very difficult conditions.

The report states that international evidence points to the fact that the educational achievements of children are to be "explained by out-of-school factors, such as good diets and home environments that are conducive to learning." Research has shown the important role played by diet and nutrition in the development of the brain throughout childhood.

The first thousand days are critical for a child's development, because it is regarded as the period when the foundations for optimum health, life expectancy and growth are established. However, 17 percent of Sri Lankan children under the age of 5, and 22 percent under the age of 2, are reported to be stunted.

Sri Lanka has also been listed as the "9th worst country" when it comes to wasting, which affects 15 percent of children under the age of 5. Sri Lanka's score lies above the Asian and African averages of 8.6 and 7.5 percent, respectively.

The significantly higher levels of wasting reported in districts such as Moneragala, with 25.4 percent, and Hambantota 21.8 percent, indicate "near-famine-like conditions."

Most children have the opportunity to attend school, but the report mentions that attendance drops off with age, and that by the age of 18, nearly 50 percent of boys and 40 percent of girls drop out of school. Many leave at the age of 15 and above, to find work to supplement their family's insufficient income.

Further, children from families with limited incomes are confronted with difficulties in creating conducive home environments for learning. For example, the report cites that "60 percent of children between the ages of 2–4 years have five books or less in their home.

The main aim of the paper, however, is to demonstrate the flaws of the existing social welfare

system and to propose a “universal child benefit” in its place. The Samurdhi relief program, used in Sri Lanka, follows an already outdated model that was implemented in European countries in the 1800s, and has proven to be ineffective.

The paper refers to the issues associated with poverty-targeted programs that are utilised in low to middle income countries. According to a recent comprehensive analysis of such programs, the lowest exclusion rate among intended recipients was found to be at 44 percent, that is, almost half of the intended recipients did not receive assistance.

The Samurdhi program, used in Sri Lanka, excludes 59 percent of eligible households with children, with the report declaring that there was little evidence that such errors could be resolved simply by enhancing the program’s targeting effectiveness.

Instead, the paper advocates a limited “universal child benefit” system, with a key component being a monthly cash transfer for the children’s families. Along these lines, the report outlines two options: “The first option would begin with all children aged 0–5 years and the second would commence with children aged 0-8 years.” In both options, children would receive 2,500 rupees per month, which would not end until their 18th birthday.

The terrible issues confronted by children are not, however, limited to Sri Lanka alone. They affect many children in South Asia and globally. But the pandemic has exacerbated the situation to an unprecedented level.

A UNICEF report titled “Lives Upended: How COVID-19 threatens the futures of 600 million South Asian children” sheds light on how already dire living conditions have worsened amid COVID-19. It reveals that 240 million of the 600 million children in South Asia live in “multidimensional poverty” with many services disrupted during the pandemic.

However, even the proposal made under the Universal Child Benefit will face opposition from the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and the Sri Lankan ruling class as whole.

The government paid 5,000 rupees to each family considered to have lost income due to the lockdown and the loss of their jobs—but only for April and May. Even then, many failed to receive that amount.

This was further exposed by the Rajapakse government’s handling of the pandemic. The

government allowed the already rundown public health sector to deteriorate even further.

According to a report issued in November by the Institute of Policy Studies, a prominent Sri Lankan think tank, around 75 percent of private sector workers, numbering 1.5 million, face a “high risk of falling into poverty,” while 68 percent of them are employed in the casual sector without any social benefits.

Similarly, the rural poor, including farmers and fishermen, are facing ongoing income loss and poverty.

The Rajapakse government, however, ordered the Central Bank to provide 150 billion rupees to companies, mainly benefiting big business. The Central Bank later expanded the amount by another 28 billion rupees.

The government’s priority has not been to take urgent measures to protect the health and lives of millions of workers and the poor, and its refusal to do so has invariably affected their children.

In fact, successive governments, in Sri Lanka and across South Asia, bear full responsibility for the social disruptions caused by the pandemic. This is the direct result of decades of austerity and “pro-investor” policies implemented by all these governments.



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