

# Universal Social Protection for Dignified Care Systems



## OVERVIEW

Sri Lanka has faced multiple crises in recent years. The economic crisis, climate shocks and fiscal consolidation have exposed the deep structural issues in its social protection systems. Schemes like Aswesuma have proven inadequate at protecting working-class and low-income households from these multidimensional shocks. In urban areas like Colombo, where these communities often occupy the informal economy, compounding crises have led to lost income, food insecurity, economic precarity and crippling debt.

These impacts are gendered, with women, especially working mothers, bearing the heaviest burdens. Women handle much of the day-to-day care of their families and households. They are the first to skip meals, not use time-saving electricity devices to save electricity and take up additional employment to make ends meet.

Narrowly targeted cash transfer programmes only provide short-term relief and do not consider

structural vulnerabilities and inequalities shaped by gendered expectations of care, informal employment, disability, age, debt, housing or exposure to climate risk.

Social protection must be transformative, centring social equity and the dignity of all individuals and communities. By recognising vulnerability to be dynamic and life-cycle-based, universal social protection calls for public investment in universal services. By guaranteeing income security and access to essential services, universal social protection ensures security before, during and after shocks.

***“The water and electricity bills are so high. After you pay those off, the entire Aswesuma amount is used up.” - Kusuma\****

\*All the names have been anonymised

## OUR FINDINGS FROM COLOMBO

Our research in Colombo during and after the economic crisis reveals that national statistics about economic recovery do not reflect lived realities. The impact of the crisis is still being felt by the working classes. This has been exacerbated in the aftermath of Cyclone Ditwah.

Impacts are layered, gendered and tied to care responsibilities. Traditional care systems are weakened due to migration and relocation. Infrastructures of care are inadequate, and rarely account for the care of older children, children with disabilities, elders and carers themselves. Women experience chronic time poverty, balancing paid work with care.

Women from working-class households largely rely on informal employment like outdoor vending and domestic work, with irregular earnings and no labour protections. Missing work due to caregiving responsibilities, climate shocks or illness can trigger economic precarity and food insecurity, all of which are ignored in traditional social protection systems.

Programmes like Aswesuma do not meaningfully support families, as they do not cover all households. Families have had to resort to borrowing money through informal credit systems at high interest rates to buy food, medicine and pay for utilities.

Families are unprotected against climate shocks. Lack of social protection means that workers in the city continue to work despite the weather, compromising their health and well-being. Illness, exhaustion, and income loss increase the care load on women, deepening their time poverty.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Community-centred urban infrastructures of care, such as day-cares, creches and after-school programmes, must be expanded and well-resourced. These facilities should be safe, affordable, with appropriate infrastructure and be monitored and supervised by a regulatory body.

School meal programmes must go beyond primary school to improve the nutrition of children of all ages. They reduce women's time poverty and offer women income-generating opportunities that align with children's school time. They also improve school attendance and relieve financial burdens on the household budget.

Legal protections for workers in the informal sector, including minimum wages, mandatory paid leave, maternity benefits, contracts, and inclusion in social security schemes, are essential to ensure they receive the same rights and safeguards as formal-sector workers.

Climate-linked protections are necessary to safeguard outdoor workers from the impact of working in rising heat. This can look like investing in public infrastructure, such as shade, public taps, bathrooms and better vending facilities.

Rolling out universal social protection requires integrated data systems. Data on families' income, care responsibilities, disability, health, housing, and climate exposure must be collected and updated regularly to ensure that response, recovery and support are inclusive and grounded in reality.

Sri Lanka must strengthen social protection methods incrementally and ensure that recovery goes beyond merely enabling communities to make ends meet. With transformative social protection, people experience a better quality of life within their lifetime.



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