

Learning Brief: Mainstreaming social protection into programmes delivery and operations – lessons learned from my secondment to WFP CO in Sri Lanka

May 2022, Natacha Pugin, SHA Member

1 Introduction ¹

“Social protection systems play a vital role in achieving a Zero Hunger world. National social protection systems have the potential to improve the lives of billions of people – operating at scale much larger than any humanitarian program.” These are the inspiring words stated by Mr. David M. Beasley, WFP Executive Director, in the introduction of the Strategy for Support to Social Protection² launched by WFP on 1st July 2021. This strategy defines WFP’s coordinating framework, priorities, modes of supports and areas of work to achieve global commitments and foster high quality social protection systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded disaster risks induced by climate change, exploited vulnerabilities, and exacerbated existing gender-based inequalities. Over the past year, research and evidence have demonstrated the increased level of stress and anxiety globally caused by the crisis and its reverberations particularly affecting women, elderly, households with children and daily labourers in the informal sector. Sri Lanka is no exception to this and Sri Lankans are facing a heightened risk of food insecurity and have been particularly weakened in the current economic, geopolitical and social landscape. In this context, a robust, adaptive and shock-responsive social protection system is crucial.

The scope of this brief is intended to explain the opportunities and challenges faced in mainstreaming social protection into programmes delivery and operations over the length of this deployment in Sri Lanka from September 2019 to March 2022, to provide a succinct summary highlighting lessons learned and key takeaways. It aims at identifying some of the entry points to overcome silos thinking and, ultimately, contributing to the knowledge management and operational expertise within SHA, and more broadly within SDC.

2 General country context and social protection in Sri Lanka

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is an economy of 21.9 million people with an estimated active population of 8.5 million³, strategically located in South Asia, around 60 kilometers off the southern coast of India. A lower middle-income country with a GNI per capita⁴ of US \$ 3,720 in 2020⁵, Sri Lanka experienced strong economic growth and poverty reduction following the cessation of a 30-year civil conflict in 2009, achieving upper-middle income status in 2019 before

¹ The views and opinions expressed in this document are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views and positions of SDC or WFP.

² <https://www.wfp.org/publications/world-food-programme-strategy-support-social-protection-2021>

³ <https://www.dailynews.lk/2022/04/11/business/276860/economically-active-population-reaches-85-mn>

⁴ Gross National Income, converted to US dollars using the World Bank Atlas method, divided by the midyear population

⁵ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CD?locations=LK>

falling marginally below the threshold in 2020⁶ and currently facing its worst economic and political crisis since the independence. Life expectancy at birth is 77 years (2018)⁷ and main economy consists of agricultural sector, manufacturing and tourism.

While poverty was relatively low in Sri Lanka prior to the pandemic, pre-existing vulnerabilities were high, partly owing to informal labour dominating the total workforce at about 57% in 2019⁸. Many workers do not have access to employment protection or other job-related social protection benefits, making them highly vulnerable during times of economic crisis. Simulation-based results done by the World Bank emphasized that 500,000 new people would fall into poverty⁹ which is now deemed a gross underestimation since this figure does not take into account the economic crisis as of May 2022. Livelihoods support programs and various relief measures implemented by the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) over the course of the pandemic were expected to have mitigated the labor market shocks and stresses faced but in reality, inequality increased because of the unequal distribution of the shock, purchasing power disparities, rampant inflation and weak governance.

Social protection in Sri Lanka is provided through a combination of both contributory and non-contributory systems including social assistance. Core components of the actual system include pensions for public servants and armed forces personnel, the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) and Employees Trust Fund (ETF), a number of voluntary pension schemes such as Farmers Insurance scheme, Fisherman's Insurance scheme and Pensions and Social Security Benefit Scheme for self-employed persons¹⁰. In addition, a variety of social welfare benefits exist for low-income households, namely the Senior Citizens Allowance, Disability Allowance, Chronic Illness Allowance and the most important one being the Samurdhi programme¹¹, which, by the end of 2021, was providing services and benefits to 1.8 million Sri Lankan households. It is currently run by the State Ministry of Samurdhi, Household Economy, Micro Finance, Self-Employment, Business Development and Underutilized State Resources Development¹².

3 Opportunities and challenges

Social protection has gained a lot of momentum over the past three years while government used this mechanism to scale up assistance to some of its citizens during the COVID-19 crisis. This is highly relevant to WFP's mandate in Sri Lanka, where contributions focused on capacity strengthening and technical and policy support to government to address the underlying causes of food insecurity and malnutrition and support longer-term recovery and resilience building¹³, an approach that should ideally be sustainable and support social cohesion.

Drawing on insights from my secondment in Sri Lanka, many strategic opportunities surfaced, allowing me to focus on social protection that supports people to meet their food security, nutrition and associated essential needs and helps them to manage risks and increase their capacity to respond to shocks. It can be summarized as follows:

⁶ Draft Sri Lanka Country Analysis, CCA, December 2021

⁷ <https://data.worldbank.org/country/sri-lanka>

⁸ Sri Lanka, Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey: Annual Bulletin – 2019 (Colombo, 2019)

⁹ World Bank. Sri Lanka Development Update: 2021 (Washington, DC, World Bank, 2021).

¹⁰ <http://ssb.gov.lk/progressE.html>

¹¹ <https://www.samurdhi.gov.lk/web/index.php/en/home.html>

¹² <https://www.treasury.gov.lk/web/about/section/departments>

¹³ <https://www.wfp.org/operations/lk01-sri-lanka-country-strategic-plan-2018-2022>



The Government's technical capacity was strengthened, and trainings were provided to key officers of the Department of Samurdhi Development (DSD) in 4 flood-prone and 4 drought-prone districts. Awareness sessions were conducted, and coordination and collaboration with other ministries such as Ministry of Health and Women's Bureau were enhanced to be more shock-responsive, inclusive and adaptive (capacity for vertical or horizontal expansion while advocacy to adapt system to reduce exclusion errors).



Data Sharing Agreement was signed between WFP and DSD in October 2020, in order to have a legal framework in place and raising awareness on importance of data protection. Privacy Impact Assessment (PIA) was conducted for all programme activities in 2 phases, underlining major recommendations. Pre-registration of 6'500 HHs living in flood-prone districts in WFP's beneficiary transfer management platform SCOPE to strengthen emergency preparation and anticipatory action.



Additional funds and resources (from DFAT, UNICEF and RBB) were mobilised to provide emergency cash-based assistance through social protection mechanisms to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 for the project targeting pregnant and nursing mothers in 6 districts including Kalutara. As part of the scale-up, top-up was provided to families with children under 5 in vulnerable situations, using pre-registration data in SCOPE, WFP's beneficiary and transfer management platform that supports programme intervention cycle. Evidence generated through these 2 projects were compiled, in collaboration with the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) team, in a concise Post-Distribution Monitoring (PDM).



Strong focus on coordination and integrated approach with nutrition, gender, resilience, Emergency Preparedness and Response (EPR), M&E, Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) activities to enhance impact and effectiveness, to foster capacities at national and sub-national levels with leaving-no-one-behind approach including consultation with civil society and communities, with some Social Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) components and the collaboration of the Scaling up Nutrition People's Forum (SUNPF).



Continuous engagement with UN Agencies and UN Working Group on Social protection, validation of UN Joint Work Plan (JWP) with objectives endorsed to align our activities, regular inter-agency meetings to build consensus, and to improve coordination and communication. Stakeholder's consultation for the National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) for Sri Lanka, offering technical support to government from the UN Social Protection Results Group, composed of ILO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF (Lead), WFP and World Bank sent in February 2022.

Overall disaster management coordination is in place in Sri Lanka, however, the necessary coordination around the collaboration with, or integration of social protection schemes, is weak and not linked to the wider disaster response mechanisms. Despite strong advocacy to strategically

engage with the Disaster Management Centre¹⁴ (DMC) through the EPR team, the drafted standard operating procedures (SOPs) and proposition to support development of a wider operational plan involving DSD and DMC are still met with internal challenges for endorsement, having challenges to progress beyond its inception state with multiple discussions.

While WFP has been globally engaged and contributed to social protection programmes to address vulnerability and social exclusion for decades, additional resources should be dedicated to staff trainings and building capacity internally, not only on how social protection can be embedded and aligned with the vision and mission of the organization but certainly how to integrate it for resilience building and for responding in contexts of disruption and politically fragile context. In Sri Lanka, the new Country Strategic Plan (CSP) for 2023-2027 was an excellent opportunity to foster the enabling environment that facilitates programme delivery and engagement to support systems strengthening.

Social protection is an investment into a nation and an accelerator for many Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and essential if we are to reach Zero Hunger. In Sri Lanka, the SP system is highly fragmented, relatively opaque and social benefits managed by different Ministries that are being reshuffled on a regular basis. Our technical support to the Department of Samurdhi Development (DSD), administering the biggest social protection scheme, was our main entry point for capacity strengthening, policy advocacy and evidence generation. It is crucial to consolidate and build on the knowledge acquired. WFP's Sri Lanka Country Office has been selected for the scoping study¹⁵ on "Enhancing food security Nutrition and Managing Risks and Shocks in Asia and the Pacific through support to social protection systems", which case study should contribute to identification of gaps, maximize knowledge and highlight the overall strategic direction for the Country Office.

In order to ensure sustainability of this secondment, an exit strategy was clearly identified with the management and the Regional Bureau in Bangkok (RBB). As the situation is worsening country wise, increasing needs identified by the UN and partners and limited resources dedicated to social protection should not challenge WFP's aim to be a partner of choice and the increasing role WFP can play in that specific field and in systems strengthening, relying on expertise and operational experience.

4 Lessons learned and key takeaways

Women and children have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and families in vulnerable situations have been pushed even deeper into precarity. The majority of these households is living in multidimensional poverty, without access to essential and basic services and level of social transfers insufficient and inadequate to generate meaningful impacts. In July 2020, the United Nations collectively worked on the UN Advisory Paper "Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19 in Sri Lanka"¹⁶ and advocated for 5 strategic priorities, expanding and scaling-up social protection system being one of them with ultimately, the implementation of a universal lifecycle cash transfer approach.

Within WFP CO and as Focal Person for all activities related to social protection, it gave us a unique platform to proactively engage with UN agencies in the field of social protection, specifically UNICEF, UNDP, ILO and UNFPA, and with the World Bank. In parallel, the UN Advisory Paper contributed to the development of a joint work plan (JWP) of the WG of UN Results Group on Social Protection and

¹⁴ <http://www.dmc.gov.lk/index.php?lang=en>

¹⁵ Initiated by WFP Regional Bureau in Bangkok (RBB) and undertaken by the University of Wolverhampton

¹⁶ <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/un-advisory-paper-immediate-socio-economic-response-covid-19-sri-lanka>

to speak as one UN. Internally, it helped us to shape the discussion on the cross-functionality of social protection, to overcome silos thinking and how further embed it with nutrition, resilience, EPR and gender to foster social cohesion and to position social protection in WFP's next Country Strategic Plan¹⁷ (CSP) for 2023-2027 and to build constructive partnerships.

Working on the elaboration and operationalization of two modes of support was professionally rewarding. By supporting the nationally led system and providing technical support to the Department of Samurdhi Development, we pre-registered 6,500 HHs into SCOPE as part of the emergency preparedness in flood-prone area in 11 divisions; we trained key Government officers, and initiated meaningful discussions on digital transformation, raising awareness on adapting and modernizing the national social protection data management system to effectively map people in vulnerable situations and provide assistance before or after a shock. In addition, we extended WFP's own programming with complementary actions in using components of the government national social protection system to directly assist pregnant and nursing mothers and families with children under 5 in Kalutara, registered with DSD or on DSD's waiting list and identified as highly vulnerable. Providing cash assistance through the existing social protection mechanism contributed to evidence generation and to document best practices.

Social protection has a major role to play in addressing socioeconomic challenges and how to support people in anticipating and managing the shocks and stress they face. As per my opinion and as far as humanitarian and development actors are concerned, global ambitions should be scaled up, not only by identifying capacity gaps and addressing them, but certainly by designing and implementing effective programmes in consultation with government and communities vulnerable to shocks and disasters, while using multiple social protection instruments to protect people and ensure adequate living standards. Knowledge sharing should be as well fostered at the country, regional and global levels.

As a donor, we should seize every opportunity to advocate, increase and align financing, to strengthen coordinated approach among major stakeholders and to systematically consider gender equity, disability, social inclusion and cohesion at every stage of this complex process of strengthening social protection systems. Monitoring progress with humility and pragmatism while integrating specific indicators should be as well considered and assessed at early stage of planning.

5 Conclusion

The learning curve of this secondment was constant and increasingly meaningful. Proactive engagement to advocate for adaptive, inclusive and shock-responsive social protection system was a constructive approach to systematically consider and integrate this modality more broadly and to raise awareness internally and externally. WFP's continuous engagement in providing technical support to the government of Sri Lanka and to anchor social protection more effectively in its own strategy through supporting national systems strengthening should be impactful in a long run. A modernised social protection system could be a powerful instrument to reduce inequalities in Sri Lanka and to contribute to a better redistribution of wealth, while the government is progressively taking forward the agenda for adequate policy reforms and gradually considering universal life-cycle approach with the technical support of key partners.

Regarding SHA's experts pool and for colleagues interested by social protection and its infinite potential, I would highly recommend dedicating time on specific trainings and acquiring the

¹⁷ <https://www.wfp.org/operations/lk01-sri-lanka-country-strategic-plan-2018-2022>

necessary technical knowledge. It can be done through internal online courses such as Linking humanitarian CVA with Social Protection or the learning series developed in 9 modules on SDC and Social Protection, while frequently consulting SDC Social Protection Shareweb¹⁸. Furthermore, based on my experience, ILO International Training Centre¹⁹ offers customized courses to empower participants to design, implement and manage social protection components and systems built for today's global economy. Socialprotection.org²⁰ is an online member-based knowledge sharing and capacity building platform, created to foster global knowledge sharing on social protection policies and offering multiple free trainings and interesting webinars. The CaLP Network has a dedicated page and trainings on social protection²¹ and hosts a dynamic and collaborative online community of practice (CoP) with regular updates and newsletter.

The “Nexus” strategic thinking adopted by SDC and how it is currently operationalized, might provide opportunities and leverage for a common approach endorsed by like-minded donors, not only to strengthen linkages between humanitarian CVA and social protection but to play an increasing role in the sustainable implementation of humanitarian-development orientation and social protection partnerships. Those types of technical deployments and secondment might be customized and replicated within WFP field offices, other UN agencies, INGOs, International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and even directly with governments in selected countries where thematic, geographical and strategic considerations are combined. It might certainly help us maximize effectiveness and relevance of our activities while being pragmatically and contextually connected to working realities, still aligned with our political engagement.

Finally, SDC's current strategic direction and reorientation in operationalizing the “Nexus” may provide a great opportunity to strengthen the linkages between humanitarian CVA and social protection and to develop a common approach.

¹⁸ <https://www.shareweb.ch/site/Poverty-Wellbeing/social-protection/Pages/SDC-Social-Protection-Online-Learning-Series.aspx>

¹⁹ <https://www.itcilo.org/topics/social-protection>

²⁰ <https://socialprotection.org/>

²¹ <https://www.calpnetwork.org/themes/social-protection-and-humanitarian-cash-assistance/>