

WEEKEND

Education crisis brewing on Sri Lanka's tea estates

► Already poorly paid, estate workers struggle to send their children to school after the economy collapsed



Suppiah Pushpadevi plucks tea leaves on the private estate where she works. Jeevan Ravindran for The National

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When 13-year old Nishanthini puts on her uniform in the morning and sets off for school, it's not always certain she will make it to class. Some days, her parents don't have enough money for bus fares for both her and her older brother but send them out anyway in the hope that a kindly bus driver or conductor will agree to take them for less.

"Sometimes that's how they go," says Nishanthini's father, Marimuthu Maheswaran. "If they go in a known bus, those boys will help out because they know these kids come every day."

But some days, Nishanthini returns home in tears.

Parents across [Sri Lanka](#) are feeling the pinch of the country's worst economic crisis that began early last year, which has affected access to education for their children, but those like Nishanthini's parents who live on tea estates, where wages have historically been poor, have been hit the hardest.

The crisis led to soaring food and fuel prices and a depreciation of the rupee that reduced real income by almost half. For Nishanthini's family, it meant the daily bus fare to and from school for their two eldest children rose to 140 rupees (\$0.43) each from 50 rupees previously — a cost they could not afford as they struggled to feed their family.

Nishanthini's mother, Suppiah Pushpadevi, is a tea picker on a private estate nestled in the hills between the towns of Hatton and Kotagala in Central Province. She must pick 18 kilograms of tea leaves per day to a daily wage of 1,000 rupees. She will earn half that for 10kg, or be paid at a per-kilo rate of 25 rupees for less. Frequent rains, managerial illnesses and a drop in tea production following a short-lived ban on fertiliser imposed in 2021 have made it extremely difficult for Pushpadevi to earn enough — this month, she had worked for only three days.



Schoolchildren Nishanthini and her brother Suhendrakumar prepare to leave for classes, amid an economic crisis in Sri Lanka. All photos: Jeevan Ravindran for The National

Mr Maheswaran is a daily wage labourer, breaking rocks for between 700 and 1,200 rupees a day, depending on output.

After the onset of the crisis, Nishanthini and her brother missed school for months returning only in December. But the family's financial struggle means their attendance has been erratic — leading to beatings by the teachers when they do make it to class.

"I just take the beating and don't say anything," Nishanthini says. "If I say we're struggling, they won't account for that."

But getting to school is only part of the problem.

At Nishanthini's school, her parents have not paid the fee to secure her a desk, so she has to move around the class, sitting at the desk of whoever is absent that day. Her brother, Suhendrakumar, has 15 subjects to study in the ninth grade but has only about six or seven exercise books. The family says an exercise book used to cost 170 rupees, but is now 300.

"We can't study all our lessons if we don't have exercise books and pencils," Suhendrakumar says. "They'll hit us. We can't study that lesson. We just sit and watch other people studying... I'm supposed to go into tenth grade this year. They've told me they'll fail me if I don't have exercise books and pencils."

Access to education has long been a challenge in Sri Lanka's plantation sector, with a cycle of generational poverty at play. The remote locations of the plantations means the children of workers often have to walk long distances to school. Some estates have their own schools but facilities are poor — one child near Kandapola town said rainwater leaked through the roof in her school and on to students' books.

At Nishanthini's home, the family has no access to a toilet, being forced to use the nearby river instead. They are in debt to the electricity company after a spike in energy prices, and Mr Maheswaran says the family will have to cut down on food to pay their bill.

Most parents have limited education, and low wages mean families find themselves making choices between stationery and food, a situation that has worsened during the economic crisis which has pushed food prices up by nearly 65 per cent last year. The World Food Programme estimated in January that 44 per cent of estate households were food insecure.

Nishanthini and Suhendrakumar often go to school without eating first or taking food with them.

"I've fainted a couple of times," Suhendrakumar says. "They'll ask, 'did you eat and come?' and we say no, we didn't bring any food. If the teachers bring food, they'll give us some."

Sithiran Rajan, the headmaster at Norwood Tamil Maha Vidyalayam, where almost all the students are from estates, says about 30 per cent of them do not get three meals a day.

"Some children bring food to school every day but don't eat in the morning before they come," Mr Rajan says. "If you look at our children, a lot of them have issues with nutrition, and they get sick often. We've come to a situation where children can't even sit for 30 minutes in an assembly or if we give them activities."

He says the prevalence of food insecurity among the students' families, which was "not a large-scale issue" before, increased three-fold due to the economic crisis.

"It's not just food expenses that parents have to take care of, they also have to pay for tuition and for clothes and other basic expenses. They

don't have an adequate salary to account for the increase in prices. So they can't look after their children's basic needs."

On an estate near the one where Nishanthini's family live, Yovan, 15, sometimes skips school when he doesn't have enough money for the bus fare. Some days, he takes up jobs breaking rocks for around 500 rupees a day. When he does go to school, he sometimes goes hungry, with an empty lunchbox. His family struggles to pay the monthly rent of 5,000 rupees for their house and have been told to leave.



15-year-old Yovan (centre) with other children who have been forced to drop out of school at the tea estate.

"He studies really well, he's really bright... He does as he's told when it comes to studies," says Yovan's father, Jesuthasan Douglas Christopher, with tears in his eyes. "I'm worried, but what can I do? Sometimes at night I just think we're better off dead. My wife is sick too, but she's gone to work because we're struggling."

Ahamad Lebbe Mohamed Zarudeen, Additional Director for Education in Central Province, says the plantation sector is in a "pathetic situation" when it comes to education. After the economic crisis hit, some parents asked to send their children to school in turns as they could not afford bus fares for all of them every day.

Mr Zarudeen says 492 children in the province dropped out of school in the 2022-23 academic year — a marked increase from the previous year.

"In the plantation sector, the parents are wage earners — more than 80 per cent of the people are getting daily wages," he said. "The cost of living has affected [them] more than other people."

Mr Rajan says his school tries hard to increase retention rates, sending letters home and speaking to parents on the phone. However, increasing numbers of parents are no longer at home with their children, with the economic crisis leading several women to seek work either in Sri Lanka's main city, Colombo, or the Middle East as housemaids, while the men leave for jobs in shops or the construction industry, a sector that has also suffered due to the crisis.

For many families, the impact of the economic crisis has meant that aspirations they had for their children have been shelved in favour of survival. On the Muruhathenna estate, Pakiam sent her son, who was 14 when the crisis began to work in a shop in Colombo, 120 kilometres away. The 10,000 rupees he sends home each month keeps the family afloat, but his mother finds it hard to accept what has happened.

"I feel so upset. If I even think about it, I get choked up. 'Don't go to work, Amma, I'll go, you stay,' he said. I'm so upset, but what do I do?" , " Pakiam sobs.

"He's left his studies and now he's working in a shop. He doesn't like to see me struggling."

Although a bailout from the International Monetary Fund has provided Sri Lanka a pathway to economic recovery, the impact is unlikely to be felt for a while by its citizens, who are currently facing the austerity measures of high taxes and higher energy tariffs imposed to meet the IMF's conditions.

Meanwhile, children on the tea estates are facing the same fate as their parents, trapped in a cycle of generational poverty.

"I feel worried that my children aren't studying, that their studies are suffering. Both my wife and I didn't study ... our children shouldn't end up like us," says Mr Maheswaran, Nishanthini's father.

"I feel scared thinking about what my children will do when they're older if they don't get to study as well."

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