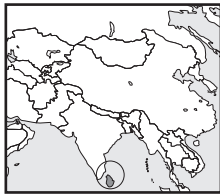


## ■ SRI LANKA

# Zero poverty reduction and mounting human rights violations

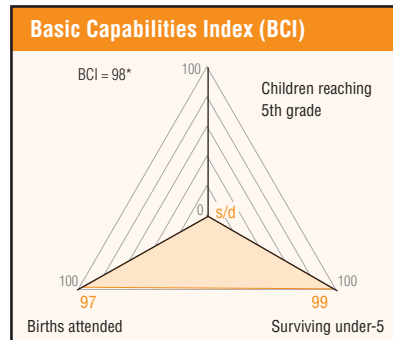


By the beginning of 2008 it was evident that the economic policies adopted over the last 30 years have deprived low-income citizens of their most fundamental rights, including the right to a decent diet. These policies, designed to intensify income disparities as a means of promoting growth, were implemented under the guidance and pressure of international financial institutions. Their implementation has contributed to massive violations of human rights. Today, the very survival of almost half the country's population is under threat.

**Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR)**  
**Law & Society Trust (LST)**  
**Sarath Fernando**

The most visible and discussed violations of human and democratic rights are disappearances and killings, accompanied by suppression of media and their staff, including several killings and disappearances. These violations have increased significantly, particularly with the escalation of the war in the North since the Government decided to abandon the cease-fire agreement.

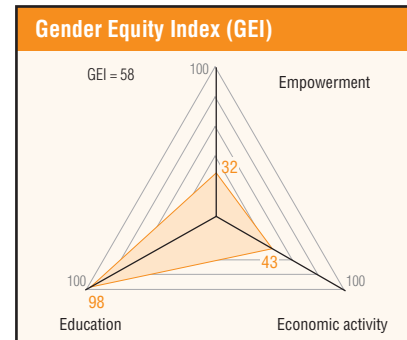
In addition to these glaring violations of civil rights, for the past three decades successive governments have pursued economic policies that have violated other basic rights. Prior to 1977, Sri Lanka embraced an economic model that emphasized social welfare, keeping income disparities to a minimum and providing support for small-scale farmers producing food for the domestic market. In contrast, for the last 30 years the country has pursued economic policies determined by large companies, a small wealthy elite and top governmental advisors who have been appointed with the approval of the international financial institutions and other foreign aid providers. Their "export-oriented growth model" has informed budgets, trade agreements, allocation of finances for infrastructure development, tax concessions to foreign and local investors, privatization of local and international trade and even essential services such as health and education, as well as borrowing to provide facilities for the rich. While social welfare and food subsidies have been cut, salaries of cabinet ministers and parliamentarians have been steadily increased to win their support for plans and decisions benefiting foreign investors and the domestic elite. Although the country claims to be a democracy, once a government is elected poorer citizens have no say in its economic plans and decisions.



### An undernourished population

Food price inflation currently exceeds 60%. The average person in Sri Lanka eats a little more than 100 kg of rice a year; the average family needs about 40 kg per month. Buying it costs a family LKR 2,400 (USD 22.35) a month, at a time when 2.1 million families have an income less than LKR 1,500 (USD 14) per month, according to official figures. Even if their income were double that, after taking possible unrecorded incomes into account, they still wouldn't be able to buy enough rice to meet their needs, let alone pay for anything else. The cost of other basic foods has also soared in recent months. Prices of bread and wheat flour have jumped to LKR 40/lb and LKR 75/kg respectively, leading to a 60% plunge in their consumption in the country as a whole – 90% in rural areas. So far, the Government has been very pleased with this "reduction in consumption," since it reduces the food import bill. As rice becomes unaffordable, a similar reduction among poor people will reduce their basic food intake below the minimum necessary to survive. Even now, only half the country's 20 million people consume the minimum daily requirement of 2,030 kilocalories. In a report entitled *Poverty Indicators - Household Income and Expenditure Survey - 2006/07*, released in March 2008, the Government's Department of Census and Statistics reported that "an average poor person in Sri Lanka receives only 1,696 kilocalories per day while a non-poor person receives 2,194 kilocalories."<sup>1</sup>

According to the UN World Food Programme (WFP), the highest rates of under-nourishment are in the north and east, as well as parts of the



dry zone towards the centre of the island. "These areas are some of the poorest on the island, with very high malnutrition rates, poor education levels and poor sanitation, all of which contribute to malnutrition," declared Jean-Yves Lequime, deputy head of WFP in Sri Lanka. The rural poor need to consume a greater number of calories than the average person, and most are getting less. "Especially in the agricultural areas, they engage with heavy work, so they need more calories," explained Gordon Weiss, chief of communications at the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital. "Most of the agricultural-based areas are considered poor areas."

### Child nutrition

"Sri Lanka has a significantly higher child underweight rate than would be expected on the basis of its [annual] per capita GDP [of USD 1,599]," according to the WFP's Lequime. "Indeed, the rate may be three times as high as would be expected from a country with Sri Lanka's level of infant mortality." Infant mortality may soon rise dramatically: 14% of children under five show signs of acute underweight and chronic underweight, while 29% are underweight, according to UNICEF. Last year's vertiginous climb in food prices portends far worse data in the months to come.

### Remittances and semi-slavery

The primary sources of foreign income are remittances from workers who have gone to countries in the Middle East in search of employment as cheap labour in export-oriented garment factories. Recent governments have permitted and even encouraged vicious exploitation of these workers while ignoring the degrading and insecure working and living

\* One of the BCI components was imputed based on data from countries of similar level.

<sup>1</sup> Extracts taken from IRIN (Integrated Regional Information Networks) website: <[www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=77985](http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=77985)>.

conditions they must endure. In addition, about a million rural workers are kept in conditions of semi-slavery, which the plantation economy requires to maintain its rate of profit and competitiveness in the international marketplace. In spite of a great deal of struggle by the plantation workers, their daily wage remains LKR 200 (USD 1.86) More than half of them are women.

### Economic failure, uprisings and war

The failure of the growth model is dragging the country down into an economic abyss. Absolutely none of the promised “trickle down” or reduction of poverty has occurred over the past quarter-century. On the contrary, economic and social disparities have increased. The breakdown in rural agriculture – a direct result of the termination of supportive government policies – has increased farmer debt enormously, leading to suicides.

During the first 17 years of these economic policies, governments enforced them through extreme repression. All opposition and resistance were suppressed. Trade unions were crushed. Political parties that criticized the policies were banned. Political victimization of those who disagreed became common practice. Official poverty alleviation programmes were used to compel political support. These programmes, such as the Janasaviya and Samurdhi movement, provided very small financial grants to families with incomes under USD 0.50 a day. To be entitled to a subsidy, families had to submit to the decisions of the party in power, disseminate its political propaganda and participate in its election campaigns. These programmes effectively erased the political freedom of 2.1 million families, about half the population.

Under these conditions, rural youth are finding it more and more difficult to make a living in agriculture or other rural livelihoods. Many have responded by intensifying their efforts to obtain an education and find employment elsewhere. However, opportunities outside the rural economy have not expanded to absorb them. One consequence of their frustration has been a series of armed uprisings, beginning with one in 1971.

The paucity of opportunities for education or employment in industry or services was also the basis for the Northern youth uprising. The participants believed that they were the victims of ethnic discrimination, and demanded for a separate state. This conflict expanded into a war in the North and East that has lasted nearly 30 years, caused well over 60,000 deaths and generated more than 1.5 million refugees.

Brushing aside evidence that its neoliberal economic policies were causing widespread strife, the Government continued to pursue them. This contributed to another armed uprising, led by youths in the rest of the country (the Southern Sinhala majority

areas) between 1987 and 1990. Their attempted to seize state power and establish a different economic and political system resulted in 60,000 deaths over two years.

The Government has used war and its declared commitment to defeating terrorism militarily to take power and retain it, while adopting economic policies that are devastating the poorer sectors of society. It uses militarism to win as much support as possible from parties and groups, including those who adhere to chauvinist ideologies. By manipulating the very real fear and insecurity, primarily in the Sinhala majority areas, inspired by the continuing war and Tamil Tiger attacks on civilians, the Government has been able to overcome its loss of popularity and justify all of its other violations and suppression of rights, despite the tremendous economic burdens its policies are inflicting on a majority of the population.<sup>2</sup>

A government that adopts more people-friendly economic policies will be in a far stronger position to convince the people of Sri Lanka that a negotiated settlement of the war and the ethnic conflict is the best route to peace and prosperity.

### Contradicting the will of the people

The comprehensive loss of human rights, including the right to food and decent livelihood, was a direct result of government policies pushed by the wealthy local elite as well as the international financial institutions and global economic powers – the so called “donors” – and implemented despite the repeatedly expressed desires of the majority of the country’s population for a different, more humane economic model.

This becomes very clear when we look at the promises that political parties made during elections – and abandoned once in office. Both Chandrika Bandaranayake and Mahinda Rajapakse, during their presidential campaigns in 1994 and 2005, respectively, promised to halt privatization and other policies demanded by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. However, once in power they blatantly violated their campaign promises and pursued the same policies they had denounced, attempting privatization of water, education and health, and allocating even more money to infrastructure investments designed to make the country attractive to foreign investors.

During her election campaign, Chandrika denounced land ownership laws advocated by the World Bank to facilitate a “free land market” as “killer

policies”. Quite justifiably. These proposed reforms in land ownership structure envisaged a rural transformation that would make 20% of the total population landless and destitute, forcing them to migrate to urban areas. After becoming President, Chandrika tried to introduce these same policies. The present Government is about to implement a similar *Bim Saviya* (Strength of Land) programme that will give tradable land titles to 1.2 million families.

In addition, the Government has massively increased the already huge foreign debt burden by allocating LKR 389 billion (USD 3.6 billion) of borrowed money to build infrastructure, at a time when the World Bank itself has declared that it no longer approves of this type of loan.

Preventing people from using their creativity to overcome hunger and poverty in order to please global economic powers that seek to extract the greatest possible profit is a violation of rights – the worst of all, since it is linked to violations of other rights, such as the right to freedom of expression, the right to social security, the right to organize and the right to live in security. Sri Lanka has enormous potential if it adopted a “people-friendly” and “environmentally-friendly” strategy for reducing hunger, poverty and social disparities. This potential is currently being ignored, along with popular efforts to realize it. ■

<sup>2</sup> Another illustration of the manipulation of a catastrophe against those who suffered it more directly is what happened with the December 2004 Tsunami. While generous donations from all over the world were received to assist the victims, these revenues were diverted to building tourism and modernizing towns, in the process displacing the people it was supposed to help and depriving them of their livelihood as small-scale fisherfolk.