

Undertaking rapid assessments in the COVID-19 context: Learning from UNICEF South Asia

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on households in Sri Lanka



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A Case Study

Context

Sri Lanka imposed a national lockdown from 20 March 2020 to May 2020, to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) continued to impose various travel and other restrictions over the year dependent on the COVID-19 risk in given areas. As in other countries, Government-imposed restrictions and the pandemic had wide-ranging socio-economic consequences on households in Sri Lanka.

To generate real-time evidence and inform rapid policy formulation and responses by the GoSL and partners, UNICEF and UNDP initiated a survey to assess the impact of the pandemic on families over time. The survey sought to assess impacts on households on several socio-economic fronts, including the impact on food and income security, and access to Government relief, health services, and education.

Implementation arrangements

The survey was implemented by UNICEF and UNDP, Sri Lanka, with the support of Verité Research, an independent think tank in Sri Lanka,

and Vanguard Survey, a market research company in Sri Lanka. UNICEF and UNDP led the conceptual framework, Verité Research designed the study methodology, conducted the technical analyses and generated survey reports, and Vanguard was responsible for sampling and data collection.

The survey was designed to have multiple rounds from May to December 2020. By the end of 2020, four survey rounds had been completed. Rounds one and two were conducted in May-June 2020 (during lockdown), round three in July 2020 when the lockdown had begun to ease, and round four was conducted from the end of October (post country-wide lockdown) for a month. The target population were households across the country. The four survey rounds were implemented at an approximate cost of USD 37,000.

Data collection and analysis

The survey was designed to collect data from a nationally representative sample of approximately 2,000 households. The idea was to do consecutive rounds with the same households, as much as possible. Due to sample attrition across rounds

ca. 50% of the sample needed to be replaced to maintain the targeted sample size (see below). In view of the need to launch the survey during the national lockdown and the COVID-19 pandemic, data in rounds one to three were collected through telephone surveys. For round four, which happened post-lockdown, the survey switched to in-person data collection with a fresh sample of households in order to increase respondents' responsiveness (see below).

The survey questionnaires were developed by UNICEF, with inputs from UNICEF's programme sections, the UNICEF Regional Office/HQ and UNDP. The questionnaires were pre-tested prior to each round and revised for each round based on the changing information needs of UNICEF programme sections and to suit the priorities of the prevailing situation. Rounds one and two gathered quantitative data. Key areas of enquiry in these two rounds were the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on household income, food consumption, children's education, and access to health services, Government-provided social assistance and the

COVID-19 relief package. Gender- and equity-related issues were explored with regard to the impact of the pandemic on pregnant/lactating women and children below age five, as well as daily wage workers. In round two questions on access to drinking water and soap, and parental concern for children's well-being were included. In round three, a few open-ended questions were introduced to probe findings from round two, such as reasons as to why households had not received the Government social assistance transfer.¹ In round four, the questionnaire was modified to include additional issues such as whether children had rejoined school after they had reopened, and reasons thereof, and disciplining of children (violence against children) as this issue had been highlighted at the time of pre-testing of the questionnaire.

The survey was administered to the female of the household, unless only the male head of the household was available, because the female head was seen to be best placed to answer family-related questions such as children's education, food consumption, supplementary nutrition for pregnant/



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¹ The response rate to the open-ended questions was limited as only 79 respondents provided an answer to the open-ended question about perceived reasons for not receiving social assistance.

lactating women and children, and access to health care. As a result, women were well-represented in the survey; in each round, approximately 70% of the respondents were women.

Verbal consent was taken from respondents prior to the survey, and responses were voluntary. As round four was conducted in-person, enumerators followed COVID-related health and safety protocols. To further reduce risk, the in-person survey avoided any high risk COVID-19 areas. Ongoing monitoring ensured quality of the data.

To enable analysis by gender and equity, data were disaggregated by gender (households with pregnant and lactating women and/or children under five, and malnourished children) and employment status (daily/monthly/weekly wage workers).

Due to the limitations of telephone surveys, the survey had to be limited to 20 minutes and questions needed to be direct with limited answer options. As a result, it was difficult to collect qualitative data. It was also difficult to develop a rapport with respondents and assess whether participants were paying attention to the questions. Responses from round three, for example, suggest that respondents were not concentrating, were misunderstanding questions, or were selecting answers randomly from the list of options. Respondents seemed to become less responsive in survey rounds post-lockdown as they were reluctant to spend time responding to a phone survey. There was also an element of fatigue in the sample across the multiple survey rounds, which could have affected the quality of data. Due to these concerns, round four was conducted in person to elicit more in-depth information and cover additional topics of interest.

Sampling

The survey sample was designed using stratified multi-stage random sampling to achieve precision,

national representation and unbiased selection. A sample size of 2,000 households was first determined to have statistical results within +/- 2 margin of error at a 95% confidence level. To ensure national geographical representation, the sample was stratified by district, distributing the sample across districts in proportion to the national population residing in the district.² The household samples for telephone survey rounds were subsequently drawn from an existing, nationally representative household database that Vanguard Survey had developed through previous surveys.³ For round four, a new random sample of households was selected on the ground in accordance with the sampling strategy used to develop the database.

While the stratification and random selection approach adopted in this assessment ensured national representation and avoided selection bias, the sample covered only those who owned a phone, so those from the most vulnerable groups may have been underrepresented in the phone surveys.⁴ Another limitation was that it was hard to retain the same cohort/panel across the rounds. Each round had some attrition; while the sample of ca. 2,000 was retained across the first three rounds,⁵ in round three, only around 45% [N=960] of respondents overlapped with those in rounds one and two. Round three was therefore a partial panel, and additional respondents had to be drawn from the database to meet the required sample size.

Partnership

UNICEF and UNDP partnered to implement the survey. Such collaborations among UN agencies were encouraged by the UN Resident Coordinator Office in Sri Lanka when relevant for the COVID-19 response. This enabled to pool funding for the survey from both agencies. Furthermore, the survey was implemented in collaboration with Verité Research and Vanguard Survey. UNICEF had worked with at least one of these organizations previously, and they were quickly brought on board. Verité Research's

² Based on the 2012 Census of the Department of Census and Statistics, Government of Sri Lanka.

³ The database included over 10,000 households who had been previously selected through stratified, multi-stage random sampling. Besides the district stratification, Grama Niladari (GN) divisions had been randomly sampled within the districts to achieve further dispersion. Households had been randomly selected within the GN division by enumerators following an in-person random walk process. Households had been requested phone numbers and permission to call them for future surveys.

⁴ The risk of underrepresentation of vulnerable groups due to phone ownership attenuated by a high penetration of mobile connections in Sri Lanka. In January 2021 the number of mobile connections in Sri Lanka was equivalent to 141.7% of the total population. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-sri-lanka>

⁵ The sample size was 2,067 in round 1, 2,005 in round 2 and 2,116 in round 3.

experience in designing and conducting robust telephone and in-person surveys, and Vanguard Survey's large national database of households (with phone numbers) that could be contacted for research, were leveraged for the survey.

UNICEF had initially planned to partner with the GoSL to conduct the survey. However, as the Government experienced difficulties to conduct a survey during the lockdown and due to remote working conditions, UNICEF and UNDP conducted the survey independently to rapidly assess how families and children across the country were affected by the crisis. A trade-off exists between waiting for an agreement to collaborate with Government and rapidly rolling out the survey to respond to evidence needs in emergency contexts.

Agility/timeliness

The survey was rapidly rolled out. A Terms of Reference was finalised at the end of April 2020,

while the first round of data collection took place in early May. The subsequent two rounds followed on a monthly basis.⁶ Each of these first three remote data collection rounds took between six to nine days only to complete. This could be achieved because both Verité Research and Vanguard Survey are local organizations and have the capacity and experience to conduct national-level surveys in Sri Lanka, drawing on a strong network of experienced enumerators. Furthermore, Vanguard Survey's existing nationally representative household survey database, including phone numbers, could be immediately used to identify a sample for the phone survey. Furthermore, UNICEF had worked with Verité Research before, which facilitated their engagement. The fourth round was implemented later and took longer to complete,⁷ since a new sample had to be drawn and data collection was implemented through in-person interviewing. As discussed above, the timely roll-out of the survey came with a trade-off in terms of not



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⁶ Round 1 took place between 1 May and 6 May 2020; round 2 between 30 May and 7 June 2020; and, round 3 between 13 July and 21 July 2020.

⁷ Round 4 took place between 25 October and 4 December 2020.

having Government fully onboard at the start of the exercise.

Use of findings

Findings from the survey are the only comprehensive documented survey of the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on households in Sri Lanka to date. The evidence informed UNICEF's response and advocacy. For example, findings from rounds two and three on the cash transfer programme in Sri Lanka informed UNICEF's advocacy for a stronger social protection response. Furthermore, results were shared with UN agencies and the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, Asian Development Bank and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government, to inform their internal programming.

The findings of the first and second rounds were shared with various Government departments, but

the initial uptake was limited due to Government's sensitivity about findings during a complex national context (as they revealed the adverse impact of the pandemic on household income, food consumption and access to health care, and particularly on households with pregnant/lactating mothers and children under five years). A learning was that survey findings, particularly if they are sensitive, need to be presented to Government strategically and in a comprehensive manner even if that means taking longer to be able to present results highlighting the rigorous study design and methodology, to demonstrate the robustness of the evidence.

The GoSL became more receptive to the evidence after round three. UNICEF presented the findings of the first three rounds to the Presidential Task Force on Economic Revival and Poverty Eradication in August, which agreed on the importance of subsequent rounds and provided inputs into the questionnaire of round four.



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Summary learnings

The strengths, challenges, learnings and innovations related to the implementation of this rapid assessment are summarized in the table below.

Table: COVID-19 Sri Lanka: Summary Learnings

Strengths	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Generated an unparalleled longitudinal data set on the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic in Sri Lanka.• The survey rounds, particularly the first three rounds, were rapidly rolled out.• A robust sampling strategy was designed that ensured precision, national representation, and an unbiased sample.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The survey was subject to sample attrition between the survey rounds and a new sample had to be drawn eventually.• The sample of the first three rounds was limited to phone owners.• The Government initially showed low interest and uptake of survey findings.• Phone interviews limited the nature and number of questions that could be asked, and may have affected the quality of data collected.
Learnings and innovations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rapid roll-out of a remote survey with national representativeness was made possible by having access to an existing, nationally representative household database with phone numbers.• It is important to contextualize and methodologically frame the survey findings with the Government, particularly at politically sensitive times such as elections.	



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For more information visit:

UNICEF Regional Office South Asia website <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/>

Key contacts

Tom Pellens, Evaluation Specialist, UNICEF ROSA tpellens@unicef.org

Louise Moreira Daniels, Chief, Social Policy and Child Rights Monitoring, Sri Lanka Country Office lmoreiradaniels@unicef.org

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