Challenges to Achieve Responsive and Accountable Governance in Social Protection in Sri Lanka[1]

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Abstract

Social protection is a critical tool for promoting economic and social inclusion, reducing inequality and poverty, addressing vulnerabilities, and investing in human development. Social protection is viewed as nationally owned policies and instruments that provide income or in-kind support, protect from deprivations and exclusion, and empower individuals and households by increasing productivity and capabilities. Responsive and accountable governance plays a vital role in removing barriers and ensuring effective checks and balances, enabling citizens to fully benefit from social protection (UNDP, 2022).

The objective of this research is to understand the challenges to achieving responsive and accountable governance in social protection, which hinder citizens from fully benefiting from social protection in Sri Lanka. This paper will draw on one of the key thematic areas identified in UNDP's Social Protection Offer 2.0, which is responsive and accountable governance. It plays vital role in removing barriers and ensuring effective checks and balances, enabling citizens to fully benefit from social protection (ibid). In this context the challenges in governance are explained through two dimensions: 1) Mechanisms and Administrative systems dimention and 2) Supply and demand dimention. These dimensions are used to explore challenges such as lack of transparency, discrimination, mismanagement and corruption in the delivery system. In addition, the research explored facilitating nature of operational communication to achieve responsive and accountable governance in social protection.

The research used qualitative methods, and the study covered seven provinces in Sri Lanka. Data was collected from over 300 research participants using Focus Group Discussions, In-depth Interviews, Key Informant Interviews, and Participatory Observations tools. Qualitative data was analyzed using the framework approach, which utilized pre-defined codes according to the thematic areas defined under Responsive and Accountable Governance in UNDP's Social Protection Offer 2.0 (ibid).

By explaining these challenges, the study provides insights for policymakers and practitioners to strengthen social protection in Sri Lanka, through responsive and accountable governance in the delivery system.

1. Introduction

Social safety nets (SSN), which operate within broader social protection system[2] are comprehensive measures implemented to provide regular and predictable support for individuals who are poor and vulnerable. SSN also known as safety nets, social assistance, or social transfers. Globally, around 1.9 billion people are enrolled in SSN programs, and the World Bank has identified eight types of SSN programs: 1) Conditional cash transfers (CCT), 2) Unconditional cash transfers (UCCT), 3) Social pensions (noncontributory), 4) Food and in-kind transfers, 5) School feeding programs, 6) Public works (eg: Cash for work, Food for work), workfare, and direct job creation, 7) Fee waivers and targeted subsidies, and 8) Other social assistance (eg: Scholarships, Transfers for caregivers and disabled, Tax exemptions) (World Bank, 2018). Social pensions and other social assistance are new two categories included in the 2018 report compared to 2015 World Bank report on State of Social Safety Nets. These additions reflect the evolving nature of SSN and the broader range of programs and measures implemented by governments to support poor and vulnerable populations.

Cash transfers are increasingly popular and complex (World Bank, The State of social safety nets, 2015). CCT combine cash assistance with specific conditions to incentivize positive behaviors to improve outcomes in areas such as education, health, and well-being for vulnerable populations. UCCT provide beneficiaries with cash without imposing specific co-responsibilities and the beneficiaries have the freedom to utilize the cash as they wish. In the ASPIRE administrative database, out of 142 countries, 70 percent have unconditional cash transfers, while 43 percent have conditional cash transfers. Despite the advancements made in SSN, further efforts are needed in low and lower-middle-income countries to enhance the efficiency of social protection (Worldbank.org, 2023).

The existing social protection systems, including SSN often perpetuate unequal power dynamics and exclusions within society, and there are significant gaps need to be address. A significant gap in social protection exists worldwide, with over half of the global population receiving only partial or no coverage at all. This limited coverage hampers people's ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from shocks, forcing them into harmful coping strategies. Other challenges related to coverage are poorly designed or managed programs, fragmented programs, ambiguity in the eligibility criteria, budget constraints, and limited fiscal resources (UNDP, 2022).

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[2] In this paper social safety nets are defined as programs which operate within broader social protection system. Social protection encompasses not only social safety nets but also social insurance, such as health insurance and contributory pensions, as well as labor market programs that provides services facilitating job access, including skills training and job search support.

A global overview on social protection and governance (McClanahan, Chirchir, Barrantes, Kidd, & Hillson, 2021) reveals essential elements to achieve universal social protection. Social protection system should have high degree of coherence and coordination across ministries, programs, schemes, and policies. Economic sustainability of the system must also be prioritized, while ensuring social justice, solidarity, and equity within and across different social protection initiatives. Accountability is crucial in the system, with clear mandates and obligations for various actors and stakeholders are firmly established within a legal and regulatory framework. Transparency is essential, providing accessible information about social protection programs, including financial management, delivery mechanisms, and entitlements. Fairness and predictability should be upheld, with equal treatment in the application of social protection laws and policies, as well as in the delivery of benefits and services. Stakeholder participation through inclusive social dialogue and decision-making processes is key to addressing coverage gaps, needs, and barriers to access. Finally, there should be a focus on adaptability, dynamism, and responsiveness to continuously improve the design and implementation of nationally defined social protection system as describe by McClanahan and et al (2021).

Social protection systems with above good governance characteristics are much more likely to be inclusive and, therefore, politically sustainable (McClanahan, Chirchir, Barrantes, Kidd, & Hillson, 2021). Governance is a vital and extensive concept that permeates every aspect of social protection policies and their implementation. International Labor Organization (ILO) suggests principles for good governance with regard social protection. These principles include the overall responsibility of the State in ensuring the adequate provisions of benefits and the effective administration of social security systems. Additionally, individuals have the right to complain and appeal if they encounter issues or disputes within the social security system (International Labour Office, 2017). ILO principles on social protection governance mentions role of the State as well as rights of the individuals.

Role of the State and the rights of the individuals is reflected in the conceptualization of the Governance (World Bank, The State of Social Safety Nets, 2018) (World Bank, The State of social safety nets, 2015) (World Bank, A review of programs in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2007) (International Labour Office, 2017) (Giannozzi & Khan, 2013). These conceptual frameworks of governance propose two dimensions: 1) Governance mechanisms and tools, and 2) supply side and demand side perspectives.

The Word Bank's and ILO reviews on SSN programs describes governance along its mechanisms. Those explain the governance in a way which public officials and institutions exercise their authority to shape public policy and provide public goods and services. Further, governance in social protection is incentives and accountability relationships that influence how providers are held responsible for their actions and their ability to deliver services

effectively and efficiently (Giannozzi & Khan, 2013). From an operational standpoint, governance involves the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders, and measures to control and accountability. SSN program coordination, implementation, transparency, and accountability can be improved by establishing strong governance arrangements to achieve universal social protection.

Supply side perspectives explains challenges on the supply relating to institutional structure and their accountability. Demand side perspectives explains social control measures and ability to raise relevant stakeholders voice on their concerns relating to SSN (Giannozzi & Khan, 2013). Demand side perspective identifies individuals as an important player in the social protection programs. However, describing this diverse groups of individuals is challenge as they come from various backgrounds and circumstances, encompassing individuals, families, or households. Among them are people of different ages, genders, and identities. Some individuals may be living with disabilities, where others are vulnerable to various social risks (Lindert, Karippacheril, Caillava, & Chávez, 2020).

In this context [i.e. explaining SSN governance through 1) mechanisms and administrative systems dimension and 2) supply and demand dimension], this paper presents citizens and government offices perceptions and experiences, to understand the challenges of achieving responsible and accountable governance in one of SSN program in Sri Lanka: Samurdhi cash transfer program[3]. Demand side perception is captured through individuals' experiences and supply side perception, including mechanisms and tools dimension is captured through offices involved in Samurdhi program. However, the paper recognizes the wider context of governing issues and social protection policies in Sri Lanka.

2. Objectives

The objective of this paper is to understand the challenges to achieve responsive and accountable governance in Samurdhi program (Cash transfer) in Sri Lanka. By doing so, the study contributes to the wider knowledge on the importance of good governance for better delivery of social protection services.

This paper is structured as follows: in Section 3, we present an overview of the literature concerning SSN, exploring good governance elements of it. Section 4 outlines the research methods employed in this study. Moving on to Section 5 and 6, we present the research findings and discussion respectively. Finally, Section 7 provides the concluding remarks.

3. Literature review

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[3] Samurdhi (Prosperity) was initated in 1995 with the primary objective of combating poverty in Sri Lanka by fostering development through public involvement.

This section describes the concept of governance in the social protection domain, with focus on SSN. The secondary data explains the concept using two dimensions: 1) mechanisms and administrative dimension, and 2) supply and demand side dimension. This literature review signifies micro level/street level understanding of governance (which are elements under mechanisms and administrative dimension) and the value of demand side perspective to understand governance, in particular the changing roles and diversity of people in the social protection delivery system.

3.1 Governance in Social Protection and Social Safety Nets

Governance is a multidimensional concept, and it is the process of governing. It can be undertaken by a government, market, or network, whether over a family, tribe, formal or informal organization, or territory, or through laws, norms, power or language (Bevir, 2012). Bevir identifies actors (government, market, or network) and the means of governance (laws, norms, power or language) in the governing process. Governance encompasses democratic, technical, political, and legal elements and it involves stakeholder participation, efficient administration, transparency, accountability, and a comprehensive legal framework to ensure predictability, rights-based entitlements, and mechanisms for addressing complaints and appeals (McClanahan, Chirchir, Barrantes, Kidd, & Hillson, 2021). This definition of governance further elaborated four elements (democratic, technical, political and legal), in relation to social protection as follows.

Democratic governance emphasizes the participation of all stakeholders involved. It implies that decision-making processes are inclusive, transparent, and accountable, allowing for the involvement of the public and relevant stakeholders in shaping policies and programs related to social protection. Technical governance focuses on the efficient administration, management, and monitoring of benefits and services in the context of social protection. It ensures that the delivery of social protection programs is carried out effectively, with proper systems in place for administration, management, and monitoring to ensure optimal implementation. Political governance relates to the legislative and executive powers responsible for social protection. It emphasizes the need for clear, transparent, and accountable decision-making processes and actions by political entities. This aspect highlights the importance of having policies and regulations in place that are aligned with the objectives of social protection and that promote fairness and effectiveness. Legal governance refers to the establishment of a comprehensive legal framework that governs social protection. It includes laws, regulations, and policies that guarantee predictability, rights-based entitlements, and well-functioning complaints and appeals mechanisms. This aspect ensures that individuals have access to legal resource, protection of their rights, and mechanisms for addressing grievances or disputes related to social protection.

Giannozzi and Khan explain SSN through governance lens and raise several questions varying from policies to voice of the beneficiaries. Questions on policies revolves around objectives, scope, implementation strategies, and intended outcomes of the policies. On the other hand, raising citizens voice is about their active engagement, promoting inclusive and participatory decision-making in the SSN process. Some of the questions are challenges related to coordination among agencies and decentralized levels of government within the broader social protection system. Additionally, questions on unclear institutional responsibilities, conflicting systems of accountability and limited avenues for citizen voice (Giannozzi & Khan, 2013). These criticisms shed light on to examine the concept of governance in a multi-dimensional approach and the following description reveals the concept using two dimensions: 1) Mechanisms and administrative systems, and 2) Supply and demand.

3.2 Mechanisms and Administrative systems dimention

Giannozzi and Khan (2013) present an analytical framework to understand governance at micro, meso and macro levels. Micro-level governance refers to analysing responsibilities of different actors and accountability relationships under the program rules to administer and implement the program. Meso-level governance focuses on sector arrangements, including the institutional arrangements between ministries involved in administering (implementing) and governing (defining policy oversight and monitoring) SSN. In addition to micro-level and meso-level governance, macro-level governance is also defined: how the SSN is embedded in the wider institutional configuration, including audit institutes, civil service code and rule of law.

These three levels (micro-level, meso-level and macro-level) are also framed as being high level, mid level and street level governance respectively (McClanahan, Chirchir, Barrantes, Kidd, & Hillson, 2021). High level governance refers to a national strategy linked to social safety nets, institutional structures and policy designs in addition to the macro-level governance defined by Giannozzi and Khan. The mid level (meso-level) encompasses programme level management information systems (MIS), integrated MIS and international frameworks. Street level governance (micro-level governance) includes governing and oversight of payment systems, grievance and appeals mechanisms, contribution collections mechanisms and avenues for stakeholder participation.

There is a growing need for a bottom-up, people-centred, demand driven, rights-based system of governance, allowing citizens to be engaged as "shapers and makers" (Sabates et al., (2017: 20) at the delivery phase that actively allowed beneficiaries to formulate and change the policy. Thus, street level governance is crucial in terms of providing us very useful insights on governance linked to social safety nets. The need for transparent mechanisms for beneficiaries to participate and seek grievance redress remains a significant challenge.

Exploring street-level governance involves considering various design features of social protection, encompassing policy design and operational systems. These features play a crucial role in facilitating the process of social accountability and grievance redress. Some of these design features include (McClanahan, Chirchir, Barrantes, Kidd, & Hillson, 2021): *Easily comprehensible and clear eligibility criteria, transfer values and programme rules* – citizens are more likely to effectively exercise their rights when they possess a clear understanding of the rules and regulations governing social protection programs.

3.3 Supply and demand dimension

Social protection programs encounter a range of supply-side challenges rooted in their institutional structure and the shaping of accountability and incentive relationships. On the demand-side, programs must ensure that key stakeholders have the ability to voice their opinions and exert social controls. The demand side governance aspects often poses a significant challenge for public programs, particularly in safety net initiatives, as the beneficiaries of social assistance are typically the most economically disadvantaged who have the least voice. Economic stress has intensified the demand for social programs, leading to a greater urgency to utilize scarce public resources optimally. Achieving tangible results is crucial for the long-term viability of these programs, making the quality of service delivery a top priority. For SSN initiatives and cash transfers specifically, this means ensuring that the correct individuals receive the appropriate benefits at the right time. Transparency, efficiency, and the prevention of errors and misuse are critical aspects that must be emphasized. However, evidence shows that in several SSN programs in the region, there are limitations in coverage, targeting can be enhanced, and significant leakages occur. These issues highlight the need for improvements in the implementation and administration of these programs to ensure that the assistance reaches those who genuinely require it, without unnecessary leakages or errors. By addressing these challenges, programs can be more effective in providing meaningful support to those in need during times of economic strain (Giannozzi & Khan, 2013).

3.4 People and institutional relationship

Lindert et al (2020) highlight challenges in the 'first mile' of social protection delivery system, which is the operational context for implementing social protection benefits and services. these challenges increase time, costs, and frustration for people involved. The authors explore the relationship between people [demand dimension] and institutions, which represent supply dimension. In addition, institutions represent mechanism and administrative dimension in social protection delivery system.

Institutions range from government agencies to non-governmental organizations, foundations, and even private entities such as payment agents, which operate at different levels: central, subnational, and local. People play a significant role in the delivery system, and

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they are characterized as individuals, families, or households. Their demography varies in age, gender, socio-economic conditions, and vulnerability. People's operational status transit within the delivery system from 'intended population', 'applicants' or 'registrants' to 'beneficiaries'.

In this context people and institutional relationships are visible in client-facing functions and decision-making functions of the delivery system. Client facing functions are typically managed by local actors. Decision making functions are twofold: centralized approach and decentralized approach. In the centralized approach decision making authority remains at a central level to ensure that individuals in similar situations are received consistent treatment across the country. In the decentralized approach the powers are granted to local entities such as municipalities, local councils, communities or even to individuals. This approach can be advantageous in terms of incorporating local realities, however there is a risk of introducing biases due to the increased local discretion (Lindert, 2020).

The interaction between people and institutions is continuous and multifaceted within the delivery system. This can manifest as face-to-face meetings with frontline workers or digital communications via mobile devices.

3.4 Operational communication

Lindert et al (2020) explain operational communication as a significant element in the delivery system as communication facilitates interactions between institutes and people. The absence of effective communication can lead to risks, including misinformation and negative perception among people. For instance, during the initial stages of a program clear communication is needed to ensure that the intended population is well-informed about the objectives, rules, and registration process. When the program progresses (eg: intake, registration, enrollment and payment) two-way communication becomes important as people need to be kept informed about procedures.

The existing literature reveals that governance in the Social Protection and SSN is a multidimensional concept, which includes democratic elements. Democratic governance ensures the inclusivity of the decision-making process. The mechanisms and administrative systems dimension of governance can be dissected into micro (street level), meso (mid-level), and macro (high level) levels. Micro (street level) governance emphasizes the necessity for transparent mechanisms, allowing beneficiaries to actively participate in the process. The supply and demand dimension explains the challenges and necessities of social protection programs. While supply side challenges are rooted in institutional structures, demand side emphasizes the importance of raising stakeholders' voice, including disadvantageous communities. People and institutional relationship explicate the challenges in the client-

facing and decision-making functions in the 'first mile' of social protection delivery. Effective communication bridges the gap between institutions and people in the delivery system.

In essence, an understanding of the street level/micro-level approach, combined with a focus on the demand side (people's perspective), is vital to explain challenges in governance in SSN. Such understanding can be gained by studying 'first mile' actors of the delivery system.

4   Methodology

This qualitative research used five data collection tools: focus group discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews (IDIs), structured observations (SO), and key informant interviews (KIIs). The study involved 28 FGDs (5-6 homogenous participants in one group), 118 IDIs, 20 SO and 38 KIIs and the research was conducted in 13 districts, covering 7 provinces in Sri Lanka. Data collection was conducted from October 2022 to May 2023. All the FGDs and IDIs were conducted face-to-face in local languages: Sinhala and Tamil, while a few KIIs were conducted virtually. SO took place in specific locations where benefit disbursements occurred[4]. Written and or verbal informed consent form was used, and participants consented to voluntary participation in the study.
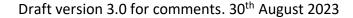
4.1 Sample

The study focused on two types of respondents: those selected from the general population (beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of SSN) and those selected from varying levels of government offices.

The target population from the general public included individuals who were below the poverty line, impacted by country's recent economic crisis, unemployed, senior citizens, persons with disabilities, individuals with chronic non-communicable diseases, widowers and widows, caregivers/guardians of orphans, and pregnant or lactating mothers. The sample was divided into 11 sub-groups based on the SSN schemes and the nature of deprivation. The study covered over 15 SSN programs and employed sampling techniques based on information saturation and demographic categories such as age, gender, ethnicity and language.

Additionally, a wide range of public offices in relevant Ministries, Divisional Secretariats and Offices from regional institutes interviewed. Those offices interact with SSN recipients when making payments, evaluating applications, verifying eligibility and providing supporting services.

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[4] Eg: Samurdhi Banks, Post Offices, Maternal and Child Health Clinics, and in other places where benefit disbursements were carried out.

4.2 Data handling

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, then securely stored in a password-protected Cloud folder. Transcribers generated word-to-word transcriptions in English and the local languages: Tamil and Sinhala. These transcripts were utilized in the data analysis process, employing qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis techniques using ATLAS.ti software. A code list, along with descriptions for each code, was generated to enhance the coding process. The coded data were analyzed to derive the study outcomes. For structured observations, the observer took notes based on their observations, and these findings were manually analyzed using pre-defined codes.

5. Findings

The SSN programs in Sri Lanka aim to provide assistance to individuals and families in need. However, research participants have revealed several limitations associated with SSN programs, including Samurdhi. This section (section 5) presents challenges of SSN programs focusing Samurdhi. The challenges to achieve responsive accountable governance in SSN programs describes the concept of governance through the intersection of Mechanisms and Administrative dimension (Micro level) dimension and Supply and Demand dimension. Further, operational communication in the delivery system is explained to reveal the gaps between institutional and people at micro level.

5.1 Key challenges of Social Safety Net programs

SSN programs in Sri Lanka have several shortcomings and limitations, as evident from the perception and experiences of research participants, including beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. The following key findings are to discuss governing issues of SSN programs particularly Samurdhi.

5.1.1 Lack of transparency and favoritism

The process of enrolling in social safety net programs is often challenging and biased, as beneficiaries need to have personal connections with relevant officers or work for them to have a chance of being enrolled. This creates an unfair system where those who are closer to the officers or have personal relationships are more likely to receive benefits. A participant states that it is impossible to enroll Samurdhi without having a good rapport with the relevant officers.

"If you take the Samurdhi program, if you know the Samurdhi officer personally or work with her [or him]*, then it is possible* [receiving Samurdhi benefits]*. Actually, the current beneficiaries are those who are around her" - Western Province_Colombo_FGD_Samurdhi-non-beneficiaries Gender mix group_41-50_SEC D & E*

The process of selecting beneficiaries is often not transparent, with local level Samurdhi officers sitting in their offices and relying on pre-existing data without conducting proper household visits. Samurdhi officers, who are responsible for producing the beneficiary list may include their own contacts, leading to exclusion and favoritism. Many deserving individuals and families who genuinely need assistance are excluded from the program. Some face challenges in registering or are denied benefits despite meeting the eligibility criteria. Some families who are not eligible for the program still manage to receive benefits. This may be due to their rapport with the relevant officer or the officer's preference for certain individuals. There are instances where individuals with higher incomes or assets, such as houses, shops, and vehicles, receive benefits while those in greater need are overlooked. The selective application of eligibility criteria raises questions about fairness in the selection process. The selection of beneficiaries is often influenced by personal relationships with relevant officers or influential individuals. Close associates of Samurdhi officers tend to receive benefits, while others are left out.

Political influence affects the selection processes of beneficiaries, diverting attention from guidelines and criteria set by the government. Requests from politicians and village leaders lead to deviations from proper circulars and guidelines. This influence results in the inclusion of political supporters, disregarding the efforts made by officers to identify suitable beneficiaries.

"Only the people who attended political meetings got Samurdhi. Initially, I applied for benefits, but didn't go for election meetings. But I didn't receive Samurdhi. [Meanwhile, others in the village who went for meetings, did]. I then started going for elections meetings. Then they put me on the Samurdhi list, [and I began receiving benefits]." Amaraweera*, 49 years, SEC D, Polonnaruwa

Politicians often confront government officials, seeking preferential treatment for their supporters or certain groups. Politicization undermines the integrity of SSN programs. Lists provided by politicians often take precedence over the recommendations made by officers based on guidelines and assessments. The influence of politicians and village leaders leads to a lack of transparency and fairness, impacting the good governance of these programs. However, there were occasions officers maintain their commitment to fairness and eligibility assessment. As one official mentioned, *I don't just recommend. I check their eligibility and then recommend."*

Trade union actions and political inclinations among officers can create problems and hinder the smooth handling of SSN programs. The Samurdhi officers have faced challenges due to trade union actions influenced by political interference. This interference has led to the creation of problems and divisions within the administrative process. The politicization of SSN

programs has been a persistent issue, as politicians exert influence and interference in the administration and implementation of these programs.

5.1.2 Discrimination on ethnicity, language, gender, and occupation

Discrimination issues arise due to ethnicity, language, gender, and occupation. Ethnicity-related discrimination within SSN programs evident, which reveals the perception among some individuals that assistance and benefits are primarily provided to the Sinhalese community. There have been instances where certain ethnic groups have received preferential treatment or priority in benefit allocation as mentioned by the participants. This bias creates disparities and unfairness in benefit distribution. This perception can result in feelings of exclusion and frustration among minority groups. According to some participants, the leaders or people in authority within the Samurdhi program are predominantly Sinhala, leading to a lack of information and opportunities for minority communities.

A single mother pointed out gender biases in the Samurdhi program, mentioning that she could not secure the allowance for her newborn infant. The Samurdhi officer had requested her husband's signature on the application for her to be eligible. Such discrimination not only undermines the rights of women but also poses significant barriers to their access to essential benefits.

"He [Samurdhi officer] said my husband's signature is necessary. I then explained my position. He then asked for a letter which I wrote and submitted. That took about a month. After that, the Samurdhi officer said that since it took a month, that benefit is not applicable". Northern Province_Jaffna_FGD_Samurdhi Program - Cash Transfer_Female_31 - 40_SEC D & E

Discrimination based on face cover among Muslim communities mentioned by some participants. Certain places require individuals to remove face covers to prove their identity, which can create difficulties for those who follow cultural or religious practices that involve face covering. This discriminatory practice can affect access to benefits and services.

Samurdhi enrollment process may have inherent biases against certain occupations, including tea estate workers and farmers. These biases can lead to unfair exclusions undermining program's goal of assisting the most vulnerable communities.

A tea estate worker described the discrimination faced by estate workers because of their occupation. According to the respondent, some Samurdhi officers believe that estate workers are ineligible for Samurdhi benefits. This is because Offices equate estate workers with government employees in terms of the salary structure and the eligibility for statutory payments: Employee Provident Fund (EPF) and Employee Trust Fund (ETF).

"No, those who work on the estate are not eligible [for Samurdhi]. They [Samurdhi offices] say that those who work on the estates are similar to government employees. That is in name only. We get paid only if we work. Other government employees get Rs 40,000 salary and even if they take two days off, they still get that salary. If we take two days off, our salary is deducted. We only get EPF and ETF, we don't get any other benefits. If we are sick and take ten days off, we are not paid for those ten days". Central Province_Kandy_FGD_Non Receipient of Samurdhi Program - Cash Transfer_Mix_31-55_SEC E

Farmers also face biases against their occupation, which can influence decisions about their eligibility. The perception that paddy farmers, especially those with paddy fields are 'inherently well-off' might be deeply integrated in the decision-making process of Samurdhi program. This assumption that owning land equates to economic stability, which might lead Samurdhi officials to belive that such farmers do not require assistance. A farmer mentioned this by stating *"We [farmers] don't receive it [Samurdhi] because we do farming. None of the farming families receive Samurdhi. I think only people who don't have paddy fields get Samurdhi"* - North Central_Polonnaruwa_IDI_Non Recipient of Samurdhi - Cash Transfer_Female_41-55_SEC E.

While paddy field ownership might be perceived as a sign of wealth, the inconsistent income that many farmers face due to various challenges is often disregarded. Factors such as unpredictable weather, pests, or fluctuating market prices can lead to significant income instability for farmers. Yet the Samurdhi eligibility criteria is not adequately account these fluctuations, which resulted exclusion of needy farmers.

5.1.3 Mismanagement and corruption

Mismanagement and corruption in Samurdhi program can have negative effects on the people this program meant to support.

Government officials, including officers from the Divisional Secretariat and Samurdhi Officers, conduct home visits to assess the eligibility of families for Samurdhi. The visits involve evaluating the financial stability of beneficiaries and determining if their circumstances still need assistance. However, a Samurdhi beneficiary mentioned, *"They [the responsible government offices] appoint someone in the village to prepare the list [of potential beneficiaries]. Only the list given by that appointed person is taken into account. The officials never visit houses" Western Province_Colombo_FGD_Samurdhi Beneficiaries_Mix_31-40_SEC D _ E.*

Another Samurdhi beneficiary mentioned that "Currently, people close to the Chairman, [of Samurdhi Society] get the most out of Samurdhi. That will happen even beneficiaries are chosen from a committee. Then we won't get anything. When I took my [disabled] son to the

Divisional Secretariate Office, I was scolded. They [Offices] asked me why I didn't apply for disability grant for the past eight years. I said I didn't know about it" Southern Province_Matara_IDI_Samurdhi Program _ Cash Transfer_Female_31 - 40_SEC E. This reveals the communication gap in the social programs.

Several participants express frustration with the inefficiencies and delays they experience when interacting with the Officers involved in Samurdhi programs. One research participant mentioned that staff members take a long time to process transactions and perform necessary tasks. Another research participant highlighted the lack of proactive outreach from officials, stating that people have to find out about programs and assistance on their own, without receiving proper communication or support. These inefficiencies can lead to delays in receiving benefits and create additional burdens for program participants, causing frustration, uncertainty, and a lack of trust in the program administration.

"The Samurdhi Officer comes on a motorbike, he hands over the application forms [for different social protection programs] to someone and tells him to distribute the forms. The Officer doesn't even get off his bike. Sometimes, he waits at a shop for the Chairman [of the Samurdhi Society] to come. Usually, those who are near the shop get application forms. The Chairman then distributes the forms to anyone he likes." - Western Province_Colombo_IDI_Non-Recipient of Emergency Cash Assistance_Male_41-55_SEC C

A research participant who had obtained a loan from Samurdhi program indicated a potential corruption in the program. "Sometimes we [those who obtained loans from Samurdhi program] give the Samurdhi Officer the loan money [repayment installment] to deposit into our account, but when we check with the bank that money has not been deposited. The Samurdhi Officer gave us a receipt as well". North Central_Polonnaruwa_FGD_Non Recipient of Samurdhi Program - Cash Transfer_Mix-31-40_SEC E. This suggests that funds intended for deposit might be mishandled by the Officer.

5.2 Gaps in the communication process

The research participants mentioned about communication process in the SSN programs, including Samurdhi. It reveals several gaps and challenges that hinder effective operational communication.

A noticeable gap in the communication process is the reliance on central figures such as Samurdhi Officers and Grama Niladhari[5]. The centralized approach can lead to information bottlenecks, as a research participant stated he has to ask details of SSN programs only from

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[5] Grama Niladhari is a Sri Lankan public official appointed by the central government to carry out administrative duties in a Grama Niladhari Division, which is a sub-unit of a Divisional Secretariat.

the Samurdhi Officer or Grama Niladhari. This underscores the challenges of relying on a single source for clarity and information.

There is a bias and exclusivity in the way information is disseminated. A research participant mentioned that sometime the Grama Niladhari passes information only to selected community leaders expecting them to pass the message to others in the village. This indicates that information might not always be shared equitably, leading to feelings of exclusion among those not in the inner circle. This was repeatedly mentioned by estate workers.

While word of mouth is the prevalent method of communication, the research participants mentioned that it can be inefficient or unreliable. They implied about the lack of authenticity, risk of misinformation and low reach of information. According to the research participants Television and SMS are somewhat efficient channels to communicate, which emphasizes the need for more direct, transparent, and inclusive methods of communication.

6   Discussion

The findings of this research paper highlight several governance-related challenges associated with SSN, including Samurdhi. This section will delve key findings and their implications for the governance of SSN programs.

The challenges in the beneficiary selection process, where personal connections and political affiliations are significant directly contradict the principles of democratic governance. Democratic governance is represented by inclusivity, transparency, and accountability in the governing process. These characteristics create the mechanisms for people to participate in decision making. The findings suggest that Samrudhi beneficiary selection process is lacking some of these elements. According to the research participants people need to have personal connections with relevant officers or work for them to have a chance to enroll Samurdhi. Such practices not only undermine the credibility of the SSN programs but also deprive deserving people. Politicians and village leaders influence on the selection process, as reveled by the research participants. Political supporters are given preference over other applicants, which violates the purpose of the program. Democratic governance advocates raising citizen's voice, but the findings suggest that it remains problematic in Samurdhi programme.

The findings related to the influence of trade union actions and political inclinations among officers reveals politicization of the program. Political governance emphasizes the need for clear, transparent, and accountable decision-making processes and actions by political entities. The politicization of Samurdhi programs, as revealed by the Samurdhi Officers and people, compromises the integrity and purpose of Samurdhi program.

Further, discrimination in any form: ethnicity, language, gender, occupation contradicts good governance principles, which includes bottom-up and people-centered approach to governance. Such discrimination can lead to feeling of exclusion and frustration among minority groups.

Street-level or micro-level governance emphasizes transparent mechanisms and active people participation. Technical governance emphasizes efficient administration, management, and monitoring of benefits and services in the context social protection. Effective technical governance needs comprehensible program rules and regulations. The research findings on inefficiencies, potential misleading of funds, and lack of proper household visits suggest gaps in the technical governance in the street-level or micro level. The reported instances where government officials rely on pre-existing data without conducting proper household visits, or where funds intended for deposit might be mishandled by officers, highlight significant issues related to transparency and accountability at the street-level.

Operational communication is an important element in the street-level or micro-level governance. Effective operational communication facilitates interactions between institutions and people, bridging the gap between policy design and its implementation. The research highlighted absence of effective communication in the last mile of the delivery system, which lead to misinformation, negative perception among people and lack of trust in the system. People rely on central figures: Samurdhi Officer and Grama Niladhri, which can lead to information bottlenecks. Such centralized approach contradicts with good governance principles, which emphasize bottom-up, people centered approach. The findings related to the bias and exclusivity in the way information is disseminated indicates significant gap in the democratic governance, as the essence of democratic governance is inclusivity. Further, democratic governance need involvement of the public and the relevant stakeholders in shaping policies. The information should be communicated with less barriers to ensure such participation from the public.

7. Conclusion

To achieve responsive and accountable governance, efforts should address governing issues at the street level. This includes addressing governance challenges related to the relationships between people and institutions at the street level. Effective operational communication is crucial to facilitate such initiatives.

A significant challenge at the street level is the lack of transparency in the delivery system. The influence of personal relationships, discrimination, mismanagement, and corruption undermines democratic, political, and technical governance. Effective operational

communication can enhance governance at the street level by making the delivery system more inclusive and trustworthy.

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