

# THREADS

The Newsletter of the Sociology Alumni Association  
University of Colombo

| Issue : I | 2021 - May



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## The 11<sup>th</sup> AGM of the Sociology Alumni Association of the University of Colombo

The 11th Annual General Meeting of the Sociology Alumni Association (SAAUC) of the Department of Sociology, University of Colombo was held on the 24th of January 2021. Due to the unprecedented times we live in now because of the COVID - 19 pandemic the AGM was held online; a first for the Alumni Association. Many sociologists old and new, who live in Sri Lanka and overseas were able to join the virtual AGM; the high participation of Alumni members was a most welcome result of having the meeting online.

The main item on the agenda was the selection of the new committee for 2021/2022. The elected members are as follows:

Position	Office Bearer
Advisor	Prof. Subhangi Herath
President	Mr. Induka Senanayake
Secretary	Ms. Chanuka Thilakarathna
Treasurer	Ms. Pushparani Figurado
Vice President I	Dr. Sagara Chandrasekera
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Executive Committee Member	Mr. Irrone Prasad
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Executive Committee Member	Dr. Champa Nelson
Executive Committee Member	Mr. Mohamed Rizwan
Executive Committee Member	Mr. Nandasena Madugoda
Executive Committee Member	Mr. Namal Weerasena
Executive Committee Member	Ms. Samitha Sugathamala
Executive Committee Member	Dr. Indika Bulankulame

The activities of the Alumni Association should engage in for the coming year was discussed. A digital quarterly newsletter was proposed to be published. This will be one of the main projects for this year which will be headed by an editorial board. The overwhelming consensus of those who participated at the AGM was to make the presence of the SAAUC felt through the projects carried out and by working towards the betterment of the budding sociologists of the Department. It was also discussed that new membership for the SAAUC should be also actively encouraged. Due to the current pandemic situation it was agreed that social medial will be used to engage in publicity campaigns and to host seminars, and other projects lined up for this year. Despite the restrictions of the online platform it was a very successful event.

## Editorial

It is with great pleasure that we bring you the first quarterly issue of the SAAUC.

The SAAUC newsletter is designed to feature news of the alumni association, the achievement of our undergraduates, post-graduate students and our alumani, feature current issues of significance to the nation and a platform to disseminate creative thinking.

In this first issue we take up the current crisis of the COVID 19. At this moment we carry a certain amount of despair, frustration and anger in the way the virus is spreading and taking new turns. This desperation also goes hand in hand as to how it is controlled and more over how the society is responding to it as responsible citizens. It is no joke that the COVID 19 has created spaces of uncertainty and the acceptance of such spaces has been a challenge to the people at large. While neighbouring India is going through a crisis in humanity, Sri Lanka is following close behind in understanding this reality. After an year of COVID 19 it is still unclear as to how much this crisis is affecting families who contracted COVID 19 as well as those of us who have to maintain protocols to survive, but nevertheless having to lead a life of hype reality and sustain our livelihoods to keep the country economically stable.

The main article in this issue tries to focus on how the Government of Sri Lanka responded to the crisis at the ground level in the first wave and how certain links were established to sustain the food supply chain during the lockdown. What lessons can we learn from a village in the Polonnaruwa district far away from the Western Province where the economy is rolled out?

We hope to keep this conversation continuing in our forthcoming issues.

Meanwhile, I like to invite all of you to contribute to this newsletter and disseminate your knowledge and friendship across the SAAUC.

Stay Safe !!

*Dr. Indika Balankulame*

# SAAUC recognises the 'Best Student' in Sociology

Annually, the Sociology Alumni Association of the University of Colombo (SAAUC), recognise the highest achiever among the graduands who have completed their undergraduate education (specialising) in Sociology. The 'Best Student' award introduced in 2010 by the SAAUC, is not only a celebration of hard work, success and distinguished academic performance, it is also an induction of a fresh, talented sociologist into the fraternity. Furthermore, the award acts as a catalyst to encourage and motivate undergraduates already pursuing Sociology to strive for excellence. In bestowing this award at the Annual General Meeting of the SAAUC, it is hoped that Sociology will be showcased as a progressive and scientific study program that prepares young people for a diverse range of careers. Supported by the Department of Sociology of the University of Colombo, the monetary reward for the Best Student presented by the President of the SAAUC becomes one among many honours received by the awardee; the award has the potential to provide an advantage for employment, scholarships and post-graduate study. Additionally, the awardee together with his/her newly graduated peers are provided with the opportunity to meet veterans who have served and are serving in eminent positions in the private and public sector, thereby providing a chance for networking and an opening for internship, research and work.

The Best Student award is generally supported by the SAAUC; however, members of the Association and the Executive Committee have come forward to sponsor the award on many occasions. Ms. Naduni Jayasinghe, who graduated with First Class honours was the recipient of the award in 2020. She undertook the study of understanding the entrepreneurial behaviour among a selected group of small and medium scale Muslim entrepreneurs in Dehiwala, Sri Lanka in fulfilment of the Sociology (special) degree program. She is currently serving as a Research Assistant at the Social Policy Analysis and Research Centre (SPARC) of the University of Colombo.



# Listening to Community Voices: An Overview of Community Level Interventions to COVID-19 in Sri Lanka: A Case Study from Thamankaduwa

**C** OVID-19 has undoubtedly showcased the systemic nature of risk where one devastating effect cascades into another, dilapidating not just discrete parts of a system, but the entire system (UNDRR, 2020). In Sri Lanka, the first case of COVID-19 was reported on 27th January 2020. A Chinese tourist who had arrived in the country two weeks prior to the said date (Epidemiology Unit, 2020). Since then, the country has been affected by three waves of the Coronavirus which has caused devastating effects that span across various dimensions of the society; ranging from health, economy and psychosocial-wellbeing to the rights of people. For instance, in Sri Lanka, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused major social and economic losses. Spanning from the widening inequalities in access to educational services, to a contraction of the GDP by 3.6% in 2020 compared to 2019 (Wimalaweera, 2020; Department of Census and Statistics, 2021). Obstructing the country's progress towards sustainable development. The pandemic has disproportionately affected vulnerable population groups such as the poor, all the more reason to perceive COVID-19 as far more than a temporary shock wave that will make the headlines for one or two years but a trigger that gives rise to long lasting inequalities and vulnerability (UNDP and UNICEF, 2020; Kadirgamar & Thiruvarangan, 2020). Responses to COVID-19 should therefore extend beyond addressing the short-term effects of COVID-19 and be geared towards mitigating said long-term impacts and strengthening community resilience. Such an

approach requires that communities are at the centre of COVID-19 responses where responses are facilitated not only for the community but also by the community (Bhattacharyya et al., 2020; Oxfam, 2020; UNDRR, 2020).

It is against this background that this article provides a brief overview of community level interventions to the first wave of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka. The article highlights the role played by community level disaster management and public health officials in such interventions while examining how far communities have been able to actively participate in these interventions, the benefits reaped from such participation and challenges to community involvement.

The facts presented in this article have been extracted mainly from a case study developed on community level responses to the first wave of COVID-19 in the Thamankaduwa Divisional Secretariat Division of the Polonnaruwa district of Sri Lanka. This case was written up as part of a research study titled 'Improving COVID-19 and pandemic preparedness and response through the downstream of multi-hazard early warning systems' undertaken by the Social Policy Analysis and Research Centre [SPARC], University of Colombo in collaboration with several international and national partners<sup>1</sup>. The case was developed using

<sup>1</sup> Partners include the Global Disaster Resilience Centre, University of Huddersfield, UK; University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka and the Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine, Sri Lanka.

in-depth interviews conducted with the District Secretary of the Polonnaruwa District, Divisional Secretary of the Thamankaduwa Divisional Secretariat Division [DSD] and the Medical Officer of Health [MOH] of the Thamankaduwa DSD. These officials have been at the heart of executing community level responses to COVID-19 in Sri Lanka. For instance, disruptions to the food supply chain was a major issue during the first wave of COVID-19 when an island wide curfew was imposed, district borders were only opened when necessary for the provision of essential services. The Divisional Secretary played a crucial role in facilitating the supply of food through the divisional level to villages under the Division. The food supply chain ran from state owned retailers like Sathosa through District and Divisional levels to GN Divisions. Sale of food at the village level, was facilitated by allowing cooperatives and small grocery stores to be open despite the curfew. Further, the Divisional Secretary coordinated with other community level officials such as the Grama Niladhari officers, Development Officers and



**Further a hotline was made available by the Thamankaduwa Divisional Secretariat through which community members could contact the Divisional Secretariat for any kind of assistance needed or to notify of any behaviour that deviates from the recommended behavioural guidelines**

Samurdhi Development Officers to select beneficiaries and distribute an allowance of LKR 5000 among economically vulnerable families reflecting a decision taken by the Central government to support such families during the pandemic. Apart from these community level interventions, measures were taken to ensure the provision of dry rations and food supplies to families that were isolated in the area and to other vulnerable entities such as temples and orphanages, while making sure that health guidelines such as social distancing were followed and ensure that the quarantine centre established in the Kandakadu area of the Polonnaruwa District had access to basic services.

Such interventions led by the Divisional Secretary have been supported by mechanisms that have mobilized community resources and fostered community participation in countering the pandemic. For instance, in order to notify the Divisional Secretary of the village level issues, lack of food supply, a whatsapp group was formed among the Grama Niladhari [GN] officers of the 55 Grama Niladhari [GN] divisions. According to data obtained from interviews, out of the 55 GN officers, approximately 35 GN officers actively participated in said virtual group. Simultaneously, at the village level, a community member was appointed for every 10 households to notify the GN officer and eventually the Divisional Secretary of any concerns or issues that have arisen at the village level owing to the pandemic. Further a hotline was made available by the Thamankaduwa Divisional Secretariat through which community members could contact the Divisional Secretariat for any kind of assistance needed or to notify of any behaviour that deviates from the recommended behavioural guidelines [Eg: a social gathering]. It was revealed during the interviews that the community was subject to the surveillance of the community itself. This proved useful in ensuring that the recommended health guidelines were followed by community members and that the required system was in place to keep the transmission of the virus under control.

These mechanisms have clearly considered the community as a key stakeholder in response to activities targeted to curb COVID-19. More importantly, said mechanisms have instilled in community members a sense of accountability, holding them accountable for controlling the spread of the virus. The described mechanisms have also provided a platform for voices of the community to

be heard and eventually for community level interventions to tailor to the context specific issues and needs of the community. Furthermore, through encouraging community participation, the community itself has been leveraged as a resource in community level efforts to combat the pandemic. This is further illustrated by the fact that a garment factory within the division acted as the main supplier of face masks in the area. The supply of face masks was therefore ensured despite the logistical barriers imposed by the pandemic.

Nevertheless, there have been certain limitations imposed by the lack of knowledge and familiarity of the community and the social characteristics of the region by the state officials. Some of the key informants stated that many of the GN officers had been appointed from outside the village and were therefore unable to maintain a close rapport with the community. This had made it difficult to identify deserving beneficiaries for the distribution of the government allowance of LKR 5000. While the relevant GN offices had some lists including the list of Samurdi beneficiaries, the list of people with chronic kidney disease and the list of people with disabilities in the respective GN division, there was no official list to identify other economically vulnerable groups such as daily wage earners and informal vendors who may have lost their means of income during the pandemic period.

It is evident that the disaster management and public health institutional infrastructure of Sri Lanka supports the emulation of a de-concentrated approach that corresponds with the administrative system of the country. This form of an institutional set up that cuts across many societal levels, i.e. from national, provincial, district, local to community levels, has been conducive for localizing national level COVID-19 responses to address context specific needs of communities and foster community engagement in mitigating the adverse effects of the pandemic. However, there is space for community level interventions to COVID-19 and similar disasters to be optimised through enhancing state-citizen interactivity at the community level. The findings of this study demonstrate that community level state offices should be established and held not just as reflections of bureaucracy but as representative of the respective local community backed by an a thorough understanding of the socio-economic, demographic and cultural characteristics of the community.

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හරිහනී වාසනා ප්‍රනාන්දු  
සහාය කටිකාචාර්ය  
සමාජ විද්‍යා අධ්‍යයනාංශය  
කොළඹ විශ්වවිද්‍යාලය

