



Traditional charity – giving to the old

Charity and social protection

Summary

Over the last few years there has been a revival of interest in social protection (SP) in the context of development. From being seen as marginal or even inimical to development a view of SP as integral to the development process has gained ground. This has led to a debate as to the form, nature and objectives of SP initiatives ranging from a view of SP as a 'safety net' for the poorest of the poor to a 'trampoline' which allows the poor to recover from temporary shocks and periods of distress and finally to approaches which see SP as a means of social transformation and triggering wider processes of development.

This briefing considers the role of charity in supporting social protection amongst the

poor and marginal of Colombo, Sri Lanka. Colombo was chosen in part because of the high levels of charitable giving reported from Sri Lanka and the wide range of social and economic conditions found in its capital. It describes the broad picture of how charity relates to social protection in Colombo. Besides acts of individual charity the briefing outlines the wide range of formal and informal organisations, religious and secular institutions, found in the city. It examines the content of charitable assistance and its relationship to religious identity and political interests and the impact that has on charity as a source of social protection. Finally, the report looks at the sustainability and effectiveness of charitable organisations in Colombo.

Key findings

- Both the state and the private sector are actively involved in social protection in Colombo.
- Besides individual acts of charity there are a vast range of organisations involved in charitable activities ranging from orphanages to old peoples' homes; from medical assistance to help with educational needs.
- Over time, traditional forms of charitable giving have in many cases been transformed to meet the needs of both givers and receivers.
- Much of charitable activity takes place within religious communities. This works to reinforce separation and reduce inter-community linkages.
- The religious nature of much charitable activity also encourages conditionality, beneficiaries being encouraged to adopt the moral stance of their benefactors.
- Social protection delivered by charitable organisations in Colombo tends to take the form of safety nets. There is little evidence that it is used in ways which might address the causes of underlying poverty and social marginality.
- There is considerable evidence that charity is used as a means of gaining political support, and political considerations at times cross-cut religious interests.
- The private charitable sector in Colombo is highly fragmented and disorganised and generally lacks a professional approach to social protection issues.

About this policy briefing

This briefing paper was written by Sarah Kabir, R.L. Stirrat, Tom Widger and Filippo Osella and is a research output from the 'Charity, Philanthropy and Development in Colombo' project, funded by the ESRC and DfID (www.charityphilanthropydevelopment.org).

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The research

The research on which this briefing is based was conducted as part of a DFID-ESRC funded project. Field research was carried out in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 2012-2013 and involved researchers from the University of Peradeniya and the Centre for Poverty Analysis in Sri Lanka working with staff from the University of Sussex in the UK.

A key objective of the research was to identify the role that indigenous philanthropy plays and can play in development. In contrast to the activities of major international development foundations, little attention has been paid to the developmental potential of indigenous charities (as distinct from NGOs) in the development process. The project assessed the degree to which charitable activity in Colombo is orientated towards development rather than other objectives and the degree to which charitable actions reinforce or subvert existing systems of marginalisation and impoverishment. At the same time, the research sought to identify how charitable resources can be more fully mobilised to achieve developmental goals and what has to be done to realise this potential.

Qualitative and quantitative research was carried out in Colombo and its immediate environs. This focused on donors (both individuals and corporate), charitable organisations and recipients. A combination of research methods was employed including questionnaires and household surveys in selected areas of Colombo, structured and unstructured interviews with a broad range of stakeholders in the charitable sector, and participant observation. Historical data were also reviewed in order to provide temporal depth to the research.

Background

In Sri Lanka, as elsewhere, charitable and philanthropic acts have long been associated with SP and assistance to the poor. In pre-colonial times kings were sources of such assistance and this model continues to be important today. Colonial rule introduced western models of charity into the country. Local charities were patronised both by foreign state and commercial interests as well as the rising Sri Lankan middle classes and sat well with earlier notions of charity and SP and the status associated with charitable giving. After Independence, the rise of a welfarist state led to increasing state interventions in matters pertaining to SP and to a certain extent a marginalisation of private forms of charity.

The situation today is that both the state and the private sector (both at an individual and a corporate level) are heavily involved in SP. Thus state provision of education and medical services can be seen as a form of SP benefitting the poor. Similarly, activities such as the samurdhi scheme channels state resources to the poor. In addition, there is a vast range of private charitable activities which are orientated towards SP in the broadest sense.

The range of charitable support for SP

Private charity and philanthropic organisations are active across a whole range of sectors ranging from formal organisations to highly informal alms giving to beggars.

At the formal level there are a range of organisations, mostly (but by no means all) religiously inspired, which support private homes for the elderly. Whilst some charge their residents a small fee, others supply their services for free. Similarly there are orphanages, again mostly under a religious umbrella, which give housing and education to the young. In both cases the frequently made claim is that religion is not important in terms of who is supported, but there appears to be a strong correlation between the religious identity of the organisations involved and the religion of the residents. There have also been increasing claims that orphanages in particular are used as means of converting people from one religion to another.

Besides homes for the elderly, there are also various institutions which supply support to the elderly in their own homes. One example of this is a 'meals on wheels' organisation which provides elderly people with daily meals. There are also 'soup kitchens' which supply meals to the indigent poor. In other cases 'dry goods' (uncooked foodstuffs) are supplied, usually at the time



In an old peoples home – modern charity

of major religious festivals but sometimes on a regular monthly basis. Besides food, there are medical charities catering for the needs of the poor either without payment or for a nominal fee.

An interesting feature of the charitable sector is how traditional forms of giving are being transformed to meet the modern context. Whilst many of these institutions were established through the gifts of particular individuals or families, the running costs of the institutions are often met from other sources. Traditionally funerals and the succeeding seven day and three month memorial rituals have been accompanied by the giving of food to kin and neighbours. Increasingly however these have been transformed into support for orphanages, homes for the elderly and meals for the poor, the family of the dead person undertaking to pay for or supply food on specific days.

These more or less formalised forms of support for SP are accompanied by less formal but by no means unimportant forms of giving. Neighbours and friends help during times of difficulty, in effect forming parts of mutual systems of social support and organised in terms of long term patterns of reciprocity. And of course there is the charity of passers-by, small donations of cash to the poor on the street.

The character of support for SP

As has already been noted, the primary driver behind much of this charitable activity is the religious imperative. Through giving the donor gains a certain form of religious currency, for instance merit if a Buddhist; blessings if a Christian.

This has a number of effects on the nature of charitable giving.

First, it ensures that charity and concomitant SP tends to take place within religious communities. The result is a tendency to a hardening of the boundaries between religiously defined groups in Colombo and does little to mitigate the growing tendencies towards a separation of communities in the city.

Second, charity tends to be distributed on a conditional basis. Thus the 'deserving poor' are those most likely to benefit from charity and charity is in effect used to encourage forms of orthodox and acceptable behaviour. This is reinforced by the practice of distributing material rather than monetary

benefits thus ensuring that benefits are used in an appropriate fashion.

Third, most of this charity focuses on providing a safety net rather than being transformative. Charity works to reinforce and denote differences of wealth and power, the poor existing as a means by which the donors can generate merit and blessings. In a sense the poor always have to be present in order for there to be a rationale for charitable actions.

Running alongside, and sometimes crosscutting religious divides there are also political considerations. A traditional role of the righteous ruler (and his successors) was giving to the poor and providing a safety net for those most in need. Politicians at all levels continue to follow this model and see charitable donations as a means of gaining a political following using either personal donations or donations through 'foundations' to gain clients and followers. Even when direct political ambitions are not important, wealthy individuals are also active in various forms of SP charitable activity as a means of gaining status.

Charitable actions tend to be determined by the interests and perceptions of the donors rather than the recipients. In broad terms (and with certain notable exceptions), there is a general lack of professionalism in the sense that little attempt is made to understand what causes poverty or generates the need for SP, and to tailor charitable acts accordingly. Within the discourse of charity, there is little acknowledgement of the recipients having 'rights' but rather of them providing a 'service' for the donors. This process has been encouraged by the increasing marginalisation of international charities and NGOs which often went beyond the 'safety net' approach to SP to address more transformative issues.

Is private charity a sustainable form of SP?

Related to this is the stress running through almost all the charitable sector in Colombo on 'social protection' rather than 'development'. As far as the generality of donors are concerned what is important is the existence of people to whom donations can be given. Only rarely is there any interest in broader developmental objectives involving the transformation of the structures which generate the poverty

and marginality which charities attempt to alleviate. Indeed, one could argue that a focus on development would threaten the very essence of charity and the benefits which flow to the donor as it would undermine the existence of suitable donees.

This tendency is apparent in the problems facing local development organisations. In the past they have been highly dependent on overseas sources of funding to support their development activities but such funds have become increasingly scarce. As yet these organisations have failed to identify or encourage Sri Lankan sources of funding and given the nature of the charitable sector in Sri Lanka it is unlikely that they will be able to utilise these resources.

Increasing the impact and effectiveness of charity to support SP

The fragmented, uncoordinated nature of the charity sector in Sri Lanka is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength in so far as it, or rather the various elements in it, continue to exist outside state control. It is a weakness in that there is little coordination between various bodies involved in the sector and little attempt to learn from each other.

Linked to this is the lack of professionalism in the sector, little knowledge of contemporary thinking about SP or access to information about SP in other parts of the world, and a generally old fashioned and patronising approach to the issues involved in SP. But at the same time, the amateurism which characterises the sector is also one of its strengths in that it attracts dedicated supporters and activists.

Even so, it is clear that privately funded approaches to SP do need to consider carefully what they are doing and what they hope to achieve from it. At present most of their activities support the continuing existence of those structures which give rise to poverty and social marginalisation. Little if any attention has been paid to the increasing importance of cash transfers, both conditional and unconditional, in other parts of the world, and the dominance of assistance in kind indicates the lack of trust on the part of givers. More generally there is a need to increase the role that the poor themselves play in managing and designing means through which charitable activities can effectively support SP initiatives.

Case Study: Charity and social protection in an urban housing scheme

Moulana Watta is a small neighbourhood of around 2000 people in north-central Colombo. The community comprises 25 encroached 'houses' and 160 public housing scheme flats across 11 blocks. At least half of the population are Sri Lankan Moor, and a smaller community of Malay Muslims also exists. The second largest community is Sinhala Buddhist, and there are also a smaller number of Sinhala Catholics and Protestants. Whilst one section of the community is relatively affluent, the majority are employed in various daily-wage and menial occupations and live on or around the poverty level. Despite this, very few people in Moulana Watta receive any kind of social protection assistance from the government.

On the other hand, a wide range of charitable organisations and philanthropists are heavily involved in gifting to the community at different times of year. These include: the Warehouse Project, a local community centre; wealthy Muslims who give zakat to poor Muslims at Ramadan;

local politicians trawling for support; mosques, churches, and temples in the immediate area; a Buddhist temple educational foundation; local branches of the Lion's Club and Rotary Club; various individual businesses operating in the area; wealthy relatives of Moulana Watta residents who live abroad; and even the President of Sri Lanka and members of the First Family, whose staff reside in the community. Whilst some activities are aimed at the whole community – for example the Warehouse Project and Lion's and Rotary clubs seek to transcend religious and ethnic barriers – others are exclusively for adherents.

Overwhelmingly, however, charitable organisations and philanthropists give immediate forms of SP rather than a kind that might facilitate longer term transformation to occur. Thus the Warehouse Project is interested in fostering a culture of 'self-help' in the community but finds itself mostly called upon to provide immediate cash transfers to help with loan repayments, or gifting schoolbooks to

children and spectacles to the elderly. Poor Muslims receive zakat from rich Muslims at Ramadan – a gift that ideally is supposed to enable the receiver to become a giver the following year but in the vast majority of cases involves little more than a small gift of money. For the recipients of charity the gift of cash or kind can make a difference in terms of meeting everyday needs, but overwhelmingly what people ask for is personal relationships with givers in the hopes that through their beneficence longer term relationships of support may grow. This is something that givers unsurprisingly do not and cannot commit to.

In Moulana Watta, charity and philanthropy provide a more certain source of SP than government. Yet because residents ultimately cannot make demands on givers, the sustainability of charitable SP as a form of poor relief remains unproven, and likely unobtainable.

Policy implications

- There is a real danger that interfering with the private charitable institutions presently supporting social protection interventions in Colombo could increase tendencies towards the use of charity for political patronage.
- At the same time, it would be unfortunate if social protection was left to religious institutions and for support to be given to charities on this basis. This would only intensify divisions between different religious groups.
- Further consideration has to be given as to how to reach those excluded from existing charitable flows.
- One of the major weaknesses of charities working in the field of social protection is a lack of professional skills to complement their undoubted commitment. Consideration should be given as to how to provide the necessary training.
- Presently the role of charities in social protection tends to reinforce the status quo and does not lead to social transformation. This could involve charities shifting the focus of their activities away from the distribution of goods towards more ambitious and radical forms of intervention.

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Other readings

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