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Prioritising Child-Friendly Policies: Addressing Sri Lanka's child malnutrition crisis

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f By Dr Nisha Arunatilake

Even before the onset of COVID-19, malnutrition stood as a significant driver of multi-dimensional poverty among children in Sri Lanka. Startling data from the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) in 2019 revealed that one in three children aged 0 to 4 who are multidimensionally poor, are either underweight or stunted. The multiple crises that affected



Sri Lanka since 2020 have only exacerbated the already precarious nutrition situation in poor households. This blog argues the need for prioritising social policies focused on children to ensure sustained investment in human capital.

Crisis Impact on Government Initiatives

In response to the pressing nutrition issues in the country, successive governments have introduced several initiatives to maintain the minimum required nutrition levels to ensure unhampered growth and development. However, the crisis affected several of these nutrition programmes, depriving households of access to much-needed social assistance for maintaining nutrition, when it was needed the most.

One such initiative that was adversely affected was the Triposha programme. Triposha is a nutrient-dense food supplement given to pregnant mothers and young children affected by malnutrition. During the crisis, supply chain disruptions and issues of sourcing ingredients necessary for production resulted in a 51% drop in the production of Thriposha in 2020. This resulted in many identified households not receiving nutrition assistance through Triposha.

Another programme adversely affected by the economic crisis was the breakfast programme for preschool (BPS) children. The BOS provides children in selected pre-schools with a daily nutritious breakfast according to the Ministry of Health guidelines. In 2017, a sum of LKR 30 was allocated per child per meal for this programme. Despite high food inflation, this amount was not revised, making it impossible to supply meals as specified by the Ministry of Health.

The Plight of the Urban Poor

A study by the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS) finds that the recent economic crisis had devastating effects on the food environment in urban underserved settlements (USSs). According to retail and eatery owners serving these communities, food prices have skyrocketed during the economic crisis. The price of nadu-rice, the cheapest variety of rice in the market, doubled from LKR 100 in August 2021 to LKR 220 in August 2022. The prices of other staples frequently consumed by poor households, like dhal, eggs, dried fish and dried sprats, also increased several folds.

The crisis also reduced the availability of food in the market. The policies introduced by the government to contain the import costs, such as the chemical fertiliser ban and food imports, reduced the variety of food in the market. Further, the vendors were storing less expensive food items in the market as the demand for expensive food items reduced due to low affordability.

As explained by a retail owner in the area:

“I used to stock 50kg of rice earlier, now, I only stock 5kg of rice.”

“We used to keep stocks of green gram and cowpea. But now only one or two customers buy those items, so I do not stock them anymore.”

Coping with Food Inflation

The households in the USSs were using various methods to cope with food inflation. Most stopped eating from outside and reduced buying snacks. Consumption of milk, vegetables, fruits, and meat has all been reduced. One of the main sources of fat for USS residents, coconuts, has also declined during the crisis. As explained by some of the residents:

“We used to drink tea with milk in the morning and afternoon. Now we can only have milk tea in the morning.”

“We used to eat about 250g of vegetables per meal earlier. Now we make the same amount of vegetables last for two meals.”

“We only eat chicken once or twice a week. We try to manage mainly with dried fish and eggs for protein.”

“We rarely eat fruits now. Fruit is expensive. If we buy fruit, we don’t have money for other food.”

“We used to eat about one coconut a day earlier. Now we make one coconut last several days, as the price of coconuts has increased.”

The above findings show that households were either marginally or moderately food insecure during the economic crisis (See infographic). Households in USSs have compromised on food quality and variety, or reduced food consumption due to the crisis.

Conclusion

The findings from Sri Lanka emphasise the pressing issue of child malnutrition, which has only worsened amidst recent crises. Although there are several government initiatives to improve the nutrition levels of children in the country, their operations were severely affected by the economic crisis.

More attention needs to be paid to sustaining the social policies focusing on children, particularly during times of crisis. Only by doing so, we can ensure that children’s development is not compromised due to crisis and that they have the opportunity to thrive, regardless of the adversities they face.

Link to original blog: <https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2023/10/11/prioritising-child-friendly-policies-addressing-sri-lankas-child-malnutrition-crisis/>

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'Zoho Corporation registering landmark achievements in Sri Lanka'

Published 7 hours ago on 2024/01/26

Gibu Mathew

By Ifham Nizam

Renowned global technology company, Zoho Corporation, founded in India, announced that it is serving 100 million users worldwide across its 55+ business applications, with particular emphasis on the outstanding 30% revenue growth achieved in the Sri Lankan market during 2023. The Corporation crossed the USD 1 billion market in 2022.

Gibu Mathew, vice president and GM, Asia Pacific of Zoho Corp, speaking to journalists at the Kingsbury, Colombo, stressed the corporate's achievements in the Lankan market.

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Hela Apparel Holdings acquires major UK-based apparel brand licensing house

Published 10 hours ago on 2024/01/26

Landmark acquisition signifies the first time a Sri Lankan apparel manufacturer has acquired a brand management company in one of its key markets.

In a landmark move for the Sri Lankan apparel industry, Hela Apparel Holdings PLC has announced the acquisition of a major UK-based apparel brand licensing house. The company, which currently trades under the name Focus Brands, is a market leader in the design, sourcing, distribution and promotion of sports fashion and lifestyle apparel brands.

It currently holds exclusive licensing agreements for the design and distribution of a number of major apparel brands, including Ellesse and Nautica, in the UK, European Union and other

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Published 22 hours ago on 2024/01/25

The Cabinet of Ministers approved the proposal presented by the President to sign the Sri Lanka-Thailand Free Trade Agreement.

After nine rounds of discussions between the two sides a 14chapter draft Free Trade Agreement was prepared, including the preamble and annexes, to improve trade and investment, compliance with local laws and regulations and facilitating knowledge sharing, which has received the clearance of the Attorney General and the agreement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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