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Multidimensional Poverty and Vulnerability in Sri Lanka, 2024-2025

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Key findings and policy implications

We assess multidimensional poverty and vulnerability in Sri Lanka using the BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey data for 2024-2025.

- Nearly one quarter of all Sri Lankans are multidimensionally poor, and nearly one half are multidimensionally vulnerable.
- The multidimensionally poor are deprived in 45% of the weighted poverty indicators, while the multidimensionally vulnerable are deprived in 37% of the weighted vulnerability indicators.
- Estate areas have the highest rates of multidimensional poverty (63%) and vulnerability (83%), but most of the multidimensionally poor (77%) and vulnerable (79%) live in rural areas because nearly 8 out of 10 Sri Lankans live there.
- Central province has the highest multidimensional poverty rate (38%), while Northern (75%), Eastern (65%), and Uva (60%) provinces have the highest multidimensional vulnerability rates.
- Western province has one of the lowest multidimensional poverty rates (17%) and the lowest multidimensional vulnerability rates (35%).
- The main sources of multidimensional poverty are health deprivations and standard of living (assets and basic services) deprivations.
- The main sources of multidimensional vulnerability are shocks, unproductive debt, poor health, and inadequate schooling.

Policy Implications for Sri Lanka

- The government of Sri Lanka should consider using multidimensional poverty and vulnerability measures to re-assess district-level poverty for the first-stage allocation of Aswesuma resources.
- Refinements and/or extensions of these multidimensional poverty and vulnerability measures could prove useful for assessing potential policy levers for reducing current poverty and the vulnerability of households to future poverty.

Background

In this research note, we use the nationally representative BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey data to explore multidimensional poverty and vulnerability in Sri Lanka. We do this by estimating two indices that were established for Sri Lanka based on the pathbreaking work of Alkire and Foster (2011): the Multidimensional Poverty Index (*MPI*), applied to Sri Lanka by the Sri Lankan Department of Census and Statistics (DCS, 2021), and the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (*MVI*), applied to Sri Lanka by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023). We construct household-level deprivation scores for both indices according to their original definitions (see the Appendix Table), with minor adaptations only.[1]

Advantageously for the Sri Lankan context, the BRIGHT survey provides recent, nationally and subnationally representative data, thus lending itself to providing a snapshot of multidimensional poverty and vulnerability in Sri Lanka in 2024-2025 and how it varies geographically. This is particularly timely given that Sri Lanka has recently incurred the worst economic crisis in its history due to unsustainable debt financing that was exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. In March 2022, the Rajapaksa government defaulted on its sovereign debt, leading to a sharp decline in the value of the Sri Lankan rupee. The combination of a depreciated currency and bans on a wide range of imported goods – including fertilizers – resulted in 80% consumer price inflation in the space of just a few months in 2022. This, in turn, led to a 30% decline in real wages, high rates of internal migration and emigration overseas, and considerable economic and social turmoil.

On a more positive note, the reform agreement between Sri Lanka's government and the IMF resulted in a fresh impetus to reform the country's social protection policies. This resulted in the poorly-targeted Samurdhi program effectively being replaced by the new Aswesuma program. Unlike Samurdhi, Aswesuma adopts a two-stage targeting approach in which funding is first allocated proportionally to each of Sri Lanka's 25 districts based on 2019 estimates of *monetary* poverty from the DCS Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), and then within districts funds are targeted among registered households' according to their 22-component multidimensional Aswesuma Deprivation Scores.

In this context, insights from the BRIGHT survey on multidimensional poverty (*MP*) are highly relevant given the conceptual similarities between the *MP* and the Aswesuma deprivation scores. Moreover, while monetary poverty is an important indicator of economic welfare, and its use in targeting Aswesuma was well justified, monetary poverty indicators have limitations. For example, monetary poverty focuses narrowly on people's inability to acquire goods and service, whereas indicators of multidimensional poverty are more holistic, broadening the scope to include deprivations in people's capabilities to function in society. Further, HIES-based monetary poverty estimates from 2019 may not be a strong predictor of poverty for the purposes of Aswesuma targeting in 2025. In an effort to fill in this gap, The World Bank (2025) has annually used microsimulations since 2022 to estimate trends in monetary poverty using the 2019 as a baseline. Their simulations predict that monetary poverty increased from 13% in 2019 to 24.5% in 2025, with new segments of the population entering into poverty – including a tripling of the poverty rates in urban and estate areas, and a doubling in rural areas. Although the accuracy of these simulations is uncertain, the broad conclusions about changing poverty patterns are undoubtedly true. Importantly,

[1] Due to information on sources of household cooking fuel not being collected in the BRIGHT data, this indicator is not included in the MPI calculated here. The weight for this indicator is distributed to the other indicators in the "Standard of Living" dimension. Similarly, the absence of information on households' ownership of radios in the BRIGHT data affected the measure of asset ownership for the MVI calculated here.

the present analysis using the BRIGHT survey data provides estimates of poverty that do not rely on pre-COVID data and that are methodologically distinct from monetary poverty measurement.

This study also examines multidimensional vulnerability (*MV*). Although conceptually related, multidimensional poverty and multidimensional vulnerability measure different aspects of wellbeing. *MP* deprivation scores identify households that are currently deprived, meaning that they are unable to meet their basic needs in multiple dimensions like adequate nutrition, sanitation, or housing. In contrast, the *MV* deprivation scores focus on the factors that put households at risk of falling into poverty in the future. Consequently, they use forward-looking indicators such as education, unemployment, debt status, and the capacity to adapt to disasters – criteria that signal whether households are equipped to deal with future economic hardship. This distinction is important in that households can be multidimensionally vulnerable without being multidimensionally poor. It is especially important in a country that is highly vulnerable to diverse economic and agroclimatic shocks, including climate change.

Consistent with DCS (2021), we classify individuals as being multidimensionally poor if they live in households that are deprived in at least one third of the weighted indicators that make up the *MP* deprivation score. Similarly, we follow UNDP (2023) and classify individuals as multidimensionally vulnerable if they live in households that are deprived in at least one quarter of the weighted indicators that make up the *MV* deprivation score.

The BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey of Sri Lanka 2024-2025

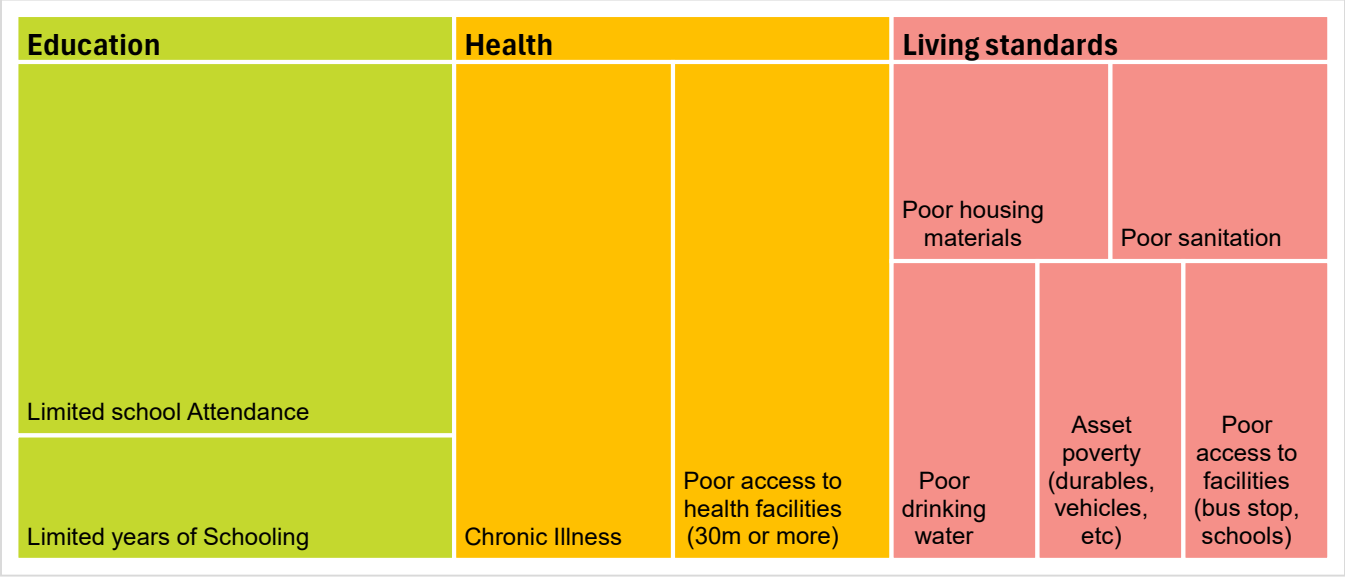
In March 2024, the Sri Lankan Prime Minister requested CGIAR support "for economic revival … including innovations that integrate livelihoods, food and nutrition security, and resilience." In response, The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and The International Water Management Institute (IWMI) launched The Building Resilient and Inclusive Growth and Holistic Transformation (BRIGHT) Project under the CGIAR Science Program on Policy Innovations. Given the absence of recent survey data on Sri Lanka's economic and social welfare since the onset of the 2022 economic crisis, the BRIGHT project implement the first ever truly multi-thematic household survey, The BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey of Sri Lanka.

The survey interviewed male and female members from 6,850 households across all provinces and districts of Sri Lanka between November 2024 and March 2025. The BRIGHT survey is representative of urban, rural and estate populations, and of each of Sri Lanka's provinces, and was also implemented in each of Sri Lanka's 25 districts. The survey is representative through both its three-stage cluster sampling approach and the use of subnational population data from the DCS. Content-wise, the BRIGHT survey builds on large-scale surveys conducted by IFPRI in Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and dozens of other countries (see https://www.ifpri.org/publications/datasets/). However, the BRIGHT survey was uniquely multi-thematic in the Sri Lanka context, covering household food and non-food expenditure, monetary poverty, education, health, housing, assets, employment and livelihoods, farm and non-farm businesses, women's empowerment, psychological wellbeing, nutrition knowledge and anthropometry, social protection, food, water and energy insecurity, debt, migration, climate change adaptation, and exposure to shocks, among other topics. More details can be found on the BRIGHT website: https://www.ifpri.org/project/bright-sri-lanka/.

Measurement of Multidimensional Poverty and Vulnerability

The *MP* and *MV* deprivation scores are both composite measures that use a wide array of different individual and household level indicators of deprivation, which are described in more detail in Appendix Tables 1 and 2. The *MP* deprivation score is a composite of three dimensions - education, health and living standards - that each receive an equal one-third weight (Figure 1). In the Education dimension, the *MP* deprivation score gives a higher weight to limited school attendance among school-age children (75%) and a lower weight to limited years of schooling among adults (25%). In the Health dimension, it gives equal weight to at least one household member having a chronic health condition and to the household living 30 minutes or more from the nearest health facility. The Living Standards dimension is based on applying equal weights to five component indicators: poor housing materials, asset poverty, poor drinking water, poor sanitation, and poor access to facilities.

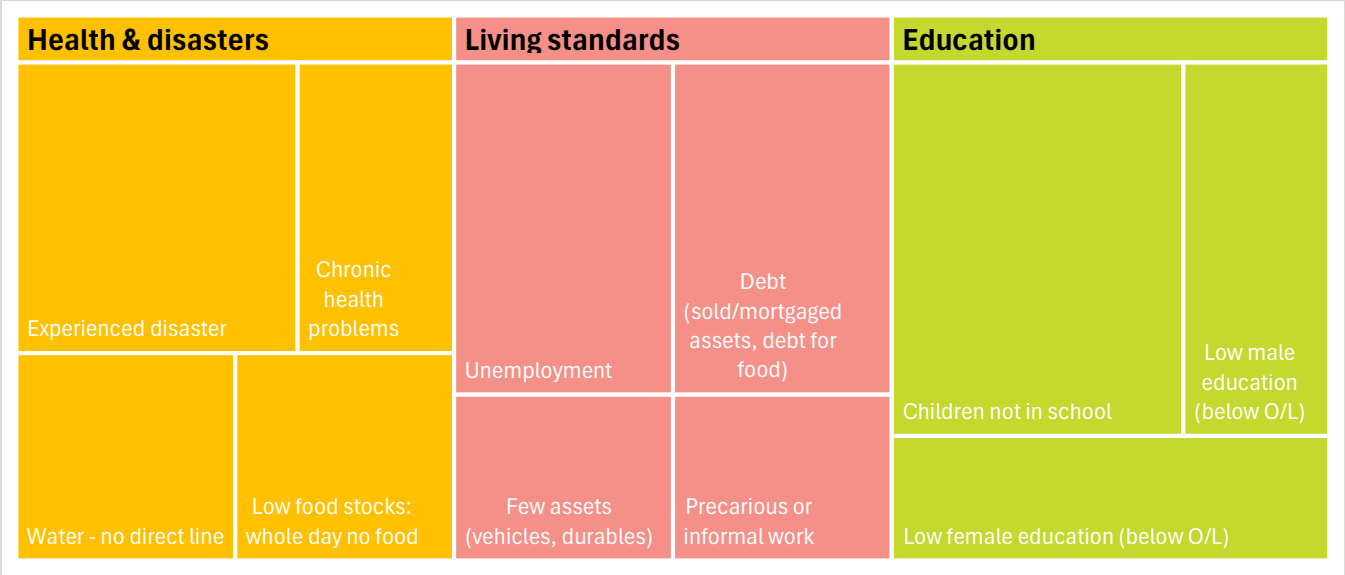
Figure 1: Components and weights of the Multidimensional Poverty Deprivation Score



Source: Authors' derivation from Alkire and Foster (2011).

The *MV* deprivation score also gives equal weight to three dimension (Figure 2), although Health is replaced by Health and Disasters, and includes larger weights on households having experienced disasters in the past year, not having direct water lines, and having low food stocks (i.e. going a whole day without food in the past year). The Living Standards dimension is also composed of different indicators, including unemployment, household debt, and precarious or informal work, as well as lack of household assets. The Education dimension is captured by at least one school-age child not being in school, and low levels of male and female adult education (not having an adult female/male household member who completed O levels).

Figure 2: Components and weights of the Multidimensional Vulnerability Deprivation Score



Source: Authors' derivation from UNDP (2023).

Key Findings on Multidimensional Poverty and Vulnerability in Sri Lanka

As illustrated in Table 1, **nearly one quarter (24.2%) of all Sri Lankans are multidimensionally poor**. According to the intensity of poverty, each poor person is deprived in 44.6% of the weighted poverty indicators. This is substantially above the one-third cutoff that is used to classify people as poor, indicating that the multidimensionally poor are deprived in many indicators, not just effectively in one third of them. Consequently, according to the *MPI* (headcount ratio x intensity), the multidimensionally poor experience 11.4% of the total deprivations that would be experienced if all people in Sri Lanka were poor and deprived in all indicators.

48.1% of all Sri Lankans are multidimensionally vulnerable. This indicates that nearly half of the population is at risk of falling into poverty in the future. According to the intensity of vulnerability, the multidimensionally vulnerable are deprived in 36.9% of the weighted vulnerability indicators, which is also substantially above the 25% cutoff for classifying individuals as vulnerable. This means that the vulnerable experience 17.9% of the total possible deprivations in the population.

Table 1: National Multidimensional Poverty and Vulnerability Statistics

	National	Urban	Rural	Estate
Multidimensional Poverty				
Headcount ratio (*H*) - % poor	24.2%	15.7%	23.9%	62.8%
Intensity (*A*) - % of deprivations among poor	44.6%	43.6%	44.5%	46.6%
MPI = *H* x *A*	10.8%	6.8%	10.6%	29.3%
Multidimensional Vulnerability				
Headcount ratio (*H*) - % vulnerable	48.1%	38.4%	48.2%	83.1%
Intensity (*A*) - % of deprivations among vulnerable	36.9%	35.5%	36.7%	42.1%
MVI = *H* x *A*	17.8%	13.6%	17.7%	35.0%

Source: BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey, 2024-2025

Multidimensional poverty and vulnerability across urban, rural and estate areas

Estate areas face significantly higher rates of multidimensional poverty and vulnerability compared to both rural and urban areas. **Nearly two thirds (62.8%) of the population in estate areas is multidimensionally poor, and 83.1% is at risk of future poverty.** In contrast, **23.6% of the rural population is poor (with 48.2% vulnerable) and 15.7% of the urban population is poor (with 38.4% vulnerable).**

The intensity of multidimensional poverty in estate areas (46.6%) does not differ substantially from rural (44.5%) areas, indicating that the degree of poverty (percent of indicators deprived) *among the poor* is similar in estate and rural areas. The difference is that a much greater share of the population in estate areas is poor compared to rural areas (62.8% vs. 23.6%).

Estate areas carry a disproportionate burden of poverty and vulnerability relative to their population size. As illustrated in Table 2, estate areas constitute only 4.4% of the total population (compared to 17.0% in urban areas). Despite being four times smaller than the urban population, estate areas account for nearly the same share of the nation's total multidimensional poverty (11.8%) as the larger urban areas do.

Table 2: Distribution of Population by multidimensional poverty and vulnerability

	Population share	Multidimensional poverty	Multidimensional vulnerability
Location			
Urban	16.9%	11.0%	13.5%
Rural	78.6%	77.5%	78.8%
Estate	4.4%	11.5%	7.7%

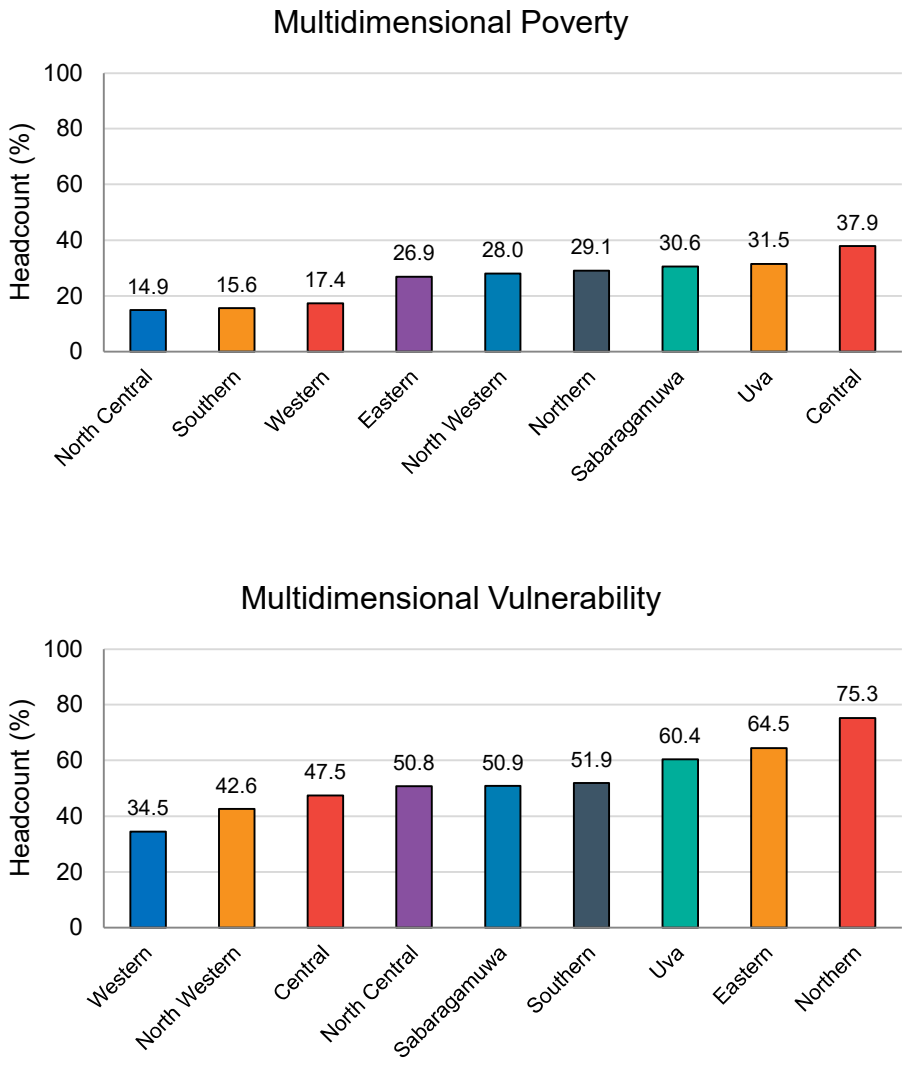
Source: BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey, 2024-2025

While the estate population has the highest individual rates of multidimensional poverty and vulnerability, the majority of the nation's poor and vulnerable citizens actually reside in rural areas (Table 2). Rural areas thus account for the overwhelming majority of all the poor and vulnerable people simply because they house the largest segment of the national population (nearly 79%): **76.5% of the multidimensionally poor and 79.1% of the multidimensionally vulnerable in Sri Lanka live in rural areas.**

Multidimensional poverty and vulnerability across by province

There are significant disparities in both multidimensional poverty and vulnerability across provinces (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Multidimensional Poverty/Vulnerability Headcount Ratios (%) by Province



Source: BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey, 2024-2025

Highest Multidimensional Poverty: Central province has the highest rate of multidimensional poverty at 37.9%. This follows in part because of the high concentration of the estate population located in the province (50% of the total national estate population lives there, and 17% of the provincial population lives in estate areas).

Highest Multidimensional Vulnerability: Northern (75.3%), Eastern (64.5%), and Uva (60.4%) provinces show the highest rates of multidimensional vulnerability. Although smaller shares of the populations in these provinces are multidimensionally poor compared to Central province, their populations are at greater risk of falling into poverty in the future. This follows from households in these provinces experiencing more weather-, pest-, and/or livestock-disease-related shocks than those in other provinces, including Central. This is an important and somewhat worrying result, given that Northern and Eastern provinces are more likely to be adversely affected by climate change due to their low and potentially declining rainfall levels.

Lowest Multidimensional Poverty and Vulnerability: Western province has the lowest multidimensional vulnerability rate (34.5%) and one of the lowest poverty rates (17.4%), reflecting its high urbanization rate (64%) and better economic infrastructure compared to all other provinces.

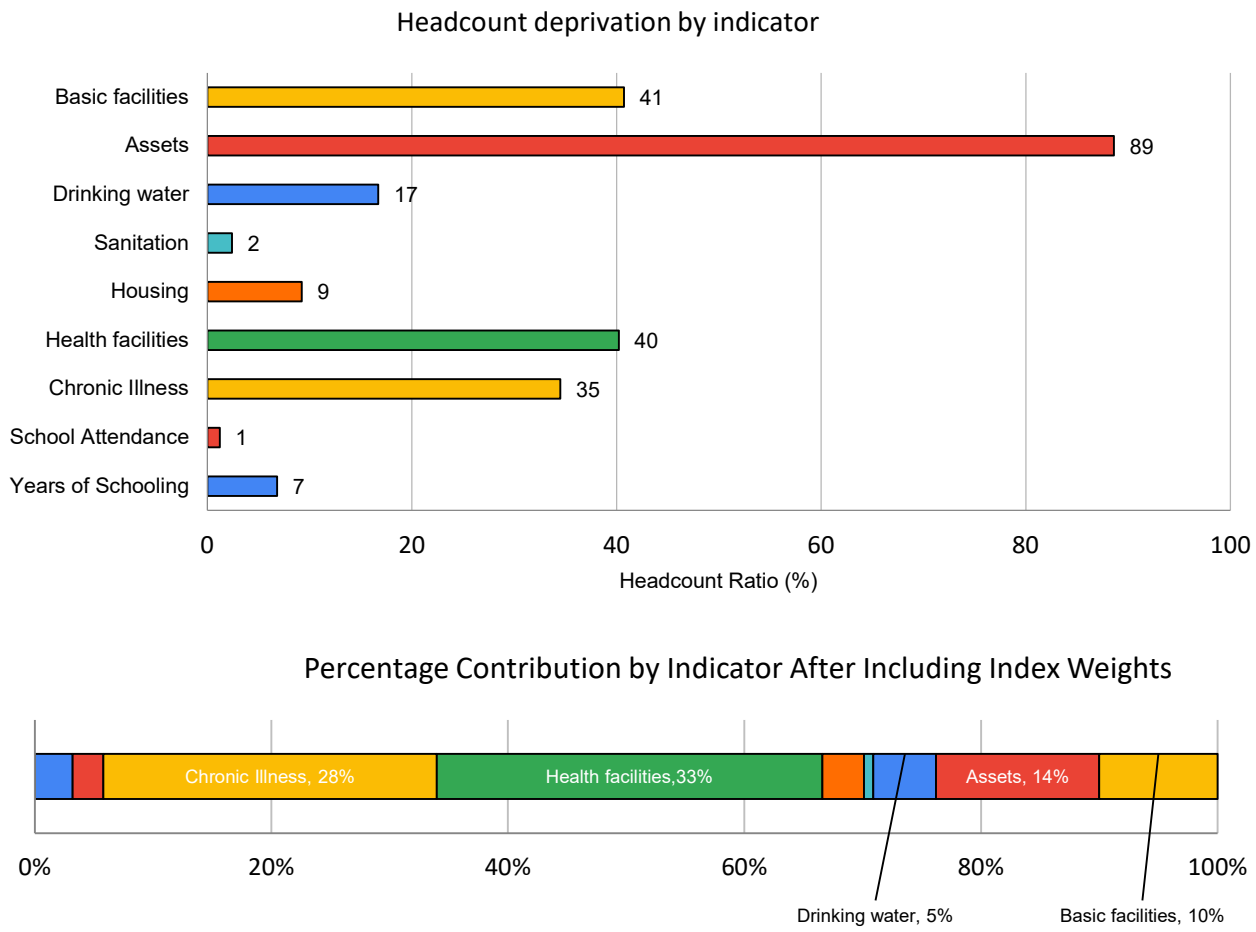
Components of Multidimensional Poverty & Vulnerability

The main components of multidimensional poverty – in terms of weighted contributions to total poverty - in Sri Lanka (Figure 4) are the Health dimension (limited access to health facilities and chronic illness) and Standard of Living dimension (lack of assets and limited access to basic facilities) (see Appendix for precise definitions of these indicators).

Health Deprivation: Nearly 40% of the total population lacks adequate access to health facilities, and over 34% are deprived due to chronic illness in their households. The combined impact of these two health indicators alone accounts for 59.2% of the total multidimensional poverty. This suggests that policies targeting health may be critical for the most substantial reductions in national multidimensional poverty. This may also reflect the adverse impacts of the economic crisis on health, which resulted in rising mortality and morbidity rates, and reduced access/affordability to medicines.

Standard of Living Deprivation: Asset deprivation is the most widespread multidimensional poverty deprivation, affecting almost nine out of ten people (88.7%) in the country. This is followed by deprivation in the basic services indicator, in which 40.6% of the population does not have adequate access to such services as a bus stop or school. Despite their high prevalences, the contribution of these indicators to overall multidimensional poverty is lower than the health indicators due to lower individual weights assigned to standard of living indicators. The combined impact of asset and basic-facilities deprivations is nonetheless 23.7% of the total multidimensional poverty.

Figure 4: The Components of Multidimensional Poverty



Source: BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey, 2024-2025

Turning to the more forward-looking multidimensional vulnerability indicator, , there is a clear shift in focus from basic facility deprivations to economic and environmental risk factors (e.g. debt and disaster) as the main threats to future poverty, though individual resilience (e.g. education and health) is also important (Figure 3).

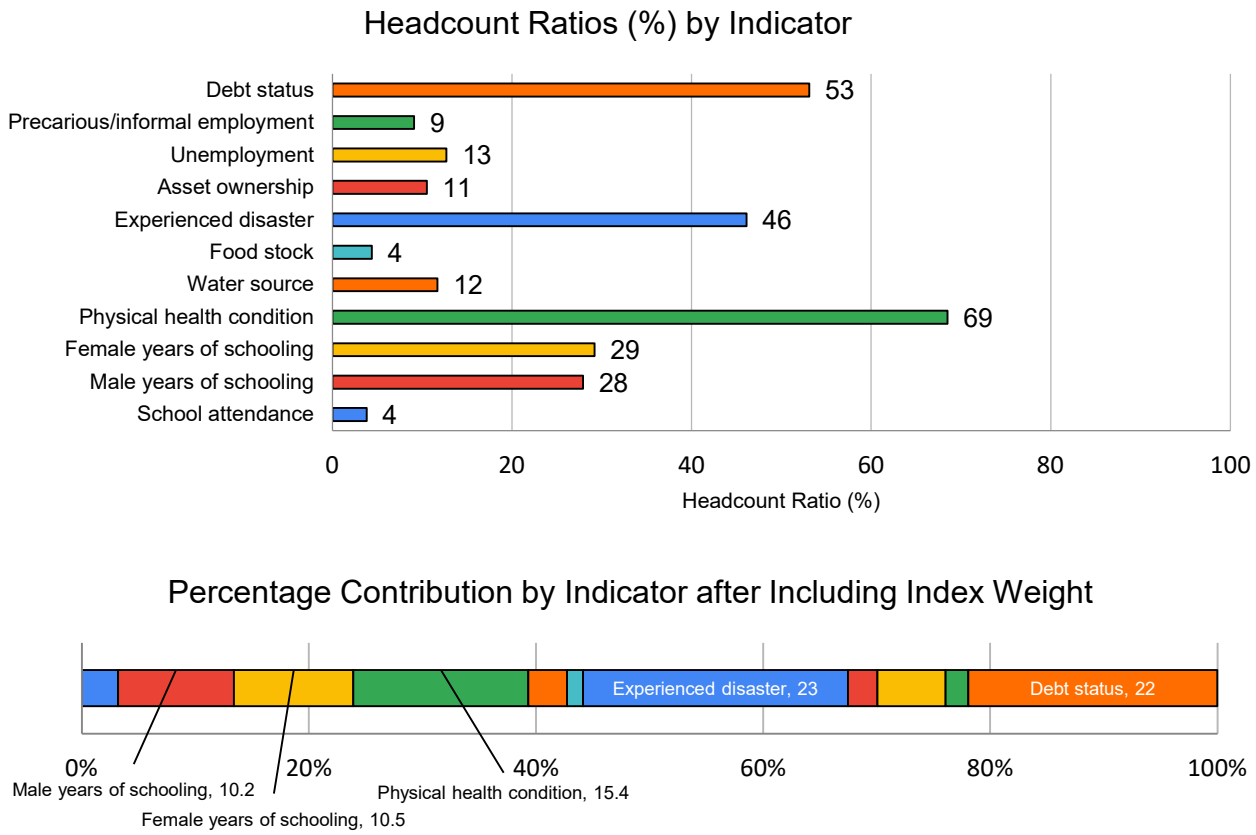
Experienced disaster: Over 45% of the population was impacted by weather, pest, or livestock disease shocks in the previous year. This is the most significant risk factor pushing people toward poverty, accounting for 23% of multidimensional vulnerability in Sri Lanka.

Debt status: More than half of the population of Sri Lanka (53%) is indebted in order to cover household basic needs. This deprivation accounts for 21.6% of national multidimensional vulnerability.

Physical Health Conditions: Over two-thirds (68%) of the population lives in a household with a member suffering from at least one health condition. Accounting for 15.2 percent of multidimensional vulnerability, poor health outcomes clearly remain a challenge for reducing current and future poverty.

Years of Schooling: Roughly one third (32%) of the population lives in households in which no adult has completed adequate years of schooling (O-level or higher), which is essential for income generation and resilience against shocks. Deprivations in male and female years of schooling contributed a combined 22% to total multidimensional vulnerability.

Figure 5: Components of Multidimensional Vulnerability



Source: BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey, 2024-2025

Correlations between Multidimensional Poverty Index and the Aswesuma Deprivation Score

Finally, we assess correlations between the Multidimensional Poverty Index and Multi-deprivation Score used for Aswesuma social protection targeting, at the national level, but also with regions and provinces. These correlations are moderately strong (r = 0.46 at the national level) suggesting that there is substantial overlap between the two indices, but also some differences, implying that they capture somewhat different dimensions of poverty. One area for future research could be to assess which types of poverty indicators – monetary, multidimensional, deprivation scores – perform best in predicting independently measured outcomes such as food insecurity, malnutrition or dietary quality.

Policy Implications for Sri Lanka

Despite substantial progress against poverty in the first two decades of the 21st Century, Sri Lanka's 2022 economic crisis substantially reversed many of the gains. A key policy priority must therefore be to rapidly accelerate poverty reduction in both the short-and-medium and longer terms. In this study we found that:

(a) Multidimensional poverty is high, affecting around one quarter of the population, but being substantially higher in estate areas (62%) and rural areas (25%) than urban areas (12%)
(b) Multidimensional vulnerability is also high, notably so in the north and east of the country, areas that are currently more vulnerable to disasters and also more vulnerable to future climate change.

Key policy questions and implications of these findings are:

(1) The government of Sri Lanka should consider using the *MP* and *MV* deprivation scores to re-assess district-level poverty rates for the first-stage allocation of Aswesuma funds. There are strong rationales for doing so. First, BRIGHT data are far more up to date (2024-2025) than HIES 2019 data. Second, multidimensional poverty and vulnerability are, by definition, more holistic indicators than monetary poverty alone. Third, should the government desire more disaggregated district or sub-district data on *MP* or *MV*, this could be cost-effectively collected by phone surveys. These measures could also be assessed as alternative to the multidimensional Aswesuma deprivation score, across which there is already substantial overlap.
(2) The government of Sri Lanka and its partners should consider using the Multidimensional Vulnerability to assess geographical or household level targeting for programs designed to improve resilience to climate change and other shocks, including shock-response social protection, asset-building programs and climate-smart agricultural interventions.
(3) Future policy-relevant research could explore refinements and/or extensions to these *MP* and *MV* measures. Analyses that explore correlations and causes of multidimensional poverty and vulnerability – and their various sub-components – could prove useful for assessing potential policy levers for reducing current poverty and the vulnerability of households to future poverty.

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APPENDIX TABLE

Table A1. Multidimensional Poverty

Dimension	No.	Indicator	A household is considered deprived if it/its…	Weight
Education	1	Years of Schooling	Has at least one member (aged 17+) who hasn't passed the G.C.E Ordinary Level (O-Level) Exam.	1/12
	2	School Attend-ance	Has any school-age child (aged 5-16) who is not at-tending school.	1/4
Health	3	Chronic Illness	Has any member who is suffering from chronic ill-ness that has stopped their usual activities or job for a few weeks or more, in the past year.	1/6
	4	Access to health facilities	Access to a health facility takes 30 minutes or more.	1/6
Standards of Living	5	Housing	Uses semi-permanent materials for the walls, floor, or roof of their house.	1/15
	6	Sanitation	Sanitary facility is not improved, or it is shared with other households.	1/15
	7	Drinking water	Has no access to a safe source of drinking water, or the time to collect it is at least 15 mins, or there has been one or more months in the past year when there wasn't as much water in the household as the family would have liked, or the quality of drinking water is not improved.	1/15
	9	Assets	Does not have at least one of TV, washing machine, fridge, computer, motorbike, three-wheeler, car, van, bus or lorry and does not have more than one of land, livestock, agriculture/fishing equipment (tractor, thresher, combine harvester, fishing boat, fishing nets).	1/15
	10	Basic facilities	Requires 15 minutes or more to reach the nearest bus stop, or 30 minutes or more to reach a mem-ber's school.	1/15

Table A2. Multidimensional Vulnerability

Dimension	No.	Indicator	A household is considered deprived if…	Weight
Education	1	School attend-ance	At least one person of school-going age is not attending school or if at least one person who is 17-18 years old is neither attending school nor em-ployed.	1/6
	2	Male years of schooling	No male aged 18-65 years has passed at least Ordinary Level.	1/12
	3	Female years of schooling	No female aged 18-65 years has passed at least Ordinary Level.	1/12
Health and Disasters	4	Physical health condition	At least one member aged 18-65 has a health condition.	5/72
	5	Water source	The household does not have a direct water line.	5/72
	6	Food stock	There was a time in the past year, when any mem-ber of household went without eating for whole day because of a lack of money or other resources.	5/72
	7	Experienced dis-aster	The household has been impacted by a flood, landslide, drought, unpredictable weather, pests, or disease to livestock, in the past year.	1/8
Living Standards	9	Asset ownership	The household does not own more than two of the following items: mobile phone, TV, laptop, bicycle, motorbike, washing machine, fridge, three-wheeler, boat, and does not own a car or a truck.	1/18
	10	Unemployment	Any of the members aged 18-65 years are unem-ployed and looking for a job.	1/9
	11	Precarious and informal employment	Any of the members 18-65 years are working as a casual/domestic/unpaid worker.	1/18
	12	Debt status	It is indebted to cover food needs, or have mort-gaged any asset, or sold belongings to meet in-come needs.	1/9

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