

OPEN FORUM ON POVERTY

**The 2001 population census of Sri Lanka and its deviation
from projected values: Some resultant implications for
poverty analysis and the targeting of poverty programmes**

by

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At the German Cultural Institute, Colombo**

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1. Introduction

The fifteenth Open Forum hosted by Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) was based on a presentation by Prof. Indralal de Silva, Head of the Department of Demography, University of Colombo who reviewed "***The 2001 census of Sri Lanka and its deviation from projected values: some resultant implications for poverty analysis and targeting of poverty programmes***". The discussion was held at the Goethe Institute, 39, Gregory's Road, Colombo 07, on Wednesday the 25th of September 2002.

The presentation was commented on by Dr. Dileni Gunawardane, Senior Economist, University of Peradeniya. Mr. Seneka Abeyratne, Chief Executive Officer of the National Agribusiness Council moderated the Floor Discussion.

This documentation contains the abstract of the presentation, which accompanied the invitation, highlights of the presentation and commentary, a synopsis of the discussion, and a list of attendees.

CEPA's objective in hosting the Open Fora is to provide a medium where a group of professionals enter into a discussion on the research / expertise shared by a colleague.

2. Summary of presentation by Professor Indralal de Silva

Consequent to providing a history of the census in Sri Lanka the presenter gave a background to the 2001 census in terms of its objectives, focus, methodologies and outcomes. The main issue for discussion was the verity and validity of the results in terms of constraints affecting the enumeration and the bases of the projections. The impact and consequences of using this data for policy planning and targeting, development interventions and population projections was also discussed.

Sri Lanka's population has grown almost eight fold since the first national census of 1871. The population size has increased from 14.8 million in 1981 to 18.7 million in 2001. However, the 2001 census of population was not a complete enumeration for, the final count was not made in the districts of Jaffna, Mullativu and Kilinochchi and in 4 other districts only a partial enumeration was possible. Thus a complete enumeration was made only in 18 out of 25 districts.

Hence, the verity of the census count became a serious issue particularly due to the fact that the population projected by demographers for the year 2001 significantly differed in the range of about 0.3 to 0.7 million. Apart from the difference between the projected and observed values for 2001, the mid year population of 2000 has been published as 19.4 million, whereas the 2001 enumeration figures strangely reveals only 18.7 million in the 2001 census count.

Further investigation is therefore needed as to why the 2001 census count and the *projected* figures differ significantly. According to the presenter, three potential reasons could be given to explain this; first, it is understood that there has been a significant level of under-enumeration (miss-out and refusal at the 2001 census); second, there has also been an undocumented emigration since 1981 and third there has been a rise in the level of under-registration of deaths since 1981, which was not incorporated into official statistics.

Apart from this deviation in the total population count of 2001 from the projected values of the same year, the sex ratio (number of males per 100 females) also shows a striking difference. Shortage of males is more striking according to the 2001 census. Most demographers have projected an age-sex structure, which indicated male favourable sex ratio for the year 2001. However, 2001 census count has indicated a sex ratio of 97.9, i.e. more females in the country than males. The reason for this difference in observed and projected values could be three-fold: higher male under-enumeration than females in the 2001 census; higher proportion of males among the undocumented emigrants since 1981; higher proportion of unregistered male deaths than unregistered female deaths since 1981. Besides, seven districts not being included in the final count again be a contributory factor.

This mismatch between the census count and the projected values has several implications when attempting to study the poverty situation in Sri Lanka.

- a. Because of a significant drop in the total population size, compared to previous years, the per capita income in Sri Lanka derived from the decimated count would increase significantly for the year 2001 and thereby give a deceptive picture.
- b. Second, consequent to the decline in total population in absolute terms, on applying the poverty percentage (percentage estimated before 2001 census) to the total a relatively smaller number of population would be identified as those below the poverty line.