

Editorial

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Child Welfare in troubled Sri Lanka: Quo Vadis?

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Sri Lanka is currently facing its worst social and economic crisis. International rating agencies have been downgrading the country's creditworthiness, i.e. sovereign rating in the recent past, culminating in the Central Bank of the country defaulting its foreign loans this year. This poor state of affairs is a result of disastrous economic decisions taken by successive governments compounded by large-scale corruption, the Covid-19 pandemic, the unfavorable global financial situation, and the looming global recession. Sequelae of the current economic crisis are far-reaching and affect many spheres of the social life of the people. The country's acute inflation rose to its highest level by more than 70%, over the last several months (Central Bank of Sri Lanka), particularly in the premise of food, which has been detrimental to the most vulnerable people in Sri Lanka. This has resulted in severe shortage of foreign reserves in the country thereby affecting the importation of essential items including foods, fuel and medicine. Many have warned that it is the children who bear the brunt of this crisis. As the Covid-19 pandemic is receding, we are now confronted with a fresh challenge in the form of a health catastrophe stemming from the ongoing economic and sociopolitical crisis.

According to UNICEF, over 5.7 million people including 2.3 million children require humanitarian assistance in Sri Lanka, making it among the top

ten countries with the highest number of malnourished children, and the UNICEF expects the numbers to rise further. It was also revealed that children under five are increasingly at risk of severe forms of malnutrition. UNICEF further reported that commodities such as food and fuel are at extremely high prices, and many staples are beyond the reach of many ordinary Sri Lankans. On September 12th 2022, the Food and Agriculture Organization and World Food Programme reported that Sri Lankan children are acutely vulnerable to the worsening situation.

Food inflation continues to rise leading to a record 94.9% in September 2022 (Colombo Price index). Many parents have been unable to afford even basic items such as rice, dhal, vegetables while meat, eggs and fish have become unaffordable luxuries for many households (The Guardian 28th October 2022).

According to Save the Children Fund, 2/3 of the families are unable to feed their children. It is predicted that long term implication on child development could be severe, thus damaging Sri Lanka's much lauded literacy rate of 92%, which is best in the region.

Staple foods have become unaffordable and severe malnutrition is already among the highest in the region.



Reports are already emerging of the increasing prevalence of child abuse, exploitation and violence against children due to mounting economic pressure.

Another important area for children is the education sector. The Ministry of Education is facing a painful experience due to lack of funds, affecting school children's mid-day meal programme and children of vulnerable families are increasingly at risk of dropping out of school.

Policy makers, school authorities, and healthcare professionals should be made aware of these issues and measures should be taken to minimize the impact of this dire situation on our children. At macro-level, as healthcare professionals, we should take an active role in pushing the administrative and political hierarchy to acknowledge that we are facing the worst healthcare crisis in the country and that its impact on children could be devastating and could result in both physical and psychological harm.

Healthcare professionals are already advocating social justice, prioritizing health needs and transparent decision-making that will help us meet the challenges of the present crisis.

Seeking the help of both local and international donors including NGOs plays an important part in mitigating the adverse effect on children. Reallocation of scarce government funds for the essential needs of the healthcare of women and children plays a vital part in this respect.

Clinicians need to be mindful of cost-effective health interventions developing appropriate protocols for management and prescribing generic medicines at all times.

The establishment of food banks, strengthening of the school meal programme which is already existence to help the poor and vulnerable communities, should continue with the help of donors and NGOs.

The government must ensure that social benefit programmes such as Samurdhi reach the most needy strata of our population.