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Alternative Strategies for Poverty Alleviation during the Economic Crisis in Sri Lanka: Insights from Literature for Policy Level Recommendations

Liyanage, P. M. T. S. K.
National Productivity Secretariat, Sri Lanka

Abstract

Poverty is one of the central issues of mankind, which can cause severe consequences, including hunger, diseases, political violence, and even civil wars and terrorism. According to research data from the World Bank, 25% of people in Sri Lanka live under the poverty line by 2022. In the decades after the independence, the Sri Lankan government has focused on social welfare strategies in fields such as free education, health services, food rationing, land reforms, and subsidies for agriculture. Social welfare policies implemented by the government have been successful in reducing the poverty level. However, the literature reveals that despite all these efforts to alleviate poverty, governments have been unable to achieve the required status through these programs. On the other hand, currently, Sri Lanka is experiencing the worst economic crisis in its history, which requires quick and solid policy reforms in every sector, including welfare and poverty. The state will no longer be able to facilitate most of the social welfare programs as it was before. Thus, poverty alleviation programs are expected to face challenges such as fiscal deficits. Moreover, the economic crisis has made people's lives worse. As per the World Bank data, an additional 2.5 million people have fallen into poverty in 2022, meaning that the number of people who need assistance is increased. This situation forces the government to seek new possibilities and alternatives to reducing poverty. This work aims to address the above gap by researching the alternative and supplement strategies that can be used in poverty alleviation policy in Sri Lanka. A range of earlier studies on causal theories of poverty and poverty alleviation strategies were critically analyzed to identify the challenges and possibilities in existing poverty alleviation program in coping with the economic crisis. Based on the study, four policy-level recommendations are presented as alternative strategies with identified policy tools for each strategy: improving the behavioural insights of people, enhancing good governance in poverty alleviation programs, focusing on the capability approach of poverty alleviation, and strengthening the participatory approach. Further, the strengths and challenges of these policy recommendations will also be discussed.

Keywords: Economic crisis, Poverty alleviation, Sri Lanka, Welfare policy

Email: tilani.sugandika@gmail.com

Introduction

Poverty has been identified as one of the most crucial issues in the world, and it can cause severe consequences, including hunger, diseases, political violence, civil wars, and even terrorism (Madduma Bandara, 2016: Semasinghe, 2015). In 2019, 648 million people worldwide lived under the poverty line of 2.15 USD per day (Poverty and Inequality Platform n.d.). Poverty can be identified as an obstacle to a country's development, sustainability, and political stability (Semasinghe, 2015). Therefore, poverty alleviation is a top priority in the global context. The United Nations' seventeen sustainable development goals also start with "Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere" (Singh & Chudasama,2020, p. 1).

As a result of the poverty alleviation and welfare programs carried out in Sri Lanka after independence, a significant decline in the poverty rate could be observed over the decades. Continuous efforts in free education, health services, food rationing, land reforms, and agriculture subsidies have also decreased multidimensional poverty (Semasinghe, 2011). In 2023, Sri Lanka's Human Development Index was recorded as 0.780, the highest in South Asia (UNDP, 2023). Targeted direct intervention programs, reducing state monopoly in welfare, and introducing a new policy framework for poverty reduction are some of the critical changes in national poverty and welfare policy that helped reduce poverty in the country (Gunetilleke, 2000; Madduma Bandara, 2016). Despite these achievements in poverty alleviation, people do not meet acceptable standards of life, failing to meet the minimum level of nutrition, shelter, and clothing (Madduma Bandara, 2016). The governments have failed to reach the expected targets for poverty reduction in Sri Lanka (Madduma Bandara, 2016; Semasinghe, 2011).

On the other hand, due to the corruption and mismanagement of resources over the decades, Sri Lanka is moving through the worst-ever economic crisis in history. Inflation and unemployment are bombarding people like never before, increasing poverty levels. The World Bank data indicated that the poverty rate doubled in Sri Lanka between 2021 to 2022 from 13.1 per cent to 25 per cent. According to World Bank, additional 2.5 million people fell into poverty in 2022 (UNDP, 2023). This means that the number of people who need assistance has increased. However, the government is seeking policy reforms to recover the economy, and it is expected that the cost-cutting measures will be implemented in the welfare sector. The existing poverty alleviation and welfare programs are at risk of meeting inadequate funds. Alternative poverty alleviation and welfare strategies should be discovered to cope with the economic crisis. Based on the research question "What are the alternative poverty alleviation strategies that can be employed amidst the economic crisis in Sri Lanka?" this study aims to fill the gap described above in searching for new methods and strategies for poverty reduction in the country. This analysis examines the challenges and possibilities present in the main poverty alleviation program (Samurdhi) in Sri Lanka parallel to the economic crisis. It also aims to explore the possibilities of reducing poverty using alternative strategies based on the theories related to poverty alleviation with reference to the Sri Lankan context. Next, four policy-level alternative strategies to reduce poverty will be identified: enhancing good governance in poverty alleviation programs, improving behavioural insights of people, focusing on the capability approach, and strengthening participatory approach. The above strategies will be discussed along with the required policy instruments needed to employ these strategies and anticipated challenges in the policy implementation process.

Literature Review

Defining and Measuring Poverty

Poverty is a very complicated and multidimensional concept, and according to the literature, there is no consensus on defining poverty among scholars. However, the literature reveals that there are two approaches to poverty: the "welfarist approach" and the "non-welfarist approach" (Madduma Bandara, 2016; Semasinghe, 2015). The authors further describe that the welfare approach takes a monetary term while the non-welfare approach talks either about the people's basic needs or their capabilities. When using monetary terms to measure poverty, it is questionable whether the real life of humans is measured. In addition, to proceed with this approach, we need data that is primarily lacking in developing countries (Semasinghe, 2015).

In contrast, the non-welfarist approach focuses on the multidimensional nature of poverty. According to Semasinghe (2015), this approach takes two paths: the basic needs approach and the capability approach. The basic needs approach, based on income, is widely used by researchers and scholars. In contrast, the capability approach takes on economic and social development through many dimensions. Poverty is not only about a lack of material, wealth, or resources (Semasinghe, 2011). The author further mentions that malnutrition, education, maternal health, sanitation, housing, and drinking water are some dimensions that directly relate to poverty. Though the income dimension was the key to measuring poverty until the recent past, non-income dimensions related to human development are now given equal priority (Semasinghe, 2015).

Theories of Poverty

Poverty can be caused by various factors, and Brady (2019) categorizes three main theories of the causes of poverty: behavioural theories, structural theories, and political theories. Behavioural theories describe how incentives and culture become the sources of behaviour for poverty (Brady,2019). According to him, when governments tend to offer more "generous" welfare policies, they demotivate people from engaging in productive poverty reduction activities such as employment. However, the author further states that, in developing countries, more focus is on how market inefficiencies demotivate people for poverty reduction measures. On the other hand, culture also explains the causes of poverty, mainly how it can induce intragenerational and intergenerational poverty (Brady, 2019). Next, structural theories demonstrate how economic and demographic contexts cause poverty through three main channels: direct channel, indirect channel, and interactive channel. Economic structures represent development, industrialization, deindustrialization, and spatial and skills mismatches, while demographic structures include neighbourhood disadvantage, age/sex composition, residential segregation, urbanization, and demographic transitions (Brady, 2019, p.161). Thirdly, political theories explain that poverty results from politically driven policies. It elaborates on how elites and businesses gain power in capitalist democracies, producing inequality. Further, how the political institutions govern the distribution of resources also causes poverty.

Poverty Alleviation Strategies

Over the decades, poverty alleviation has become a key concern in government policy-making, especially in developing countries. Poverty and social welfare policies are mutually connected. Welfare services act as safety nets for poor people, and social welfare policies aim to reduce poverty (Semasinghe, 2015). Four categories of approaches can be identified in poverty alleviation: community organizations-based micro-financing, capability and social security methods, market-based approaches, and good governance (Singh & Chudasama, 2020). In evaluating these strategies in a developing country, the authors state that these four types have positives and challenges in each category. Therefore, a combined approach of all is necessary to drive poverty alleviation. They conclude that "to address multidimensional poverty, an integrated and multidimensional poverty alleviation approach is needed" (Singh & Chudasama, 2020, p.18). Another categorization of poverty alleviation methods introduces three types of strategies: market-based, social services, and targeted transfer schemes (Gunatilaka, 1999).

Several policy instruments can be used in the poverty alleviation process. Althaus, Bridgman, and Davis (2018) present seven types of policy instruments: advocacy, networks, money, government action, law, behavioural economics, and narrative. The authors further emphasize the importance of choosing the right mix of instruments for the problem at hand for a good policy solution. Behavioural economics is one of the essential policy tools that can be used in poverty alleviation." The focus of behavioural economics is the distorting effects of behavioural biases. These create gaps between what people want to achieve (to maximize welfare) and what they choose or prefer (which often fails to maximize their welfare)" (Althaus et al., 2018, p.111). They can make people choose different paths by making the environment easier because it concentrates on how people feel and think (Althaus et al., 2018). Behavioural policy applications can be employed at low costs and are suitable during fiscal constraints (Moseley & Stoker, 2013). Law (rules and regulations), advocacy, and networking are other policy tools discussed in this research paper.

Poverty Alleviation Strategies in Sri Lanka

When looking at the history of Sri Lanka after its independence from the British in 1948, several poverty alleviation approaches could be observed from time to time. Components of the policy cycle can be attributed to poverty alleviation in Sri Lanka, as described in this section. Until the introduction of trade liberalization in 1977, social and welfare policy in Sri Lanka was more fiscal (universal provisions) and even after 1977, education and health services continued as free components. As such, school uniforms, textbooks, and even mid-day meals were provided by the government. However, the food subsidies were cut, and a value-based approach was adopted to issue food stamps to low-income earners. In 1990, the government shifted to a direct target intervention program called "Janasaviya", which addressed income transfer and production generation (Gunetilleke, 2000). Later, in 1995, this program was replaced by a new project called “Samurdhi", which had the same basic model with expanded elements. This shift occurred due to the change in the governing regime at that time. According to the multiple stream model illustrated by Zahariasis (2016), which describes policy agenda-setting variables, the new policy reform was introduced to align with the party ideology. This Samurdhi program is the major poverty alleviation project in Sri Lanka.” The program assists the poor by providing services for five mutually bound components: welfare, microfinance, infrastructure development, social services, and livelihood development programs” (Madduma Bandara, 2016, p.282). The author states that these policies and programs have caused a significant decline in the absolute poverty level in Sri Lanka; the poverty headcount ratio has declined from 28.8% in 1995 to 6.7% in 2012. The welfare component includes food stamps, subsidies for fuel (for lighting kerosene lamps), nutrition packages for pregnant and lactating mothers, and milk-feeding subsidies for children between two and five years. Eighty (80%) per cent of the total budget of the Samurdhi program is allocated to the welfare component (Madduma Bandara, 2016). The major problem with welfare is the dependency mentality of beneficiaries.

Along with these benefits, being a "Samurdhi" welfare recipient makes families eligible for many other subsidies, such as scholarships for education, low-interest rates for credit, and subsidized prices for electricity and water supply connections. Therefore, the recipients want to remain as beneficiaries, so they hide the actual income data from officials. Further, officers at grass root level appointed to monitor and supervise beneficiaries refrain from forcing beneficiaries to reveal the actual situations, as they want to maintain their relationships with the neighbourhood (Madduma Bandara,2016). This implies the ineffectiveness of the policy cycle's policy monitoring and evaluation stage.

Though the Samurdhi program gradually contributed to the decline in the poverty ratio, the literature finds some drawbacks. Politicization, mal-targeting, and corruption are vital weaknesses (Madduma Bandara, 2016; Gunetilleke, 2000). It is widely accepted that 25 per cent of the beneficiaries are mal-targeted mainly because of political influence. Even though grassroots-level officers remove the names of ineligible beneficiaries from the list, they somehow get their names back on the list with the support of local politicians. This is a well-known criticism of the program. However, none of the governments tried to solve it as there was a possibility of losing the voters' base if they acted on that. The government's failure to act on this issue can be related to "politics" in the multiple-stream framework, as Zahariasis (2016) states that any of the proposed solutions would negatively impact party ideology and the political movement of the party.

The Economic Crisis in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is located in South Asia with a population of 21.5 million. It was under British colonial rule and gained independence in 1948. Currently, Sri Lanka is facing its worst economic crisis in seventy years. As a country that depended highly on tourism, the economy was first attacked by the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. Depletion of foreign reserves, together with massive borrowings that happened over decades, dragged the country into a severe economic crisis (Gamage,2023; Imtiyaz, 2023). In 2022, Sri Lanka officially declared its bankruptcy by defaulting on debts (Social Indicator,2023). The foreign exchange deficit heavily impacted imports, including fuel, medicine, and food essentials. Fuel shortage interrupted the transport sector and the continuous supply of electricity, collapsing major export industries and essential services (Fernando, 2022; Senanayake, 2023).

Accordingly, the currency of Sri Lanka was further depleted against the US dollar, and inflation and unemployment increased (Senanayake, 2023). The country's poverty level is expected to increase with low purchasing power (UNDP,2023). Applying Brady's (2019) theory, this is an example of poverty caused by politically driven policies. Therefore, the most recent cause of poverty in Sri Lanka is inappropriate economic policy decisions. According to the World Bank data, there is an increase in the poverty rate to 25 per cent in 2022, compared to 13.1 per cent in 2021 (UNDP, 2023). A food crisis is predicted, and at the same time, the direct effects of the economic crisis will impact access to education and health sectors (UNDP, 2023). With all these effects, the government is moving towards new policy reforms in all sectors with a cost-cutting approach. Government poverty alleviation programs will take a new direction. With minimum budgets allocated for welfare, alternative strategies should be considered to face this critical issue of humankind amidst the economic crisis in Sri Lanka.

When analyzing the Samurdhi program, it can be stated that it is a comprehensive poverty alleviation approach with many of the strategies we find in the literature, such as micro-financing and social safety nets. However, in dealing with the economic crisis in Sri Lanka, low budgetary, highly effective, and sustainable alternative strategies should be identified to suppress the drawbacks of the "Samurdhi" program. The capability and good governance approaches could be employed for poverty alleviation by fulfilling the above criteria. This paper will present policy recommendations based on capability, good governance, behavioural insights, and community-based approaches.

Methodology

The author carried out a systematic literature review as the methodology. The review had the following steps in its process.

Search Strategy

The literature review used two electronic search databases: Google Scholar and the University of Sydney online library. These databases were selected since they give indexes of peer-reviewed literature and cover a wide range of publications. It used a time frame from 1971 to 2024 and keywords "theories of poverty, state welfare policies and poverty alleviation, and the economic crisis in Sri Lanka". Accordingly, 18600 articles from Google Scholar and 824 from the University of Sydney online Library were screened.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

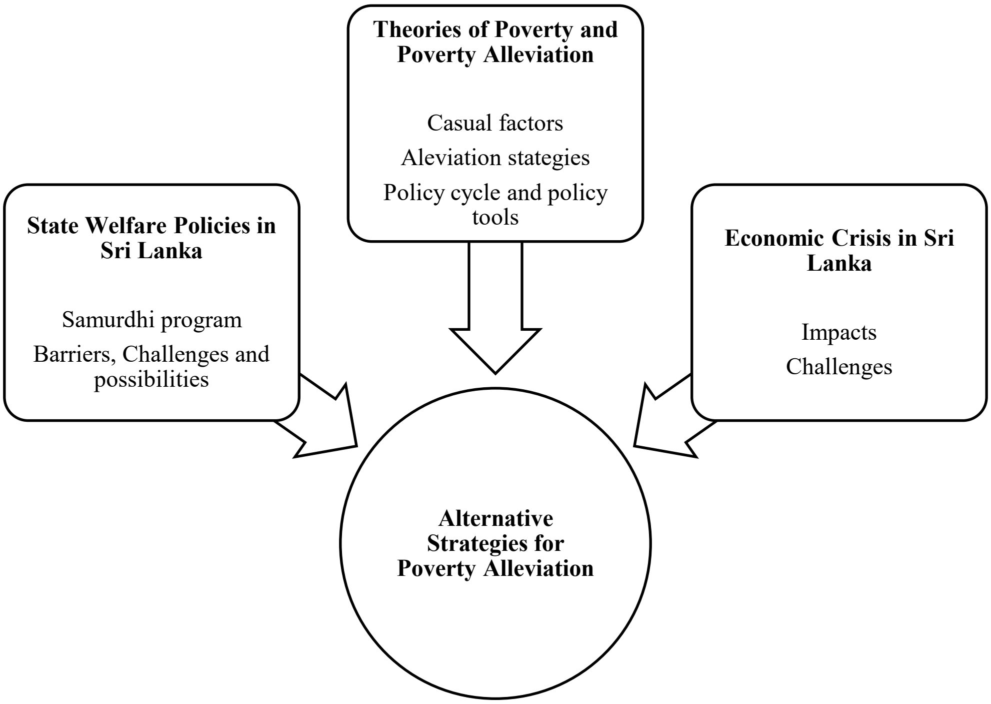
In the second stage, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were characterized. The selection of articles was confined to those written in English, aligning with the language of this literature review to maintain language consistency. Google Scholar yielded English articles, resulting in no alteration in volume. However, the number of articles available via the University of Sydney online library decreased to 127. Subsequently, the shortlisted articles underwent a further screening process to ascertain the presence of peer review and full-text availability. This sorting led to a shortlist of reviewed articles, 127 (peer-reviewed and full text available) from the University of Sydney online library, and 778 from Google Scholar. The reason for selecting peer-reviewed sources is to ensure the quality, credibility, and reliability of the information being used and to verify the accuracy of the content and the validity of the research methods. The full-text availability option ensured access to the complete content of the articles, as it is essential to understand the research, as abstracts alone might not provide sufficient depth or context.

Quality and Eligibility Assessment

Then the article titles and abstracts were carefully reviewed manually to assess their relevance to theories of poverty and poverty alleviation strategies. Finally, after being removed for duplication, fifteen (15) articles were selected for review. However, sufficient peer-reviewed literature related to the economic crisis in Sri Lanka was not found. Therefore, some grey literature sources, such as reports were also used for the analysis. Research papers were divided and analyzed into three main categories: articles related to theories and causal factors of poverty, articles related to state welfare policies in Sri Lanka, and articles related to the economic crisis. The findings of these three categories were then combined to produce four policy-level recommendations, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Analytical Framework for Methodology



Alternative Strategies for Poverty Alleviation

Enhancing Good Governance in Poverty Alleviation Programs

The Samurdhi program is criticized for lacking participatory, transparent, and accountable measures. Mainly, the reported mal-targeting of beneficiaries occurs due to the lack of transparency in the program. Policy tools such as rules and regulations can be used in this process to enhance good governance. Laws, as policy tools, can facilitate, coerce, or prohibit an action or behaviour (Althaus et al., 2018, p.110). Transparency in selecting beneficiaries could be improved through laws by giving direction to employees on their duties. In addition, involving information and communication technologies (ICT) can also increase transparency and good governance in the Samurdhi program. ICT literacy of the employees and beneficiaries would be challenging in proceeding with this approach. However, increased good governance not only in poverty alleviation programs but also in the entire government structure would enhance the involvement of third-sector contributions for poverty alleviation amidst the economic crisis. The third sector, which includes United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), can effectively address financial restrictions in poverty alleviation efforts. Key components of good governance such as transparency and accountability are essential in building trust and credibility with donor agencies. For instance, Singh and Chudasama (2020) emphasize that adopting robust good governance practices is a prerequisite to securing aid from multinational donor agencies (p.3). These practices ensure that resources are utilized efficiently and reach the intended beneficiaries, thereby increasing donor confidence. Transparency in operations allows for clear and open reporting of how funds are allocated and spent, which is critical for building trust with donors. Accountability mechanisms ensure that there are checks and balances in place to prevent misuse of funds, further reinforcing donor confidence. Guptha (2011) discusses how effective government involvement can enhance NGO led poverty alleviation programs, citing examples from West Bengal, India. In this context, the government's role in facilitating coordination among various stakeholders, providing necessary infrastructure, and ensuring a conducive policy environment is highlighted as critical for the success of such programs.

Improving Behavioural Insights of People

As mentioned in the behavioural cause theory, the beneficiaries have become demotivated to engage in productive activities such as employment, developing a dependent mentality (Brady, 2019). Behavioural insights are one of the policy tools that can be used to eliminate this situation. When attributing to the Samurdhi program, beneficiaries can be motivated to engage in income-earning activities by being guided towards various opportunities, such as entrepreneurship. There are over three hundred divisional secretariats nationwide for divisional administration under the Ministry of Home Affairs (Ministry of Home Affairs, Sri Lanka, 2021). Each divisional secretariat has counsellors, science and technology officers, and small and medium-scale entrepreneurship development officers who can effectively be employed in behavioural insight development programs. There is no extra cost for these resource persons as the government already employs them, and a bottom-up approach can be taken to nudge people for behavioural changes. However, this type of program needs strong coordination between government organizations, which would be challenging in achieving the objectives. The government can enforce rules and regulations introduced as policy tools (Althaus et al., 2018) to create a collaborative environment to implement behavioural economic programs.

Focus on the Capability Approach of Poverty Alleviation

The present economic crisis in Sri Lanka is predicted to be long-lasting as the recovery measures would take time to respond to the critical issues. Therefore, poverty alleviation programs need to take the capability approach path. According to this theory, poverty is not an expected outcome of a lack of wealth or resources (Semasinghe, 2011). Instead, it is more about quality of life, and when people lack choices when meeting basic needs, they can be considered poor. Further capability approach emphasizes that poverty alleviation is an integrated approach with both economic and social developments (Semasinghe, 2011). As such, "the capabilities produced as outcomes of welfare policies are interrelated and reinforce one another" (Semasinghe, 2011, p.153). For example, education enhances other basic needs such as health and nutrition. The Samurdhi program already has a significant component for social and spiritual development (Madduma Bandara, 2016). This component addresses women's empowerment to a certain extent, and there is a possibility of expanding these programs to meet the demands of the capability approach (Semasinghe, 2015). Global studies have also revealed that educating young women is a very effective antipoverty behaviour (Brady, 2019). The economic and social status of women in Sri Lanka is markedly superior to that of their regional counterparts (Gunetillake, 2000). For example, Sri Lanka scored a Gender Development Index of 0.947 in 2022 in “High Human Development” category (UNDP, 2022). It indicates that gender gap is relatively narrow, reflecting a high level of gender equality in health, education and command over economic resources. Therefore, engaging women in the capability approach is likely to yield more favourable outcomes in Sri Lankan context.

After assessing rural poverty in Sri Lanka through a capability approach, Semasinghe (2011) concludes that public health policies can effectively reduce rural poverty while suggesting that education and housing policies may also play a vital role. Enhancing individual capabilities leads to human development of the society, thus producing long-term sustainable outcomes in poverty alleviation in Sri Lanka during the economic crisis. Advocacy, networking, and rules and regulations can be effectively used as policy tools in this process (Althaus et al., 2018).

Strengthening Participatory Approach

The participatory approach is a well-used strategy in poverty alleviation (Singh & Chudasama, 2020). The third sector organizations, including non-government organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs), can play a vital role in this approach (Gunetilleke,2000). Before 1990, this approach was minimal in poverty alleviation strategies in Sri Lanka; however, the government itself invited the third sector to strengthen the country's welfare (Kelegama, 2001). Besides the Samurdhi program, thousands of NGOs and CBOs engage in poverty alleviation in Sri Lanka in agricultural development, small enterprise development, health and nutrition, environmental protection, and micro-credit sectors (Gunetilleke, 2000). In coping with the economic crisis, these projects can be focused on food security by encouraging home gardening and access to natural capital. In the rural communities in Sri Lanka, there is ample space in home gardens to cultivate vegetables and fruits, which provide basic and essential nutrition. Advocacy from religious leaders in these areas would be an effective policy tool (Althaus et al., 2018). On the other hand, networking can also be a policy tool when all the stakeholders related to poverty alleviation, such as politicians, public officials, NGOs, CBOs, and communities, act together to achieve the targets.

Conclusion

The country's present economic crisis will likely challenge the continuous progress achieved in poverty alleviation in Sri Lanka. Therefore, alternative or supplement strategies are needed for the sector to cope with increasing poverty levels and decreasing funds. Enhancing good governance in poverty alleviation programs, improving the behavioural insights of the people, focusing on the capability approach of poverty alleviation, and strengthening participation in the programs could be identified as policy-level recommendations to poverty alleviation during the economic crisis. Though there are challenges in achieving these policies in action, they would be beneficial in producing sustainable outcomes in poverty alleviation amidst the economic crisis in the Sri Lankan context.

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