

# The Effectiveness of Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme Preliminary Findings and Ongoing Assessments

## Interim Report of a Baseline Survey



**Right to Life Human Rights Centre**

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## I. Introduction

### A. Background of the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme:

The Aswesuma Welfare Benefit program was introduced by the Sri Lankan government as a successor to the Samurdi Program, which faced criticism due to its inability to effectively reach deserving beneficiaries. Aimed at providing targeted financial assistance to vulnerable populations, the Aswesuma program was designed to rectify the exclusionary issues of its predecessor. Since its initiation, the program has garnered significant attention and participation, receiving 3,744,494 applications for welfare benefits across 340 Divisional Secretariats in Sri Lanka.

The program's primary goal is to accurately identify and provide financial aid to deserving individuals and families facing economic hardships. However, the considerable number of appeals (1,028,885) and objections (134,540) filed after the identification of 1,792,265 eligible families raises concerns about the accuracy of beneficiary selection. Moreover, the appeals from 84,374 families to be placed under a higher benefit category indicate potential discrepancies in the current categorization system's ability to address varying beneficiary needs.

### B. Purpose of the Baseline Survey:

The baseline survey on the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit scheme serves the overarching purpose of assessing the program's effectiveness, identifying potential shortcomings in beneficiary selection, and recommending strategies to enhance its accuracy and efficacy. This survey aims to delve deeper into the operational aspects of the program, evaluating its impact, transparency, and the challenges encountered during its implementation.

The primary objective of this survey is to scrutinize the Aswesuma program comprehensively. It seeks to pinpoint areas where the program might falter in accurately targeting beneficiaries, address the causes of exclusions or discrepancies in beneficiary selection, and explore factors contributing to the need for appeals or modifications in benefit categories.

### C. Scope and Objectives of the Preliminary Report:

The scope of this preliminary report encompasses a focused evaluation of the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit program, primarily addressing its effectiveness, transparency, and the challenges faced during its implementation. The report aims to present initial findings and observations from the ongoing baseline survey, shedding light on the program's current state and potential areas for improvement.

The objectives of this preliminary report are to provide an overview of the Aswesuma program, highlight the research questions guiding the baseline survey, and offer a glimpse into the methodology employed for data collection and analysis. The report aims to establish a foundation for the comprehensive assessment to follow, laying out the groundwork based on the initial stages of the survey.

### D. Methodology Overview:

The methodology employed for this baseline survey incorporates a multi-faceted approach to gather comprehensive data on the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit scheme. It involves quantitative and qualitative techniques, including surveys, interviews, and data analysis, to collect information from beneficiaries, program administrators, and stakeholders involved in the program's implementation.

The survey's data collection methods entail structured questionnaires administered to beneficiaries, semi-structured interviews with program administrators, focus group discussions with community representatives and key informant interviews. The collected data will undergo rigorous analysis, combining statistical tools and qualitative analysis techniques to derive meaningful insights into the program's performance and challenges faced.

This methodology overview ensures a systematic and comprehensive approach to evaluate the Aswesuma program, allowing for an in-depth understanding of its strengths, weaknesses, and areas requiring attention or improvement.

## II. Methodology

### A. Description of the Survey Design:

The survey design employed for this study was comprehensive and aimed to capture diverse perspectives and experiences regarding the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit program in Sri Lanka. It utilized a mixed-methods approach integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to provide a nuanced understanding of the program's effectiveness and beneficiary experiences.

### B. Sampling Technique and Sample Size:

A representative sample of 1092 individuals from 17 districts and 74 Divisional Secretariats across Sri Lanka were selected using a simple random sampling technique. This ensured an equal opportunity for each individual in the population to participate in the study, facilitating a fair representation across various regions and communities. The sample size included Aswesuma applicants, beneficiaries (both Aswesuma and Samurdi), appellants, and eligible community members.

### C. Data Collection Methods:

The study employed a combination of data collection methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit program. Quantitative data was gathered through structured questionnaires administered to all participants, containing both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Qualitative insights were obtained through semi-structured interviews, focused group discussions (FGDs) involving 150 participants, and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with 20 key stakeholders. These varied approaches allowed for a detailed exploration of participant experiences, opinions, and perspectives related to the program.

### D. Period of Data Collection:

The data collection for this survey was conducted within a specified timeframe, focusing on recent years up to September 30, 2023. The duration allocated for data collection ensured that insights and experiences gathered were reflective of the program's current status and recent developments. The survey captured a snapshot of the program's progress and challenges faced by participants within the designated timeframe.

### E. Challenges Faced During Data Collection:

Several challenges were encountered during the data collection process, albeit managed effectively to ensure the integrity of the study. Logistics in reaching remote or inaccessible areas posed some difficulties in participant engagement and data collection. Additionally, ensuring the cooperation and participation of all intended respondents across diverse socio-economic backgrounds required meticulous planning and coordination. However, stringent adherence to ethical principles, clear communication with participants, and a systematic approach aided in mitigating these challenges, ensuring the reliability and validity of the collected data.

### III. Overview of Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme

#### A. Brief Explanation of the Scheme's Objectives and Implementation:

The Aswesuma Welfare Benefit program was introduced by the Sri Lankan government as a targeted financial assistance initiative, aiming to address the limitations observed in its precursor, the Samurdi Program. Implemented under the Welfare Benefits Board (WBB), the Aswesuma program was established to ensure more effective and inclusive support for vulnerable populations. Its primary objective is to provide financial aid to deserving individuals and families facing economic hardships.

The scheme operates under a legal framework outlined in the Welfare Benefits Act No. 24 of 2002, reinstated in February 2016. Its implementation involves a transparent process for identifying eligible recipients and providing them with financial benefits. The WBB oversees the establishment of welfare benefit schemes, development of eligibility criteria, financial allocations, and the specification of benefits to be granted under the Aswesuma program.

#### B. Target Beneficiaries and Eligibility Criteria:

The Aswesuma Welfare Benefit program targets vulnerable populations across Sri Lanka. As of its initiation in July 2023, the program has received an overwhelming response, with a total of 3,744,494 applications for welfare benefits from 340 Divisional Secretariats across the island.

Initially, 1,792,265 families were identified as eligible for benefits under the Aswesuma program. However, subsequent stages revealed a considerable number of appeals (1,028,885) and objections (134,540), suggesting potential discrepancies in beneficiary selection. Additionally, 84,374 families selected for benefits have appealed for placement in higher benefit categories, indicating potential shortcomings in the program's categorization system.

#### C. Key Features and Benefits Offered by the Scheme:

The Aswesuma Welfare Benefit program aims to rectify the exclusionary issues faced by its predecessor, the Samurdi Program. Its key features include a structured approach to identifying and providing financial assistance to vulnerable populations based on specified eligibility criteria set by the Welfare Benefits Board.

The program offers financial aid to eligible families, intending to alleviate economic hardships and support them in meeting their basic needs. Despite challenges related to beneficiary selection, the Aswesuma program signifies a pivotal step towards ensuring that deserving individuals receive the necessary assistance, albeit with ongoing efforts to refine its categorization system to better address the varying needs of beneficiaries.

## IV. Preliminary Findings

### A. Demographic Profile of Beneficiaries Surveyed:

The survey encompassed a broad demographic spectrum reflecting the population's diversity in Sri Lanka. The racial distribution among the participants highlighted that 67.3% identified as Sinhala, 24.4% as Tamil, and 8.1% as Muslim. The survey focused predominantly on these three major racial groups in the country. Gender representation showed that 62.3% were female, while 37.7% were male, signifying a substantial female presence in the survey. In terms of age, the highest proportion (70.7%) fell within the 35-65 age range, followed by the over 65 age group, indicating a predominant presence of middle-aged and older individuals. The average family size among respondents varied, with 22.6% having 4 members, followed closely by 19.5% and 18.8% with 3 and 2 family members, respectively. Regarding income, a significant portion (70.4%) reported a low-income range of 10,000/= to 20,000/=, while 1.7% stated they had no source of income, relying on their children or neighbors.

### B. Utilization of Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme among Respondents:

The survey revealed that a considerable majority (83.7%) had applied for the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Program, showcasing substantial interest and participation in the initiative. Only a small fraction (9.1%) stated they did not apply, while 7.2% mentioned being unaware of the subsidy program. Furthermore, among those who applied, 33.3% were currently receiving benefits from the Aswesuma subsidy, while 43.7% had filed appeals regarding the program.

### C. Perception and Awareness of the Scheme among the Target Population:

The survey data indicated varying sentiments toward the Aswesuma program. In terms of satisfaction and enthusiasm, 35% expressed dissatisfaction with the program, while 17.9% were quite satisfied, and 3.6% were completely satisfied. There was a significant neutral sentiment (29.3%) regarding the poverty relief program, indicating an ambivalent stance among respondents. When asked about the progress in their living standards due to the program, 58.1% stated they experienced no or minimal progress. However, 18.7% reported moderate to considerable improvement in their living standards.

### D. Initial Observations Regarding the Scheme's Effectiveness in Meeting its Objectives:

The initial observations regarding the program's effectiveness revealed a mixed perception among beneficiaries. While a substantial number of participants engaged with the Aswesuma program by applying for benefits, there were varying degrees of satisfaction and perceived impact on living standards. The program received both positive and negative feedback, with significant numbers expressing dissatisfaction and a lack of substantial progress in their living conditions despite the program's implementation. The data highlights a need for further evaluation and improvement to ensure better efficacy in meeting the program's intended objectives.

## V. Data Analysis (if applicable)

### A. Statistical analysis of preliminary survey data

Graphs, Charts, and Tables:

Demographic Profile:

Figure 1.1: Race Distribution

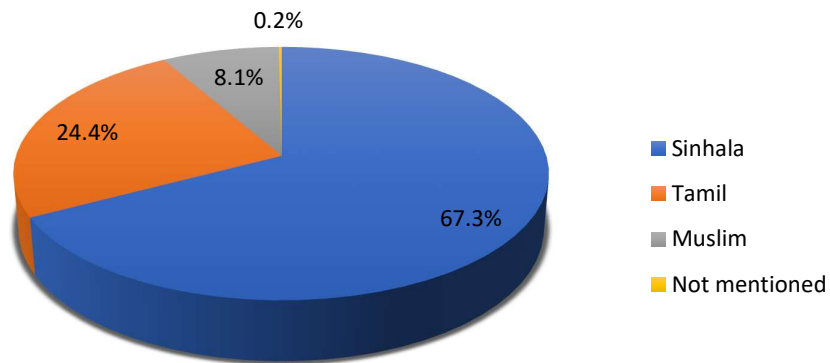


Figure 1.2: Religion Distribution

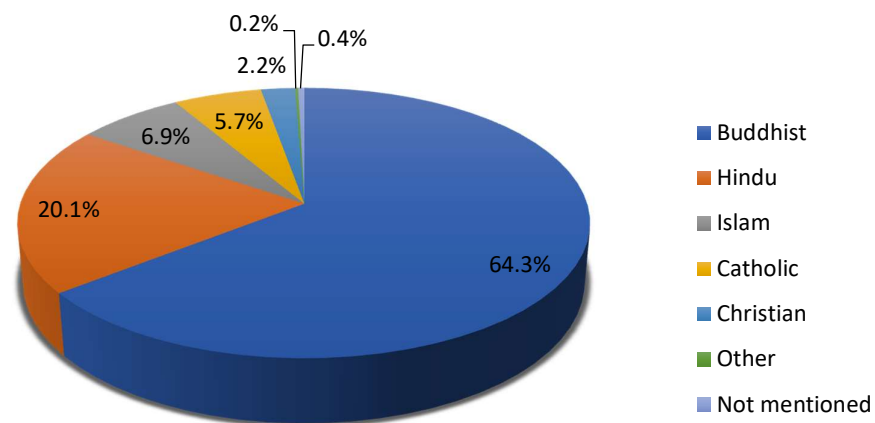


Figure 1.3: Gender Distribution



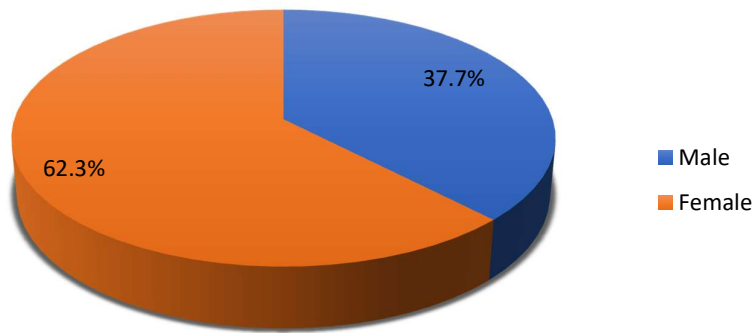


Figure 1.4: Age Groups of Participants

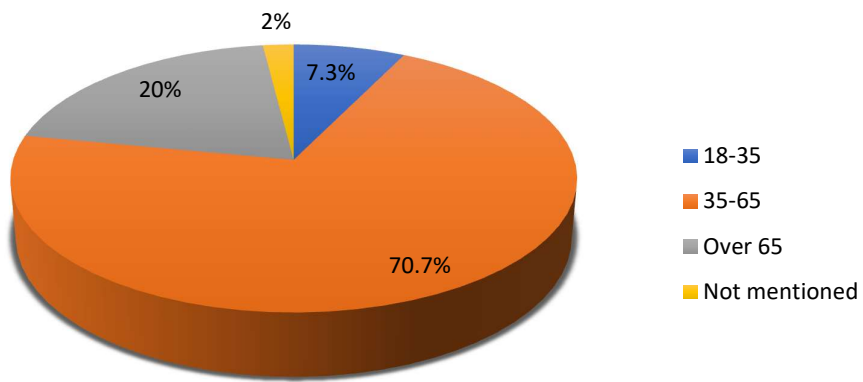


Figure 1.5: Family Size Distribution

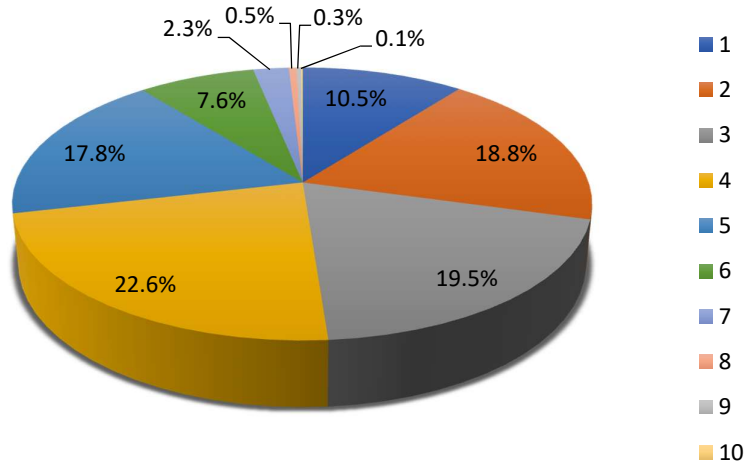


Figure 1.6: Family Income Levels

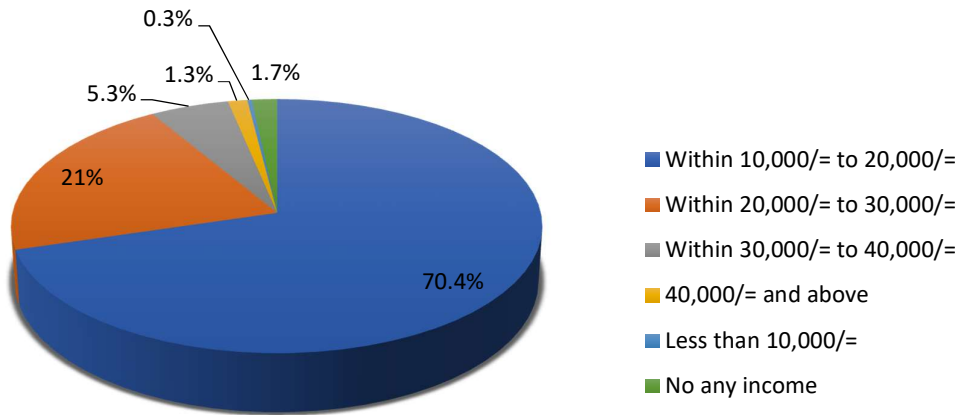


Figure 1.7: Sources of Income

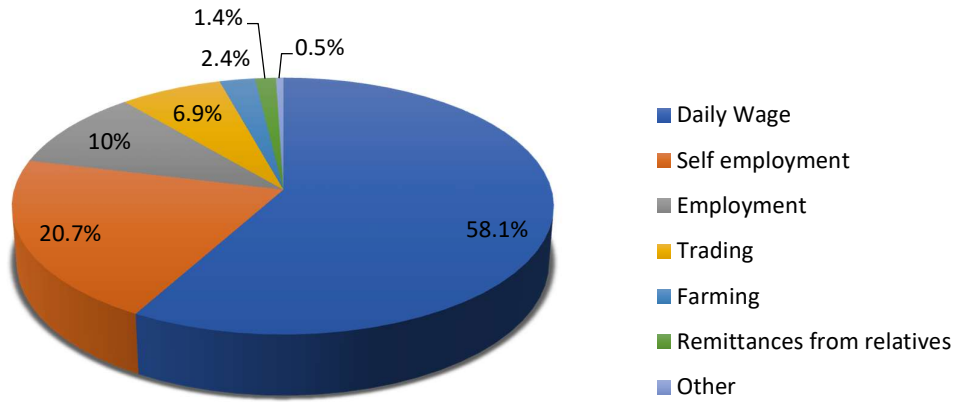


Figure 1.8: Nature of Residences

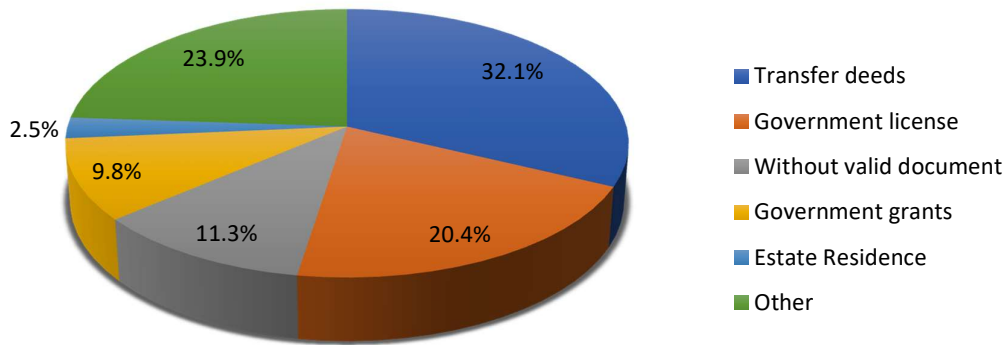


Figure 1.9: Land Ownership and Extent (dry land)

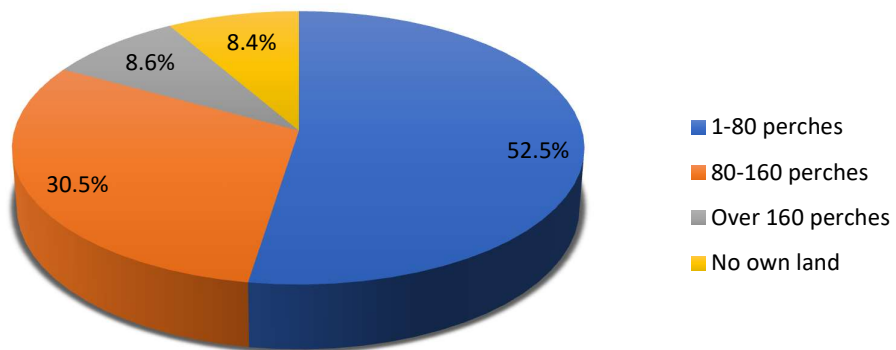


Figure 1.10: Main Crops Cultivated

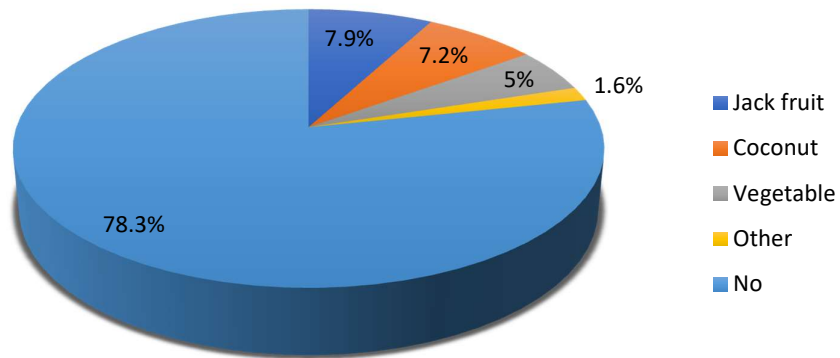


Figure 1.11: Number of Families Residing Together

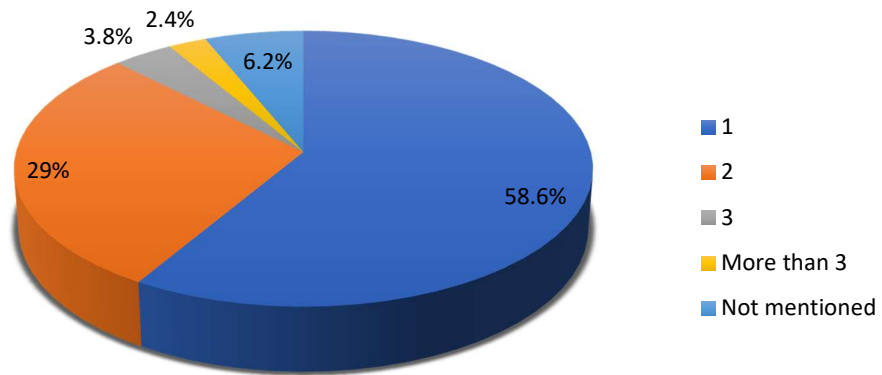
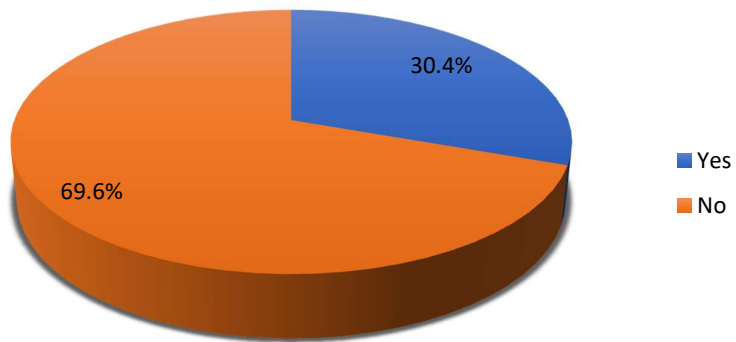


Figure 1.12: Ownership of Vehicles



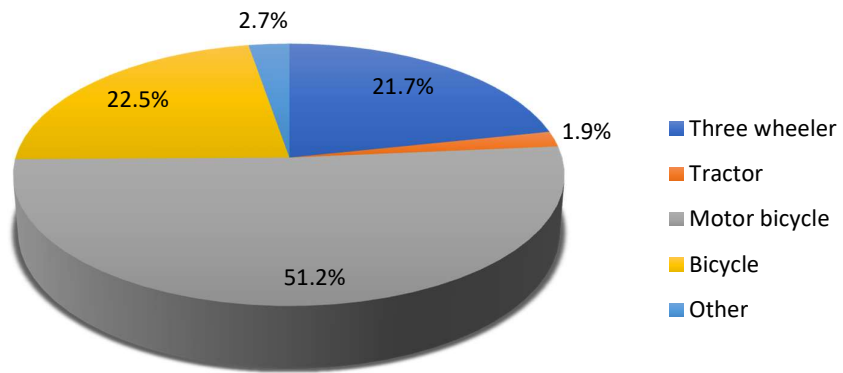


Figure 1.13: Bank Account Ownership

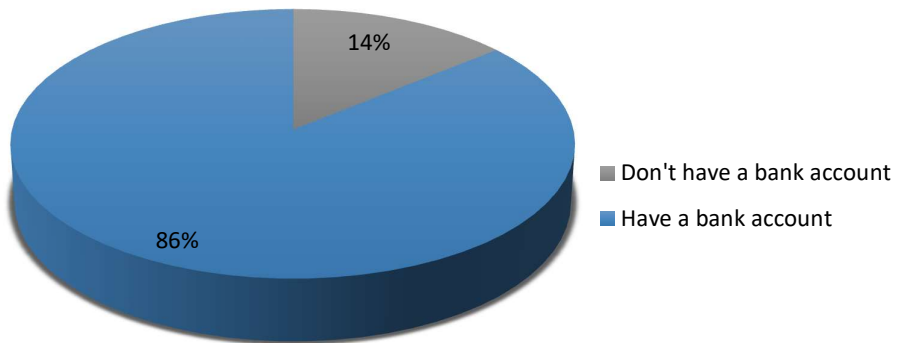


Figure 1.14: Savings Status

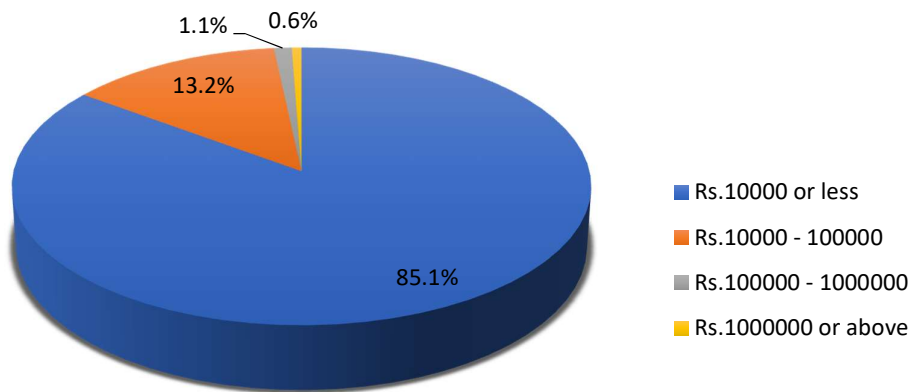


Figure 1.15: Emergency Money Sources

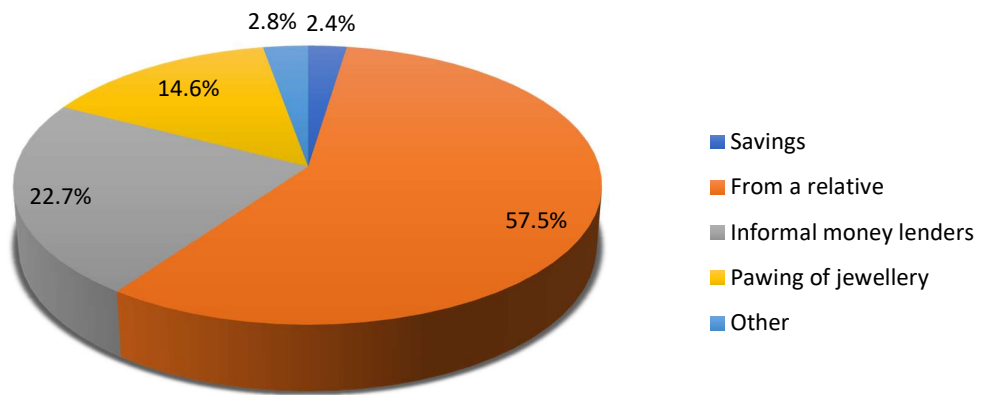


Figure 1.16: Micro-finance Acquisition

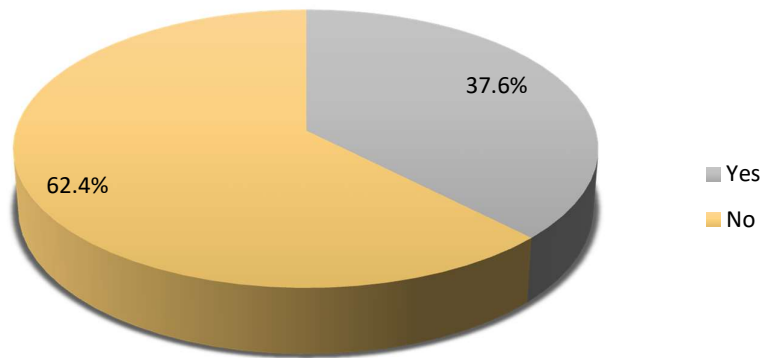


Figure 1.17: Period of Poverty Relief Received

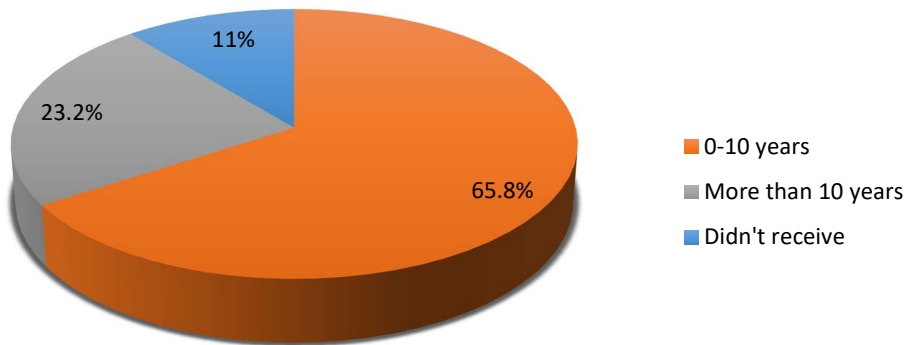


Figure 1.18: Reception of Covid-19 Subsidy



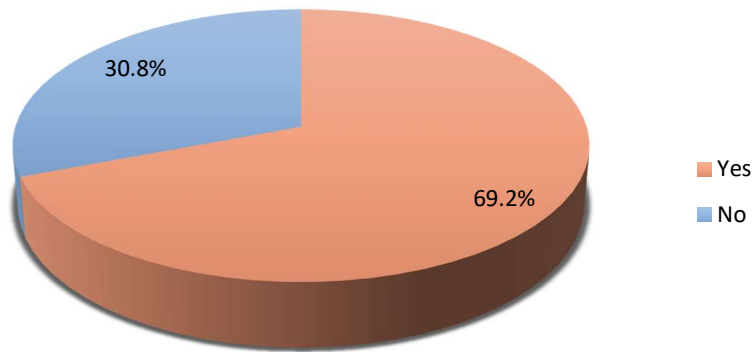
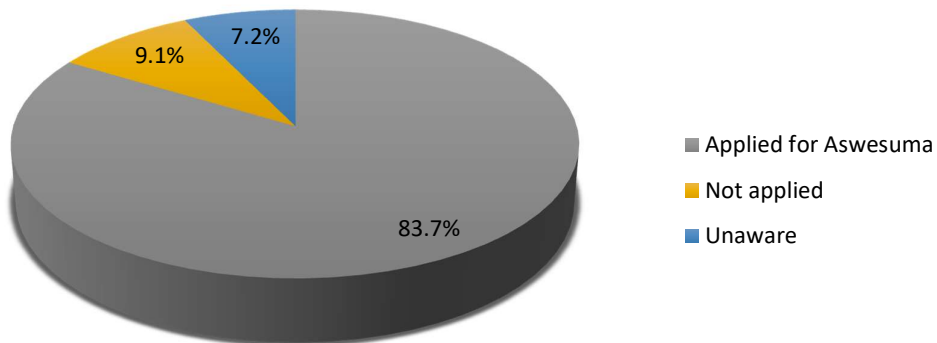


Figure 1.19: Aswesuma Program Application Statistics



## B. Trends or patterns observed in the collected data

### Key Trends:

#### Demographic Trends:

- Majority participation from Sinhala ethnicity.
- Buddhist representation was the highest in the religious category.
- A larger percentage of females participated in the survey.

#### Socioeconomic Patterns:

- Majority of families had a low income (10,000/= to 20,000/= range).
- Daily wages and self-employment were the main sources of income.
- Most participants resided on their own land or government-licensed land.

#### Access to Financial Services:

- A significant proportion had bank accounts but lacked substantial savings.
- Reliance on relatives for emergencies was prominent.

#### Aswesuma Scheme Utilization:

- High participation and application for the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Program.
- Substantial reception of various subsidies and relief programs.

## C. Initial correlations or insights discovered

#### Insights:

##### Perceptions of Aswesuma Scheme:

- A mixed response on the application process and accuracy of information recorded.
- Issues of exclusion and dissatisfaction due to various reasons reported by respondents.
- Lack of language support for the Tamil community and perceived favoritism by officers.

##### Information Collection:

- Varied sources of information collection, including neighbors, relatives, and mobile communications.
- Some discrepancies reported in the accuracy of recorded data.

##### Appeals and Obligations:

- Appeals primarily associated with loss of Aswesuma subsidy or dissatisfaction with the process.
- Some respondents unaware of Aswesuma application procedures.

##### Expenditure of Funds:

- Majority spent funds on basic needs, education, and business investments.
- Some used funds to repay debts or expand their businesses.

##### Suggestions for Improvement:

- Recommendations for extending subsidy terms, offering interest-free loans, and better survey mechanisms.
- Calls for inclusive programs, emphasizing agro-empowerment and insurance inclusion.

##### Future Assurance and Needs:

- Concerns over future assurance and instability, especially related to employment and political uncertainties.
- Requirements for self-sufficiency, skill development, and employment opportunities to alleviate dependency.

#### Surveyor Observations:

- A vulnerable community noted, many living under the poverty line, facing multiple issues.
- Lack of support from local officials and challenges in data collection.

## VI. Limitations

### A. Constraints or limitations encountered during the survey process

#### Accessibility Challenges:

- Difficulties in accessing certain remote areas or households due to geographical constraints or lack of transportation.

#### Language Barriers:

- Inadequate language support for the Tamil-speaking community leading to misinterpretations or difficulties in communication during interviews.

#### Limited Participation:

- Some respondents abstained from providing opinions due to distrust, skepticism, or concerns about the survey process.

#### Time and Resource Constraints:

- Limited timeframes and resources impacted the depth and breadth of data collection, resulting in rushed or incomplete surveys.

### B. Potential biases or limitations in the data collected

#### Selection Bias:

- Potential bias in the selection of participants due to their availability or willingness to participate, impacting the representativeness of the sample.

#### Response Bias:

- Biases in responses due to social desirability or reluctance to provide accurate information, leading to underreporting or overestimation of certain factors.

#### Information Accuracy:

- Accuracy concerns due to reliance on third-party sources for data collection, leading to potential discrepancies or inaccuracies in recorded information.

#### Cultural or Social Bias:

- Biases stemming from cultural or societal factors influencing participants' responses, perspectives, or interpretations of the survey questions.

## C. Factors that might impact the accuracy or completeness of the preliminary findings

### Data Integrity and Validity:

- Concerns regarding the reliability and validity of data due to possible errors in data collection methods or recording procedures.

### Incomplete Data Collection:

- Possibility of missing data or incomplete responses from certain households or individuals, affecting the overall completeness of findings.

### Sampling Limitations:

- The sample might not fully represent the diverse population, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings to the entire target population.

### Interpretation Challenges:

- Challenges in interpreting qualitative responses due to subjective opinions or differing perspectives among respondents.

### External Influences:

- External factors such as political instability or socioeconomic changes might have influenced respondents' views or behaviors, impacting survey outcomes.

## VII. Conclusion

### A. Summary of Key Preliminary Findings

#### **Survey Perception:**

Approximately 44% of the population refrained from providing feedback on the survey process, with 28.6% expressing dissatisfaction.

23.5% of respondents were content with the survey's conduct, while a minority (3.9%) highlighted various issues, including misinformation and selective data collection.

#### **Data Collection Methods:**

Majority of respondents stated that information was gathered through announcements, neighbors, relatives, Divisional Secretariat, Grama Niladhari, Samurdi officer, or mobile communications.

A portion of the sample claimed lack of visitation by investigation officers, leaving them unaware of how their data was obtained.

#### **Reasons for Appeal or Grievances:**

Main reasons included the loss of Aswesuma Subsidy, survey errors, inadequate previous Samurdi subsidy, and lack of awareness about the Aswesuma application process.

#### **Utilization of Funds:**

Most respondents utilized the funds for essential needs (food, medicine, utilities) and some for educational expenses, business development, debt settlement, and savings.

**Suggestions to Improve Aswesuma:**

Majority recommended extending the subsidy term or providing additional relief.

Suggestions included interest-free loans for self-employment, fair investigation practices, comprehensive survey mechanisms, and programs on agro-empowerment.

**Requirements to Exit Subsidy Programs:**

Respondents sought reliefs, loans, training for self-employment, employment opportunities according to skills, education, and capacity, especially for their children.

**Future Assurances:**

Most respondents lacked confidence in future stability due to unemployment, political uncertainty, and inadequate support, especially for the elderly.

**Observations by Surveyors:**

Surveyors noted a high vulnerability among the population, with many living below the poverty line and facing various challenges like inadequate income, chronic illnesses, and limited living conditions.

## B. Implications of the Initial Results for the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit Scheme

**Identification of Program Issues:**

Dissatisfaction and grievances voiced by respondents highlight existing flaws in the Aswesuma program, including improper survey practices, misinformation, and exclusion of eligible beneficiaries.

**Need for Program Refinement:**

Suggestions for extended relief periods, interest-free loans, fair investigations, and comprehensive survey mechanisms point toward critical areas requiring improvement within the Aswesuma program.

**Enhancing Social Support and Economic Empowerment:**

Addressing the highlighted issues could lead to increased effectiveness and acceptance of the Aswesuma program, contributing to better social support and economic empowerment among vulnerable communities.

## C. Suggestions for Further Analysis or Areas of Focus in the Ongoing Survey

**Refinement of Survey Methodologies:**

Conduct a detailed analysis of survey methodologies to rectify shortcomings and ensure inclusive and comprehensive data collection.

**In-depth Investigation into Grievances:**

Explore grievances voiced by respondents to understand specific instances of misinformation, exclusion, or dissatisfaction during the survey process.

**Evaluation of Programmatic Changes:**

Assess the feasibility and potential impact of implementing suggested changes, such as extending subsidy terms, offering interest-free loans, and improving investigation practices.

**Socioeconomic Impact Assessment:**

Conduct an assessment of the socioeconomic impact of the Aswesuma program on beneficiaries to measure the effectiveness and identify areas for enhancement.

**Community Engagement Strategies:**

Develop strategies for improved community engagement to address language barriers, increase awareness, and foster trust among different demographic groups.

*Currently, the ongoing processes of conducting Key Informant Interviews and an in-depth desk review are integral parts of our comprehensive baseline survey. These critical components are actively progressing and will significantly contribute to a deeper understanding of the data collected. The forthcoming recommendations, imperative to enhancing the Aswesuma Welfare Benefit scheme, will be shaped and refined upon completion of these pivotal phases. Moreover, the insights gained from these ongoing assessments will fortify our preliminary findings, enabling a more nuanced and informed set of recommendations. We eagerly anticipate leveraging these additional layers of analysis to offer comprehensive and impactful suggestions aimed at optimizing the effectiveness of the program.*