

EVIDENCE-GATHERING ON COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS, PRIORITY NEEDS AND PREFERENCES IN SRI LANKA

MAY 2023
SRI LANKA

Assessment overview

Data for this assessment was collected through a mixed methods approach, but with primarily a qualitative focus, in four selected locations in Sri Lanka. The case study locations were selected through preliminary Key Informants Interviews and a secondary data review. The selection was based on the level of severity of needs and the level of assistance provided. A total of 180 Key Informants Interviews were conducted in Colombo, Kilinochchi, Batticaloa and Nuwara Eliya. Respondents were identified through a mixture of purposive sampling and snowballing through the network of contacts of the REACH field team and the contracted enumerators (See page 8 the profile of the interviewed key informants).

The research also included a quantitative household survey. To ensure that the quantitative findings are statistically representative (95/10), the selection of households was randomized. However, the findings should be considered indicative only. The quantitative survey covered topics such as the priorities and preferences of affected people when it comes to humanitarian, resilience and recovery assistance, as well as their perceptions of humanitarian actors. A total of 496 household surveys were completed (post-data cleaning) across the four identified Districts.

Context

Since the first half of 2022, Sri Lanka has been facing a multidimensional crisis that has severely impacted the daily lives of a majority of the country's nearly 22 million inhabitants. The crisis has been characterized by political instability, rampant inflation and severely disrupted economic activity.

Millions of people have become food insecure as a result of soaring food prices and reduced harvests, and daily life has been made more difficult by severe shortages of essential items, including basic medicines, commodities and fuel.

In June 2022, the United Nations in Sri Lanka, with the support from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) launched a Humanitarian Needs and Priorities Plan (HNP)¹ to appeal for funding to respond to the emergency needs of 1.7 million people, with a planned response centered around food security, livelihoods, nutrition, health and protection.

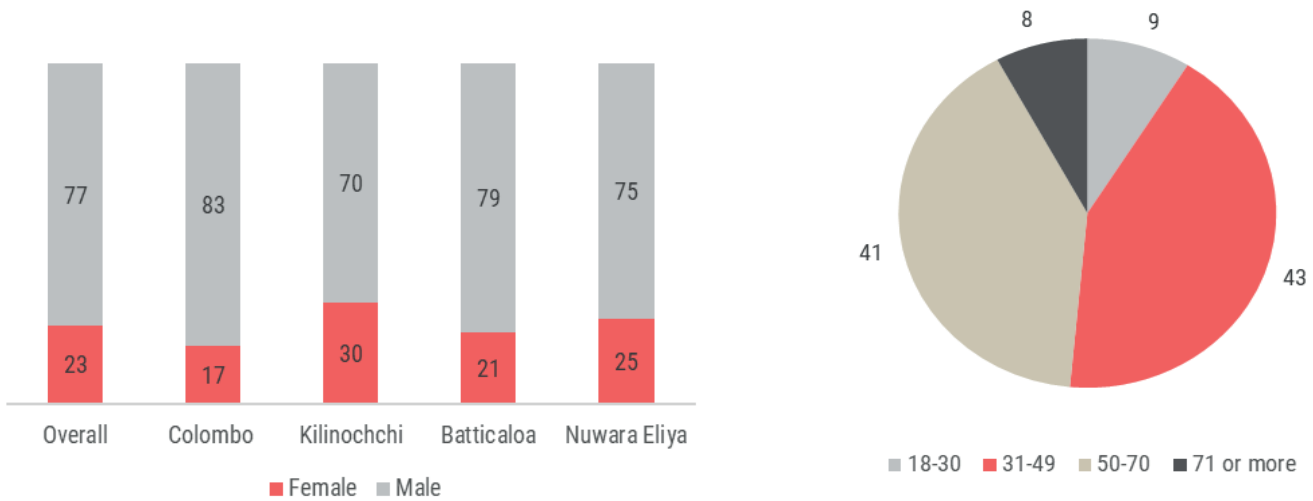
Considering the persistence of the crisis and its impact on humanitarian needs, the HNP was extended until December 2022 and the number of people in need of assistance was revised to 3.4 million people. The plan was put together in haste in the midst of a fast-evolving economic crisis and its first iteration was informed by limited inputs from people affected by the crisis.

KEY FINDINGS

- 97% of the surveyed households reported that they directly experienced an **economic shock** over the last six months prior to data collection.
- 64% of the surveyed households reported that one of their main three **priority needs is to benefit from a livelihood support** or have access to employment opportunities and 61% of the households identified **access to food** as one of their main three priority needs.
- 73% of the households reported **being in debt as a consequence of the crisis** and 55% reported **having a decreased access to food**.
- 69% of the households reported **not having received any humanitarian assistance** in the last 30 days prior to data collection. Among the households who benefitted from aid, 71% benefitted from in-kind food assistance and 54% reported receiving cash assistance (cash-in-hand).
- 39% of the households across all Districts, and 63% in Nuwara Eliya, reported **not being satisfied with the way aid providers behave in their area**. According to 57% of the respondents not satisfied with the way aid providers behave, humanitarian service providers **did not consult affected populations on their needs**. Additionally, 56% of the households reported a perception that **aid providers privileged certain population groups when providing aid**.

1. Core demographics

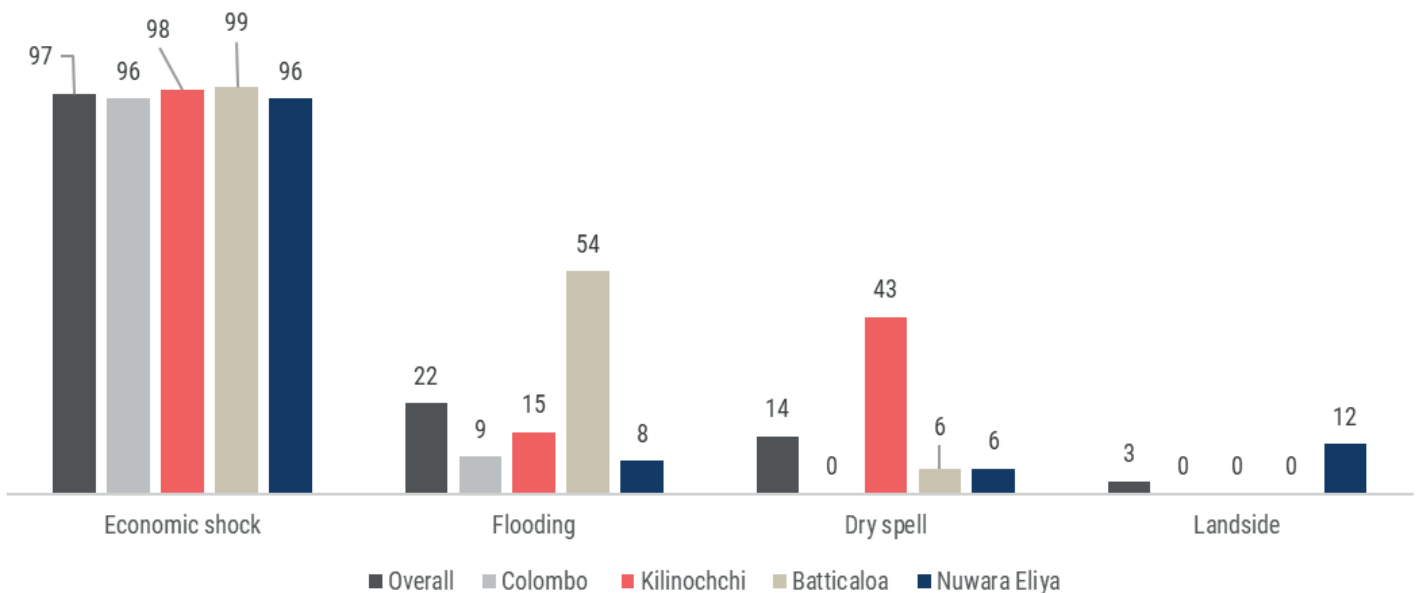
Gender and age of the head of the household



77% of the surveyed households reported that the head of the household is a man. Concerning the marital status of the head of the household, 83% of the respondents reported that the head of the household was married. The **highest proportion of female-headed households was in Kilinochchi (30%)** and **21% of the surveyed households in the same District reported that the head of the household was a widow.**

2. Exposure to economic and natural shocks

Shocks experienced by households in the last six months prior to data collection*

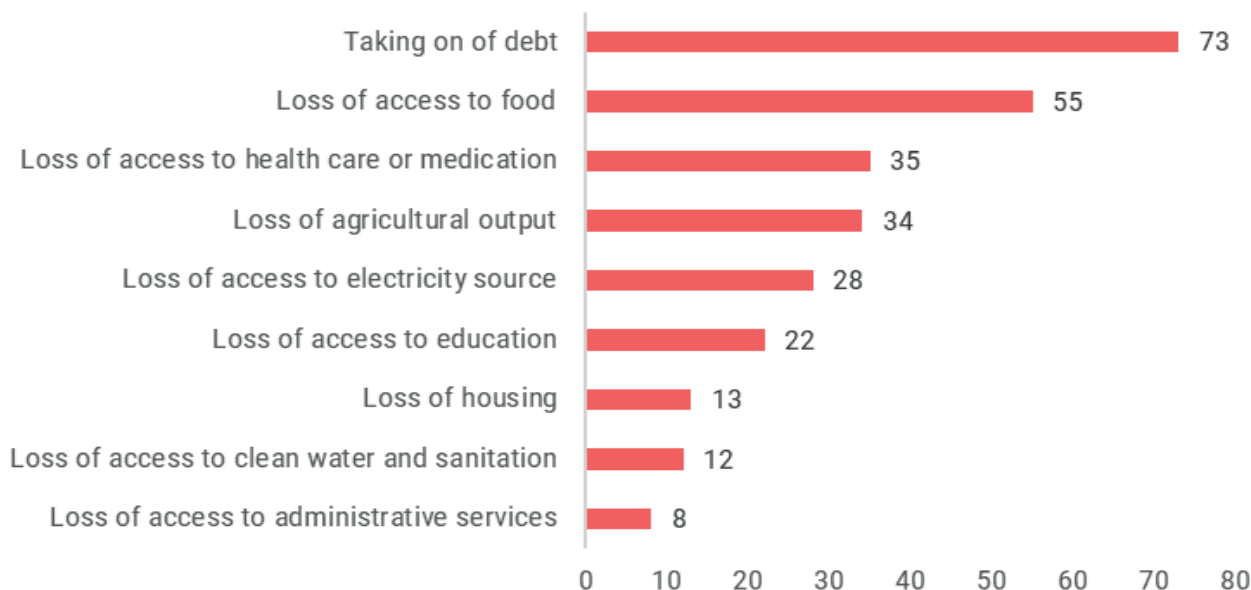


97% of the surveyed households reported that their household **directly experienced an economic shock over the last six months prior to data collection.** When asked if they directly experienced any other type of shock, **54% of the surveyed households in Batticaloa reported flooding** and **43% of the households in Kilinochchi reported a dry spell.** In addition, 12% of respondents in Nuwara Eliya reported that they have been exposed to landslides.

*Multiple options from the list of possible answers could be selected by respondents.

3. Effects of the crisis and coping mechanisms

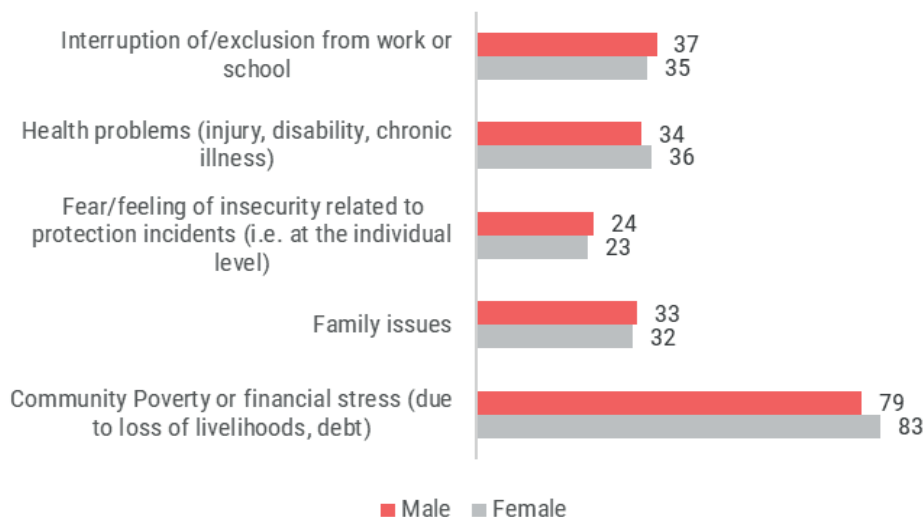
Most frequently reported negative effects of the economic shock faced by the surveyed households in the six months prior to data collection (of households who reported experiencing an economic shock in the six months prior to data collection (97%))*



When asked how the economic shock affected their household in the last six months prior to data collection, respondents referred to several negative consequences exacerbating their economic vulnerability and worsening their living standards. The four most frequently reported negative effects were reportedly **being in debt** as specified by 73% of the respondents, **loss of access to food** (55%), loss of access to **healthcare or medication** (35%) and loss of **agricultural output** as mentioned by 34% of the surveyed households.

In order to cope with the effects of the COVID-19 crisis and the food inflation, the interviewed KIs mainly mentioned among others **resorting to loans**, usually provided by informal brokers or microfinance structures, **selling personal items and jewelry**, multiplying their source of income through **daily work opportunities** or developing **home-gardening** activities to ensure **food self-sufficiency**.

Most frequently reported causes associated with a change in behavior² noticed by the surveyed households in the last six months prior to data collection**



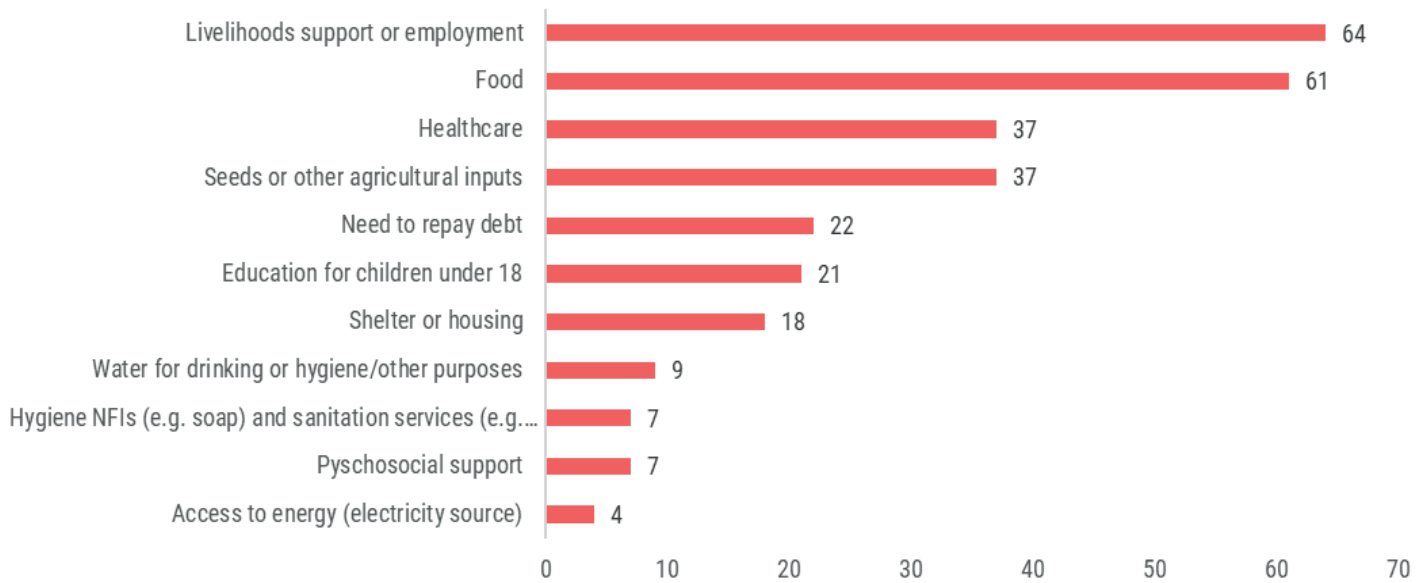
90% of the surveyed households mentioned **noticing a change in behavior** of a female member of the household in the last six months prior to data collection and 87% of a male household member. The main reported change in behavior was **having an excessively sad mood or crying** (53% for female household members and 58% for males).

The prevalence of risks related to mental health issues were mostly reportedly **attributed to community poverty issues and financial stress**.

*Multiple options from the list of possible answers could be selected by respondents.

4. Main reported humanitarian needs

Priority needs reported by the surveyed households*

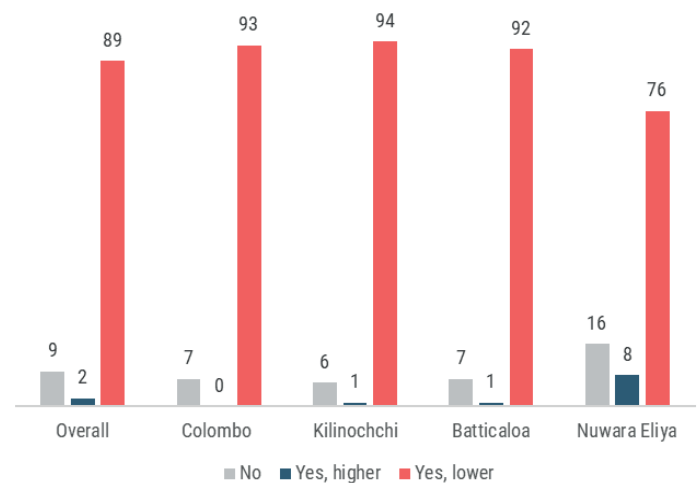


64% of the surveyed households reported that **benefiting from livelihood support or having access to employment opportunities** was among their main three priorities. It was the most frequently need reported in Batticaloa and Kilinochchi. This priority could be explained by the **decrease of their income** as reported by 89% of the surveyed households. However, in Colombo and Nuwara Eliya, the most frequently reported need was **access to food**.

When asked about the priorities of their communities, the interviewed KIs highlighted the **inter-connectedness of the needs of affected populations**. For example, the agricultural sector has been reportedly highly affected in all Districts except for Colombo, and this had consequences on livelihoods and food security as explained by most KIs.

Access to decent housing was also reported as a priority need by 27% of the surveyed households in Colombo and 23% in Nuwara Eliya. **Populations living in informal settlements** were highlighted by some KIs in Colombo as the most vulnerable. These areas commonly called "Wattu areas" or "shanties" have **irregular access to basic services** such as water or electricity and most residents are daily wage earners. Finally, 27% of the surveyed households in **Kilinochchi reported that access to water for drinking** and other domestic purposes was a priority need.

% of households noticing a change in their income in the last six months prior to data collection



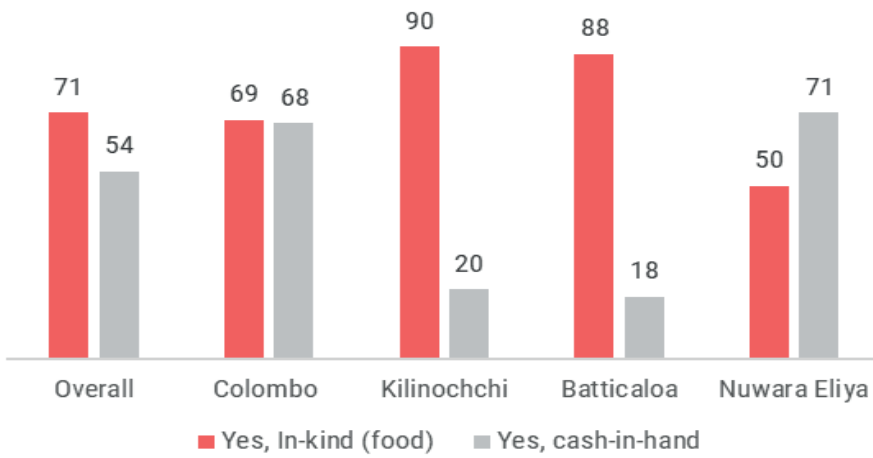
“Due to the current situation in the country, our agricultural activity has been greatly affected. Our income has decreased and our needs have increased. The reason for this is the shortage of fertilizers and agricultural inputs or equipment in the country.”

Farmer KI in Kilinochchi

*Multiple options from the list of possible answers could be selected by respondents.. Respondents could choose up to three priority needs, in no particular order.

5. Access to assistance and preferences of affected populations

Most frequently reported types of assistance received in the last 30 days prior to data collection of households that reported receiving assistance (31%)**



Concerning the preferences of affected populations in terms of humanitarian assistance, most KIs interviewed in the four assessed Districts reported that **humanitarian actors should prioritize long-term effect interventions**. Most KIs referred to activities that could be implemented to **support their livelihoods** such as access to **livelihood means** (distribution of materials, agricultural inputs, access to fuel, etc.) or the **promotion of skills development opportunities** (vocational training, professional mobility, access to higher education, etc.).

On the other hand, some KIs highlighted the **persistence of humanitarian needs** and the **need for short-term, tangible and concrete solutions to affected communities**. KIs referred for example to the need of improving access to food, healthcare services and medicines, access to water for drinking or irrigation purposes (Kilinochchi) or to decent housing (Colombo and Nuwara Eliya).

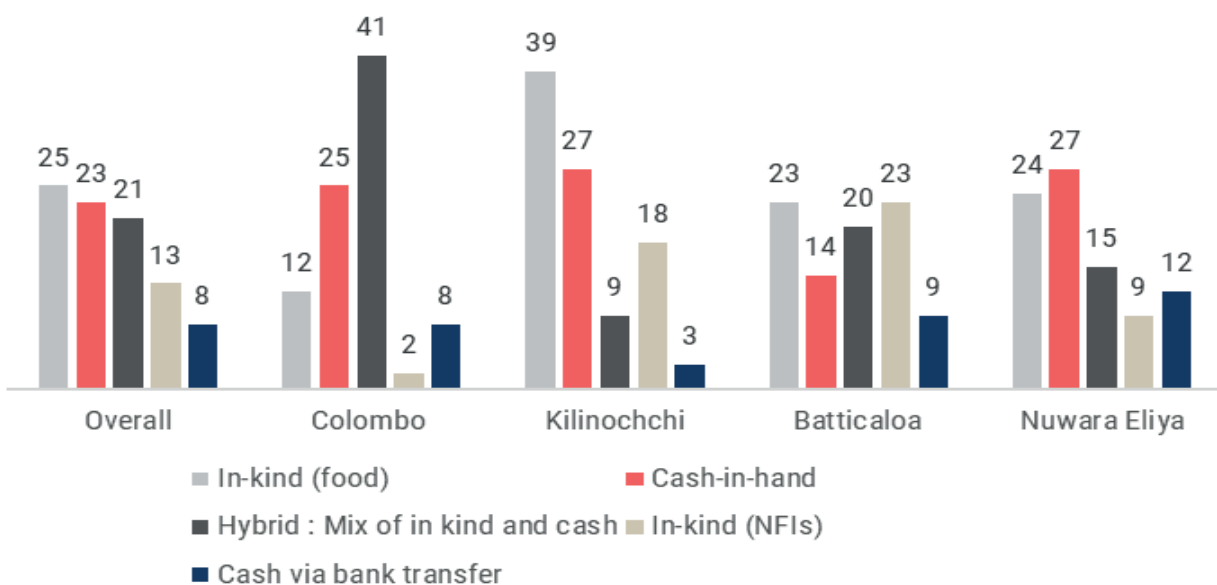
In Nuwara Eliya, Batticaloa and Kilinochchi, **less than 27% of the surveyed households reported having access to humanitarian assistance**.

In Colombo, the findings show that 60% of the respondents reported having received assistance. This can be explained by the **variety of actors operating in the capital**, that are as specified by some KIs INGOs, Community Based Organisations (CBOs) public structures as well as private companies or individuals and political parties.

In Batticaloa, Kilinochchi and Colombo, **the main reported type of assistance provided to affected populations was reportedly in-kind food assistance**. However, in Nuwara Eliya, cash assistance was the most reported assistance modality received by the surveyed households who benefitted from aid.

Most KIs specifically referred to public allowances (including Samurdhi*) when mentioning receiving cash.

Most frequently reported preferred assistance modalities by households**

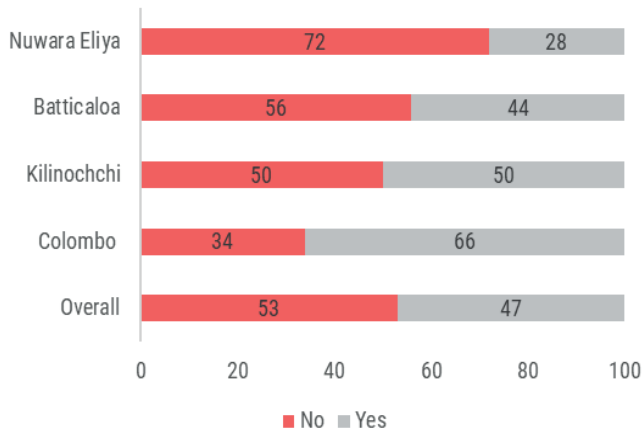


*The Samurdhi (prosperity) programme was launched by the government in 1995. It specifically consists of a cash assistance provided to the most vulnerable populations.

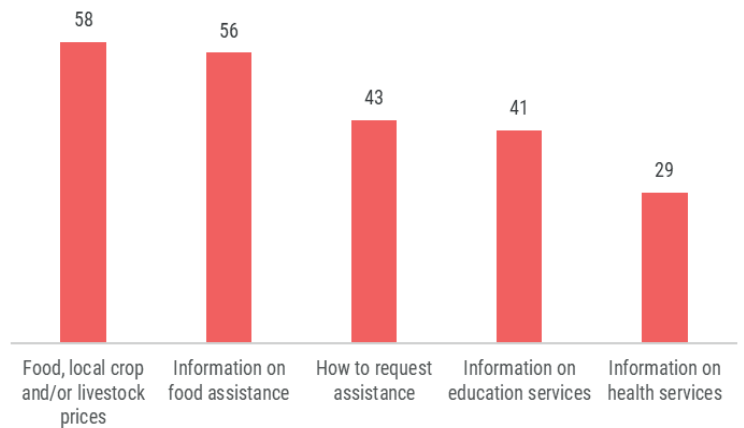
**Multiple options from the list of possible answers could be selected by respondents.

6. Community participation and inclusion

% of households reporting being able to access information regarding assistance

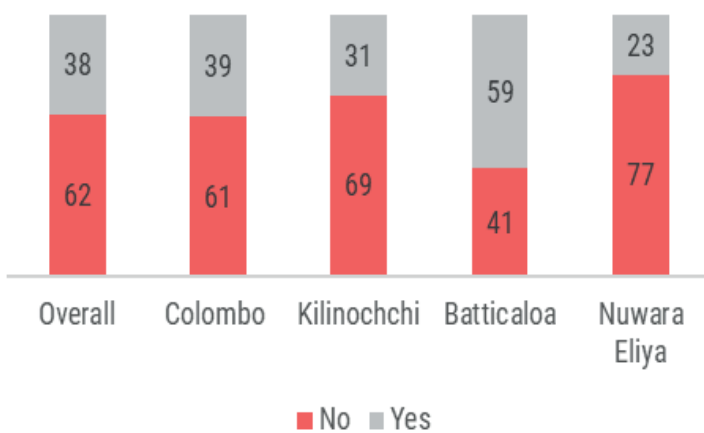


Most reported types of information sought by the surveyed households from aid providers*



53% of the surveyed households across the four Districts reported **not knowing how to access humanitarian assistance**. This proportion was particularly high in Nuwara Eliya (72%). Most KIs also mentioned facing challenges when seeking information regarding humanitarian assistance. The most reported challenges were related to the perception of **favoritism as well as communitarian, religious or political differentiations affecting the impartial and efficient dissemination of information**. Some KIs also referred to the difficulties faced by **persons with disabilities, those who lack a literacy education, people living in remote areas and older persons** to seek and hear about assistance programs. In addition, some KIs mentioned that the communication with minority groups because of the language barrier was a challenge to ensure access to information. In terms of their preferences, most of the surveyed households reported **prioritizing access to information related to food, agricultural inputs or livestock** as well as to education and healthcare services.

% of the surveyed households reporting feeling able to influence decisions made by humanitarian actors regarding the type and modality of assistance provided

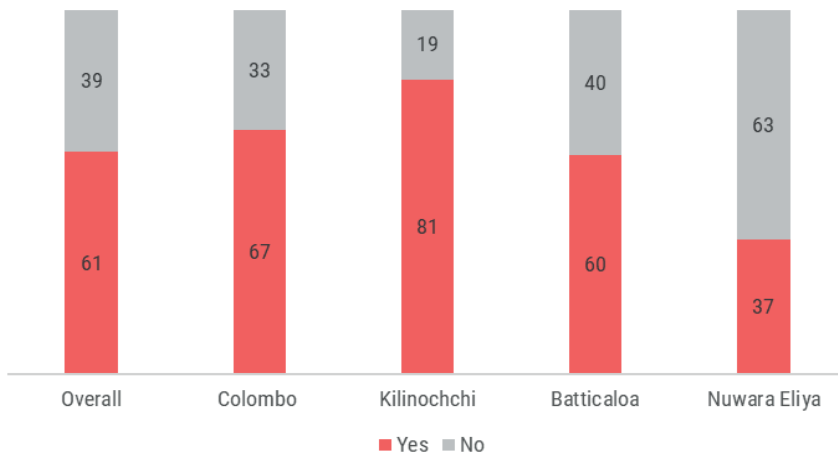


62% of the surveyed households reported **not feeling able to have an influence over decisions regarding the type and modality of assistance provided**. However, in Batticaloa, 59% indicated that they felt able to contribute to shaping the assistance provided in their community. In Batticaloa, KIs indicated that **community consultations were being held with community-based organisations** (fishermen's association, Rural Development Society or the Women Development Society). Other KIs reported that **needs are communicated to representatives of local authorities** such as the Grama Niladari or the Samurdhi officer.

*Multiple options from the list of possible answers could be selected by respondents.

7. Satisfaction towards humanitarian assistance and feedback mechanisms

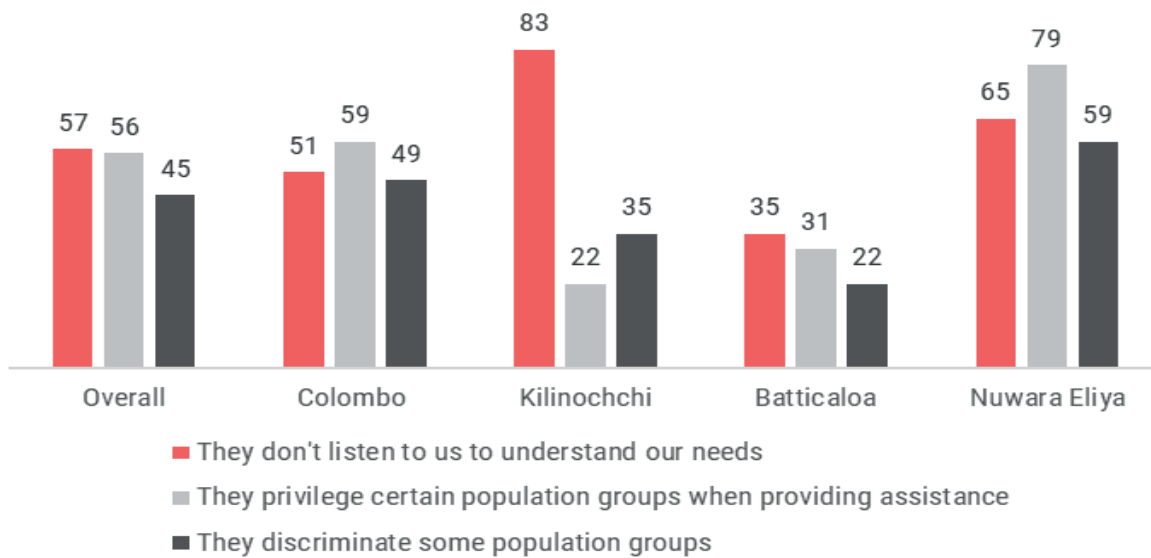
% of the surveyed households reporting being satisfied with the way aid workers generally behave in their area



61% of the households reported being satisfied with the way aid workers behave in their area. However, **63% of the households in Nuwara Eliya were not satisfied and 69% thought that assistance did not reach the most in need.**

On the other hand, only a few respondents were aware of mechanisms to share their dissatisfaction regarding assistance or aid workers as **58% across all Districts were not aware of any method to contact aid providers** about their needs or concerns. This proportion rises to 77% in Nuwara Eliya.

Most reported reasons for not being satisfied with the way aid workers behave in their area, of households that reported being unsatisfied with the way aid workers behave in their area (39%)*



When asked about the reasons of their dissatisfaction to the 39% of the respondents that specified not being satisfied with the way aid workers behave, 57% of the surveyed households across all Districts and 83% in Kilinochchi reported that aid workers **“don't listen to us to understand our needs.”** In addition, 56% of the households reported that they **privilege certain population groups.** This was also highlighted by some KIs that shed light on **perceived unfair beneficiary selection processes and nepotism** when it comes to the allocation of aid.

Additionally, 45% of the surveyed households not satisfied with the way aid workers behave pointed out a perception that **some population groups were being discriminated against.** Some KIs highlighted perceiving that some minorities (Tamils, Muslims, Christians, etc) were being left out because of their culture or religion. They were reportedly also facing issues in accessing information because of **language and communication barriers.** In Nuwara Eliya, some KIs stressed the **ineligibility of plantation workers** (that are mostly women and Tamils) to assistance and social protection programs, even though they were identified among the most vulnerable population groups.

*Multiple options from the list of possible answers could be selected by respondents.

Profile of the interviewed key informants per District:

	Colombo	Kilinochchi	Batticaloa	Nuwara Eliya
Persons with disabilities	5	5	5	5
Female-headed households	5	5	5	5
Youth	5	5	5	5
Affected populations in urban areas	5	0	0	0
Plantation workers	0	0	0	5
Small-scale agriculture	0	5	5	0
Affected populations in rural areas	0	5	5	5
Tourism industry	5	0	0	5
Fishing communities	0	0	5	0
Daily wage earners	5	0	0	0
Pregnant women and with multiple children	5	5	5	5

ENDNOTES

PAGE 1

¹OCHA, Sri Lanka Food Security Crisis - Humanitarian Needs and Priorities 2022 (June – Sept 2022)

PAGE 2

²A change in behavior refers to "excessive sad mood or crying, betwetting, decrease or increase in appetite or sleep pattern, social withdrawal, inability to be alone, angry or aggressive or violent behavior, avoiding going to work, lack of interest to do activities which were pleasurable before, substance abuse, fatigue without doing significant work, excessive worry, no hope for the future hyper vigilance".

ABOUT REACH

REACH Initiative facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT).