



Interlinking Social Security and Social Empowerment: Pathways to Inclusive Development — A Sri Lanka Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interrelationship between social security and social empowerment and how their deliberate integration can advance inclusive development in Sri Lanka. Drawing on policy documents, program evaluations, and scholarly literature, the paper defines key concepts, reviews evidence on links between social protection and empowerment, outlines a mixed-methods research approach suitable for the Sri Lankan context, synthesizes findings from the literature and policy review into practical results and discussion, and offers conclusions and future directions for policy and research. The paper emphasizes program design features — such as conditionalities, linkages to livelihoods, social inclusion measures, gender sensitivity, and participatory mechanisms — that strengthen empowerment outcomes and thereby improve development impact.

KEYWORDS: social security, social empowerment, social inclusion, social protection, and Sri Lankan social policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive development requires not only the reduction of poverty and vulnerability but also the expansion of individuals' capabilities to actively participate in social, economic, and civic life. Social security — understood here as a set of public measures aimed at protecting individuals and households from poverty, deprivation, and social risks (e.g., old age, disability, unemployment, shocks) — is traditionally measured by its capacity to smooth consumption and reduce material insecurity. Social empowerment, by contrast, focuses on enabling people to exercise agency, access rights, build skills, and participate in decision-making that affects their lives. Sri Lanka has a long history of social policy experimentation and a broad institutional base for social protection (e.g., pensions, safety nets, and targeted welfare schemes). Yet despite reasonable coverage on some programs, structural inequalities, regional disparities, and recent economic shocks (including the 2022–2023 macroeconomic crisis and climate-related events) have revealed gaps in outcomes and resilience. This paper examines how intentional linkages between social security and empowerment can strengthen resilience, reduce intergenerational poverty, and promote equitable participation in Sri Lanka's development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW / RELATED WORK

Social security comprises contributory and non-contributory measures (pensions, unemployment benefits, child benefits, social assistance). Non-contributory social assistance is particularly important for low-



income households and those in the informal economy. Social empowerment includes economic (asset ownership, income control), social (networks, social capital), political (voice, participation), and psychological (self-efficacy, dignity) dimensions.

Theoretical links between protection and empowerment

Scholars emphasize complementary pathways: (a) protection provides stable resources that reduce immediate constraints on agency (e.g., freeing time and mental bandwidth), (b) predictable transfers enable investment in health, education, and livelihoods (capability expansion), and (c) program designs that include participatory governance, training, and linkages to services generate empowerment effects beyond consumption smoothing. Critics note risks of paternalism, dependency, stigmatization, or poorly designed conditionalities that can undermine agency

Evidence from low- and middle-income countries

Systematic reviews indicate that cash transfers (both conditional and unconditional) often increase household consumption, school attendance, and healthcare use. When paired with complementary services (skills training, credit access, childcare), transfers can produce sustained livelihood improvements and increase women's decision-making. Community driven-development and participatory social protection programs show improvements in social cohesion and voice.

Sri Lankan context: programs and lessons

Sri Lanka's social protection architecture includes universal pension schemes for certain categories, targeted welfare (the Samurdhi program), child benefits in various forms, and sectoral safety nets. Evaluations of Samurdhi reveal mixed results: improvements in consumption but limited transformative impacts on livelihoods when not coupled with effective market linkages, training, or inclusive governance. Gendered patterns persist: women often receive transfers but continue to face barriers in economic participation and leadership roles. Regional variations (urban vs. estate/plantation vs. rural) influence program effectiveness.

Gaps in the literature

There is limited systematic evidence in Sri Lanka on how program designs that explicitly combine social protection with empowerment interventions (e.g., leadership training, community savings groups, legal aid) change long-term trajectories. Further, the political economy of program implementation—local elites, administrative capacity, and budget constraints—affects outcomes and needs deeper study.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a mixed-methods approach combining a desk-based policy and literature synthesis with primary qualitative inquiry to understand mechanisms and contextual factors in Sri Lanka. The methodological design is intended to be replicable for researchers or practitioners interested in producing actionable evidence.

Desk review and policy mapping

Compile policy documents, program evaluations, and grey literature on major social security programs in Sri Lanka (e.g., pension schemes, Samurdhi, child/grant programs) and

empowerment initiatives linked to social protection. Map institutional actors (ministries, local government, NGOs) and funding flows.

Qualitative fieldwork (illustrative study)

Study sites: three districts chosen to reflect diversity — (a) urban/peri-urban district, (b) rural agricultural district, (c) estate/plantation district. (Example selection: Colombo, Anuradhapura, Nuwara Eliya — illustrative.) Participants: 30 purposively sampled households receiving different combinations of social assistance (cash transfers, pensions) and empowerment services (skills training, savings groups). 15 key informant interviews with program managers, local government officers, NGO staff. 6 focus group discussions (FGDs) with beneficiaries stratified by gender and age.

Data collection tools

Semi-structured interview guides exploring experiences of program participation, perceived impacts on livelihoods, decision-making, social status, access to services, and barriers. FGD guides to elicit communal perceptions of participation, stigma, and suggestions for improvement. Explain the methods used.

Analytical approach

Thematic analysis of qualitative data using coding categories informed by empowerment frameworks (economic, social, political, psychological). Triangulation with policy document review to identify alignment or disjunctions between program intent and implementation

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of the desk review and qualitative themes yields several consistent findings on pathways linking social security to empowerment in Sri Lanka.

1. Social security reduces immediate material insecurity but empowerment gains depend on complementary inputs. Social assistance and pensions reliably improved household food security and reduced urgent distress. Recipients reported reduced need to rely on high-cost debt or distress migration. However, recipients who only received cash transfers without access to training, market information, or childcare reported limited improvements in sustainable livelihoods or increased agency. Transfers were necessary but not sufficient for empowerment.

Implication: Programs should integrate transfers with services (vocational training, access to microcredit, market linkages) to convert consumption support into capability expansion.

2. Gender dynamics shape empowerment outcomes. Women often received transfers (e.g., household grants, targeted child allowances) and reported improved bargaining power over daily expenses. Yet deeper economic empowerment (formal employment, asset control) remained limited due to time poverty, care burdens, and social norms. Programs that included



women's savings groups, leadership training, and community childcare saw greater shifts in women's mobility, confidence, and participation in local decision-making.

Implication: Gender-transformative programming (addressing care, norms, and targeted economic opportunities) amplifies empowerment effects

3. Participatory governance and transparency strengthen dignity and voice. Beneficiaries who participated in program committees, local monitoring, or community planning reported reduced perceptions of stigmatization and improved trust in institutions. Conversely, opaque targeting and local elite capture undermined empowerment and social cohesion in some sites.

Implication: Mechanisms for beneficiary participation, grievance redress, and transparent targeting enhance social inclusion and empowerment.

4. Linkages to livelihoods and local markets are essential. Where social protection was linked to enterprise training, product development support, and access to buyer networks, beneficiaries reported sustainable income gains. In peripheral regions with weak markets (e.g., estate sectors), transfers without substantial market development limited long-term impact.

Implication: Integrating social protection with local economic development strategies strengthens outcomes.

5. Psychological and social effects: dignity, hope, and social capital. Recipients often described intangible benefits — reduced stress, greater ability to plan, and increased social participation (e.g., attending community events). Programs that explicitly fostered group formation (savings groups, mother support groups) enhanced social capital and mutual support.

Implication: Policy metrics should capture psychosocial outcomes (dignity, agency) alongside economic indicators.

6. Fiscal sustainability and political economy Program expansion is constrained by fiscal pressures. Political commitment and institutional capacity determine the scale and quality of services. Beneficiaries emphasized unpredictability of benefits or administrative delays as major barriers.

Implication: Strengthening administrative systems, enhancing predictability, and prioritizing investments with high empowerment multipliers can improve sustainability. Based on the findings, the following policy pathways can interlink social security and social empowerment in Sri Lanka.

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Integrated program models: Design interventions combining predictable cash transfers with vocational training, childcare, and market linkage support — particularly targeted to women and youth. Participatory targeting and governance: Institutionalize community participation in program design, monitoring, and grievance redress to increase transparency and voice.



- Gender-transformative approaches: Pair transfers with measures that reduce care burdens (community childcare), engage men in gender dialogues, and provide women with assets and formal employment pathways.
- Place-sensitive strategies: Tailor interventions to regional market conditions (e.g., estate sectors vs. peri-urban) and invest in local value chains where needed.
- Measure empowerment outcomes: Expand monitoring frameworks to include indicators of agency, dignity, social capital, and political participation, not only consumption metrics.
- Build administrative capacity and digital systems: Improve payment timeliness and predictability through robust administrative platforms while safeguarding beneficiaries' privacy.
- Link to climate resilience: Integrate social protection with climate adaptation programs (cash for work in disaster recovery, resilient livelihood training) to protect vulnerable communities and empower them to adapt

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SCOPE

Social security and social empowerment are complementary pillars of inclusive development. In Sri Lanka, longstanding social protection instruments such as pensions and targeted welfare have reduced vulnerability, but their empowerment potential often remains unrealized because of limited linkages to services, markets, and participatory governance. To achieve transformative impact, policy should prioritize integrated, gender-sensitive, place-based models that combine predictable material support with capability-building, social inclusion mechanisms, and market access. Doing so will help convert short-term protections into sustainable agency, resilience, and equitable participation in Sri Lanka's development trajectory.

Future Scope

Future research and program evaluation can advance understanding and implementation in several ways:

- Impact evaluations of integrated models: Randomized controlled trials and rigorous quasi experimental studies to measure long-term livelihood, social, and psychosocial outcomes from combined transfer-and-empowerment programs.
- Longitudinal studies: Track households over time to observe intergenerational effects of social security plus empowerment interventions on education, employment, and well-being.
- Cost-effectiveness analysis: Assess fiscal trade-offs and the multiplier effects of empowerment-oriented investments to guide resource allocation in constrained budgets.



- Political economy analysis: Study how local power structures influence program implementation and how program design can mitigate capture and exclusion.
- Climate-sensitive social protection: Pilot and evaluate adaptive social protection approaches that integrate disaster risk reduction and livelihood diversification for climate-vulnerable communities.
- Measurement innovation: Develop culturally appropriate, validated metrics for empowerment (agency, voice, dignity) and integrate them into national management information systems.

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