Demography and Health in South East Asia and The Pacific

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DETERMINANTS OF INFANT MORTALITY IN SRI LANKA

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1.Introduction:

Sri Lanka (Ceylon) is a picturesque pear-shaped island situated in the Indian Ocean, separated from the Indian Sub-Continent by a 22 miles wide strip of water called Palk Strait. Sri Lanka has an area of 65,608 sq. km. and it extends 432 km. from North to South and 224 km from East to West. In 1871, the year of the first census, Sri Lanka's population was 2.4 million. It has increased during the last twelve decades about seven times to 17.5 million in 1990. Sri Lanka population consists of a plural society: different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups in the population. Ethnically, the 1981 census shows that the predominant group, Sinhalese, constitutes 74 per cent of the total population, the Tamils 18 percent and the Moors 7 percent. These ethnic groups have their own religious faiths. Sinhalese are predominantly Buddhist, Tamils, both Sri Lankan and Indian, are largely Hindus while the Moors are exclusively Muslims. In contrast to that of most other developing countries in Asia, the level of expectation of life at birth is remarkably high , viz. 71 for females and 68 for males in 1980's.

This was largely brought about by the rapid decline of infant mortality during last four decades.

The level of infant mortality is widely used as an indicator of the level of socio-economic development in a society. Sri Lanka is however an exceptional case where the infant mortality has dramatically declined during last four decades without a similar change in economic development. The infant mortality dropped from 82 per thousand live births in 1950 to 17 per thousand live births in 1990 while the per capita income has remained at less than US$ 430 in 1990. It is argued that the decline in infant mortality in Sri Lanka was not due to economic development but a result of social development and adoption of welfare measures by the state. Hence it is important to examine the underlying factors which determine low infant mortality in Sri Lanka to understand such key socio-cultural factors. It is indeed helpful for policy makers to formulate better policies on health and social welfare in Sri Lanka as well as in other developing countries.

2. Objective of the Study:

The main objective of the study is to examine the determinants of infant mortality in Sri Lanka. It is interesting to examine the magnitude of the strength of socio-economic variables when controlling for the biological factors.

3. Data and their limitations:

The data for this analysis comes from the Sri Lanka Demographic