

A Framework for Family Well-being in Sri Lanka

Family well-being is undoubtedly a major political concern in any society. The concept refers not just to the economic prosperity of a family unit, but also acknowledges the broader social determinants of well-being, such as physical and emotional health, social connectedness, and safety. Thus the analysis of this concept requires consideration beyond the well-being of the isolated individual and needs to incorporate an understanding of the collective status of the family and intra-family relationships.

As the basic unit of society, the family performs an array of functions for the development and well-being of its members. Families share resources; care for the elderly, sick and disabled; and offer a nurturing environment to children in ways that no other institution can successfully provide as the family. It is, therefore, imperative that social services effectively promote the well-being of the family and its individual members.

The concept of family well-being has attracted increasing attention amongst academics and policy-makers. However, there is still no widely accepted framework for the analysis of family well-being to guide research, policy and resource allocation.

What is family well-being?

The concept of well-being goes beyond the economic prosperity of a family. It also captures subjective judgement on the extent of health, happiness and prosperity, enjoyed by the family as a social unit, including the supportive intra-family relationships.

Source: Families Australia Inc. 2006.

Conceptual Framework on Family Well-being

From an analysis of models of national and individual well-being and welfare, Families Australia Inc. (2006) has identified four main elements of family well-being: physical safety and physical and mental health; supportive intra-family relationships; social connections outside the family; and economic security and independence. According to McKeown and Sweeney (2001), all of the following variables may affect family well-being: health, employment, income, education, population, crime prevention, gender relationships, human rights, and social capital.

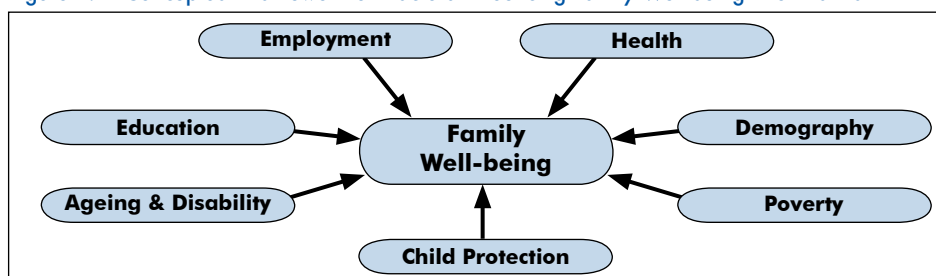
After an examination of the available models for family well-being, the following conceptual framework has been adopted by the Institute for Health Policy (IHP) to demonstrate the impact of social security and social services on family well-being in Sri Lanka (Figure 1). Although the framework includes both the physical and psychological dimensions of family well-being, only the physical dimensions can be demonstrated with the available data.

As the diagram indicates, an analysis of family well-being necessitates careful consideration of the eclectic range of determinants of well-being, particular to the national context. At present, a composite index, whereby all these concepts are weighted respectively, using both objective and subjective data, remains absent. Such an index would facilitate a comparative analysis of family well-being over time.

Family Well-being in Sri Lanka

Over the past five decades in Sri Lanka, the earlier extended family structure has evolved to become a nuclear one. This may be attributed to the changing socio-economic environment. The rising educational attainment and the migration of young people to urban areas for employment are some of the contributing factors. Further, declining fertility rates and increasing longevity have altered the demographic profile, increasing the proportion of the elderly within the population. These trends have had important economic and social implications for the family, especially with regard to non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Therefore, the changing nature of the family and its needs require an analytical and dynamic public policy response.

Figure 1: A Conceptual Framework on Factors Influencing Family Well-being in Sri Lanka



When applied to Sri Lanka, the framework reveals that impressive efforts have been made to expand access to social security services. In general, most Sri Lankans are relatively secure in terms of health, education, food and housing. Compared to those of neighboring South Asian countries, Sri Lanka's systems for social protection are admirable and more extensive, with up to a third of the workforce covered by employment protection and social security, and around 40 percent of households covered by the Samurdhi safety-net programme. Whilst some of the social protection programmes achieve universal coverage – for instance, health and education – others target certain populations – Samurdhi beneficiaries, the aged, the disabled, and populations affected by the conflict.

However, studies have demonstrated that social protection in Sri Lanka requires refining and strengthening in order to achieve better results. Vulnerability remains widespread, as people find ways of coping in poverty, rather than managing to rise above it.

There are noticeable weaknesses in the core areas of Sri Lanka's social protection system. Although the Sri Lankan labour market as a whole enjoys some employment protection and social security, the formal sector benefits most – few of whom are likely to be poor; in contrast, the two-thirds majority of the labour force working in the informal sector are most likely to be poor and are largely unprotected.

Although Sri Lanka's social insurance schemes provide some measure of protection, the benefits provided are inadequate, coverage is limited, administration and regulation are weak, and, crucially, their financial sustainability is in question. Similarly, in the area of social safety nets, targeting appears to be a considerable problem in the Samurdhi programme. Coverage is gravely inadequate for certain vulnerable groups, namely the poor and disabled, and, due to fiscal constraints, urgent initiatives often suffer, such as conflict and disaster relief programmes. Further research is required to evaluate the contribution of social protection programmes to the enhancement of psychological well-being in the population.

Nevertheless, it is evident that the social protection and social service programmes in Sri Lanka have contributed to the improvement of the physical well-being of the population over the past few decades, particularly in the fields of health and education. Social protection programmes are vital for the promotion of welfare, whilst ensuring that the dividends of economic growth are shared more equally across the population. Improving such programmes is a key challenge for policy makers in Sri Lanka.

Key Policy Recommendations Presented at National Workshop

A national workshop on 'Enhancing Family Well-being through Social Protection and Effective Delivery of Social Services' was held in March 2008, organized by IHP in collaboration with the Emerging Social Issues Division of UNESCAP. The following key policy recommendations emerged from the paper presented by IHP researchers at the workshop.

Key Policy Recommendations

- **Improve the quality of *health care and educational services*.**
- **Provide *skills training and credit to informal sector workers, who are disproportionately affected by poverty*.**
- **Expand the *cash compensation programme to capture the disabled poor*.**
- **Review and expand coverage of the *old age income support programmes which are currently inadequate and unsustainable – for example, the Employees Provident Fund and the Public Servants Pensions Scheme*.**
- **Provide better targeting for:**
 - *children and the elderly in social protection programmes;*
 - *women and young adults in employment programmes;*
 - *the poor in the Samurdhi programme.*

Further Reading

Abeykoon, A. T. P. L. and Elwalagedera, R, (2008), 'Review of social Protection Policies and Programmes Strengthening Family Well-being', paper presented at the national workshop on Enhancing Family Well-being through Social Protection and Effective Delivery of Social Services.

Families Australia Inc., (2006), 'Family Wellbeing in Australia: A Families Australia Vision', available at <http://www.familiesaustralia.org.au/publications/pubs/policy-familywellbeing.pdf>, accessed on 20th February, 2008.

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United Nations, (2006), 'Draft Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses', New York.

UNESCAP, (2008), 'Social Services Policies and Family Well-being in the Asian and Pacific Region', available at <http://www.unescap.org/esid/publications/2525.pdf>, accessed on 24th April, 2009.

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