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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POVERTY AND DEVELOPMENT IN TIMES OF CRISIS

HONOURING 25 YEARS OF THE CENTRE FOR POVERTY ANALYSIS

07TH & 08TH MAY 2026

ABSTRACTS



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Tel : +94 112 503 009

Email : info@cepa.lk

Website : www.cepa.lk

16, Jawatte Road,
Colombo 5,
Sri Lanka

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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
**POVERTY AND DEVELOPMENT IN
TIMES OF CRISIS**

Honouring 25 Years of CEPA

ABSTRACTS

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In the year that CEPA marks its 25th anniversary, we humbly acknowledge the valued support of the Asian Development Bank in accompanying us on this intellectual journey. We dedicate this event to all those across the world whose ideas, research, and commitment continue to advance the shared endeavour of lifting people out of poverty.

*Overcoming poverty is not a task of charity, it is an act of justice.
Like Slavery and Apartheid, poverty is not natural.
It is man-made and it can be overcome and
eradicated by the actions of human beings.”*

- Nelson Mandela -

Message from Executive Director

It is with great pride and gratitude that I welcome you to the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) International Conference 2026, commemorating our 25th anniversary. Although I am new to CEPA, since its establishment in 2001 CEPA's journey has been guided by its founders, pioneers, leaders, and staff to reach this level of excellence. Over the years, CEPA has grown into Sri Lanka's leading independent think tank on poverty and development, committed to producing rigorous research, fostering dialogue, and shaping policies that improve the lives of vulnerable communities.

At CEPA, we recognize that poverty analysis is multidimensional, encompassing the full spectrum of development issues—social protection, livelihoods, gender equity, climate resilience, biodiversity, reconciliation, and economic transformation. Poverty remains the most pressing challenge facing Sri Lanka today, particularly in the aftermath of successive external shocks and a severe economic crisis. These realities underscore the urgency of our mission: to ensure that decision-making is informed by robust, non-partisan evidence, and that policies are designed to protect and empower those most vulnerable.

This conference takes place at a time of both global and local crises, when many countries are grappling with new waves of poverty and development issues. It is therefore a moment not only to celebrate CEPA's journey, but also to reaffirm our core belief that poverty is an injustice which must be overcome through collective effort, innovation, and inclusive policy. By bringing together scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and partners from across the globe, we aim to reflect on lessons learned, share new insights, and chart pathways for resilience and transformation.

On behalf of CEPA, I thank you for joining us in this milestone event. May our discussions inspire fresh thinking, strengthen partnerships, and contribute to building a more just and sustainable world.



Prof Sirimal Abeyratne
Executive Director

Message from the Conference Chair

As Chair of the International Conference on Poverty and Development in Times of Crisis, it is my pleasure to welcome scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and development thinkers from Sri Lanka and around the world. At a time of economic uncertainty, climate shocks, conflict, displacement, and widening inequalities, this conference offers an important space for dialogue, evidence and collective action.

We are especially grateful for the valued partnership of the Asian Development Bank in supporting this conference. I warmly acknowledge Mr. Takafumi Kodano, Ms. Shannon Cowlin, and Ms. Hasitha Nimali Wickramasinghe for their invaluable support, commitment, and partnership throughout this journey. We are encouraged by the strong response to this year's call for papers, with over 100 submissions and approximately 80 participants, including 19 international delegates. As we mark our 25th year, this conference reflects our continuing commitment to research exchange, critical debate, and engagement on urgent development challenges.

Through plenaries and thematic sessions, participants will explore poverty, resilience, livelihoods, governance, inclusion, sustainability and pathways to equitable recovery. This conference is where research meets policy and evidence informs action.

I thank all presenters, participants, reviewers, speakers, and organisers for making this gathering possible, and I wish you a productive and rewarding conference.



Dr. Indika Bulankulame
Chair, International Conference on Poverty and Development in Times of Crisis

Keynote Address

Poverty and Development in Times of Crisis

We live in an era defined by recurrent and overlapping shocks. Whether triggered by natural disasters, pandemics, economic mismanagement, or geopolitical tensions, crises invariably strike hardest at the poor and vulnerable. This reality imposes a profound responsibility on policymakers to ensure that macroeconomic adjustment and development strategies explicitly safeguard those least able to withstand shocks. Stability, often viewed narrowly as a macroeconomic prerequisite for growth, is equally vital in preventing reversals in poverty reduction in more immediate and tangible ways.

Sri Lanka's recent experience with multiple compounded crises starkly illustrates this challenge. The COVID 19 pandemic, the economic collapse of 2022, recurring natural hazards, and global geopolitical spillovers have sharply escalated living costs, eroded real incomes and savings, disrupted education, heightened job insecurity, and accelerated outmigration. These shocks have deepened entrenched socio economic vulnerabilities, with the heaviest toll borne by low income households, small businesses, and other fragile segments of society.

Recognising these risks, Sri Lanka's IMF supported stabilisation programme has also placed explicit emphasis on strengthening social safety nets, including a mandated floor on social spending. Without such protections, essential macroeconomic adjustments, particularly higher taxation and cost reflective utility pricing, would have sharply increased the incidence of poverty. Interestingly, the rising tax burden has also intensified public scrutiny of social assistance, creating an opportunity to improve the targeting, efficiency, and accountability of safety net programmes, while simultaneously demanding stronger governance, transparency and accountability in economic management, with stronger institutions.

Looking ahead, Sri Lanka faces a difficult yet unavoidable path. Catching up with its former peers requires tackling binding constraints to growth in a far more demanding global environment – one shaped by stricter standards on human rights, environmental sustainability, intellectual property, and financial integrity, which were absent when many advanced economies experienced their high growth episodes in the past. Moreover, the technology divide complicates the catch up process across countries while exacerbating income disparities within a country. As literature has amply displayed, sustained growth and job creation remain the most effective antidotes to poverty, but they must be driven by deep structural reforms with a long-term focus, rather than by short term fiscal or monetary stimulus.

Following the crisis of 2022, the Sri Lankan economy displayed a remarkable rebound in terms of several macroeconomic indicators. Nevertheless, repeated shocks that are mostly beyond the control of policymakers suggest that resilience of the economy and people will continue to be tested in the period ahead. Just as national buffers must be rebuilt to withstand future shocks, the resilience of the

poor and vulnerable must also be strengthened. Among other things, this requires timely, high quality poverty data, gathered through both traditional and innovative methods, alongside rigorous, policy relevant research. Institutions such as CEPA play a critical role in translating evidence into actionable insights, guiding policymakers toward a more resilient and inclusive development trajectory.



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Deputy Governor, Central Bank of Sri Lanka

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Editing & Proofing

Dr. Vivimarie Vanderpoorten
Department of Language Studies, Open University of Sri Lanka

Sahan Wanniarachchi,
Department of Language Studies, Open University of Sri Lanka

Cepa Conference Coordinators

Erica Morais
Sandunlekha Ekanayake

Formatting & Layout

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Senior Fellow, ODI Global.

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Team Leader, Social Cohesion and Reconciliation,
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Senior Research Professional
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Mr. Rajindra Rohitha

Team Leader, Natural Resources &
Climate Change - Centre for Poverty Analysis

Ms. Nilupulee Rathnayake

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Centre for Poverty Analysis.

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Department of Economics, University of Colombo

7th May 2026 - Plenary Session - 1

Theme: Challenges of Trade and Economic Reforms for Growth in Developing Countries in an Uncertain Global Era - Session curated by ODI & CEPA

The plenary session, “Challenges of Trade and Economic Reforms for Growth in an Uncertain Global Era”, will examine how shifting geopolitical dynamics, supply chain disruptions, and rising protectionism are reshaping the global economic landscape. As developing countries grapple with inflationary pressures, debt vulnerabilities, and uneven recovery paths, policy makers may face difficult trade-offs between resilience and openness. The discussion will explore how structural reforms can build economic gains from macroeconomic stabilisation to foster competitiveness, productivity, and inclusive growth while reducing poverty. The session aims to provide policy lessons for Sri Lanka and other developing countries in uncertain times while laying the foundation for durable economic growth.

Moderator: **Prof. Dirk Willem te Velde** - Director, International Economic Development Group, Principal Research Fellow, ODI Global

- Special Remarks - **Sir Vince Cable** - Distinguished Fellow, ODI Global
- Panellists:
 - Mr. K.A. Vimalenthirajah** - Secretary, Ministry of Trade, Commerce, Food Security & Cooperative Development
 - Prof. Sirimal Abeyratne** - Executive Director, CEPA
 - Ms. Yvette Fernando** - Board Member, CEPA & Former Senior Deputy Governor at the Central Bank of Sri Lanka
 - Dr. Ganeshan Wignaraja** - Senior Visiting Fellow, ODI & Advisor, CEPA
 - Prof. Prabir De**, Professor - Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), New Delhi.

8th May 2026 - Plenary Session - 2

Theme: Not by growth alone: The economic and social imperatives of addressing inequality in Sri Lanka

Curated by the Subscribing Members of CEPA

Why does inequality matter in Sri Lanka?

Objectives: to communicate why it is important to study (and address) inequality, to increase awareness among researchers and development practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of and engage with issues around inequality

In a society with high inequality, a small number of people enjoy high incomes, access to resources and opportunities, while a much larger number are effectively barred from full participation in society, perhaps due to inability to access quality education and health care, or lack of income generation opportunities. Over time, inequality translates as lack of opportunities for the next generation, perpetuating poverty and injustice.

In Sri Lanka, while income-related poverty decreased substantially during the 1980-2022 period prior to the economic crisis, this was accompanied by a rise in inequality. From the 1980s onwards when growth-centred economic policies were implemented, the share of income and wealth of the top 10% of Sri Lanka's population has increased markedly by 2024, while that of the bottom 50% of the population has declined. The economic participation rate of women, which was around half the rate of men, has decreased between 1995-2024, pointing to women losing out on their fair share of economic growth.

In sectors such as plantation crops and garment factories, manual workers, often women, are paid a fraction of what is paid to the top management, often justified in terms of established practices and market imperatives. Moreover, regional disparities between the Western and Southern provinces inhabited largely by the Sinhalese, and Eastern and Northern provinces inhabited largely by Tamils and Muslims, as well as the Central, Sabaragamuwa and Uva provinces, have also increased. Qualitative studies show that there are a multitude of factors that foster inequality, including precarious employment, unpaid care work, gender and ethnic differences, old age and disability.

Behind these manifestations of inequality are political and social consequences, such as three decades of civil war, labour strikes, civil unrest and protests leading to displacement, migration, food insecurity and poverty of substantial social groups. Education and health gains have not been translated into stable employment opportunities that provide living wages to large segments of the population. Unequal access to land and other natural resources has resulted in disproportionate losses from climate-related disasters. Women are increasingly more vulnerable to gender-based violence, harassment and insecurity.

Inequality is a matter of social justice that Sri Lanka needs to address urgently to ensure that economic, social and political benefits are distributed equitably across its population. If unaddressed, it is a time bomb with the potential to explode derailing any progress made in the country's development trajectory.

Moderator: **Nilakshi De Silva**, Subscribing Member - CEPA

- Special Introductory Remarks: **Dr. Vagisha Gunasekara**, Senior Economist - UNDP
- Panellists:

Dr. Gayathri Lokuge, Team Leader - Employment and Livelihood, CEPA

Mr. Sandun Thudugala, Activist and Director for Programmes and Operations, Law and Society Trust, and member of Peoples Alliance for Right to Land

Ms. Niyanthini Kadirgamar, Researcher and member of the Feminist Collective for Economic Justice

8th May 2026 - Plenary Session - 3

Theme: Bringing Together: National Strategies and Donor Partnerships for Promoting Growth and Poverty Reduction in Sri Lanka

This panel takes stock of the ongoing growth versus redistribution debate in Sri Lanka at a critical moment in the country's recovery. While macroeconomic stabilisation under the IMF programme has created new opportunities for growth, recent external shocks—including Cyclone Ditwah and the Iran conflict—have heightened economic risks and intensified hardships for vulnerable communities. Under the theme Bringing Together: National Strategies and Donor Partnerships for Promoting Growth and Poverty Reduction in Sri Lanka, the discussion will examine the outlook for growth, poverty, and inequality; explore policy options for aligning growth targets with social protection and vulnerability reduction; assess how stronger coordination between national priorities and development partners can close the implementation gap in donor-funded projects; and identify reforms needed to strengthen transparency, accountability, and development effectiveness in externally supported initiatives.

- Moderator: **Dr. Ganeshan Wignaraja**, Senior Visiting Fellow - ODI Global
- Panellists:
 - Ms. Azusa Kubota** - Resident Representative, UNDP
 - Dr. Utz Johann Pape** - Lead Economist - Poverty & Equity Global Practice, World Bank
 - Prof. Sirimal Abeyratne** - Executive Director, CEPA

Table of Content

Thematic Session A

1. Economic Systems and Policy	
1.1. Post-Crisis Economic Strategy for Sri Lanka: From Stabilization to Resilient Growth (Talal Rafi)	3
1.2. A Policy Framework for Strengthening Economic Resilience in Developing Economies (Shanika Rathnayake)	4
1.3. Crisis to Collective Memory: Why Sri Lanka Must Institutionalize the Lessons the 2022 Economic Crisis (Dr. Roshan Perera et al.)	5
1.4. Green Trade Criteria and the Risk of Poverty Traps: An Analytical Trade-System Perspective in the 5SEnSu Model (Muhammad Ali Hassan et al.)	6
1.5. Real Time Monitoring and Adaptive Course Correction in Crisis Affected Development Interventions in Sri Lanka: Evidence from Secondary Data (M. D. Lakma et al.)	7
2. Systemic Resilience	
2.1 Poverty and Development Nexus in Bangladesh during Times of Crisis (M.D. Moshiul Alam)	11
2.2 Trapped in Place: Spatial Mapping of Inequality-Driven Poverty in Post-Crisis Sri Lanka (Poongothai Venuganan et al.)	12
2.3 Clean Energy Transition in Agriculture and Allied Sectors: Policy Pathways for Sustainable Livelihoods in India (Dr Rupali Khanna, Dr Vandita Sahay)	13
2.4 Community Mobilisation in Development-Induced Disasters: A Case Study Based on the Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project, Sri Lanka (Nipuni K.K Dissanayake)	14
2.5 Youth Agency in Economic Recovery: Human-Centred Design as a Pathway to Inclusive Poverty Alleviation (K. N. N. Jayathilaka)	15
3. Poverty and Political Economy	
3.1 Pilgrimage Economies and the Restructuring of Local Livelihoods: An Ethnographic Study of the Dondra Shrine Sri Lanka (Pavani Virasha)	19
3.2 Community-Based Tourism as a Resilience Strategy for Poverty Reduction in Times of Crisis: Insights from Sri Lanka (E.H. Nawanjalee)	20
3.3 Assessing the Capacity of Tea Tourism as a Mechanism for Addressing Historical Marginalisation of Malaiyaha Communities in Sri Lanka (Thamasi Konara, Piyumi Lekamge)	21
3.4 The Political Economy of Global Care Chains: A Case study of Sri Lanka – Saudi Arabia (Venya De Silva, Savant Gamage)	22

4. Macro Governance	
4.1 Structural Transformation, Labour Market Adjustment, and Poverty Dynamics in Sri Lanka (2018-2024): Evidence from Post-Crisis Macroeconomic and Labour Statistics (Achintha Koswatta)	25
4.2 Political Economy of Poverty and Development Governance in Sri Lanka: Electoral Myopia and Programmatic Coherence (Johnson Peiris)	26
4.3 Linking Governance and Poverty in Times of Crisis: Evidence from the Sri Lanka Barometer (Natasha Palansuriya)	27
4.4 The Persian Gulf Trilateral Axis of Russia, China, and Iran: Military cooperation, geopolitical changes, and strategic support (Mohamed Shariff Anees)	28

Thematic Session B

5. Social Protection	
5.1 A Spatial Analysis of Targeting under the Aswesuma Welfare Programme Using Census and Administrative Data (Sanali Wimalarathne)	31
5.2 Beyond the safety net: Evaluating the resilience of Aswesuma Beneficiaries in the wake of 2025 climate shocks (M.P.P. Hisra)	32
5.3 Exploring Patriarchal Terrorism through the cases of Domestic Violence within informal Justice System in Bangladesh (Mostak Bari Fahim et al.)	33
5.4 Memory Frames Under Siege: Theorizing the Evolution of Mullivaikkal Memorial Politics (Shamini Chandran)	34
6. Climate Systems	
6.1 Climate Risk and Financial Exclusion in Sri Lanka's Agriculture Sector: Structural Barriers and Climate-Related Risks (Eranda Fernando)	37
6.2 Can Climate Litigation be used to protect the poor? A comparative study of public interest litigation in Sri Lanka and Pakistan. (C. Lakshan Wickramasingha)	38
6.3 Beyond Cash Transfers: Governance, Climate Stress, and the Structural Limits of Poverty Reduction in District Mohmand of Peripheral Pakistan. (Shakeel Ahmed Fakhre Alam)	39
6.4 Integrated Drainage and Climate-Resilient Water Management in the Lower Gal Oya Basin, Sri Lanka (Mohideen Pichai Mohamed Irshath et al.)	40
6.5 MISP E+: An Integrated Machine Learning-Based Decision Support System for Flood Emergency Resource Allocation in Sri Lanka (H.D.M.R. Haputhanthri et al.)	41
7. Climate & Livelihood	
7.1 Community-Led Climate Adaptation and Poverty Reduction in Environmentally Vulnerable Rural Contexts (Rajan Thavaseelan)	45
7.2 Uninhabitability, Vulnerable Communities, Climate-Induced Displacement and Relocation as an Adaptive Strategy: The Case of Sri Lanka (Nishara Fernando)	46

7.3	From Line Rooms to Livelihood Justice - Enhancing Safety, Income Security, and Social Cohesion Among Plantation Workers in Disaster prone Sri Lanka (H. Sivalingam)	47
7.4	Climate Change and Rural Livelihoods: Adaptation Strategies in Polonnaruwa Medirigiriya DSD, Sri Lanka (P.P.G. Thushan Kavinda)	48
7.5	On the Wrong Side of the Curve: Exploring the Waste Kuznets Curve and Waste Management Policy and Legal Frameworks in South Asia (Shihara Ferdinando)	49

8. Gender and Youth Agency

8.1	Married Women's Labor Force Participation as a Household Coping Strategy during Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis. (B.A.D.S. Sahasra)	53
8.2	Social Reproduction, Informal Labour, and Artisanal Wages: Feminist Economic Evidence from Women Kantha Embroidery Workers in Rural Bengal (Monami Sinha et al)	54
8.3	Strengthening Rural Livelihoods through Dairy Interventions: Evidence on Women's Empowerment and Poverty Reduction in Bangladesh (Shahana Afrose Chowdhury)	55
8.4	Economic Hardship and Social Participation: Poverty as a Barrier to Youth with Mental Health Conditions (L. Y. Deneesha Pabasarie)	56
8.5	From Economic Precarity to Political Assertion: Relative Poverty and Youth Democratic Engagement in the Contemporary Social Order (K. Dilki Nathasha Priyadarshani)	57

Thematic Session C

9. Trade Liberalisation, FTAs and Poverty

9.1	Assessing Economic Effects of U.S. Tariffs on the Sri Lankan Economy: A CGE Analysis Using the GTAP Mode (Udaya Namalgama)	61
9.2	A Case for a 21st Century India-Sri Lanka FTA (Deshal De Mel, Ganeshan Wignaraja)	62
9.3	Impact of Border Closures on Trade and Livelihoods: A Case Study of Pakistan–Afghanistan Trade Suspension Amid Political Tensions (Islam Gul)	63
9.4	MSMEs and E-Commerce Trade: Evidence from a Firm-Level Survey of 953 Firms in Sri Lanka (Anishka de Zylva et. al.)	64
9.5	Impact of Trade Openness and Foreign Direct Investment on Poverty Reduction in Sri Lanka (Kamalahran Shanmugam)	65

10. Educational Inequality

10.1	Informality, Literacy, and Labour Vulnerabilities: A Case Study of Sri Lankan Domestic Workers in Dubai (Navini Premalal)	69
10.2	Development or Exclusion? The Impact of School Closures on Malaiyaha Tamils (Kamaleswary Letchumanan); Bridging Digital Disparity Amongst Social Groups in Promoting	70

10.3	Equitable Access to Quality Education in India (Minaketan Behera)	71
10.4	Barriers to Post-Ordinary Level Educational Continuation in Matuwagala Estate, Ratnapura District: Structural Constraints Affecting A/L Transition (S. Fathima Sharfin, S. Lakshana)	72
10.5	Government Spending on Education in India: Helping or Hindering Equality in Education? (Tanusree Dash et al)	73
11.	Artificial Intelligence, Technology and Digital Inclusion	
11.1	Evaluating Sri Lanka’s 2024 National AI Strategy and its relevance to persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka (N.T. Ranasinghe)	77
11.2	Education, Artificial Intelligence, and Digital Inclusion: Policy Pathways for Workforce Transformation (Shashithanganee Weerawansa et al.)	78
11.3	Artificial Intelligence–Enabled Learning Applications and Educational Access and Equity in Crisis Contexts (Jannatun Naim)	79
11.4	Digital Divide: The Impacts of Digital Poverty on Urban Low-Income Households (T. G. P. Dilshani, J. N. D. Jayathunga)	80
11.5	Measuring Digital Financial Literacy in Colombo District, Sri Lanka (K.A.D. Thaksalani)	81
12.	Urban Poverty & Systems	
12.1	High life in a high-rise: An ethnographic study of poverty and development in Colombo, Sri Lanka (Avanka Mahikanthi Fernando)	85
12.2	Colombo’s urban poor and the cost of cost-reflective electricity tariffs (Meghal Perera)	86
12.3	Urban Spatial Poverty and Social Protection Policies: A Study of Urban Slum in the Colombo District of Sri Lanka (T. H. R. De Silva)	87
12.4	Heat Stress, Ageing Vulnerability, and Poverty Nexus: Towards Inclusive Urban Adaptation in Dhaka, Bangladesh (Shanawez Hossain)	88
12.5	Beyond Access: Structural Energy Poverty, Inequality and Household Energy Resilience in Sri Lanka (Ashani Fernando)	89

Thematic Session D

13.	Food Security and Sustainable Agriculture	
13.1	Socio-Economic and Demographic Determinants of Maternal Egg Consumption: Evidence from Nuwara Eliya District, Sri Lanka (Hasitha Priyashantha et. al.)	93
13.2	A Comparative Study on Disparities in Food Security between Rural and Urban Households: A Case Study of Ratnapura District, Sri Lanka (T. M. L. Jeewanthi et. al.)	94
13.3	Assessing the potential of BIOFIN initiatives on development of Apiculture and Superfoods productions: A study in tank cascade systems, Anuradhapura (G. Praveena)	95
13.4	Warming Seas and Economic Pressures: Determinants of Marine Fish Production in Sri Lanka (W.H.A. Sandaruwan)	96

14. Employment and Livelihoods	
14.1 From Geopolitical Conflict to Household Poverty: The Impact of Middle East Fuel Supply Disruptions on Vulnerable Communities in Sri Lanka (Dilusha Silva)	99
14.2 Impact of Rainfall Variability on Work Demand for MGNREGA (Shashidhar Kumar, Akhand Pratap Singh)	100
14.3 Informality as a space of vulnerability or resilience? A study on fisheries communities in Negombo during the economic crisis (Kalara Perera)	101
14.4 Examining the Social and Cultural Barriers to Female Participation in Green Jobs of Sri Lanka (P.V. T. B. Somarathna)	102
14.5 Disaster Risk Reduction Preparedness and Business Continuity Planning Capacity Among Small and Medium Enterprises in Sri Lanka: A Multi-District Baseline Assessment (Zihan Zarouk et al.)	103
15. Governance Gaps	
15.1 Exogenous economic shocks to make the economics scream: Geopolitical dynamics of poverty and its measurements in Sri Lanka (Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake)	107
15.2 When Governance Fails: Fragile Livelihoods in Bangladesh's Haor Wetlands (Marium Binte Hassan Farin)	108
15.3 Fiscal Decentralization and Income Inequality among Elderly Women in India (Ananya Singh)	109
15.4 Cybercrime and the Poor: Legal Gaps in Protection Against Digital Financial Crime (Mathumitha Karunanathan, Gayathri Ramachandran)	110
16. Social Vulnerability & Policy	
16.1 Secondary Displacement and Human Security Challenges in Pakistan's Tribal Districts: The Case of Tirah Valley (Islam Gul)	113
16.2 Hidden Labor Costs: A Sociological Analysis of Menstrual Poverty among Female Workers in the Biyagama Free Trade Zone (Sachini Madurapperuma)	115
16.3 Exclusion and Unequal Distribution of Welfare Benefits among Older Adults: Case Studies in Urban, Rural, and Estate communities in Sri Lanka (Wasana Rathnayaka et al.)	116
16.4 Improving Poverty Econometric Targeting Accuracy Using Machine Learning: Evidence from Timor-Leste (Andres Chamba et al)	117
16.5 Regional Disparity Analysis of Social Well-being in Punjab: A Comparative Analysis of Measurement Approaches for Local Development Planning (Abdul Hameed, Abdul Rashid)	118

Thematic Session E

17. Skills & Future

- 17.1 Actions and deterrents for seeking employment among unemployed females: 121
An analysis based on 2023 Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey (Kumudika Boyagoda, Neranjala Sumathipala)
- 17.2 Education and Earnings Dynamics in Sri Lanka: Evidence from a Cohort-Based Pseudo-Panel (K.K.T. Udayanga) 122
- 17.3 Crisis of Graduate Employability in Sri Lanka: The Bridge Between Governmental University Educational Standards and Labour Market Expectations (S.A. Nanayakkara) 123
- 17.4 Sri Lanka's Education System and Generation Alpha: Ready for the AI-Augmented Labour Market? (W.M.P.M. Wijayawardhana, N.F. Nuha) 124
- 17.5 AI Tool Usage and Its Impact on Undergraduate Academic Performance: Evidence from a Public University in Sri Lanka (P.G. Himashini Madushika) 125

18. Young Researcher's Platform

Economic, Growth, Transformation, and Community Impact

- 18.1 Factors Influencing Investment Intention Among Management Undergraduates in Western Province in Sri Lanka (K R T Y Madurangi) 129
- 18.2 Sri Lankan Labour: Where Do the Ladies Fit In? (Hashini Wijesekara) 130
- 18.3 An Assessment of Trends, Patterns and Determinants of Female Labour Force Participation in Sri Lanka (Thamari Dissanayake) 131
- 18.4 Leveraging Fiscal Policy for Economic Transformation in Sri Lanka (Hansani Dilshani) 132
- 18.5 Building a Diversified and Inclusive Economy in Sri Lanka: Insights from Sectoral Analysis (Maheshwaranathan Chesika) 133
- 18.6 The Right to Development and Structural Poverty: Rethinking State Obligations in Times of Crisis (D.L.M. De S. Rajakaruna et al) 134
- 18.7 The Hidden Hustle of Moonlighters in Sri Lanka's Informal Sector (N.A.J. Kithmini) 135
- 18.8 Evaluating the Geriatric Healthcare Financing Policy Gaps on Aging Population in Sri Lanka (P. Malaka Gayashan) 136

THEMATIC SESSION A

Track 1 Economic Systems and Policy

Post-Crisis Economic Strategy for Sri Lanka: From Stabilization to Resilient Growth

Talal Rafi

Visiting Fellow, Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA)

talalrafi86@gmail.com

1.1

ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka's sovereign debt crisis in 2022 marked its most severe economic disruption since independence, exposing deep structural vulnerabilities in fiscal policy, monetary management, external sector performance, and long-term growth strategy. While macroeconomic stabilization has progressed through fiscal consolidation, monetary tightening, and debt restructuring under the IMF's Extended Fund Facility, stabilization alone does not guarantee long-term recovery or renewed debt sustainability. This paper examines how Sri Lanka can transition from short-term adjustment toward resilient, inclusive, and sustainable growth. Adopting a mixed-methods approach—combining macroeconomic time-series analysis with expert interviews—the study identifies three core pillars of resilient growth: strengthening credible fiscal institutions and debt sustainability frameworks; promoting export diversification and external sector resilience; and targeting social protection and human capital investment to reduce poverty. The paper argues that reforms undertaken immediately after a crisis often generate social backlash and reform fatigue, which can undermine long-term recovery. Resilience requires deep institutional reforms, productivity enhancement, and sustained policy credibility rather than cyclical macroeconomic recovery alone. Sri Lanka's experience offers broader policy lessons for small open economies navigating debt distress in the Global South.

Keywords: *Sri Lanka; Debt Sustainability; Economic Resilience; Export Diversification; Economic Reforms; Post-Crisis Recovery; Poverty*

A Policy Framework for Strengthening Economic Resilience in Developing Economies

Shanika Rathnayake

Centre for Banking Studies, Central Bank of Sri Lanka

kumarir@cbsl.lk

ABSTRACT

In recent years, developing economies have become increasingly vulnerable to macroeconomic shocks resulting from external crises, commodity price volatility, rising debt, and domestic structural weaknesses. These shocks manifest as disrupted growth, amplified inflation, and weakened fiscal sustainability over a considerable period. Consequently, the enhancement of economic resilience—the capacity of an economy to absorb shocks without compromising economic growth—has emerged as a central policy objective for policymakers and international institutions alike. Within this context, the present study develops a policy framework that can be used to strengthen economic resilience in the wake of macroeconomic shocks. Utilising a balanced panel dataset of developing Asian economies with comparable structural features from 2000 to 2024, the study applies fixed and random-effects models to assess the effects of fiscal balance, debt level, inflation rate, and institutional quality on the resilience of the economies. Economic resilience is defined through a shock-resistance indicator, which adjusts the GDP growth rate for volatility, and remains the primary outcome variable. Dynamic panel models are used to ensure the robustness of the results by accounting for the persistence of the outcome variable. The results are expected to identify the salient policy drivers of economic resilience, providing insights into the interactions between fiscal discipline, debt management, inflation targeting, and institutional effectiveness in promoting economic resilience, thereby informing a policy framework of prioritised policy levers. The study, by integrating econometric results and policy relevance, contributes to understanding the resilience-building process in developing economies, providing important guidance in the pursuit of mitigating the impact of macroeconomic shocks that often characterise the post-shock period.

Keywords: *Economic resilience, fiscal policy, monetary policy, institutional quality*

Crisis to Collective Memory: Why Sri Lanka Must Institutionalize the Lessons of the 2022 Economic Crisis

Roshan Perera, PhD; Yasmin Raji, Suramya Ameresekera
Centre for Poverty Analysis, Independent, Independent
roshananne@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka's 2022 sovereign debt default represents the most severe macroeconomic crisis in its post-independence history. Yet it was not unexpected. Since 1965, the country has entered into seventeen IMF stabilization programs, revealing a cycle of crisis, stabilization, and reversal. This paper investigates why repeated stabilization episodes fail to produce lasting institutional reform and sustained growth. It advances a theoretical argument that macroeconomic crises persist not solely because of technical policy errors, but because of the weak institutionalization of crisis lessons—what this paper conceptualizes as the absence of 'collective economic memory.' Drawing on political economy theory, the study situates Sri Lanka's experience within broader comparative patterns of reform sustainability. Historical analysis of IMF engagements, electoral cycles, and policy reversals demonstrates that stabilization in Sri Lanka has been externally driven, politically contested, and socially un-internalized. Weak tax morale, political patronage, and a lack of policy consensus have undermined the translation of stabilization into structural transformation. Comparative cases from countries such as Germany, the United States, Jamaica, South Korea, and India illustrate how major crises can be institutionalized into durable fiscal, monetary, political, and social norms. The paper argues that preventing an '18th IMF program' requires embedding mechanisms of collective economic memory through fiscal rules, strengthened central bank independence, bipartisan economic compacts, and public economic literacy. Sustainable macroeconomic stability ultimately depends not only on sound policy design, but also on the institutionalization of political and social commitment to reform.

Keywords: *Macroeconomic stability; political economy; IMF programs; institutional reform; collective economic memory*

Green Trade Criteria and the Risk of Poverty Traps: An Analytical Trade System Perspective in the 5SEnSu Model

Muhammad Ali Hassan¹, Abdul Nafay Sajid², Mah Noor Javed³
Zhongnan University of Economics and Law
learners7575@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The shift toward digital and green trade standards is transforming global trade regulation and acting as a set of non-tariff institutional constraints for developing economies seeking market access. Although green and digital trade requirements are gradually becoming part of global trade systems, their effects on development outcomes are not well understood, especially in states where institutions are not sufficiently developed to meet new sustainability standards. These requirements in such circumstances can affect trade involvement and may even worsen the current state of persistent poverty. It is thus important to understand how sustainable trade requirements interact with both economic structures and institutional capacity to determine their development implications. The paper investigates the linkage between sustainable trade preparedness and poverty traps by extending the Five-Sector Sustainability (5SEnSu) model into the international trade framework, mapping the Environmental, Institutional, Production, Distribution, and Social Welfare sectors onto relevant trade indicators. This empirical investigation operationalizes regulatory capacity by using the Digital and Sustainable Trade score from the Business Ready (B-READY) dataset of the World Bank to measure sustainable trade preparedness of each economy, trade structure measures (export diversification and export concentration indices) from UNCTADstat, and the WDI poverty headcount ratio to assess the persistence of poverty conditions. Using a cross-country empirical design, this paper examines how enhanced institutional preparedness for green and digital trade shapes trade structure and reduces the risk of poverty traps. We further employ Instrumental Variable (IV) estimation to address potential endogeneity between governance and poverty, using a lagged institutional proxy and regional trade agreement fixed effects. Furthermore, this paper extends robustness checks by exploring the mediating role of trade structure in the relationship between green trade readiness and poverty conditions across countries. The initial results of the study suggest a critical threshold that translates into sustained poverty traps for countries failing to maintain minimal institutional preparedness, while showing improved trade diversification and reduced poverty persistence in institutionally well-prepared countries. These findings suggest that trade-based factors are significant in shaping poverty conditions in countries where poverty was previously thought to be attributable solely to domestic factors. The study suggests that improved institutional capacity and trade liberalization are complementary in addressing persistent poverty traps in developing economies.

Keywords: *Digital and Green Trade Governance; Non-tariff Barriers; 5SEnSu Model; Trade diversification; Poverty Traps*

Digital Real-Time Monitoring Systems and Adaptive Course Correction in Crisis-Affected Development Interventions in Sri Lanka: Evidence from Secondary Data

Lakma Ravihari¹, Muthuwadura Udeni Thakshila², Adam Lebbe Abdur Rahman³
 Friends Lanka Child Foundation¹, Central Queensland University² - Australia, Tanweer
 Academy - Thihariya, Sri Lanka³
 lakmaravihari1992@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Development programmes in Sri Lanka have been extensively implemented during multiple crisis periods, including the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), the economic downturn (2021–2022), and various natural disaster response efforts. These overlapping crises have highlighted the limitations of traditional monitoring systems, which rely on paper-based data collection conducted at fixed intervals (e.g., quarterly, biannually, and annually), often resulting in delayed and non-real-time information for poverty alleviation and social protection programmes. In this context, this study examines the effectiveness of digital real-time monitoring systems in improving service delivery during crisis situations in Sri Lanka, addressing a notable gap in secondary data on this topic. The study employs qualitative secondary data analysis using monitoring frameworks, evaluation reports, government policy documents, donor M&E reports, and scholarly literature published between 2020 and 2022. Digital real-time monitoring is defined as the use of digital tools to collect and analyse data almost immediately to support timely decision-making and improved programme implementation. Thematic analysis was conducted under four key dimensions: data timelines, indicator adaptability, decision making, and organisational learning. Findings indicate that digital real-time monitoring improves programme responsiveness and effectiveness in crisis-affected contexts when systems are timely and adaptable. During Sri Lanka’s economic crisis, mobile data collection tools and dashboard systems enabled weekly and monthly tracking of indicators such as food insecurity and school attendance, allowing field staff to prioritise vulnerable and marginalised households. In contrast, paper-based systems were found to delay response and limit effective decision-making in rapidly changing conditions. However, several challenges were identified, including poor data quality in rural areas due to weak internet connectivity and limited digital literacy among staff, as well as weak integration between NGO and government databases, leading to duplication and exclusion errors. Donor-imposed rigid logical frameworks also constrained flexibility, while limited analytical capacity reduced the effective use of real-time data for decision-making. Overall, the study highlights the need to shift from compliance-driven monitoring to learning-oriented adaptive management in Sri Lanka’s development sector.

Keywords: *Digital Real-Time Monitoring; Adaptive Course Correction; Sri Lanka; Crisis Affected Development Programmes; Secondary Data Analysis*

THEMATIC SESSION A

Track 2 Systemic Resilience

Poverty and Development Nexus in Bangladesh during Times of Crisis

Md. Moshiul Alam

Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission, Ministry of Commerce, Bangladesh.

alambtc@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Bangladesh has experienced remarkable progress in poverty reduction from 2010 to 2022, cutting the national poverty rate from 37.1% to 18.7%. The pace of poverty reduction has slowed in recent years due to rising inflation, stagnant job creation, widening inequality, and repeated economic shocks. These challenges have significant implications for the country's broader development trajectory. The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the national economy. In addition, the Russia-Ukraine war triggered global food and fuel price increases. Furthermore, Bangladesh's low fiscal revenue collection, and major natural disasters such as cyclones and river erosion severely disrupted livelihoods, particularly in coastal and rural areas. These structural challenges highlight the complex relationship between poverty reduction and sustainable development in the context of recurring crises. Although poverty rates have declined over time, income inequality has widened. This research paper aims to examine the linkage between poverty and development in Bangladesh during periods of crisis. It also provides policy recommendations to address underlying structural disparities and strengthen community resilience in alignment with the SDGs. The study used secondary data collected from various sources, including indicators such as per capita income, GDP, trade balance (exports and imports), investment, and inflation. Additionally, poverty trends, income inequality measures such as the Gini index, and other macroeconomic indicators were analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interconnected dynamics. The Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) model was employed to examine both short-run and long-run relationships among the variables. It was found that, despite frequent crises, Bangladesh has achieved substantial progress in poverty reduction and development, but income inequality prevails. To sustain these gains, it is necessary to have stronger social safety nets, effective climate adaptation strategies, export diversification, and institutional reforms. Developing a crisis-resilient development model will be essential to sustain Bangladesh's post-Least Developed Country (LDC) transition and address its challenges, and ensure inclusive and sustainable growth in the coming decades.

Keywords: Poverty, Per Capita Income, ARDL Approach, GINI Ratio

Trapped in Place: Spatial Mapping of Inequality-Driven Poverty in Post-Crisis Sri Lanka

Chandranath Amarasekara, PhD; Poongothai Venuganan, Lasantha Wijerathna
Central Bank of Sri Lanka
poongothai@cbsl.lk / poongo231@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

For many decades Sri Lanka had been lauded for its post-independence socioeconomic achievements, particularly the sharp reduction in poverty between 1990/91 and 2019, alongside consistent advances in health, and education, and declines in unemployment. However, with the economy having faced two consecutive shocks—COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the economic crisis in 2022—questions arise regarding the extent to which these achievements may have been reversed. This is a growing concern in Sri Lanka’s ongoing economic recovery journey, which seeks to set the economy on a sustainable and inclusive growth trajectory. Accordingly, this study seeks to integrate diverse datasets and conduct an analysis of inequalities that exacerbate poverty and hinder its reduction, incorporating spatial determinants and population-or area-adjusted indicators to map trends in income and asset disparities at the district and/or provincial levels. In turn, this helps identify deprived pockets and uncover their causes and consequences to highlight the long-run impact of persistent inadequacies despite substantial national investments. Findings reiterate that entrenched regional inequalities can perpetuate and exacerbate poverty, thereby posing a significant challenge to building resilience at both the macro and micro levels. A district ‘scorecard’ highlights how certain districts require customized interventions to benefit from and contribute to the ongoing recovery process. The study also highlights critical gaps that impede evidence-based policymaking. Policy recommendations advocate for decentralized, customized interventions, leveraging existing district-level government machinery and targeted actions to disrupt intergenerational inequality cycles and thereby foster sustainable and equitable development.

Keywords: *Measurement and Analysis of Poverty, Inequality, Spatial Mapping, Education, Health, Infrastructure, Government Policy*

Clean Energy Transition in Agriculture and Allied Sectors: Policy Pathways for Sustainable Livelihoods in India

Rupali Khanna, PhD¹; Vandita Sahay, PhD²
Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi, India
rkhanna@knc.du.ac.in

ABSTRACT

India's rural economy is largely dependent on agriculture and related industries, such as dairy, fisheries, livestock, forestry, and food processing, but these sectors continue to experience energy poverty or rely heavily on energy derived from fossil fuels at every stage of the value chain. Inadequate cold-chain and storage infrastructure worsen food loss and income insecurity, and this reliance increases greenhouse gas emissions, post-harvest losses, and livelihood vulnerabilities. This paper explores explicit and implicit energy links in the fields of irrigation, mechanization, cold storage, food processing, handloom, dairy, and fisheries, and looks at how institutional frameworks and national-level policies in India incorporate clean and decentralized renewable energy (DRE) solutions within agricultural and related value chains in order to strengthen sustainable livelihoods and improve socioeconomic resilience. This paper undertakes a policy-focused analysis to examine how national-level schemes and institutional frameworks in India incorporate renewable and decentralized energy solutions to support agricultural and allied livelihood activities. By examining policy documents, program guidelines, institutional mechanisms, and illustrative case studies, the study highlights the role of decentralized renewable energy solutions in supporting sustainable livelihoods, improving productivity, reducing losses, and enhancing socioeconomic outcomes in rural areas. There are uneven linkages of renewable energy, even though a number of schemes acknowledge that energy is essential to productivity and value addition. While many livelihood and value-chain modernization programs mention electrification without outlining clean energy pathways, programs like PM-KUSUM and off-grid biogas initiatives show strong decentralized renewable energy linkages. These solutions have a great deal of potential to lower losses, boost incomes, increase efficiency, and create jobs in rural areas. Embedding renewable energy in farm and livelihood plans can enhance rural life. Policies must be better coordinated. This is important for helping rural areas cope with energy poverty, and climate change in India. To achieve sustainable development, DRE must be included in farm plans, and policies must support each other to build a stronger and more resilient rural India.

Keywords: *Energy policy, energy poverty, livelihoods, rural development, clean energy transitions, climate adaptation*

Community Mobilization in Development-Induced Disasters: A Case Study Based on the Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project, Sri Lanka

Nipuni Dissanayake

Centre for the Study of Human Rights, University of Peradeniya

nipunikaushi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Public participation is a crucial component of sustainable development. However, it remains a neglected aspect in many development initiatives in Sri Lanka. This study examines the nature and extent of public participation in the Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project (UOMDP) in the Badulla District. The UOMDP was launched in 2013 to enhance electricity generation, irrigation, and water supply in the Monaragala and Hambantota Districts. The tunnel excavation of the UOMDP caused severe damage to the bedrock, resulting in groundwater depletion, destruction of local water resources, and impacts on agriculture, livelihoods, and food security in the surrounding villages, trapping them in a cycle of vulnerability. This qualitative study draws on primary data from thirty semi-structured interviews and field observations, and on secondary data from research publications and news reports. Political Ecology and the Participatory Approach to Development were used as the theoretical framework for the analysis. The findings reveal that local communities were neither consulted nor adequately informed about the project before its implementation, and they became aware of it only after experiencing its adverse impacts. In response to this catastrophe, affected communities, led by youth, have organized grassroots movements demanding justice, culminating in massive protests in Bandarawela town. These grassroots mobilizations have later evolved into politically oriented movements with leftist tendencies. Resistance to the UOMDP has fostered a sense of empowerment among affected villagers and the realization of the power of their collective voices, which were repeatedly marginalized. This study further found that utilizing local knowledge from the project's planning phase could have contributed to more environmentally friendly, sustainable development outcomes that address local needs. In conclusion, the disaster associated with the UOMDP underscores the deep interconnections between vulnerability and ignorance, the importance of public participation in development, and the environmental, social, and economic consequences of unsustainable development.

Keywords: *Public Participation, Community Mobilization, Political Ecology, Sustainable Development, Development Projects*

Human-Centered Design as a Framework for Youth Agency in Economic Recovery

K N N Jayathilaka

Department of Social Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
The Open University of Sri Lanka
knnja@ou.ac.lk

2.5

ABSTRACT

Youth in Sri Lanka remain heavily affected by the prolonged economic crisis, with many unable to secure stable livelihoods over the past several years. Despite the introduction of poverty alleviation initiatives, most remain top-down in design and implementation, often excluding youth voices. This lack of participation undermines sustainability, weakens ownership, and limits the potential for inclusive resilience. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which Human-Centered Design (HCD) can reposition youth as co-creators within poverty alleviation initiatives during Sri Lanka's prolonged economic crisis. HCD emphasizes lived experiences, participatory engagement, and context-sensitive problem-solving, making it particularly suited to addressing the challenges faced by marginalized youth. By focusing on youth agency, the study highlights how participatory design can generate solutions that are not only more relevant but also more sustainable in the long term. Using a qualitative conceptual design, the study examines national and international policy responses to youth poverty and economic recovery. It identifies gaps in development interventions, particularly the absence of mechanisms that meaningfully integrate youth perspectives. The proposed HCD framework offers a scalable, participatory model that strengthens youth agency, enhances economic resilience, and advances rights-based approaches to poverty alleviation. By positioning youth as co-creators, the framework provides practical guidance for policymakers, NGOs, and development practitioners seeking strategies that move beyond traditional top-down models. It demonstrates how youth involvement in design and decision-making processes can foster ownership, build resilience, and contribute to inclusive recovery in post-crisis contexts. Ultimately, this study positions Human-Centered Design as a transformative pathway for empowering youth and ensuring that economic recovery efforts in Sri Lanka are both participatory and sustainable.

Keywords: *Empowerment, Human-Centered Design, Poverty, Sri Lanka, Youth*

THEMATIC SESSION A

Track 3 Poverty and Political Economy

Pilgrimage Economies and the Restructuring of Local Livelihoods: An Ethnographic Study of the Dondra Shrine Sri Lanka

Nirosha Lakmini Ruwanpathirana, Pavani Virasha Godakanda
Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
University of Sri Jayawardenepura
virashagodakanda@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Pilgrimage has gradually been experiencing a modification in a tourism-pilgrimage continuum whereby market forces converge with devotion. Key pilgrimage sites like Sri Pada show that spiritual mobilities have now moved into a connection with leisure activities, wellness activities and heritage consumption. Simultaneously, regional shrines like Dondra (*Devinuwara*) serve both as the center of rituals and a venue of economic development. Although pilgrimage economies are expanding rapidly, there is limited sociological research on the way commodification restructures the livelihoods of local people, ritual power and the authenticity of the sacred. This paper examines how market integration abolishes devotion and daily economic life within communities that operate around a shrine. The study uses a qualitative ethnographic approach as the research is based on the field observations, in-depth interviews and ritual documentation that was conducted at the Dondra Shrine. The discussion is a synthesis of both sociology of religion and political economy and examines the relationship between sacred practices and commercial activities. The study indicates the development of the pilgrimage service economy that is characterized by micro and small trades such as vendors, transportation services, ritual experts and household-based trades. Offerings in the form of money garlands, milk-rice almsgiving and vow-based offerings are at once expressions of devotion and also help the circulation of money in the local sphere. However, with the emergence of heightened commercialization, the traditional authority formations are transformed, managerial leadership becomes influential and sacral integrity may be undermined. Aspects of livelihood change that are also relevant include gender inclusion and diversification of livelihoods across seasons. Consequently, pilgrimage economies exist as a hybrid form between moral and economic aspects. Sustainable development requires participatory governance systems that ensure balance between economic opportunity and cultural conservation and distribution of local benefits in an equitable manner.

Keywords: *Pilgrimage economy, Sacred commodification, Rural livelihood, Religious tourism, Sri Lanka*

Community-Based Tourism as a Resilience Strategy for Poverty Reduction in Times of Crisis: Insights from Sri Lanka

Ediriyathalawa Hansika Nawanjalee

Department of Social Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, The Open University of Sri Lanka.

eh naw@ou.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

Tourism is a crucial segment of income to the people's livelihood and rural development in Sri Lanka, particularly within economically vulnerable communities. Nevertheless, recurring crises, such as the COVID 19 pandemic, the recent economic crisis and natural disasters, have shown the precariousness of income from tourism. Community-Based Tourism (CBT) is a development paradigm increasingly promoted as an inclusive, locally-anchored, development paradigm that potentially can improve resilience and abate poverty while disruptive events occur. Despite much policy attention to CBT as a pro-poor approach to tourism, there is little empirical evidence for the role of CBT as a resilience strategy in times of crisis. Accordingly, this study attempts to examine the degree to which CBT promotes livelihood resilience and poverty alleviation in crisis affected Sri Lankan communities. A qualitative research design is used which is based on semi-structured interviews of key stakeholders involved in CBT. Participants include representatives of CBT practitioners, government officials and representatives of NGOs involved in community development. Purposive sampling is used to represent a variety of stakeholder perspectives. Thematic analysis is applied to reveal recurring patterns related to coping strategies, income diversification, and community adaptation. Complementary policy documents and sector reports were analysed to offer contextual support. The study indicates that CBT contributes to resilience by facilitating diversified income sources, strengthening social networks, and participating in women and youth. However, constraints, such as limited financial resources, poor access to markets, and gaps in policy, could hinder its long-term potential for poverty reduction. The findings stress CBT's role as a grassroots mechanism for resilience as well as the need for better institutional support, targeted capacity building and improved market linkages. The study provides practical policy-level information for policymakers and development agencies working on inclusive, crisis-resilient tourism strategies as part of sustainable poverty reduction.

Key words - *Community-Based Tourism, Poverty Reduction, Livelihood Resilience, Crisis Adaptation, Sri Lanka*

Assessing the Capacity of Tea Tourism as a Mechanism for Addressing Historical Marginalisation of Malaiyaha Communities in Sri Lanka

Thamasi Konara, Piyumi Lekamge
Faculty of Law, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University
nadana.konara@kdu.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

The Malaiyaha (Hill Country Tamil) community in Sri Lanka occupies a paradoxical position within the nation's political economy: foundational to its globally celebrated tea industry, yet historically excluded from full citizenship, land ownership and socio-economic mobility. Constructed under British colonialism as an indentured labour force and rendered stateless in the post-independence period, Malaiyaha communities have endured what may be described as layered non-recognition; legal, economic and symbolic. Parallely, tea tourism has emerged as a key pillar of tourism development strategy. Plantation landscapes are curated as sites of heritage consumption, where 'Ceylon tea' is marketed through narratives of tradition, authenticity and national pride. This paper interrogates whether such tourism-led growth can serve as a vehicle for economic stabilisation among historically marginalised plantation communities. Does cultural visibility within tourism economies translate into material redistribution, participatory governance, and poverty reduction? Or does it repackage colonial hierarchies through aesthetic commodification? Drawing on feminist political economy and postcolonial legal theory, this paper reconceptualises poverty reduction as a question of structural inclusion rather than income generation alone. It examines governance arrangements in tea tourism, value chain, labour regimes and narrative ownership. Particular attention is paid to the gendered dimension of inclusion, analysing whether Malaiyaha women who embody both productive and cultural labour, gain substantive economic agency through these emerging heritage markets. The paper argues that without rights-based regulatory intervention and community ownership frameworks, even inclusive tea tourism risks institutionalising symbolic recognition without structural transformation. However, if reoriented through participatory and distributive justice models, inclusive tea tourism may function as a site for reconstructing economic citizenship and addressing intergenerational poverty.

Keywords : Colonialism, Inclusive Tourism, Malaiyaha Community, Postcolonial Legal Theory

The Political Economy of Global Care Chains: A Case study of Sri Lanka – Saudi Arabia

Venya De Silva, Savant Gamage
Verite Research
savant@veriteresearch.org

ABSTRACT

This study examines the political economy of Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers (MDWs) employed in Saudi Arabia, situated within the framework of global care chains. It contextualizes MDWs as being at the intersection of female labour participation, feminized migration, and the gendered status-quo of care regimes linking to the dynamics of a labour-exporting country facing debt-driven economic insecurity. The central research problem addresses how recruitment practices in Sri Lanka and the kafala sponsorship system in Saudi Arabia generate structural vulnerabilities that expose MDWs to exploitation, abuse and forced labour, while existing policies remain insufficient to guarantee protection.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative case study approach. Policy analysis is grounded in secondary data, institutional reports, and cross-national comparison. It analyses current regulatory frameworks in Sri Lanka and Saudi Arabia, evaluates bilateral labour agreements, and draws comparative lessons from the Philippines as a labour-sending country and Qatar as a labour-receiving reform case. This approach enables identification of policy gaps and feasible reforms within existing geopolitical constraints.

Key findings indicate that exploitative recruitment fees, misinformation, contract substitution, and debt bondage originate in the migration process, while the kafala system restricts workers' mobility and legal autonomy, facilitating workplace abuse and rights violations. Weak enforcement of current policies and structural power imbalances between worker and employer and the two nation states, limit policy effectiveness. Comparative evidence suggests that stronger bilateral agreements, prohibition of recruitment fees, accessible complaint mechanisms, and labour mobility reforms can significantly reduce vulnerability.

The study concludes that renegotiating the Sri Lanka–Saudi Arabia bilateral labour agreement is essential to enhance MDW protection through enforceable standards on contracts, wages, and dispute resolution mechanisms. Strengthened cooperation and oversight would improve governance of labour migration while safeguarding workers' rights. This paper contributes to broader debates on ethical labour migration, gendered care work, and international labour standards.

Keywords: Labor migration, migrant domestic workers, political economy, care, female migration

THEMATIC SESSION A

Track 4 Macro Governance

**Structural Transformation, Labour Market Adjustment, and Poverty Dynamics in Sri Lanka
(2018-2024): Evidence from Post-Crisis Macroeconomic and Labour Statistics**

**Achinthya Koswatta, PhD; Ms. Chathurika Hansamali, Neavis Morais, PhD;
Balamurali Navarathnam**

**Department of Social Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
The Open University of Sri Lanka
hmkos@ou.ac.lk**

ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka experienced severe macroeconomic contraction during 2020-2023, followed by stabilization and recovery in 2024. Scholarly publications document significant shifts in GDP growth, sectoral composition, labour force participation, unemployment, poverty, and price dynamics. Understanding the interaction between structural transformation and labour market adjustment is critical for inclusive recovery. This study examines how macroeconomic contraction and subsequent recovery affected (i) sectoral GDP composition, (ii) employment structure by gender and province, and (iii) poverty dynamics. It investigates whether post-crisis growth has translated into broad-based labour market improvements. Using annual and quarterly national accounts, labour force, sectoral, and poverty statistics (2018- 2024), the study constructs a macro-labour panel combining GDP by industrial origin, employment by sector, gender-disaggregated labour force participation, unemployment by age and education, and provincial poverty headcounts. Econometric analysis includes structural decomposition, growth-employment elasticity estimation, and dynamic regression models assessing the relationship between sectoral value added and labour market outcomes. Distributional analysis evaluates gender and regional disparities. Preliminary evidence indicates: (i) contraction in constant-price GDP during 2020-2023 followed by positive growth in 2024; (ii) increased services sector dominance; (iii) declining labour force participation, particularly among females; (iv) persistent youth and educated unemployment; and (v) notable provincial disparities in poverty incidence. Growth recovery appears uneven across sectors and demographic groups.

The findings suggest that macroeconomic stabilization alone is insufficient for inclusive recovery. Targeted labour market interventions, gender-responsive employment policies, and sector-specific productivity enhancement are required to translate structural transformation into equitable development outcomes.

Keywords: *Structural transformation; Labour market dynamics; Poverty incidence; Post-crisis recovery; Sri Lanka*

Political Economy of Poverty and Development Governance in Sri Lanka: Electoral Myopia and Programmatic Coherence

Johnson Peiris

Department of Economics, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo

devputh@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Poverty and development governance in contemporary political economies increasingly represent a structural policy challenge rather than a residual welfare concern, particularly under conditions of recurrent economic crisis. As economic shocks and macroeconomic instability have become endemic features of modern development trajectories, the management of vulnerability and deprivation requires more than episodic intervention. It demands the institutionalization within the broader structure architecture of economic management mechanisms capable of integrating sufficient flexibility and continuity in poverty and development governance.

This article contends that, in Sri Lanka's setting, poverty and development governance is significantly constrained by electoral myopia defined as the systematic prioritization of short-term electoral advantage over sustained developmental commitments. Such short termism is reinforced by the gradual transformation of political parties into non-programmatic vehicles of electoral mobilization. As ideological coherence and policy discipline erodes within competitive electoral cycles, distributive governance shifts away from rule-based coordination towards discretionary and electorally responsive allocation

Drawing on the political economy of distributive politics and the scholarship on political party institutionalization, this study situates electoral incentives within broader institutional design questions. It comparatively evaluates the Janasaviya and Samurdhi programs to assess how variations in programmatic coherence reshape beneficiary selection, policy durability, administrative design and fiscal sustainability. The analysis demonstrates how programmatic party institutionalization increasingly shifts distributive policy and politically mediated allocation eroding the institutional and fiscal foundations necessary for poverty and development governance.

By locating poverty and development governance within party transformation and competitive electoral cycles, the article highlights how democratic contestation and absent programmatic discipline, may erode long term developmental coherence. The findings contribute to comparative political economy debates on clientelism, party systems, and development governance in crisis prone democracies.

Key Words: *Poverty Governance, Clientelism, Programmatic Parties, Electoral Myopia, Janasaviya, Samurdhi, Political Economy*

Natasha Palansuriya, PhD; Minuri Perera, Saranie Wijesinghe
The Insights Initiative
natasha@insightsinitiative.com

ABSTRACT

Good governance plays a critical role in shaping socioeconomic outcomes, particularly in contexts of economic stress and institutional strain. In Sri Lanka, recent crises have highlighted how corruption, weak institutional performance and declining public confidence in governance may influence access to opportunities, public services and household wellbeing. Yet, empirical evidence linking multidimensional governance conditions to poverty outcomes remains limited at the subnational level. The overall objective of the study is to examine whether variations in governance quality, captured through indicators such as equality of opportunity, political trust, and state responsiveness, are associated with changes in lived poverty and household wellbeing across Sri Lanka's provinces. It seeks to assess whether governance deterioration corresponds with worsening socioeconomic conditions and whether improvements in governance align with recovery. The study draws from longitudinal provincial data from the Sri Lanka Barometer (SLB), a nationally representative public opinion survey measuring social cohesion, governance and socioeconomic wellbeing. Using the SLB methodology, the study compares trends across provinces and survey rounds (2020–2025). Descriptive and comparative analyses examine relationships between Equality of Opportunity, Political Trust, State Responsiveness, the Lived Poverty Index, and Household Relative Wellbeing to identify temporal and spatial patterns. The SLB data shows that periods marked by declining governance quality, reflected in reduced equality of opportunity, falling political trust and weakened perceptions of state responsiveness, are consistently associated with rising lived poverty and declining household wellbeing. The most pronounced shifts are identified in the 2021 survey round (in the lead up to the 2022 economic crisis), when governance indicators deteriorate alongside sharp socioeconomic decline across provinces. Subsequent modest improvements in governance indicators correspond with partial recovery in wellbeing and reductions in lived poverty in the subsequent survey rounds. Provincial comparisons further show that weaker governance environments tend to coincide with poorer socioeconomic outcomes. The findings demonstrate that good governance is closely linked to poverty and socioeconomic resilience in Sri Lanka. Strengthening accountable, responsive, and trusted governance systems may therefore be central not only to institutional reform but also to poverty reduction and inclusive development policy.

Key Words: *Governance, Lived Poverty, Political Trust, State Responsiveness, Socioeconomic Resilience*

The Persian Gulf Trilateral Axis of Russia, China, and Iran: Military Cooperation, Geopolitical Changes, and Strategic Support

Mohamed Shariff Anees

Department of Political Science and Public Policy, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo
anees@poli.cmb.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

The Gulf region has witnessed a surge in military tensions as a result of a critical geopolitical shift, as Russia and China have started to provide strategic support to Iran, thereby promoting a multipolar world order against the dominance of Western powers. The strategic pact signed by Iran, Russia, and China in January 2026 serves as a prime example of this phenomenon, as these three major world powers have joined hands against unilateral sanctions. This paper seeks to analyze the research problem of “how the military support provided by Russia and China strengthens Iran’s deterrence capabilities, thereby destabilizing the Gulf region while promoting a multipolar world order.” By using a qualitative research approach, this paper seeks to analyze the issue based on secondary research materials, including reports published by think tanks (such as the CSIS and Carnegie Endowment) and news analyses. It examines the historical development from Cold War agreements to post-JCPOA agreements, assesses military contributions such as Russia’s Su-35 aircraft, S-400 systems, and Shahed drones; China’s naval drills, DF series missiles, and BRI-related infrastructure; and analyses joint military exercises such as the “Security Bond” series. The research findings include increased interoperability between the three nations, with Russia providing air defense support and China providing maritime support, thereby emboldening Iran, sparking Gulf arms races, undermining U.S.-led norms, and linking local conflicts to great power rivalries. It is concluded that the trilateral axis represents a structural multipolar world in the Gulf region, calling on nations to focus on diplomacy instead of conflict. In practice, Gulf nations should seek diverse alliances, while global actors need to adjust to non-Western financial systems to avoid escalation risks.

Keywords: *Trilateral axis, Russia-China-Iran, Persian Gulf security, military cooperation, multipolar order*

THEMATIC SESSION B

Track 5 Social Protection

A Spatial Analysis of Targeting under the Aswesuma Welfare Programme Using Census and Administrative Data

Sanali Wimalarathne, Yuneesha Nilmith Ediriweera, Tiloka De Silva
Department of Decision Sciences, University of Moratuwa
sanaliwimalarathne@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The Aswesuma programme was introduced in the aftermath of the economic crisis in Sri Lanka in 2023 as a successor to the Samurdhi programme. Aswesuma employs a multidimensional deprivation framework to identify beneficiaries and classify them as Severely Poor, Poor, Vulnerable, and Transient Poor. While assessments of Aswesuma targeting efficacy remain limited, Sri Lanka also lacks up-to-date poverty data that reflect the adverse economic consequences of the past few years. As such, this study has two key objectives: first, to examine whether the coverage of Aswesuma aligns with available indicators of deprivation and identify areas which may exhibit inclusion or exclusion errors; and second, should Aswesuma coverage align with deprivation indicators, to use Aswesuma coverage as a proxy for deprivation to develop a poverty map for Sri Lanka. For this purpose, we combine Divisional Secretariat Division (DSD) level administrative data on Aswesuma applicants and beneficiaries with six deprivation indicators based on housing and access to safe water and sanitation from the Census of Population and Housing (CPH) 2024. Deprivation indicators are correlated against Aswesuma coverage rates and beneficiary category distributions. Spatial econometric methods are then to be employed to detect poverty hotspots and develop poverty maps. Preliminary analysis reveals moderate positive correlations between all CPH deprivation indicators and Aswesuma beneficiary proportions, with a composite housing deprivation indicator recording the strongest correlation of 0.60. Accordingly, the most-deprived regions, as per the CPH indicators, are not necessarily those with the highest programme coverage, though this may be explained by the broader scope of the Aswesuma targeting criteria. Future work will expand this analysis using spatial econometrics to produce updated DSD-level poverty and vulnerability maps reflecting post-crisis conditions. It is expected that this study will offer insights to improve spatial equity, while the poverty maps can serve as a tool for policymakers to prioritise resource allocation.

Keywords: *Aswesuma; social protection targeting; poverty mapping; multidimensional deprivation; Sri Lanka*

Beyond the Safety Net: Evaluating the Resilience of Aswesuma Beneficiaries in the Wake of 2025 Climate Shocks

M.P.P.Hisra

Department of Law, University of Jaffna

hisrafarooque@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

By early 2026, Sri Lanka's economic recovery stands at a critical juncture. The transition from the legacy Samurdhi welfare scheme to the Aswesuma social protection framework was designed to modernize poverty alleviation through improved targeting and digital delivery. However, the resilience of this new system has been significantly tested by external shocks. The year 2025 functioned as a de facto stress test, marked by high-intensity climate disruptions, including Cyclone Ditwah and subsequent monsoonal flooding. These events threatened to reverse fragile recovery gains among vulnerable households, highlighting the limitations of static poverty alleviation models in an era of compound crises. This study evaluates the shock responsiveness of the Aswesuma programme in the context of climate-induced income and asset loss. It introduces the concept of a "resilience gap," defined as the disparity between fixed cash transfers and the actual cost of household recovery following environmental shocks. The central research question examines whether the current welfare framework is capable of preventing asset depletion and long-term indebtedness among rural and urban poor households during climate emergencies. This research adopts a mixed-methods approach. Quantitatively, it conducts a longitudinal analysis of household consumption patterns using data drawn from the Aswesuma social registry, cross-referenced with GIS-based flood inundation data from the 2025 disaster cycle. Qualitatively, primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 Aswesuma beneficiary households in the Anuradhapura District. These interviews focused on post-disaster income loss, asset depletion, housing repair costs, and reliance on informal credit markets. Preliminary findings indicate that while Aswesuma transfers are effective in maintaining a minimum nutritional threshold, they are insufficient to function as a resilience-building mechanism. A significant proportion of beneficiary households resorted to asset liquidation, particularly livestock and farming equipment, to finance post-disaster housing repairs, thereby undermining the long-term poverty reduction objectives of the programme. The evidence suggests that, in the absence of temporary benefit "top-ups" during climate shocks, beneficiaries remain vulnerable to falling back into multidimensional poverty. The study concludes that Sri Lanka's social safety net must evolve into a Shock-Responsive Social Protection (SRSP) system. It recommends integrating early-warning triggers into the existing digital welfare infrastructure to enable automatic, temporary benefit expansions during climate emergencies. More broadly, the paper argues for a shift from poverty targeting to vulnerability targeting, repositioning social registries as tools for climate-adaptive resilience rather than mere subsistence support.

Keywords: *Aswesuma programme, climate shocks, Sri Lanka, poverty, vulnerability*

Exploring Patriarchal Terrorism through the Cases of Domestic Violence within Informal Justice System in Bangladesh

Mostak Bari Fahim, Md. Masud Nabi, Md. Abdul-Rakib

Department of Criminology and Police Science, Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University, Tangail-1902, Bangladesh.
mostakbarifahim@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Domestic violence has a far-reaching negative impact on individuals and society. In Bangladesh, domestic violence has been normalized within the structure of society. This study is based on the theory of patriarchal terrorism, which explains how patriarchy in a society leads to domestic violence. This research describes several dynamics of domestic violence cases in the informal justice system from the perspective of patriarchal terrorism. Using cross-sectional and time-series data from the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), this research analyzed 672 cases filed from 2017 to 2023. In this study, the sociodemographic information of the victim and offender, along with the nature, pattern, and frequency of domestic violence incidents, was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Additionally, a comparison of these incidents before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic was presented through cross-tabulation analysis. This study found that the grievances in the complaints are associated with low income, lack of education, and financial dependency of the wife due to a lack of income sources. Cases where wives and their parents lived near their in-laws showed decreased rates of domestic violence. Most of the cases were filed by wives (92.3%) against their husbands and were filed within the first year of marriage (72.8%). Moreover, most complaints (65.55%) were filed within a year of initial separation, which increased in the post-pandemic period. Secondary complaints, which include cases filed after prior court or NGO attempts, also increased in the post-pandemic period. The pandemic temporarily reduced registered domestic violence cases due to lockdown restrictions, but the post-pandemic period saw an increase. Domestic violence disputes are more often resolved with the marriage intact (63.15%) than dissolved through the informal justice system. Power, control, dominance, and patriarchy are evident in this study, as described through the framework of patriarchal terrorism. A comprehensive response from individuals, society, and relevant organizations is needed to change perceptions of power, control, and dominance to prevent domestic violence.

Keywords: *domestic violence, patriarchal terrorism, power control, informal justice, COVID-19 pandemic*

Memory Frames Under Siege: Theorizing the Evolution of Mullivaikkal Memorial Politics

Shamini Chandran

Political Science and Public Policy, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo

shami@poli.cmb.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

Memorial politics in Mullivaikkal, the location of the 2009 finale of the Sri Lankan civil war, reflects the state's policing of collective memory in the face of Tamil resistance. This resistance has shifted from the 2019 demolitions of memorials—such as the Jaffna University stone demolished in 2021—to the 2025 surveillance and legal restrictions on the use of symbols such as kanji porridge, amid tensions between the diaspora and the UNHRC, the economic crisis, and state restrictions (Sri Lanka Campaign, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024; CPA, 2016). This paper proposes a new approach to memorial politics through the application of Maurice Halbwachs's theory of socially framed memories, which can be erased by the state to deny solidarity with victims, and John Paul Lederach's concept of "re-storying" encounters for reconciliation, to create a new approach to memorial politics in the context of transitional justice, challenging state-induced forgetting (Halbwachs, 1992, as cited in Dazzo, 2021; Lederach, 1997). Using qualitative discourse analysis of reports (UNHRC, Amnesty International), media timelines (BBC, Groundviews), and state discourses equating grief with LTTE terrorism, this study examines the shift in strategies from overt destruction to covert control, which permits Tamil covert practices while denying co-narratives, further entrenching ethnic divides in the absence of hybrid sites (Factum, 2025; Orjuela, 2018). Key findings show that re-storying is stagnant: the 2022 leniency observed in Aragalaya has been overridden by pragmatic tightening in 2025, in contrast to international examples such as Berlin's negotiated designs or Rwanda's co-opted unity narrative (Young, 2003; Jost, 2013). Inclusive hybrid memorialization has the power to break entrenched frames, allowing Lederach-type encounters to occur. The UNHRC should mandate hybrid sites as a peacebuilding model for South Asia, breaking such frames to allow meaningful encounters to take place (Philpott, 2012; Winter, 1995).

Keywords: *Mullivaikkal, collective memory, re-storying, memorial politics, transitional justice*

THEMATIC SESSION B

Track 6 Climate Systems

Climate Risk and Financial Exclusion in Sri Lanka's Agriculture Sector: Structural Barriers and Emerging Climate-Related Risks

Eranda Roshan Fernando
Independent Researcher
eranda1580@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Agriculture is a cornerstone of Sri Lanka's rural economy, supporting employment, food security, and regional value chains. Prior research identifies three primary channels through which climate risk affects financial inclusion: physical risks, transition risks, and unintended regulatory effects. This study extends the above-mentioned perspective by integrating structural barriers to provide a more comprehensive analysis of financial exclusion among farmers and processors across major agricultural sectors, including paddy, tea, fruits, vegetables, and coconut, in key production regions of Sri Lanka, namely the North Central, Central, and Southern provinces. Using a qualitative approach, the study employed purposive sampling to select participants and collected primary data through in-depth interviews with smallholder farmers, agro-processors, and representatives from financial institutions (n = 14), ensuring representation across the above-mentioned crop types. The findings show that physical risks, such as droughts, floods, and erratic rainfall, undermine income stability, erode savings, and weaken creditworthiness. Transition risks are reflected in the limited availability of climate finance, particularly for adaptation-focused finance. While some mitigation-oriented finance exists, it largely benefits larger enterprises, sidelining smallholders and processors who lack collateral and compliance capacity. Unintended policy consequences, including regulatory changes and tariff revisions, further constrain investment viability and increase borrower risk. These risks are compounded by institutional barriers, including rigid collateral requirements, weaknesses in land administration systems, and conservative lending practices. These institutional barriers are embedded within broader structural constraints in the agricultural finance system. The interplay of climate-related risks with these structural constraints creates a reinforcing cycle, restricting both conventional credit access and the climate finance essential for adaptation and resilience-building. The study presents policy recommendations to expand adaptation-focused finance, leverage the recently established National Credit Guarantee Corporation to ease collateral constraints, and promote innovative agricultural insurance for climate risk. Aligning climate policies with equitable finance access is vital for inclusive agricultural growth.

Keywords: *Climate Risk; Financial Exclusion; Structural Barriers*

Can Climate Litigation be used to Protect the Poor? A Comparative Study of Public Interest Litigation in Sri Lanka and Pakistan

C. Lakshan Wickramasingha
Faculty of Law, University of Colombo
chethanalakshan2000@gamil.com

ABSTRACT

Climate change is increasingly affecting communities in South Asia. In countries such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan, floods, droughts, and other extreme weather events have severe consequences for low-income and marginalised groups who have limited resources to adapt or recover. While courts in Pakistan have directly addressed climate change through constitutional litigation, Sri Lanka has not yet developed a clear body of climate-specific case law. This difference raises an important question: can climate litigation be used as a legal tool to protect the poor? This study examines the potential of public interest environmental litigation to advance climate justice in Sri Lanka, drawing lessons from Pakistan's judicial experience. Using a comparative doctrinal approach, the research analyses constitutional provisions relating to fundamental rights, equality, and state responsibility in both countries. It reviews significant environmental and climate-related cases to understand how courts have interpreted state obligations in the context of environmental harm and climate inaction. The study finds that Pakistan's judiciary has explicitly recognised climate inaction as a violation of fundamental rights, thereby strengthening accountability mechanisms. In contrast, although Sri Lankan courts permit such litigation, they have not yet clearly framed climate change as a rights-based issue. The research concludes that Sri Lanka possesses the constitutional foundation necessary to develop climate litigation. With strategic judicial engagement and legal reform, climate litigation could become an important mechanism for protecting vulnerable communities and promoting climate justice.

Keywords: *Climate litigation, Climate Justice, Public interest litigation, Poverty, Sri Lanka*

Beyond Cash Transfers: Governance, Climate Stress, and the Structural Limits of Poverty Reduction in District Mohmand of Peripheral Pakistan.

Shakeel Ahmed, PhD; Fakhre Alam, PhD
Department of Social Work, University of Peshawar, Pakistan
shakeel@uop.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

Across the Global South, peripheral regions experiencing conflict and climate stress remain locked in multidimensional poverty, despite expanding social protection initiatives. In Pakistan's newly merged districts, governance fragmentation, ecological vulnerability, and limited institutional capacity challenge the sustainability of poverty reduction efforts. Grounded in the capability approach, this study frames poverty as a condition shaped by structural inequalities, constrained agency, and uneven access to public resources. The study explores whether multi-sectoral poverty reduction strategies, particularly Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programmes, enable long-term resilience or reinforce short-term relief cycles in District Mohmand. It also examines how governance arrangements intersect the relationship between climate pressures, conflict legacies, and development outcomes. Employing a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design, the research integrates quantitative survey data from 341 beneficiaries with qualitative semi-structured interviews. An abductive analytical framework enables the study to connect empirical findings with broader theoretical debates on governance and capability expansion. Findings reveal that governance gaps remain central to persistent vulnerability. High levels of displacement (85%), drought exposure (44%), and unemployment (42.2%) illustrate compounded risks. Although CCT initiatives foster localised resilience — enhancing social cohesion, reducing communal tensions, and supporting small-scale climate-adaptive infrastructure — 62.5% of respondents reported predominantly emergency-focused assistance. Gendered labour burdens and weak interdepartmental coordination further limit transformative outcomes. The study argues for a paradigm shift from project-based poverty alleviation toward integrated governance reform that prioritises climate-sensitive planning, cross-sector coordination, and citizen participation. By situating evidence from Mohmand within broader Global South debates, the paper contributes policy-relevant insights on strengthening institutional pathways for sustainable development in crisis-affected regions.

Keywords: *Governance and Poverty, Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs), Mohmand, Climate and Conflict-Affected Regions, Global South Development.*

Integrated Drainage and Climate-Resilient Water Management in the Lower Gal Oya Basin, Sri Lanka.

Mohideen Pichai Mohamed Irshath¹, Sinnathamby Abdul Jabbar²

Research Fellow, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka¹, Consultant, Dev Consultants²
engsaj@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The Senanayake Samudraya was constructed in 1953 under the Gal Oya Development Board as one of Sri Lanka's earliest large-scale multipurpose irrigation schemes, designed to irrigate approximately 125,000 acres, with an additional 30,000 acres sustained through return flows. Although the project significantly increased regional agricultural productivity, inadequate attention to downstream drainage created long-term hydrological imbalances in the Lower Gal Oya River Basin, particularly in Karaivahu and the Periyakalappu coastal belt from Kalmunai to Akkaraipattu in the Ampara District. These flat terrains, with naturally poor drainage gradients, experience prolonged waterlogging, resulting in soil degradation, salinity development, and partial land abandonment. The objectives of this study are to evaluate drainage deficiencies and their impacts on waterlogging and soil degradation, and to develop a climate-resilient water management framework for sustainable agriculture in the Gal Oya River Division. Data on rainfall, temperature, evaporation, streamflow, reservoir releases, historical flood records, and drainage maps were carefully integrated with field surveys and soil analyses. The study shows that paddy cultivation in low-lying coastal areas of the Ampara District was solely dependent on independent minor tanks and flood irrigation from the Gal Oya River prior to the commissioning of the Gal Oya Irrigation Scheme, and that current prolonged waterlogging is attributed to inadequate outfall drainage and the accumulation of irrigation return flows. The evidence shows that sustainable agricultural development requires improved water management and effective drainage systems for enhanced production. Therefore, comprehensive expert studies need to be carried out to promote adaptive water management practices, implement drainage infrastructure modernisation, and strengthen resilience to climate change, in order to protect existing arable lands and ensure long-term agricultural sustainability in the Lower Gal Oya Basin.

Keywords: *Irrigation drainage, climate resilience, reservoir management, flood mitigation.*

MISP E+: An Integrated Machine Learning-Based Decision Support System for Flood Emergency Resource Allocation in Sri Lanka

H.D.M.R. Haputhanthri, P.C.D. Kulasinghe, R.C.S. Ranasinghe, N.T. Weerawarna
Department of Information and Communication Technology, Faculty of Technology,
University of Colombo
2020t00871@stu.cmb.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

Flooding is among the most recurrent natural hazards in Sri Lanka, especially in Gampaha District. Although the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) is recognised worldwide as a guideline for reproductive health service delivery in crisis situations, it is implemented in a mostly reactive manner using traditional, non-automated means. Traditional disaster management strategies lack an integrated system that incorporates predictive flood analytics with automated resource allocation. This paper proposes a new web-based decision support system called MISP E+, which combines machine learning for flood impact prediction with a demographic approach to MISP resource estimation. The Design Science Research approach was used for developing and validating the proposed system. Historical flood data from 2005 to 2025 were used to train a Random Forest regression model to predict the number of affected people, which in turn can be used to estimate the quantities of reproductive health commodities and essential relief items such as food, water, and medical supplies at the local level. The results indicate that the prediction model was able to estimate the affected population with an accuracy of 68.5%. Using the prediction results, the system was able to generate comprehensive emergency resource requirement projections. The system reduced the time taken in the estimation process and minimised resource wastage compared to the manual planning approach. The usability evaluation confirmed the operability of the system. The results demonstrate the potential of integrating predictive analytics with localised health resource planning to improve preparedness and response to disasters, and to promote the equitable distribution of resources among vulnerable groups.

Keywords: *Disaster Risk, Reproductive Health, Flood Prediction, Resource Allocation*

THEMATIC SESSION B

Track 7 Climate & Livelihood

Community-Led Climate Adaptation and Poverty Reduction in Environmentally Vulnerable Rural Contexts

Rajan Thavaseelan, PhD; Aditi Ghosh
ChildFund Sri Lanka
rthavaseelan@childfund.org

ABSTRACT

In Kiran, Batticaloa District in Eastern Sri Lanka, baseline assessments showed low community engagement in climate adaptation (17%), limited household food security (16%) and constrained participation in water governance (20–39%), underscoring exposure to climate-induced shocks and structural gaps in local capacity. When climate shocks collide with weak local water governance, rural poverty doesn't just persist—it compounds. Rural agrarian communities in environmentally fragile regions face escalating climate risks that deepen long-standing socio-economic vulnerabilities. This study examines whether community-led, gender-responsive climate adaptation can strengthen resilience while addressing poverty and social exclusion. Using a mixed-methods design, we draw on baseline and outcome-level quantitative data complemented by qualitative participatory tools—hazard mapping, seasonal calendars, and livelihood risk assessments. The intervention reached 2,353 participants and included the rehabilitation of minor irrigation tanks and canals; renovation of tube wells and drinking water systems; the formation of inclusive water management committees; training of young lead farmers (YLFs) in climate-smart agriculture (CSA); seed bank strengthening; climate-resilient home gardening and flood-preparedness simulations with local authorities. Findings indicate measurable gains in water security, agricultural productivity, and livelihood diversification. Tank rehabilitation enabled paddy cultivation across 293 acres, while 70% of targeted domestic water systems reported year-round functionality. CSA adoption among YLFs supported crop diversification and intensified cultivation cycles; solar-powered drip and micro-sprinkler systems increased yields and reduced labor requirements. Women-headed households reported greater savings from home gardening and small livestock, along with improved participation in community water governance. The study concludes that participatory, locally grounded adaptation models can reduce climate vulnerability and contribute to poverty reduction. Embedding community-driven risk assessments within decentralized policy frameworks is essential to sustaining equitable, scalable climate resilience outcomes. The intervention aligns with the National Adaptation Plan (2016–2025), which prioritizes water, food security and community-level governance, and with gender-responsive adaptation commitments across agriculture and water sectors.

Keywords: *climate adaptation, community resilience, poverty reduction, climate-smart agriculture, participatory governance*

Uninhabitability, Vulnerable Communities, Climate-Induced Displacement and Relocation as an Adaptive Strategy: The Case of Sri Lanka

Nishara Fernando

Department of Sociology, University of Colombo

nishara.fernando@soc.cmb.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

According to the Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025, 9.8 million people were displaced due to disasters in 2024. While many of these individuals returned home after a disaster, this often occurred because they did not receive adequate support to rebuild in safer areas. Their needs are frequently overlooked. As a result, those living in hazard-prone areas feel compelled to stay, fully aware that they are exposing themselves to ongoing risks because they lack the resources to relocate. Groups facing multiple sources of social vulnerability choose to take the risk of living in hazardous environments, despite understanding the long-term negative consequences of this choice. Another group has been forcibly relocated as a strategy to reduce risk exposure, often ending up in unplanned settlements against their will. This situation perpetuates a cycle of poverty and social vulnerability even though these individuals are no longer exposed to immediate hazards. In this context, the researcher aims to illustrate how these new settlements have become development failures and to identify the new policies that should be implemented to make climate-induced relocation a success, drawing on empirical data collected from relocation settlements in Colombo, Galle, Kegalle, and Bulathsinhala, using a longitudinal study design. Interviews conducted with random samples of respondents living in selected settlements at various stages of relocation reveal that many displaced individuals remain trapped in a cycle of poverty, sometimes passing these conditions on to their descendants. The findings also indicate that some families have moved out of the settlements due to a lack of employment opportunities, rising expenses, conflicts between the host communities and the relocated individuals, or a lack of essential services. Additionally, some families have opted to maintain residences in both their new and old settlements to maximise the benefits of each location. In conclusion, the research emphasises the importance of treating relocation as a long-term, people-centred process, providing multiple relocation options, conducting periodic monitoring and evaluation of vulnerable groups and supporting them to ensure that climate-induced relocation is secure and sustainable.

Keywords: *climate-induced displacement and relocation, uninhabitability, adaptation, vulnerability*

From Line Rooms to Livelihood Justice - Enhancing Safety, Income Security, and Social Cohesion Among Plantation Workers in Disaster-prone Sri Lanka

Sivalingam. H.

Medicines Sans Frontiers (MSF)/ Doctors without Borders

sh69849955@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka's tea industry has underpinned national prosperity, generating significant export earnings and providing livelihoods for hundreds of thousands of workers. Yet the economic value of tea has often masked the persistent hardship faced by those who harvest it. In Ury Estate, Gonakelle Estate, and Me Male Estate in the Badulla District, workers endure unstable incomes, hazardous work without adequate safety equipment, and overcrowded line room housing with limited access to basic services long before environmental shocks struck. The devastation caused by Cyclone Dityah in November 2025 dramatically exposed the extent of structural vulnerability in plantation communities through widespread flooding and landslides. To examine how entrenched inequalities shaped livelihood outcomes, structured household surveys (n = 210), semi-structured interviews (n = 32) and prolonged participant observation were undertaken across the three estates. Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26, applying descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations and regression analysis to identify patterns in income stability, occupational risk exposure and access to social protection. Thematic analysis of qualitative data captured workers' lived experiences, coping strategies and community responses. The findings revealed that 72 % of households experienced unstable incomes, 64 % of workers lacked basic safety gear, and over 80 % lived in structurally vulnerable housing prone to disaster risk. These overlapping pressures eroded social cohesion, intensified competition for scarce resources and exacerbated livelihood insecurity. Although labour and housing policies existed in principle, weak enforcement allowed structural deprivation to persist. Ensuring fixed living wages, enforcing labour protections, guaranteeing access to occupational safety and healthcare and investing in disaster-resilient housing with reliable water and sanitation are urgent priorities to strengthen community resilience and safeguard the long-term sustainability of Sri Lanka's tea sector.

Keywords: *disaster resilience, labour law, occupational hazards, income instability, social cohesion*

**Climate Change and Rural Livelihoods: Adaptation Strategies in Medirigiriya DSD,
Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka**

P.P.G. Thushan Kavinda
Department of Geography, University of Kelaniya
thushankavinda266@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Rural communities in Sri Lanka's dry zone, particularly in the Medirigiriya Divisional Secretariat Division (DSD) in Polonnaruwa, are increasingly vulnerable to climate change, as shifting rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts and rising temperatures threaten agricultural productivity, household income, and food security. This study examines how these communities perceive climate risks and the strategies they adopt to sustain their livelihoods, using a mixed-methods approach that combines structured household surveys with in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in selected villages. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to assess changes in crop yields, income stability and food security, with results indicating that over 65% of households reported a decline in crop yields, while 58% experienced income instability due to climate variability, and more than 70% of respondents identified water scarcity as a major challenge affecting agricultural activities. Qualitative findings further explore local knowledge, coping mechanisms, and barriers to adaptation. The findings reveal that households employ multiple adaptation strategies, including crop diversification, water-saving irrigation techniques, seasonal labor migration, and reliance on community networks; however, limited access to financial resources, agricultural extension services, and timely climate information constrains effective adaptation, while social capital and indigenous knowledge play a significant role in enhancing resilience. The study highlights that targeted interventions, such as promoting climate-smart agriculture, improving access to climate information and strengthening social protection programs, can significantly enhance adaptive capacity and reduce vulnerability in rural communities.

Keywords: *climate change, rural livelihoods, resilience, dry zone, vulnerability, adaptation*

On the Wrong Side of the Curve: Exploring the Waste Kuznets Curve and Waste Management Policy and Legal Frameworks in South Asia

D.S.K. Athulathmudali, D.S.N. Ferdinando, K.A. Gunawardena
Independent Researcher
ferdinandonatalie@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Solid waste disposal in South Asia is escalating due to rapid, unplanned urbanization and economic growth, rendering many areas uninhabitable. Despite being emerging economies, the region faces challenges in achieving sustainable development due to overconsumption and weak solid waste management policies. This study analyzes the impact of economic growth on solid waste in South Asia by exploring the Waste Kuznets Curve hypothesis, which posits that economic growth initially increases waste generation but eventually leads to improved waste management practices. The study covers the period from 1990 to 2019, focusing on selected South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The quantitative data were retrieved from the World Bank Indicators database and Our World in Data. The variables comprised methane emissions from waste as the dependent variable, and GDP Per Capita, Net Foreign Direct Investment as a Percentage of GDP, Domestic Material Consumption Per Capita, and the Government Effectiveness index as the independent variables. The qualitative data was drawn from publicly accessible policy documents, and parliamentary acts of the selected South Asian countries, benchmarked against international frameworks on waste management of the UNEP and the UN SDGs. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining descriptive statistical analysis with a Panel ARDL model to investigate the relationship between economic growth and waste generation, supplemented by a thematic analysis of waste management policies. The findings reveal an N-shaped Waste Kuznets Curve in South Asia, indicating that waste generation initially rises with income, declines due to better solid waste management policies, but subsequently increases again at higher income levels. The thematic analysis identifies holistic waste control mechanisms in most of the South Asian countries, yet significant gaps in prevention and mitigation strategies remain, impeding adaptation to the long-run equilibrium. These findings underscore the need for stronger policy frameworks capable of mitigating and preventing waste generation to alter the trajectory of the Waste Kuznets Curve and improve sustainable waste management across the region.

Keywords: *economic growth; Kuznets curve; Panel ARDL; solid waste; South Asia*

THEMATIC SESSION B

Track 8 Gender and Youth Agency

Married Women's Labor Force Participation as a Household Coping Strategy during Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis.

B.A.D.S. Sahasra
Centre for Poverty Analysis
Sahasra@cepa.lk

ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka's recent economic crisis has created significant economic and social pressures on households, and reshaped labor market dynamics and income-generating strategies. In such contexts, women's labor force participation often emerges as an important household coping mechanism when families face income instability. This study examines how the economic crisis influenced female labor force participation in Sri Lanka and whether married women entered the labor market as a household coping strategy during periods of economic hardship. The study uses cross-sectional quantitative data from the Sri Lanka Labor Force Survey (LFS) for the years 2018, 2021, 2022, and 2023, allowing a comparison of female labor force participation in the pre-crisis and crisis periods. Logistic regression models are employed to estimate the probability of labor force participation among married women of working age (15 years and above). The analysis controls for key socio-economic and demographic characteristics, including age, education level, regional sectors, spousal income level. In addition, household dependency characteristics, such as the presence of infants, young children, and elderly household members are incorporated to assess how family responsibilities influence women's participation in the labor market. The findings suggest that the economic crisis increased the likelihood of married women entering the labor force, indicating the presence of an added worker effect, where women seek employment to compensate for household income losses. However, the magnitude of this response varies depending on household circumstances, particularly the presence of dependent children and elderly family members, which may limit women's ability to engage in paid employment. The study contributes to discussions on economic resilience and inclusive labor markets by highlighting how female labor force participation can support household coping strategies during periods of economic crisis and instability.

Keywords: *Female Labor Force Participation, Economic Crisis, Household dependency, Married Women, Sri Lanka.*

Social Reproduction, Informal Labour, and Artisanal Wages: Feminist Economic Evidence from Women Kantha Embroidery Workers in Rural Bengal

Monami Sinha, Narender Thakur, Subhashree Sanyal, Sipoy Sarveswar
University of Delhi
msinha@knc.du.ac.in

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the gendered political economy of Kantha embroidery in rural Birbhum, West Bengal, using primary field data collected under an ICSSR-funded ethnographic and quantitative research project. Kantha embroidery, a traditional craft historically practiced by women within the domestic sphere, constitutes a significant yet undervalued source of livelihood for rural households. Through a mixed-methods approach combining survey-based descriptive statistics and multivariate regression modelling, this study investigates the determinants of Kantha wages, the socio-economic characteristics of artisans, and the extent to which income earned from home-based craft work contributes to women's empowerment and children's educational expenditure. The findings reveal that although Kantha wages are low, they provide essential financial support, particularly for school fees, private tuition, and household consumption. Income from Kantha work expands women's agency in household decision-making and strengthens their bargaining position, consistent with feminist economic arguments that even small increments in earnings can enhance women's capabilities and choices (Kabeer, 1999). The analysis is situated within feminist theories of social reproduction and informal labour. Diane Elson's framework illustrates how women combine reproductive labour and productive labour within the same domestic space, leading to undervaluation of their paid work because it is embedded within unpaid household responsibilities (Elson, 1995). This dynamic is visible in Birbhum, where Kantha stitching is performed in fragmented intervals of time after cooking, cleaning, and caregiving, producing what feminist scholars identify as severe time poverty. Nancy Folbre's argument that markets rely on and exploit women's socially expected altruism and domestic obligations further explains the low-wage equilibrium faced by Kantha artisans (Folbre, 2001). Despite the high skill content of their work, women receive wages that do not reflect either the labour intensity or cultural value of Kantha embroidery. The study's regression results also support Bina Agarwal's insight that asset ownership shapes women's bargaining power, as landlessness is associated with significantly lower Kantha wages (Agarwal, 1997). Together, these empirical and theoretical contributions demonstrate that women's home-based craft labour sustains rural households while remaining structurally undervalued due to gendered institutions, historical marginalisation, and exploitative supply chains. Strengthening the Kantha sector through state procurement, cooperative organisation, and design innovation can improve both livelihoods and gender equity. The study contributes to feminist economics by providing new quantitative evidence on how informal artisanal work shapes women's agency, household welfare, and intergenerational educational outcomes.

Keywords: *Kantha embroidery, gendered political economy, women's empowerment, informal labour, home-based work*

Strengthening Rural Livelihoods through Dairy Interventions: Evidence on Women's Empowerment and Poverty Reduction in Bangladesh

Shahana Afrose Chowdhury, PhD
Department of Environmental Studies and Sustainability,
University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh
shahana.chowdhury@ulab.edu.bd

ABSTRACT

Livelihood interventions in rural Bangladesh increasingly emphasize women's economic empowerment and asset-based development as pathways to sustainable poverty reduction. However, rigorous longitudinal evidence on the gendered impacts of dairy-based programs remains limited. This study examines the socio-economic and empowerment outcomes of households participating in the Kazi Shahid Foundation (KSF) dairy intervention between 2019 and 2025.

The study assesses changes in household welfare, livelihood diversification, women's decision-making power, resilience to shocks and poverty status, with a specific focus on intra-household gender dynamics. A longitudinal panel dataset was constructed using household surveys conducted at baseline (2019) and follow-up (2025). Descriptive and comparative analyses were applied, with program membership duration used as a proxy for exposure intensity.

The findings indicate significant improvements in multidimensional livelihood outcomes. Households experienced enhanced housing conditions, sanitation and accumulation of productive assets. Importantly, women's empowerment improved substantially, with increased control over income, ownership of dairy assets, and participation in household decision-making. The intervention also contributed to positive shifts in gender norms, reflected in modest reductions in early marriage, dowry practices, and gender-based violence. In addition, households demonstrated improved resilience, relying more on savings and diversified income sources rather than distress coping strategies. Poverty incidence declined over time, with longer program participation associated with higher income and asset accumulation.

The study concludes that integrated, women-centered dairy interventions can generate synergistic impacts across economic and social dimensions. The findings highlight the policy importance of promoting women's asset ownership, financial inclusion, and sustained program engagement to achieve inclusive rural development and long-term poverty reduction.

Keywords: *Livelihood improvement; Dairy-based interventions; Women's empowerment; Poverty reduction; Household resilience*

Economic Hardship and Social Participation: Poverty as a Barrier to Youth with Mental Health Conditions

Loku Yaddehige Deneesha Pabasarie

Youth and Community Development Unit, Department of Social Studies, Open University of Sri Lanka
lypab@ou.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

Poverty and disability are closely interconnected, particularly for young people experiencing mental health conditions in low-resource contexts. Although increasing attention has been given to disability-inclusive development, the economic challenges faced by youth with psychosocial disabilities remain underexplored. These challenges significantly shape their social participation and everyday experiences. Addressing this gap, this study examines how poverty and economic hardship shape the social participation of youth with mental health conditions. The study, using a qualitative research design, involved 15 young people aged 18–35 years who were receiving treatment at the Mental Health Clinic of Matara General Hospital in Sri Lanka. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that economic hardship functions as a central and cross-cutting barrier to social participation. Unemployment, unstable income, and treatment-related expenses significantly restricted opportunities for education, vocational development, and community engagement. Financial constraints limited access to diverse treatment options, with participants relying primarily on public healthcare services, being unable to afford private care or alternative medications. Family-level poverty intensified economic dependency, limiting young people's autonomy and participation in decision-making within both household and community contexts. Participants frequently reported withdrawing from social interactions due to financial constraints and perceived social inferiority. These experiences demonstrate how poverty operates not only as material deprivation but also as a structural mechanism that strengthens psychosocial exclusion and stigma. The intersection of vulnerability and mental health stigma produced a cycle of marginalization that constrained mobility, self-confidence, and social belonging. These findings highlight the need for integrated, rights-based, and disability-inclusive policies that connect mental health support with employment opportunities, social protection mechanisms, and community-based interventions. Addressing economic marginalization is essential for promoting equitable social participation and inclusive development among youth with psychosocial disabilities.

Keywords: *Poverty, Psychosocial Disability, Youth, Social Participation, Social Exclusion*

From Economic Precarity to Political Assertion: Relative Poverty and Youth Democratic Engagement in the Contemporary Social Order

K. Dilki Nathasha Priyadarshani
Department of Public Policy, University of Ruhuna.
kdnpdilkinathasha@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Relative poverty plays a central role, as does analyzed poverty in developing countries. It refers to the condition in which people lack the minimum income required to maintain the average standard of living in their society (World Bank, 2024). Current South Asian youth are increasingly concerned about relative deprivation and are insecure about their future. They are responding both individually and collectively to address these issues. Relative poverty describes the state of people whose income is less than a specified proportion of the median income of the total population, indicating inequality in income distribution (OECD, 2022). This study targets understanding the evolving new dynamics of youth democratic practices under economic hardship and relative poverty. The research problem is, despite varying levels of absolute poverty, how does relative poverty shape the democratic engagement of youth in post-2022 Sri Lanka? This study adopts a mixed-method research design. Qualitative data were be collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with civil society activists and academics and will be thematically analyzed. Quantitative data were gathered through questionnaires distributed among three clusters: university students, alumni, and non-university youth, selected through a random sampling method. NVivo and SPSS software was utilized for data analysis. Relative deprivation theory, economic insecurity, and social inclusion and exclusion are the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding this study. The findings indicate that 84% of respondents view digital political engagement as a collective strategy to address relative poverty, while 71% prefer migration as an individual solution, revealing a dual response to economic insecurity. Limited time and economic pressures constrain participation in community-based political activities, suggesting a shift from traditional to more flexible forms of engagement. Despite the perception that the current government is the last institutional option for reducing inequality, satisfaction remains partial. However, 67% of respondents still express optimism, indicating a complex relationship between relative deprivation and democratic trust. This study highlights how the new dynamics of youth democratic engagement evolve under conditions of relative deprivation and generates important implications for understanding youth participation and future social and political development in Sri Lanka.

Key Words: *Relative Poverty, Democracy, Youth, Development*

THEMATIC SESSION C

Track 9 Trade Liberalisation, FTAs and Poverty

Assessing Economic Effects of U.S. Tariffs on the Sri Lankan Economy: A CGE Analysis Using the GTAP Model

Udaya Namalgama, Jeevika Weerahewa, PhD; Sumali Dissanayake
Postgraduate Institute of Agriculture-University of Peradeniya
udaya.caa@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In August 2025, the United States announced significant tariff increases on selected trading partners, with Sri Lanka initially facing a 44% ad valorem duty, later reduced to 20%. Given that the United States absorbs nearly one quarter of Sri Lanka's exports, primarily apparel, rubber, and tea, valued at approximately US\$3 billion annually, the economy is highly vulnerable to such measures. The apparel sector, a major source of rural income and female employment, is particularly exposed. Despite extensive global research on U.S. tariff escalation, limited attention has been paid to smaller South Asian economies. This study addresses that gap by assessing the economy-wide impacts of U.S. tariffs on Sri Lanka using the Global Trade Analysis Project (GTAP) model, distinguishing between short-run (fixed capital) and long-run (mobile capital) adjustments. The results of the simulation reveal significant negative effects under both tariff scenarios on the Sri Lankan economy. A 44% tariff reduces GDP by 0.93% in the short run and 0.46% in the long run, while a 20% tariff leads to declines of 0.50% and 0.25%, respectively. Exports and imports contract markedly, with sharper long-run export reductions. Apparel output falls dramatically by over 40% in the short run under the 44% tariff and declines further in the long run, reflecting structural adjustment and resource reallocation toward light and heavy manufacturing and other tradable sectors. Factor prices and labor incomes decline significantly, particularly in the short run, while welfare losses reach US\$3.4 billion under the 44% tariff scenario. Although capital mobility moderates these effects over time, negative impacts on allocative efficiency, terms of trade, and investment persist. The findings underscore the urgency of export diversification, regional trade integration, productivity upgrading, and domestic adjustment policies to strengthen Sri Lanka's resilience against external protectionist shocks.

Keywords - U.S. Tariffs, GTAP-CGE Model, Export Diversification, Sri Lanka Economy

A Case for a 21st Century India-Sri Lanka FTA

Deshal De Mel & Ganeshan Wignaraja, PhD

Economists

deshald@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The India-Sri Lanka FTA (ILFTA) is Sri Lanka's oldest and most successful bilateral trade deal. Some reduction in trade barriers through the ILFTA has enabled Sri Lanka to increase trade and investment flows with a globally rising Indian economy. Bilateral talks on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership (CEPA) and an Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement (ECTA) have followed with partial success. The ILFTA has also set the stage for Sri Lanka's subsequent free trade agreements (FTAs) with Pakistan, Singapore, Thailand and the South Asian Free Trade Agreement. Critics of the ILFTA cite a widening trade deficit favouring India, limited use of preferences by Sri Lankan exporters due to non-tariff barriers, and unfair competition for local small and medium enterprises. Amidst an ongoing domestic debate on the benefits of FTAs in an uncertain global economy, a Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) expert committee is currently reviewing the country's existing and proposed FTAs to make recommendations. To contribute to this review and debates on trade, this essay assesses outcomes from India-Sri Lanka trade talks, examines some of the issues and challenges, and makes suggestions. The proposals cover the adoption of a modern FTA template like the UK/EU models, speed and ambition of an India-Sri Lanka FTA, building trade negotiations capacity and introducing formal stakeholder consultations.

Keywords: *ILFTA, bilateral trade, FTAs, non-tariff barriers, trade policy reform*

Impact of Border Closures on Trade and Livelihoods: A Case Study of Pakistan–Afghanistan Trade Suspension Amid Political Tensions

Islam Gul
SBS Radio Australia
islam.gul.afridi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Since 12th October 2025, escalating tensions between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban—following Pakistani airstrikes on suspected TTP hideouts inside Afghanistan—have led to the closure of five major border crossings: Torkham, Kharlachi, Ghulam Khan, Angoor Adda, and Chaman. Initially shut for all movement, after one month Pakistan allowed only returning Afghan refugees. However, on February 26, renewed cross-border firing caused a complete shutdown, even for refugees. The hostilities have also triggered mass displacement near Torkham and in Chitral’s Arandu area. For five months, trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and transit trade to Central Asia, has been severely disrupted, causing significant economic losses to Pakistan’s industrial sector and agricultural exports. Border communities—customs agents, laborers, transporters, hotel operators, and mechanics—depend heavily on this trade. Official data shows bilateral trade was USD 2.46 billion in 2024, but declined to roughly USD 1.77 billion in 2025, a nearly 40% drop. Pakistan’s exports include wheat, sugar, pharmaceuticals, cement, petroleum products, textiles, and machinery, highlighting Afghanistan’s dependence on Pakistan. Conversely, Afghanistan exports fresh/dried fruits, vegetables, coal, talc, precious stones, carpets, hides, and cotton. Small traders and vulnerable communities are hardest hit; in Peshawar, pharmaceutical and industrial businesses face supply chain disruptions and employment threats. This study examines impacts on economic inequality, employment, access to essential goods, and poverty reduction. It employs a mixed-methods design: primary data via semi-structured interviews with trade unions, officials, traders, laborers, and experts; secondary data from official statistics, media, and literature. This allows triangulation of quantitative indicators (trade volumes, losses) and qualitative dimensions (stakeholder experiences). Findings highlight that border closures disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, undermine regional integration, and hinder industrial and agricultural growth. Moreover, since 9/11, crossings like Ghakhi Pass and Kaga Pass remain closed, worsening long-term hardships. The research underscores the urgent need for robust policy frameworks to ensure trade continuity despite political uncertainty.

Keywords: *Pakistan–Afghanistan trade, border closures, economic losses, employment and poverty, policy framework*

MSMEs and E-Commerce Trade: Evidence from a Firm-Level Survey of 953 Firms in Sri Lanka

Anishka de Zylva, Thamali Ranasinghe, PhD; Ganeshan Wignaraja, PhD
Daraz Sri Lanka, Alibaba Group, and ODI Global
anishka.dezylva@daraz.lk

ABSTRACT

E-commerce trade is a growing area of research in trade and development, but there is limited evidence on the dynamics of cross-border e-commerce in developing countries. Micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) constitute the majority of Sri Lanka's firms and employment, and policy makers view them as a critical pathway for poverty reduction and economic recovery from recent economic and climate-related crises. However, there is an absence of evidence on how e-commerce or digital channels influence trade participation of MSMEs in Sri Lanka and the role of the regulatory environment. This paper seeks to address these research gaps by investigating the participation of MSMEs in international trade in Sri Lanka, particularly through e-commerce, and the policy constraints that shape their trading behaviour. The empirical analysis examines the relationship between firm size, e-commerce adoption and trade participation in Sri Lanka. It also attempts to shed light on how the regulatory environment influences trade participation by firm size. It draws on a rich firm-level survey of 953 importers and exporters in Sri Lanka conducted in late 2025 and early 2026. The paper analyzes firm-level trade patterns across traditional and e-commerce channels and explores how factors such as firm size, age, and capability influence participation in cross-border trade. The findings suggest that smaller, newer firms are more likely to adopt e-commerce as a market access strategy and that e-commerce trade is associated with export diversification. E-commerce participation also appears to shift firms toward consumer-oriented sectors and direct-to-consumer cross-border trade. However, firm-level trade participation is influenced by regulatory constraints, including complex customs documentation, logistics delays, foreign exchange restrictions, and skills gaps. The results suggest that firm characteristics play a role in shaping trade participation, while regulatory and business environment factors significantly influence firms' ability to engage in cross-border e-commerce trade. The paper highlights several policy implications for improving trade facilitation, strengthening digital capabilities, and enabling MSMEs to integrate more effectively into global markets through e-commerce.

Keywords: Trade, E-commerce, Sri Lanka, MSMEs, Firm-level Analysis

K. Shanmugam
Centre for Poverty Analysis
kamal.shan91@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Trade liberalisation has been a pivotal factor in economic reform in many developing countries. There have been numerous studies regarding whether an open market and trade integration promote economic growth and development and transform the economy into a modern export-oriented industrial system, thereby ultimately reducing poverty. Critics argue that trade liberalisation can expand income inequality and weaken domestic industrial production. Sri Lanka adopted an open economic policy in 1977, relatively earlier than major economies such as China and India. The trade liberalisation policy aimed to reduce import tariffs, promote export-oriented industry by attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and establish Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) to expand trade integration and economic development. Despite these policy initiatives, the question remains regarding the extent to which trade liberalisation has contributed to sustainable and inclusive poverty reduction in Sri Lanka. The trade policy reforms have significantly contributed to accelerating export earnings, technology transfer, and generating employment opportunities. In particular, the garment sector has provided employment for a large number of workers, especially female workers. These developments suggest trade openness has the potential to accelerate economic growth and reduce poverty by creating more employment opportunities through FDI inflow and expanding trade through FTAs. The objective of this study is to examine the “Impact of Trade Openness and FDI on Poverty Reduction in Sri Lanka”. This study employs ARDL model for quantitative analysis, utilising time-series data to identify the relationship between trade liberalisation and poverty outcomes. In conclusion, the study suggests that trade openness and FDI can contribute to economic growth. However, their effectiveness in reducing poverty depends on complementary policies and institutional capacity. A balanced approach that combines trade openness with inclusive economic growth is essential to ensure the benefits of global integration are widely shared across society.

Keywords: Trade openness, Foreign Direct Investments, Economic Growth, Employment, Poverty Reduction

THEMATIC SESSION C

Track 10 Educational Inequality

The Role of Financial Awareness in Shaping Poverty Outcomes of Sri Lankan Migrant Workers

Navini Premalal¹, Francis Solomantine²

Department of Legal Studies, NSBM Green University¹, Middle East Centre for Training and Development (MECTD) – Dubai²
navinikeshi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Sri Lankan labour migration to the Gulf region remains a key livelihood strategy for low-income households seeking to escape poverty. Facilitated by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) framework, aspirant migrants are required to undergo pre-departure training. However, despite its broad coverage, this training does not adequately address the financial risks associated with migration such as heavy recruitment fees where workers borrow money to pay recruitment agents and arrive in the Gulf already indebted. Once abroad, workers are effectively trapped in a debt repayment cycle where they work primarily to repay debt rather than improve livelihoods. This is coupled with the Kafala system in the Gulf where a workers' legal status is tied to their employer, limiting job mobility. An initial survey revealed, out of total respondents (N 119), more than 39 or 54% claimed that they covered the cost by obtaining a personal loan; 26 or 22% had to mortgage their property. When examining their current status of debt liability at the time of leaving the country, nearly 55 or 46% respondents claimed that they had partially settled, whereas 51 or 43% claimed that they were unable to settle. The data demonstrates that a significant proportion of workers rely on high-risk borrowing mechanisms and remain unable to fully repay their debts. As such, there is a knowledge gap; a lack of financial literacy, between migrating abroad to alleviate poverty and the risk of becoming further entrapped in debt as a result of migration. Therefore, this research examines how inadequate financial awareness among Sri Lankan migrant workers contributes to debt accumulation and ultimately undermines the poverty alleviation potential of labour migration. For this purpose, the study adopts a combined doctrinal and empirical approach. A doctrinal analysis was conducted on the SLBFE framework, IOM regulations, and the International Law regime on pre-departure training for migrant domestic workers. This is done to identify any potential legal gap in the present system. Subsequently, a survey employed on migrant workers resident in Dubai was used to reveal the real-world outcomes of the pre-departure training and the knowledge gap between the migrant workers' goal of poverty alleviation through debt repayment and making financially literate decisions. The research is conducted against the backdrop of empowerment theory and financial literacy theory of financial inclusion. Ultimately, the paper aims to examine how gaps in financial awareness among Sri Lankan migrant workers contributes to debt accumulation and undermines the effectiveness of labour migration as a strategy for poverty alleviation.

Keywords - financial awareness, migrant workers, poverty

Redefining Access: The Consequences of School Closures for Malaiyaha Tamils

Letchumanan Kamaleswary, Shani Asokan, Vijaykumar Sugumaran
Centre for Equality and Justice, Independent Researcher, Independent Researcher
lkamales85@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Current education reforms in Sri Lanka represent a comprehensive overhaul, encompassing systemic changes to existing structures. As part of a strategy to optimize human resources and infrastructure, the government has proposed the closure of schools with fewer than 50 students. This policy poses a disproportionate threat to the Malaiyaha Tamil community, who are already marginalized within the formal education system and experience significantly higher dropout rates compared to national averages. This proposal risks institutionalizing a new form of educational exclusion, further marginalizing a community already struggling to achieve parity in educational development.

This study employs a mixed methods approach to capture the perspectives of diverse stakeholders. Ten key-informant interviews were conducted with teachers, principals, and parents from plantation communities and activists. Further, an online rapid poll was conducted with 100 primary school teachers working in schools situated in plantation areas in Nuwareliya, Badulla, Kandy, Rathnapura, Kegalle and Matale districts where a majority of the Malaiyaha Tamils reside. Content and narrative data analysis methods were used, and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach was applied to the findings of the study.

The study found that teachers from primary schools situated in plantation areas are aware of ongoing educational reforms and are concerned that small schools with less than 100 students will be shut down, leading to higher school dropouts and poor development and education among Malaiyaha Tamils. Teachers recommend that reforms should include consultations with the plantation community, and teachers at those schools. Alternatives to school closures should be considered for optimal resource utilization, in the best interests of all children.

Findings of this study are relevant to those working on education and development, including policymakers currently involved in education reforms, as data indicated that education systems cannot take a 'one size fits all' approach. Diverse socioeconomic factors must be taken into consideration, including the lived experiences of the plantation community when considering school location, attendance, and allocation of resources.

Keywords: *Malaiyaha Tamils, education, plantation schools, reformation, estate*

Bridging Digital Disparity Amongst Social Groups in Promoting Equitable Access to Quality Education in India

Minaketan Behera, PhD
Centre for Informal Sector and Labour Studies,
School of Social Sciences,
Jawaharlal Nehru University
behera.minaketan@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In India, digital teaching has become pervasive over the past few years and accelerated more during the COVID pandemic. National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) also aims to build an empowered education sector by unleashing the potential of digital learning. The national education policy aims to expedite the universalisation of education through the intensive use of digital devices and services by teachers and students. However, certain challenges are faced, such as digital disparities owing to class, gender, regional, and caste divides within India's population. This impedes the process of digital learning. Using secondary data, this paper examines issues in digital learning, particularly inequalities in access to digital platforms across caste, class, and gender. The study outlines various measures to address inequalities and ensure that students from all backgrounds can access digital learning. Educational institutions need to adopt a more inclusive and flexible approach by understanding student profiles and making efforts to reduce the existing digital and educational inequalities that adversely affect the performance of females, students from rural and low-income households, and those from specific social and marginalised groups.

Note: Chairperson and Professor of Economics, Centre for Informal Sector and Labour Studies (CIS&LS), School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi-110 067, Email: behera.minaketan@gmail.com

Keywords: Digital learning, inequalities, higher education, marginalised groups, digital divide, discrimination.

Barriers to Post-Ordinary Level Educational Continuation in Matuwagala Estate, Ratnapura District: Structural Constraints Affecting A/L Transition

S.Fathima Sharfin¹, S.Lakshana²

¹District Secretariat Colombo.

²Department of Political Science, University Of Peradeniya.
sharfi199@gmail.com, lakshanasanthakumar1@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Education is universally recognized as a pathway to social mobility and a means of overcoming poverty and marginalization. Yet, within Sri Lanka's plantation estate sector, persistent inequalities continue to hinder equitable access to higher levels of education. While primary school enrollment is nearly universal, the transition from the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (G.C.E. O/L) to Advanced Level (A/L) remains alarmingly low in estate communities compared to urban and rural populations. This study investigates the structural barriers affecting the continuation of education beyond the O/L stage in Matuwagala Estate, Ratnapura District, with the key objective of identifying socioeconomic, institutional, and cultural constraints that limit progression to A/L. Out of a school population of 250 students, only 20 (8%) reach the O/L stage, and a mere 5 (2%) continue to A/L, reflecting a systemic discontinuation rate of 75% among O/L completers. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative data from school records and household surveys with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews involving students, parents, teachers, and estate administrators. Findings highlight chronic poverty, household income insecurity, and the necessity of early wage labor as primary drivers of school discontinuation. Domestic responsibilities, particularly for female students, further exacerbate the challenge. Institutional limitations such as restricted A/L subject streams, shortages of qualified teachers, inadequate facilities, and language barriers compound the problem, while entrenched gender norms disproportionately affect girls' educational continuation. The study concludes that the low transition to A/L is not a reflection of individual academic failure but rather the outcome of deep-rooted structural inequalities. Addressing these barriers requires targeted financial assistance, improved institutional resources, and strengthened educational support systems. By doing so, estate communities can be offered a fairer chance at progression, enabling long-term social mobility and this can contribute to national educational equity.

Keywords: *Educational Inequality, O/L–A/L Transition, Estate Education, School Discontinuation, Plantation Sector, Sri Lanka*

Government spending on education in India: Helping or Hindering equality in education?

Tanusree Dash, PhD; Sukanya Bose, PhD; Ananya Ghosh Dastidar, PhD
Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi
dash.tanusree@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Education is considered as one of the most effective tools to achieve sustainable development. Earnings, development, and opportunities for advancement are all boosted by education. Financing of education broadly comes from two sectors i.e. Public and Private sector. The public provisioning of education is supported on three grounds: Market failure, Equity and Merit good. These features justify government intervention in the provision and financing of education to ensure an equitable distribution of educational opportunities to the entire population. The current paper not only tries to examine the trends of public education expenditure across states and Union Territories (UTs) in India but also the association between public education expenditure and educational inequality. The study has used the education Gini (EDUGINI) coefficient as an Index to quantify the extent of education inequality. Per capita public education expenditure is used as an indicator of the public expenditure on education across states/UTs (there are 28 states and 8 Union territories in the country) in India for the analysis. Though the analysis of data on education expenditure as a percentage of GDP in India implied a nearly stagnant public education spending in India, per capita public expenditure is found to have increased between 2007-2008 and 2017-2018. The analysis reveals that public expenditure on education has a lagged effect on educational inequality in the reference period. Apart from this, economic status of the states is found to be associated with the per capita public expenditure on education. It was found that the rich states/UTs are found to have higher per capita education expenditure and low inequality in educational attainment. The absence of targeted policies may have long-term implications for those poor states/UTs. Given the wide disparities in educational expenditure across states/UTs, it is imperative to implement a public policy intervention that prioritizes low-income states.

Key words: *Public education expenditure, education inequality, sustainable development.*

THEMATIC SESSION C

Track 11
**Artificial Intelligence,
Technology and Digital Inclusion**

Evaluating Sri Lanka's 2024 National AI Strategy and its relevance to persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka

N.T. Ranasinghe

Department of International Relations, University of Colombo

nishu.ranasinghe8@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) include those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, when confronted with various barriers, may impede their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006). The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) represents one of the most consequential technological transitions of the current era. In this context, countries are increasingly investing in national AI strategies, which positions Sri Lanka in a critical role. As a consequence, the National AI Strategy was introduced. This research aims to evaluate the National AI Strategy for Sri Lanka by using the Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities (CRPD) which is an internationally recognised treaty, and to which Sri Lanka has been a party. Therefore, this research uses a qualitative, document analysis approach, utilising the National Strategy and the CRPD to analyse whether the national strategy complies with international standards. The evaluation finds that although the strategy does not specifically mention PWDs, it aligns with several articles of the CRPD. For instance, the strategy highlights the principles of inclusivity, accessibility, human-centric design for diversity and localised accessibility, which align with the articles thematically designed as accessibility and universal design (articles 4,5,9), social participation and protection in crisis (articles 11,19,20,21), education and employment (articles 24 and 27) and legal capacity, awareness, and monitoring (articles 12, 13, 26, 29, 32, 33) of the CRPD. Overall, the strategy aligns with international standards and addresses the digital divide and digital exclusion affecting PWDs. However, the practicality of this strategy and its implementation are to be assessed. In conclusion, it can be stated that the strategy would be successful if the gaps, such as identifying PWDs' needs related to digitalisation and AI, were specifically addressed. Incorporating a separate disability chapter in the strategy's implementation framework would narrow the digital divide and provide positive outcomes for all, without discrimination.

Keywords: *AI Governance, CRPD, Disability Rights, Inclusivity, Persons with Disabilities*

Education, Artificial Intelligence, and Digital Inclusion: Policy Pathways for Workforce Transformation

Shashithanganee Weerawansa, PhD; A U G C A Gunathilaka, Tilan U Hewage
Department of Economics, University of Colombo
shashi@econ.cmb.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

Although the rapid progress in artificial intelligence and digital technologies has reshaped the nature of the labour force and productivity in the economy, as well as the configuration of the modern economy and has provided the much-needed impetus for innovation and transformation in the economy, it has also highlighted the huge gap in the country's preparedness and the required skill set to effectively function in this emerging digital technology landscape. In Sri Lanka, this is a particularly worrying factor because the country has a huge workforce; approximately 23% of the total workforce in the country, which translates into 1.8 million workers whose jobs can be easily integrated into the emerging generative AI technologies. However, only a quarter of this number has the required digital skill set to function effectively in this emerging technology landscape and access to digital work tools. It is therefore no surprise that this has emerged as a major factor in the country's bid to maximize the benefits in productivity gains through the use of AI technologies. The main objective of the research is to examine the gap between the curriculum and the skill set required by the industry in the emerging technology landscape characterized by the use of AI technologies. It is also the intention of the research to identify the factors inhibiting the employability of technology graduates in the emerging technology landscape and the measures the country can take to improve the preparedness in the emerging digital technology. The research design involved using an exploratory policy analysis approach, which involved using qualitative approaches for stakeholders' analysis and secondary data analysis. It involved using industry discussions, labor market trends, and global and local reports to analyze how well the education system is aligning with the emerging skill requirements of AI. Findings so far reveal a notable gap between theoretical knowledge gained from formal education and the required practical digital skills that employers demand from their employees. At the regional level, 22% of jobs in South Asia are exposed to AI technologies, and the demand for AI skills is increasing at a rate that is significantly higher than any other domain. Further, between 2023 and 2025, the increase in AI-related jobs is greater than 75% in comparison to jobs that are not AI-related. To overcome the challenges, intensification of educational efforts are needed to ensure that individuals are equipped with AI-related skills to bridge the digital divide, increase employment opportunities, and ensure that countries like Sri Lanka benefit from this AI-driven change.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Digital Transformation, Digital Inclusion*

Artificial Intelligence–Enabled Learning Applications and Educational Access and Equity in Crisis Contexts

Sayada Jannatun Naim
Faculty of Business Studies, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh
Sayada.naim@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Periods of crisis—whether triggered by public health emergencies, economic instability, or climate-related disasters—place significant strain on education systems. School closures, limited infrastructure, and uneven digital access disrupt learning continuity and often deepen existing inequalities. In Bangladesh and across South Asia, students from low-income, rural, and otherwise marginalized communities are particularly vulnerable, facing higher risks of learning loss and disengagement. In such contexts, questions of access and equity become central to both immediate response and long-term recovery. This study proposes to examine how artificial intelligence (AI)–enabled learning applications can contribute to maintaining educational access and promoting greater equity during crisis situations. The focus is on practical and scalable tools, including adaptive learning platforms, AI-supported tutoring systems, and mobile-based applications that personalize instruction and provide timely feedback. These technologies offer potential pathways for sustaining learning when conventional classroom delivery is interrupted. The study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining a structured review of existing literature and policy reports (including UNESCO, World Bank, and national education data) with a small-scale survey of students and teachers in Bangladesh and selected South Asian contexts. The analysis applies descriptive statistics and thematic interpretation to examine patterns of access, usage, and perceived effectiveness of AI-supported learning tools while acknowledging that AI is not inherently equitable. Unequal access to devices, connectivity, and digital skills may limit who benefits from such innovations. The study therefore seeks to explore the conditions under which AI applications can narrow, rather than widen, existing educational gaps. Particular attention will be given to how these tools support differentiated learning, identify students at risk of falling behind, and inform targeted interventions. Indicative findings suggest that while AI-enabled tools can support learning continuity and enable early identification of at-risk students, their impact remains uneven due to persistent disparities in access to devices, internet connectivity, and digital literacy. In addition, concerns related to data privacy and potential algorithmic bias highlight the need for careful and ethical implementation. By situating AI within broader discussions of educational resilience and inclusive development, this paper aims to contribute evidence-based insights for policymakers and practitioners. Ultimately, it argues that thoughtfully implemented AI-enabled applications can strengthen education systems' capacity to respond to crises while advancing more equitable access to quality learning. In particular, the study highlights the importance of integrated digital inclusion strategies, including investment in affordable connectivity, equitable access to devices, teacher training, and clear ethical guidelines for the use of AI in education.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Educational Access, Equity, Crisis Contexts, Learning Applications, System Resilience, Digital Divide, Adaptive Learning, EdTech*

Digital Divide: The Impacts of Digital Poverty on Urban Low-Income Households

T. G. P. Dilshani, J. N. D. Jayathunga
Department of Geography, University of Colombo
dilshanipreethika4@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Digital poverty has become a significant challenge in urban low-income communities, where access to digital technologies does not necessarily result in meaningful digital inclusion. This study examines the nature of digital poverty in the Wanathamulla Grama Niladhari Division in Thibirigasyaya Divisional Secretariat, Colombo. The objective of the study is to examine the extent and dimensions of digital poverty within the study area with particular attention to digital literacy, patterns of digital usage, and engagement with government digital services. The study adopts a quantitative research design, supported by qualitative methods, to capture the multidimensional nature of digital poverty. Original fieldwork was conducted using structured household surveys as the primary data collection method, complemented by structured interviews and direct observations. The target population comprised low-income households in Wanathamulla, focusing on individuals aged 15 years and above. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure balanced representation across age groups. Data analysis was carried out using descriptive statistical techniques and thematic analysis to examine variations in digital literacy, usage patterns, and access to government digital services. The findings reveal that digital poverty in Wanathamulla is primarily driven by deficits in digital skills rather than lack of access to digital devices. Most households possess smartphones, indicating that device availability is not a major constraint. However, digital literacy and effective usage remain critically low, especially among older adults. More than 95% of residents aged over 60 demonstrate poor digital skills and heavy dependence on others for basic digital tasks, with digital technology use largely confined to voice calls. Engagement with government digital services is extremely limited, with less than 5% of residents actively using e-government platforms. The study concludes that digital poverty in Wanathamulla is multidimensional and deeply rooted in social, educational, and institutional factors. Addressing digital poverty requires community-based digital literacy initiatives, age-sensitive interventions, and inclusive design of public digital services to promote equitable digital inclusion.

Keywords: *Digital poverty; Digital literacy; E-government services; Older adults; Wanathamulla*

Measuring Digital Financial Literacy in Colombo District, Sri Lanka.

K.A.D. Thaksalani¹, H.G.C. Hansamali²
Department of Economics, University of Colombo
denuwani@econ.cmb.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

In the context of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered financial services increasing worldwide, Digital Financial Literacy (DFL) has become a critical determinant of participation in the digital financial ecosystem. DFL refers to the integration of financial and digital literacy required to access, understand, and use digital financial products and services, including AI-enabled tools. Local survey findings indicate that despite Sri Lanka's relatively high literacy rate, digital and financial literacy levels remain comparatively low. This study assesses DFL within a single framework, focusing on Colombo District. The objectives are to construct DFL scores across knowledge, attitudes, and behavior, and examine the relationship between demographic characteristics and DFL. This study adopts a quantitative mono-method research design using primary data from a cross-sectional survey guided by the OECD/INFE DFL framework. Data were collected from 100 individuals aged 18 and above in Colombo District using a convenience sampling technique. All participants provided informed consent and collected data were analyzed using MS Excel and IBM SPSS. The findings reveal low digital financial knowledge, particularly regarding basic concepts and potential risks, implying that populations with lower DFL are disadvantaged in accessing AI-enabled financial tools. Attitudes and behaviors show moderate engagement, and overall DFL remains at a moderate level. Consistent with global trends, attitudes and behaviors exceed knowledge, with moderate DFL in Colombo District. Importantly, the results indicate that demographic factors such as gender, age, education, and income significantly influence the level of DFL, aligning with findings from international studies. The study highlights the importance of targeted, integrated financial and digital literacy initiatives to enhance DFL, ensuring equitable participation in AI-powered financial services and promoting the effective use of digital finance in Sri Lanka. The findings are exploratory in nature, and demographic relationships should be interpreted with caution.

Keywords: *Digital Financial Literacy, Financial Inclusion, DFL Measurement, OECD/INFE Framework, Sri Lanka*

THEMATIC SESSION C

Track 12 Urban Poverty & Systems

**High life in a high-rise: An Ethnographic study of Poverty and Development in Colombo,
Sri Lanka**

Avanka Mahikanthi Fernando
Department of Sociology, University of Colombo
avanka@soc.cmb.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how urban development projects disrupt people's lives and perpetuate poverty. This study was conducted in a state-owned high-rise housing project in Colombo, Sri Lanka between September 2019 and January 2021. Colombo is a heterogeneous city that is home to diverse ethno-religious and socio-economic groups. This ethnographic study delves into everyday intricacies and livelihoods of urban communities living within a nexus of neoliberalism, ethno-religious and sociocultural difference, national crises, and a global pandemic. Investigating disruption in the lives of urban watta dwellers due to urban development projects, this study underscores the impact on employment and livelihoods. The research methodology consisted of participant observation, a household survey of 320 households and 20 in-depth interviews. Whereas extant scholarship emphasises vulnerability and precarity due to urban development projects, scholarship also highlights coping strategies used by urban communities. This study uses a synthesis view to demonstrate that on the one hand, those relocated are subject to vulnerability, risk and precarity, but on the other hand, they are not passive victims, instead exerting differential strategies in constructing home and belonging in everyday life. The study investigates different livelihood strategies and employment challenges in a post-relocation setting. It presents the importance of equipping urban working-class communities with adequate social protection, decent wages, safe working conditions and stable money giving and loan taking measures especially during crises and advocates increased social protection measures, consolidating policies regarding precarious employment and the implementation of laws that uphold human dignity and decent wages.

Keywords: *Development, poverty, crisis, ethnography, Sri Lanka*

Colombo's Urban Poor and the Cost of Cost-Reflective Electricity Tariffs

Meghal Perera

Colombo Urban Lab, Centre for a Smart Future

meghal@colombourbanlab.com

ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka's electricity tariffs were revised for the first time in eight years in August 2022, in the context of prolonged disruption of energy supplies as a result of Sri Lanka's economic crisis. A period of drought coupled with the shortages of imported fuel needed for electricity generation resulted in power outages which increased up to 13 hours. The initial tariff hike of 75% was justified as an essential measure to tackle the spiralling losses of the Ceylon Electricity Board. Subsequent tariff hikes in 2023 were positioned as necessary as per IMF conditions for cost-reflective tariffs as part of its bailout. Urban households that are dependent on supply chains and have higher costs of living are disproportionately affected by increased electricity bills. This paper draws from qualitative research with over 100 urban low-income households in Colombo from November 2021 to January 2026, tracing the impact of electricity tariffs on these households and exploring how the polycrisis exacerbated vulnerabilities and changed the nature of electricity consumption. The paper charts how tariff hikes usher in a new wave of energy poverty among the urban poor which in turn leads to the adoption of maladaptive tactics that reduce quality of life and keep households trapped in a cycle of debt and disconnection. It argues that the impacts of tariff hikes are disproportionately borne by women in these households, as attempts to cope with energy poverty both influence and are influenced by the interplay of health, livelihood and tenure. The paper puts forward policy recommendations such as recalibrating lifeline tariffs, and formulating a coherent and transparent disconnection policy, to address energy poverty among the urban poor. It offers insight into enduring impacts of the crisis and IMF reforms on urban poor communities, nuancing debates on electricity policy.

Key words: *electricity, energy poverty, urban, crisis*

Urban Spatial Poverty and Social Protection Policies: A Study of Urban Slum in the Colombo District of Sri Lanka

T. H. R. De Silva

Department of Political Science and Public Policy, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo
himaya@poli.cmb.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, developing countries have increasingly relied on social protection policies to address poverty and vulnerability. In Sri Lanka, despite the gradual expansion of state welfare programmes, their reach and effectiveness in addressing the poverty of urban slum and shanty dwellers remain deeply unequal. The central research problem of this study is: why do social protection policies consistently fail to deliver adequate and equitable outcomes for urban slums, despite their existence? The main objective is to examine the gap between policy design and ground-level implementation in the spatial transformation of urban poverty. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Primary data were gathered through observation, questionnaires, and unstructured interviews in the Mattakkuliya area of Colombo. Secondary data were drawn from academic literature, policy documents, and government publications. SPSS was used for quantitative analysis, while the theory of social space and the policy implementation gap theory served as the theoretical framework. The findings reveal that the failure of social protection policies in urban informal settlements is not accidental but is mainly shaped by political, social, and economic factors. Although social protection policies in Sri Lanka are theoretically well designed, some are structured in ways that increase social insecurity among the urban poor. Even well-designed policies often fail in practice due to implementation challenges. Spatial identity is a key barrier to accessing social protection, while patron–client relationships in urban areas, especially among slum and shanty dwellers, further deepen these issues. Many residents accept their condition of vulnerability and show limited interest in leaving these settlements, partly due to concerns about survival and the loss of certain benefits. Therefore, it is important to adopt spatially sensitive policy approaches, promote employment instead of dependency on welfare, strengthen accountability mechanisms and ensure meaningful community participation to achieve inclusive and effective urban social protection.

Keywords: *Urban poverty, social protection, patron–client relationships, spatial identity, policy implementation gap.*

Heat Stress, Ageing and Poverty Nexus: Towards Inclusive Urban Adaptation in Dhaka, Bangladesh

Md Shanawez Hossain, PhD

Department of Global Studies & Governance, Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB)
shanawez@iub.edu.bd

ABSTRACT

Escalating ambient temperatures and recurrent heatwaves associated with climate change disproportionately burden marginalized groups and vulnerable communities, particularly older adults experiencing poverty. In Bangladesh, rapid urban expansion and deepening socioeconomic disparities have intensified exposure to urban heat stress, particularly for the urban older adults. In megacities such as Dhaka, for marginalized older persons, poverty not only amplifies direct biophysical exposure to extreme heat but also constrains adaptive capacity, thereby generating a mutually reinforcing cycle linking ageing vulnerability, thermal stress, and economic precarity. This study investigates the intersectionality of aging, heat stress, and poverty in shaping health outcomes, livelihood insecurity, and adaptive practices among older residents in Dhaka. It critically examines how poverty heightens susceptibility to heat-related physical and mental disorders while simultaneously limiting the adoption of protective and preventive measures, thus exacerbating multidimensional vulnerability. The research is theoretically anchored in the Health Belief Model and further informed by adaptation theory and multilevel governance perspectives. Employing a qualitative triangulated design, data were collected through in-depth interviews (IDIs), and key informant interviews (KIIs) with 60 adults aged 60 and above from Dhaka North and South City Corporations. A systematic literature review and rigorous textual analysis situate empirical findings within broader climate governance and urban policy debates. The findings reveal a pronounced poverty–heat–ageing nexus: where urban older adults in informal outdoor labor during peak heat periods face risks of heat exhaustion, psychological distress, and chronic health complications. Substandard housing, inadequate pension coverage, limited cooling access, and social isolation undermine their resilience. Further, fragmented governance and insufficient heat-mitigation infrastructure perpetuate inequities. Addressing these challenges necessitates integrated, rights-based urban policies that simultaneously advance poverty alleviation, social protection and climate adaptation to promote social cohesion, solidarity and equitable urban development.

Keywords: Heat Stress; Ageing Vulnerability; Poverty; Marginalized Communities; Urban Adaptation

Beyond Access: Structural Energy Poverty, Inequality and Household Energy Resilience in Sri Lanka

Ashani Fernando, Janani Kithmini Kamal Kandewatta, Sandaram P. Premaratne,
Wijithapure Wimalaratana
University of Colombo, Peking University, Shanghai University
ashani@econ.cmb.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

Energy poverty is a multidimensional challenge, encompassing access, affordability, reliability, and the ability of households to sustain adequate energy services. Sri Lanka's recent economic crisis provides a critical context to examine how macroeconomic shocks could transform structural energy deprivation into acute affordability stress and energy insecurity. This study analyzes multidimensional energy poverty and its distribution among Sri Lankan households, as well as their responses to energy stress induced by crises. Using a primary survey of 1,245 households across urban, rural, and estate sectors, the analysis applies a two-layer framework. To capture deprivation in electricity access and reliability, clean cooking transitions and adequate household energy services, a Multidimensional Energy Poverty Index (MEPI) is developed. Secondly, an Energy Resilience Score measures affordability pressures and coping behaviours during the crisis. The Lorenz curve and Gini coefficient are used to test the inequality. The causes of household energy poverty and resilience is evaluated by an ordered logistic model. The preliminary findings show that structural deprivation, unequal access to energy, and diverse household resilience are the three main aspects of energy poverty in Sri Lanka. The MEPI estimations suggest 66.9% of families have an average deprivation intensity of 64.7% and are multidimensionally energy poor. Out of this cohort, 46.5% of households use traditional fuels and 40.6% are unable to buy LPG or electricity for cooking. Such deprivations are especially noticeable in the areas of clean cooking and energy affordability. The inequality analysis reveals disparities among socioeconomic groups, such as greater deprivation among households headed by women and variation across sectors. The risk of experiencing energy poverty and crisis-related energy stress is highly influenced by energy affordability pressures, electricity reliability, and distance to LPG suppliers, according to ordered logit data. Some houses managed to retain energy access through coping mechanisms, while others faced severe affordability challenges. Such variations demonstrate varied resilience in household responses to the economic crisis. The results show that there is some overlap between crisis-driven energy stress and structural energy poverty. Therefore, integrated policies that address both short-term affordability shocks and long-term service deprivation are necessary for effective policy responses.

Keywords: Energy poverty; Household resilience; Inequality; Economic crisis; Sri Lanka

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THEMATIC SESSION D

Track 13 Food Security and Sustainable Agriculture

Socio-Economic and Demographic Determinants of Maternal Egg Consumption: Evidence from Nuwara Eliya District, Sri Lanka

Hasitha Priyashantha, PhD¹; Chamod Ranaweera¹, Ashen Epa Arachchi², Shishanthi Jayarathna¹, Chandima Gajaweera¹, N.S.B.M. Atapattu¹, Janak K. Vidanarachchi²

¹ Department of Animal Science, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna.

² Department of Animal Science, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Peradeniya.
hasithap@agri.ruh.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

Achieving food security requires not only sufficient production but also equitable economic access to safe, nutrient-dense foods. Animal-sourced foods like eggs are critical for maternal nutrition, yet structural inequalities limit access among vulnerable populations, especially estate and rural dwellers. This study examined socioeconomic and structural determinants of maternal egg consumption in Nuwara Eliya District, Sri Lanka, focusing on income, geographic disparities, socioeconomic status (SES), food security, education, and household characteristics. An interviewer-administered cross-sectional survey was conducted among 145 pregnant women attending public health clinics, selected via simple random sampling prior to an awareness workshop in November 2025. Statistical analyses included correlation, two-way ANOVA, and multiple linear regression with maternal egg consumption frequency as the dependent variable, and income, egg price, SES score, education, household size, and 30-day food insecurity as predictors. Egg consumption showed a significant positive correlation with per-household income ($r = 0.17$, $p = 0.04$), identified as the strongest predictor. Mean weekly consumption was higher among urban mothers (4.7 eggs) than estate-sector mothers (3.6 eggs, $p = 0.03$). Estate residents reported higher egg prices, though not statistically significant. Education did not significantly influence consumption across income categories, indicating knowledge alone does not translate into higher consumption in economically constrained households. No significant difference was observed between food-secure and food-insecure households, suggesting eggs function as an essential item despite constraints. Household SES score and size were not significant predictors. Regression confirmed income as the strongest predictor (Beta = 0.203), while SES score (Beta = 0.101, $p = 0.338$), education (Beta = -0.077, $p = 0.467$), egg price (Beta = -0.067, $p = 0.520$), food insecurity (Beta = 0.015, $p = 0.889$), and household size (Beta = 0.001, $p = 0.994$) lacked statistical significance. Findings demonstrate that structural economic factors—particularly income and geographic price differentials—shape access to eggs. Awareness-building alone is insufficient without complementary economic measures. Strengthening food systems resilience requires policies that enhance purchasing power, address spatial price disparities, and support decentralized poultry systems to improve maternal nutrition and national food security in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: food security, structural inequality, egg consumption, maternal nutrition, Sri Lanka

A Comparative Study on Disparities in Food Security between Rural and Urban Households: A Case Study of Ratnapura District, Sri Lanka

W M M Fernando, T M L Jeewanthi, M S Bambarabotuwa, J N D Jayathunga
Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.
menuram10@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Food security is a global goal that has not yet been achieved, as a result of factors such as poverty, economic instability, inflation, and climate change, which present challenges to household stability within developing countries. Ratnapura District was chosen because the area has one of the highest levels of food insecurity in Sri Lanka compared to many other districts. The objective of this study was to understand the impacts of food insecurity and its rural and urban differences within the selected areas. The sample consisted of 100 households from Kathlana (Rural) and Ratnapura Town West (Urban) Grama Niladhari Divisions, selected using the simple random sampling technique, and a structured questionnaire was used to collect the primary data. Descriptive statistics, the Household Hunger Scale (HHS), and the Relative Importance Index (RII) were utilized to analyze the data. The results indicate that rural households experienced greater levels of food insecurity than urban households. The HHS showed that only 66% of total households surveyed experienced no hunger at all, 33% suffered from moderate levels of hunger, and 1% of total households had extreme levels of hunger. Economic access was identified as the key determinant of urban food security, whereas physical access and distance to the nearest market were the major barriers to rural food insecurity. Additionally, a positive correlation was observed between food security and educational and income levels in both rural and urban households. Regional infrastructure, access to markets, and transportation barriers were identified as critical factors contributing to food insecurity. It was recommended that a real-time data monitoring system be implemented, along with promoting home gardening to strengthen household coping strategies. Additionally, policymaking should prioritize improving both transportation and market infrastructure within rural areas to bridge the gap between rural and urban regions.

Keywords: *Economic Access, Food Security, Food Insecurity, Physical Access, Household Hunger*

Assessing the Potential of BIOFIN Initiatives on Development of Apiculture and Superfoods Productions: A Study in Tank Cascade Systems, Anuradhapura

G.Praveena , N.M.K.C.Premarathne , U.G.A.I.Sirisena

Faculty of Agriculture, Department of Agricultural Systems

Department of Agricultural Systems, Faculty of Agriculture, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka
sampraveenamadhumi0611@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Biodiversity degradation is increasingly threatening the ecological sustainability of tank cascade systems and rural livelihoods. Addressing the global biodiversity financing gap requires innovative financial mechanisms that integrate conservation with inclusive economic development. The Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN), launched by the UNDP, is a framework for raising and managing capital and using financial instruments to support sustainable biodiversity management. Although Sri Lanka has adopted BIOFIN at the national policy level, limited research exists on its operationalization within tank cascade systems. This study evaluates whether BIOFIN-aligned instruments can promote apiculture and the commercialization of superfoods (moringa, sesame, tamarind, lotus, and jackfruit) as biodiversity-positive livelihood strategies in the tank cascade systems of Anuradhapura District. A mixed-method design was employed, combining survey data from 87 farming households with key informant interviews with value chain actors and financial institutions. A complementary log-log regression model was run to examine factors influencing farmers' willingness to adopt apiculture. Results indicate that the ability to cultivate superfoods significantly increases the likelihood of willingness at the 5% level ($p = 0.01$), while male participation is positively associated and significant at the 10% level ($p = 0.06$). Value chain analysis identifies the beekeeper, processor, retailer, and consumer chain as the most economically viable distribution channel, although retailers capture disproportionately higher margins. Thematic analysis reveals structural constraints, including the absence of biodiversity-linked credit schemes, weak certification systems, limited collective marketing, and institutional fragmentation. The findings provide strong policy justification for introducing biodiversity-linked green credit lines, pollination-based incentive payments, fiscal support for small-scale beekeepers, and formal quality certification mechanisms under BIOFIN. Integrating such instruments into Sri Lanka's rural development and agricultural finance policies could internalize ecosystem service values, enhance market equity, and position biodiversity finance as a structural poverty reduction strategy within tank cascade systems.

Keywords: *biodiversity finance, apiculture, superfoods commercialization, value chain analysis, green credit*

Warming Seas and Economic Pressures: Determinants of Marine Fish Production in Sri Lanka

W.H.A. Sandaruwan

National Aquatic Resources Research & Development Agency (NARA), Sri Lanka
aravindasandaruwan4@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Marine fisheries play a vital role in Sri Lanka's coastal economy by supporting employment, sustaining coastal livelihoods, and contributing to national food security. Many small-scale fishing households depend directly on marine resources for income, making the sector vulnerable to environmental variability and economic shocks. In recent years, rising ocean temperatures and macroeconomic instability have raised concerns about their potential effects on marine fish production and the resilience of coastal fishing communities. This study examines the influence of climate variability and macroeconomic conditions on marine fish production in Sri Lanka using monthly data from January 2015 to December 2024. Following a fisheries production framework, where output is determined by environmental conditions and input cost factors, the analysis examines the effects of sea surface temperature (SST), precipitation, inflation, and exchange rate movements on fish production. An Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) modeling framework is employed to estimate both short-run and long-run relationships among the variables. The bounds test confirms the presence of a long-run equilibrium relationship among the variables, with an F-statistic of 7.94, exceeding the upper critical bound at the 1% significance level. The long-run estimates indicate that sea surface temperature has a statistically significant negative effect on marine fish production, suggesting that warming ocean conditions may reduce fish availability. Exchange rate depreciation also shows a significant negative relationship with fish production, likely reflecting increased operational costs in the fisheries sector, such as higher prices for imported fishing equipment and fuel. In contrast, inflation and precipitation do not show significant long-run effects, although rainfall exhibits some influence in the short run. The error correction coefficient (-0.22) indicates that approximately 22% of short-run deviations from equilibrium are corrected each month. These findings highlight the combined influence of environmental and economic factors on fisheries production and underscore the need for climate-resilient fisheries management to support coastal livelihoods.

Keywords: *climate variability, marine fisheries, coastal livelihoods, Sri Lanka*

THEMATIC SESSION D

Track 14 Employment and Livelihoods

From Geopolitical Conflict to Household Poverty: The Impact of Middle East Fuel Supply Disruptions on Vulnerable Communities in Sri Lanka

H. Dilusha Indushanka Silva , Shashithanganee Weerawansa, PhD
Department of Economics, University of Colombo
dilushahr@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East periodically destabilize global oil markets, generating supply-side price shocks with severe macroeconomic consequences for petroleum-dependent import economies. Sri Lanka offers a compelling case here. Imported fuels absorb up to 50% of the country's export income (Caldera et al., 2023), rendering the economy acutely exposed to external energy price volatility and chronic balance-of-payments stress. Situating the analysis within a political economy of energy dependence framework and Alkire and Foster's (2011) Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) methodology, this study investigates the structured causal pathway through which Middle East-sourced fuel supply disruptions translate into household-level poverty and livelihood vulnerability. Drawing on crisis transmission theory (Raddatz, 2007; Collier & Goderis, 2012), the study maps an explicit causal chain: geopolitical conflicts lead to crude oil supply disruption, which leads to imported fuel price inflation, which leads to currency depreciation and fiscal stress, which leads to rising domestic energy, transport, and food costs, ultimately resulting in household welfare deterioration. The empirical salience of this pathway is substantiated by Sri Lanka's 2021-2023 economic crisis, during which headline inflation surged to 54.6% in June 2022, with food inflation reaching 80.1%, driven by the combined pass-through of fuel costs and exchange rate depreciation (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2022). Concurrently, national poverty incidence doubled from 13.1% to 25.0% between 2021 and 2022, adding an estimated 2.5 million people to poverty at the \$3.65/day (2017 PPP) threshold (World Bank, 2023). Methodologically, the study adopts a secondary data-based critical review and quantitative analytical design spanning 2010-2024. The quantitative component employs Vector Autoregression (VAR) modelling to identify dynamic relationships among Brent crude price shocks, the USD/LKR exchange rate, domestic fuel prices, headline and food inflation, and household consumption expenditure, drawing on Central Bank of Sri Lanka macroeconomic time-series data and Department of Census and Statistics Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) microdata. The critical review systematically analyzes the adequacy of existing fuel pricing policy and targeted social protection mechanisms in mediating vulnerability across rural-urban, gender, and occupational subgroups. The findings offer policy-relevant insights for strengthening energy price shock resilience in import-dependent developing economies confronting recurrent geopolitical instability.

Keywords: *geopolitical conflict; fuel supply disruption; household poverty; multidimensional poverty; energy dependence; Sri Lanka; crisis transmission; social protection*

Rainfall Variability and Demand for Work under MNREGA in India: Evidence from Panel Data

Shashidhar Kumar, Akhand Pratap Singh

Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

shashi23_ssa@jnu.ac.in

ABSTRACT

Rainfall variability plays a critical role in shaping agricultural production, labour demand, and rural livelihoods in India. Given the heavy dependence of rural households in India on rainfed agriculture, deviations from normal rainfall, such as droughts, delayed monsoons, or uneven precipitation, can disrupt agricultural employment and income stability. MGNREGA, a flagship programme for rural employment in India, is set to be replaced by the newly proposed VB-GRAMG bill, which proposes to temporarily halt the employment programme for an aggregate of 60 days in order to maintain labour supply for agriculture. The paper attempts to highlight the safety net that MGNREGA provides in the case of weak rainfall and argues why it is not wise to pause work in agricultural seasons. The study utilises a panel dataset comprising monthly state-level household work demand and individual work demand under MGNREGA, from 2020 to 2025. The impact of standardised rainfall on household work demand and individual work demand are analysed separately, by employing fixed effects panel regression models that control for unobserved time-invariant state-specific characteristics and time-variant year shocks and seasonal patterns in the demand for work. Actual wage and male agricultural wage rate are taken as control variables. Results from the model show a significant impact of standardised rainfall and actual MGNREGA wage on both household as well as individual work demand. The Breusch-Godfrey test and Breusch-Pagan test are performed to check for autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity respectively. Errors are clustered at the state level to overcome the problems of heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation. The Hausman Specification test is performed for model selection purposes. R Programming is used throughout to develop the model.

Keywords: *agricultural distress, MGNREGA, climate change*

Informality as a Space of Vulnerability or Resilience? A Study on Fisheries Communities in Negombo during the Economic Crisis

M. Kalara N. Perera
Centre for Poverty Analysis
kalara@cepa.lk

ABSTRACT

Informality is often framed as a marginalised space, an anomaly excluded from formal systems of governance. In Sri Lanka, the fisheries sector, which is largely informal, sustains the livelihoods of thousands of coastal families. Even with limited institutional protection and support systems, the sector has continued to survive and has thrived at times. However, the sector is vulnerable to external shocks, and this was evidenced during the height of the Economic Crisis in 2022. During this period, structural vulnerabilities faced by fisheries communities were exacerbated and the productivity of the sector declined. Yet, in times of crisis, informality may also act as a resilient space that allows households and communities to adapt to the evolving context and engage in their livelihoods. This study examines how fisheries communities in Negombo navigated the economic crisis amidst their many vulnerabilities. This is a qualitative study using both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected in Negombo through Key Informant Interviews, Focus Group Discussions, and In-depth Interviews with community members and other stakeholders. The study employs thematic analysis to understand recurring patterns of adaptation, and these patterns are interpreted in relation to the broader socio-economic context. The study argues that the informal nature of the work enabled the communities to adapt to the crisis. Because of the flexibility of labour arrangements, households could mobilise family members to engage in activities contributing to their livelihoods. Families have also diversified their livelihoods by engaging in other income-generating activities while continuing to fish, or have permanently moved to an alternative form of livelihood. Women specifically have initiated other income-generating micro-activities within their settlements or have opted to migrate. Informal economic and social networks, which have a strong presence in fisheries settlements, support communities through their own informal governance systems by providing credit and resources. All these strategies showcase reactive resilience but often come at the cost of increased household labour, financial strain, and the deepening of existing vulnerabilities. Therefore, while vulnerability and resilience can co-exist in times of crisis, the need to address structural vulnerabilities is crucial.

Keywords: *informality, fisheries livelihoods, Negombo, marginalised*

Examining the Social and Cultural Barriers to Female Participation in Green Jobs of Sri Lanka

Somarathna, P.V. T. B.

Department of International Studies, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

thejanisomarathne@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The global transition toward a green economy presents significant opportunities for sustainable development through “green jobs” in sectors such as renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and environmental conservation. However, women’s participation in these sectors remains disproportionately low, often falling below 40% globally. In Sri Lanka, despite high educational attainment, women face substantial gender disparities in emerging green industries, compounded by patriarchal social structures and restrictive socio-cultural norms. This study examines the specific social and cultural barriers that limit women’s entry into and retention within the green labour market. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study explores socially embedded phenomena shaped by cultural values. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 25 participants across the Western, Central, and Southern provinces. Thematic analysis was applied, guided by Social Theory and Gender and Development perspectives. The findings reveal five primary interrelated barriers: traditional gender roles that prioritise domestic responsibilities, restrictive family and community expectations, the perception of green jobs as masculine and technically demanding, mobility and safety concerns regarding remote project sites, and limited access to professional networks. Despite these challenges, there is a positive shift in attitudes among younger generations and a growing interest in environmentally meaningful work. The study concludes that female underrepresentation is deeply rooted in socio-cultural structures rather than in individual capacity. To foster a gender-inclusive green transition, policy interventions must engage households and communities to challenge entrenched stereotypes. Practical recommendations include implementing gender-sensitive safety measures, conducting workforce diversity training, and adopting flexible work arrangements to enhance women’s retention and career advancement in Sri Lanka’s green economy.

Keywords: *cultural norms, female participation, green jobs, social barriers, Sri Lanka*

Disaster Risk Reduction Preparedness and Business Continuity Planning Capacity Among Small and Medium Enterprises in Sri Lanka: A Multi-District Baseline Assessment

Zihan Zarouk, Manori Dissanayaka, Nandasiri Weerasinghe, Bandula Wickramaarachchi,
Lankadheer Kodippily, Ravichandran Aravandia, Nirosha Thilakarathna
Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, Colombo, Sri Lanka
zihanzar@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) constitute the backbone of Sri Lanka's economy, contributing over 52% to GDP and providing 45% of national employment. Despite their economic significance, SMEs remain disproportionately vulnerable to natural hazards and climate-induced disasters, with global estimates indicating that approximately 40% of SMEs never reopen following a disaster event. Sri Lanka's multi-hazard risk environment — characterised by droughts, floods, cyclones, and landslides — further compounds these vulnerabilities (ADB, 2020; Centre for a Smart Future, 2024; UNDRR, 2022). This study examines the baseline disaster risk reduction (DRR) preparedness, hazard perceptions, and business continuity awareness among SMEs across five districts in Sri Lanka, prior to their participation in district-level multi-hazard and business continuity planning workshops. A cross-sectional pre-workshop assessment survey was administered to 264 SME participants across Kurunegala, Monaragala, Nuwara Eliya, Trincomalee, and Vavuniya, under the 'Climate and Disaster Ready through Effective Disaster Management Systems and Coordination' project, implemented by the World Food Programme (WFP) with technical support from the Disaster Management Centre (DMC) and the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce (CCC). Structured questionnaires captured data on sectoral representation, DRR familiarity, prior risk assessment experience, hazard perceptions, self-rated understanding of key DRR concepts, and existing DRR strategy adoption. Results revealed that 82.1% of respondents had never conducted a formal risk assessment, while 31.0% had not implemented any DRR strategies. Supply chain disruptions, power outages, and droughts emerged as the three most frequently reported hazards. Self-rated understanding across six DRR concepts was critically low, with 36.4% to 61.5% of participants rating their knowledge at the lowest level. The findings highlight a significant preparedness deficit among Sri Lankan SMEs, reinforcing the urgency for scaled, context-specific DRR capacity-building interventions aligned with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.

Keywords: *disaster risk reduction, small and medium enterprises, business continuity planning, multi-hazard assessment, sustainable livelihoods framework, Sri Lanka*

THEMATIC SESSION D

Track 15 Governance Gaps

Exogenous Economic Shocks to 'Make the Economy Scream': The Geopolitical Dynamics of Poverty and its Measurement in Sri Lanka

Darani Rajasingham-Senanayake, PhD
 Subscribing Member, Centre for Poverty Analysis
 darini.raj.sen@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

By 2019 Sri Lanka had emerged as the wealthiest country in South Asia by ALL metrics (PPP, GDP per capita, SDI, HDI, PQLI etc.), having enjoyed ten years of peace and development after the war with the LTTE ended in 2009. Then, after the Easter terror attacks in 2019 and the county has been in a downward spiral. Indeed, Sri Lanka which sits front and center of major Indian Ocean energy, trade and sub-marine data cable routes, has faced a series of Exogenous Economic Shocks to "Make the Economy Scream" with cascading impacts and effects. "Make the economy scream" is a strategy rooted in 1970s US foreign policy (specifically against President Allende in Chile) to destabilize a target government through severe economic pressure, often with externally linked internal sabotage and hybrid economic warfare. For instance, events such as ISIS terror attacks, or un-natural disasters like Ditwah, as well as, forms of (plausibly deniable), hybrid warfare including cyber operations. There were also hybrid maritime shocks in the shipping lanes and seas of Sri Lanka, with the Express Pearl and MT Diamond. Then in 2025 there were the Ditwah twister storms similar to Operation Popeye.

For the purposes of this study Hoffman's (2009) definition is adopted: Hybrid threats incorporate a range of unique combinational threats specifically designed to target a geostrategic country's vulnerabilities in alignment with outcomes beneficial to the external actors' economic or security interests. This paper will examine the nature of exogenous economic shocks, their cascading local impacts and their geopolitical dimensions to contextualize the narrative that today nearly 25 percent of the country is under the poverty line at this time. It will suggest that external geopolitical factors are a more plausible explanation for the Geostrategic Indian Ocean island's current impoverishment. As Nozhorov notes: Economic crises can no longer be explained only with endogenous factors intrinsic to a national economic system. As such, the paper attempts to move beyond the Methodological Nationalism that frames country-specific analysis by experts and think tanks in the development economics industry to broaden the frame and question how 'crises' are framed and measured. Finally, the paper would reflect on local-global power/knowledge hierarchies in the development aid, experts, and poverty reduction industry and how local empirically grounded observations, perceptions, and expert analysis, particularly, in the national languages are elided and devalued given the Rule of international Experts and role of disinformation.

It is suggested, in conclusion, that until the geopolitical economic dimensions of poverty and underdevelopment in Sri Lanka are recognized and its root causes addressed, poverty reduction programs in Sri Lanka will be merely a band-aid that in the long run enables further depletion of the country's human and natural resources. Finally, we ask: is the 'exorbitantly privileged' US dollar an adequate measure of the wealth of nation/s, and was the US torpedo of an Iranian frigate in Sri Lanka's Exclusive Economic Zone last month a warning shot to the island nation-- to tow the Empire's line in the context of the BRICS promoted trend to de-dollarization in the Global South?

Keywords: *Hybrid Economic Warfare, Exogenous Economic Shocks, Geostrategic Vulnerability Geopolitics of Poverty*

When Governance Fails: Fragile Livelihoods in Bangladesh's Haor Wetlands

Marium Binte Hassan Farin, Shanawez Hossain PhD

Department of Environmental Science and Management, Independent University, Bangladesh
farin.hassan22@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The Haor region of Bangladesh has wetland ecosystems that support the livelihoods of thousands of farmers and fishers, but the governance systems that are supposed to safeguard resources do not always benefit the communities that rely on them. This paper examines the gap between the governance rhetoric and the real situation on-ground in the Haor region of Aushtagram, Mithamoyen, and Nikli in Kishoreganj district. The study applies qualitative interviews with local people to understand how policy enactment, market forces, individual activities, and institutions shape livelihood outcomes. Results show that there are a number of gaps in governance which have direct impacts on the livelihoods of the rural people. The timing of agricultural subsidies is mostly after the critical farming season, which makes them ineffective to the small farmers. The key players in the fisheries industry often practise control over accessibility of wetlands by ensuring that the traditional fishing communities cannot access common water bodies. Simultaneously, regulation enforcement, including a ban on some fishing nets, causes inconsistencies in small-scale fishers that use modern equipment to be economically viable. Although these technologies are not new in the market, the enforcement measures result in victimizing the local fishers instead of focusing on regulatory failures at production or distribution points. Such dynamics explain the role of governance failure, unequal access to resources and inconsistent application of policies in enhancing livelihood insecurity in the Haor region. The research suggests that sustainable management of wetlands must be governed by policies that do not oppose the equitable nature of resource usage, timely policies and development of local ecological knowledge with modern development strategies.

Keywords: *Governance gaps; livelihoods; wetland governance; Haor region; Bangladesh*

Fiscal Decentralization and Income Inequality among Elderly Women in India

Ananya Singh

Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur Khalsa College, University of Delhi

ananya0147singh@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

India is undergoing a demographic transition characterized by an expanding elderly population and the phenomenon of “feminization of aging” with older women outnumbering older men and facing disproportionate socioeconomic vulnerabilities due to a lifetime of deprivation and disadvantages. Simultaneously, the weakening of traditional family-based support systems and the inadequacy of formal social protection mechanisms in effective targeting and compensation, especially for elderly women, highlight the need to examine fiscal institutions that can be utilized to improve welfare delivery outcomes. The existing literature is insufficient to address income disparities among older women at the intersection of fiscal institutions and social security mechanisms. This study aims to analyse the role of fiscal decentralization in influencing social protection outcomes for elderly women in India, with respect to income disparities and gendered ageing. The study adopts a comparative, state-level analysis to evaluate how fiscal decentralization and institutional accountability affect welfare delivery outcomes in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. A mixed-methods framework is employed, utilising secondary data analysis with institutional evaluation. Quantitative analysis incorporates state-level welfare expenditure, while qualitative insights are derived from policy literature and institutional analyses. Findings suggest that fiscal decentralization can improve targeting efficiency and welfare delivery when complemented by institutional accountability and community participation (SHGs). However, the presence of intergovernmental fiscal imbalances weakens redistributive outcomes. The study argues that decentralization contributes to reducing income disparities among elderly women when the state governments moderate leakages and institutional distortions while exercising revenue-expenditure autonomy. These findings highlight the importance of fiscal federalism in shaping gender-sensitive social protection.

Keywords: *fiscal decentralization; elderly women; income inequality; social protection; welfare delivery*

Cybercrime and the Poor: Legal Gaps in Protection Against Digital Financial Crime in Sri Lanka and Comparable Global South Contexts

Mathumitha Karunanathan, Gayathri Ramachandran
United Nations Development Program (UNDP), ANC Education
gayuram22@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Digital financial services are expanding rapidly across the world, including in Sri Lanka and the wider Global South, and are often promoted as tools for financial inclusion. However, this growth has enabled digital financial crimes disproportionately affecting low-income and digitally vulnerable communities through scams, phishing, identity theft, and fraudulent transactions. Poor individuals face more severe consequences due to limited financial buffers, lower digital literacy, and weaker access to legal remedies. Against this backdrop, this paper examines whether existing international and national legal frameworks adequately protect low-income communities in Sri Lanka and comparable Global South contexts from digital financial crime. Adopting a doctrinal and analytical approach, the study reviews academic literature, Global South policy reports, and national regulatory responses to cyber-enabled fraud, supplemented with empirical data from the World Bank Global Findex reports, INTERPOL assessments, OECD financial literacy surveys and Sri Lanka's Financial Stability Review and Financial Intelligence Unit publications. The analysis considers international frameworks, including the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime, UNODC Cybercrime Framework, and OECD safeguards, alongside Sri Lanka's Computer Crimes Act, Payment and Settlements Systems Act, Financial Consumer Protection Regulations and relevant Central Bank guidelines. The paper's distinctive contribution lies in applying the principle of substantive equality to cybercrime law, drawing on Fredman's equality framework and Sen's capabilities approach. This jurisprudential lens emphasizes that equal protection under the law does not always mean identical treatment; legal systems should provide additional safeguards for structurally and economically disadvantaged groups. The analysis concludes that current legal frameworks focus primarily on criminalization and institutional cybersecurity, offering limited protection for marginalized digital users. The paper recommends a more equity-oriented approach, including targeted safeguards, enhanced consumer protection, and forward-looking regulatory strategies to ensure that digital financial systems remain safe, inclusive and accessible for low-income communities in Sri Lanka and the broader Global South.

Keywords: *Cybercrime, Digital poverty, Financial fraud, Global South, Substantive equality*

THEMATIC SESSION D

Track 16 Social Vulnerability & Policy

Secondary Displacement and Human Security Challenges in Pakistan's Tribal Districts: The Case of Tirah Valley

Islam Gul Afridi, Shah Khaile Shah Jee
SBS Radio Australia
islam.gul.afridi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Forced displacement has been one of the most persistent and destabilizing consequences of prolonged insecurity in Pakistan's tribal districts. Over the past two decades, cycles of militancy, counter-terrorism operations, and fragile peace arrangements have forced millions of residents to leave their homes often multiple times, resulting in patterns of initial displacement, return and renewed displacement. This paper examines the dynamics of forced and secondary displacement in the Tirah Valley, with a focus on how insecurity and state-led military operations intersect to produce long-term instability in civilian lives. Drawing on qualitative data, including media reports, policy documents and narratives from displaced communities, the study highlights how counter-terrorism measures, while aimed at restoring order, have contributed to recurring displacement due to incomplete rehabilitation, governance gaps, and weak reintegration frameworks. This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the dynamics of forced and secondary displacement and their implications for human security in Pakistan's tribal districts, with a particular focus on the Tirah Valley. Primary data is collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders. These include displaced families affected by multiple waves of displacement, as well as victims of violence and their family members. The study engages with local political leaders, community elders, and influential tribal figures to capture community-level perspectives on displacement, governance, and security. In addition, interviews are conducted with representatives of political party alliances, district administration officials, and personnel from the Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA) to understand institutional responses, policy frameworks and operational challenges. Members of parliament and representatives of local jirga bodies—particularly those involved in negotiations and agreements with security forces regarding displacement and return—are consulted to provide insights into decision-making processes and conflict management mechanisms. To strengthen the analytical framework, the research incorporates official data from relevant government institutions and supplements it with expert opinions from security analysts and policy specialists. Secondary sources, including policy documents, media reports and existing literature, will be used to triangulate findings and ensure analytical rigor. This multi-layered methodological approach enables a comprehensive understanding of both the structural and lived dimensions of displacement, ensuring that the study captures the complexity of human security challenges in conflict-affected regions. Empirical evidence from Tirah Valley shows that a total of 33,833 families were registered during recent displacement phases although only 15,000 were verified by district authorities, reflecting inconsistencies in estimation, registration and verification processes. The involvement of multiple actors, including district administrations, the Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA), and NADRA created procedural delays and coordination challenges, particularly regarding identity verification and eligibility determination. The study further reveals significant operational and humanitarian challenges, including inadequate planning, shifting registration mechanisms and logistical constraints

in providing food, transport and financial assistance. Displaced families received financial support packages of PKR 240,000 per family through digital transfers, followed by monthly assistance of PKR 35,000 for subsistence, and an additional PKR 25,000 upon return amounting to over PKR 3.5 billion disbursed. However, issues such as dual-address registration, misidentification of beneficiaries, and limited banking infrastructure in tribal areas hindered effective distribution and access to aid. The lived experiences of displaced populations demonstrate severe livelihood disruptions, erosion of social cohesion, psychological distress and heightened vulnerability, particularly among women, children and the elderly. Harsh weather conditions, overcrowded migration routes and inadequate registration facilities further exacerbated risks during displacement. The findings indicate that displacement in Pakistan's tribal districts should not be viewed as a one-time humanitarian crisis but as a cyclical and structurally embedded phenomenon. Without displacement-sensitive security planning, transparent governance mechanisms and sustainable reintegration policies, affected populations remain at risk of repeated displacement. The paper concludes that durable peace in the region requires integrating human security priorities with counter-terrorism strategies, ensuring that both the causes and long-term consequences of displacement are effectively addressed.

Keywords: *Forced Displacement, Human Security, Counter-terrorism Operations, Tirah Valley*

Hidden Labor Costs: A Sociological Analysis of Menstrual Poverty among Female Workers in the Biyagama Free Trade Zone

Madurapperumage Sachini Sewwandi
Sociology Department, University of Sri Jayewardenepura
sachinimadurapperuma23@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In the global discourse on the feminization of poverty, the “menstrual tax” remains a silent crisis of structural inequality. While Sri Lanka’s garment industry is a pillar of the national economy, the lived reality for women in the Biyagama Free Trade Zone (FTZ) is one of profound biological and economic deprivation. This study examines menstrual poverty, defined as the intersection of high-cost sanitary products, inadequate infrastructure, and the socio-cultural silence of the body during menstruation. Informed by creative ontology, this research explores how poverty is socially constructed through the denial of reproductive dignity. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study triangulates quantitative data from 384 women with qualitative interviews. The findings reveal a state of infrastructural violence: systemic barriers, including inflationary costs and restrictive workplace policies, force women to “trade in hygiene,” prioritizing family nutrition over personal health. One significant phenomenon identified is the normalization of suffering, and workers perceived the lack of “recreational rest” and physical discomfort as an inherent part of their job, not as a violation of their human rights. To address these inequalities, the study proposed a multi-layered policy framework: Reclassification of sanitary products from ‘luxury goods’ to ‘essential goods’ to exempt them from luxury taxes, enforcing mandatory standards for BOI workplaces in terms of sanitary disposal and ‘recreational rest,’ and socio-educational workshops to address the ‘taboos’ in the workers’ minds. The study concludes that addressing the “bleeding cost” of labor is not merely a health intervention but a fundamental requirement for achieving economic equity and social justice for women who power the nation’s exports.

Keywords: *Menstrual poverty, menstrual equity, free trade zone, feminization of poverty, women’s labor.*

Exclusion and Unequal Distribution of Welfare Benefits among Older Adults: Case Studies in Urban, Rural, and Estate communities in Sri Lanka

Wasana Rathnayaka ¹, Sunethra Perera ², Chandani Liyanage ³, Fareena Ruzaik ⁴,
Reiko Hayashi⁵, Nuskiya Hassan ⁶

^{1,2,3, & 4} University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

⁵ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, Japan

⁶ South Eastern University of Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka is experiencing significant socio-economic challenges arising from its rapidly ageing population. This study aims to examine economic and social inequalities and the uneven distribution of welfare benefits among older adults in Sri Lanka. It conducts qualitative in-depth interviews analyzed thematically to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of older adults regarding the exclusion from, and unequal distribution of, welfare benefits. The study employs purposive sampling to select 90 older adults across three Grama Niladhari (GN) divisions in the Western Province of Sri Lanka, representing diverse geographic contexts: Colombo (urban), Kalutara (estate), and Gampaha (rural). Within each GN division, 15 men and 15 women were included to ensure balanced gender representation. Participants were aged 60 and above, and caregivers were also interviewed to capture in-depth perspectives on the exclusion from an unequal distribution of welfare benefits. The findings reveal pronounced sector-based disparities in benefit allocation, adequacy, and administrative accessibility. Older adults in estate and rural sectors reported higher levels of financial insecurity, procedural barriers, documentation constraints, and perceived inequities in beneficiary selection. Urban participants, while facing cost of living pressures, demonstrated relatively better institutional access. Across sectors, older persons living alone and women with limited lifetime earnings were particularly vulnerable to exclusion. The findings underscore the need for context-sensitive targeting mechanisms, strengthened administrative transparency and integrated support systems to ensure equitable welfare distribution amid Sri Lanka's accelerating demographic ageing.

Keywords: *Exclusion; Unequal Distribution; Welfare; Older Adults*

**Improving Poverty Econometric Targeting Accuracy Using Machine Learning:
Evidence from Timor-Leste**

Andres Chamba², Alberto Gualtieri², Nilton Vicente, Ali Ahmad Khan¹, Manucheher Shafee¹, Paulino Pinto¹, Giorgia Valleriani², Florêncio Pina Dias Gonzaga⁴, Gemito do Carmo Amaral de Jesus⁴

¹ World Food Programme (WFP), Timor-Leste Country Office, ² World Food Programme (WFP), Global Headquarters, ³ National Institute of Statistics Timor-Leste (INETL), ⁴ Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion, Government of Timor-Leste (MSSI)
andres.chamba@wfp.org

ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether an optimal method exists to accurately identify the poorest and most vulnerable households in Timor-Leste. Using data from the 2024 SLS-4 survey, four Proxy Means Tests (PMT) were developed based on a welfare indicator constructed from log-transformed monthly per capita expenditure. A set of observable and verifiable socio-economic covariates was selected using both linear and non-linear machine learning econometric techniques. Four modelling approaches—simple OLS, penalized OLS (LASSO), xGBoost, and Random Forest—were evaluated using adjusted R^2 values and targeting error metrics benchmarked against the international poverty line of \$1.90 PPP. Across all models, predictive power fell within the expected international range (adjusted $R^2 \approx 0.46$ – 0.48) and performed within expected global benchmarks; however, significant differences emerged in their ability to minimize classification errors, which are critical for ensuring that scarce public resources reach households most in need. The Random Forest model emerged as the most effective targeting tool, achieving the lowest inclusion error (4.32%) and exclusion error (23.21%) among all methods tested, reflecting superior accuracy in classifying households below the poverty threshold. Its ability to capture non-linear relationships, handle missing data, and reduce overfitting makes it particularly suitable for Timor-Leste’s context, characterized by limited income verification systems and a large informal sector. By adopting a data-driven Random Forest-based PMT and periodically re-estimating it using the full SLS-4 dataset and updated poverty lines, the government can substantially improve the precision, transparency and equity of social spending. This approach supports a more cost-effective allocation of benefits, minimizes political or administrative distortions and strengthens the foundations of a national social registry capable of directing resources to those who need them most.

Keywords: *Proxy Means Testing (PMT), Random Forest Targeting, Social Protection Allocation, Poverty Identification (Timor-Leste)*

Regional Disparity Analysis of Social Well-being in Punjab: A Comparative Analysis of Measurement Approaches for Local Development Planning

Abdul Hameed, PhD¹; Abdul Rashid, PhD²

¹Islamic Research Institute (IRI), International Islamic University Islamabad,

²Director General (DG), International Institute of Islamic Economics (IIIE), International Islamic University Islamabad
hameedleghari@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Multidimensional poverty has become a relevant conceptual framework of understanding deprivation other than income measures. Punjab has numerous variables that contribute to poverty based on health, education and living standards which have to be measured with a holistic approach in order to observe the real level of poverty. The proposed research is expected to investigate the concept of multidimensional poverty in Punjab through the study of the domain-based deprivation and the comparison of other measurement techniques, such as multidimensional poverty index (MPI) with varying and equal weights, principal component analysis (PCA) and sum-score approach. The study relies on secondary information of the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) Survey 201920. There are several methods of measuring poverty used to compare the variation in incidence and severity of poverty based on the indicators and region. The results show that multidimensionality of poverty is strong in Punjab. The most underprivileged dimensions are education and standards of living with 42.1% of the households not having sufficient years of school and 57.7% having a living-standard deprivation. The rate of health deprivation is relatively low, 13.8% of the population is not immunized and 11.1% are not delivered with the assistance of skilled personnel. Comparison of the methodologies indicate that there are differences in the poverty estimates with MPI having the highest number of poor people at 16% and PCA and equal-weight MPI registering the lowest number of 12%. Regional analysis shows that South Punjab is the poorest region with a 29% poverty rate headcount of 0.49. The paper finds that using a combination of methods of measurement enhances the strength and policy implications of poverty measurement. The results support the idea of region-specific and multidimensional policy interventions in order to curb structural inequalities and poverty in regions.

Keywords: *Multidimensional Poverty, Health, Education, Living Standard, Regional Inequality, Pakistan*

THEMATIC SESSION E

Track 17
Skills & Future

Actions and deterrents for seeking employment among unemployed females: An analysis based on 2023 Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey

Kumudika Boyagoda, Neranjala Sumathipala
Department of Demography, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo
neranjala@demo.cmb.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

In Sri Lanka where female labour force participation is low (31.3% in 2023), but there is a need to increase, currently unemployed females ready to accept employment are vital. Employing such willing, but unutilised labour is beneficial for the labour market as well as the individuals. The issue of unutilized labour is usually looked at from the angle of labour market constraints, such as job opportunities and skill mismatches etc. Less attention is paid to see the individuals' actions in finding employment. Using secondary data from the 2023 Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey (LFS), this study aims to identify whether willing to work females actually take action in seeking employment, and if not, what deters them. The publicly available data of LFS-2023 contains 25% of the total sample and includes 18,937 individuals. From this, 5753 females are currently not employed, and 291 expect to do a paid job/start self-employment. Among them 56% had taken some action to find employment while 44% had not. Not taking proactive actions is a limitation from the side of potential job seekers. The main reason for not taking action is education-related (25%) which can be overcome. 33% also cite household activities which are a conventional deterrent that needs facilitation of dual roles. In addition, negative self-reactions accounted for 34%. These include does not believe getting a suitable job, 'no skills/training', and 'personal difficulties faced'. While policy needs to address labour market issues when deploying unutilized labour, the individual's attitudes are also a crucial factor. Policy should identify the potential female workforce and promote community-based actions such as training, self-confidence building, developing transferable skills etc. In addition, demand side constraints such as gender discrimination and stereotyping, occupational segregation, workplace security etc. should be addressed. Simultaneously integrating individual-level deterrents must be connected with labour market reforms to create a more supportive environment for female workers.

Key Words: *Females, Unutilized labour, Potential workforce, Sri Lanka*

Education and Earnings Dynamics in Sri Lanka: Evidence from a Cohort-Based Pseudo-Panel

Kamburawala Kankanamge Tharindu Udayanga
Department of Economics, University of Sri Jayewardenepura
kktudayanga@sjp.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka has long maintained a strong commitment to free education and has achieved high literacy and enrolment rates relative to many developing countries. However, rising school dropout rates in recent years have raised concerns about whether the economic incentives to remain in education have weakened. This study examines whether the returns to different levels of education in Sri Lanka have changed over time, with particular attention to the period 2011–2022. Using nationally representative microdata from the Labour Force Survey conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, this study constructs a pseudo-panel based on two-year birth cohorts of individuals born between 1956 and 1998. In the absence of true longitudinal data, cohort means are used to approximate panel structure. Both random-effects and fixed-effects models are estimated to analyse the evolution of returns to secondary, upper secondary, and tertiary education. A key methodological challenge is that education is largely time-invariant at the individual and cohort levels, which prevents direct estimation in a fixed-effects framework. To address this issue, education categories are interacted with year dummies, allowing identification of changes in market returns to education over time rather than level effects. The fixed-effects results reveal substantial time variation in returns to education. While returns to secondary education show moderate but generally increasing trends after 2013, upper secondary and especially tertiary education display larger and more volatile changes. In particular, the post-2014 period is characterised by notable increases in returns to higher education. Overall, the findings suggest that the economic value of upper secondary and tertiary education has strengthened in recent years. These results carry important policy implications, indicating that investment in higher levels of education continues to yield significant labour market rewards in Sri Lanka.

Key words: *Returns to Education; Earnings Dynamics; Pseudo-Panel Data; Fixed-Effects Model; Sri Lanka*

**Crisis of Graduate Employability in Sri Lanka:
The Bridge Between Governmental University Educational Standards and Labour Market
Expectations**

Saneth Nanayakkara
Faculty of Law, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University
sanethnanayakkara2003@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Graduate unemployment in Sri Lanka is in crisis mode, with 20-30% of public university graduates remaining unemployed or under-employed after several years of graduation despite significant public investment in higher education. This research proposal aims to address an existing gap in literature by shifting from descriptive studies to explore structural and institutional mechanisms that contribute to the disjuncture between public university education and employment market requirements. Existing literature on this issue, although providing evidence of its prevalence, lacks theoretical depth, methodological approaches that provide employer-centric data, and insufficient consideration of institutional mechanisms that influence employability outcomes. The current study takes a pragmatic approach to mixed-methodology research by collecting quantitative data from 600 graduates and 150 employers, complemented by qualitative data from university administrators, policymakers and unemployed graduates in three strategically sampled public universities to ensure institutional diversity. The study also explicitly engages with human capital theory, credentialism, and segmented labour market approaches to explain, rather than simply describe, the disjuncture between public university education and employment market requirements. Some of the objectives of this study are to explore skill mismatches between graduate and employer requirements, curriculum and institutional issues that lead to unemployment, graduate experiences in the employment market and expectation-reality gaps, and evidence-based policy recommendations to bridge the disjuncture between public university education and employment market requirements in Sri Lanka. By shifting from micro-level or individualized deficit narratives to structural issues of curriculum design failure, governance failure, disciplinary hierarchies and political economy issues, this study promises to contribute to addressing the disjuncture between public university education and employment market requirements in Sri Lanka's evolving employment market landscape.

Key Words: *Graduate employability, Skills mismatch, Labour market expectations*

Sri Lanka's Education System and Generation Alpha: Ready for the AI-Augmented Labour Market?

Pasan Malinda Wijayawardhana, Nazardeen Farhath Nuha
Ceylon Foundation for Economic Policy-Analysis (CFEP)
pasan@dbe.cmb.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the global labour market with projections indicating 170 million new jobs while 92 million jobs are expected to be displaced by 2030. This shift requires future generations to be digitally literate, be critical thinkers and be adaptable. In Sri Lanka, where youth unemployment is the highest in South Asia, preparing Generation Alpha (those born from 2010 onwards) for an AI-augmented labour market between 2030 and 2040 is particularly important.

This study examines the Sri Lankan education system's readiness to meet the demands of an AI-augmented future labour market for Generation Alpha. Qualitative data from a focus group discussion involving the Director (Information Technology) at the Ministry of Digital Economy, the Director of Education at the Ministry of Education, the founder of Uva Wellassa University, a few faculty members from state universities and a Gen-Alpha individual were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis based on pragmatism to identify structural and cultural barriers.

The study revealed seven themes of unpreparedness in Sri Lanka's education system: a lag in AI adoption, shallow digital literacy, teacher deficit, digital divides, curriculum misalignment, fragmented knowledge, and a lack of ethical guidance which impair Generation Alpha's AI readiness. Delays in AI adoptions and superficial engagement with digital tools reflect shallow digital literacy. Poor teacher-readiness stymies educators' ability to guide learners effectively, and digital and cognitive divides risk creating unequal access to AI opportunities. Furthermore, the disconnect between the curriculum and the real-world applications of AI results in students being exam-ready but not prepared for real world AI challenges. The disciplinary silos within which knowledge is held hinder interdisciplinary problem-solving which is required for innovation. Moreover, the lack of responsible AI regulation may create technically competent but socially unaware AI users. Based on the findings, the study proposes three reforms: embedding AI literacy within ethical training in schools, empowering teachers through continuous digital training and collaboration, and piloting AI-ready learning ecosystems to prepare Generation Alpha for an AI-driven future.

Keywords: *AI-Augmentation, Generation Alpha, Labour Market, Sri Lanka*

AI Tool Usage and Its Impact on Undergraduate Academic Performance: Evidence from a Public University in Sri Lanka

P.G.H. Madushika, K.A.D.Thaksalani, N.A.J. Kithmini, T.P.H.P. Gunathilaka
Department of Economics, University of Colombo
himashini@econ.cmb.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

Higher education teaching systems have been undergoing a paradigm shift from teacher centered to learner centered approaches. Meanwhile, Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools have emerged as innovative technologies with significant potential to transform educational practices worldwide. As a result, Sri Lankan university undergraduates are also adopting AI tools for their educational purposes. However, previous studies related to AI have reported mixed findings, pointing out both the benefits and drawbacks of using AI tools for educational purposes in relation to academic performance. Accordingly, this study explores the determinants of AI tool adoption among university students focusing on Behavioral Intention, AI tool usage, Student Interaction with AI tools and the impact of AI tool usage on academic outcomes. The study is guided by an enhanced Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) with respect to the literature. The study applied a mono-method approach involving a quantitative cross-sectional survey data analysis. The total sample of 160 undergraduates was selected from a faculty at a state university using the convenience sampling method. Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in SPSS 22.0 and AMOS 24.0. Based on the previous literature, the findings of the study were expected to establish a positive and significant influence of Performance Expectancy, Facilitating Conditions, and Student Interaction on undergraduates' Behavioural Intention to use AI tools for their academic-related work. In turn, Behavioural Intention was expected to have a positive and significant influence on actual AI tool usage, while Information Accuracy and Personal Innovativeness were also expected to have an impact on actual AI tool usage. Furthermore, actual use of AI tools were expected to have a positive and significant impact on the Academic Performance of the selected faculty's undergraduates. This study intends to provide policymakers and university administrators with valuable and insightful directions for developing and implementing strategies for the responsible and productive use of AI tools in undergraduates' academic activities.

Keywords: *Academic Performance; Artificial Intelligence; Technology Adoption; Undergraduates*

THEMATIC SESSION E

Track 18
Young Researcher's Platform
Economic, Growth, Transformation, and
Community Impact

Factors Influencing Investment Intention Among Management Undergraduates In Western Province In Sri Lanka

K R T Y Madurangi
Department of Business, NSBM Green University
yalanamadurangi99@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the determinants of investment intention among management undergraduates in the Western Province of Sri Lanka, focusing specifically on financial literacy, risk tolerance, subjective norms, and long-term financial goals. A total of 386 students participated, selected through convenience sampling, and primary data were collected using a Google Form survey. Descriptive analysis indicates that most participants are young, female, and in their final year, with limited practical investment experience despite possessing substantial financial knowledge. This reveals a clear gap between what students know and how they apply it in practice, a gap driven by insufficient goal-oriented planning, low urgency to invest, and considerations regarding future migration or higher studies abroad. Multiple regression results demonstrate that all four factors exert a significant positive influence on investment intention, with financial literacy being the most impactful. Collectively, these variables explain 84.2% of the variation in investment intention, underscoring the combined importance of personal competencies and social influences. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions that enhance not only financial knowledge but also practical application, risk assessment, and goal-directed behavior to foster proactive investment practices among young adults.

Keywords: *financial literacy, investment intention, long-term financial goals, management undergraduates, risk tolerance, social influence, student investment behavior*

Sri Lankan Labour: Where Do the Ladies Fit In?

Hashini Gayanga Wijesekera

Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, National University of Singapore

hashinigw@u.nus.edu

ABSTRACT

This persistent gap between educational attainment and labour market outcomes for women in Sri Lanka remains a policy dilemma that has failed to garner effective remedial action. Despite progress in education, this has not translated into proportional gains in the labour market, with female labour force participation remaining largely stagnant at below 35 per cent for more than two decades. This essay explores why increased female educational attainment in Sri Lanka has failed to achieve its intended goals in the labour market. Through a scholarly review of the literature, combined with a statistical analysis of recent data, the essay proposes a reconsideration of workforce development strategies, including expanding the vocational education sector, improving labour market inclusivity, and transforming preferences regarding public sector jobs.

Keywords: *female labour force participation, work, education, Sri Lanka, labour market*

An Assessment of Trends, Patterns and Determinants of Female Labor Force Participation in Sri Lanka

Kihanduwage Thamari Rochana Dissanayake
Faculty of Agriculture, University of Peradeniya
thamari.dissanayake98@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examines the trends, patterns, and determinants of female labor force participation (FLFP) in Sri Lanka within a global and regional context. Despite major progress in education and social development, Sri Lanka's FLFP rate has stagnated at around 30-35 percent from 2002 to 2023, indicating that economic growth alone has not increased women's labor market engagement. The analysis integrates three objectives. First, Labor Force Survey (LFS) time-series data (2013 to 2023) are used to analyze national trends by age, education, and residential sector. Results show a gradual shift of women from agriculture to services and a decline in participation among younger cohorts. Second, the U-shaped hypothesis between FLFP and economic growth is tested using a panel dataset of 210 countries (1990 to 2023) extracted from the World Development Indicators. Ordinary least squares estimates confirm a significant U-shaped relationship, with Sri Lanka on the downward portion of the curve. Finally, cross-sectional LFS data (2023) are analyzed using binary logit regression. The results indicate that childcare responsibilities significantly reduce female labor force participation, while education and household wealth exert positive influences. Muslim women exhibit significantly lower participation, highlighting the role of cultural and religious norms. Expanding affordable childcare facilities and implementing flexible labor policies are critical for enhancing women's economic participation in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *labour force participation, U-shaped hypothesis, Sri Lanka, childcare responsibility, labor force survey*

Leveraging Fiscal Policy for Economic Transformation in Sri Lanka

Wepitiyage Hansani Dilshani
Centre for Poverty Analysis
hdilshani2000@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explored the transition from sovereign default toward macroeconomic stabilization, arguing that fiscal discipline alone cannot bridge the transformation gap required for inclusive growth. As an extension of this, the essay utilized a descriptive fiscal analysis of national budget estimates spanning from 2016 to 2026 to examine how fiscal resource allocation influenced structural change. Findings revealed a structurally stagnant budget where recurrent costs for operational survival consistently crowd out the capital investments necessary for future development. The analysis highlighted a persistent implementation gap and an optimism bias that leads to under-utilization in growth-oriented sectors. Furthermore, to move forward, the nation must transition its strategic maritime location from a passive asset to an active hub for global value chain integration. The integration of digitalization as an internal tool is needed to modernize institutions and enhance transparency. Key recommendations include institutionalizing long-term governance through an independent growth commission to insulate fiscal policies from political shifts, rebalancing public expenditure toward high-multiplier capital investment in productive sectors, and adopting performance-based budgeting. By aligning fiscal policies with strategic priorities and maintaining institutional discipline, the country can address past inconsistencies and transform temporary stability into a diversified, resilient, and inclusive economy.

Keywords: *budget estimates, fiscal policy, policy inconsistencies, strategic maritime Integration, structural transformation*

Maheswaranathan Chesika
Department of Economics, University of Jayawardenapura
chesika20mahesh@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka's economy has undergone significant structural changes over the past few decades, shifting from an agriculture-based economy toward a service-dominated structure. However, the sustainability of this transformation is questionable due to its limited industrial expansion and a narrow export base. Accordingly, this study examines the impact of structural transformation on economic growth by analysing the contributions of the agricultural, industrial, and service sectors to GDP, while incorporating foreign direct investment and exports as control variables. Using annual data from 1991 to 2024, sectoral value-added data measured in billions of U.S. dollars are converted to logarithmic form. The Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) bounds testing approach is employed to estimate both short-run and long-run relationships. The findings reveal a strong long-run relationship, with the industrial sector and exports showing significant positive effects on GDP. The agricultural sector shows a positive but statistically insignificant impact, while the service sector and foreign direct investment have negative, insignificant coefficients. This pattern reflects a premature structural transformation, where the economy shifted toward services without sufficient industrial expansion and productive investment in foreign direct investment. The error correction mechanism confirms that deviations from the long-run equilibrium are gradually corrected over time. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening industrial development in Sri Lanka by effectively utilizing the country's available resources and leveraging its strategic geographic location. Therefore, expanding the industrial base and promoting export-oriented production are essential for achieving sustainable economic diversification and supporting a more resilient and inclusive growth path. This study also provides insightful and actionable policy recommendations to support economic transformation in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *sectoral analysis, industrial development, ARDL, economic diversification, Sri Lanka*

The Right to Development and Structural Poverty: Rethinking State Obligations in Times of Crisis

D.L.M. De S. Rajakaruna, H.A.J.S.L. Harankaha, C.M. Gamage
Faculty of Law, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka
lakkhinimandara@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Structural poverty remains a persistent and deeply rooted challenge that arises from unequal social, economic, and political structures rather than individual failure. During times of crisis such as economic downturns, pandemics, and natural disasters, these structural inequalities are further intensified, pushing vulnerable populations into deeper poverty. This research examines the Right to Development as a universally recognized human right for addressing structural poverty, with a particular focus on the evolving obligations of the state in times of crisis with special reference to Sri Lanka. Using international legal instruments, including the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the study argues that development must be understood as a people-centered, participatory, and equitable process. The research adopts a doctrinal and qualitative legal methodology, relying on the analysis of international treaties, UN reports, scholarly literature, and selected policy responses to crisis situations. This research critically analyses state responses to crises, highlighting the limitations of short-term relief measures that fail to address the underlying causes of structural poverty. It emphasizes the need to rethink state obligations beyond emergency assistance and toward long-term, rights-based development strategies that prioritize social protection, equality, and non-discrimination, with special reference to Sri Lanka. The study further underscores the importance of strengthening institutional frameworks and ensuring meaningful participation of marginalized groups in development processes while referring to the constitutional provisions of Sri Lanka. It concludes that the effective realization of the right to development during times of crisis is essential for reducing structural poverty, safeguarding human dignity, and promoting inclusive and sustainable development.

Keywords: *right to development, structural poverty, state obligations, human rights law*

The Hidden Hustle of Moonlighters in Sri Lanka's Informal Sector

N.A.J. Kithmini

Department of Economics, University of Colombo

kithmini@econ.cmb.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

Moonlighting, the practice of holding multiple jobs simultaneously, has become increasingly visible in labour markets characterized by informal employment and income insecurity. In Sri Lanka, where the informal sector accounts for a significant share of national GDP, many workers engage in secondary employment to sustain their livelihoods. Existing research has focused on determinants of moonlighting, while little attention has been given to how workers experience this phenomenon and the role of national labour policies. This study investigates the lived experiences of informal sector moonlighters using a mixed-method approach. Quantitatively, it analyses Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey data (2019 and 2023) using descriptive statistics. Qualitatively, it draws on in-depth interviews with 10 purposively-selected informal sector workers in the Ratnapura district and key informants including labour economists, legal experts, and government officials. Data trends show a peak moonlighting rate of 11% in 2016, stabilizing around 6% post-2019, with a slight increase to 6.4% in 2023. Workers cited unstable income, seasonal employment, rising living costs, and lack of social protection as key motivations for moonlighting. While essential for financial survival, moonlighting adversely affects their physical and mental health due to long working hours. Key informants stressed the absence of regulatory frameworks addressing moonlighting in the informal economy, revealing systemic gaps in labour protection. The study identifies disconnects between policy frameworks and ground-level experiences and concludes with recommendations to improve social protection, develop policies for informal sector moonlighters, and enhance national data collection. These findings are essential for informing evidence-based policies to protect Sri Lanka's informal workforce.

Keywords: *income security, informal sector, moonlighting, social protection*

Evaluating the Geriatric Healthcare Financing Policy Gaps on Aging Population in Sri Lanka

P. Malaka Gayashan
Centre for Poverty Analysis
gayashanmalaka@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka's aging population is growing rapidly and is expected to increase from 6.3% to 12.3% in the next 25 years. Correspondingly, there has been a dramatic increase in the prevalence of NCDs in the aging population and, consequently, an increase in the need for long-term care, presenting critical challenges for its predominantly public healthcare system. Empirical evidence shows that a large proportion of older persons require continuous medical care, making them particularly vulnerable during systemic shocks such as health crises and economic disruptions. Despite free public healthcare, rising out-of-pocket health expenses and inadequate social protection mechanisms have left older adults increasingly vulnerable to financial hardship. Addressing this problem, the researcher intends to propose policy measures that can be implemented to reduce the financial burden of healthcare among the aging population. This study utilized a qualitative approach and obtained primary data through ten Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), which were conducted with selected individuals representing a diverse range of perspectives within the health sector. Using primary data, thematic analysis was conducted based on four predetermined main themes. Thematic findings initially implied that the health sector requires systematic improvement of geriatric care facilities, training, and preventive care services; there is a lack of enforcement of existing policies and frameworks related to elderly people; and the public sector requires targeted enhancements such as tax progression, medication cost reduction, and geriatric medical education. There is a timely need for a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) for service integration in geriatric care. This study concludes how healthcare access, elderly isolation, the inadequacy of non-communicable disease management programs, and caregiving costs intensify the financial and psychological burden of ageing. These findings reveal gaps between macro-level policy objectives and ground-level implementation in addressing elderly healthcare financing. This study also contributes to understanding ageing-related healthcare vulnerabilities as a development challenge during periods of crisis.

Keywords: *aging population, geriatric care, out-of-pocket health expenses, public-private partnership, public sector*

CENTRE FOR POVERTY ANALYSIS (CEPA)

No. 16, Jawatta Road
Colombo 00500, Sri Lanka

T: +94 112 503 009

W: www.cepa.lk

E: info@cepa.lk

 @cepa_sl

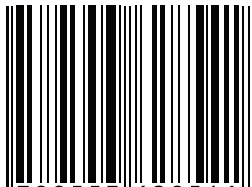
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