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Child Poverty

Who are the poorest children in Sri Lanka?

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By Wimal Nanayakkara

The UN General Assembly has adopted the following definition of child poverty, on 10th January, 2007 - "Children living in poverty are deprived of nutrition, water and sanitation, access to basic healthcare services, shelter, education, participation and protection, and that while a severe lack of goods and services hurts every human being, it is most threatening and harmful to children, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights to reach their full potential and to participate as full members of the society". As the definition points out,

measuring child poverty can no longer be lumped together with general poverty assessments, which often focus solely on income levels. It is also necessary to take into consideration, the access to basic social services, such as education, health care facilities, safe drinking water and sanitation, proper housing, etc.



To get a broader picture of child poverty, this article provides a brief analysis that looks at not only the children (under 5 years and under 18 years) living in Income Poor (IP) households, but also those living in multi-dimensionally poor (MDP) households. Multi-dimensional Poverty Index (MPI) is an index of acute multi-dimensional poverty that has three dimensions: health, education and living standards. These are measured by 10 indicators, which cover most of the aspects included in the above definition of child poverty, except the last two on participation and protection. Measuring MDP is too complex to be explained in a brief article of this nature (HDR Technical Notes, provide details on the latest methodology, recommended by the UN to measure MDP). According to the UN

recommendations, only the people / children living in households facing a weighted sum of more than 33.3% of a combination of the deprivations are considered to be MDP. Households facing 20% to 33.3% deprivations, out of the 10 deprivations, are considered to be "Near poor".

In this analysis only the former is considered due to the limitations in the length of the article. However, in addition to the children living in IP and MDP households, the analysis also looks at non-poor children (those not living in IP or MDP households), but who still face some of the deprivations, such as, not having access to safe drinking water/ sanitation facilities, not attending school, etc., to draw the attention of the relevant authorities to the fact that there are children in the non-poor groups also, who are deprived of certain basic needs. This article will only look at the total picture of incidence of child poverty at national level. However, as there are considerable regional variations, which need the attention of planners and policy makers, an analysis showing the regional picture will be published later.

Out of 1.7 million children under 5 years and out of 6.2 million children under 18 years, 10.6% and 11.0% respectively, were either Income Poor and/or Multi-dimensionally Poor in 2012/13. Out of a total of 1.7 million children under 5 years, 8.7% were IP, 3.5% were MDP and 1.6% were both IP and MDP. As such, altogether 10.6% of the children under 5 were either IP, MDP or both IP and MDP

Out of 6.2 million children under 18 years, 8.6% were IP and 4.3% were MDP. In this age group, 1.9% were both IP and MDP, and as such, 11.0% were either IP, MDP or both IP and MDP.

Further analysis shows that even some of the non-poor children (who are neither IP nor MDP), are also facing deprivations in some of the basic needs, such as safe drinking water and/or safe sanitation, although they do not get classified as poor, though they may be in the near poor category. Out of the 1.5 million non-poor children under 5 years (who are neither IP nor MDP), 10.5% do not have access to safe drinking water and 15.8% do not have access to safe sanitation. Out of the 5.5 million non-poor children under 18 years, 9.8% do not have access to safe drinking water and 13.9% do not have access to safe sanitation.

The share of children in poorer households is very much higher than the share in richer households, confirming that poorer families have more children than the richer families. The share of children (under 5 years, as well as under 18 years) in first "Per capita Expenditure Decile" (or the poorest 10%

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of the households) is 15%, while the corresponding share in the richest decile (or richest 10%) is only around 6.0% (Figure 2). Multi-dimensional Poverty Headcount is highest for both children under 5 years (13.3%), as well as those under 18 years (16.4%), in the first per capita expenditure decile. Headcounts or percentage of children in poverty, decline down to less than 6% in the second per capita expenditure decile and continue to decline further, thereafter, showing that only the children in the poorest three to four per capita expenditure deciles are affected by MDP in Sri Lanka.

Who are the Poorest Children in Sri Lanka?

It is important to identify, children belonging to what types of Socio-Economic Groups (SEGs) are most vulnerable and poorest. For this purpose, the households were classified into 12 Socio-Economic Groups, based on the occupation or the activity of the head of the household (as given in Figure 3). The children in households affected by "IP, MDP or both IP and MDP", were considered together (in order to make the analysis simpler), to identify the SEGs to which the poorest and most vulnerable children (under 18 years) belong.

The poorest children in Sri Lanka are from households headed by (i) Agricultural Labourers, (ii) Non-agricultural Labourers, (iii) persons who are unable to or too old to work, and (iv) skilled agricultural and related workers: There are four SEGs that stand out above others. The poverty headcount (IP and MDP combined) is highest for children (Under 18 years) in households headed by "Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery Labourers" (26.1%), followed by children in households headed by "Non-agricultural Labourers and similar workers" (19.1%). The other two SEGs with high poverty headcounts for children, are households headed by "Persons unable to or too old to work" (15.7%) and by "Skilled Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery Workers" (12.4%).

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