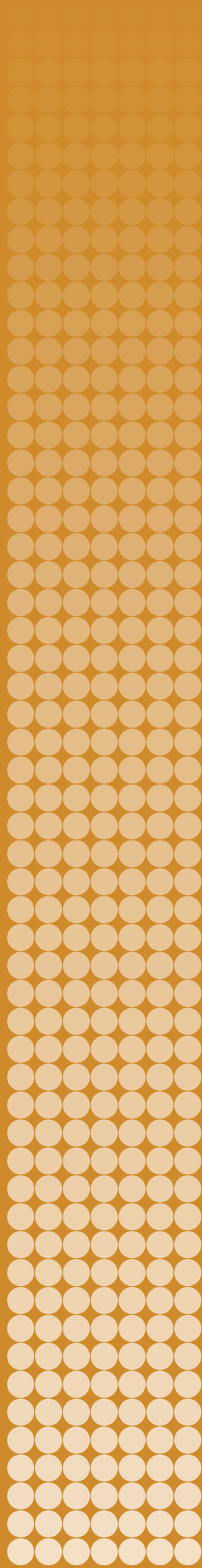


THE WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME'S CONTRIBUTION TO IMPROVING THE PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN SRI LANKA

SIMONE BUNSE AND VONGAI MURUGANI



**STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL
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World Food Programme

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The SIPRI–WFP Knowledge Partnership and Disclaimer

The World Food Programme and SIPRI established a knowledge partnership in 2018 to help strengthen WFP’s contribution to improving the prospects for peace in the countries where it works. The research for phase I of this partnership was based on four countries—El Salvador, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan and Mali—and produced initial findings in June 2019. The evidence from these case studies indicated that some WFP programming positively contributed to improving the prospects for peace but also identified various issues that needed to be addressed. The preliminary report made a number of general and country-specific recommendations on how WFP’s contribution to improving the prospects for peace could be improved. However, further research was required to test the robustness and general applicability of the initial findings and recommendations, and to refine and add to them with more case studies.

Accordingly, phase II of the inquiry was broadened to include new countries and deepened through a focus on five thematic areas. Eight countries were identified for research in phase II: Colombia, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, Lebanon, Nigeria, South Sudan and Sri Lanka. The five thematic areas were climate change, stabilization, gender, cash-based interventions and measurement. The research has reported on these areas in all eight states and was complemented with a deep dive into one or two of the thematic areas in each country.

The Sri Lankan case study is the 11th of 12 country case studies in phase II. The research focused on identifying possible contributions made by WFP to improving the prospects for peace through its promotion of gender equality and women’s empowerment. The findings and recommendations are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the positions of SIPRI or WFP, or the management, executive directors or boards of these institutions. The authors alone are responsible for any errors or omissions.

Executive summary

The World Food Programme (WFP) has worked in Sri Lanka since 1968 to protect people's access to food, fight malnutrition and strengthen food systems. This report investigates the impact on gender dynamics and community resilience of its engagement in the Monaragala district in the south and the Mullaitivu district in the north. It analyses how two WFP projects in these two post-conflict communities might have affected social cohesion in order to identify tentative pathways through which WFP's programmes directly or indirectly impact the prospects for peace. The results build on a thorough examination of relevant primary and secondary sources, 34 interviews and seven focus groups.

Country context

Sri Lanka is a particularly challenging operational context. From 1983 until 2009, Sri Lanka experienced civil war (used here as a value-free technical term) between the Government of Sri Lanka and the separatist organization, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE). It ended with a military victory by the government over the LTTE.

Its root causes were a number of complex interlinked factors, such as ethnic politicization, colonialism, religion, class and caste cleavages, economic inequality and discriminatory policies, not least the Sinhala-only language policy. Despite some attempts at reconciliation after 2009, a modern state identity in which all of Sri Lanka's different ethno-religious groups feel safe has not developed.

Since 2012, Sinhalese and Buddhist ultra-nationalism have increased, targeting not only Tamils, but also Muslims and Christians. This has contributed to sporadic outbreaks of religious violence. Trust in Sri Lanka's social cohesion was severely shaken in 2019 after coordinated attacks on churches and hotels by suicide bombers from a violent Islamist fringe group. Despite attempts to strengthen Sri Lanka's social cohesion, ethnic and religious divisions are still wide.

While this research was being carried out in 2021 and 2022, the country experienced its worst economic and financial crisis since independence, leading to increased political instability and violent clashes between pro- and anti-government groups. After defaulting on its loans in 2022, food inflation in Sri Lanka skyrocketed and poverty rates returned almost to 2009 levels. According to WFP data, 33 per cent of households were food insecure in December 2022. If the current protests lead to a growing realization among Sri Lanka's population that ethnic politics has contributed to the current economic crisis and to widening inequalities, there may be opportunities to address long-standing grievances and move forward to the type of sustainable peace that is essential for long-term economic development.

Gender grievances

While ethnic, economic and religious grievances have manifested themselves in sporadic violence since 2009, gender grievances have gained little attention. This is partly because the gender gap is almost closed in health and education. However, according to Sri Lanka's 2021 Labour Force Survey, only 33 per cent of Sri Lankan women were in paid employment in 2021 compared to 67 per cent of men. Sexual harassment on public transport is widespread and women in rural areas often work from home or on family farms to avoid long commutes. Women form a significant proportion of the agricultural labour force but there is still a gender gap in the food and agricultural sector. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations,

only 16 per cent of all land in private hands is owned by women. This limits their access not only to agricultural assets, but also to subsidies, credit or irrigation water.

Crucially, gender in Sri Lanka should be analysed in combination with other identity markers such as ethnicity, religion, social class, caste and location—north versus south, urban versus rural and capital versus periphery. Depending on the combination of identities, women experienced the civil war and its aftermath, and experience current realities very differently. Since the end of the civil war, poorer, less educated rural women, female heads of household and women whose husbands were killed, for example, have been less likely than other women to find paid employment. Female former combatants have been left particularly vulnerable.

WFP's engagement in Sri Lanka seeks to contribute to a transformation of gender dynamics through income generation, livelihood diversification and resilience-building activities.

WFP's resilience building initiatives in Monaragala and Mullaitivu

WFP's resilience building initiatives aim to prevent shocks and stressors from having long-term adverse development consequences for communities through capacity building related to food security and nutrition. Conflict, a surge in food prices, climate change, water scarcity or economic uncertainty are examples of such stressors.

WFP's project Building Resilience Against Recurrent Natural Shocks through Diversification of Livelihoods for Vulnerable Communities in Sri Lanka (or resilience, risk reduction, recovery, reconstruction and nutrition, R5n) sought to make farmers more resilient to drought. It used conditional cash transfers to help them to invest in water harvesting systems for irrigation purposes, diversify agricultural production and produce for markets. It also sought to contribute to gender equality by targeting women and men equally and providing all participants with equal benefits.

The findings suggest that R5n had the potential to impact gender dynamics and thereby social cohesion through two channels. First, interventions that enable women to participate in higher value, higher volume agriculture and move away from subsistence farming, giving them control of assets, increase gender equality. This can benefit women's social integration, which is a key element of social cohesion. Second, providing sustainable income sources to both women and men can reduce tensions within and between households, thereby improving social relations, community connectedness and people's willingness to take responsibility for others—all of which increase social cohesion. This could make future violence less likely.

Recommendations

To strengthen gender transformation and rural women's social integration into Sri Lankan communities, and thereby increase social cohesion and the move towards positive peace, WFP should:

1. Continue to ensure equal access to its resilience-building programme for women and men. To identify additional entry points for integrating programme participants into their communities, WFP should collect data disaggregated not only by sex, but also by other identity markers, including marital status. Single or widowed women in rural Sri Lanka are particularly vulnerable to social isolation and bias, and have limited economic opportunities.
2. Ensure equal access to their programmes for the various ethnicities represented in the districts in which they operate. This will require

insight into and understanding of the ethnic composition of and power dynamics in the relevant communities, as well as the potential barriers women and men face in accessing WFP programmes. Participants in resilience building programmes, which are not emergency, needs-based aid projects, should reflect the ethnic composition of their community to avoid unintended contributions to conflict. Resilience-building projects could be an entry point for creating social networks, connectedness and trust not only between women and men, but also between women and men of different ethnicities that have a common goal to enhance the resilience of their communities to adverse events.

3. Collect sex-disaggregated data on agricultural production and market sales/income to establish the extent to which women are able to produce higher-value agricultural produce and move away from subsistence farming. The extent to which women can switch production or move to more technical, higher-paid roles, for example in paddy cultivation, should also be measured. To analyse whether this fosters women's social integration, WFP would need to ask programme participants in their outcome surveys whether they are attending Farmers' Organizations (FOs), what positions they hold in their FOs and since when, and how their role in their household and communities might have grown since they began participating in the programme. To assess the extent to which WFP programmes contribute to gender equality, it is necessary to understand the extent to which women have gained positions of power or can express opinions, for example, on decisions on cultivation, fertilizer and irrigation.
4. Work in partnership with local men in leadership roles, which could help to broaden attempts to foster equality between men and women after the project concludes. This would make it more likely that the long-term process of transforming gender relations will be sustained and gender equality evolves into a shared community value.
5. As part of project design, consider developing complementary activities that foster relations and build trust between programme participants from the north and the south of the country. Training and exchanges could, for example, be facilitated for and between rural farmers from Mullaitivu and rural farmers from Monaragala, or for widows from the north and the south whose husbands were killed in Sri Lanka's civil war. If the focus is local social cohesion rather than national cohesion, similar exchanges could be fostered, for example, between programme participants from different castes in Mullaitivu. These initiatives would need to be accompanied by strategies to prevent a backlash against programme participants.
6. More systematically analyse, including by sex, the links between the R5n resilience project, increased income and negative coping strategies. Providing men with opportunities to generate regular income could reduce the social pressures related to their expected role as the main breadwinner, thereby decreasing the likelihood of them becoming violent. Providing women with such opportunities could reduce their engagement in illegal economic activities such as brewing alcohol, which could in turn contribute to violence reduction in their communities. Understanding these linkages can help WFP to position its work to create virtuous circles

that reduce men's and women's reliance on negative and sometimes illegal coping strategies that increase insecurity in communities. Given that such outcomes cannot be assumed to be automatic, assistance to livelihood should be combined with family counselling and mentoring programmes.

7. Consider training R5n programme participants to disseminate the adaptation strategies and resilience-building knowledge they gained to interested members of their communities. Such interactions can strengthen social networks and generate a sense of solidarity between participants and non-participants.
8. Add indicators of social cohesion to monitoring surveys. The questions should focus on the extent to which participants share produce, resources and expertise with non-participants and other context-specific indicators. Understanding specific social cohesion needs not only between the different communities in which WFP works, but also within them, is crucial to designing inclusive programmes that can create trust and enhance social relations.

Mainstreaming home-grown school food into Sri Lanka's National School Meals Programme

The objective of the Homegrown School Feeding (HGSF) programme was to help to mainstream homegrown food in Sri Lanka's national school meals programme by turning school caterers engaged in subsistence farming into higher-volume producers of homegrown vegetables and eggs. The project sought to ensure higher nutritional value of school meals while reducing caterers' input costs and at the same time generating reliable income streams for programme participants not only through catering, but also by selling their excess produce.

The findings of the study suggest that the HGSF programme had the potential to positively impact gender dynamics and therefore social cohesion. If WFP's HGSF project could provide women with the opportunity to become self-employed school caterers with a sustainable and recognized business model based on working from home with the government as a client, their increased income potential might translate into increased decision-making power within the household and enhanced social standing within their communities.

Recommendations

To strengthen gender transformation and rural women's social integration into Sri Lankan communities, and thereby increase social cohesion and moves towards positive peace, WFP should:

1. Explore ways to overcome bottlenecks in the payment of caterers for the provision of school meals in partnership with the government and advocate for prompt payment. Payment delays contributed to high caterer turnover.
2. Track programme data to determine whether the turnover rate is the same or different for women and men, in order to identify potential gendered effects or barriers to successful programme participation.
3. Consider promoting family businesses that involve men whose wives are engaged in the HGSF programme. Joint participation in the programme

could help the catering business grow and expand to non-state clients, and enable the sharing of rewards and the income generated, as well as social integration and status gains.

Abbreviations

DS	Divisional Secretariat
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
FO	Farmers' Organization
GDP	Gross domestic product
GNDs	Grama Niladhari Divisions
HGSF	Home-grown School Feeding
IPKF	Indian Peacekeeping Force
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam
MFIs	Microfinance Institutions
R5n	Building Resilience Against Recurrent Natural Shocks through Diversification of Livelihoods for Vulnerable Communities (Resilience, Risk Reduction, Recovery, Reconstruction and Nutrition)
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization

1. Introduction

The World Food Programme (WFP) has worked in Sri Lanka since 1968 to protect people's access to food, fight malnutrition and strengthen food systems.¹ This report forms part of a series of country case studies on the World Food Programme's contributions to improving the prospects for peace. It investigates the impact of WFP engagement in Sri Lanka's Monaragala and Mullaitivu districts on gender dynamics and community resilience. The aim is to learn how selected WFP projects in these two districts affect social cohesion in post-conflict communities and to identify pathways through which WFP's programmes might directly or indirectly affect the prospects for peace. The research seeks to feed into ongoing efforts to strengthen the contribution of WFP's conflict-sensitive programming to improving the prospects for peace in Sri Lanka in general and its rural communities in particular. It contributes to a growing evidence base on the extent to, and channels through, which WFP programming can either contribute to improving the prospects for peace or have unintended adverse effects. The findings are expected to inform future operational fine-tuning.

Section 2 provides an overview of Sri Lanka's country and conflict context, including the root causes of its civil war (1983–2009) and continuing grievances since it ended.² The thematic focus of this country case study is gender. Section 3 examines gender issues and how these are similar or different in Monaragala and Mullaitivu. Section 4 outlines the research design and its limitations. Section 5 analyses two WFP interventions and their contributions to increasing the prospects for peace. Sri Lankans' silences on their conflict experience, gender and ethnic grievances, as well as unaddressed trauma, present data limitations. The analysis therefore sets out three tentative theories of change on how the WFP programmes selected affected social cohesion and thereby the prospects for peace. Section 5 concludes with recommendations on future operational fine-tuning.

¹ World Food Programme (WFP), Sri Lanka Country Brief, Jan. 2023.

² Civil war is defined as 'a violent conflict between a state and one or more organized non-state actors in the state's territory'. This distinguishes it from violent conflict, riots or other violent acts which do not involve state actors, see <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/civil-war>>.

2. Sri Lanka: Country context

Located off the south-east coast of India, Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious island with a population of 22 million.³ In 2021, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was just over US\$ 4000.⁴ Sri Lanka is ranked 73rd of 191 countries in the UNDP Planetary Pressures-adjusted Human Development Index for 2021–22.⁵ In 2020, average life expectancy was 76 years.⁶ Adult literacy was 92 per cent.⁷ Compared to other former British colonies in Asia, Sri Lanka's level of human development in 2021–22 ranked well above Indonesia (114th), Bangladesh (129th), India (132nd) or Pakistan (161st), but below Malaysia (62nd) and Singapore (12th).⁸

Almost 75 per cent of the Sri Lankan population is Sinhalese.⁹ The largest ethnic minority is Tamil. Tamils are either Sri Lankan (11.2 per cent of the population) or Indian (4.1 per cent). Indian Tamils are descended from the Tamil plantation workers brought to Sri Lanka from India by British colonizers.¹⁰ The second largest minority (9.3 per cent) are (mostly) Tamil-speaking Sri Lankan Moor.¹¹ They are descended from Middle Eastern traders whose commercial interests brought them to Sri Lanka from southern India in the 7th century.¹²

This provides a religious mix that is 70.1 per cent Buddhist (most of the Sinhalese), 12.6 per cent Hindu (the majority of Tamils) and 9.7 per cent Muslim (mostly Sri Lankan Moor).¹³ There is also small Christian minority of 7.6 per cent of the population from both Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups.¹⁴ The Sinhalese are concentrated in the central and southern regions of the island. The Tamils reside mainly in the north and east of the country, but there are also a significant number of Tamils in the capital, Colombo.¹⁵ The east coast is multi-ethnic, if predominantly Muslim.

The incidence of poverty in 2019 was 14.3 per cent.¹⁶ However, national indicators conceal important differences between urban, rural and estate or plantation areas. In 2019, the percentage of poor people in urban areas, where 17.2 per cent of the population lives, was 6 per cent, compared to 15 per cent in rural areas (where almost 80 per cent of the population lives), compared to 33.8 per cent in estate areas (where 4.5 per cent of the population lives).¹⁷ The Western part of the country, in particular the coastal area around Colombo, is the most urbanized. The estate areas are mainly in the centre of the country, while the north, south and east are rural. The agricultural sector

³ World Population Review, 'Sri Lanka Population: Live'.

⁴ World Bank, 'Sri Lanka: Overview'.

⁵ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Human Development Report, 2021–2022, Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives: Shaping our Future in a Transforming World (UNDP: New York, 2022).

⁶ World Bank, 'Life expectancy at birth: Female, Sri Lanka'.

⁷ World Bank, Literacy rate: adult total (per cent of people aged 15 and above), Sri Lanka.

⁸ United Nations Development Programme (note 5).

⁹ Central Bank of Sri Lanka, *Economic and Social Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2020* (Central Bank of Sri Lanka Statistics Department: Colombo, 2020).

¹⁰ Central Bank of Sri Lanka (note 9).

¹¹ Central Bank of Sri Lanka (note 9). The term 'Moor' comes from the Portuguese who controlled Sri Lanka in the 16th century, see Johansson, A., 'Who are Sri Lanka's Muslims?' *The Conversation*, 22 Apr. 2019.

¹² Johansson (note 11).

¹³ Central Bank of Sri Lanka (note 9).

¹⁴ Central Bank of Sri Lanka (note 9).

¹⁵ Thuraurajah, K., 'Who are we without the war? The evolution of the Tamil ethnic identity in post-conflict Sri Lanka' *Ethnicities*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2020), p. 567.

¹⁶ Sri Lankan Department of Census and Statistics (DCS), Ministry of Economic Policies and Plan Implementation, 'Poverty indicators, 2019', Apr. 2022.

¹⁷ DCS (note 16); and DCS, *Multidimensional Poverty in Sri Lanka*, 2021.

employs around 25 per cent of the population nationwide, but small-scale farming is the dominant economic activity in rural areas.¹⁸

Sri Lanka's social cohesion score for 2009–15 was 0.28 on a scale of –1 (lowest score) to +1 (highest social cohesion). This is up from 0.10 in 2004–2008.¹⁹ The score measures three domains: resilience of social relations, community connectedness and focus on the common good.²⁰ Social relations are ‘the networks and interactions between individuals and groups within a community, trust in others, and acceptance of diversity’.²¹ Connectedness is ‘the degree to which people identify with the community, the trust they have in society’s institutions, and whether they believe that social conditions are just’. ‘Focus on the common good’ measures ‘actions and attitudes that evince people’s willingness to take responsibility for others and the community’.²² The latter includes ‘solidarity and helpfulness, the recognition of social rules, and participation in society and political life’.²³

Sri Lanka moved from being categorized as a ‘middle tier’ country in Asia in terms of social cohesion in 2004–2008 to the ‘second tier’ category in 2009–2015. Middle tier countries have social cohesion scores of between –0.25 and 0.25, while second tier countries’ social cohesion scores are above 0.25 but below 0.84.²⁴ However, Sri Lanka’s overall social cohesion score conceals significant variations in the three domains measured.

While Sri Lanka scored high (0.86) on its ‘focus on the common good’ in 2009–2015 (up from –0.40 in the period 2004–2008) and moderate on ‘connectedness’ (0.44 in 2009–15, up from 0.32 in 2004–2008), its score on ‘social relations’ was already low but fell in the post-conflict period from –0.40 in the period 2004–2008 to –0.44 for 2009–15.²⁵

Social cohesion is crucial to achieving collective social and economic goals, particularly in multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies such as Sri Lanka.²⁶ Strengthening social cohesion is therefore an important pathway to sustaining peace.

Root causes of conflict in Sri Lanka

Ever since Sri Lanka’s independence from British colonial rule in 1948, the country has been scarred by repeated cycles of violence, from several bloody youth insurrections in pursuit of Marxist ideas to wider ethnic conflict and religious violence. The insurrections by marginalized rural poor Sinhalese Buddhist youth (mostly from south and central Sri Lanka) were suppressed in 1971 and in 1987–89, resulting in an estimated 60 000 deaths.²⁷

Ethnic conflict and power disputes between Sri Lanka’s Hindu, Tamil minority in the north and east of the country and the Buddhist Sinhalese majority in the rest of Sri

¹⁸ O’Neil, A., ‘Sri Lanka: Distribution of employment by economic sector from 2009 to 2019’, 19 Jan. 2023; and International Fund for Agricultural Development, ‘Sri Lanka: The context’.

¹⁹ Walkenhorst, P., ‘What holds Asian Societies together?’, *Asia Policy Brief*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Mar. 2018.

²⁰ Larsen, M. M., Koch M. and Dragolov, G., ‘Measuring social cohesion in Asia’, ed. Bertelsmann Stiftung, *What holds Asian Societies Together? Insights from the Social Cohesion Radar* (Pre-print, 2018), pp. 49–68.

²¹ Walkenhorst (note 19), p. 2.

²² Walkenhorst (note 19), p. 2.

²³ Walkenhorst (note 19), p. 2.

²⁴ The Asia Social Cohesion Radar has 5 tiers overall, which range from ‘first tier’ (scores above 0.84) to the ‘bottom tier’ (scores below –0.84). see Larsen, Koch and Dragolov (note 20).

²⁵ Walkenhorst (note 19), p. 5.

²⁶ World Bank, *The Promotion of Social Cohesion Through Education in Sri Lanka*, South Asia human development sector, Discussion paper no. 46 (World Bank: Washington, DC, 2011).

²⁷ Watkins, J., ‘The state, conflict and the individual: The effect of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrections in Sri Lanka on the mental welfare of a population’ *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2005), pp. 216–29.

Lanka trapped the country in a civil war in 1983–2009.²⁸ The mostly Tamil-speaking Sri Lankan Moors were caught in the middle, since they lived in the disputed regions in the north and east.²⁹ Active fighting ended after a military victory by the government over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

During this period, 84 000 Tamils fled to India, hundreds of thousands sought refuge in Europe and the United States, and 800 000 Tamils were internally displaced within Sri Lanka.³⁰ The UN estimates that 80 000–100 000 people died.³¹

The root causes of Sri Lanka's civil war were a complex combination of interlinked factors, such as ethnic politicization, colonialism, religion (Buddhist revivalism), class and caste cleavages, institutionalized discrimination, which led to economic disadvantages, and an institutional culture of negating minority rights.³² The British colonial rulers had favoured the Tamil minority at the expense of Sinhalese religion, language and culture. Independence was therefore a mechanism for the Sinhalese majority to reassert its cultural and religious identity and restore its dominance.³³ Political parties, which until 1948 had been multi-ethnic programmatic parties with politics dominated by class difference, had become ethnic- or religion-based parties by the 1960s.³⁴ Colonialism, however, cannot account for the onset and protracted nature of the conflict.

Ethnic animosity and radicalization post-independence were initially linked to implementation of the 'Sinhala only' Language Act, which led to riots in 1956 and 1958. A new constitution in 1972 afforded Buddhism and the Sinhala language superior status. The 1972 constitution completed Sri Lanka's transition to full independence. It did away with the position of a Governor General appointed by the British to represent the Crown in Sri Lanka and consolidated the country's ethnographic centrism.

Other factors increased Tamil distrust in the 1970s and 1980s, such as discriminatory access to education and state employment (where Tamils had traditionally been overrepresented), government-sponsored Sinhalese resettlement in predominantly Tamil areas, resource allocation that favoured majority Sinhalese areas and terrorism laws that allowed government security forces to arrest and imprison anyone suspected of unlawful activity without trial.³⁵ Widespread human rights abuses following enactment of the 1979 Terrorism Act further fed Tamil extremism. Several radical movements were formed, from which the LTTE emerged as the dominant militant group.³⁶ Its leader was from the impoverished rural north.

By 1978, when the Tamil language was officially recognized, many Tamils had lost faith in the country's institutions and began mobilizing around calls for an independent state.³⁷ Five years later, ethnic riots broke out and the country's institutions broke down. Thousands of young Tamils joined the LTTE to fight for an independent Tamil state in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Although, early on in the conflict, some Tamil-

²⁸ Anandakugan, N., 'The Sri Lankan civil war and its history, revisited in 2020', *Harvard International Review*, 31 Aug. 2020.

²⁹ Thiranagama, S., 'Muslims and ethnic identity in Sri Lanka', *Politique et religions en Asie du Sud: Le sécularisme dans tous ses états?* [Politics and Religions in South Asia: Secularism in all its forms?] (Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales: Paris, 2012).

³⁰ Janowski, K., 'UNHCR in talks on Sri Lankans uprooted by civil war', UNHCR, 16 Jan. 2003.

³¹ Nebehay, S. and Pal, A., 'Sri Lanka faces UN scrutiny over civil war crimes', Reuters, 23 Mar. 2021.

³² De Votta, N., 'Control democracy, institutional decay, and the quest for Eelam: Explaining ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 1 (2000), pp. 55–76.

³³ DeVotta (note 32).

³⁴ Athukorola, P. and Jayasuriya, S., 'Economic policy shifts in Sri Lanka: The post-conflict development challenge', *Asian Economic Papers*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2013).

³⁵ DeVotta (note 32).

³⁶ Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, 'Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)'.

³⁷ DeVotta (note 32).

speaking Muslims joined the Tamil cause, they also began to be targeted by the LTTE.³⁸ To help finance the LTTE, Sri Lankan Moors were frequently extorted or forced to pay unofficial taxes or kidnap ransoms.³⁹ Later, the LTTE attacked mosques killing many Muslims to ethnically cleanse the territories it controlled. In retaliation, Sri Lankan Moors started working with Sri Lanka's national security forces.⁴⁰

The civil war lasted 26 years. Peace negotiations failed in 1984, 1985, 1987, 1989 and 1995, and between 1997 and 2006.⁴¹ Several external players became involved, such as India and Norway. But the gap between the governments' and the LTTE's competing ethno-nationalist projects was too wide to achieve peace.⁴² Sustained by a transnational diaspora, the LTTE developed a navy, an air force, an elite suicide commando unit and a group of highly committed force commanders, making it one of the most capable insurgent forces in modern history.⁴³

Tamil women played a key role in the conflict either as part of an all-female LTTE division, known as the 'Women's Front', or as part of the LTTE's 'Black Tigers' suicide bombers.⁴⁴ The Women's Front pursued the right to self-determination through the creation of an 'independent democratic state of Tamililam', the abolition of 'oppressive caste discrimination' and 'feudal customs such as the dowry system', as well as 'social, political and economic equality'.⁴⁵ Female Black Tigers were an exploitable resource, given their willingness to give their lives for the cause of a Tamil state.⁴⁶

One of the most significant attacks of the insurgency was the suicide bombing by a young woman in May 1991, which assassinated India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi as well as numerous bystanders while campaigning for re-election in Tamil Nadu, in revenge for India's collaboration with Sinhalese forces against the LTTE between 1987–90.⁴⁷ In 1993 a suicide bomber killed Sri Lanka's President along with 17 others.⁴⁸ More generally, the LTTE's suicide bombings heightened ethnic distrust and racism against Tamils, and helped to erode any political will to recreate the type of institutions and civil society needed to unite Sri Lanka.⁴⁹

The LTTE's military defeat in 2009 was made possible by a decline in the insurgent group's funding after it was designated a terrorist organization by the European Union and others in 2006, and when the separatist Tamil army fighting in the eastern province defected from the LTTE to join the counterinsurgency. This constrained the LTTE geographically to the north. In addition, China embraced a military solution

³⁸ Johansson (note 11).

³⁹ Thiranagama (note 29).

⁴⁰ Gunaratna, R., 'Sinhala-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka: The need for restoring communal history', *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, vol. 10, no. 4 (Apr. 2018), pp. 1–4; International Crisis Group, 'Sri Lanka's Muslims: Caught in the Crossfire', Asia Report no. 134 (May 2007); and Imtiyaz, A. and Iqbal, M., 'The Displaced Northern Muslims of Sri Lanka: Special Problems and the Future', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 46, no. 4 (June 2011).

⁴¹ Paul, C. et al., 'Sri Lanka, 1976–2009: Case outcome: COIN Win', eds C. Paul et al., *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies* (RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, CA, 2013), pp. 423–40.

⁴² Sørbo, G. et al., *Pawns of Peace: Evaluation of Norwegian Peace Efforts in Sri Lanka, 1997–2009*, Report no. 5/2011 (Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation: Oslo, 2011).

⁴³ Paul et al. (note 41).

⁴⁴ Alexander, E., 'Women of war: The female fighters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam', *Cornell International Affairs Review*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2014).

⁴⁵ Samarasinghe, V., 'Soldiers, housewives and peace makers: Ethnic conflict and gender in Sri Lanka', *Gender Peace and Security Research Hub*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1996), p. 217.

⁴⁶ Manchanda, R., *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency* (Sage: London, 2001), p. 102; Gunawardena, A., 'Female black tigers: A different breed of cat?', Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv, Memorandum no. 64 (Aug. 2006); and Schweitzer, Y., 'Female suicide bombers: Dying for equality', Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv, Memorandum no. 84 (Aug. 2006), pp. 83–84.

⁴⁷ Paul et al. (note 41).

⁴⁸ Moore, M. 'Suicide bomber kills leader of Sri Lanka' *Washington Post*, 2 May 1993.

⁴⁹ DeVotta (note 32).

and provided the Sri Lankan government with military assistance. Since 1998, China had been working with a number of Asian countries and Russia to combat terrorism, ethnic separation and religious extremism.⁵⁰ It sought to do this through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).⁵¹ Sri Lanka became a Dialogue Partner in the SCO, successfully framing the 'Tamil conflict as a terrorism threat requiring a counter terrorism response'.⁵²

In sum, Sri Lanka exemplifies how state building can be undermined when one ethno-national group seeks to 'build a religion, juridico and politico-economic society by excluding its minorities' and when 'ethnic identity is used to create national identity'.⁵³ Peace in 2009 came through a military victory by the Government of Sri Lanka. Such a 'victor's peace', however, is comparable to negative peace.⁵⁴ Unless grounded in 'local consent and legitimacy', it is unlikely to be sustainable or to move beyond the absence of violence on the spectrum of peace as a process.⁵⁵

Post-conflict context and current grievances

After 2009, Sri Lankan policymakers concentrated on preserving peace by focusing on economic development, particularly through infrastructure investment and tourism. Chinese development finance for infrastructure in Sri Lanka quadrupled between 2010 and 2019 as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which was launched in 2013.⁵⁶ Similarly, tourism more than quadrupled over the same period, and accounted for over 12 per cent of Sri Lanka's GDP in 2019.⁵⁷ It was an underlying assumption of successive governments that economic development, reducing poverty and building infrastructure, roads and schools would lead to reconciliation.⁵⁸ Forced disappearances, human rights abuses, mass graves and allegations of rape and torture were reluctantly investigated.⁵⁹

Nonetheless, even though aid and assistance flowed from Western donors, international agencies, China and India after 2009,⁶⁰ trade liberalization was soon reversed.⁶¹ Sinhalese 'populist state-centered economic policies', economic mismanagement, the resurgence of nationalism and the concentration of power in a small ruling group became key characteristics.⁶² Over time, this led to chronic fiscal deficits and eventually to the 2022 post-conflict economic crisis.⁶³

Coupled with Sri Lanka's import dependence, the country gradually slid into a debt trap and financial crisis, requiring repeated financial aid from the International Monetary Fund. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated debt problems by reducing vital

⁵⁰ Weiqing, S., *China's Approach to Central Asia: The Shanghai Co-operation Organisation* (Routledge: London, 2016).

⁵¹ Weiqing (note 50).

⁵² Hein, P., 'Riding with the devils', *India Quarterly*, vol. 73, no. 1 (Mar. 2017), pp. 77–98.

⁵³ DeVotta (note 32); and Thuraurajah (note 15), p. 565.

⁵⁴ Richmond, O. P., 'The victors' peace in history', *Peace: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014).

⁵⁵ Richmond (note 54).

⁵⁶ Wignaraja, G. et al., *Chinese Investment and the BRI in Sri Lanka* (Chatham House: London, 2020).

⁵⁷ Global Data, 'Ongoing economic, geopolitical crises make Sri Lanka tourism industry revival uphill task, says GlobalData', 19 Aug. 2022.

⁵⁸ Interview, WFP staff member no.5, 28 Oct. 2021.

⁵⁹ Aneez, S., 'UN presses Sri Lanka to meet commitments on war crimes investigations, reforms', Reuters, 23 Mar. 2017.

⁶⁰ Athukorola and Jayasuriya (note 34).

⁶¹ Prema-chandra, A., 'Sri Lanka's trade policy: Reverting to dirigisme?' *World Economy*, 21 Dec. 2012.

⁶² Athukorola and Jayasuriya (note 34), p. 1.

⁶³ Interview, Expert no. 3, 26 Jan. 2023.

income from tourism. In early 2021, with the Sri Lankan Rupee devaluating hastily, the government declared a state of economic emergency.⁶⁴ Default followed in May 2022.⁶⁵

Food inflation, as measured by year-on-year change, increased from 9 per cent in 2021 to 46.6 per cent in April 2022.⁶⁶ In October 2022, the World Bank predicted a 25.6 per cent poverty rate in 2022, close to 2009 levels.⁶⁷ Interviewees in Sri Lanka's rural areas expressed particular grievances about the ban on agrochemical fertilizers issued in 2021 in response to the country's balance of payments crisis.⁶⁸ The ban reduced agricultural production—a vital source of income not only through the country's exports, but also for its already vulnerable rural communities. The crisis led to serious energy and food security concerns related to soaring fuel prices and disrupted food supply chains, as well as a shortage of essential medicines.

Protests erupted in March 2022, which turned violent over the course of the year. These led to the resignation of the governing cabinet in April, the prime minister in May and the president in July.⁶⁹ At the time this research was being undertaken, the risk of political instability and prolonged clashes between pro- and anti-government groups remained, providing for an increasingly complex operating environment for aid agencies and their government partners.⁷⁰

Overall, despite some attempts at reconciliation, the power asymmetry between the Sinhalese-dominated states and the Tamil minority remained.⁷¹ Particularly in the north but increasingly also in the eastern part of the country, deep distrust of the military and the police has persisted or grown. Reconciliation and the development of a modern state identity in which different ethno-religious groups thrive and feel safe remains elusive.⁷²

By 2012, Sinhalese and Buddhist ultra-nationalism were spreading and targeting not only Tamils, but also Muslim and Christian communities.⁷³ Sinhalese hardliners claimed that 'Muslims were destroying Buddhist heritage' following the destruction of Buddhist statues in Afghanistan and attacks on Buddhist temples in Bangladesh.⁷⁴ In 2014, mosques and Muslim-owned businesses were attacked. Sinhalese-Muslim riots followed in 2018 triggered by a traffic accident involving Muslim youths attacking a Sinhalese driver.⁷⁵ Moreover, during the Tamil conflict, Islamic missionaries had introduced political Islam, with new clothing restrictions and a global jihadi discourse against the West. This divided the local Muslim community, on the one hand, and contributed to anti-Muslim sentiment, on the other.⁷⁶

Trust in Sri Lanka's social cohesion was further shaken in April 2019 when suicide bombers from an Islamist fringe group killed nearly 300 people and injured more than

⁶⁴ Lovito, M., Sud A. and Colnaghi W. B., *Infrastructure Financing in Sri Lanka: Lessons Learnt and Future Collaboration*, Policy Brief 16/2021.

⁶⁵ Hoskins, P., 'Sri Lanka defaults on debt for first time in its history', BBC News, 20 May 2022.

⁶⁶ Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 'On year-on-year basis, CCPI based headline inflation continuously increased to 29.8 per cent in April 2022', 29 Apr. 2022.

⁶⁷ World Bank, *Poverty & Equity Brief*, 'Sri Lanka', Oct. 2022.

⁶⁸ Interview, WFP staff member no. 6, 29 Oct 2021; Interview, WFP staff member no. 9, 4 Nov. 2021; Interview, Expert no. 1, 15 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; and Interview, Expert no. 2, 26 Nov. 2021.

⁶⁹ Frayer, L., 'The prime minister of Sri Lanka resigns after weeks of protests' Npr, 9 May 2022.

⁷⁰ Economist Intelligence Unit, Sri Lanka 'In brief' [n. d.].

⁷¹ Kent, L., 'The Rajapaksa regime: Navigating the victor's peace', *New Mandala*, 20 Sep. 2021; and Richmond (note 54).

⁷² Arnmarker, L., 'Reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka: A study on reconciliation possibilities after a victor's peace', Lund University, Department of Political Science, Spring 2017; and ACLED, 'Anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka', 16 Mar. 2018.

⁷³ ACLED (note 78); Gunaratna (note 40), pp. 1–4; and Gunasingham, A. 'Arrest of influential religious hardliner and religious extremism in Sri Lanka' *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, vol. 10, no. 8 (Aug. 2018), pp. 7–9.

⁷⁴ Gunaratna (note 40), pp. 1–4.

⁷⁵ Gunaratna (note 40), pp. 1–4.

⁷⁶ Gunaratna (note 40), pp. 1–4.

500 in coordinated attacks on churches and hotels.⁷⁷ The intelligence and policing failures identified in subsequent investigations deepened distrust.⁷⁸

Although some attempts have been made to strengthen Sri Lanka's social cohesion, for example through educational programmes, ethnic and increasing religious divides remain.⁷⁹ In the light of these differences, people's growing mistrust in state institutions and the fact much of the country is mono-ethnic at the administrative sub-unit level (divisional secretariats, DS), some analysts argue that 'overarching, national social cohesion' does not exist in Sri Lanka.⁸⁰ This provides a particularly challenging context for any development organization to operate in. In addition, reconciliation is difficult to achieve and requires creative thinking as the grassroots level remains mono-ethnic.

Interestingly, the current protests reveal a growing realization among Sri Lanka's population that ethnic politics has contributed to the country's economic crisis and widening inequalities.⁸¹ One interviewee explained that 'People are finally beginning to see a direct link between social cohesion and the economic crisis. Social cohesion, issues of good governance and anti-corruption laws are all being talked about right now'.⁸² This could open up avenues for processes to address long-standing and current grievances in order to move from 'negative peace' towards the type of sustainable peace that is essential for long-term economic development.

⁷⁷ Shaffer, R., 'Counter-terrorism, intelligence and policing in Sri Lanka: A case study of the 2019 Easter terror attacks', *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 3 Jan. 2023.

⁷⁸ Shaffer (note 77).

⁷⁹ Gunaratna (note 40), pp. 1–4.

⁸⁰ Trinn, C., 'Sri Lanka: The dark side of social cohesion in divided societies', eds, A. Croissant and P. Walkenhorst, *Social Cohesion in Asia* (Routledge: London, 2019), pp. 190–212.

⁸¹ Ramarkrishnan, S., 'Sri Lanka: Young protesters wary of traditional politics', *Made for Minds*, 30 May 2022.

⁸² Interview, Expert no. 3, 26 Jan. 2023.

3. Gender context and gender-related grievances in Sri Lanka

Despite the existence of numerous studies highlighting gender grievances, many interviewees and policy implementers did not identify gender inequalities as a major concern or priority.⁸³ Several reasons explain this. First, Sri Lanka's gender gap is almost closed in health and education, scoring 0.98 and 0.988 out of 1, respectively.⁸⁴ Second, Sri Lanka compares favourably to the gender gap in some of its nearest neighbours such as India and Pakistan. Sri Lanka is ranked 110th of 146 in the 2022 Global Gender Gap Report, well ahead of India (135) and Pakistan (145).⁸⁵ Third, Sri Lanka elected the world's first woman prime minister in 1960.⁸⁶ Finally, it is difficult to isolate gender from other identity markers, such as ethnicity, religion, social class, caste or urban versus rural. For example, Sri Lanka's first female prime minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, was the widow of a former prime minister (Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike).⁸⁷ Their daughter, Chandrika Kumaratunga, became president some years after her husband, who was also a politician, was assassinated.⁸⁸ While both were widows of political assassinations, their socio-economic status was incomparable to most other widows in the country.⁸⁹

Comparing Sri Lanka with four former British colonies in Asia, Sri Lanka has lower scores on gender equality measures than all of them. Singapore is placed 49th in the 2022 Global Gender Gap Report, followed by Bangladesh (71), Indonesia (92) and Malaysia (103).⁹⁰ Despite having had the world's first woman prime minister, Sri Lanka's gender gap is widest in political empowerment (0.157).⁹¹ Female representation in parliament was only 5.3 per cent in 2021.⁹² Women's economic participation (0.556) is also low, particularly in the light of the near equality in levels of education between men and women.⁹³ In 2021, women constituted just one-third of Sri Lanka's economically active population.⁹⁴

There is a significant gender gap in Sri Lanka's food and agricultural sector. Women comprise almost 30 per cent of the agricultural labour force,⁹⁵ but they often face discrimination in 'accessing essential productive resources and services, technology, market information and financial assets'.⁹⁶ A study by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations notes that only '16 per cent of all owned land in Sri Lanka belongs to women, and this limits their access to different agricultural assets and benefits such as subsidies, credit or irrigation water'.⁹⁷

⁸³ World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report, 2022*, Insight Report, July 2022; Seneviratne, P., 'Gender wage inequality during Sri Lanka's post-reform growth: A distributional analysis', *World Development*, vol. 129, no. 11 (May 2020); and Asian Development Bank (ADB) et al., *Country Gender Assessment: Sri Lanka, an Update* (ADB: Manila, 2015).

⁸⁴ World Economic Forum (note 83).

⁸⁵ World Economic Forum (note 83).

⁸⁶ Sri Lanka Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 'World's first female prime minister' [n.d.].

⁸⁷ Britannica, 'Sirimavo Bandaranaike', Updated 6 Oct. 2022.

⁸⁸ Council of Women World Leaders, Chandrika Kumartunga: President of Sri Lanka, 1994–2005, 'Biography'.

⁸⁹ Interview, Development expert, 6 Mar. 2023.

⁹⁰ World Economic Forum (note 83).

⁹¹ World Economic Forum (note 83).

⁹² UNDP Sri Lanka, 'Gender equality: A human right' [n.d.].

⁹³ World Economic Forum (note 83).

⁹⁴ Government of Sri Lanka, Department of Census and Statistics, 'Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey, Annual Report', 2021.

⁹⁵ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 'FAO calls for urgent action to mainstream gender in agriculture policy in Sri Lanka', Colombo, 21 Sep. 2018.

⁹⁶ FAO (note 95).

⁹⁷ FAO (note 95).

In addition, according to a survey by the United Nations Population Fund, sexual harassment is omnipresent: 90 per cent of respondents had experienced sexual harassment on public buses and trains in Sri Lanka at least once in their lifetime, although only 4 per cent reported those incidents to the police.⁹⁸ The 2019 Women's Wellbeing Survey suggests that 20.4 per cent of women in Sri Lanka had experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime.⁹⁹ The rate is even higher in Sri Lanka's estate sector, where 39.6 per cent of women had experienced physical and/or sexual abuse by a partner.¹⁰⁰

Crucially, macro-level gender indicators conceal deep differences when gender intersects with other identity markers, such as ethnicity (majority or minority), religion, social class, caste or location (north or south, urban or rural, capital or periphery).¹⁰¹

Women experienced the violence between 1983–2009 and its aftermath differently, depending on the combination of different identities. While soldiers were recruited from poor families in the south, the fighting was concentrated in the north. Since active fighting ended in 2009, poorer, less educated women, female heads of household and women widowed by the civil war have been less likely than other women to find paid employment.¹⁰² In 2017 (the most recent data available), female workforce participation in the north was 21 per cent, significantly lower than the national average.¹⁰³ The highest female labour force participation rate is among Indian Tamil women, who are concentrated in the tea plantations where women have steady employment as tea pickers but face precarious working conditions and the highest rates of physical and/or sexual violence.¹⁰⁴ Sri Lankan Moor women have the lowest labour force participation rates.¹⁰⁵

According to UN estimates, around 20 per cent of households in the north are headed by women who lost their husbands in the civil war.¹⁰⁶ There is little industry and most economic activity is agricultural, while traditional norms constrain which jobs are considered suitable for women. Women's job opportunities in the north are therefore extremely limited,¹⁰⁷ even though they are often supporting up to four people in their households.¹⁰⁸ In contrast to the widows of Sinhalese soldiers in the south, Tamil widows in the north and Muslim widows in the east do not receive a pension, as their husbands did not fight in the Sinhalese army. Moreover, land and property ownership problems are common, either because the land is occupied by the military or because women have difficulties accessing their inheritance. Widows often lack death certificates, may have lost their marriage certificates or did not legally register their marriage.¹⁰⁹ Discussion of the predicament of women widowed by the civil war,

⁹⁸ UN Population Fund Sri Lanka (UNFPA), *Does She Travel Safe? Report on Sexual Harassment in Public Transportation in Sri Lanka* (UNFPA: Colombo, 2018).

⁹⁹ Government of Sri Lanka, *Women's Wellbeing Survey, 2019*. Findings from Sri Lanka's first dedicated National Survey on Violence against Women and Girls, Final report, Oct. 2020, p. 34.

¹⁰⁰ Government of Sri Lanka (note 99), p. 34.

¹⁰¹ Interview, Expert no. 3, 26 Jan. 2023.

¹⁰² Solotaroff, J. L. et al., *Getting to Work: Unlocking Women's Potential in Sri Lanka's Labor Force* (World Bank: Washington, DC, 2020).

¹⁰³ Perera, A., 'Sri Lanka's war widows trafficked as slaves to Gulf', 9 Aug. 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Solotaroff (note 102); and Government of Sri Lanka (note 99), p. 34.

¹⁰⁵ Solotaroff (note 102).

¹⁰⁶ The New Humanitarian, 'Help at last for Sri Lanka war widows', 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Interview, Local expert no. 8, 22 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 11, 22 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 12, 23 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 1, 23 Nov. 2021; and Focus group discussion no. 6, 23 Nov. 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Central Bank of Sri Lanka (note 9).

¹⁰⁹ Azmi, F., 'Gender and wellbeing in post-war Sri Lanka', eds Searle, B. A., Pykett, J. and Alfaro-Simmonds, M. J., *A Modern Guide to Wellbeing Research* (Edward Elgar Publishing: Cheltenham, UK, 2021); and Yusuf, S., 'Women in Peace or Pieces? Perspectives from Sri Lanka', *Canadian Woman Studies*, vol. 33, nos 1–2 (2019), p. 39.

particularly Tamil and Muslim women, was taboo for many years.¹¹⁰ Some observers reflected that the country remained in a 'state of denial about the past'.¹¹¹ Any truth-seeking efforts related, for example, to the missing and unaccounted for were short-lived and quickly aborted.¹¹²

In addition to severe economic challenges, widows face social and cultural barriers related to the 'breakdown of traditional support structures, patriarchal attitudes, social stigma, and years of societal violence'.¹¹³ The security forces in the north and east failed to distinguish between rebels, rebel supporters and civilians, so the harassment of Tamils, including women, was pervasive.¹¹⁴ Few cases of sexual violence or other human rights abuses were prosecuted during the civil war or after 2009. This has tainted the image of military and government officials.¹¹⁵ Survivors of violence have very little voice or remain silent fearing shame and stigma.¹¹⁶

Even though the physical fighting was concentrated in the north of the country and widows of Sinhalese soldiers in the south receive a pension, they experience similar social isolation. They are also vulnerable to sexual bribery by officials processing entitlements for them or their families, or for example when seeking to enrol their children in good schools.¹¹⁷

One study has concluded that patriarchy not only restricts women's independence, but contributes to widows' 'inferiority complex' and 'poor social integration'.¹¹⁸ In the words of one woman whose husband was killed in battle: 'War was a nightmare, peace has been equally scary'.¹¹⁹

More generally, widowhood in Sri Lanka can affect the 'physical safety, identity and mobility of women'.¹²⁰ The potential risk of sexual harassment when working outside the home was noted by many interviewees.¹²¹ One study found that the sexuality of women in Sri Lanka's south received new emphasis on separation from men through widowhood or divorce, and was constructed as 'uncontrolled, unpredictable and, thus, threatening to the community'.¹²² More generally, the social acceptability of long-distance commuting or migration for work is low for women, whether married, unmarried, widowed or divorced.¹²³ In this context, providing women with self-employment opportunities where they can work from home is often regarded as a way forward.¹²⁴

¹¹⁰ Saman, M. and Obert, M., 'The war widows of Sri Lanka', 14 Nov. 2018.

¹¹¹ Human Rights Watch, World Report, 2022, 'Sri Lanka: Events of 2021'.

¹¹² Saman and Obert (note 110)

¹¹³ Saman and Obert (note 110).

¹¹⁴ DeVotta (note 32).

¹¹⁵ Human Rights Watch (note 111).

¹¹⁶ Fonseka, B. and Schulz, E., 'Gender and transformative justice in Sri Lanka', London School of Economics, 2018.

¹¹⁷ Centre for Equality and Justice, *Sexual Bribery of Military War Widows in Sri Lanka: Anuradhapura, Kunderagala and Galle districts* (Centre for Equality and Justice: Colombo, 2018).

¹¹⁸ Amarasinghe, S. and Epa, P. H. R., 'Issues and challenges confronted by women war widows in post-conflict Sri Lankan society', 2017.

¹¹⁹ The New Humanitarian, 'Help at last for Sri Lanka war widows', 13 May 2015.

¹²⁰ Upali, P., 'Military war widows in Post-war Sri Lanka', *Journal of Conflict, Peace and Development Studies*, vol. 2 (2016).

¹²¹ Interview, Local expert no 2, 16 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 13, 24 Nov. 2021.

¹²² Upali, P., 'Military war widows in Post-war Sri Lanka', *Journal of Conflict, Peace and Development Studies*, vol. 2 (2016), p. 8.

¹²³ Solotaroff (note 102).

¹²⁴ Interview, WFP staff, 3 Feb. 2023. See also Suryanarayan, V., 'Continuing tragedy of war widows in Sri Lanka', *New Indian Express*, 20 Apr. 2021; and Solotaroff (note 102).

Finally, it is noteworthy that there are more disabled women and girls in Sri Lanka across all age groups than men and boys.¹²⁵ Disability prevalence in Sri Lanka was 12.9 per cent in 2018 and is linked to the violence experienced by combatants and civilians.¹²⁶ Some women have become disabled as a result of domestic violence.¹²⁷

Comparing Monaragala and Mullaitivu

Sri Lanka's conflict drivers and gender realities are reflected in the two districts selected for this study: Mullaitivu in the Northern Province and Monaragala in Uva Province in the south of the country. The two districts have some features in common but are also different in important ways.

Social and Economic Similarities

Both districts are multi-ethnic and multi-religious, but with a dominant ethno-religious majority. Mullaitivu is predominantly Tamil, while Monaragala is predominantly Sinhalese. Both are among the poorest districts in Sri Lanka with high levels of food insecurity and indebtedness. In 2015, financial disputes accounted for 74 per cent of the disputes resolved by Community Mediation Boards in Monaragala and 69 per cent in Mullaitivu.¹²⁸ Interviewees from the two districts had common safety concerns related to alcoholism and the presence of other drugs.¹²⁹ In both districts, female-headed households were particularly vulnerable to social isolation, stereotyping and discrimination.¹³⁰ The percentage of widows was comparable in Monaragala (20.7 per cent) and Mullaitivu (23.8 per cent).¹³¹ While women and men had similar education levels,¹³² traditional household and family roles, as well as mobility issues constrained female labour force participation in both districts.¹³³ Agricultural work and subsistence farming were the dominant economic activities, given the limited opportunities for women to engage in other activities.

Social and Economic Differences

The differences between Mullaitivu and Monaragala include their population size, the dominant ethno-religious majority, their conflict experiences and the explanations for poverty. Poverty in Mullaitivu is a direct result of the civil war, which destroyed infrastructure and assets, and displaced or killed many people.¹³⁴ Poverty

¹²⁵ Joshi, S. B., *Women with Disabilities and their Access to Economic Opportunities: Through the Lens of Gender Budgets*, 2018, UN Women and Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.

¹²⁶ Joshi (note 125).

¹²⁷ Joshi (note 125).

¹²⁸ Munas, M. et al., *Community Mediation: Dispute Resolution of the People, by the People and for the People*, (Centre for Poverty Analysis: Colombo, 2018).

¹²⁹ Interview, Local expert no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 2, 16 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 8, 22 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 9, 22 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 10, 22 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 11, 22 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 4, 22 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 5, 23 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 6, 23 Nov. 2021.

¹³⁰ Interview, Local expert no. 11, 22 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 4, 22 Nov. 2021; and Focus group discussion no. 1, 23 Nov. 2021.

¹³¹ DCS, 'Female Headed Households by District', 2012.

¹³² Ministry of Education, Grade 1 Admissions by Gender and DS Division, 2021; Ministry of Education, Grade 1 Admissions by Gender and DS Division, 2020; University Grants Commission, University Admissions by University and Academic Year in Monaragala District; and University Grants Commission, University Admissions by University and Academic Year in Mullaitivu District.

¹³³ See also Solotaroff (note 102).

¹³⁴ Newhouse, D. L., Suarez Becerra, P. and Doan, D., 2016. *Sri Lanka Poverty and Welfare: Recent Progress and Remaining Challenges* (World Bank: Washington, DC, 2016); and Palliyage, R. D. N., 'Essays on poverty in Sri Lanka', Doctoral dissertation, RMIT University, 2021.

in Monaragala is attributed to low levels of government investment or other external funding resulting in poor access to basic services.¹³⁵ The percentage of people who are poor in Mullaitivu (44.5 per cent) was more than twice as high as in Monaragala (21 per cent) in 2019.¹³⁶ Trust in state institutions, such as the military and police, is higher in Monaragala than in Mullaitivu.¹³⁷ Female-headed households in Mullaitivu seemed particularly vulnerable to theft.¹³⁸

Although the presence of drugs was high in both districts, the percentage of local administrative units (Grama Niladhari Divisions, GNDs) reporting drug abuse as a problem was more than twice as high in Mullaitivu (51 per cent) compared to Monaragala (24 per cent).¹³⁹ The percentage of administrative units reporting high rates of alcoholism as a problem was high in both districts. However, the prevalence of alcoholism was more than twice as high in Mullaitivu (69.8 per cent) than in Monaragala (28.8 per cent).¹⁴⁰ Data on drug treatment showed that 99 per cent of patients were men.¹⁴¹ No district-level data was available for comparative purposes. The higher prevalence of drug abuse and alcoholism in Mullaitivu was not attributed to poverty alone, but also to untreated post-conflict trauma.¹⁴² Figure 3.1 shows that Tamil ethnic concentration is highest in the north. Mullaitivu stands out with the highest poverty rate.

Gender differences

In terms of gender differences, the female unemployment rate in Monaragala was more than three times that of men in the period 2017–20, but comparable to that of men (albeit slightly higher) in Mullaitivu.¹⁴³ Women's labour force participation was much higher in Monaragala than in Mullaitivu.¹⁴⁴ District-level statistics show that 40–60 per cent of women worked in Monaragala compared to 20–40 per cent of women in Mullaitivu, while 60–80 per cent of men worked in both districts.¹⁴⁵

Indebtedness was a problem in both districts, but more unregistered microfinance institutions (MFIs) operated in Mullaitivu than in Monaragala. Women in Mullaitivu, particularly heads of household not eligible for credit from banks, were more likely to borrow money from unregistered MFIs, and hence particularly vulnerable to threats and intimidation by debt collectors.¹⁴⁶ Many organizations therefore advocate stricter regulation of microfinance, particularly in the north and east.¹⁴⁷

¹³⁵ Household Income Expenditure Survey, Poverty Indicators for Monaragala District, 2009–19.

¹³⁶ Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Economic Policies and Plan Implementation, 'Poverty Indicators, 2019', Apr. 2022.

¹³⁷ Interview, Local expert no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 4, 22 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 5, 23 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 6, 23 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 12, 23 Nov. 2021; Local expert no. 2, 24 Nov. 2021; and Interview, expert, 26 Jan. 2023.

¹³⁸ Focus group discussion no. 4, 22 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 10, 22 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 1, 23 Nov. 2021; and Focus group discussion no. 6, 23 Nov. 2021.

¹³⁹ DCS, Monaragala District, 2020; and DCS, Mullaitivu District, 2020.

¹⁴⁰ DCS, Monaragala; and DCS, Mullaitivu (note 112).

¹⁴¹ Satkunanathan, A., *A Broken System: Drug Control Detention and Treatment of People Who Use Drugs in Sri Lanka* (Harm Reduction International: London, 2021).

¹⁴² O'Donnell, A. et al., *Shadows of Conflict in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka: Socioeconomic Challenges and a Way Forward* (World Bank: Washington, DC, 2018).

¹⁴³ DCS, District Statistical Handbook: Monaragala, 2021, Labour Force Participation, 2017–20; and DCS, District Statistical Handbook: Mullaitivu, 2021, Labour Force Participation, 2017–20.

¹⁴⁴ See also Solotaroff (note 102).

¹⁴⁵ See also Solotaroff (note 102).

¹⁴⁶ Arambepola, C. and Romeshun, K., *Debt at My Doorstep: Microfinance Practices and Effects on Women in Sri Lanka* (Centre for Poverty Analysis: Colombo, 2019); and Najab, N., 'Spiraling into poverty, one debt at a time', UNESCO, Rejkjavik, 2020.

¹⁴⁷ Najab (note 146).

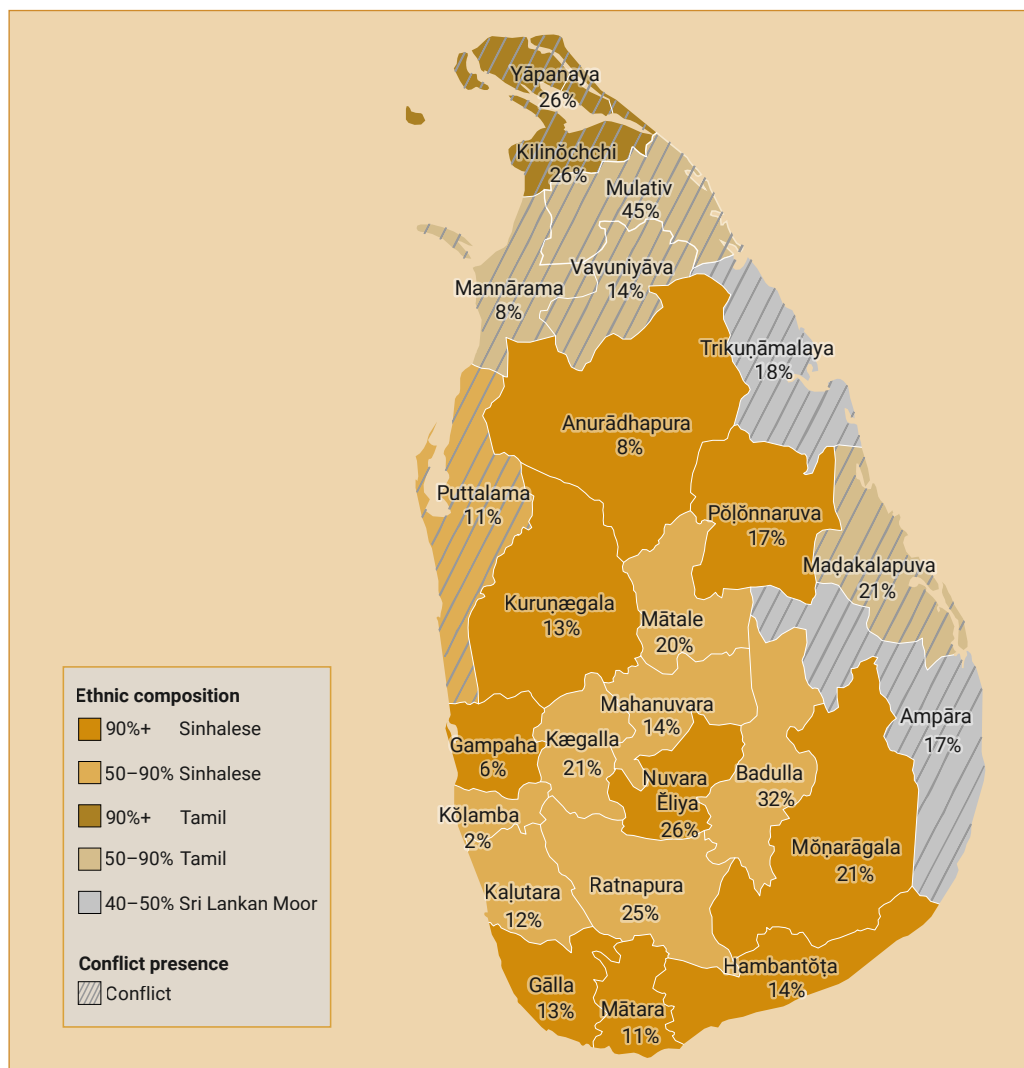


Figure 3.1 Map of ethnic composition and poverty in Sri Lanka, various years

Notes: The percentages show the proportion of individuals living in poverty in each district. Conflict indicates districts that experienced concentrated fighting during the Sri Lankan Civil War, 1983–2009. The map only includes ethnic groups with a presence greater than 1 per cent in any of Sri Lanka's districts.

Sources: Sri Lankan Department of Census and Statistics, 'Table 2.10 Population by ethnic group and census years', 2012; Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Economic Policies and Plan Implementation, 'Poverty Indicators, 2019', Apr. 2022 (based on the 2012 Census); and Lilja, J., 'Trapping constituents or winning hearts and minds? Rebel strategies to attain constituent support in Sri Lanka', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2009), pp. 306–26.

Gender-based Violence

In both Monaragala and Mullaitivu, sexual and gender-based violence results from of a combination of residual violence and social norms that normalize violence against women and girls. Between 2016 and 2020, an annual average of 109 sex crimes were reported in Monaragala. Domestic violence in Monaragala had a prevalence of 7.4 per cent in the previous 12 months for women who had been or were currently

married in 2016.¹⁴⁸ Some research links the prevalence of such crimes to the high number of former combatants in Monaragala.¹⁴⁹

In Mullaitivu, the annual average number of reported sexual crimes in 2016–20 was 27.75. The prevalence of domestic violence in 2016 was 28.3 per cent for women who had been or were currently married.¹⁵⁰

It is difficult for survivors of abuse to get justice. Many survivors in the north preferred community mediation boards, which use culture and tradition as guiding principles, to the police force, which is perceived as biased.¹⁵¹ In some instances, women, members of lower castes or people of lower socio-economic status felt pressured to accept unfavourable resolutions.¹⁵² Given that women and men often preferred community mediation over police involvement, the actual prevalence of domestic violence is likely to be higher.¹⁵³ (On the social and economic similarities and differences between Mullaitivu and Monaragala, see Annex 1.)

¹⁴⁸ DCS, District Statistical Handbook: Monaragala, 2021, 'Number of crimes reported in Monaragala District, 2016–20'; and DCS, 'Domestic violence from intimate partner', [n.d.].

¹⁴⁹ DCS, 'Domestic violence from intimate partner' (note 148); and Jayasundara-Smits, S., 'Lost in transition: Linking war, war economy and post-war crime in Sri Lanka', *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2018), pp. 63–79.

¹⁵⁰ DCS, 'District Statistical Handbook: Mullaitivu, 2021', Number of crimes reported in Mullaitivu District, 2016–2020; and DCS, Domestic violence from intimate partner (note 148).

¹⁵¹ Munas et al. (note 128).

¹⁵² Munas et al. (note 128).

¹⁵³ Munas et al. (note 128).

4. Research methods and limitations

The research approach involved a literature review, qualitative case studies and data collection. The research rests on a thorough review of the relevant literature and case studies of two WFP programmes in Monaragala and Mullaitivu. The first, referred to as R5n, for resilience, risk reduction, recovery, reconstruction and nutrition, was implemented in both districts. It sought to build resilience against recurrent natural shocks through the diversification of livelihoods among vulnerable communities in Sri Lanka. It ran from 2019 to 2022.¹⁵⁴ The second, on home-grown school feeding (HGSF), was a pilot project undertaken in 2021.¹⁵⁵ This study examined its implementation in the Monaragala district.

Secondary literature and government reports were reviewed to understand Sri Lanka's conflict context, level of social cohesion and gender dynamics. WFP policies and programmes were studied to assess the objectives and transformation sought through its engagement in Sri Lanka. Three tentative theories of change were generated about the pathways through which WFP's programmes might affect social cohesion in Sri Lanka's post-conflict communities, and thereby indirectly impact the prospects for peace.

These theories of change were subsequently investigated by examining the cases of R5n and the HGSF programme. The selection of case studies was motivated by both practical and methodological considerations in consultation with WFP Sri Lanka staff. Monaragala and Mullaitivu districts were selected because they experienced the period during 1983–2009 differently. This allowed the peacebuilding potential of the same WFP programme (R5n) to be studied in two different post-conflict communities: one (Mullaitivu) where much of the fighting took place and one (Monaragala) from where many of the combatants were recruited. As both districts are in Sri Lanka's Dry Zone, they experience frequent climate-related shocks that increase the vulnerability of poor, agriculture-based livelihoods.¹⁵⁶

R5n was designed to contribute to gender transformation through livelihood diversification, income generation and resilience-building activities.¹⁵⁷ WFP defines gender transformation as 'changing unequal gender relations by challenging deeply entrenched gender norms, biases and stereotypes in order to promote shared power, control of resources, decision-making and support for women's empowerment'.¹⁵⁸ The HGSF pilot, in turn, was designed to contribute to the economic empowerment of school caterers, most of whom are women, through capacity building, income generation and financial training.¹⁵⁹ Both programmes sought to contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment but had no explicit social cohesion or peacebuilding aims.

The fieldwork for this study was undertaken in Colombo, in Thanamalwila DS in Monaragala and in Thunukkai DS in Mullaitivu over two weeks in November 2021. Data was collected in 34 meetings with WFP staff, programme participants, government officials, other development practitioners and experts, and religious community

¹⁵⁴ WFP, *Sri Lanka Annual Country Report, 2021*.

¹⁵⁵ National Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development, *Baseline Data Collection: Pilot Project to Mainstream Home Grown School Feeding Modality into the National School Meal Programme*, Final Report, Confidential report; and WFP (note 154).

¹⁵⁶ WFP Sri Lanka, *Baseline Report: Project R5n (Phase II)*, Dec. 2020.

¹⁵⁷ WFP Sri Lanka (note 156); and WFP (note 154).

¹⁵⁸ WFP (WFP), *WFP Gender Policy, 2022: Accelerating Progress Towards Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*, May 2022, p. 24.

¹⁵⁹ National Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (note 155).

leaders in Mullaitivu.¹⁶⁰ Seven of these meetings were focus group discussions with R5n and HGSF participants.¹⁶¹ A roughly equal number of people were consulted in Colombo, Monaragala and Mullaitivu. Overall, inputs were collected from 95 interviewees (32 men and 63 women, see Annex 2).

Limitations

Four limitations are worth highlighting. First, R5n was implemented in five districts (Batticaloa, Mannar, Matale, Monaragala and Mullaitivu), of which three are predominantly Tamil and two predominantly Sinhalese. However, only two (Monaragala and Mullaitivu) were studied as part of this research. HGSF was implemented in two districts (Matale and Monaragala, both predominantly Sinhalese) but fieldwork was only conducted in Monaragala.

Second, robust and up-to-date data was sparse on several key variables that could drive conflict or illustrate gender grievances, particularly at the district level. For example, data on women's and men's unemployment rates dated back to 2016 or 2017 and can therefore only serve as a proxy for current social and economic realities in the two districts.

Third, the fieldwork was conducted before the current political and economic crisis. Since that time, the prevalence of food insecurity in Mullaitivu has risen from 17.72 per cent in 2019 to 57 per cent in 2022; pre-crisis food insecurity in Monaragala was 14.86 per cent but no data is available for 2022.¹⁶²

Fourth, and crucially, many interviewees refused to acknowledge the impact of the conflict, ethnicity or gender on their lives. In addition, the term peace was considered too sensitive to use so social cohesion served as a proxy instead in the interviews and focus group discussions. The silence of interviewees on these key issues limited the extent to which the researchers could collect robust data on pathways to reducing conflict and fostering conditions for sustainable peace. Nonetheless, the tentative theories of change this study presents on the channels through which WFP programming might impact the prospects for peace in Sri Lanka's Monaragala and Mullaitivu districts are useful starting points for further testing and fine-tuning.

¹⁶⁰ There were seven interviews with government officials, six with UN organizations and representatives of a gender coalition in Colombo, five with programme participants and two with religious community leaders.

¹⁶¹ In Monaragala the team conducted three focus group discussions: one with a group of women caterers and two mixed gender groups working on the R5n programme. In Mullaitivu the team conducted four focus group discussions; three with mixed gender groups participating in R5n and one with women who had participated in the 'Empower: Building peace through the economic empowerment of women in northern Sri Lanka' programme.

¹⁶² World Bank, 'Sri Lanka development update: Protecting the poor and vulnerable in a time of crisis', Oct. 2022; and Department of Census and Statistics and WFP, *Sri Lanka Food Insecurity Experience Survey, 2019*.

5. Findings: WFP engagement in Sri Lanka

Building Resilience Against Recurrent Natural Shocks through Diversification of Livelihoods for Vulnerable Communities in Monaragala and Mullaitivu: R5n

The main objective of R5n was to make smallholder farmers more resilient to drought.¹⁶³ Resilience is ‘the ability of individuals, households, communities, cities, institutions, systems and societies to prevent, resist, absorb, adapt, respond and recover positively, efficiently and effectively when faced with a wide range of risks...’.¹⁶⁴ WFP’s resilience building approach aims to ‘mitigate the damaging effects of shocks and stressors before, during and after crises, thereby minimizing human suffering and economic loss’.¹⁶⁵ Such shocks and stressors include, for example, conflict, a surge in food prices, climate change, water scarcity or economic uncertainty.¹⁶⁶

R5n project activities included building or reconstructing water harvesting systems for irrigation purposes, diversifying agricultural production by incorporating crop, poultry and livestock farming and assisting farmers to produce for markets.¹⁶⁷ The programme was people-centred, with a focus on ‘the individual and household levels, and to some extent the community’.¹⁶⁸

WFP shared construction specifications for wells and sheds and provided the same financial support to women and men. WFP also supervised the construction process. Programme participants received initial funds to buy the raw materials for a well or a shed. Specific milestones were agreed and had to be completed satisfactorily before further conditional cash transfers were disbursed.¹⁶⁹

To select the programme participants, WFP worked alongside government officers at the GND and DS levels. First, WFP issued a call for applicants, which listed the eligibility criteria. WFP and government officers jointly verified applicant eligibility through recorded visits, which informed the final selection of participants. The transparency of the selection process and the distribution of R5n in districts in the Northern, Eastern and Uva provinces demonstrated WFP’s commitment to building resilience in vulnerable Sri Lankan households regardless of ethnicity. Although data was collected on the sex of programme participants, no data was collected on their ethnicity, religion or marital status. Hence, it was not possible to assess the extent to which the ethno-religious make-up of the participants reflects that of their districts or analyse the extent to which female-headed households, including single women or widows, benefited.

Across the five districts, the project supported 5 090 (51 per cent) women and 4 892 (49 per cent) men from 2 150 households.¹⁷⁰ A gender analysis informed the precise project design,¹⁷¹ to ensure that it could deliver equal opportunities for women and men, and to understand the different needs and barriers to access.¹⁷² At the household

¹⁶³ WFP (note 154).

¹⁶⁴ UN Sustainable Development Group, UN Common Guidance on Helping Build Resilient Societies, Dec. 2020, p. 31.

¹⁶⁵ WFP (WFP), ‘Policy on building resilience for food security and nutrition’, WFP/EB.A/2015/5-C, 27 Apr. 2015.

¹⁶⁶ WFP (note 165).

¹⁶⁷ WFP Sri Lanka (note 156).

¹⁶⁸ Brusset, E. et al., *Measuring Peace Impact: Challenges and Solutions* (SIPRI: Stockholm, 2022), p. 15.

¹⁶⁹ Focus group discussion no. 1, 23 Nov. 2021.

¹⁷⁰ WFP (WFP), *Evaluation of Sri Lanka WFP Country Strategic Plan, 2018–2022*, Report no. OEV/2021/004 (WFP: Rome, 2022).

¹⁷¹ WFP (note 170).

¹⁷² WFP, Gender Action Plan for R5n, Oct. 2021.

level, the project advocated for women to receive the cash transfer to incentivize joint financial decision making.¹⁷³

In addition, implementers advocated the inclusion of women in local economic activities and Farmers' Organizations (FOs).¹⁷⁴ Empowering women is a key predictor of sustainable peace in conflict-affected communities. FOs in Sri Lanka are often segregated by sex, preventing the emergence of common decision-making platforms. An FAO study of mixed rural development societies in 2018 found that 'only 20 per cent of any of the top three positions were held by women'.¹⁷⁵

Deliberately targeting women was gender transformative in the context of rural Sri Lanka, where women farmers are mostly invisible and unpaid family farm labourers.¹⁷⁶ R5n's gender-sensitive and transformative approaches were guided by WFP's Gender Policy, which seeks to adapt food assistance to the different needs of women, men, girls and boys; ensure that 'women and men participate equally in...gender-transformative food security programmes' and policies; enhance decision-making by women and girls with regard to food security and nutrition; and protect the 'safety, dignity and integrity of women, men, girls and boys' who receive food assistance.¹⁷⁷

Theory of Change 1: Getting women into higher value, higher volume agriculture

If WFP's R5n programme enables women, who comprise a large proportion of the agricultural workforce, to participate in higher value, higher volume agriculture and move away from subsistence farming by giving them control over assets, **then** gender equality increases, benefiting women's social integration and **thereby** social cohesion.

Contextual background

Many rural women in Sri Lanka undertake subsistence farming, where most of the produce is consumed by their household.¹⁷⁸ They tend to work on family farms that are not registered in their names, which makes their contribution to agriculture invisible.¹⁷⁹ Women who aspire to produce commercially are constrained by restricted access to resources such as machinery and technology, to credit and extension services, and to networks and markets—all of which are essential to increasing yields and income.¹⁸⁰ Social and cultural norms, as well as patriarchal structures are also a barrier to gender equality. The intersection of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and rural or urban residence can determine an individual's level of decision-making power or vulnerability to shocks and stresses, but gender also remains a means of allocating resources.¹⁸¹ Generally, the value of Sri Lankan women's assets, including household goods, savings and jewellery, are only a small percentage of the value of men's assets, which include fixed assets.¹⁸² In agriculture, where land ownership

¹⁷³ Interview, WFP staff member no.15, 19 Nov. 2021

¹⁷⁴ WFP, WFP Sri Lanka, Gender Analysis and Action plan, updated Dec. 2022.

¹⁷⁵ FAO (note 95).

¹⁷⁶ FAO, *Country Gender Assessment of Agriculture and the Rural Sector in Sri Lanka* (FAO: Colombo, 2018); and Ratnayake, R., 'Gender issues in agriculture: Sri Lanka: A review of women's involvement/empowerment in agriculture' [n.d.], Sri Lanka Water Partnership.

¹⁷⁷ WFP (WFP), 'WFP Gender Policy, 2015–20', 30 July 2015.

¹⁷⁸ FAO (note 176).

¹⁷⁹ FAO (note 176).

¹⁸⁰ Oxfam Australia and Monash University, *Rural Women's Participation and Recognition in Sustainable Agricultural Livelihoods Across their Life Course in Post-war Sri Lanka*, Executive Summary, Mar. 2018.

¹⁸¹ FAO (note 176).

¹⁸² Oxfam Australia and Monash University (note 180).

ensures farmers' access to FOs and agricultural services, gendered resource allocation leads to systematic discrimination against or the exclusion of women and girls.¹⁸³

Through gender transformative interventions in rural Sri Lanka, WFP creates opportunities to integrate women who are not only less visible in their communities, but also more likely to experience social isolation and discrimination given gender expectations, work constraints and post-conflict realities. Enhancing women's social standing and relations, fostering their connectedness within communities and incentivizing a focus on the common good (solidarity and civic participation) within families/households and the broader community can all be indirect effects of WFP engagement, which are crucial to supporting an enabling environment for peace.¹⁸⁴ Ideally, not only gender, but also ethnicity and marital status should be taken into consideration when selecting programme participants or identifying and designing processes to strengthen social cohesion.

Analysis: Towards higher volume, high value agriculture?

Mixed focus groups in both Monaragala and Mullaitivu confirmed that women were more likely to work on family-owned plots and produce vegetables, while men tended to work in paddy (rice) cultivation.¹⁸⁵ Although family plots might have high levels of productivity, the small cultivated area limits the income women can generate, for example, from chillies, green gram or other crops.¹⁸⁶ While paddy is low productivity, the large area of land cultivated generates higher incomes for men.¹⁸⁷

When both women and men work in paddy cultivation, women undertake the manual and time-consuming tasks, while men are in charge of more technical tractor-based work and fertilizer application, which most women are not trained to do.¹⁸⁸ The gender gap in land area, skills and expertise for some tasks, and access to services is reflected in the incomes earned by women (Rs 11 086/acre) and men (Rs 16 970/acre).¹⁸⁹ Providing both resources and skills through R5n therefore has the potential to increase women's productivity (yield per cultivated area) and income, technical know-how and roles, thereby helping to reduce inequalities.

Although WFP has not conducted a productivity study, focus group participants agreed that women and men had recorded higher yields through use of the R5n wells and sheds.¹⁹⁰ A WFP survey showed that 38 per cent of farmers reported that their yields had increased because they now have a water source nearby.¹⁹¹ This data was not broken down by sex. In addition, 21.1 per cent of R5n participating households across the project sites reported growing more nutritious crops, which are typically higher value crops.¹⁹² This data point was broken down by sex. It revealed that only 7.8 per cent of the households that reported growing more nutritious crops were headed by women (16 out of 219).¹⁹³ This suggests that important barriers remain to women growing more nutritious, higher value crops.

¹⁸³ FAO (note 176); and Oxfam Australia and Monash University (note 180).

¹⁸⁴ Dragolov, G. et al., *Social Cohesion Radar: Measuring Common Ground* (Bertelsmann Stiftung: Gütersloh, Germany, 2013).

¹⁸⁵ Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 3, 17 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 4, 22 Nov. 2021; and Focus group discussion no. 1, 23 Nov. 2021.

¹⁸⁶ Fukase E, Soo Kim, Y. and Chiarella, C., 'Exploring the sources of the agricultural productivity gender gap: Evidence from Sri Lanka', *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper*, Apr. 2022.

¹⁸⁷ Fukase, Soo Kim and Chiarella (note 186).

¹⁸⁸ FAO (note 176).

¹⁸⁹ Fukase, Soo Kim and Chiarella (note 186).

¹⁹⁰ Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 4, 22 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 12, 23 Nov. 2021.

¹⁹¹ WFP Sri Lanka, 'R5n Outcome monitoring tool, 2022', Jan. 2023.

¹⁹² Fukase, Soo Kim and Chiarella (note 186).

¹⁹³ Fukase, Soo Kim and Chiarella (note 186).

Factors undermining a transition away from subsistence farming

Several barriers were identified that might undermine women's ability to move away from subsistence farming. First, women faced a number of gender-specific barriers to selling their produce in local markets. In Mullaitivu, bad roads and limited transport options made it difficult for women to take their produce to market.¹⁹⁴ While men could cycle with their produce to larger markets, women had to hire vehicles, which made the process unprofitable. Moreover, both Mullaitivu and Monaragala have few markets, which forces women in particular to sell their produce at the farm gate for lower prices.¹⁹⁵ Women may also lack the skills to negotiate in markets, putting them at a disadvantage when selling to skilled buyers.¹⁹⁶ Their limited experience in selling their farm produce is related to marketing being considered men's work.¹⁹⁷

Second, focus group participants stated that prices kept increasing during the course of constructing their wells and sheds. This made participants worry that they would not be able to complete the construction.¹⁹⁸ Similarly, a WFP evaluation showed that participants sometimes used their own funds to reach agreed milestones.¹⁹⁹ Insufficient financial resources can result in participants using substandard materials, which affects the durability of the created assets. To maintain quality, WFP needs to ensure that transfer values match input costs. To ensure the durability of the assets, WFP should work with communities to maintain assets after project completion.

Third, focus group participants in both Monaragala and Mullaitivu spoke about the threat that elephants, monkeys and peacocks posed to their crops, and in the case of elephants also to their lives.²⁰⁰ Protecting agricultural produce and wildlife at the same time remains a challenge.

Gender Equality and Transformation

WFP's approach promotes the idea that women and men are equally qualified regardless of their gender, marital status or ethnicity, and that their work is valued equally. Both focus group participants and individual interviewees noted that this approach challenges gender norms in their respective communities, where fewer women than men are in paid employment and women typically earn 30 per cent less than men for a day's work.²⁰¹ Promoting gender equality contributes to a reduction in gender gaps, which create fault lines that weaken social cohesion in communities.²⁰²

Providing equal technical and financial support to farmers regardless of gender signals that WFP validates rural Sri Lankan women as farmers and decision makers who deserve to have the same investment opportunities and earning potential as men. By transferring assets and money directly to women, WFP also begins a process of increasing the value of women's individual assets.

Married women programme participants were likely to share the value of the assets created through R5n with their families/husbands. Nonetheless, increasing the value of women's assets, including jointly owned assets, can shift the household power

¹⁹⁴ Focus group discussion no. 6, 23 Nov. 2021.

¹⁹⁵ Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; and Focus group discussion no. 1, 23 Nov. 2021.

¹⁹⁶ FAO (note 176); and Ratnayake (note 176).

¹⁹⁷ FAO (note 176); and Ratnayake (note 176).

¹⁹⁸ Focus group discussion no. 1, 22 Nov. 2021

¹⁹⁹ WFP (note 170).

²⁰⁰ Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local Expert no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local Expert no. 3, 17 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 10, 22 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 5, 23 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 2, 23 Nov. 2021; and Interview, Local expert no. 12, 23 Nov. 2021.

²⁰¹ International Labour Organization, 'Women at work: The course for Sri Lanka', Press release, 8 Mar. 2018.

²⁰² COAR, 'Improving Gender-mainstreaming in Social Cohesion Programming', 27 Feb. 2022, Studies for Stabilisation, Priority Response Issues in North-East Syria.

dynamic since owning and controlling assets increases both participation in strategic decision making and bargaining power.²⁰³ Being involved in financial decision making fosters women's economic empowerment and—if income-generating—can improve household well-being as women spend more of their money on food, education and health than men.²⁰⁴ Generally, conflict is more likely to be resolved peacefully if power is shared between women and men, and both have access to resources and networks they can tap into to build peace.²⁰⁵

Through R5n, WFP sought to foster more equal gender relations, resource distribution and decision-making. However, lasting transformation of this kind can take decades.²⁰⁶ WFP plays an important role in initiating the process and laying the foundations for communities to continue to work on gender transformation. The sum of these transformative actions is expected over time to reduce inequalities between women and men and to gradually foster more inclusive processes that promote the connectedness of women in their diversity to each other and to other members of their communities. Stronger connections and social relations between women, and between women and men are essential for building social cohesion. The more opportunities there are for women and men to interact through WFP programmes that reflect gender-equal values, the higher the likelihood that transformative processes take will root. Evidence collected in 2021 suggests that equal access for women and men is not always readily embraced by all members of a community, highlighting the importance of conflict sensitivity.

Conflict sensitivity

WFP staff and locals in Mullaitivu noted that equal access to the programme for women and men generated some complaints related to the selection of 'inappropriate' women participants.²⁰⁷ These complaints targeted women heads of household and included allegations of 'immorality'. A local expert attributed this to the strict standards imposed on rural women. If women are single or work outside the community, they are frequently suspected of earning money from sex work or illegal activities.²⁰⁸ This indicates that facilitating women's equal access to inputs to raise the volume and value of their produce does not address underlying patriarchal norms. More work needs to be done to signal that all programme participants are valued equally regardless of who heads the household or of marital status. In addition, as women move into markets that are dominated by male sellers and buyers, they can experience harassment and stigma. Hence, more work should be done to challenge discriminatory social norms by raising awareness about bias, stereotypes and discrimination. This would require deep cultural awareness to avoid the impression of 'externally imposed' values.

Although WFP has data on the sex of programme participants, it does not collect data on women's other identity markers, such as programme participants' ethnicity. This is based on the impartiality principle, which stresses that humanitarian support must be provided based on need.²⁰⁹ However, programmes that are not providing emergency aid, and select participants based on the likelihood that they will succeed

²⁰³ Rao, N., 'Gender equality, land rights and household food security: Discussion of rice farming systems', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 June 2005, pp 2513–21.

²⁰⁴ Quisumbing, A. R. et al., *Gender in Agriculture: Closing the Knowledge Gap* (FAO: Rome, 2014), p. 444.

²⁰⁵ Forsberg, E. and Olsson, L., 'Examining gender inequality and armed conflict at the subnational level', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2021).

²⁰⁶ International Fund for Agricultural Development, 'Changing lives by transforming gender norms', 15 Oct. 2021.

²⁰⁷ Interview, Local expert, 26 Jan. 2023.

²⁰⁸ Interview, Local expert, 26 Jan. 2023.

²⁰⁹ WFP, Ethical culture, Annual reports.

in the programme and contribute to its overall objectives, ideally reflect the ethno-religious composition of the population of the district. This is not only to ensure equal access, but also to avoid unconscious bias or perceptions of bias in multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies. In a country that has suffered from institutionalized ethnic discrimination, equal access and perceptions of distributional fairness are crucial to avoid conflict and build trust and social cohesion. It also ensures that gender is not isolated as an identity marker.

WFP deals with conflict sensitivity related to ethnicity in at least three ways. First, it works in districts with different ethnic majorities. Second, it selects participants from vulnerable communities at the smallest administrative units characterized by mono-ethnicity. Third, ethnic minorities that tend to own less land in the districts where WFP operates often qualify for other means-tested or needs-based assistance. To increase the conflict sensitivity of the R5n programme, even greater attention could be paid to distributional equity by collecting data on ethnicity. This would allow a systematic comparison of the extent to which programme beneficiaries mirror the ethnic make-up of the vulnerable population across administrative units and levels of governance.

Recommendations

1. WFP should continue to apply roughly equal quotas for women and men participants. An understanding of specific gender barriers helps to ensure that they are addressed by programme design, thereby fostering equal access to WFP's resilience-building programmes. To identify additional entry points for the integration of programme participants into their communities and challenge deeply entrenched gender norms, WFP should collect data disaggregated not only by sex, but also other identity markers, including programme participants' marital status (single, married, divorced or widowed).
2. WFP should ensure equal access to its programmes for the different ethnicities present in the districts in which they operate. This will require insight into and understanding of the ethnic composition of the relevant communities, of the power dynamics within communities based on ethnicity, and of the potential barriers individuals face to accessing WFP programmes. Programme participation should reflect ethnic composition. This could be an entry point for creating social networks, connectedness and trust not only between women and men, but between women and men of different ethnicities that have a common goal of enhancing the resilience of their communities to shocks.
3. To investigate more systematically the extent to which women were able to move away from subsistence farming and produce higher volumes or higher value crops, data on produce and market sales/income would need to be collected that is systematically disaggregated by sex. In addition, it would be important to measure the extent to which women switched produce or moved into more technical, higher-paid roles, such as in paddy cultivation. To analyse the extent to which this might foster women's social integration, WFP would need to ask the programme participants in their surveys whether they are attending FOs, what roles they play in their FOs and since when, and how their role in their households or communities might have grown since participating in the programme.

To assess the extent to which WFP programmes contribute to gender equality, it is necessary to understand the extent to which women have gained positions of power and are able to express their opinions, for example, on decisions on cultivation, fertilizer and irrigation.

4. Ideally, WFP would work in partnership with local men in leadership roles to help sustain and broaden attempts to foster equality between men and women in all aspects of their lives. This could involve giving women a greater role in FOs to foster integration into their respective communities once the project has ended. This would make it more likely that the long-term process of transforming gender relations is sustained and that gender equality becomes a shared community value rather than one that is imposed externally.
5. Given that local communities are mono-ethnic in much of Sri Lanka, WFP should consider developing complementary activities as part of project design that foster relations and build trust between programme participants from the north and the south. Training and exchanges could, for example, be facilitated for and between rural farmers from Mullaitivu and rural farmers from Monaragala or widows from the north and the south. If the focus is local social cohesion rather than national cohesion, such exchanges could be fostered, for example, between programme participants from different castes in Mullaitivu. These initiatives would need to be accompanied by strategies to prevent any backlashes against programme participants.

Theory of Change 2: Ensuring a sustainable income source for women and men

If the assets and means to diversify livelihoods supplied by WFP's programmes in Monaragala and Mullaitivu prevent tensions within and between households by ensuring a sustainable income source for both men and women, **then** social relations, connectedness and a focus on the common good in these two districts will be strengthened, **thereby** increasing social cohesion and making future violence less likely.

Contextual background

There are few employment opportunities in rural Monaragala and Mullaitivu.²¹⁰ In both districts, low incomes have created tensions within and between households. The research coincided with the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, during which higher-than-usual levels of domestic violence were recorded in Sri Lanka.²¹¹

In 2020 government statistics documented the prevalence of drugs as a menace in 24 per cent of GNDs in Monaragala (78 out of 319), while the prevalence of alcohol was a menace in 29 per cent of GNDs (92 out of 319).²¹² The rates were more than twice as high in Mullaitivu for the same year; 51 per cent of GNDs in Mullaitivu reported the prevalence of drugs as a menace (70 out of 136) and almost 70 per cent recorded the prevalence of alcohol as a menace (95 out of the 136).²¹³ The links between substance abuse, particularly of alcohol, and violence, including sexual assault and domestic

²¹⁰ World Bank. 'Part 1: Understanding poverty in Sri Lanka', 2 Mar. 2017.

²¹¹ Ratnayake, C. and Mutucumarana, T., 'Adding fuel to the fire: The dramatic rise in domestic violence during Covid-19', Groundviews, 22 Sep. 2022.

²¹² DCS, 'Grama Niladhari Divisions Statistics: Moneragala District', 2020.

²¹³ DCS, 'Grama Niladhari Divisions Statistics: Mullaitivu District', 2020.

violence, are well established, especially when combined with other risk factors such as location within a disadvantaged community. By providing women and men with the means to generate a consistent income, WFP might contribute to reducing tensions within and between households. General gender and conflict research has shown links between domestic and community violence.²¹⁴ Therefore, any activities that minimize the triggers of violence in the household or can reduce community violence should be promoted.

Analysis

Focus group participants and individual interviewees told how within households women and men would argue over women working outside the home or borrowing money from microfinanciers.²¹⁵ Such arguments sometimes led to domestic violence.²¹⁶ Tensions at the community level were related to various factors. Women and men in both communities lamented problems with drug and alcohol abuse in their communities.²¹⁷ Interviewees stated that the abuse of drugs and alcohol was a means of coping with poverty.²¹⁸ The much higher prevalence of drug abuse in Mullaitivu has been associated with methods of dealing with undiagnosed post-traumatic stress/trauma, power dynamics and poverty.²¹⁹ This is supported by other research.²²⁰

The focus groups also revealed that illegal alcohol brewing was common in both districts and an important source of income for some unemployed women.²²¹ Illegal brewing and the production of other drugs undermine social relations because the presence of alcohol and drugs in a community is associated with violence. Unemployed young men, who were often drug users, worked in illegal sand mines in Mullaitivu. Focus group participants and interviewees in Mullaitivu stated that there were links between substance abuse and harassment and violence in the communities. This was targeted particularly at women and girls, and in some instances the elderly.²²² Finally, gender inequality can result in conditions in which violence in general, and violence against women in particular, is normalized.²²³

Access to regular income

Several women and men in the focus groups explained how WFP's asset creation and livelihood diversification projects had created the conditions for participating households to earn a more regular income and improve their food security.²²⁴ A mixed focus group discussion and several interviewees in Mullaitivu provided anecdotal evidence that a stable income reduced excessive alcohol consumption and associated

²¹⁴ Bandara, P. et al., 'Socioeconomic and geographic correlates of intimate partner violence in Sri Lanka: Analysis of the 2016 Demographic and Health Survey', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 37, no. 21–22 (2021).

²¹⁵ Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 9, 22 Nov. 2021; and Interview, Local expert no. 12, 23 Nov. 2021.

²¹⁶ Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 9, 22 Nov. 2021; and Interview, Local expert no. 12, 23 Nov. 2021.

²¹⁷ Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert 3, 17 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 5, 23 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 4, 22 Nov. 2021; Department of Census and Statistics, Monaragala (note 212); and Department of Census and Statistics, Mullaitivu (note 213).

²¹⁸ Interview, Local expert no. 3, 16 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; and Focus group discussion no. 1, 23 Nov. 2021.

²¹⁹ Interview, Local expert, 26 Jan. 2023.

²²⁰ Interview, Local expert, 26 Jan. 2023.

²²¹ Interview, Local expert no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 6, 23 Nov. 2021.

²²² Focus group discussion no. 1, 23 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 12, 23 Nov. 2021.

²²³ Forsberg and Olsson (note 205).

²²⁴ Interview, Local expert no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 1, 23 Nov. 2021; and Focus group discussion no. 4, 22 Nov. 2021.

negative behaviours, such as engaging in public and domestic violence.²²⁵ While links between access to a secure income and reduced alcohol consumption were made in one focus group discussion, other research on Sri Lanka shows that domestic violence affects women and men from different socio-economic groups.²²⁶ A more systematic evaluation is required to understand the channels through, extent to and conditions by which generating regular income in Sri Lanka could reduce alcohol consumption and reduce levels of violence. One such channel raised in the focus group discussions was the value and dignity associated with having a steady income.²²⁷

Promoting knowledge and resource sharing

WFP's interventions contributed to stronger social relations by strengthening social networks between programme participants and between participants and their non-participating neighbours. Focus group discussions and interviewees from Monaragala and Mullaitivu stated that the assets created by R5n had led to improved neighbour relations.²²⁸ Some project participants shared the water from their wells, while others shared fresh produce or their training materials and knowledge with non-participants.²²⁹ They did this so that other members of their community could also increase their yields and become more resilient. Although not directly related to gender dynamics, by sharing these resources, particularly with neighbours who were not part of the project, R5n participants exhibited a sense of solidarity that is essential for building social cohesion. In the long run, this can generate trust between neighbours who in the past may have had little interaction or competed over scarce resources such as water. By meeting frequently during project meetings and other related activities, women and men can learn about each other's values, and their similarities and differences, which humanizes relations. Such interactions do not automatically lead to stronger social cohesion or improved relations, but they create a foundation on which women and men can build to create more positive and productive relationships that are bound by respect and appreciation of gender diversity.

Conflict sensitivity concerns

If assets are not maintained properly or programme participants are unable to protect their produce and sustain the diversification of farming activities, the objectives of R5n will be undermined. This could lead to participants adopting illegal practices and coping strategies to secure enough food, which has in the past contributed to insecurity in the community.

Recommendations

1. WFP should analyse the links between its R5n project, increased income and resilience, and negative coping strategies in Sri Lanka more systematically and by sex. For example, providing men with opportunities to generate regular income might reduce the social pressures related to their expected role as the main breadwinner and thereby reduce the likelihood of them becoming violent. Providing women with such

²²⁵ Focus group discussion no. 4, 22 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert 8, 22 Nov. 21; Interview, Local expert 11, 22 Nov. 21.

²²⁶ Government of Sri Lanka (note 99), p. 34.

²²⁷ Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 3, 17 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 5, 23 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 6, 23 Nov. 2021.

²²⁸ Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 3, 17 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 4, 22 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 1, 23 Nov. 2021.

²²⁹ Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 3, 17 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 5, 23 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 4, 22 Nov. 2021.

opportunities might reduce the likelihood of them engaging in illegal economic activities such as brewing alcohol, which can increase violence in communities. Understanding these linkages can help WFP position its work to create virtuous circles that reduce men and women's reliance on negative and sometimes illegal coping strategies, which may help them to gain access to food but contribute to the overall insecurity of communities. Such outcomes cannot be assumed to be automatic, however, so any livelihood assistance should be combined with family counselling and mentoring programmes.

2. WFP should consider training R5n programme participants to disseminate the adaptation strategies and resilience-building knowledge they have learned to interested non-participants in their communities. Such interactions can strengthen social networks and lead to a greater sense of solidarity between participants and non-participants.
3. WFP should add social cohesion indicators to their monitoring surveys. The questions could focus on the extent to which participants share produce, resources and expertise with non-participants and other context-specific indicators. Understanding specific social cohesion needs not only between the different communities in which WFP works, but also within them is crucial to designing inclusive programmes that create trust and enhance social relations.

Homegrown School Feeding pilot in Monaragala

WFP implemented the HGSF pilot in the Thanamalwila (Monaragala district, Uva) and Wilgamuwa (Matale district in Central province) educational zones in 2021.²³⁰ The pilot supported 42 schools and 63 caterers.²³¹ Most of the caterers were parents with no prior knowledge of catering. The objective of the HGSF pilot was to help to mainstream home-grown food into Sri Lanka's national school meals programme by turning school caterers engaged in subsistence farming into higher-status producers of homegrown vegetables and eggs. The project sought to ensure the high nutritional value of school meals while at the same time reducing caterers' input costs and generating reliable income streams for programme participants—not only through catering, but also by selling their excess produce.²³² The government-run national school meals programme paid the caterers for the school meals. Excess local supply could be sold either to other school caterers or on local markets.

The design of the project was informed by a gender analysis and a baseline study.²³³ The study identified a high turnover of school caterers, caused by long working hours and cash flow problems, among other things.²³⁴

The selected programme participants were all subsistence farmers who were already growing vegetables or keeping poultry. The HGSF pilot helped them to increase their production.²³⁵ Although the programme did not specifically target women, approximately 93 per cent of the caterers who participated in the HGSF pilot were

²³⁰ WFP, *Sri Lanka Annual Country Report, 2021*; National Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (note 155); and Ranasinghe, H., 'Gender rapid assessment of Home-grown School Feeding', WFP, Rome, Aug. 2020, Confidential document.

²³¹ WFP (note 170).

²³² WFP (note 170).

²³³ National Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (note 155); and Ranasinghe (note 230).

²³⁴ National Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (note 155).

²³⁵ National Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (note 155); and Ranasinghe (note 230).

women.²³⁶ To be eligible for selection, the caterers had to have children who attended the school they catered for.²³⁷ The caterers in Monaragala prepared between 150 and 200 meals a day.²³⁸

WFP, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, organized capacity building activities for the caterers covering agricultural production, hygienic food handling and food preparation, women's empowerment and financial management.²³⁹ The training on women's empowerment and financial management was provided by the Department of Women's and Children's Affairs and by a private sector partner of WFP.²⁴⁰ The caterers were given gas cookers, tools, seeds, small irrigation systems and poultry.²⁴¹ The HGSE activities and materials were designed to empower women, but had no explicit intention to address gender-based violence or to contribute to social cohesion.

Theory of Change 3: Creating self-employment opportunities for women

If WFP's HGSE project provides women with opportunities to become self-employed school caterers with a sustainable and recognized business model based on working from home, and the government as a client, **then** their increased income potential might translate into increased decision-making power in their household and enhanced social standing in their communities.

Contextual background

The caregiving roles of rural women in Sri Lanka are difficult to combine with income generating work.²⁴² Unpaid family work both in households and on family farms is the norm. Some rural women work in food processing and textiles.²⁴³ For many women, caregiving roles, social norms or family farming responsibilities act as significant barriers to transitioning from informal economic activity to formal small- and medium-sized entrepreneurship.²⁴⁴ In addition, market access remains difficult and this has been further complicated by Covid-19 and related containment measures. These barriers prevent women, who constitute just 10 per cent of formal entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka, from running profitable businesses.²⁴⁵

The resulting gender asset gap within households and in rural communities in Sri Lanka means that women are disempowered relative to men in ownership, income generation and decision making.²⁴⁶ Such inequalities can weaken and impede efforts to strengthen social cohesion within households and in communities more broadly.

²³⁶ National Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (note 155).

²³⁷ WFP (note 170).

²³⁸ Focus group discussion no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021.

²³⁹ WFP (note 170); Interview, WFP Staff member no. 3, 25 Oct 2021; and Interview, WFP Staff member no. 4, 27 Oct, 2021.

²⁴⁰ WFP (note 170).

²⁴¹ WFP (note 170).

²⁴² Madurawala, S. et al., *Women-owned and Led Micro, Small Medium Enterprises in Spice and Coir Sectors of Sri Lanka: Constraints and Policy Options*, Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, Working Paper Series no. 28 (Sep. 2017).

²⁴³ Asian Development Bank & Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (note 83); and Attygalle, K. et al., *Female Entrepreneurship and the Role of Business Development Services in Promoting Small and Medium Women Entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka* (Institute of Political Studies and Oxfam International Sri Lanka: Colombia, May 2014).

²⁴⁴ InfoRD, 'Empowering Sri Lanka's business women in SME sector', 14 Sep. 2016.

²⁴⁵ Asian Development Bank & Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (note 83); and Madurawala et al. (note 242).

²⁴⁶ Wijewardhana, B. V. N. and Dias, M. M. M., 'Enhancing rural women empowerment in Sri Lanka', *International Journal of Governance and Public Policy Analysis*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2021).

Hence, the HGSF project sought to provide women with opportunities to become self-employed school caterers.

Analysis

Women in Monaragala who were participating in the HGSF pilot indicated that they were selected to cater for children at their local schools because they were already skilled cooks, worked at home and were engaged in agricultural production.²⁴⁷ Some were already making homemade preserves for sale.²⁴⁸ Cooking is part of the many roles women perform as part of their household duties.²⁴⁹ Catering work, which involves cooking, serving and cleaning the school serving points, could therefore be considered an extension of women's work in accordance with Sri Lanka's gendered social norms. This explains why only a small minority of caterers were men. Interestingly, many women programme participants said their husbands helped them with the cooking, which suggests that the programme was seen as an income-generation opportunity that was worth involving other family members. In addition, it shows that the division between women's and men's work is not set in stone, particularly when the household as a whole will benefit. Marketing excess produce through the HGSF project to other caterers was seen as a viable avenue to overcome barriers related to female entrepreneurship, as selling below cost or losing produce to spoilage are matters of concern to most smallholder farmers.²⁵⁰

Equipping caterers to be self-employed

The training the women received in hygienic food handling was an essential step to becoming a public health-certified professional caterer. WFP supported programme participants to obtain public health certification. At the start of the pilot, 75 per cent of sampled caterers had certification.²⁵¹ The certificate was a government requirement for caterers who wanted to provide food to schools.²⁵² Financial training for caterers was intended to help programme participants manage and assess their business finances more systematically. A clear process was therefore created by which women could become government contractors with a secure income.²⁵³

Overall, caterers' experience of the business model was mixed and turnover remained high. For one caterer and her family, the school catering resulted in other catering (and hence income generation) opportunities, for example at community events.²⁵⁴ Others highlighted a number of shortcomings. First, government reimbursements for school meals were often slow, and sometimes two to five months late. Thus, caterers had to borrow ingredients or buy them on credit to maintain a supply of meals, which placed significant financial burdens on already strained households.²⁵⁵

Second, the work created long triple shifts for women as caterers, farmers and home makers. Some reported that they started cooking as early as 2:30 in the morning so they could have the meals ready to serve at 6:50, after which they carried out their farming responsibilities.²⁵⁶ Women reported workdays of 10.5 hours with little time to rest.²⁵⁷

²⁴⁷ Focus group discussion no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021.

²⁴⁸ Focus group discussion no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021.

²⁴⁹ Gunewardenan, D., 'The tyranny of the kitchen spoon for Sri Lanka's women', World Bank Blogs, 7 Mar. 2016.

²⁵⁰ Focus group discussion no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021.

²⁵¹ National Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (note 155).

²⁵² Sri Lanka Ministry of Education, *Manual on School Nutrition Programme*, [n.d.].

²⁵³ Jansz, T., 'Home-grown heroines: The farmers boosting school meals in Sri Lanka', WFP, 7 Jan. 2022.

²⁵⁴ Focus group discussion no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021.

²⁵⁵ WFP (note 170).

²⁵⁶ Focus group discussion no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021.

²⁵⁷ Alkire, S. et al., 'The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index', *OPHI Working Paper* no. 59 (Feb. 2013).

Some programme participants considered catering a burden that no one else in the communities was prepared to shoulder.²⁵⁸

Despite the mixed experiences with the model, some features and early results are noteworthy. First, the HGSF pilot incentivized social integration and a focus on the common good. It created opportunities for caterers, school authorities and parents to cooperate to ensure that every school pupil in the community had at least one nutritious meal a day. These meals were essential for some pupils who came to school without having eaten because their households could not afford to provide them with breakfast.²⁵⁹ The focus group participants stated that some parents had started donating fresh produce. When caterers' payments were late, the school administrators were open to caterers substituting ingredients or meals.²⁶⁰ The caterers perceived this as a demonstration of trust in them and the work they did in their communities.²⁶¹ Second, the caterers' elevated social status could, over time, help to integrate them into community decision-making processes on schools and children's well-being. These are roles women typically play in communities, and nurturing and caregiving are an extension of women's work in their households. At least one programme participant who provided catering at a school in Monaragala won a national prize for best social entrepreneur awarded to reward and showcase professional women and their careers.²⁶²

Third, the caterers also relied on other farmers to purchase produce as they could not produce all the ingredients, thereby promoting connections to broader local markets.²⁶³ Purchasing produce regularly could create opportunities for caterers to be integrated into FOs, so they can coordinate the production and purchase of perennial and seasonal vegetables. This could create avenues for women who farm but face barriers such as lack of land title to join and participate in FOs, thereby contributing to more inclusive decision making. Inclusion and participatory processes are essential components for building and strengthening social cohesion across the community.

Conflict sensitivity

The caterers asked that WFP provide income-generating projects for their husbands and other men in their communities.²⁶⁴ This request indicates that one unintended consequence and tension of working mostly with women, even in activities that are usually considered women's work, can be that men feel left out of empowerment activities. In the long run, the lack of economic activities for men can lead to tensions within households.

Recommendations

1. WFP, in partnership with the government, should explore how to overcome bottlenecks in the payment process to avoid delays that contribute to high caterer turnover. Pre-paying caterers or supplying a combination of shopping vouchers and cash transfers might be a way to increase the retention of the caterers they have trained.

²⁵⁸ Focus group discussion no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021.

²⁵⁹ Focus group discussion no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021.

²⁶⁰ Focus group discussion no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021.

²⁶¹ Focus group discussion no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021.

²⁶² Interview, WFP Staff member no. 4, 27 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 2, 16 Nov. 2021; and WFP Sri Lanka, Country brief, Jan. 2021.

²⁶³ WFP (note 170).

²⁶⁴ Focus group discussion no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 2, 16 Nov. 2021.

2. WFP should use programme data to determine whether the turnover rate is the same for women and men, in order to identify potential gendered effects or barriers to success related to programme design.
3. WFP should consider promoting family businesses that involve men whose wives are engaged in the HGSP project, so they can participate in the programme, help their catering business grow, cater for additional (non-state) clients and share in the rewards, such as increased income generation, social integration and status.

6. Conclusions

This report investigated the impact of WFP engagement in the Monaragala and Mullaitivu districts on gender dynamics and community resilience. It examined how two WFP projects in these two post-conflict communities affected social cohesion, to identify pathways through which WFP's programmes might directly or indirectly impact the prospects for peace.

Resilience-building in Monaragala and Mullaitivu

The findings suggest that R5n had the potential to impact gender dynamics and thereby social cohesion through two channels. First, interventions that enable women to participate in higher value, higher volume agriculture (and move away from subsistence farming) by giving them control over assets could increase gender equality, to the benefit of women's social integration—a key element of social cohesion. Second, if providing sustainable income sources to both women and men reduces tensions within and between households, improving social relations, community connectedness and the focus on the common good—all aspects that increase social cohesion—then violence might be less likely in the future.

To strengthen the potential for R5n to enhance gender transformation and rural women's social integration in Sri Lankan communities, thereby increasing social cohesion and the prospects for peace, the analysis recommends:

1. WFP should continue to ensure equal access to its resilience-building programmes for women and men. To identify additional entry points to integrate programme participants into their communities, WFP should collect data disaggregated not only by sex, but also programme participants' marital status (divorced, single, widowed).
2. WFP should ensure equal access to its programmes for the different ethnicities represented in the districts in which they operate. This will require insight into and understanding of the ethnic composition of, and power dynamics in, the relevant communities, and of the potential barriers women and men face in accessing WFP programmes. Programme participants should reflect ethnic composition. Resilience-building projects could be an entry point for creating social networks, connectedness and trust not just between women and men, but between women and men of different ethnicities that have a common goal of enhancing the resilience of their communities to shocks.
3. To investigate more systematically the extent to which women are able to produce higher value agriculture and move away from subsistence farming, data on produce and market sales/income will need to be collected that is systematically disaggregated by sex. The extent to which women switch produce or move to more technical, higher-paid roles, for example in paddy cultivation, should also be measured. To analyse whether this fosters women's social integration, WFP would need to ask programme participants in their outcome surveys whether they are attending FOs, what role they play in them, since when, and how their role in their household or community has changed or grown since participating in the programme. To assess the extent to which WFP programmes contribute to gender equality, it will be necessary to understand the extent to which

women have gained a position of power and are able express their opinion, for example, on decisions on cultivation, fertilizer and irrigation.

4. WFP should work in partnership with local men in leadership roles. This would help to sustain and broaden attempts to foster equality between women and men in all aspects of life, including a greater role in FOs after the project concludes. This would make it more likely that the long-term process of transforming gender relations will be sustained and that gender equality evolves into a shared community value.
5. Given that local communities are mono-ethnic in much of Sri Lanka, WFP should consider developing—as part of its project design—complementary activities that foster relations and build trust between programme participants from the north and the south. Training and exchanges could, for example, be facilitated between rural farmers from Mullaitivu and rural farmers from Monaragala, or widows from the north and the south. If the focus is on local social cohesion rather than national cohesion, such exchanges could be fostered, for example, between programme participants from different castes in Mullaitivu. These initiatives would need to be accompanied by strategies to prevent a backlash against programme participants.
6. WFP should more systematically analyse the links between its R5n project, increased income and resilience, and negative coping strategies. Providing men with opportunities to generate a regular income could reduce the social pressures related to their expected role as the main breadwinner, thereby reducing the likelihood of domestic violence. Providing women with such opportunities might reduce the likelihood of them engaging in illegal economic activities such as brewing alcohol, which can contribute to violence in communities. Understanding these linkages can help WFP position its work to create virtuous circles that reduce men and women's reliance on negative and sometimes illegal coping strategies, which can contribute to overall insecurity in communities.
7. WFP should consider training the R5n participants to disseminate the adaptation strategies and resilience-building knowledge they acquired as programme participants to interested non-participants in their communities. Such interactions can strengthen social networks and generate a sense of solidarity between participants and non-participants.
8. Related to the above, WFP could add indicators of social cohesion to their monitoring surveys. The questions could focus on the extent to which participants share produce, resources and expertise with non-participants, as well as other context-specific indicators. Understanding specific social cohesion needs in the different communities where WFP works is crucial in this context, in order to design inclusive programmes that can create trust and enhance social relations.

Mainstreaming home-grown food into the National School Meals Programme

The findings on the HGsf pilot suggest that it has the potential to affect gender dynamics and thereby social cohesion. If WFP's HGsf project provides women with opportunities to become self-employed school caterers, with a sustainable and recognizable business model based on working from home and the government as a client, their

increased income potential could be translated into increased decision-making power within their household and enhanced social standing in their communities.

To strengthen gender transformation and rural women's social integration in Sri Lankan communities, and thereby increase social cohesion and peace, the analysis of the HGSF recommends that, if the model is scaled-up:

1. WFP, in partnership with the government, should explore ways to overcome bottlenecks in the payment of caterers for the provision of school food. Payment delays contribute to a high turnover of caterers.
2. WFP should review programme data to determine whether the turnover rate is the same for women and men, to identify potential gendered effects or barriers to successful programme participation.
3. WFP should consider promoting family businesses that involve men whose wives are participants in the HGSF project. Men's participation in the programme might help the catering businesses grow to cater for additional (non-state) clients, and enable them to share the rewards, such as increased income, social integration and status.

Annex

Table 1. Social and economic similarities and differences between Mullaitivu and Monaragala

	Mullaitivu	Monaragala
<i>Social indicators</i>		
Population size (2021) ^a	98 000	505 000
Men/Women (2021) ^a	50.00%/	49.80%/
	50.00%	50.20%
Sinhalese/Buddhist (2012) ^b	18.59%/	94.90%/
	10.50%	94.60%
Tamil/Hindu ^b	76.99%/	1.80%/
	71.94%	2.70%
Indian Tamil/Hindu ^b	3.25%/	1.10%/
	na	na
Sri Lankan Moors/Muslim ^b	1.09%/	2.10%/
	1.48%	2.20%
Christian ^b	16.02%	0.50%
Education level ^c	low	low
Interviewees' safety concerns ^d	Theft, violence related to alcohol and drug abuse	Domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse
per cent of GN divisions that reported prevalence of drugs/alcohol as a menace ^e	51.00%/	24.00%/
	70.00%	29.00%
Reported sex crimes (2016–20, annual average) ^f	27.75	109
Reported domestic violence (2016, % of married women) ^g	28.30	7.40
Trust in military and police ^h	lower	higher
<i>Economic indicators</i>		
Unemployment women/men (2017–20) ⁱ	5.70%/	9.43%/
	4.40%	3.16%
Poverty (headcount, 2019) ^j	44.50%	21.00%
Dominant economic activity ^k	agriculture	agriculture
Illegal economic activities ^l	alcohol brewing, drugs, sand mining	drugs
Income level (2016 national average 62 237Rs) ^m	Low (31 868Rs)	Low (48 842Rs)
Level of household indebtedness ⁿ	high	high
Food insecurity (2019–22) ^o	17.72%/	14.86%/
	57.00%	–

– = non-applicable.

^a Sri Lankan Department of Census and Statistics (DCS), Mid-year Population Estimates by District and Sex, 2014–2022.

^b DSC, District Statistical Handbook: Mullaitivu, 2021, Percentage Distribution of Population by Ethnic Group and DS Division, 2012; DSC, District Statistical Handbook: Mullaitivu, 2021, Percentage Distribution of Population by Religion and DS Division, 2012; DSC, District Statistical Handbook: Monaragala, 2021, Percentage Distribution of Population by Ethnic Group and DS Division, 2012;

and DSC, District Statistical Handbook: Monaragala, 2021, Percentage Distribution of Population by Religion and DS Division, 2012.

^c Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Economic and Social Statistics of Sri Lanka, Colombo, Aug. 2020.

^d Interview, Local expert no. 1, 16 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 2, 16 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 2, 17 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 8, 22 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 9, 22 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 10, 22 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 11, 22 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 4, 22 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 5, 23 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 6, 23 Nov. 2021.

^e DSC, Grama Niladhari Divisions Statistics, 2020: Mullaitivu District; and DSC, Grama Niladhari Divisions Statistics, 2020: Monaragala District.

^f DSC, District Statistical Handbook: Monaragala, 2021, Number of Crimes Reported in Monaragala District, 2016–20; and DSC, District Statistical Handbook: Mullaitivu, 2021, Number of Crimes Reported in Mullaitivu District, 2016–20.

^g DSC, Domestic Violence From Intimate Partner.

^h Interview, Local expert no. 1, 16 Nov 2021; Focus group discussion no. 4, 22 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 5, 23 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 6, 23 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 12, 22 Nov. 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 2, 24 Nov 2021.

ⁱ DSC, District Statistical Handbook: Mullaitivu, 2021, Annual Labour Force Survey reports. Labour Force Participation 2017–2020; DSC, District Statistical Handbook: Monaragala 2021, Labour Force Participation 2017–20.

^j DSC, Ministry of Economic Policies and Plan Implementation, 'Poverty Indicators, 2019' Government of Sri Lanka, Apr. 2022.

^k DSC, Grama Niladhari Divisions Statistics, 2020: Mullaitivu District; and DSC, Grama Niladhari Divisions Statistics, 2020: Monaragala District.

^l Interview, Local expert no. 1, 16 Nov 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 2, 16 Nov 2021; Interview, Local expert no. 9, 22 Nov. 2021; Focus group discussion no. 5, 23 Nov. 2021; and Focus group discussion no. 6, 23 Nov. 2021.

^m DSC, Household Income Expenditure Survey, 2016: Overview.

ⁿ Arambepola, C. and Romeshun, K., *Debt at My Doorstep: Microfinance Practices and Effects on Women in Sri Lanka* (Centre for Poverty Analysis: Colombo, 2019).

^o World Bank, Sri Lanka Development Update, 'Protecting the poor and vulnerable in a time of crisis', Washington, DC, Oct. 2022; and DSC, Sri Lanka Food Insecurity Experience Survey, 2019.

Table 2. Breakdown by interviewee, number and type of meeting, location and gender

Interviewees/Location	Gender	Meetings	Women	Men	Total
<i>World Food Programme^a</i>					
Colombo	single	9	4	7	11 ^c
Colombo	mixed	2	2	2	4 ^c
<i>United Nations agencies and NGOs^a</i>					
Colombo	single	6	5	2	7 ^c
Colombo	mixed	1	3	1	4
<i>Government officials^a</i>					
Colombo	single	2	5	2	7
Monaragala	single	3	2	1	3
Mullaitivu	single	4	3	1	4
<i>Programme participants^a</i>					
Monaragala	single	3	2	1	3
Mullaitivu	single	2	1	1	2
<i>Programme participants^b</i>					
Monaragala	single	1	7	0	7
Monaragala	mixed	2	10	5	15
Mullaitivu	single	1	5	0	5
Mullaitivu	mixed	3	14	7	21
<i>Community leaders^a</i>					
Monaragala	–	0	0	0	0
Mullaitivu	single	2	0	2	2
Total		41	63	32	95

– = non-applicable; NGO = non-governmental organization.

^a Interviews.

^b Focus groups.

^c Some meetings had two or more participants.

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