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How poor are the poor? An investigation into the incidence of human poverty in drought stricken areas of the Hambantota District

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Poverty is viewed 'as pronounced deprivation on well being'. This makes poverty necessarily a multi dimensional proposition. It permeates a variety of material and non-material considerations of human life. However, poverty as an economic concept is often defined narrowly; it is seen as phenomenon associated with income inadequacy, and hence measurement of poverty is linked to the determination of poverty lines and making head count estimates with a view to ascertain the numbers of persons falling below the poverty lines. The drawbacks of income based poverty measures are well documented: they have given rise to some improvements in the already available statistical measures of poverty. The human poverty index developed by the UNDP is one major criteria in this regarded.

The concept of human poverty encompasses survival deprivation, inadequate access to knowledge, non-availability of safe drinking water and safe sanitation, absence of basic care and non-availability of electricity and safe energy. While any attempt to measure income or consumption poverty may still be difficult, assessment of human poverty is more complicated undertaking because of its multi-dimensional nature.

In this context the study using data from the Lunugamwehera divisional development area of the Hambantota district attempts to establish base line human poverty levels of people living in a few selected drought stricken villages. The area studied has had a number of transitional episodes of poverty and droughts that interfered the livelihood of the rural community whose main occupation is agriculture. The drought attacks that were consecutive were particularly pronounced during the period between the years 1995 to 2001.

The study revealed how material deprivation arising from crop damage, loss of livestock, non-availability of drinking water etc., have impacted on people in different ways. It disclosed how some of the derived poverty symptoms such as stunting, wasting and malnutrition have impacted on the children. The status of the villages as measured in terms of human poverty was found to have had cumulative effects on income levels leading to an intensified the process of social reproduction of poverty.

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