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A Sociological Study on

Vulnerability to Chronic Poverty and
Livelihood Strategies

The Case of a Low Income Settlement

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Abstract

External and internal aspects of vulnerability in urban societies have so far remained either unexplored or neglected. Social geographers, economists, sociologists and political scientists have paid more attention to the study of external aspects of vulnerability concentrating on rural societies in the developing world. In this regard, Sri Lanka is no exception. It is against this background that the present study has made an effort to fill *this gap* at least to a certain extent. The study makes an effort to develop an Experimental Livelihood Security Index to identify households that are vulnerable to chronic poverty in a low-income urban settlement. Having developed the index, the study explored the livelihood strategies adopted by the selected sample households in order to understand the ways and means used by them to make their livelihoods more secure and less vulnerable to chronic poverty.

The concept of vulnerability is often used as a synonym for poverty in development studies literature. In the context of the present study; I argue that vulnerability is not simply another word for poverty. Here, vulnerability is defined as the possibility of the households to fall into poverty or chronic poverty. Moreover, having reviewed the existing literature on the concept of livelihood security and vulnerability, the study concludes that there are neither well-developed theories nor clear-cut disciplinary approaches to study 'vulnerability' or 'livelihood security'.

The main methodological approach adopted in this study can be described as eclectic as it involves both quantitative and qualitative methods, for both data collection and analysis. The findings of the research study show that households with a combination of either chronically ill members or hard core drug addicts or alcoholics with no secure and diversified sources of income become more vulnerable to chronic poverty. The findings also support the view that income could also be considered as one of the indicators of households that are vulnerable to chronic poverty in relation to the urban context.

It is evident from the case studies that many of the vulnerable persons concerned were born and brought up in poor and vulnerable households. They were suffering from multiple sources of vulnerability such as higher levels of dependency, unstable income and risky life styles (alcoholism, gambling) etc. These factors reinforce their poverty and continue to have long lasting impacts. The individual case studies of selected females indicate that their households became even more destitute and vulnerable to economic and social shocks and stress situations after marrying men who were drug addicts, alcoholics and drug dealers.

When vulnerable households and their present livelihood strategies at the time of the fieldwork were explored; it was possible to identify two groups namely the households with only coping strategies and households that adopt coping strategies as well as effective or ineffective enhancement strategies. It is clear that many households have only adopted various coping strategies at the time of the fieldwork and were suffering from multiple risks and long term stress situations. As a result, they had exhausted their coping capacity over time. In other words, they became more vulnerable.

It is also evident from this study that vulnerable households depend on an extensive stock of social capital of their family members, friends and neighbours as an informal safety net to cope with shock and stress situations.