

## RURAL POOR AND CHILD CARE SERVICES IN A MODERN IRRIGATION SETTLEMENT

A Case Study of Day Care Centres in a Mahaweli Irrigation Settlement  
in Sri Lanka.

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*The Mahaweli project is absorbing a major slice of Sri Lanka's investment programme and taking up over one third of the annual government budget's expenditure in recent years. One of the key areas in this massive multi-purpose project is that of human settlement and there is no doubt that the needs of the settlers here would have to be constantly watched if this programme is to proceed as planned. The requirements of the more articulate and 'better-off' settlers readily come to the surface and gain attention, but unfortunately it is more often the others who are the more vulnerable groups, particularly as far as social infrastructure services are concerned. It was with the intention of helping to improve the efficiency of one such service that Lionel Siriwardena of the People's Bank, Research Department compiled this note in the course of a wider study in the Mahaweli H area.*

The Mahaweli Project provides the country with a major development thrust not merely because of its size and massive investment, for it is they who would be involved in the agricultural and other activities of the scheme in the years to come. It also follows that among other aspects the nutritional and health conditions and needs of the children of the Mahaweli Settlers are important. In this context the surveys of nutritional status in the country, carried out by the Ministry of Plan Implementation in 1980, which reveal that the highest undernutrition among children is in the H area of Mahaweli Settlement assumes greater significance than it would have done in normal circumstances. The alarmingly high rate of undernutrition recorded, ranging from 24.7 percent to 38.5 percent and the equally alarming disparities in undernutrition between the Mahaweli H area and other districts in Sri Lanka have called for attention.

It was against this backdrop that plans were drawn up for Maternity/Health Services Centres (Darakagara) in the Mahaweli Settlement area to promote and maintain better health among the children, through preventive health care and training systems, together with necessary curative health services. The plan envisaged that all mothers and children in the area attended the centres. One of the major objectives was to solve the problem of increasing undernutrition among children. Subsequently these plans were altered under expert advice of UNICEF personnel to introduce the modern concept of Day Care Centres. The broad objectives of the Day Care Centres may be put down as follows:

- (a) The Day Care Centres were to cater for children between the ages of 2 to 5 years. Mothers were to bring the children in the morning to the Day Care Centres and take them back in the evening on their return home after their economic activities.
- (b) The children in the Day Care Centres were to benefit by a free health service and materials as well as some food items such as Thriposha, (a CARE nutritional food). Day Care Centres set up in this manner were intended to improve the health conditions of the children.
- (c) The children were expected to learn "good behaviour" related to basic hygiene, as well as get some pre-school training.
- (d) It was envisaged that children would be less prone to accidents and injuries because they would be under the care of the palikas (Caretakers), unlike at home where the parents are out at work.
- (e) Children of school going age who did not attend school because they have had to take care of younger siblings would be free to attend school regularly, since now the Day Care Centres would look after the younger children.
- (f) Day Care Centres would also facilitate the administrators and health workers to provide their services quickly, effectively and conveniently through those Centres.

In this paper an attempt will be made to evaluate the efficiency and success of eight Day Care Centres established in Galnewa, Kalankutiya and Megalewa regions of the H area in 1981. The writer has been engaged in a research study of social change and the development process in a settlement village of H area of the Mahaweli and had been monitoring such changing processes since 1976. In the course of this study fair access and rapport has been obtained and established with many villagers in the region. In the attempt to evaluate the impact these Centres, while this broad background knowledge of the area and its social and economic features were useful, the methodology adopted was indepth interviews with the villagers who were also parents of the children less than 5 years in age.

The major finding of this evaluative study was that only about 15 percent of the children between two and five years were actually making use of the Day Care Centres. For instance, at the Thoranagama Day Care Centre there were only 25 children attending the Centre regularly although there were about 150 children between the age of two and five among the 200 families in the region.

Interestingly it was observed that the 25 children who attended the Day Care Centres came from families of the higher income group in the settlement villages of the region. The pattern was similar at Sudarashagama which is regarded as the most successfully organised of the Day Care Centres. It served a total population of 1,600 with children numbering about 450. But the average attendance at the Day Care Centre was 25, which means that less than 6 per cent of the children attended the Centre. Once again the majority of the children were from higher income groups in the settlement villages. Indeed only 4 children were identified from families of the lower income groups.

This feature of the Day Care Centre servicing only children of higher income groups raises the question of how effectively it can fulfil its objectives and help the less privileged children, since problems such as under-nutrition are more often the problem of the lower income group. In both developing and developed countries nutritional status has mainly proved to be positively co-related with income level. Higher income generally means better food, better housing and better sanitation which are important ingredients in meeting a healthy population and vice versa.

The major problem then appears to be in an evaluation of the Day Care Centre in the context of improving the nutritional status of children, and why do the Day Care Centres not attract a larger number of children particularly those of the lower income groups. This study uncovered the main reasons contributing to the low attendance at the Day Care Centres.

The first reason for poor participation was that there did not appear to be a real need for the children to be left at the Day Care Centres in order that the mothers could engage in some economic activities. Firstly, economic activities available to mothers were limited and also whatever was available was seasonal, being mainly restricted to the peak periods of paddy cultivation activity.

This was made more problematic by two relevant issues. Firstly, the insistence that the parents should provide a meal. This was particularly difficult during the harvesting period as this is the time when the families have come to the end of their resources which they would have collected at the previous harvest. Agricultural activity at this time too needs some money. Thus it becomes extremely difficult for them to provide a meal for all the children. Secondly, women were generally confined to their homes as they had to prepare meals, tea etc., for the working family members engaged in agricultural activities. Except in peak periods, having children with them at home was therefore not a problem as the planners had envisaged. The few who did send their children to the Day Care Centres during the harvesting time, were also required to take the children back home for lunch as the noon day meal arrangements at the Day Care Centre (to be provided by one parent for all the children) had broken down mainly for reasons referred to above. This made it more problematic for the parents. To some it was more convenient to keep the children at home rather than take them to the Centre, back again for lunch, and once again for the afternoon sessions and then back in the evening.

One other factor in the Day Care Centre that appears to contribute to its not attracting many children was the attitude of the palikas (Care Takers). At the beginning the palikas were supposed to work as volunteers, without the payment of a salary. They were given a training and a decision was also taken to pay them a nominal allowance.

Almost all the palikas however, were asking for a formal salary. They felt that they too worked like the other Mahaweli officials but were paid poor salaries or allowances as compared to them. They were agitated and concerned about their careers, often at the cost of neglecting the children. They had lost their original spirit as volunteers and of wanting to help people. There was also a feeling amongst parents that the palikas were trained and were salaried personnel just like other Mahaweli Authority officials. They were perceived as such and a formal relationship between palikas and parents had grown and even created conflicts. Of the eight Day Care Centres the one called Sudarashana Gama is a neatly maintained one, though having the same problems as the others in the region one or more burglaries have occurred since they were established. In the case of one Day Care Centre consequent to the burglary in which almost all the equipment etc., disappeared it had to be closed down. While obviously these burglaries are the work of criminally inclined persons in the region, it is also symptomatic of the people's attitude to the Day Care Centres. Firstly, we observe that the State Education Department schools which maintain less security for their physical assets and could be more open to burglary have hardly or never been burgled. This appears to suggest that there is some social consciousness of the benefits of the schools which leads to their being less or never burgled. This may be because either the community of low attendance of children from the lower income groups. It appeared that this was maintained as a model or show piece for the benefit of visitors, particularly foreign personnel.

This Day Care Centre is located on the Galnewa-Thambuttegama road called Elizabeth Jaya. There appeared to be a concern by palikas in this Centre as well as the field officers to make the appearance of this Centre attractive, since large numbers of outside officials and foreigners visited the Centre. On the other hand, hardly any visits were paid to the other Centres. Thus, the visitors book of Sudarashana Gama Centre has a lengthy record of visits, mostly foreigners; and was the only Centre where Sri Lankan and foreign officials appear to pay regular visits. According to most of the comments in the visitors book, quoted below the Day Care System was functioning very well and had helped to reduce the health problems of the children in the settlement area -

"Day Care Centres are very impressive and fantastic"

"This programme provides a great service to the Settlers"

"This programme is quite impressive, very satisfactory, very useful".

"Large numbers of problems of the children in the Mahaweli Settlement area are being solved through the Day Care Centres".

A majority of the foreign and Sri Lankan visitors were from the UNICEF. According to the visitors book some of the missions and individuals who visited only the Sudarshana Gama Day Care Centre in 1981 were:

Date	Organisation
21.01.1981	Foreign Mission
06.02.1981	Foreign Mission
06.02.1981	Local Mission
06.02.1981	Dept. of Probation and Child Care
26.02.1981	School of Social Services
31.03.1981	Foreign Mission
27.04.1981	CARE Organisation
30.04.1981	Foreign Mission
15.09.1981	Foreign Mission
15.09.1981	US Embassy
15.09.1981	Foreign Mission
16.09.1981	Marga Institute
16.09.1981	A Team - USAID
18.09.1981	Foreign Mission
08.10.1981	Foreign Visitor
28.10.1981	Foreign Mission
28.10.1981	Foreign Mission
30.11.1981	Foreign Mission
05.12.1981	Foreign Mission
02.12.1981	Foreign Mission

Some responses of the villagers to some of our questions were illustrative of the village perception and attitude to the Day Care Centres. The lack of relevance of the Centre and its objectives, to the central problems of their lives was apparent. A few samples of such responses to the following questions are given below.

"Does the Day Care Centre provide a useful service to you by taking care of the children from morning till evening, so that you and your wife can engage in economic activities without difficulty and increase your income".

"We did not have any of these facilities before the Mahaweli settlement. We lived in our old villages without such problems, the children too were never a problem. Chena cultivation was done together

by all the family members. Pregnant women carried their infants with food and participated in the cultivation of chena, while the children were kept in watch huts. It was a very hard life, but we considered our children as part of our lives and economic activities. Moreover, looking after only children between 2 and 5 years of age does not help when the children below 2 years of age are still left with their mothers and need to be looked after by them".

"Secondly, to send the children to Day Care Centres there should be economic activities for the women to be engaged in. During the land preparation and harvesting period our women are busy for about 3 to 4 weeks. During most of this time too they are not working full time in the fields as they have to prepare meals.

For more than 10 months of the year they do not have much work in the field. And when preparing food taking care of children at home at sometime was not problematic."

A family with two children stated that they do not send the children to Day Care Centres because the mother feels lonely without them.

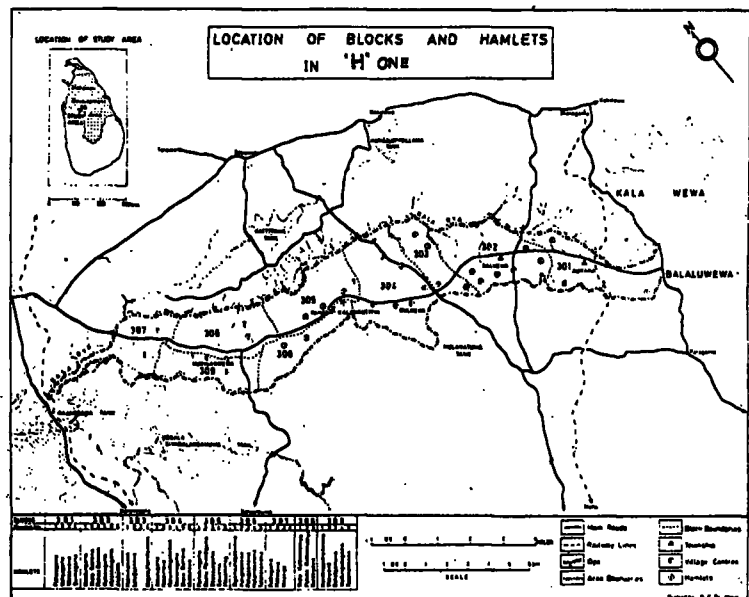
"According to the Palikas of the Day Care Centres, children are trained in health care and hygienic behaviour such as washing their hands before a meal and dressing in clean clothes"

"Yes we are very happy to see that the children are learning good habits. The children who attended centres may learn how to wash their hands before meals, but what about the others who remain at home. We cannot provide them with food in time during off-seasons. Sometimes they do not have food to eat although they wash their hands! Often they have to eat unhygienically cooked food with clean hands. First of all we should be certain of some income during the off-seasons to provide food for the children. The majority of our small children are naked because we do not have money to buy clothes and dress them every day. Although they could learn how to use clean clothes they do not have the clothes to do so! They are used to being naked at home. There is one thing the children have learnt at the Centre - They are no longer shy to say "Hello" particularly to the foreign visitors".

*Children of school going age are now free to attend school regularly because they do not have to look after small children since the Day Care Centre has undertaken to do so".*

"We ask our schooling children to stay at home to look after small infants only when the mothers are not well. This happens at many times of the year irrespective of whether it is cultivation time or not."

"During the land preparation and harvesting period we ask our schooling children to stay at home because we have to get help for cultivation in order to minimise costs on hire of labour and not to look after younger children."



A further index of the settler villages' attitudes and response to the Day Care Centres is in the nature and number of burglaries that have occurred in the Day Care Centres. In all eight Day Care Centres offers protection against burglary to these schools; or that those inclined to burglary do not want to do so because they recognise the social benefits of the school; or both. On the other hand the Day Care Centres do not seem to be viewed in the same light as the schools, and even the reactions to these burglaries by the people is a laconic one. It is possible that there is a reaction against the Centres which are more accessible to the privileged few and seem to foster their values.

Another index of how these Day Care Centres function is that the more positive attitude towards them are from the traders cum rich peasants, the elite of the villages. They seem to regard Day Care Centres positively, and being prone to pattern their social behaviour on urban models are happy with the Day Care Centres because they are suggestive of Montessori Schools in urban towns of Sri Lanka. These traders cum rich peasants are also very busy during the peak periods of paddy cultivation activity being involved in trading of paddy cultivation inputs, active in their own paddy land cultivation and also in capitalist tenant farming activity, a growing new feature in the Mahaweli H area. Thus Day Care Centres are useful since these look after their children at this time.

To some, the concept, role and functions of Day Care Centres have got in motion processes that have "left out" people that the stated objectives of the Day Care Centres intended to include. The diagnosis of undernutrition focuses on the material lack of certain things, and the Day Care Centre attempted to rectify this. But in attempting to do so they have reached only those already in control of economic and social power in the settlement village. The fundamental problem appears to lie in the diagnosis which focuses on the lack of material needs, while what appears crucial is that the under-nourished are undernourished because they are prevented from achieving the power to secure the things that could nourish them. From these different perceptions of the problems flow different policy programmes. From the diagnosis of the experts it appears that the solution is to only supply the needed resources, whereas the crucial problem is to achieve power to secure resources. This latter perspective suggests a need to remove obstacles that could lead to a more just sharing in control over resources.

(Changes after 1982 are not recorded in this note)