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Strategies for Leveraging Social Registries for Climate Action in Sri Lanka

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Social protection can play a key role in supporting climate change adaptation and mitigation by providing income protection to those affected by climate shocks and disasters and facilitating a green economy transition through skill development and employment opportunities.

To enhance their effectiveness in responding to climate shocks, social protection systems require robust data on population characteristics and detailed information about the intensity and likelihood of potential shocks.

However, many countries operate with social registries[1] focused on collecting data to assess chronic poverty based on proxies that are fixed or change slowly over time, limiting their ability to predict and respond to climate shocks effectively.

This brief provides recommendations for enhancing the quality of social registry data and integrating it with climate risk information.

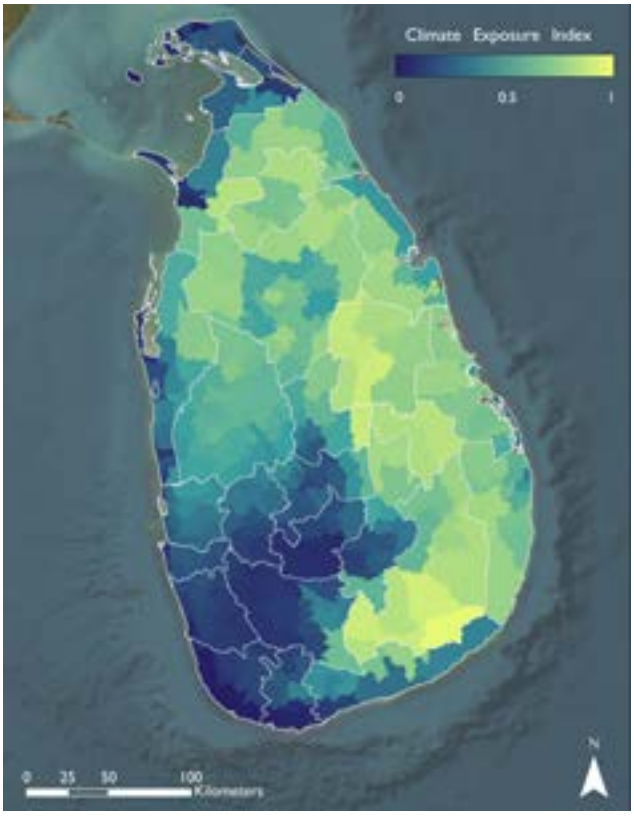
These measures aim to improve the identification of vulnerable populations and inform the design of adaptive and shock-responsive social protection interventions to support climate adaptation and mitigation efforts.

1 A social registry is a database or system that contains information on households and individuals within a specific population. Its purpose is to provide a centralized and up-to-date data source that can be used for targeting, planning, and implementing social protection programs.

Impacts of Climate Change in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka experiences significant natural hazards, primarily floods, droughts, extreme heat, and landslides, which are exacerbated by climate change. Floods are the most common type of natural hazard in Sri Lanka with 37 recorded events from 1981-2020, followed by droughts, then storms. In Sri Lanka, flood hazards are common across the country's lowland areas, whereas drought hazards are closely related to the timing and geography of the country's two monsoon seasons, the more robust Maha season and the milder Yala season, spanning from November to February and May to September respectively. Nineteen million Sri Lankans are projected to live in locations set to become moderate or severe climate hotspots by 2050. Climate change projections show an increasing trend in extreme events and natural disasters that pose significant threats to Sri Lanka's economy and human health.

A Climate Risk and Vulnerability Analysis conducted by Tetra Tech (Map 1) shows households located in high-exposure areas. The most climate-exposed households can be found in northern and north-central provinces, where droughts, floods, and landslides threaten main livelihoods, like rain-fed rice paddy agriculture. Additionally, in the southeastern Uva Province, extreme heat and drought impact main livelihoods like rice farms and tea plantations in relation with Sri Lanka's monsoon seasons. The analysis estimates that 7 percent of the national population (369,644 households) reside in regions highly susceptible to climate-related hazards.



Map 1: Climate Exposure Analysis

Sri Lanka's Progress Towards Climate Risk Integration in Social Protection Systems

KEY PROGRESS IN SOCIAL PROTECTION IN SRI LANKA

The social protection system in Sri Lanka has been through recent changes, with the government focusing on initiatives to support the most vulnerable. The recently launched 2024 National Social Protection Policy (NSPP) and transition to the newly introduced Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Payment Scheme, marked a significant evolution in Sri Lanka's approach to social protection. The Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Payment Scheme, launched in 2023, is a consolidated welfare system in Sri Lanka that aims to reduce poverty and enhance social well-being by providing monthly cash benefits to vulnerable individuals and families. These changes, particularly in beneficiary identification, coverage, targeting, and delivery mechanisms, can enhance the country's ability to respond to climate risks through more efficient and scalable social protection systems. Sri Lanka's key progress includes:

- Reaching nearly two million beneficiaries and providing benefits through Aswesuma.
- Changes in targeting using a multidimensional deprivation score has ensured that nearly 950,000 new families, who previously did not qualify for government assistance, now do.
- Introduction of direct benefit transfers to beneficiaries' bank accounts. Digital payments can enable faster transfer of financial assistance to individuals impacted by a shock, supporting a more shock-responsive social protection system.
- Identification of beneficiaries based on three categories — transitional/vulnerable, poor, and extremely poor. This allows Aswesuma to tailor its assistance based on the degree of need, providing temporary assistance to those who may only require short-term support, which could in the future, be used to provide temporary assistance after a climate shock.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SOCIAL REGISTRY AND CURRENT LIMITATIONS

The Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Payment Scheme uses a new Integrated Welfare Management System (IWMS), run by the Welfare Benefits Board, to store beneficiary data collected from both online and physical registrations. The social registry for the program currently holds data on 3.4 million households, while 1.8 million are eligible for assistance. The program uses 22 criteria to assess eligibility, which includes data on household information, assets, income, demographic details, and educational attainment.

These criteria are based on multidimensional deprivation indicators developed by the Department of Census and Statistics for the 2019 Household Income and Expenditure Survey. The social registry in Sri Lanka serves as a crucial tool for identifying and targeting vulnerable populations including the poor, elderly, persons with disabilities, children, and women, for social assistance programs, yet some limitations exist.

- As noted in the NSPP, Sri Lanka lacks a unified registry. The functionalities of the consolidated digital and data management systems, IWMS, remain limited with other social assistance programmes, like the Elderly Allowance programme, Disability Allowance programme, and the Thriposha National Supplementary Food Programme.
- The Aswesuma scheme's intake grievance process is not fully digitized. Many forms remain submitted via hard copy and manually inputted into the IWMS system, slowing data processing and increasing opportunities for errors. Processing all the information collected during the first round of data collection for the Aswesuma programme took approximately 2.5 months.
- The Aswesuma 2022 enrollment data is accessible via IWMS' online portal. However developing data-sharing and use memorandum of understandings (MOUs) with agencies outside of government has been slow, and there is limited use of social registry for social protection programming outside of Aswesuma. Increasing linkages with other ministries and development agencies could support more shock-responsive programming.
- The Aswesuma programme has encountered issues with beneficiaries' understanding of Aswesuma, its objectives and eligibility requirements. The programme could benefit from a public awareness campaign to clarify Aswesuma's objectives and goals for cash transfers.

AVAILABLE CLIMATE RISK DATA AND EXISTING GAPS

Integrating social protection into disaster risk management and climate risk indicators into social protection registries allows for a more holistic approach to managing various types of risks faced by vulnerable populations. Sri Lanka's strong disaster risk management sector tracks various types of climate data, including historical climate and hazard data and flood and landslide vulnerability assessments. Despite these resources, significant gaps remain in terms of accessing and using the data for improved social protection programme targeting.

- Climate risk data exists, especially amongst disaster management agencies, but siloed databases and limited data sharing lead to a lack of integration and use of climate risk data in social protection programming. Beyond individual champions, there is currently no integration at the policy level encouraging collaborative efforts amongst the ministries governing these sectors.

- Disaster management agencies are not yet utilising impact-based forecasting, which could improve predictions on how specific populations, like schoolchildren, pregnant women or the elderly, will be affected by disasters. Utilising socio-economic data from the Aswesuma registry could provide more granular details, such as the distributions of specific populations or the manifestation of disabilities.
- Climate vulnerability data is not captured in the current registry, yet a disproportionate number of vulnerable households (about 65,000 households[1]) live in climate-sensitive areas in Sri Lanka, particularly in the north, north-central, and southeast provinces where landslides, drought and extreme heat threaten agricultural livelihoods. Expanding the registry to capture additional climate-vulnerable information can help social assistance programs improve targeting for shock responsiveness.

Bridging Social Registries and Climate Data: The Path Forward

Strengthening social protection in Sri Lanka while integrating climate data involves leveraging existing government capacities. Key strategic points and recommendations for consideration include:

1. **Invest in robust climate hazard and exposure analysis for geographic targeting.**

Investing in climate hazard analysis is essential for identifying vulnerable regions and supporting low-income households. Various efforts are ongoing to develop climate hazard maps, but efforts need to be centralized to create a comprehensive mapping for social protection.

2. **Integrate climate vulnerability indicators in the multidimensional deprivation score.**

The Aswesuma scheme uses a multidimensional deprivation score to assess well-being across various dimensions, but does not yet include climate vulnerability indicators. To address this, the government should integrate climate risk factors into the multidimensional deprivation score, considering physical exposure, impacts on households, adaptive capacities, and input from relevant ministries. Technical support and guidance from the Department of National Planning and the Department of Census and Statistics is essential for effective implementation

1 Estimates based on Tetra Tech's Climate Vulnerability Assessment from May 2024.

and addressing the dynamics of vulnerability in a changing climate.

3. **Identify and register climate-vulnerable "near poor" households.**

Risks posed by climate change are not factored into the three poverty classifications of transitional/vulnerable, poor and extremely poor under Aswesuma. Concerns exist that households may experience downward mobility within these categories due to their exposure to climate-related shocks. A climate vulnerability score is recommended, categorizing risk into high, moderate, and minimal levels. This would enable targeted support and improve targeting of early warning dissemination for climate-vulnerable households, including those not currently benefiting from Aswesuma. As an interim measure, individuals not currently entitled for Aswesuma but living in disaster-prone areas at the divisional level could be integrated into the social registry. This would enable pre-identification and facilitate the rapid delivery of assistance in the event of a disaster. The existing design of the social registry allows for the inclusion of non-beneficiaries, providing an entry point for such an approach.

4. **Progressively build a household-level climate risk index in the Integrated Welfare Management System for long-term use.**

While a climate vulnerability score based on the multidimensional deprivation score can enhance targeting strategies, using it without climate risk considerations may miss specific household vulnerabilities. It is recommended that a detailed risk and vulnerability analysis at the household level be conducted and integrated into the IWMS. Creating a multifaceted climate risk index that incorporates various hazards, exposure levels, and vulnerabilities at the household level is vital for enabling detailed risk mapping and prioritization of support at a household level to facilitate effective shock-responsive programming.

5. **Revamp the existing livelihood component of the Samurdhi program to address climate risks and impacts on livelihoods.**

It is recommended that Samurdhi pilot projects from 2024 to 2026 be designed with risk-informed approaches by conducting a comprehensive mapping exercise to identify the most vulnerable livelihoods and specific climate risks the initiatives may encounter. Additionally, exploring different climate financing options and partnership models could bring more stability to the programme.

6. **Strengthen coordination among key government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and international partners to better engage in disaster management, climate change and social protection.**

Noting the siloed nature of various agencies, a comprehensive climate risk management strategy could be developed to effectively address disaster management, climate change, and social protection challenges. Establishing a national climate-smart social protection task force could also address coordination gaps between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and international partners.

7. **Strengthen existing social protection systems and build capacities of actors.**

With a growing recognition of the impacts of climate change, each sector has specific technical and capacity constraints that currently stand in the way of more cross-sectoral collaboration on the issue. For example, the Aswesuma scheme targeting, intake, and grievance processes need additional support to reduce exclusion errors and increase the speed and accuracy of data processing. The disaster management sector could use additional resources to upgrade data collection efforts on vulnerability, exposure and coping capacity. It is recommended that the government of Sri Lanka prioritise investments in existing social protection system components and implementation processes to build capacities for stakeholders to establish a strong shock-responsive social protection system.

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