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political effectiveness of the Samurdhi
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24 July 2020

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/102558/>
MPRA Paper No. 102558, posted 29 Aug 2020 09:22 UTC

SOCIAL PROTECTION IN SRI LANKA:

An analysis of the social, economic and political effectiveness of the Samurdhi program

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July, 2020



Abstract

Sri Lanka is an important reference for social protection effectiveness in the South Asian region and the developing world. The government of Sri Lanka has been an active contributor to the human development and social protection structures for decades. The Samurdhi Program was then introduced in 1995 to lift the most vulnerable groups above the poverty line and facilitate the integration of the poor into the social and economic structures of the country. This paper analyses the effectiveness of the Samurdhi Program in the social, economic and political spheres. The main findings suggest that the Samurdhi Program has helped numerous families to overcome poverty, mainly due to an extensive coverage and because characteristics of the households are key determinants to receiving the grants, which allow for some wealth redistribution from the non-poor to the poor. Nevertheless, the program faces great limitations due to ambiguous entry and exit mechanisms and political interferences in the selection procedures which lead to leakages to non-poor households. In addition, a persistent high debt-to-GDP ratio threatens Sri Lanka's long-term sustainability for welfare spending.

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SOCIAL PROTECTION IN SRI LANKA:

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main roles of the state is to effectively provide services that can cover the basic needs of its population, such as health, education, electricity, water and sanitation. In addition, the state designs and implements social welfare programs to address the risks and vulnerabilities of certain groups of the population that would be left behind otherwise: children, women, elderly, disabled people and the poor (Godamunne, 2015).

Sri Lanka is known for having a high human development index with a value of 0.78 in 2018 (UNDP¹, 2019) and the state has been an essential contributor for inclusive development for decades. Even though living standards in Sri Lanka have been affected due to domestic conflict from 1983 to 2001, the country “continues to perform more strongly than the rest of South Asia in terms of its human development indicators and social protection coverage” (Kabeer, 2009: 11).

Nevertheless, poverty levels had remained constant until 1995 with 28.8% of the population under the poverty line (DCS², 2006) and with a child mortality rate of 20.0 per 1,000 live births during the same year (World Bank, 2018). In 1995, the Samurdhi program was introduced by the government with the final objective of reducing poverty levels with unique features to include communities into the decision-making and target population identification processes (ILO³, 2016). It is administered by the Department of Samurdhi Development and it operates throughout all 25 districts. The program is considered the largest welfare program in Sri Lanka and it accounts for 0.3% of the total GDP.

This thesis paper focuses on reviewing the key components and objectives of the Samurdhi program, and analyzes the effectiveness of the program in the social, economic and political spheres. This study argues that the Samurdhi program is an important safety net program that has contributed to poverty reduction to some extent but still faces great limitations to effectively target potential population due to political interferences in the eligibility process, which lead to leakages to non-poor and exclusion of poor households.

¹ United Nations Development Programme.

² Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka.

³ International Labour Organization.

In order to conduct the assessment, both qualitative and quantitative secondary data were analyzed, especially from Reports of the Department of Samurdhi Development, the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the World Bank. Other working papers such as from the Institute for Human Development and the Centre for Poverty Analysis were extremely insightful. Data from the Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka (DCS) was also relevant for the development of this research.

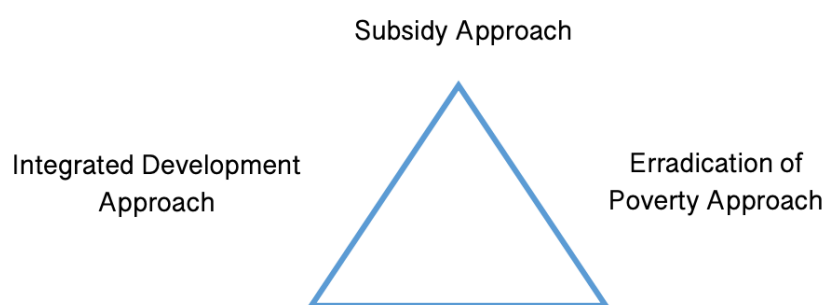
The study therefore will be structured as follows: Chapter 1 (Introduction) presents basic concepts of social protection, briefly introduces Samurdhi as a safety net program for poverty alleviation and describes the structure and methodology of the thesis paper; Chapter 2 explains the key components and main objectives of the program and discusses the eligibility criteria for population targeting; Chapter 3 analyzes the social, economic and political effectiveness of the program regarding target population and coverage, social and justice distributional effects, welfare effects, financial and institutional sustainability, administrative and operational costs; finally, Chapter 4 presents the conclusion.

2. THE SAMURDHI POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAM

2.1 Key components

The Samurdhi program was installed by the government back in 1995 with the final objective of eradicating poverty and help vulnerable groups, such as people employed in the informal economy, unemployed, women, children and other marginalized groups, to have access to better opportunities. The program aims to achieve this through a three-phase development approach:

Figure 1. Three phase development approach: Samurdhi program



Source: Department of Divineguma (Samurdhi) Development, Performance Report (2015).

The purpose of the program in the long run, is to facilitate the integration of the poor into the economic and social structures (Integrated Development Approach) as a result of the development process of the country through a financial mechanism (Subsidy

Approach) that enables them to overcome poverty (Eradication of Poverty Approach) and maintain decent living standards (Department of Divineguma Development, 2015).

According to Galappattige, Jayaweera, Perera & Buhari (2012) the Samurdhi program currently operates through two main components:

- (i) The *relief program* which includes cash transfers (Subsidy Approach) in order to help families to overcome malnutrition and incentivize them to contribute to their social security funds and savings account for future social and economic risks or investment activities.
- (ii) The *empowerment program* which includes five subprograms: 1) rural infrastructure program; 2) livelihood program; 3) social development program; 4) Samurdhi housing program; and, 5) microfinance through Samurdhi Bank societies.

For the nature of the present thesis that pretends to assess the safety net element of the program, only the first component is analyzed.

2.2 The relief program component: objectives

Since the commencement of the program in 1995, subsidies had been granted in the form of food stamps, which were only transformed into cash transfers in 2012. This modification took place as an attempt to not only help families to overcome malnutrition and be able to move away from extreme poverty (Thibbotuwawa, Printhika, Jayasinghe-Mudalige & Udugama, 2012), but also to encourage beneficiaries to contribute to a savings account, that could allow them to counter economic and life shocks⁴, and invest in economic activities (Department of Samurdhi Development, 2018). This is the bulk of the program as it accounts for 80% of the total program budget (Thibbotuwawa et al., 2012).

2.2.1 Eligibility criteria

According to the Department of Samurdhi Development (2018), the general criteria for the selection of families who are entitled to receive the cash transfer includes: (i) levels of education; (ii) health; (iii) economic situation; (iv) total of assets; (v) housing conditions and; (vi) demography of the family. Nevertheless, no clear indicators for the selection of the beneficiaries were found in any of the Performance Reports. As stated by various reports (World Bank, 2016; Sebastian, Shivakumaran, Silwal, Newhouse, Walker & Yoshida, 2018),

⁴ Shocks that are inherent to the different stages of life: birth, marriage, illness, death plus scholarships.

the primary mechanism for eligibility is the self-declared income, which could be easily underestimated by households in order to qualify for the program.

Moreover, eligible households receive subsidies of different values depending on their income and number of members of the family as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of the allowance related to the Subsidy Approach for the year 2018

No. of family members	Value of subsidies Rs	Compulsory savings Rs	Social Security contribution Rs	Housing lottery Rs	Amount entitled to the beneficiary Rs
+ 3	3,500	300	100	50	3,050
3	2,500	200	100	50	2,150
- 3	1,500	100	100	50	1,250
Empowered families	420	270	100	50	-

*Empowered families refer to those families who have graduated from the program due to an improvement of their income level and are therefore lying above the poverty line.

Source: Department of Divineguma (Samurdhi) Development, Performance Report (2018).

Regardless of the value of the subsidies in the form of cash transfers, all beneficiaries must contribute to their compulsory savings, social security and housing lottery. Compulsory savings are demanded to create awareness of the importance of saving for any future economic investment, health risk or investment in education; social security contributions are to support families during occurrences such as deaths, births, marriages or hospitalization and; housing lottery is a fund that benefits from all contributors in order to provide better housing opportunities of those in need that are part of the program (Department of Samurdhi Development, 2018).

3. ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROGRAM

3.1 Target population and coverage

As depicted in Table 2, in the lapse of 14 years, there was a decrease in the number of families receiving the grants from 1,864,058 to 1,384,021, which represents a drop of 25.8% of coverage. Contrastingly, the total amount of value of grants increased more than four times from Rs. 8,593 million to Rs. 39,239 million.

Table 2. Number of beneficiary families and value of grants 2004-2018

Year	Number of families	Value (Rs. million)
2004	1,864,058	8,593
2005	1,960,664	9,244
2006	1,916,594	10,570
2007	1,844,660	9,423
2008	1,631,133	9,967
2009	1,600,786	9,274
2010	1,572,129	9,241
2011	1,541,575	9,043
2012	1,549,107	10,553
2013	1,477,313	15,256
2014	1,479,811	15,042
2015	1,453,078	39,994
2016	1,407,235	40,740
2017	1,388,242	39,707
2018	1,384,021	39,239

Sources: Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Annual Reports (2008, 2014, 2018).

The significant reduction of the number of households covered by the program might be related to an attempt from the government to improve its target population, as proposed and criticized by many reports. For example, a report from the Centre for Social Protection, states that there is “evidence that the program suffers from both leakages to non-eligible households and exclusion of eligible ones” (Kabeel, 2009: 12) because in 2000, only 60% of households in the poorest quintile received benefits from the program, while 44% of households in the three highest quintiles, were also benefited.

Table 3 indicates that in 2006/07 55.7% of the poorest households were receiving cash transfers from Samurdhi while 6% of the richest households also received the benefits. Even though the benefits received by households in the top three quintiles were reduced in 2009/10, we observe the same pattern for those in the bottom two quintiles. Hence, there is a continuous shortcoming in the selection of beneficiaries that does not enable a fully efficient redistribution from the non-poor to the poor.

Table 3. The distribution of Samurdhi cash benefits by income quintile 2006/07-2009/10

Quintile	% of total households receiving cash transfers	
	2006/07	2009/10
1st	55.7	44.0
2nd	39.7	31.0
3rd	27.4	21.0
4th	16.0	12.0
5th	6.0	4.0
Total	29.1	23.0

Source: Institute for Health Policy (IHP) analysis of Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2006/07 and 2009/10 cited in ILO 2016, Tables 23 and 24.

In this sense, there seems to be a persistent gap in the selection procedures, as many beneficiaries, as well as Samurdhi officers, have expressed their concern about political affiliation biases (Glinskaya, 2000). This explains why many ineligible households become grant recipients in return for their political support. Besides, there is also evidence about systematic targeting errors due to ethnicity bias. According to a report from the World Bank (2007), Sinhalese were significantly more likely to receive grants compared to Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils and Moors. This trend represents another barrier to effectively reach the poorest since, in 2002, the latter reported higher household poverty rates than Sinhalese (DCS, n.a.).

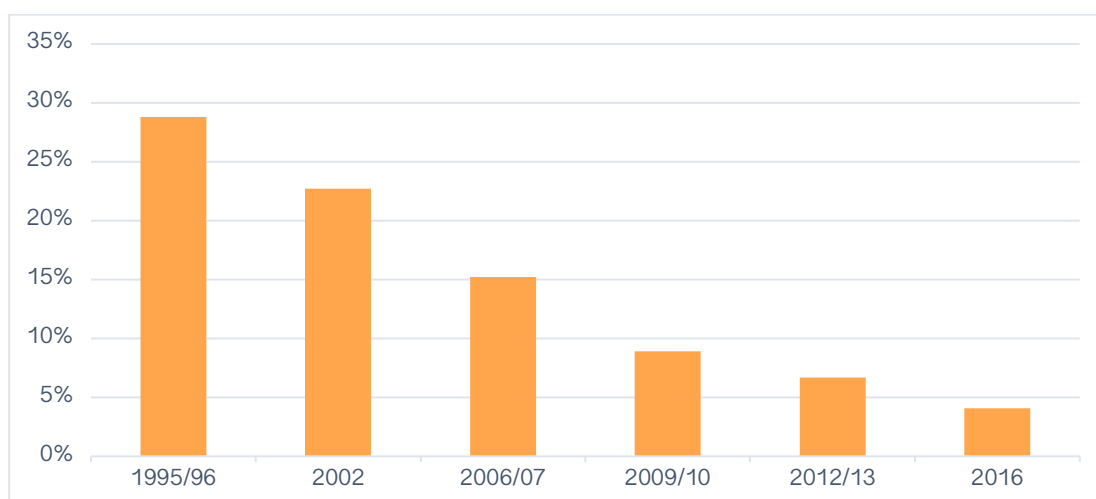
On the other hand, during the early 2000s, the insufficient value of grants was the focus of criticism, since these only covered a quarter of the minimum amount needed in order to move families away from poverty (World Bank, 2007), which is why the government significantly increased their value in 2012 (when direct cash transfers replaced food stamps) but especially during 2015, when the value of grants rose from Rs. 15,042 million to Rs. 39,994 million in only one year.

3.2 Social justice and distributional effects

Although the Samurdhi program suffers from systematic targeting errors, it still represents an important welfare program that has helped thousands of families to overcome poverty. According to Glinskaya (2000) and World Bank (2007) household conditions are a determinant factor to receive the grants. This includes households with no access to electricity and using kerosene for lighting instead; families taking care of disabled people or with seriously ill members, as well as families with a lack of assets such as livestock and land, are certainly more benefited by the program. Furthermore, households headed by farmworkers are more likely to become grant recipients in contrast to households headed by salaried workers in the public and private sectors. Finally, an increment in years of education reduces the probability of becoming a beneficiary.

As displayed in Figure 2, poverty levels have shown a downward trend over a time horizon of 20 years. When the Samurdhi program started back in 1995, the total population of Sri Lanka was 18.2 Million (World Bank, 2019). During that time, more than 5.0 Million people were lying below the poverty line, which represented 28.8% of the total population. As of 2016, Sri Lanka had a total population of almost 21.2 Million (ibid.) and a poverty headcount index of 4.1% or 869,000 people below the poverty line. From 2012/13 to 2016, the poverty headcount index decreased by 2.6 percentage points, meaning that more than half a million people were able to graduate from poverty during this last period.

Figure 2. Poverty headcount ratio (%) various years



Source: Poverty Indicators 2016, DCS.

3.3 Welfare effects

Child and adult malnutrition are a persistent condition among the poor in Sri Lanka. While a non-poor, on average, consumes 2194 kilocalories per day, poor individuals usually consume 77% of the same amount per day (Thibbotuwawa et al., 2012). As one of the objectives of the program is to eradicate malnutrition through cash transfers, Thibbotuwawa et al. (2012, p. 7) found that “Samurdhi recipients were not able to increase their food expenditure in order to have a more balanced diet” even after receiving the grants. This was associated with targeting error problems and the deficient value of grants per family.

Another crucial aspect of the program, in the long run, is to insert the poor into the economic and social structures of the country, by providing subsidies to poor families so they can send their children to school, lowering the financial burden that this may represent, and breaking the intergenerational circle of poverty. In this regard, the authors further found that, being a Samurdhi beneficiary increases the probability of children to attend primary school. Nevertheless, the same pattern cannot be observed for secondary and tertiary levels of education. This could be associated with the higher opportunity cost that represents sending older children to school, as many of them enter the labor force at an early age, in order to contribute to the family’s income.

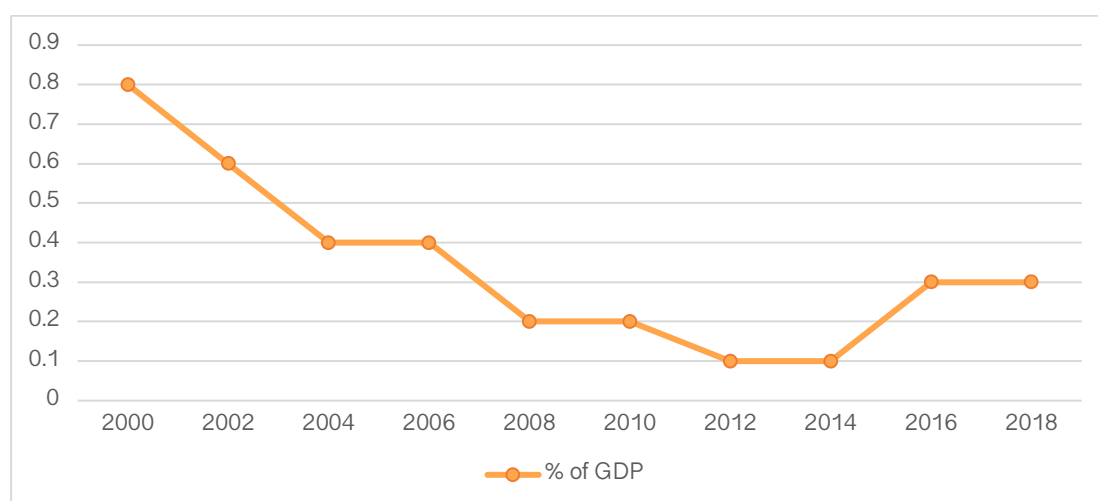
Furthermore, there was no significant evidence that the health situation of families receiving the benefits was improved (Thibbotuwawa et al., 2012). Interestingly, however, as many of the beneficiaries are employed in the agricultural sector in rural villages, the authors found evidence of a notable increase in income from agricultural activities. As their primary source of income, rural workers invested a share of the grant in agricultural

activities in order to increase output and being able to move away from poverty in the long run, which is in line with the objectives of the program.

3.4 Financial and institutional sustainability

Even though the total expenditure of the Samurdhi program and the value of grants per family have increased significantly in the last decade, total expenditure as a share of GDP dropped from 0.8% in 2000 to 0.1% in 2012 as shown in Figure 3. This reduction as a share of GDP represented an important hurdle to achieve Samurdhi's objectives in the view of the fact that, even with perfect targeting, the budget of 0.1% of GDP was not sufficient to bring all needy above the poverty line (ILO, 2016). In an attempt to follow this recommendation, the government again increased Samurdhi's total expenditure to 0.3% as a share of GDP in 2016 and 2018.

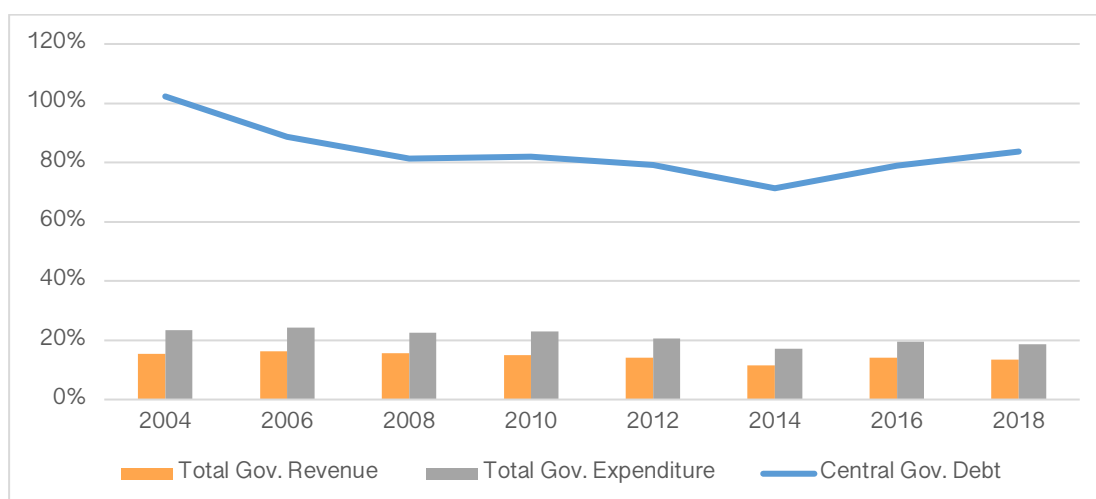
Figure 3. Samurdhi's total expenditure (% of GDP) 2000-2018



Source: Department of the Commissioner General of Samurdhi communicated to IHP cited in ILO 2016, Table 22 & Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Annual Reports (2015, 2017, 2019).

Nevertheless, the program's budget remains low to bring almost a million people out of poverty. As Thibbotuwawa et al. (2012) suggest, safety net programs such as Samurdhi are costly to run, and the government must be able to cover the budget needs either by taxation mechanisms or by resorting to debt. In this context, as depicted in Figure 4, total government revenue as a percentage of GDP has remained shallow, with an average of 14.4% from 2004 to 2018. Moreover, total government expenditure remained above 20.0% of GDP between 2004 and 2012, but has steadily decreased to 18.7% in 2018. On average total government expenditure remained at 21.2% of GDP over the course of 14 years. As a result of the persistent fiscal deficit of 6.7% on average, public debt remains high, accounting for a total of 83.7% to GDP in 2018, which in turn threatens Sri Lanka's long-term financial sustainability.

Figure 4. Government Revenue, Expenditure and Central Debt (% of GDP) 2004-2018



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data from the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Annual Reports (2006-2019).

As of 2018, current transfers and subsidies, including Samurdhi, accounted for about 3.0% of recurrent expenditure as a percentage of GDP (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2019). An increasing trend of debt as a percentage of GDP, might impose an extra burden on taxpayers, or a decline in government expenditure towards welfare programs, limiting the scope of Samurdhi and endangering current benefits which could overall affect Sri Lanka's economic and social development in the long run.

3.5 Costs and transfer efficiency

During 2018, a total of Rs. 55.9 bn have been allocated to run the Samurdhi program. Table 4 shows that recurrent spending accounts for about 93% of total expenditure, which is distributed among cash transfers to households and salaries plus other employment benefits to the staff of over 26,000. Subsidies and cash transfers account for 75.9% of total recurrent expenditure and 70.9% of total program expenditure. Although the most considerable bulk of the total budget (more than two thirds) goes to welfare spending, there is a substantial amount that goes to administrative costs of wage bills (21.8%) and other capital assets spending (6.6%) that diminishes the welfare impact of the total budget.

Table 4. Financial performance of the Samurdhi program 2018

Recurrent Expenditure (Rs.)	
Wages, salaries and other employment benefits	12,206,201,961
Other goods and services	374,302,344
Subsidies, grants and transfers	39,654,303,469
Total (A)	52,234,807,774
Capital Expenditure (Rs.)	
Rehabilitation and improvement of capital assets	7,339,815
Acquisition of capital assets	10,794,215
Capacity building	7,440,519
Other capital expenditure	1,072,093,018
Total (B)	1,097,667,567
Deposit and advance payments (C)	2,603,151,967
Total Expenditure (A+B+C) (Rs.)	55,935,627,308

Source: Department of Divineguma (Samurdhi) Development, Performance Report (2018).

There is evidence of overlap between households receiving transfers from the Samurdhi program and the Ministry of Social Welfare, where the benefits are meant to reach specialized groups such as disabled resulted from conflicts and families of soldiers who lost their lives during war (World Bank, 2006). In this sense, an optimization of the target population from both programs could improve the financial performance of the Samurdhi program oriented to alleviate poverty.

Besides, the program possesses strong organizational structures at the national, district, divisional and village levels. Even though wages for many employers remain low, the staff is highly committed and motivated to work towards an inclusive development, which is translated into a high community participation in all aspects of the program (Ismail, Immink, Mazar & Nantel, 2003).

3.6 Social, economic and political effectiveness: strengths and areas of opportunity

Table 5. Social, economic and political effectiveness: strengths and areas of opportunity

	Strengths (What works well?)	Areas of opportunity (What can be improved?)
Social effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The program has historically covered a large proportion of the poor. • Beneficiaries are incentivized to contribute to their saving accounts in order to counter possible future life risks. • Low welfare household conditions are a significant determinant to receive cash transfers, which allows for some wealth redistribution. • Being a cash transfer recipient improves the probability for children to attend school, at least at the primary education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A more significant redistribution from the non-poor to the poor can occur if leakages to non-eligible households are reduced. • Optimization of transparency and accountability are essential to improve population targeting, entry and exit mechanisms. • Imposing some conditionalities on the cash transfers such as regular check-ups at health facilities and school enrollment could improve the health and education status of beneficiaries.
Economic effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The largest bulk of the program budget goes to welfare spending. • A large amount of highly motivated and committed staff enhances transfer efficiency at all operational levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An increase in the value of the grant per family can have a more significant impact on consumption patterns. • Optimization of the target population could improve the financial efficiency of the program by avoiding overlap of beneficiaries with other programs.
Political effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a strong ownership of the program from all stakeholders (communities, staff and government) which ensures the program long-term continuity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The program can reduce the coverage of non-eligible households by eradicating political interferences in the selection procedures.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

4. CONCLUSION

As the most extensive welfare program in Sri Lanka, the Samurdhi program has contributed to reducing poverty levels over the last 20 years. Even though the program has reduced its coverage due to efforts to improve its target effectiveness, the total budget expenditure, as well as the value of grants per family, have increased more than four times since the commencement of the program.

From the social perspective, Samurdhi's impact on primary education is positive and households in precarious conditions are more likely to receive the benefits. Nevertheless, there is a persistent political and ethnicity biases which lead to leakages to non-poor and exclusion of poor households. From the economic perspective, even though the program total expenditure as a share of GDP has significantly decreased, the largest share of the program budget goes to households through cash transfers. However, the increasing trend of debt to GDP ratio could threaten Sri Lanka's long-term sustainability and negatively impact on welfare spending. From the political perspective, the large, strong and committed organizational structure enhances transfer efficiency and community participation.

However, the long-term impacts of the Samurdhi program on beneficiaries still remain unclear. Further research is needed to understand how families have been able to graduate from poverty after receiving the grants; an empirical analysis to simulate the outcomes of the program with imposed conditionalities on the transfers; and a comparative analysis with similar poverty alleviation programs from other countries, to explore how entry and exit mechanism can be improved.

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