

# UNDERSTANDING POVERTY AND DEVELOPMENT: A ROUGH GUIDE FOR JOURNALISTS



# **UNDERSTANDING POVERTY AND DEVELOPMENT: A ROUGH GUIDE FOR JOURNALISTS**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka has recently been declared a Middle Income Country. Public expenditure on the social sector has declined as a percentage of the GDP and this has created widening inequalities. Poverty, therefore, is still a crucial issue, but it needs to be understood from a more holistic perspective which considers aspects such as people's capabilities, private and social assets, leisure (or lack of it), and attainment of social participation and security.

However, most media look at poverty from a purely economic perspective – that of a lack of money. A wider understanding on poverty would include democracy, good governance, rule of law, freedom of expression and media freedom as prerequisites for people to realize their full capabilities. In addition to the limited understanding of poverty, most media houses allocate little or no budget for field-based and investigative journalistic assignments on poverty related topics.

With the Media Fellowships on Poverty and Development, the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) hopes to tackle this gap.

The fellowships are meant to enhance the skills of fifteen (15) competitively selected journalists by giving them a better understanding of the many dimensions of poverty, and providing them with guidance to cover unrevealed or under-reported aspects of poverty.

Winners of the fellowships will benefit from face-to-face interactions with senior journalists and development researchers, and receive a grant to cover their field visit costs. They will have the opportunity to study a story of their choice in depth and detail, but on the understanding that their media outlet will carry their story.

This manual is prepared as part of the fellowship process. It is not an information dossier on poverty in Sri Lanka, but an exploration of how poverty can be covered meaningfully in our media.

This is aimed primarily at mid-career media professionals in print, broadcast or web journalism. It is presumed that they have had training and/or experience in the craft of journalism – this only adds a layer on top on how to find and tell good stories on poverty, under-development and inequality.

## 2. POVERTY AS A BIG STORY

**“ For me as an editor, there is a compelling case for engaging with poverty. Increasing education and literacy is related to increasing the size of my readership. Our main audiences are indeed drawn from the middle classes, business and policymakers. But these groups cannot live in isolation. The welfare of the many is in the interests of the people who read the Daily Star.”**

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**MAHFUZ ANAM,**  
**Editor and Publisher of *Daily Star* newspaper, Bangladesh**

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Poverty and deprivation are not on the ‘issue radar’ of most media outlets. That is because of a widely held notion that stories on these issues are depressing, boring or irrelevant.

That is a misconception. If covered in sufficient depth, and with sensitivity and empathy, poverty related stories can be diverse, illuminating and stimulating for our media audiences. And there are many ways in which to tell these stories in interesting and engaging ways.

Editors like Mahfuz Anam are rare. Most of the time journalists have to try hard to convince their editors that stories on poverty and social justice are worth covering. An editor of an English language newspaper in India – home to nearly 400 million people living in poverty -- once remarked, “We are not interested in stories of the poor, because poor people are not among our readers”.

Such cynics miss out on one of the biggest stories of our times: how and why poverty persists in various forms despite decades of policy interventions, development aid and charity work. They also ignore the fact that in recent years, millions of families in developing countries have come out of abject income poverty.

Poverty is, and should be, a big story if taken in the right economic and societal contexts. Poverty is never about lack of money and inability to access or afford even basic human needs. Contentious issues such as land ownership, wealth distribution and women’s rights are integral parts of the wider poverty discussion.

To understand why poverty persists and how it can be overcome, we need to look at the bigger picture. Covering poverty in the media is much more than a numbers game (even though statistics are an important part of it). It requires an integrated approach that

combines macro level factors with micro level insights. More than anything else, it requires journalists to keep an open and inquisitive mind.

Discussions on development disparities are inherently political. In Sri Lanka, any political discussion quickly descends to a polarisation between ideologies or a division along political party positions. In this melee, who speaks for the common man and woman? And, just as important, who gets a fair hearing?

How are we to talk meaningfully about poverty, inequality and social injustice issues at a time when their magnitude is being downplayed – and sometimes wholly denied – in the higher echelons of political power and governance in Sri Lanka?

There is much that journalists and their media outlets can do to spark off and sustain public discussions and debate on poverty and development. It is a decisive time in Sri Lanka to have these conversations.

Mega shifts are taking place, such as:

- Sri Lanka becoming a middle income country;
- the country's population, as a whole, getting older;
- more people living in urban areas, with higher aspirations than ever before; and
- society becoming more networked thanks to the spread of communications technologies.

These shifts challenge researchers and activists to change how they study, analyse and advocate. Old frameworks are no longer sufficient. More complex scenarios are unfolding, which generate new moral dilemmas and ethical challenges.

For journalists who care to look beyond the headlines, there are plenty of stories to uncover, understand and relate. Poverty is a big story, with many faces and nuances. Explore and share with an open mind!

### 3. POOR JOURNALISM THAT IGNORES THE POOR

It is not just in Sri Lanka, or in the developing countries, that many media outlets overlook the issues of poverty.

Ammu Joseph, an independent journalist and author based in Bangalore, has long monitored and critiqued Indian media's coverage of poverty and development. She wrote in 2007 how so much of reporting is confined to events and incidents, rather than analysis of underlying factors.

“Yet there is obviously plenty of scope for investigative journalism to help the public understand why, despite the huge amounts of money allocated over the years for a plethora of policies and programmes meant to tackle the many faces of poverty, India - the new kid on the global economic block -- still has the dubious distinction of being a world leader in hunger, maternal mortality and several other indicators of poverty. And if our newspapers and 24x7 news channels can provide regular updates on the stock markets, foreign exchange and bullion rates, weather, pollution, etc., surely they can add a poverty watch or at least an MDG watch to raise public awareness -- and maybe even create public opinion -- on India's performance in this critical area of development?”<sup>1</sup>

The trend is found in developed countries too, which have their own challenges of poverty.

Simon Kuper wrote in the *Financial Times* (UK) in 2013: “Poverty has never been sexy. In 2008, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation analysed 40 hours of British TV, and found that the word ‘poverty’ appeared only twice, both in *Shameless*, a comedy drama. One reference was to the Live Aid concert; the other to Comic Relief. When poor people did get airtime, it was often as objects of derision on *Jerry Springer*-like shows.”

Kuper noted that while there is a vigorous media debate about inequality in the UK, it was focused mostly on the “1 per cent”, the richest in society. Most people profiled in the media – artistes, athletes and many politicians – are millionaires; the poorer ones are referred to in collective terms.

He argued that journalists should learn from historians, who generations back dropped their exclusive focus on kings and queens to write “history from below”. He cited the example of the British historian and writer E. P. Thompson (1924-1993), who in *The Making of the English Working Class*, set out to rescue long-dead workers “from the enormous condescension of posterity”.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Is the media watching poverty enough? Ammu Joseph. *India Together*. 29 October 2007. <http://indiatogether.org/medpov-op-ed>

<sup>2</sup> Poverty's poor show in the media. Simon Kuper. *Financial Times*, UK. 29 March 2013. <https://next.ft.com/content/6e8b7882-9672-11e2-9ab2-00144feabdc0>

Things are not much better in the United States. Despite 46.7 million Americans—nearly 15 per cent—living in poverty in 2014, according to the official census statistics, domestic and international poverty are not covered in adequate depth or detail in much of the US media.

As Katia Savchuk noted in *California* magazine in early 2016, “Despite a rich tradition of poverty journalism—from Jacob Riis’s *How The Other Half Lives* to James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed*—reporting remains scant. In 2014, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, a progressive media watchdog group, found that three major network newscasts devoted just 0.2% of their programming to poverty in a 14-month period. Similarly, the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism found that poverty coverage accounted for less than one percent of stories in 52 mainstream news outlets from 2007 to mid-2012.”<sup>3</sup>

A long-cherished practice in many media organisations is for journalists to propose to editors a news story or feature they would like to work on. Known as ‘story pitching’, this challenges journalists to be imaginative in how they present a story in a way that meets media’s constant requirement of carrying what is new, true and interesting.

One strategy that western journalists have found helpful is to connect stories of poverty and social deprivation to the wider issues of economic inequality – a concern widely shared by the middle classes.

## CREATIVE WAYS TO GET THE STORY OUT

In 2000, Tina Rosenberg, a journalist for *The New York Times*, pitched a story for its Sunday magazine about the AIDS epidemic ravaging the world’s poorest nations. She wanted to show how pharmaceutical companies had pressured governments in sub-Saharan Africa, where 1 in 12 adults were living with HIV or AIDS, to deny access to generic drugs, making treatment unaffordable.

Her editor’s response: “I cannot subject our readers to another 7,000-word story on how everybody is going to die in Malawi.”

After her editor’s disheartening response, Rosenberg found a way to get her story into print. Instead of writing about countries in crisis, she focused on the one nation that had managed to fend off pressure from drug makers: Brazil. “How To Solve The World’s AIDS Crisis” became a cover story. It highlighted the worst situations but also offered a hopeful alternative.

“It was far more engaging to readers and far more impactful,” said Rosenberg, who later co-founded the Solutions Journalism Network to encourage reporting on responses to social problems.

**Source :** <http://alumni.berkeley.edu/california-magazine/just-in/2016-04-06/poor-journalism-media-coverage-poor-getting-better-or-worse>



Edward Wasserman, Dean of the University of California Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, observes that coverage of inequality has improved since the 2008 financial crisis that led to a depression. "People discovered the 'undeserving poor'. The reality of inequality has grown so extreme that it touches the mass majority of readers."

When media does cover issues of poverty on occasion, it is often stereotyped or superficial. The poor are portrayed as victims, parasites or trouble-makers.

Simon Kuper says: "Rather than presenting them only as victims, we could copy the narratives of triumph over adversity used in working-class women's magazines, suggests Amina Lone, social researcher in Manchester. It worked in *Educating Rita*, a film about a Liverpudlian hairdresser who goes to university."

<sup>3</sup> Poor Journalism: Is Media Coverage of the Poor Getting Better or Worse? *California* magazine, 6 April 2016  
<http://alumni.berkeley.edu/california-magazine/just-in/2016-04-06/poor-journalism-media-coverage-poor-getting-better-or-worse>

## 4. UNDERSTANDING POVERTY: A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

Poverty can be perceived, assessed and understood in different ways. One way is the overview or bigger picture perspective enabled by statistical data and their analysis.

This section offers a quick survey of the vast area of study devoted to poverty studies.

### HOW TO MEASURE POVERTY?

There is no single approach for describing poverty, and no single indicator for measuring it. Poverty is a complex phenomenon with many dimensions

Researchers use four main approaches to define, measure and monitor poverty. They are the monetary approach, capability approach, social exclusion approach and the participatory approach.

- *Monetary approach* concentrates on the economic dimensions of deprivation such as income and expenditure. This is the best known aspect of poverty.
- *Capability approach*, introduced by the Indian economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, focuses on the availability of a means to a good life. Does an individual have a life that she values? Can she achieve a basic level of capabilities in terms of health, education, environment and empowerment? If not, poverty is understood as being deprived of the capability of living a good life.
- *Social exclusion approach* recognises that some people are socially discriminated and excluded. As a result, they fail to fully participate in decision making, civil, social and cultural life.
- *Participatory approach* is based on the perceptions of people, and is therefore subjective.

Absolute poverty has been described as “subsistence below the minimum requirements for physical wellbeing”. It is most commonly measured by the ability of a household to afford a minimum set of consumption requirements.

Relative poverty is taken as income or consumption levels that are below a particular fraction of the national average.

Researchers on poverty identify two distinct categories: people who are living in poverty (chronic poor), and those who are vulnerable to poverty or can easily fall into poverty (transient and near poor).

## WHAT IS THE POVERTY LINE?

The poverty line (also known as poverty threshold or poverty limit) is an attempt to measure economic poverty for official purposes. It is the minimum level of income deemed adequate in a particular country for a person to survive.

As at July 2016, Sri Lanka's official poverty line stood at LKR 3,937 per person per month. However, this captures only the economic dimensions of poverty (income and expenditure) and leaves out aspects such as health, education, social relations and environmental issues.

**“ Sri Lanka's official poverty line is LKR 3,937 per person per month. This captures only the economic dimensions of poverty (income and expenditure) and leaves out aspects such as health, education, social relations and environmental issues. ”**

The main data source used to calculate the poverty line is the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics once in three years – the latest was conducted in 2012/13.

If the per capita monthly real expenditure is less than the value of the official poverty line, then that person is considered to be in poverty. Using this method, the Department calculated Sri Lanka's poverty headcount index for 2012/13 as 6.7% -- or 1.3 million people.<sup>4</sup>

However, CEPA's analysis shows that limiting poverty to monetary or absolute measures, is insufficient and can even be misleading.

For instance, data shows that income poverty in the estate sector has fallen significantly in recent years. However, most estate residents still lag significantly behind in their access to education, water and sanitation, and adequate housing. In other words, they remain deprived.

As CEPA argued in April 2016, "A reliable and accurate poverty measurement that captures poverty in all of its dimensions is required. Such a measurement is a prerequisite for capturing the poor and near poor, and for targeting in pro poor and poverty reduction programmes such as Samurdhi... and [other] allowances for poor and vulnerable groups such as the elderly and the disabled. A measurement based on a single dimension such as the monetary approach ignores other (multidimensional) aspects of poverty and thereby effectively fails to capture the wider issues that affect those who face deprivation and exclusion."<sup>5</sup>

## DATA SOURCES:

DCS website : <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/page.asp?page=Poverty>

World Bank South Asia: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar>

UNDP Human Developments for Sri Lanka: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/LKA>

<sup>4</sup> Poverty Indicators from HIES 2012/13: [http://www.statistics.gov.lk/poverty/PovertyIndicators2012\\_13.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.lk/poverty/PovertyIndicators2012_13.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cepa.lk/publications/details/who-are-the-poor-more-than-one-way-of-understanding-poverty--f47e5fe0ca450d78e0226c36474c479e.html>

## 5. UNDERSTANDING POVERTY: THE GROUND LEVEL VIEW

Like many other factors in today's society, poverty is complex. A bird's eye view of national level statistics is useful, but not sufficient, to understand its many variations.

Some seemingly impressive national level statistics can hide or eclipse major disparities at provincial and district levels. A careful data analysis shows that all parts of Sri Lanka have not progressed equally well during the past two decades.

For example, while many districts have already cut income poverty rates in half, there are some exceptions. These include eight districts in the Northern and Eastern provinces, for which reliable data are not available to compare with earlier years. In the Moneragala District in Uva Province, poverty has, in fact, increased during the past few years.

Similarly, many human development indicators are lower in the plantation estate sector, where 4.4% of the Lankan population lives. An example: while at least 90% of people in urban and rural areas can access safe drinking water, the rate in the estate sector is 46.3%.

Some think that poverty is mostly or entirely a rural phenomenon. This is wrong, as there is also urban poverty with its own dynamics. Studying and responding to poverty needs to be done wherever it exists, in whatever form.

Studying poverty – academically or journalistically – is best done not as a fleeting 'snapshot' but more like a series of images taken over a period of time. This is because families can move in and out of poverty due to changing circumstances.

In a recent op-ed article, CEPA argued:

"Whilst reliable data is central to poverty estimates, poverty measurement also calls for data spanning over time, i.e. longitudinal studies in which the same households are visited repeatedly over many years. This is necessary to understand chronic and transient poverty. For instance, whilst data indicates that the numbers of those in poverty in absolute terms has reduced from 2005 -2010, there is still a significant number of people hovering just above the poverty line and who are vulnerable to fall back into poverty due to 'shocks' either at the household or community level -- such as the death of an income earning member of the household or an external shock such as a natural disaster or a sudden rise in the price of essential goods." <sup>6</sup>

Such long-term studies are important to capture the different categories of poor such as:

- the transient poor who move in and out of poverty;
- the 'invisible poor' who work in the informal labour sector;
- female headed households;
- the elderly (those over 60, whose share in population is 13% and increasing);

- the homeless; and
- other vulnerable groups who may be ‘missed’ in official poverty head counts.

Sri Lanka currently does not have longitudinal data sources to capture and analyse these different dimensions and categories of poverty and the poor. So these categories of poor are less likely to be covered by poverty reduction programmes.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/160403/business-times/who-are-the-poor-more-than-one-way-of-understanding-poverty-187999.html>

## **GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE: SRI LANKA: A TALE OF THREE COUNTRIES**

Journalists can use statistics, but they should be careful not to become mesmerized by numbers and expert interpretations. Good journalism involves skeptical inquiry and investigation. A recent cover story by *Echelon* business magazine (April 2016) provides a good example.

Its basic premise: “Officially, only 6.7% of Sri Lankans are poor, according to the Census and Statistics Department’s estimate of poverty. However, this definition of poverty is incredibly misleading and irrelevant because a person only needs to earn over Rs 3,930 or a family of four Rs 15,720 to be above poverty, the department estimates. Even in one of the island’s poorest regions, they wouldn’t think Rs 15,720 can provide basic needs for a family of four.”

A credible headcount poverty rate isn’t difficult to estimate when household income data are available, the article argues. But using the right benchmarks are critical: “Sri Lanka is now a middle-income country and a measure of poverty relevant in sub-Saharan Africa is not useful here.”

Poverty in middle-income countries is estimated as those living on less than US\$ 2.50 (2005 purchasing-power parity or PPP) or US\$ 4 (2005 PPP) a day. These two middle-income poverty lines correspond to income of Rs 6,058 and Rs 9,692 a month per person in 2012/13 prices.

“Up to 65% of Sri Lanka’s population is poor if poverty estimates were to use middle-income nation consumption thresholds,” argues the article.

This is revealing, but the situation is not bleak. As the article notes, “The violence, difficulties and poverty somehow haven’t extinguished people’s ability to dream. They have greater expectations about the future than most poor people in the (South Asian) region.”

Based on income poverty, its causes and impacts, it’s possible to draw boundaries around three distinct Sri Lankas that co-exist on the island, the article says. This is a very good example of how journalistic narrative can help non-specialist readers to understand challenges of economic development and social development needed to raise all Lankans to higher living standards.

Full article is online at: <http://echelon.lk/home/sri-lanka-a-tale-of-three-countries/>

## 6. REPORTING POVERTY: CHALLENGE OF DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM

‘Development journalism’ was a concept that originated in the 1960s and was widely promoted in the 1970s as a way for media to support development programmes undertaken, for the most part, by governments.

But the term later acquired a bad reputation because some media practitioners and governments saw it as uncritically reporting everything governments did in the name of development.

For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, there was little space in the Lankan media to question or critique the Mahaweli Development Programme. Today, it is acknowledged as having produced both benefits and adverse impacts.



TARZIE VITTACHI

Noted Lankan journalist and editor Tarzie Vittachi (1921 - 1993) was an early promoter of development journalism –he saw it as a way to go beyond headline events to understand the processes and people impacted. “Unfortunately, the phrase was later used by various governments for reporting the ‘good things’ that happen in their country and ignoring all the bad things,” he said, years later.

Nepali editor Kunda Dixit, one among many Asian journalists trained and inspired by Vittachi, agrees. “Development journalism became the last refuge of mediocre media...It was taken by many Third World journalists as an excuse to be third-rate, and editors’ eyes glazed over at the very mention of the word ‘development’...Reporting on development, instead of breathing life into usually insipid subjects like aquaculture or primary health care, ended up being just rehashed UN reports with the same blizzard of buzzwords.”

But development journalism should not be an excuse for sloppy journalism. Indeed, it is possible to apply all the principles of journalism to covering issues of poverty and development. In this instance, it helps if journalists covering such stories also have plenty of empathy, imagination and passion.

Vittachi always reminded journalists that “the news behind the news” was more important than the news itself. Dixit illustrates this with a well-known example: farmer suicides.

Farmer suicides in India have been making headlines for years. In 2014, there were 5,650 farmer suicides; the highest number of farmer suicides was recorded in 2004 when

18,241 farmers took their lives. Activists and researchers have come up with various reasons including monsoon failures, high debt burdens, bad government policies, mental health and family problems.

In his book *Dateline Earth: Journalism as if the planet mattered* (IPS Asia Pacific, 2010) Dixit says: “Thousands of cotton farmers have committed suicide in India because of falling prices and indebtedness. But each suicide is covered as an event by the reporter in the crime beat, and not investigated as a trend. The causes are rarely analysed. How deep are journalists willing, or allowed, to dig for context? Who does the selection of news, what are the selection criteria? In a society where the scales of social justice are skewed in favour of the rich and powerful, being ‘objective’ ends up perpetuating the status quo, and that is a bias. It is biased against the poor and left out. We aren’t being neutral when we cover only issues important to the dominant groups in society. So, instead of striving for ‘objectivity’, maybe we need to be ‘fair’.”

Dixit says the media need a paradigm shift in the way they approach stories. “Journalists should strive to cover deprivation and the cause of social injustice, not just their effects. It means each one of us having a conscience and using it: by striving to be fair in an unfair world.”

## CASE STUDY 1: POVERTY AND ALCOHOL: HOW TO EXPLORE THE NEXUS IN MEDIA?

Speaking at an event to mark World No Tobacco Day on 31 May 2016, President Maithripala Sirisena blamed the use of tobacco and alcohol for increasing poverty levels and declining health among the poor.

According to news reports, the President said more than LKR 500 million was being spent per day in Sri Lanka on tobacco and alcohol and the low income groups are spending 35% of their earnings on these. He said the government will take clear decisions with respect to alcohol and tobacco industry and use.

The nexus between alcohol, poverty and well-being among low income groups has long been studied. While adverse health impacts of high alcohol use is established, linkages to poverty are more complex. Do people remain poor because of their heavy spending on alcohol, or do poor people consume more alcohol as a means of escapism from drudgery?

Journalists need to be careful when covering this topic - it has socio-economic, public health and moral dimensions. Ideally, journalists should not bring their own moralistic viewpoints for or against alcohol (unless writing an opinion article), and instead limit themselves to facts, figures and expert viewpoints. There is a considerable volume of research by medical and social scientists on many facets of this issue.

*One 2010 paper noted, "The poor spent less than those with higher income on alcohol and tobacco, but the expenditure constituted a much larger slice of their income thus compromising their ability to meet basic needs. In low-income countries, damaging economic consequences start at lower levels of alcohol and tobacco consumption and affect a significant proportion of the population. Defining risk levels and guidelines on safe limits based purely on individual health harm has, at best, little meaning in such settings."* (Reference found at: [goo.gl/Gt4p5o](http://goo.gl/Gt4p5o))

In late June 2016, researcher Krishan J Siriwardhana started a Facebook discussion around this topic which he later turned into an opinion article in *Ravaya*. Two points that emerged: the problem is not drinking per se but spending too much on it; and while the two are co-related, it is not a simple, linear (cause-and-effect type) link. He also cited research by leading sociologist Dr Kalinga Tudor Silva on the poor estate workers in Sri Lanka's Central Province showing how they spend a high proportion of their low wages on alcohol, tobacco and betel. The mindset among some poor people of 'seeking temporary relief' in alcohol is not to be dismissed lightly, and needs further study according to Dr Silva.

A journalistic investigation on poverty-alcohol link would be more balanced if it looks at legalized and illicit liquor, health and sociological impacts and brings in the sentiments of some alcohol addicts who are poor.



## 7. REPORTING ON POVERTY: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

Given that poverty is a complex phenomenon, journalists who want to report with clarity, depth and empathy face a number of challenges.

One immediate, internal challenge is to overcome the apathy or indifference of many editors. As explained in sections 2 and 3, they consider poverty as an endlessly depressing topic. It is up to journalists to come up with new and interesting angles to persuade editors. The basis for a story idea can be new official statistics, academic research or ground level work by a charity. Or it could be the powerful story of an individual who worked herself out of poverty through innovation, hard work and persistence.

Once the internal ‘hurdle’ is cleared, a journalist working on any poverty related story needs to be aware of many other challenges. Some of these are listed here, with suggested strategies for coping.

- **Beware of official data:** Governments’ official poverty assessments and policies do not fully capture all facets of poverty. Politicians are anxious to show fast and vast reductions in poverty. Sometimes, under political pressure, government statisticians change definitions – which makes historical comparisons difficult or meaningless. Thus, for the complete picture, journalists need to reach out to multiple sources in government, academic and non-profit sectors (single source stories are never good, anyway).
- **Also question academic and charity data:** Good journalists must question everything – even information coming from seemingly passionate charity workers or highly credentialed academics. Many charities and NGOs tend to be well informed about micro level conditions at the ground level, but may lack the bigger (national level) picture. Some may even over-state their case. Likewise, certain academic studies are flawed by their small sample size or other methodological limitations.
- **Watch out for ‘source manipulation’:** Journalists need sources, and are ethically bound to protect their sources when confidentiality is involved. At the same time, journalists need to be cautious so that sources do not manipulate. Some government officials, researchers or charity workers may have their own agendas and could provide selective information or interpretations. The skeptical journalist questions everything including his trusted or friendly sources.

- **Remember, people are not numbers:** While statistics help our understanding, we should never limit our explorations of any issue to numbers alone. Behind every social or poverty related statistic are real men, women and children struggling to maintain a dignified life. Informed by numbers, look for the human interest. Try to personalise trends by talking to specific people or families.
- **Avoid stereotyping:** This is good advice for everyone, but especially for journalists. In this topic, society has various prejudices about the poor – as being lazy, untrustworthy and manipulative. These human characteristics are found among people of all socio-economic levels -- and not just among the poor. So journalists have to be careful to approach stories on poor people with an open, unbiased mind. Let the story be driven by specifics of the individual/s, communities and locations – with some statistical data providing background and context. Leave moral judgments out.
- **Consider gender perspectives:** Poverty is often the result of unequal power relations in societies. Women are disproportionately impacted by poverty which is made worse by various social and political factors. When covering poverty and development issues in the media, journalists need to be aware of, and sensitive to, these gender differences. This means more than tokenistically including women in stories. The gender differences need thoughtful analysis. See also box below.
- **Consider societal and cultural factors:** As explained in this guide, poverty is more than the lack of money. Societal and cultural factors also contribute to keeping people in poverty. Such cultural practices can be rooted in strong social hierarchies like caste, or in traditions that prevent girls and women from pursuing certain kinds of higher education, training or jobs. Whether we like it or not, these beliefs and practices are deep-rooted. They need to be acknowledged as contributing to certain situations of poverty and under-development.
- **Things change:** Sri Lanka is a post-war society in transition. Much is changing, and sometimes fast. Journalists are expected to report and analyze the latest conditions. For this, they must access the most recent data and the best informed experts. Any data source more than five years old should be avoided (except in the case of census of population, conducted once every 10 years). Impressions from old field visits or past interviews should be used with caution as ground realities can – and often do – change.

## GENDER AND POVERTY REDUCTION

Many of the world's poorest people are women who must, as the primary family caretakers and producers of food, shoulder the burden of tilling land, grinding grain, carrying water and cooking.

Equality between men and women is more than a matter of social justice - it's a fundamental human right. But gender equality also makes good economic sense. When women have equal access to education, and go on to participate fully in business and economic decision-making, they are a key driving force against poverty. Women with equal rights are better educated, healthier, and have greater access to land, jobs and financial resources. Their increased earning power in turn raises household incomes. By enhancing women's control over decision-making in the household, gender equality also translates into better prospects and greater well-being of children, reducing poverty of future generations.

Gender equality and women's empowerment is central to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Yet, while there are some positive trends in gender equality, there are still many areas of concern. Girls account for the majority of children not attending school; almost two-thirds of women in the developing world work in the informal sector or as unpaid workers in the home. Despite greater parliamentary participation, women are still outnumbered four-to-one in legislatures around the world.

**Extracted from: Gender and Poverty Reduction (Introduction) by UNDP**

[http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/povertyreduction/focus\\_areas/focus\\_gender\\_and\\_poverty.html](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/povertyreduction/focus_areas/focus_gender_and_poverty.html)

## CASE STUDY 2: HOW URBANIZED IS SRI LANKA?

The level of urbanization is an indicator of a country's economic development and the living standards of its people. So how urbanized is Sri Lanka? Many keep repeating a notion that 'we are predominantly rural', but is that really the case anymore?

The 2012 Census of Population and Housing categorised only 18.2% of the Lankan population as being urban. However, that figure is misleading because a narrow definition is being used. Currently, only those living in Municipal Council (MC) or Urban Council (UC) areas are considered urban. In reality, some Pradeshiya Sabha areas are just as urbanised.

In November 2015, speaking at a conference held in Colombo, Minister of Megapolis and Western Development Champika Ranawaka argued that Sri Lanka's urban population share is "probably as high as 48%". That is two and a half times higher than the current figure.

He mentioned as examples Pradeshiya Sabha areas like Homagama, Beruwala and Weligama that are administratively classified as 'rural' despite having many urban characteristics. His main concern: such misconceptions distort the country's policy decisions on infrastructure and urban development.

The World Bank's global lead for urban development strategies, Sumila Gulyani, present at the event, agreed that nearly half of Sri Lanka's population has already become urban. The Bank's own estimates are roughly the same, she said. "The official statistics of urban population in Sri Lanka is from 14% to 18% -- but if you look at the agglomeration, it is (actually) around 47%".

She added: "All South Asia countries under-state their urbanization level relative to, say, Latin America. In India it's the same story. The reason has traditionally been that the rural areas got more national subsidy programmes -- and no administration wanted to be called urban!"

Taking South Asia as a whole, 30% of its combined population now lives in cities. A massive rise in this urban share is expected in the coming decades. Sri Lanka cannot buck this trend.

Despite this, old myths linger on for years. The problem, Gulyani highlighted, is in the mismatch of capabilities. "If the (local government) council that is managing an urban area is a rural council, you are not going to see the kind of planning and urban management you need to see for productive urban growth."

Meanwhile, a new World Bank report titled *Leveraging Urbanization in South Asia: Managing Spatial Transformation for Prosperity and Livability* (September 2015) notes that Sri Lanka's share of the population officially classified as living in urban areas actually fell slightly between 2000 and 2010.

"These official statistics, however, miss considerable 'hidden' urbanization," says the report. It suggests that as much as one-third of Sri Lanka's population may be living in areas that, while not officially classified as urban, "nevertheless possess strong urban characteristics". The report tries to overcome our region's data deficiencies by drawing on some unconventional data sources -- such as nighttime lights and other forms of remotely sensed earth observation data.

Full text: <http://www.dailymirror.lk/94975/let-s-get-real-about-sri-lanka-s-urbanization>

### **CASE STUDY 3:**

## **TOILETS OR TELEPHONES? THAT'S THE WRONG QUESTION!**

Around the world, some 2.5 billion people don't have access to a clean, private toilet. World Toilet Day (November 19) champions this worthy cause, and those who advocate sanitation as a basic human right.

But sometimes single-issue activists get carried away. A case in point is the common headline: more people have mobile phones than access to toilets.

The often cited example is India, where the 2011 census found that 63.2% of Indian households had a telephone connection (mostly mobiles) but 53.1% didn't have access to any toilet facilities. The situation was worse in rural areas, where 67.3% had no toilets (close to 600 million people). Most are forced in to open defecation.

But that is a totally wrong comparison says Dr Rohan Samarajiva, who heads LIRNEasia, a Colombo-based think tank that studies information and communication technologies (ICTs).

He says that until a generation ago, privileged households in South Asia had a single fixed phone shared by a whole family. Much has changed since then. Costs of owning and using a mobile have come down so much that most people, even among the poor, can now afford to own and use one. Many now treat mobile phones as personal devices (i.e. not shared).

LIRNEasia's multi-country, large sample surveys in South and Southeast Asia since 2006 have shown how a growing number of phone users own multiple mobile SIMs. They switch between networks to benefit from various rates and packages.

As Samarajiva explains: "Mobiles are personal devices; toilets are generally a household amenity. The number of toilets is generally lower than the number of people living in the house. There is no way one can directly compare the number of mobile SIMs...with the numbers of toilets in a meaningful way."

If anyone really wants a legitimate mobile/phone to toilet comparison, Samarajiva suggests working with data from the demand side: census or representative-sample household surveys. He once did that for Sri Lanka, using data amassed by the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2009/10 conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics covering a countrywide sample of 22,500 households. He found that only in the richest Western Province that the number of households with phones came even close to the number of households with toilets for the residents' exclusive use.

It's not as if people willingly trade off toilets for mobile phones, as some activists argue. There are economic and infrastructure reasons why hundreds of millions don't have toilet facilities. Culture and education play a less significant role.

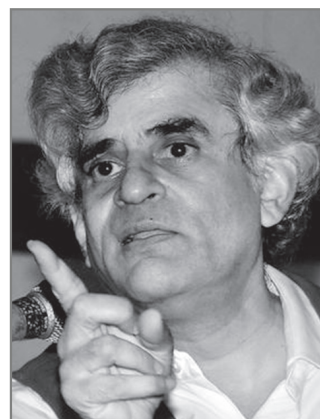
Sanitation is not simply a matter of investing public, private or charity money. Larger issues of water supply, land tenure and house ownership come into the picture. In many parts of South Asia, infrastructure development has lagged behind the growth of cities and towns.

The unmet sanitation needs of poor people is indeed a big story. It deserves political attention, practical technologies and meaningful investments. But bashing mobile phones through unrealistic comparisons will not advance that cause.

Adapted from: <https://collidecolumn.wordpress.com/2012/11/25/when-worlds-collide-43-toilets-or-telephones-thats-the-wrong-question/>

## 8. INSIGHTS FROM PATHFINDERS: P. SAINATH

Palagummi Sainath is an Indian journalist and photojournalist who has blazed new trails in covering social and economic inequality, rural affairs, poverty and the aftermath of globalisation in his native India. In all his work, he has gone in search of the human face of poverty. Economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has called him "one of the world's great experts on famine and hunger".



P SAINATH

After India embarked on economic liberalisation in 1991, he felt that the media's attention was moving from "news" to "entertainment": consumerism and lifestyles of the urban elite were gaining prominence in the newspapers which rarely carried news of the reality of poverty in India. "I felt that if the Indian press was covering the top 5 per cent, I should cover the bottom 5 per cent", he recalls.

In 1993 Sainath received a *Times of India* fellowship and took to the back roads in the 10 poorest districts of five Indian states. It involved covering nearly 100,000 km across India using 16 forms of transportation, including walking 5,000 km on foot over two years. The *Times of India* newspaper published 84 field-based articles written by Sainath during this period. Many were reprinted in his book, *Everybody Loves A Good Drought* (1996).

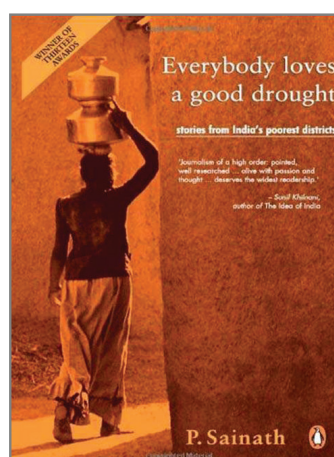
As he wrote in the introduction, his idea was to investigate the living conditions of the rural poor by spending time with them, and talking with them. But he read many official and academic reports in preparation, and compared that data with ground realities.

He mostly visited the field in the off-agricultural seasons. The questions he posed included: what do the poor do in some 200-240 days of the year during which there is no agriculture in their areas? How do they survive? What are their coping strategies? What kind of alternative livelihood do they find when not farming?

"The idea was to look at those conditions in terms of *processes*. Too often, poverty and deprivation get covered as *events*. That is, when some disaster strikes, when people die. Yet, poverty is about much more than starvation deaths or near famine conditions. It is the sum total of a multiplicity of factors. The weightage of some of these varies from region to region, society to society, culture to culture. But at the core is a fairly compact number of factors. Land, health, education, literacy, infant mortality rates and life expectancy are also some of them. Debt, assets, irrigation, drinking water, sanitation and jobs count too.

He added: “You can have the mandatory 2,400 or 2,100 calories a day and yet be very poor. India’s problems differ from those of a Somalia or Ethiopia in crisis. Hunger – again, just one aspect of poverty – is far more complex here. It is more low level, less visible and does not make for the dramatic television footage that a Somalia and Ethiopia do. That makes covering the process more challenging – and more important. Many who do not starve receive very inadequate nutrition. Children getting less food than they need can look quite normal. Yet poor nutrition can impair both mental and physical growth and they can suffer its debilitating impact all their lives. A person lacking minimal access to health at critical moments can face destruction almost as surely as one in hunger.”

Sainath’s field based reports touched on many and varied topics. He highlighted the realities of education and healthcare in rural India. He investigated how rural, small scale farmers are trapped by debt, weather anomalies and uncertain market prices. He documented how caste factors and bureaucracies are blocking the rural poor from improving their living standards. He studied the impacts of natural disasters like droughts and floods to see how affected communities coped with these disruptions. He raised broader questions like the rural people’s access to forests, and women’s right to income and property ownership.



Sainath uncovered large scale waste and corruption of public funds in the name of rural development.

Among his many examples:

- The case of a road to a village built to benefit a tribe where only one member of the tribe lives,
- A major dairy development project which, two years and Rs 20 million later, failed to yield even an additional litre of milk.

He not only wrote about problems and their underlying causes, but also about the resilience of the rural poor, the commitment of genuine NGO workers and of innovative solutions worked out at the grassroots levels. Occasionally, he featured honest public officials who were fighting their own system to serve the people.

He also critiqued the manner in which local and national level journalists are often misled by officials into believing – and reporting – that the poor were a big ‘problem’ standing in the way of India’s progress.



Sainath's writing had some impact. It provoked various governmental responses including the revamping of the Drought Management Programmes in Tamil Nadu; development of a policy on indigenous medical systems in Orissa, and revamping of the Area Development Programme for tribal people in Madhya Pradesh. He was instrumental in setting up the Agriculture Commission in Andhra Pradesh to suggest ways for improving agriculture in that state.

Sainath also inspired a generation of younger journalists to get out of their city based media offices to travel to remote locations of India, to talk and listen to the majority of India's poor living in the villages.

*Everybody Loves A Good Drought* is in its 34th printing, and is now being used in over 100 universities in India and overseas. In the late nineties, Nikhil Chakravartty, India's then senior-most editor, described Sainath's work as "the conscience of the Indian nation."

In 2007, Sainath became a winner of the Ramon Magsaysay Award, Asia's most prestigious prize (and often referred to as the 'Asian Nobel'), for Journalism Literature and Creative Communications Arts. He was given the award for his "passionate commitment as a journalist to restore the rural poor to India's national consciousness."

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## 9. INSIGHTS FROM PATHFINDERS: KALPANA SHARMA

“Journalists are good or bad, professional or unprofessional. I am not sure if other labels, such as ‘environmental’ or ‘developmental’, ought to be tagged on to journalists.”

So says Kalpana Sharma, one of India’s most experienced journalists who has been covering development and social justice issues for decades. She has also ‘walked her talk’ -- setting a shining example for journalists everywhere.

Kalpana has been both a path-finder and trail-blazer in journalism that cares. In my view, she set the gold standard in investigating and critiquing development in the Indian context.



**KALPANA SHARMA**

During her career, Kalpana worked with the *Times of India*, *Indian Express* and the feisty news weekly *Himmat* (1964-1981). But it was at *The Hindu* newspaper, from where she retired a few years ago as Deputy Editor, that she excelled in covering the ‘other India’ largely ignored by most of other mainstream media.

The Other India’s denizens are over 400 million people living under the global poverty line of \$1.25 per day – who make up around a third of the world’s total poor.

Kalpana’s stock in trade has always been a mix of curiosity, sense of social justice, wanderlust and a deep passion for people. She is living proof that quality journalism can be pursued even in these turbulent and uncertain times for mainstream, corporatised media.

From female infanticide and farmer suicides to religious fundamentalism and patriarchy, Kalpana has been covering under-reported or misunderstood stories on a sustained basis. To do so, she frequently goes to the field, networks with researchers and activists, and keeps her eyes, ears and mind wide open.

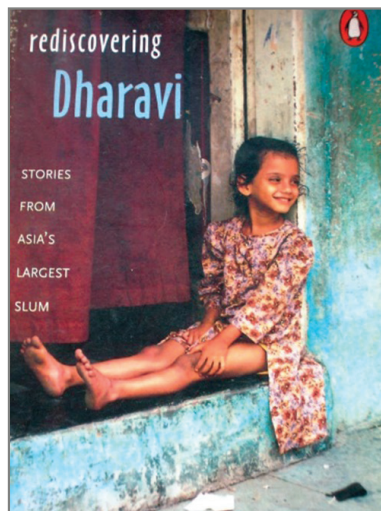
Kalpana’s reporting from the ‘Ground Zero’ of many disasters and conflict zones has highlighted the multiple struggles of people living on the margins of survival.

For many such communities, a headline-creating event is just the latest episode in their prolonged and silent suffering. The media pack that descends on them after a sudden development can’t seem very different from the assorted politicians who turn up unflinchingly during election campaigns.

Once in the field, she sees connections often missed by other journalists looking for a quick sound bite or dramatic image. Unlike some news hounds, she doesn’t exploit the misery of

affected people. And she returns to the same locations months or years later to follow up.

She shared these post-disaster insights in a chapter contributed to *Communicating Disasters: An Asia Pacific Resource Book* (TVEAP & UNDP, 2007).<sup>7</sup> As she wrote: “Much of disaster reporting sounds and reads the same because the reporters only see what is in front of them, not what lies behind the mounds of rubble, figuratively speaking. What was this region before it became this disaster area? How were social relations between different groups? What was its history? What were its relations with the state government? Was it neglected or was it favoured? How important was it to the politics of the state?”



Kalpana takes a particular interest in the plight of poor women. She often writes about women who struggle on the margins of the margin. A recurrent theme is how invisible ‘superwomen’ hold India’s social fabric together.

Many communities and production systems – from domestic work and child care to waste disposal and farming – would grind to a halt if these unseen and unsung women took even a day off. In reality, they just can’t afford such luxuries.

For 19 years, Kalpana wrote a biweekly column in *The Hindu* titled The Other Half (it was phased out at the end of 2015). In her columns, she took a current topic – from politics, culture, sport or environment -- and explored its gender dimensions. She did so by carefully blending facts, personal insights and opinion that makes her writing very different to the activist shrill.

And it’s not just in the rural hinterland of India that Kalpana has travelled listening and talking to people. Living in the megacity of Mumbai, she has been equally concerned with its issues of poverty, gender disparity, environmental mismanagement and governance.

In 2000, she wrote an insightful book about the Dharavi slum in Mumbai, said to be Asia’s largest, looking at both its social inequalities and the people’s admirable resilience. Titled *Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia's largest slum* (Penguin), it was called ‘a model of sane, human, down-to-earth writing’. This was years before the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) showcased the location to a global audience.

Kalpana Sharma’s work is now published by The *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW), Scroll.in (current affairs website).

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<sup>7</sup> *Communicating Disasters: An Asia Pacific Resource Book*. Edited by Nalaka Gunawardene and Frederick Noronha. TVE Asia Pacific and UNDP Asian Regional Centre, Bangkok. 2007. Available at: <http://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/library/climate-and-disaster-resilience/communicating-disasters-resource-book.html>

## HOW BEST TO DEPICT THE POOR IN MEDIA?

Set and filmed in India, *Slumdog Millionaire* is the story of a young uneducated man from the slums of Mumbai who appears on the Indian TV's version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* (*Kaun Banega Crorepati*) and does so well to reach the final question that the game show host and the police suspect him of cheating.

Some Indians felt that their country's ugly urban underbelly had been magnified by locating and filming the story in Mumbai slums. But senior journalist Kalpana Sharma did not see it that way.

"If through (the movie) the world gets a peek at an India inhabited by millions of people who continue to live their lives without clean water, sanitation or electricity, what is the problem?" she asked.

In a perceptive essay titled *Shantytowns of the Mind*, written in *The Indian Express* in early January 2009, Kalpana flagged important concerns: "*Slumdog Millionaire*'s success raises some deeper questions. How do we depict poverty as writers, filmmakers, journalists? Is it fair to expect us all the time to give a full, balanced, sensitive portrayal? Or is it inevitable that we write, film, for our audiences? And if, as a byproduct, people are sensitized, so be it. Also, if they are annoyed, so be it. If we are considered exploitative, so be it."

Kalpana ended with these words: "In the end you realise as a writer, a journalist or a filmmaker, that the best you can do is to shine a torch, a searchlight, on an entrenched problem. But the solution will not be found merely by that illumination. For that, there are many more steps to be taken.

"*Slumdog Millionaire* has focused its lens on the children of India's slums through a work of fiction. What we do to change their future is the non-fiction that has yet to be written."

Full text: <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/shantytowns-of-the-mind/>



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