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Ensuring Food Security of Communities during Lockdown: Contributions of Sri Visudhdawasa Buddhist Center in Sri Lanka

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This case study is based on an interview with Rev. Embilipitiye Sobitha Thero of Sri Visudhdawasa Buddhist Center, Maththegoda, Sri Lanka.

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Abstract

This case study shares the effort of Rev. Embilipitiye Soitha Thero and his team at the Sri Visuddhawasa Buddhist Center, Maththegoda, Sri Lanka fulfilling the fourth desired role of “Social Worker” in helping the communities in lockdown through fresh produce and vegetable assistance.

Best practices:

1. Rational and needs based approach to prioritization of beneficiaries could be used to cater to the needs of the community in a systematic manner in providing assistance during the COVID-19 Pandemic.
2. Coordination with health and security forces can help the religious leaders to continue their social service work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key words: *COVID-19, CORRECT-19, Social Worker*

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Sri Visudhdhawasa Buddhist Centre is located in Kirigampamuwa, Polgasovita in Maththegoda area, catering to a population of 4000 urban population and around 1200 families. The Center's community was diverse in their socio-economic aspects, such as education, housing conditions, and livelihood. The majority of the community members were Buddhists, while some families believed in Catholicism/Christianity. People in this community were employed both in the government and private sectors, while others were self-employed or daily waged laborers. There was little agricultural land left in this rapidly urbanizing area with a few paddy fields and scanty home gardening.



Figure 1 : Sorting out the Fresh Produce

With the commencement of COVID 19 outbreak in Sri Lanka in March 2020, the quarantine curfew was enacted in the whole country within a week. With this situation, people had no option but to be locked down in their houses. Most of the services were in their infant stages of adopting into the new normalcy of online and remote methods of operation. Food and other essential supplies became scarce. The daily waged and self-employed persons couldn't continue their livelihoods. These conditions lead to a situation where the availability of necessary supplies and the ability to purchase them were significant challenges.

"We started by sharing whatever the temple had with the people in need," Ven. Embilipitiye Sobitha Thero mentioned. "We were able to advocate those who were

relatively financially stable to contribute towards the provision of essential food items for those who were in need. We were able to get the support of government and private sector employees, businessmen and person employed abroad from the area.", the Ven. Thero continued. The cash donations were made in person or by depositing into the bank account.

Two methods were used for food procurement. The first method was to buy the food items from wholesale stores such as Sathosa, Sampath Stores, and other supermarkets in the Maththegoda area. In addition to providing the ordered goods, these stores assisted the teams in packaging them into the distribution packs free of charge.

The second method was to reach out to vegetables from the farmers in remote areas of the country. This was not an easy task during the COVID-19 mobility restrictions. However, Rev. Thero was able to obtain permission from the Maththegoda Police and Medical Officer of Health (MOH) office to travel to remote farms in Embilipitiya and Thanamalwila, from his native place to bring back the products to the temple. Rev. Thero provided the leadership to a small yet powerful team of committed and dedicated five volunteers throughout the process. It was necessary to keep the team small and manageable to ensure adherence to COVID-19 preventive measures.

With the temple's leadership and the subscription of several households in the area, 150 packs of dry rations were prepared. These dry-ration packs were distributed to the neediest families as recommended by the Grama Niladhari through the list of low-income families in the area. In addition, Rev. Thero and his team used Facebook to communicate about the community service activities they were engaged in. This could attract more persons who were willing to donate and contribute, not only in cash but also in kind. By now, not only individuals but also media channels and supermarkets have started making in-kind contributions to the efforts of Rev. Thero.

As time passed by, many more people joined the efforts of the Rev. Thero and the team. Some people of Kirmagpamuwa community also contributed by sharing the vegetables which grew small home gardens. Others helped to pluck coconuts and jack from the

trees in the village premises to be shared with the community.

While helping those in need within the community, villagers lead by Rev. Thero were kind enough to cheer up the first responders from essential services 24/7, such as the police as well, by serving tea and snacks.

There were some challenges too that the Rev. Thero and the team had to face. The youth continued a positive and supportive attitude from the beginning. However, some older community members looked at the initiative with a bit of skepticism and suspicion. "This Rev. Thero must for sure be having a hidden agenda to compete in the next election. There is no need to spoon-feed poor people. They can manage on their own!" Rev. Thero reported some overheard some conversations going on among a minority of persons.



Figure 2 : Supervising Sorting of Vegetables

Even though the government offices and the police of the area were well-aware of the mission as well as the adherence to health guidance of the Rev. Thero and his team and even facilitated the movement, this was not the case when they traveled to remote areas. The team and their vehicle were stopped at every single roadblock. Some even suspected if they were transporting cannabis! Thus, the large stack of vegetables was checked over and over again several times on the way to Maththegoda, sometimes leading to delays of hours.

When the team went to the remote areas, some farmers from whom they bought vegetables too were afraid to meet in person due to fear and stigma associated with COVID-19, as by now, Maththegoda was so known across the country for its first COVID-19 case reported locally.

When distributing the dry rations, especially when they had to be carried down the narrow lanes, more people joined and helped carry those to the houses of beneficiaries. However, some people saw this as a violation of health regulations and called MOH and the Public Health Inspectors (PHI). The additional people were sent home, and the Rev. Thero and the team were allowed to continue the distribution.

One major challenge that the Rev. Thero and the team had to overcome was prioritizing beneficiaries based on need. There were many complaints of those who need not receiving assistance, even though many efforts were made to streamline the process. However, with time, Rev. Thero and his team were able to attract more and more donations, hence was able to cater to the need of those who did not receive assistance in the first round. Subsequently, through a third round, it was possible to provide some service even to the middle-income families in the area. It should be noted that all families who needed assistance were served irrespective of their religion or belief.

Another critical challenge inherent to the COVID-19 situation was the lack of supplies even when the Rev. Thero and the team had donors who would contribute financially to buy them. Day by day, supplies were depleting in the markets. The innovative approach of reaching out to remote farmers was the solution that Rev. Thero and the team adopted to solve this problem.

The major challenge was the complains from people who didn't receive the assistance. Rev. Thero was able to managed these complaints by explaining to the patiently the rationale behind the prioritisation of the beneficiaries (Refer Figure 1).

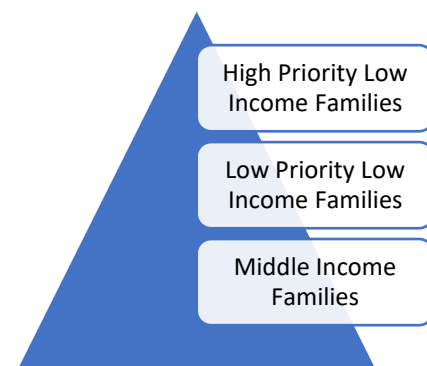


Figure 3 : Prioritisation of Families Based on the Need

As per Figure 3, during the first round, priority was given to low-income families with urgent needs. During the second round, the rest of the low-income families were supported. With the influx of more donations, the middle-income families were also covered who had no way to buying food items due to mobility restrictions, and the less supply in the markets so far.



Figure 3 : Vegetable Packs Ready to be Distributed

The Rev. Thero had experience of assisting communities during times of disasters since his childhood. When he was a Samanera or a novice, he was actively engaged in supporting communities affected by floods, droughts, and Tsunami in different areas of the country with his Master Rev. Hipankande Saddhasiri Anunayake Thero. These experiences helped the Rev. Thero to spontaneously and naturally support communities during challenging times. Thus it is clear that inculcating the habit of helping those in need had been an integral part of the formative phase of the Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka.

Reflecting on the lessons learned by assisting the communities during the COVID-19 Pandemic, Rev. Thero was confident that the Sri Lankan community coheres when shocks and stressors hit even in urban areas. Rev. Embilipitiye Sobitha Thero has played an exemplary role as a social worker, one of the eight desired roles of religious leaders during the COVID19 Pandemic (Wijesekara and Jayasinghe 2021).

"As Buddhist Monks, we are in a powerful position to provide leadership and advocacy in our communities. We have given up worldly affairs to a large extent. We cannot afford to have long-term personal plans or responsibilities. As religious leaders have more freedom and opportunity to contribute to greater community wellbeing and promotion of community resilience during a crisis.", stated Rev. Embilipitiye Sobitha Thero. When asked about the way forwards, Ven. Thero reflected: "Communities are always dynamic. It is difficult to determine what would be the next shock for them. But as a member of Maha Sangha, we should have a strong commitment for promoting resilience in his community irrespective of whatever comes next."

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