The Signing of the Constitution of the United States, by Junius Brutus Stearns.

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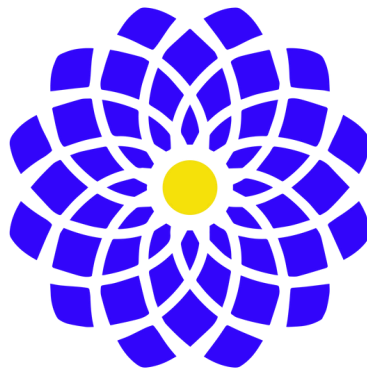Research Consultant of the BALPP and Education Policy Research Expert

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Editorial

As 2024 ended, Sri Lanka made progress in addressing, to a great extent, some of the critical challenges that plunged the nation into a crisis. Now as the "Bankrupt Nation" label on Sri Lanka begins to fade, Sri Lankans from all walks of life welcomed the new year with hopes for prosperity and progress. The stabilization of the currency, drop in inflation and increase in foreign reserves have produced a favorable environment for both local and foreign investors and entrepreneurs.

Nonetheless, challenges persist in the economic, political and social landscapes of the country that require proper planning, efficient policy management and ethical governance. As Sri Lanka's premier institute on policy making and strategic leadership, the Bandaranaike Academy for Leadership and Public Policy (BALPP) is committed to raising awareness and educating the public on policy and leadership related issues and creating the next generation of leaders who are capable of addressing these critical issues concerning governance and public policy. Therefore, the BALPP Policy Tribune is dedicated to the above purpose.

It is with immense pleasure that we launch the **Bumper Issue** of the BALPP Policy Tribune comprising of 15 submissions. This issue features several articles, opinion pieces and policy briefs written by scholars and experts in the field of policy making and leadership on promoting strategic leadership skills, community empowerment, ethical governance and public policy related matters. The photo essay which is featured in this issue highlights BALPP's commitment to social causes. The interview with Professor Vajira Dissanayake, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo emphasizes the need for proper policy planning, prioritizing investment in technology and mastering sustainable practices within the health sector of the country and training and empowering youth in the country to contribute actively to proper policy planning within the country. We are hoping to publish two more issues of the BALPP Policy Tribune during this year.

Editorial

We are happy to collaborate with The Strivers' Network (TSN), a youth-led organization that is involved in empowering emerging young scholars by supporting their higher education. We have received several articles and policy briefs from scholars attached to The Strivers' Network (TSN) that examines critical issues and challenges confronting modern day Sri Lankan society. These articles and policy briefs explore some of the gaps in policy making, policy implementation and issues related to strategic leadership in Sri Lanka and provide policy recommendations and guidelines to address these issues and create positive transformation in society.

We would like to thank all the contributing authors for their dedication and strong commitment in making this publication a successful and meaningful one. Their work is admirable as they have managed to raise awareness and educate the public on contemporary issues relating to policy making, policy development, policy implementation, strategic leadership and ethical governance.

We would also like to extend our gratitude to the members of the independent panel of reviewers for their constructive and insightful feedback. The authors carefully considered each comment and made the necessary revisions to address the concerns of the reviewers.

This year is a crucial year for all of us. As Sri Lankans, we must strive hard to address critical socio-economic and political challenges within the country by contributing to the formulation of effective policies and strategies. It is then that we can move forward as a nation by building public trust and confidence in government and public institutions, reduce waste, increase efficiency and master sustainable development practices.

We sincerely hope that the BALPP Policy Tribune will strengthen this process and empower our community to be more policy-oriented and efficient citizens.

We would like to request all of you to read the latest issue of the Policy Tribune and contact us with your valuable feedback and comments. We would also like to invite interested scholars and experts in the fields of leadership and policy making to contribute to the upcoming issues of the BALPP Policy Tribune.

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Reducing Inequalities for Sustainable, Equitable Human Development

By Professor Nadeera Rajapakse

In the context of the economic (and political) crisis and its impact on individuals, groups, and communities, recovery measures need to address existing structural inequalities for two main reasons: first, because without removing inequalities, widespread economic and social prosperity is impossible, or is at best inequitable and non-inclusive. Second, inequalities are harmful in themselves, not only as effects on economic growth. In other words, like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) highlight *[1]* , inequality is a standalone goal as well as a cross-cutting issue.

The brief makes policy recommendations aiming for meaningful, inclusive, sustainable economic development in Sri Lanka's post-crisis context. By meaningful, we focus on people and not only on infrastructure; by inclusive we refer to policies that take into account plural identities, and by sustainable we target long-term goals over short-term profits. By using Amartya Sen's concept of human development as enhancing personal and collective freedoms alongside GDP growth (1984, 1999) *[2]* , the recommendations made here aim to address the existing structural weaknesses and inequalities that have been exacerbated by Sri Lanka's political and economic crisis. Interdisciplinary analysis is essential to take stock of intersecting categories of identity that influence inequalities. We focus on two areas, debt refinancing and the export of low-skilled labour, which are related concerns in Sri Lanka today, with widespread effects on human development.

1 SDG 10 Reduced inequalities: "Inequalities based on income, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, class, ethnicity, religion and opportunity continue to persist across the world. Inequality threatens long-term social and economic development, harms poverty reduction and destroys people's sense of fulfilment and self-worth. This, in turn, can breed crime, disease and environmental degradation. We cannot achieve sustainable development and make the planet better for all if people are excluded from the chance for a better life". https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/inequality/

2 "The Capability approach judges individual well-being not in terms of goods consumed nor in terms of utility satisfaction, but rather on the realized functions, i.e., the set of alternatives a person has". In Sen's words, it is a "perspective of freedom in a positive sense: who can do what" (Sen 1984, 376).

About the Author Nadeera Rajapakse is an assistant professor in the History of Economic Thought and English for Economics. She is working on the representation of migrants and migration in Economics and discussing the merits of using Amartya Sen's theoretical framework. She has also worked on interdisciplinary analyses of development, identities and culture. Her previous research areas have focused on moral debates on money and usury in Scholastic Thought..

Debt Refinancing

As a result of authoritarian political decisions on large-scale loss-inducing infrastructure investments and policies, the country faced severe foreign exchange shortages culminating in a debt crisis amounting to 103.8% of GDP as of March 2023 (Dias, 2023). *[3]* This crisis hit households at a time when many had not yet recovered from the shocks of COVID-19. After struggling through months of shortages of gas, fuel, electricity, medicine and many other essential items, the people took to the streets in protest.

With a change in leadership propelled by the people's protests, the government's response was to secure an International Monetary Fund bailout in 2022. In June 2024, the IMF agreed to a 48-month Extended Fund Facility providing the country with immediate access to about US $336 million, bringing the total funds disbursed to about US $1 billion (IMF executive board, 2024). These financing deals were linked to the IMF's 2023 debt sustainability and requires debt to be paid down through high budget surplus.

Sri Lanka's debt is held by both foreign and domestic creditors. Foreign creditors have been categorised into various groups *[4]* , of which we can differentiate bilateral creditors and ISB (International Sovereign Bond) holders and other commercial creditors. Negotiations are underway with bilateral creditors for debt relief, while ISB holders have suggested GDP growth-dependent debt restructuring. This means that debt repayments will be made according to GDP growth rates, with the country expected to pay higher interest rates on estimated future growth rates. Thus, the 28 percent debt concession granted at present could be reduced to 15 percent if growth rates surpass the limit set by the IMF (Kuruwita, 2024). In exchange for this emergency loan, the IMF imposed a series of conditions. Briefly, "further trade liberalization to promote exports and foreign direct investment; labor reforms to upgrade skills and increase female labor force participation; and state-owned enterprise reforms to improve efficiency and fiscal transparency, contain fiscal risks, and promote a level playing field for the private sector" (IMF, 2024).

These conditions along with the GDP-related concessions, calling for a budget surplus, which in turn requires greater inflows of foreign exchange, bring us to the second issue discussed here: Sri Lanka's highest foreign exchange earner: low-skilled migrant workers.

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3 Political crisis because: "This latest round of 'odious debt' in Sri Lanka was created by an authoritarian and corrupt government, led by a President who initially fled the country rather than take responsibility for the economic catastrophe he unleashed. If the Pandora papers are anything to go by, a former President and an entire corrupt family clearly accumulated personal wealth at the expense of Sri Lankan people. This is an economic catastrophe that was enabled and facilitated by highly paid financiers at places like Blackrock and other private investment firms, which now hold almost 35% of Sri Lankan external debt. Their windfall profits during a global pandemic indicate the extent to which they have profited at a time of human misery" (K Ruwanpura, 2022). Also, it has been termed odious debt because "much of it is odious debt used to extract funds by both global creditors and local elite, without using it in the interests of the broader citizenry" (Yukthi, 13 May 2024).

4 "These creditor groups are the Official Creditor Committee of official bilateral lenders (co-chaired by France, India, and Japan), who hold $5.8 billion of Lankan debt; the China Exim Bank ($4.2 billion); other Official Creditors (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan – $0.3 billion); ISB holders ($14.2 billion); China Development Bank ($3.2 billion) and other commercial creditors (under $0.2 billion)" (Kuruwita, 2024)

Export of Low-skilled Migrant Labour

Contributing to 5.1% of GDP, low-skilled women migrant domestic workers (maids) overall remittances surpass earnings coming from tea and garment exports (World Bank blog, 2022). While, on the one hand, remittances are seen as exerting a positive effect on development, poverty alleviation and unemployment (Ratha, 2023), on the other hand, this type of gendered labour is characterised by exploitative and abusive working conditions, the lack of rights, and multiple layers of risk and vulnerabilities. The government has been unable to protect migrant workers and often use restrictions and bans as a way of addressing the dangers they face (Weeraratne, 2022). However, as Amartya Sen's development framework shows, restrictions imposed on the women's (and men's) right to migrate and find employment opportunities only exacerbate the risks. Instead of effectively dissuading them from migrating, restrictions force migrants to seek irregular, informal means of mobility, thus exposing them to even greater vulnerabilities. Just as the IMF emphasises female labour force participation, the lack of alternative employment and of sustainable livelihood options are seen as push factors driving women to seek employment abroad despite the risks.

Exacerbating Structural Inequalities Prevalent in the Country

Inequalities

The IMF debt finance scheme was hailed by many with relief as the only resort for Sri Lanka to emerge from its debt crisis. However, many others spoke out against its debilitating effects on the wider population. The bail out came with austerity measures, including cuts in public spending, steep increases in utility tariffs, food and energy costs, indirect and regressive taxation, limited cash handouts as social security. While we separate inequalities into various categories for purposes of clarity, we insist that these categories overlap and need to be considered as intersecting and compounding factors.

Gender-based inequalities : Due to their unpaid caregiving roles at household level, women often shoulder responsibilities of ensuring families are fed, looked after and educated, even as they face falling wages, rising food, electricity and water bills, precarious and informal employment and lack of access to meaningful social security. Consequently, the current debt refinancing proposals, which prioritise external creditors and ensure re-entry into finance markets, bail out private finance (both local and global) by putting the burden on the workers, and especially women workers – both paid and unpaid. *[5]*

Domestic debt restructuring has placed the burden on public pension funds, with teachers and nurses, among others, having their pensions slashed. Cuts in public spending on education, health and social security will further aggravate the burden faced by women, but not only: income, age and ethnic origins are also categories upon which inequalities thrive.

5 Amartya Sen refers to the "social technology" that enables the economic system to function thanks to the invisible contribution of women performing unpaid work (1991). $10.8 trillion – the total earnings of women's unpaid care work as reported by Oxfam (2020)

Income inequalities: Colombo may look dazzling with its luxury hotels and malls, but the crises faced by working class families tell a different story. Research has shown that the quality of life of working-class families has deteriorated and that they are still battling with everyday expenses. Accumulated bills and shortages have put them in situations of severe debt, compounded by the increases in the prices of essential items, following VAT increases. They are at a "point of no return" (Colombo Urban Lab, 2023), taking loans to survive, rather than to navigate one-off shocks. Consequently, reducing inflation and bringing food prices down are welcome, though not sufficient to ensure long-term sustainable growth. Here too women face much of the burden of managing the daily needs of their families and face the pressure of negotiating loans. In a situation where alternative funding is absent, they turn to microfinance and moneylenders (Arambepola, 2019). Thus, understanding the complex and intersecting needs driving households to debt is essential when discussing the regulation of microfinance and informal credit markets.

Age-related inequalities: Older people are particularly at risk during the current situation as a result of underlying health conditions, social and economic disadvantages, and insufficient social protection mechanisms. In addition, the economic crisis led to greater food insecurity and inaccessible healthcare for older people. "Many older people aren't receiving their full list of prescribed medicines and cannot afford to buy privately. Some have stopped taking their medications altogether, waiting until the drugs are available again. Others are turning to alternative medicines such as Ayurvedic or traditional methods which can only serve as a temporary measure" (Helpage International, 2022).

The domestic debt restructuring also worsens the situation for older people, who tend to either be out of paid work or earning very little and whose pensions and available savings are very quickly used up on food and healthcare. According to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey of 2019, people aged 65-years-old and above are the poorest group in Sri Lanka (Department of Census and Statistics, Multidimensional Poverty in Sri Lankan, 2019).

Minority rights-related inequalities: Crises and conflicts tend to exert disproportionate impacts on vulnerable groups, which include ethnic and religious minority groups in Sri Lanka, who have faced long-term patterns of discrimination (Hennayake, 2006). The State needs to recognise and remedy human rights violations to ensure justice, safety and security, essential capabilities for inclusive human development and growth (Sen, 1999). Justice is required to address enforced disappearances, land disputes, disenfranchised populations and environmental issues.

Harassment and discrimination on the basis of identity-related issues (gender, sexual origin, sexuality, religion, ethnic origin, etc.) not only impede productivity on labour markets, thus hampering economic growth, but also cause harm to society's wellbeing (Ariyarathne, 2022).

"Decisions on economic policies must be guided by Sri Lanka's international human rights obligations, including by ensuring adequate social protection. (...) Sri Lanka's creditors should provide the Government with the fiscal space needed to realise economic, social and cultural rights" (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024).

The failure to protect minority rights and well-being creates a big push factor propelling risky, costly emigration, borne by society at large.

"(...) the dominant three foreign exchange earners for the country – garments, tea exports and migrant workers to the Middle East – rest on the efforts of women workers" (Ruwanpura, 2022).

The unforgiving spiral of debt servicing without considering equitable growth: The imperatives of debt service put huge pressures on essential social spending in Sri Lanka, even before being forced into debt default and having to approach the IMF for assistance. Sri Lanka now faces massive constraints even in continuing with earlier social spending levels, much less in responding adequately to the need for greater social protection in the face of the economic crisis caused by debt distress. The lack of professional skills, which would be further widened by reduced public spending, and the lack of imagination in absorbing women gainfully into the economy, along with the pressures to tend to her dependents will not remove incentives pushing women to migrate. However, valuing her work and enabling freedoms to migrate safely and work in decent conditions are feasible policy orientations.

Recommendations

Deprivations are intersecting. Some workers face numerous compounding deprivations stemming from gender and ethnic discrimination, such as women employed in the garment industry and tea-plantation workers, especially those from minority Tamil groups. Policy conditionalities associated with debt relief have rarely shown an understanding of gender dynamics, not recognising the different ways that women and men – across intersectional identities – interact with the economy, as paid and unpaid workers, as household providers, as family members and as citizens (Ghosh, 2021).

Universal social protection "Social security is not charity but a human right of all people. Women's groups are demanding that universal social security in this time of crisis be made binding and enforceable by law. Without meaningful expansion of social safety nets and increasing fiscal allocation, targeted schemes like Aswesuma will not benefit the millions of families hit hard by the crisis." (Dias, 2023).

Sri Lanka must move away from targeted social welfare schemes to systems that offer universal social protection, particularly in the context of crises. Targeted poverty reduction schemes have their weaknesses and in Sri Lanka, inefficient targeting as well as outdated eligibility criteria - those for the Aswesuma welfare scheme were developed before the debt crisis - result in many vulnerable groups slipping through the net. The multidimensionality of vulnerability and poverty also needs to be considered, going beyond basic income related criteria. *[6]*

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6 "According to the UNDP report on multidimensional vulnerability of Sri Lankans, as many as 12.34 million people in Sri Lanka (55.7% of Sri Lankans) are multi-dimensionally vulnerable, and yet only 2 million households have been selected as beneficiaries under Aswesuma" (Colombo Urban Lab, 2023).

It should also be recognised that 66 per cent of the labour force work informally, including women who do unpaid domestic care work, so have little access to social protection schemes. Similarly, only 40 to 50 per cent of older people receive any form of benefit such as pensions, provident funds, or cash payments (Helpage International, 2022). Contradictory measures like targeting the already meagre pension funds of Sri Lanka's wage workers, only exacerbate existing class, gender, and ethnic inequalities. In particular, any requirements of public spending cuts that reduce employment in public services or reduce wages of public workers, should be avoided.

It is unrealistic to expect specific programmes targeted to women/children to undo the damage created by broader macroeconomic policies that reduce employment and livelihoods. Therefore, as far as possible, policies should be universal so as to prevent unjustified exclusion of those already disadvantaged in other ways. *[7]*

Collective bargaining for women migrant workers
Commodification is a phenomenon afflicting women migrants, by which they are recognised only for the service they provide, and hence low-skilled and low valued (Rajapakse, 2023). The unlimited supply of low-skilled labour from competing sending countries in the face of asymmetric power wielded by receiving countries is a situation that facilitates commodification of migrant labour. Sri Lanka's National Migration Policy has the protection of workers as a core policy area, which can be made more efficient if sending countries negotiate collectively for their migrant workers' rights. Turning regional rivalries in South Asia into potential collaborative endeavours, such as the Colombo Process, is imperative (IOM, 2003). *[8]*

The nature of vulnerabilities as well as the exploitation and abuses that low-skilled workers from the region generally experience is similar despite the differences in their nationalities. South Asian countries need to demand better terms of employment and increased protection for their workers. Most sending countries have ratified conventions and laws aimed at protecting their migrant workers. These are nonetheless ineffectual if destination countries, especially in the Middle East, have not. Developing common solutions, strategies and facilities, such as insisting on domestic work being included in labour laws in destination countries, setting up common safe houses and transit homes in destination countries, in coordination with embassies/diplomatic missions of SAARC Member States need to be done collectively. *[9]*

7 "In the 2023 budget, the Government allocated LKR 539 billion for defense and public security while household cash transfers and food relief (which includes all the key social welfare programs such as Samurdhi, allowances for elders, disabled, kidney disease, school meal programs and nutrition programs for mothers and children) was allocated LKR 187 billion. Sri Lanka continues to remain one of the countries in the region that spend the least of its GDP on social welfare" (Colombo Urban Lab, 2023).

8 "The Regional Consultative Process on Overseas Employment and Contractual Labor for Countries of Origin in Asia or the Colombo Process aims to provide a forum for Asian labor-sending countries to (...) Share experiences, lessons learned and best practices on overseas employment and contractual labor; Consult on issues faced by overseas workers, and labor sending and receiving states, and offers practical solutions for the well-being of overseas workers, particularly the vulnerable overseas workers; Optimize development benefits from organized overseas employment, and enhance dialogue with countries of destination; and review and monitor the implementation of the ministerial recommendations and identify further steps for action" (IOM, 2003)

9 "(...) SAARC countries, including Sri Lanka, have been in a search to find broader regional groupings that are capable of meeting particularly their economic objectives in a sustainable manner. These have included joining organizations such as the BIMSTEC and the IORA. Sri Lanka has most recently sought membership of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)" (Colombopage quoted in Ariyasinha, 2023). There are increasing calls that Sri Lanka seeks the membership of the BRICS - the group of emerging economies (Ariyasinha, 2023).

Avoiding fiscal austerity

Imposing fiscal austerity measures should be avoided because countercyclical policies are required during the downswing and debt relief measures should be directed towards ensuring such countercyclicality. Regressive indirect taxation measures like value added tax (VAT) that increase prices of essential commodities are anti-poor and anti-women and can inhibit economic recovery. They also have a significant gender dimension for female consumers and producers, since women-run Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) are more likely to be unregistered, and therefore less able to redeem tax payments on their inputs, which are already likely to be more expensive as they are buying on a smaller scale. Instead, the structure of taxation can be changed to focus on more progressive taxation, in particular through equitable taxation of multinationals, taxes on extreme wealth, taxes on financial transactions.

Ensuring equitable labour-market participation

Since labour market participation is often at the core of IMF conditions, especially that of women, the country should take measures to ensure equal wages to men and women in both the public and private sectors. There needs to be appropriate measures for internal debt relief, especially for women-owned MSMEs in informal credit arrangements. It is important consider specific requirement of women borrowers and borrowers from previous conflict-zones who are less likely to have collateral and land titles that provide access to credit. It is also important to recognise the very specific needs of women entrepreneurs, especially with regard to access to inputs and markets. For example, facilitating childcare arrangements for working mothers and migrant mothers. Policies need to facilitate greater associations and unions of women workers, both employed, self-employed and migrant.

Considering debt cancellation

Scholars have pointed to the possibility of debts unpayable being cancelled. Debt justice movements across the developing world have urged for the cancellation of all unsustainable and illegitimate debts in a manner that is ambitious, unconditional, and without carrying repercussions for future market access. Past cases show how reducing debt stock and debt payments allow countries to increase their public financing for urgent domestic needs. The IMF's Debt Sustainability Analysis (DSA), which measures sovereign vulnerability to sovereign debt stress, must incorporate SDG financing needs, climate vulnerabilities as well as human rights and gender equality commitments into its methodology (Ghosh, 2021). Sri Lanka is strengthening ties and membership with the BRICS and this is an opportunity to suggest greater solidarity, cooperation and stronger governance: in other words, opportunity to discuss alternatives to ultraliberal, competitive, market-based economic policies.

Strengthening Justice and Human Rights

It is essential to strengthen Sri Lanka's Human Rights framework in order to enhance the freedoms of every person by repealing discriminatory laws (for example, 365 and 365A of the Penal Code of Sri Lanka, which criminalise same sex intimacy) and ensuring that the country move away from a military state by repealing the prevention of terrorism act. (Rajasingham Senanayake, 2011). Overall, in keeping with the goal of greater accountability and governance, stakeholders and experts need to be continuously included in participatory, deliberations on decision-making, laws, truth and reconciliation commissions and anti-corruption efforts (Orjuela, 2008).

Conclusion

We need to break the vicious spiral: because there is more power given to external creditors, maintaining investor confidence and avoiding the risk of capital flight are priorities underpinning all macroeconomic policies. As a result, public spending is further curtailed to make sure eventual capital flight can be absorbed without expanding the budget deficit. Consequently, there is lower social security and greater deprivation for many categories of people. Therefore, countries like Sri Lanka, with the greatest need of social protection for its most vulnerable categories of people, spend the least amount on it through public expenditure, which is, on the contrary directed towards debt servicing. *[10]*

Acknowledging that broader development depends on equitable development and considering the detrimental effects neoliberal policies have exerted in Sri Lanka, Sen's idea of finding the middle path - combining the advantages of liberal and open economic systems with strong welfare and social protection policies and governance - offers alternative possibilities. Finally, the struggles for debt justice and overall economic justice need to be linked to the struggles for equality and freedom.

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10 "(...) comparing debt service payments to core social spending (covering expenditure on education, health and social protection). In upper middle income countries, just under half of the amount of social spending was spent on debt service, but in lower middle income countries (where such spending is all the more required) the debt service payments were more than social spending. Shockingly, in the low income countries, debt service payments came to 171 per cent of social spending! These are not just the poorest countries, with significant proportions of absolutely hungry people, but also the most climate-vulnerable countries, which are already experiencing a range of climate-related shocks that affect ordinary people" (Gosh, 2023).

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Strategies to Overcome the Financial Difficulties in Carrying Out Research in Sri Lanka

By Professor Vasitha Abeysuriya

Introduction

Research and development (R&D) are critical drivers of economic growth, innovation, and societal progress. However, in many developing countries, including Sri Lanka, financial constraints remain one of the foremost challenges in fostering a vibrant research culture. With limited funding opportunities, Sri Lankan researchers face difficulties in conducting high-quality research that can address local challenges and contribute to global knowledge. This policy paper aims to explore the financial barriers to research in Sri Lanka and propose strategies to overcome these obstacles. The paper draws on global best practices, regional experiences, and local context to recommend actions that can help ensure sustainable research funding and a robust research ecosystem.

Challenges in Funding Research in Sri Lanka

Before discussing strategies, it is essential to understand the financial barriers currently hindering research activities in Sri Lanka. These barriers are multifaceted and interrelated.

1. Limited Government Investment in Research

Historically, Sri Lanka's investment in R&D has been insufficient. According to UNESCO data, Sri Lanka spends less than 0.2% of its GDP on research and development, far below the global average of 1.7% (Ranasinghe et al., 2012). This underinvestment is a significant hurdle, as government funding often serves as the backbone for most research activities in developing countries. Public universities and research institutions rely heavily on state support, which, due to budget constraints, often does not meet their needs. Recent trends indicate no significant improvement, maintaining a low investment in R&D.

2. Dependency on International Donors and Foreign Funding

While international donors and foreign aid play an essential role in funding research in Sri Lanka, there are risks associated with this dependency.

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Foreign-funded research projects are often subject to specific geopolitical interests and external priorities, limiting the scope and flexibility of local research (Perera & Gunatilake, 2024). Moreover, the reliance on foreign funding makes it difficult for Sri Lankan researchers to sustain long-term research programs independently. Data from various reports, including the National Health Research Council, indicate a heavy reliance on overseas funds.

3. Inefficient Allocation and Use of Existing Resources

Even with available funds, inefficient allocation and utilization of financial resources within research institutions exacerbate the problem. Bureaucratic delays, lack of transparency in financial management, and poor project planning often lead to suboptimal use of allocated funds. Additionally, researchers may struggle to access these funds due to complex application processes or misalignment with research priorities. For example, the Ministry of Health provides a research allowance to all medical officers, yet the proportion of this funding directly supporting research projects is unclear and likely insufficient.

4. Limited Private Sector Involvement in Research

The private sector in Sri Lanka remains underdeveloped in terms of R&D investment. The country's businesses have not traditionally prioritized innovation and technology development, which further limits opportunities for collaboration between academia and industry. This gap contributes to a lack of funding options for applied research projects that could have real-world impact and provide commercial benefits. Research by private sector institutions and semi-government organizations, such as the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Institute for Health Policy (IHP), shows potential but remains limited in scope and scale (IPS, IHP).

Recommendations

Based on the identified challenges, the following strategies are recommended to overcome the financial difficulties in carrying out research in Sri Lanka:

1. Increase Government Investment in R&D: Advocate for a significant increase in the national budget allocation for research and development to at least 1% of GDP, aligning with global averages.

2. Enhance Efficiency in Resource Allocation: Implement transparent and efficient financial management practices within research institutions to ensure optimal use of available funds. Streamline application processes and align funding priorities with national research goals.

3. Strengthen Public-Private Partnerships: Encourage collaboration between academia and industry to leverage private sector investment in research. Establish incentives for businesses to invest in R&D and support applied research projects with commercial potential.

4. Diversify Funding Sources: Reduce dependency on international donors by exploring alternative funding mechanisms, such as public-private partnerships, crowd-funding, and leveraging diaspora contributions.

5. Leverage Success Stories: Highlight and build upon successful research initiatives, such as those in the mental health sector, to demonstrate the potential for impactful research in Sri Lanka despite financial constraints (Siriwardhana et al., 2011).

6. Institutional Strengthening and Capacity Building: Enhance the capacities of local institutions like the National Health Research Council, National Research Council, and National Science Foundation to effectively manage and disburse research funds (NSF, NRC).

Conclusion

Addressing the financial difficulties in carrying out research in Sri Lanka requires a multifaceted approach that includes increasing government investment, enhancing resource allocation efficiency, fostering public-private partnerships, diversifying funding sources, leveraging success stories, and strengthening research institutions. By implementing these strategies, Sri Lanka can build a robust research ecosystem that supports high-quality research and contributes to global knowledge.

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Leading with Empathy: Building Connections

By Shayani Jayasinghe - Research Associate/BALPP

On the 30th of October 2024, the students of the ECLPP (Executive Credential in Leadership and Public Policy) and several staff members of the BALPP took part in an exposure visit to the Suwa Arana managed by the Indira Cancer Trust (ICT). During this visit, the students and staff of BALPP managed to gain clear insights into the operations of the organization, the stakeholders who are involved and their contributions in raising awareness and educating the public on cancer as well as helping and supporting cancer patients and their families to navigate through challenging times.

The Suwa Arana managed by Indira Cancer Trust (ICT)was established to provide support to children with cancer and their families through therapy, counselling, donations and many other services. The volunteers briefed us about all the activities and took us on a tour around the Suwa Arana. As we explored each floor of the Suwa Arana, we managed to experience some of the main activities carried out by the organization.

Ever wondered how donated hair can become a lifeline for cancer patients?
The on-site wig factory makes about 20-25 wigs per day for cancer patients from donated hair.

There are several volunteers at the wig station to prepare these wigs, sterilize them, pack them and donate them to the needy.

Being diagnosed with cancer and receiving treatment can be very stressful for patients and their families. During the observation tour, we learnt that Indira Cancer Trust (ICT) conducts several relaxation therapy and counselling programmes for cancer patients and their families.

These programmes and counselling sessions offer creative ways to reduce stress caused by cancer, maintain inner peace and carry out day-to-day activities peacefully. The Healing Garden under construction with the assistance from Japan will be utilized for this purpose.
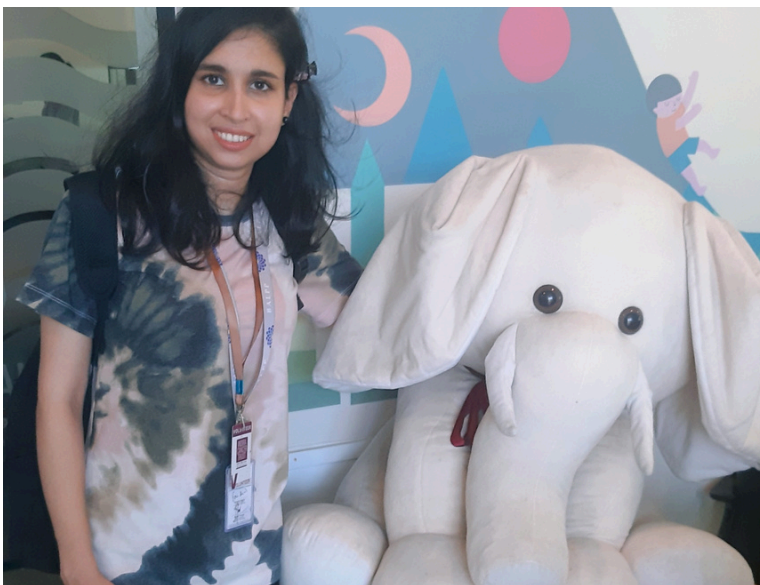
Ele the Elephant- the official mascot for pediatric cancer.

The donations received from every purchase of Ele are used to provide holistic treatment and care for children diagnosed with cancer.

Donations for Ward 01 and 02 of the Apeksha Hospital, Maharagama

After donating food items for the patients, we managed to interact with them and share their experiences with us. The patients were very happy to meet us and gave us their blessings as a sign of showing gratitude for our contributions.

The Pink Ribbon: a token of showing solidarity with the Breast Cancer Awareness Movement. We were all given a pink ribbon pin to be worn every Wednesday to raise awareness on breast cancer.

A very productive day comes to an end with so many wonderful memories.

This visit offered the students a valuable opportunity to connect with the impactful initiatives carried out by Indira Cancer Trust (ICT) and broaden their understanding about cancer diagnosis and treatment, issues concerning patients and healthcare providers, resources needed for the procedures as well as contribute actively to a meaningful cause through dedication and strong commitment.

The Policy of Social Emotional Learning (SEL): Can We Apply its Principles into Traditional, Developing Societies?

By Professor Izhar Oplatka

Every profession has forms of emotion regulation that are slightly distinctive, and teaching is no exception. Emotion display and suppression is an integral part of the teacher's role, especially when teachers interact with colleagues and pupils (Nias, 1989). It is defined as "the process by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions" (Gross, 1999, p. 275). Emotion regulation is a person's ability to control his/her emotions and behaviours in such a way that s/he will be able to function effectively even when experiencing the arousal of strong emotions (Shary, 2021).

Because teaching is constructed as an emotional practice, teachers are required to regulate their emotions in different situations. It was found that emotions influence cognition in different ways and, therefore, are considered relevant for learning and performance (Frenzel et al., 2023). For example, pleasant emotions generally exert conductive effects on learning.

Since early 1990s, social emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as a major policy in American education, in general, and in teacher education programs, in particular (Hoffman, 2009). The main conjecture underlying SEL is the need to promote students' social and emotional competence because it may increase not only their SEL skills but also their academic achievement (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Thus, educational leaders and teachers are concerned about the ways of creating the kind of classroom environment that instigates students' SEL as well as are engaged in in-service trainings aimed at helping them boost their own social-emotional competence.

However, emotion regulation is governed by social display rules (Change, 2020) which are virtually influenced by local cultural values and norms. These cultural scripts provide guidelines for "correct" strategies of emotion regulation and, thereby, generate emotion rules that are unique and contextualised (Keltner et al., 2003). In other words, culture determines many times the extent to which educational leaders and teachers display certain emotions and suppress others.

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My argument in this essay is that the policy of SEL has been influenced by western values and therefore should be applied very carefully in non-western countries; otherwise, a failure in the implementation of this policy in these countries is inevitable. For example, test anxiety is more likely to occur in societies characterized by high achievement motivation in which success in an exam is highly valued (Frenzel et al., 2023). Can we apply policies aimed at copying with test anxiety in societies characterized by low achievement motivation just like the literature from the opposite societies recommends? I doubt it. The same can be considered in respect to SEL. In the remainder of this essay, I will look at the principles of SEL and contradict them with the characteristics of traditional societies.

The Principles of SEL: A Cultural View
Several organizing frameworks for SEL have been proposed in the education literature, each outlining various components that influence SEL. Many of these frameworks share, according to Schonert-Reichl (2017), three distinct and interrelated dimensions—the learning context, students' SEL, and teachers' SEL. I describe each one of them briefly and raise some ponderings about their application in traditional, developing societies.

The Learning Context.
SEL skill development and interventions should occur in a safe, caring, supportive, participatory, and well-managed environment. This environment supports students' development and enables them to exercise the skills they learn. An effective learning context includes factors such as communication styles, performance expectations, classroom structures and regulations, school organizational climate, commitment to academic success for all students, district policies, and parental and community involvement.

Nevertheless, many of these factors pertain mainly to Western culture. For example, Tobin (1995) indicated that certain conjectures underlying the value of "talk about the emotions" reflect the cultural preferences of the American White middle-class, emphasizing the power of a culturally based ideology of emotional self-expression in American education. Similarly, Hoffman (2009) claimed that cultural differences and diversity might make some sorts of SEL problematic without sufficient adaptations in minority groups. Caring is perceived differently across social groups, though.

An example we receive from the Bedouin society in Israel, a traditional, minority group of Moslems who live in the desert. According to local values, emotion display is not culturally legitimate, as arising from the next quote:

We have a very famous saying – hide what you have to say inside your body and don't let it get out lest it shame you. This is our education. Don't say what you have to say, don't let others know what you feel because it can shame you and your family... (A female teacher, 17 years in teaching. Cited in Oplatka & El- Quran, 2022, p.344)

In this sense, regardless of the factors affecting SEL indicated above, local cultural scripts in many traditional societies are stronger from the policy of SEL and are unlikely to enable the implementation of this policy in local educational systems in many developing countries, at least in its 'western' form.

Students' SEL.
SEL involves the processes by which students learn and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to understand and regulate their emotions, to feel and display empathy for others, to set and attain positive goals, to nurture and maintain positive relationships, and to make responsible decisions. Students are expected to develop greater self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, all of which competencies that are necessary in the modern labor market. Saarni's (1997) comment sharpens the contextual influences in this respect:

In many respects, these skills of emotional competence reflect Western societies' notions of "how emotion works." I refer to such beliefs as folk theories of emotion...other non-Western cultures do not necessarily view unexpressed emotions as accumulative or as explosive. (p. 47)

Let's juxtapose these competencies with the major characteristics of traditional societies, such as harmony, interpersonal relationships, and collectiveness. In a society that glorifies the collective commitment of individuals to their social groups, what is the meaning of educating young people to develop self-awareness and self-management? What is the meaning of responsible decision-making in societies characterized by high-power distance?

Teachers' SEL.
Teachers' social-emotional competence and wellbeing strongly affect the learning context and the application of SEL into schools. Teachers' own competencies shape the nature of their relationships with students. For example, classrooms with warm teacher-child relationships promote deep learning among students: children who feel comfortable with their teachers and peers are more willing to grapple with challenging material and persist at difficult learning tasks (Meritte et al., 2012).

Here again, these assumptions are strongly rooted in western cultures and are far from being universal. In a study about emotion regulation among female teachers in a very traditional and religious society, the Ultra-Orthodox society in Judaism, it was found that these teachers refrain from displaying any kind of emotions, i.e., they tend to suppress their emotions due to emotion rules in their society. One female teacher in Oplatka and Vertaimer's (2023) study explained:

A distance between students and teachers is more acceptable in [our school]. There is a huge distance, teachers won't express too many emotions of closeness...teachers almost never say 'I love you' in an Ultra-Orthodox school (Rachel, p. 178).

No doubt, teachers in this traditional society cannot adopt SEL in its western construction because their first obligation is to their society.

Conclusion

Several conclusions arise from my analysis:
- Emotion regulation, including SEL, is highly contextualized and cannot be blindly adopted across different societies and cultures.
- Policy makers and supervisors in developing countries should consider what aspects of SEL they will introduce in their educational system to better increase the chances of effective implementation of this policy.
- Teacher education in developing countries should pay attention to emotion in the classroom but only from a local cultural perspective (e.g., Confucianism, Buddhism). School members and stakeholders cannot feel connected to policy drafts imported from other cultures, even if they accept them. Parents, for example, are unlikely to support the incorporation of western values that contradict their own culture. SEL is no exception.

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Blended Learning in Sri Lanka: Opportunities, Challenges, and Strategic Policy Recommendations for the Future

By Dr. Visula Abeysuriya

Executive Summary

Blended learning, an educational approach combining online and in-person instruction, has emerged as a critical strategy for enhancing teaching and learning in Sri Lanka. This policy paper explores the implementation of blended learning in the country's educational system, highlighting its potential to address systemic challenges while improving accessibility, flexibility, and student engagement. It also delves into the obstacles that must be overcome, such as digital infrastructure gaps, teacher preparedness, and socio-economic disparities. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for successfully integrating blended learning practices in Sri Lankan schools and universities, aiming for a more inclusive, resilient, and future-ready education system.

Introduction

Blended learning, which integrates digital and face-to-face learning methods, has gained significant traction worldwide, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. For Sri Lanka, a country facing educational challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, limited access to quality learning resources, and varying levels of digital literacy, blended learning presents an opportunity to modernise the education system and improve learning outcomes. As the nation seeks to develop its human capital and meet the demands of a rapidly changing global economy, adopting blended learning can be a crucial enabler of educational reform (Udagama, 2020).

Current State of Education in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's education system, while historically strong in terms of literacy rates and essential educational attainment, faces several challenges that hinder its ability to deliver high-quality education to all students:

- **Inequality of Access**: Rural and disadvantaged areas often lack modern educational resources, such as the Internet, computers, and other digital tools (Edirisinghe, 2021).

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- **Overcrowded Classrooms:** Many schools, particularly in urban areas, suffer from overcrowded classrooms, limiting the effectiveness of traditional teaching methods (Mendis, 2022).
- **Teacher Training and Professional Development:** Despite technology's increasing role in education, many teachers lack the training to incorporate digital tools effectively into their teaching practice (Gunasekara, 2020).
- **Outdated Curriculum:** Traditional curriculums often lag behind the demands of the modern workforce, which increasingly values digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills (Wickramasinghe, 2021)

In response to these challenges, the government of Sri Lanka and various international organisations have initiated efforts to introduce digital technologies into education, most notably through the e-Asia project and the National e-Learning Centre (NELC). However, the full-scale implementation of blended learning across the country remains in its early stages (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Benefits of Blended Learning in Sri Lanka
Blended learning offers several critical benefits for the Sri Lankan education system, which could help address some of the existing challenges:

1. Improved Access and Flexibility
Blended learning can enhance access to education, particularly in rural areas where physical schools may be distant or under-resourced. By combining face-to-face learning with online resources, students can access educational content remotely, breaking down barriers of geography and time (Dharmaratne, 2022). This is particularly important for students in remote areas, where teacher shortages and infrastructure challenges are expected.

2. Personalized Learning
Blended learning allows for a more personalised approach to education. Students can learn at their own pace, using digital platforms that offer adaptive learning paths based on their strengths and weaknesses (Gunasekara, 2020). This approach is particularly beneficial for learners who need additional support or are ahead of the class.

3. Enhancement of Digital Literacy
By incorporating digital tools into everyday learning, students and teachers alike will develop crucial digital literacy skills essential for success in the modern world. This prepares students for future employment in a digital economy and fosters critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills (Wickramasinghe, 2021).

4. Teacher Development
Blended learning can catalyze improving teacher training. Teachers can engage with online professional development resources, participate in virtual communities of practice, and adopt new pedagogical strategies incorporating technology (Udagama, 2020). This shift can help alleviate some of the challenges teachers face in crowded classrooms, enabling them to differentiate instruction and engage students more effectively

Challenges to the Adoption of Blended Learning

While blended learning offers significant potential, several challenges need to be addressed to realise its full benefits in Sri Lanka:

1. Infrastructure and Connectivity

Sri Lanka's digital infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, is a significant barrier to the widespread adoption of blended learning. Many schools lack reliable internet access, and students may not have personal devices such as laptops or smartphones to participate in online education (Edirisinghe, 2021). To overcome this challenge, the government must prioritise investment in digital infrastructure, ensuring equitable access to the internet and devices for all students.

2. Teacher Preparedness and Training

Despite growing interest in digital tools, many teachers in Sri Lanka are not adequately trained to use blended learning methods effectively. The introduction of blended learning requires a substantial shift in teaching practices, and teachers must be equipped with the technical skills and pedagogical knowledge necessary to implement these strategies effectively (Mendis, 2022). Professional development programs focused on digital literacy and blended teaching strategies are essential for success.

3. Socio-Economic Inequality

Socio-economic factors often influence digital literacy and access to technology. Students from low-income families or rural areas may face more difficulties accessing online learning resources (Gunasekara, 2020). To ensure equity, the government must consider providing subsidies, digital devices, or other support mechanisms for disadvantaged students.

4. Cultural and Institutional Resistance

Resistance to change within schools and cultural attitudes towards traditional teaching methods can challenge adopting blended learning (Wickramasinghe, 2021). Educational reforms of this nature require a shift in mindset, and sustained efforts are needed to engage stakeholders including educators, parents, and policymakers in the process.

Strategic Policy Recommendations

To successfully integrate blended learning into Sri Lanka's education system, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. Invest in Digital Infrastructure

The government must invest in reliable internet connectivity and provide digital devices to students and teachers, particularly in rural areas. Public-private partnerships can be explored to expand infrastructure and reduce costs. Additionally, schools should be equipped with the necessary hardware and software to facilitate blended learning (Ministry of Education, 2020).

2. Teacher Training and Capacity Building

A national strategy for teacher training should be developed, focusing on equipping educators with the skills needed to implement blended learning. This includes both digital literacy and pedagogical approaches for online and hybrid teaching. Ongoing professional development should be incorporated into teachers' career trajectories, supported by government-led initiatives and international collaborations (Udagama, 2020).

3. Promote Equity in Access to Technology

To address socio-economic disparities, the government could implement targeted programs to provide digital devices to disadvantaged students. This could include low-cost loan programs, free internet access in community centres, or partnerships with tech companies to offer affordable devices (Edirisinghe, 2021).

4. Curriculum and Assessment Reform

The national curriculum should be updated to incorporate blended learning practices and digital tools, ensuring students are equipped with the skills needed for the future workforce. Assessment methods should also be adapted to better measure student outcomes in a blended learning environment, including project-based assessments and digital portfolios (Wickramasinghe, 2021).

5. Public Awareness Campaign

A national campaign to raise awareness about the benefits of blended learning and digital education should be launched. This should target educators, students, parents, and policymakers to foster a culture of innovation and openness to new teaching methodologies (Gunasekara, 2020).

6. Research and Evaluation

Continuous research and evaluation of blended learning practices are essential to measure their effectiveness and make data-driven decisions. In collaboration with academic institutions, the government should establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the impact of blended learning on student outcomes, teacher performance, and overall system effectiveness (Dharmaratne, 2022).

Conclusion

Blended learning offers a promising path forward for Sri Lanka's education system, addressing critical challenges while providing students with the tools they need to succeed in an increasingly digital world. However, its successful implementation requires careful planning, investment, and collaboration across all levels of government and society. By addressing infrastructure gaps, investing in teacher training, and ensuring equity of access, Sri Lanka can harness the full potential of blended learning to create an education system that is more inclusive, flexible, and adaptable to the needs of the 21st century.

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In Search of Opportunities to Realize Ideals

August 1984 to July 1989 - Sri Lanka

By Mr. Lalith Lankathilleke

This article discusses policy related issues by reflecting upon the personal experiences of the author.

Upon our evacuation from the Juba, the capital of the regional government of South Sudan, we returned to Sri Lanka in June 1984. The UNCHS had offered transfers to either Uganda or Jamaica. The second was very tempting, given it's the land of Bob Marley, Vivian Richards, and Courtney Walsh. However, we had more pressing reasons to come back home. Firstly, my father was battling severe cancer, and we needed to care for him. Secondly, I had read about the government's ambitious shift from a Hundred Thousand Houses Programme (HTHP) to a Million Houses Programme (MHP).

Living in Juba for the past three years has isolated us from global events. We only received letters from family via Nairobi, thanks to Norwegian Church Aid (NCA). We were unaware of the situation in Sri Lanka, including the 1983 riots. I found out that many of my friends had been affected, including my close university friend, Easwaran Selvaraja.

We rented a house in Colombo, brought my father from Bandarawela to live with us, and began his treatment. One morning, as I read the newspaper, I saw an advertisement for a Senior Manager (Urban Housing) position at the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA). Excitedly, I applied, though my relatives and friends dissuaded me, saying, "You need government and political connections to secure a job in government institutions, and you don't know anyone in the governing party."

Despite their concerns, I applied and was called for an interview. During the interview, they asked the usual question: "We have a massive task of building a million houses. If you are selected, what would you do?" I replied, "It's actually simple; people can build their own houses if an institution like NHDA assists them with credit, materials, and technical advice. We also need to bring people together so they can support each other." I expressed these ideas boldly, more to share my thoughts than expecting to get the job.

The interview board included Mr. W.D. Aillaperuma, Mr. Conrad Tissera, Mr. Susil Sirivardane, and others, none of whom I knew. After my interview, they asked me to wait outside. After a few more interviews, a board member came out and asked, "When can you start?" I was taken aback. "What are you talking about?" I wondered. Society had made me believe that securing a government job without connections, especially political ones, was impossible. Yet, here I was, offered a senior position in an important organisation under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister at the age of 34, defying all my relatives' and friends' expectations.

I accepted the position despite the modest salary of approximately Rs 6,000, with allowances bringing it to around Rs 10,000. Understanding that I would be working as a volunteer, I embraced the role for the significant challenge it presented. In August 1984, I commenced my duties as a Senior Manager at the NHDA, tasked with designing the Urban Housing Sub-Program of the Million Houses Program. My responsibilities included developing guidelines, establishing institutional frameworks, and overseeing the implementation of the program. I was supported by Hameed, my manager, and a small,dedicated staff.

The Rural Housing Sub-Program, led by Susil Sirivardena, was already fully operational across the country. In contrast, the urban areas, comprising 51 Municipalities and Urban Councils, were home to about 18 percent of the population and presented more complex challenges due to issues such as lack of land ownership, inadequate services, and overcrowding in slums and shanties.

My academic background, particularly my Master's thesis in 1976 on Urban Low-income Housing, had prepared me well for this role. Influenced by the ideas of John Turner and guided by my mentor Michael Slingsby, I had explored radical housing solutions. During my research, I was deeply moved by the dire living conditions in Summitpura where 500 families had been relocated to marshy lands from Colombo's streets as part of the city's preparations for the Non-Aligned Countries Conference in 1976.

Taking the initiative, I assisted these families in transferring their ration books, (the famous book that entitled people to get their groceries from the cooperative0, to a new cooperative, enrolling their children in local schools that had initially excluded them, and constructing their homes from whatever materials they could salvage, including woven coconut roofing sheets. This experience provided me with a profound understanding of the urban poor's challenges, resilience, and self-reliance in overcoming their hardships.

Additionally, my part-time work with the Department of Housing and the Colombo Master Plan Project, where I addressed housing issues, further enriched my expertise and prepared me for the comprehensive and impactful work at NHDA.

With this background, I prepared the guidelines for the Urban Housing Sub-Program (UHSP) of the Million Houses Program. The guidelines for the Rural Housing Sub-Program (RHSP) had already been established, and the program was under implementation in all the districts of the country, led by Susil Sirivardena.

In the first few weeks of my tenure at the NHDA, Susil and I developed a strong friendship. He saw me as an ally who understood his vision and was prepared to challenge the entrenched bureaucracy. Before joining NHDA, I had not known Susil or heard about him, but I quickly recognised him as a kindred spirit with similar convictions. His personality, national dress, and distinctive hand-woven bag, known as a "pan malla" in Sinhala, further reinforced my belief in his authenticity. I later learned that Susil had graduated from Oxford University, returned to Sri Lanka to become a school teacher in Anuradhapura, and eventually joined the civil service, although his political convictions had kept him out of favour. Susil's organisational skills, enthusiasm, passion, and optimism had a profound influence on everyone at NHDA, including myself.

Within two weeks of assuming my duties, I was tasked with presenting the UHSP at a high-level meeting chaired by Hon. R. Premadasa, the Prime Minister and Minister of Housing and Local Government. I prepared the presentation on flip charts, as there were no computers or PowerPoint presentations available at that time. On the day of the meeting, I entered the conference room and found myself among many senior officials I was meeting for the first time. The Prime Minister, the Secretary of the Ministry Mr. R. Paskaralingam, the Mayor of Colombo Mr. Sirisena Cooray, and senior officials from the NHDA and the Urban Development Authority were present. This was my first encounter with the charismatic Prime Minister R. Premadasa. As a 34-year-old newcomer to the government, I felt quite nervous in such a distinguished gathering.

The new UHSP was a key agenda item. Summoning all my courage, I stood at the flip chart and made my presentation in English. I outlined how families would build their homes with technical assistance, the types and amounts of housing loans available, and, most importantly, the institutional arrangements. I elaborated on the establishment of Community Development Councils (CDC) at the community level and Housing and Community Development Committees (HCDC) at the local government level. Mr. Premadasa was highly impressed with the design of the UHSP and engaged in discussions about integrating Colombo Municipal Council's existing CDCs into the program. After thorough deliberation, there was consensus on the content of the program and the institutional arrangements.

Before continuing, it is necessary to provide a brief background on the socio-political events that led to the launch of the Million Houses Program and the policies it was based on.

In 1977, the United National Party (UNP) came into power with a two-thirds majority in Parliament. Leveraging this majority, President J. R. Jayawardena instituted significant changes in the governance of the country. Firstly, the constitution was amended to establish a Presidential system, bestowing extensive powers upon the President. Subsequently, the economy was shifted from a closed socialist system to a liberal economy. Consequently, 1977 is regarded as a pivotal year when the country embraced a liberal system with an open economy.

This shift had a profound impact on the populace's mindset, transitioning from reliance on the state for food, clothing, education, and health to a focus on generating income to access these needs. Housing, however, was an exception. Given the housing crisis at the time and the market's inability to meet the needs, a program to build One Hundred Thousand Houses Programme (HTHP) was launched. The HTHP marked a departure from previous approaches and reflected the new government's commitment to making housing a priority investment sector. To implement the program, a new organization, the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA), was established with wide-ranging powers.

The process of the HTHP was characterized by poor articulation of strategies and approaches. Professionals involved in the HTHP meticulously counted bricks, bags of cement, tiles, and sheets to achieve the target of one hundred thousand houses. By the end of the program in 1983, an assessment was undertaken by a dedicated group of professionals who had been heavily involved in it. This think tank was tasked with designing the next housing program. A glaring lesson learned during this period was that for every house the government built, people —especially the poor—had built seven houses on their own. Even middle-income earners could not afford the HTHP houses without substantial subsidies. Additionally, the houses built did not reach the poor but rather the more influential segments of society, and the program did not significantly impact the lives of the urban poor, rural poor, or estate workers. This realisation prompted a simple question: "Why should the government be building houses when people are doing it better and in greater numbers?"

It dawned on the think tank that if the government supported people in their efforts to house themselves, many more families could be housed at a lower cost, thus transforming the lives of a greater number of people.

Under this premise, the Million Houses Programme (MHP) commenced in 1984, driven by the Prime Minister's desire to maximise the reach of available resources. The MHP redefined the role of the state to support people in resolving issues they could not manage on their own. The core idea was to intervene without interfering, enabling more people to benefit from less financial input while preserving their initiative and drive. Professionals began developing methods to support individuals in housing themselves. State support focused on resolving land issues, regularizing informal settlements, providing technical assistance and training, and most importantly, offering access to small loans without collateral.

Another significant realization was the diversity of people's housing needs. Based on these varied needs, an innovative tool, the Housing Options and Loan Package (HOLP), was developed. This tool allowed people to borrow what they needed to fulfil their basic housing requirements. It was also recognised that people do not build their dream house all at once; they build in stages as their economic situation and family circumstances evolve. For instance, a family might need an additional room as their children grow. The flexibility of the HOLP and the government's support to meet these changing needs represented a major breakthrough.

Returning to my efforts in getting the urban programme underway, following the green light from Prime Minister Premadasa, I prepared the "Guidelines." I kept them straightforward, using bullet points to outline principles, institutional arrangements, and a simple "how to do it." The Urban Housing and Loans Package (U-HOLP) was developed to address the diverse needs of urban residents. I then started holding meetings, beginning in Colombo, with urban local authorities to explain the programme. These meetings were chaired by the Mayors or Chairpersons of the Municipalities and Urban Councils and were attended by senior officials, ward members, and, in some cases, community leaders. At the time, Mr. Premadasa was the Minister of Housing and also of Local Government, which facilitated close collaboration between local governments, the Ministry of Housing, and the NHDA for the programme's implementation.

With the changes in 1977 on how the country should run, the Government established two major institutions for its ambitious programs on urban and housing development: the Urban Development Authority (UDA) in 1977 and the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA) in 1978. The UDA was mandated to plan and undertake development with state and private sector investment, while the NHDA was created to address the significant housing shortage at the time.

The Urban Development Authority was housed at the premises of the Town and Country Planning offices on McCullum Road, where the Nelum Kuluna stands today. The UNDP provided technical assistance to the UDA to prepare a Colombo Master Plan Project with Professor Nevil Gunaratne as its Project Director. The Colombo Master Plan Project was well-resourced, featuring a team of foreign experts working on different aspects of the Master Plan.

The NHDA was located in a completely new eight-storey building on Chittampalam Gardiner Mawatha in Colombo Fort, next to the Regal cinema. Due to the prominent location of this building in the city and its tile façade, it was cynically referred to by some as the largest public toilet in Colombo.

The Colombo Municipal Council faced a significant challenge, with more than half its citizens living in so-called slums and shanties. Slums were tenement gardens built by colonial companies and private landlords during the colonial period to house workers brought to Colombo to work in the harbour and other factories. A major portion of these tenements were in the present inner-city area. These structures were predominantly single rooms attached in rows facing each other with a narrow access path in the middle. Interestingly, the indentured labour brought by the Dutch from present-day Indonesia were the predominant occupants of the tenement gardens in the area now called Slave Island. Slums also included old, abandoned houses mainly in Colombo North.

Shanties were temporary structures made of coconut leaves and discarded wooden boards erected on marginal, unclaimed lands like canal banks and road reservations. At that time, the largest shanty settlements were Wanathamulla in Borella and Henamulla Camp in Thotalanga (Colombo North).

An indicator of the urban housing problem's scale was that in 1977, over 50% of Colombo's population lived in slums and shanties. The living conditions in these areas were appalling, with limited access to water and non-existent toilet facilities. These settlements were notorious as dens of crime, earning the nickname "Koriyawa" in Sinhala, likened to the state of low-income settlements in Korea during the Korean War.

To address the significant problem of urban housing, the Urban Development Authority (UDA) established a dedicated "Slum and Shanty Unit," headed by my friend and colleague Easwaran Selvaraja. This unit comprised over eighty professional staff, including architects, planners, engineers, and technical officers, and received technical assistance from UNDP experts. At the time the Urban Housing Subprogram of the Million Houses Program was launched, the Slum and Shanty Unit had already initiated upgrading projects in Wanathamulla, Henemulla Camp, and other settlements.

I was personally impressed with the work Easwaran had started, and naturally, we engaged in extensive professional and personal discussions. Sadly, despite his dedication to uplifting the urban poor, Easwaran and his family had suffered greatly during the 1983 riots solely because he was born into a Tamil family. As a result, our discussions often delved into the state of our society and its politics, but we both remained committed to our mission of emancipating marginalised people. Many of our conversations ended in tears, as Easwaran reached a point where he felt he could no longer continue his mission. However, he had confidence in me to carry on his work. Following our discussions, Easwaran informed the hierarchy of the UDA and NHDA about the proposed merger of the Slum and Shanty Division with the Urban Housing Division.

To accommodate the 80+ staff from the UDA, the 6th floor of the NHDA building, which previously had residential flats, was allocated to the Urban Housing Division. I was given the freedom to redesign the floor, opting for an open-plan office. My desk was positioned in the middle, with a view of the Galle Face and the sea to the left and the entire office to the right. At that time, all government offices were "closed door," with officers sitting in small cubicles. The size of the cubicle reflected one's rank in the hierarchy, often igniting status conflicts. My decision to create an open-plan office was considered radical at the time, but it was endorsed by the General Manager, Mr. Ailapperuma.

One morning, Mr. Premadasa walked onto the 6th floor unannounced. I greeted him and explained that the open-plan arrangement facilitated better communication and relationships among officers, saved space, and ensured transparency. He was very impressed and advised the heads of other organisations accompanying him, like the Common Amenities Board, to adopt a similar office layout. My staff were thrilled to meet Mr. Premadasa personally and appreciated his recognition of their efforts. Interestingly, the word "transparency" was not in common use in 1984 to describe my intentions, but Mr. Premadasa mentioned our office arrangement at the next Heads of Department meeting, recommending it as an example for others to follow.

All the staff of the Slum and Shanty Unit were initially very apprehensive about joining a new organisation under new management and an unknown head. I learned that Easwaran had to do considerable convincing to gain their acceptance of this move. To ease the transition, I approached the situation carefully. I listened to them, visited the sites, and learned their methods and practices for upgrading. It quickly became apparent that they were dedicated professionals with a solid understanding of the issues. I was fortunate to "inherit" a valuable human resource asset for the Urban Housing Division.

This team had an extremely professional approach to what was termed "upgrading" of slums and shanties. Their process involved setting up community development councils, undertaking intensive socio-economic surveys, precisely analysing the data, and planning on the drawing board. This was the methodology they had been taught at university reinforced by methods adopted by the World Bank and UNCHS. I had no doubts about their dedication to the cause. However, their process was very time-consuming, and the outcomes were often not accepted by the communities.

This situation reminded me of my experiences in Botswana and Seychelles, where simplified planning was more effective. I realised that the process needed to be deprofessionalised to better meet the needs of the communities. I had to tread carefully, avoiding confrontation with a team of hard-core professionals. After unsuccessful intensive professional discussions, I decided to issue a circular—a familiar tool for bureaucrats. I boldly stated in the circular, "no more socio-economic surveys." This directive sent waves through the team, with some labelling me as "unprofessional" and even stupid. Eventually, they grudgingly accepted the new approach.

The challenge was to demonstrate how it could be done effectively. My starting point was the people. We needed to develop the process starting from them. I spent long days sitting with both the communities and my team to understand their needs and ideas. Clear, practical ideas began to emerge. We could accomplish the work on the ground, but we needed to agree on some basic principles and guidelines.

To formalise this new approach, we decided to have a meeting—a workshop, as it was popularly termed—with a structured agenda. This marked the first step in the evolution of community action planning.

The first of these workshops was conducted in Wanathamulla. With re-planning and obtaining secure tenure as their priority concerns, broad guidelines were established, such as the range of plot sizes, widths of footpaths, and access arrangements. It is worth mentioning that technical officials from the Colombo Municipality, who were responsible for approving various parameters, also participated in these workshops. It was an eye-opener for them as well as for the professionals on our team, highlighting the difference between professional thinking and people's thinking.

I still recall a particularly humorous discussion during this workshop. It was agreed that the width of short access footpaths should be a minimum of 6 feet (1.8 meters). The Municipal Engineer quickly pointed out that this width would not be sufficient for a fire engine. The community members laughed, explaining that despite having numerous fires, no fire engine had ever come near the settlement; they had always managed without help from the council. They had a logical method for determining the width of the path: they demonstrated carrying a coffin, considering the width of the coffin and six people carrying it on their shoulders. This collective learning process of planning with the people was enjoyable and educational—something not taught in universities.

During the implementation of the MHP, the professionals and staff of the NHDA underwent a tremendous degree of "unlearning and relearning." They had to unlearn what they had been taught in universities and schools and relearn from the people. This process led to some of the most innovative approaches to support people in making their own decisions, approaches which are elaborated in the section below. The biggest challenge in this process was the transformation of professionals from being prescriptive to being supportive. It required a significant change in roles: from experts who dictate solutions to facilitators who empower communities.

"The game of life has two rule books: the known and the unknown. One has limits and the other does not. The known is school; the unknown is the wealth of knowledge hiding in everyone's head." -Lalith Lankatilleke

The People's Process of Housing practiced in the MHP placed people at the center of the process, meaning they were central to decision-making and action. This naturally extended into taking responsibility. People became responsible for their decisions and actions, effectively transforming them from objects of development to subjects of their own development. This transformation was not confined to meeting their housing needs; it was a process that empowered people to overcome their problems with confidence and dignity.

In 1991, the next programme, termed the 1.5 million Housing Programme, was launched based on the same principles. However, political upheavals and instability in the subsequent years meant that this housing programme was not completed, and housing received lower priority in the development sector. Despite this, the fundamentals of the people's process remained in the hearts of both the people and the professionals.

People's Process - The Approach

A clear understanding of the "Self Help" approach and People's Process is crucial in light of current development debates. This approach inherently implies that the family owning the house (or the plot) is fully responsible for the construction of the house, with external support provided in the form of technical advice and funding. This grants the family the freedom to decide how to build the house with the resources available, which they use to meet their varied needs.

For instance, in low-income communities, there are many female-headed households, and the house-building process requires time to be managed between income generation, child-rearing activities, and constructing the house.

Additionally, beyond the varying needs of individual families, the needs of the community as a whole must be considered. Families do not live in isolation; they live in communities, which places them in a position of responsibility to one another. By tradition and in resource-constrained societies, this responsibility is inherent. They also need services such as water, sanitation, roads, power, and civic facilities. They require child-care and elderly-care support from the community. These needs must be addressed through a collective effort. Therefore, it naturally becomes a community approach where every family participates in the development of not just their own housing but also their settlements and living conditions. **This extension from the individual to the community is what is articulated as the People's Process of housing and settlement development.**

Unlocking Potential
Realizing that people's ingenuity and creativity need to be directed towards rebuilding their lives and physical assets was one of the key learning processes. Working with the people, the process turns housing reconstruction into an opportunity to rebuild shattered communities and not just houses, virtually transforming a crisis into an opportunity. The process of moving from the emergency phase to recovery and reconstruction becomes seamless when people are placed at the centre of the process. Organised communities, with their mutual assistance and care for each other, help people to overcome the psychological trauma of the disaster.

But what are the keys to unlocking this tremendous potential of the people? Firstly, organising people to gain confidence to cross the psychological threshold; secondly, empowerment through mobilisation; thirdly, security—a place to call their own; fourthly, some form of financial assistance to get them started, followed by technical advice to build back better. This will complete a cycle of support for people to rebuild their lives and homes. Some aspects of the process developed with people are listed as follows:

- **Community Land Regularisation:** informal settlements typically do not have proper plot boundaries, access roads, community facilities, provision for infrastructure, etc. The regularisation of the settlement is done by the community, firstly by agreeing through consensus plot sizes, road and foot path widths areas for infrastructure and public spaces. These agreements are reached through a short workshop utilising the Community map. Then the plan is physically set out on the ground by the community with pegs demarcating the boundaries. This process of planning is very different to that of planners' drawings boxes on paper and trying to set it out on the ground. The vital lesson in this process is that people's conception of space and the use of land is very different to those of professional planners. This people's process of planning allows people to realise their needs physically.

- **Community Contracting:** a community contract is a contract awarded to the community organisation by a government agency or an NGO to carry out physical works that have been identified in the CAP. The work usually covers construction of houses and community infrastructure. If infrastructure or housing is built through conventional contracts the community benefits only from the output of the contract and not from the process of construction. Awarding the contract to the community has the advantages outlined in the table below:

- **Community Banking** is a means for the poor to save collectively and borrow funds for their needs. Mainly organised by women, forming saving groups and five to ten groups within a community forming a branch. Members then have access to credit for their immediate emergency needs and business needs. The major difference between savings and credit programmes organised by NGOs and Community Banking is that in Community Banking the members decide and manage their own bank. Experience over the last two and half decades shows that the communities manage savings and credit better than external NGOs. Through this process of economic empowerment of women, they are able to break away from the cycle of poverty and achieve tremendous life improvements. Women are highly motivated to take leadership and organise themselves to build social capital which go beyond the financial benefits. Issues regarding identity, literacy, domestic violence, drugs have been successfully addressed by communities with the social capital they have built.

- **Community Monitoring:** traditionally monitoring is the preserve of the professionals for ensuring quality outputs on targeted time schedules and has little to do with the ultimate satisfaction of the beneficiaries. Community monitoring is a system where communities monitor themselves for progress of work, quality and accountability. It is a process where members of the community get involved in ensuring that their own efforts are realised to provide the best output, since they own it. The system allows the external funding agency to assess beneficiary satisfaction of the intended objective.

The Role of the Professional

The MHP helped develop methods on how to get people into the center of the decision making process', and the unlearning and relearning process. Professionals started transcending from being a 'prescriptive' professional to a 'support' professional. The role of the prescriptive professional vis-a-vis the support professional is compared in the following table:

What it takes to be a 'Support Professional'

Prescriptive Professional	Support Professional
Uses data exclusively from socio-economic surveys to decide on solutions	Designs methods for communities to gather data for their own use
Tells people what they should have	Listens to people on what they need
Prescribes solutions unilaterally	Extracts solutions collectively
Prescribes standards	Realisation of standards
Predetermines options	Allows people to think of options
Does not think of trade-offs	Articulates trade-offs

Key Principles

In the application of the People's Process in post-conflict and post-disaster reconstruction following key principles have to be observed:

- Respect the primacy of the needs of the people
- Recognise people's organisations and their capacities and strengthen mutual respect and dialogue
- Design reconstruction investment to directly go to the hands of the people
- Support by the authorities is essential for people to take recovery into their own hands
- Ensure security, protection and the right to a 'place to live'
- Responsibility for recovery rests with the affected people
- Cultivate a spirit of community solidarity and peace building
- Devolve decision making to the point of action
- Generate a process that would allow every family in need to rebuild their lives and a basic home which can be improved incrementally

Developing a community process is one thing but working in an environment where the process can be checked, improved, and validated through intellectual analysis was imperative. Here, it needs to be recorded the intellectual assistance we received from our external friends: the Development Planning Unit (DPU) of the University of London and MIT School of Architecture. Our friends Pat Wakely, Barbara Mumtaz of DPU, and Reinhard Goethert (Shrimp) and Nabeel Hamdi from MIT provided critical and practical analysis that indeed contributed immensely to the process of Community Action Planning.

UN-Habitat considered the Million Houses Program as one of their main thrusts in conceptual development. The Sri Lankan government's policy of supporting people to build their own housing rather than directly building housing—i.e., "provision to support"—was adopted by the senior professionals of UN-Habitat as the policy of "Facilitation." This meant facilitating people by resolving problems that they could not handle by themselves, most importantly access to land and credit. The synergy between the actual practice in Sri Lanka and the advocacy of UN-Habitat marked a significant shift in global policy towards achieving the goal of shelter for all.

To strengthen this collaboration, UN-Habitat implemented a technical assistance program for the NHDA with funding from the Danish government. My old friend from South Sudan, Graham Boyd, was identified as the best person to provide this and he was posted to NHDA as a Community Development Advisor. This was indeed a wonderful opportunity for mutual intellectual and moral support for each other. Graham worked tirelessly with the communities, guided by his instincts for detail. Alana Albee, Graham's wife and our old friend from South Sudan, joined him with their daughter. Alana, with her deep commitment to the advancement of women, got involved voluntarily in working with our communities in organising them into savings groups.

Nandasiri Gamage, from a community, was a stalwart of the process. He engaged deeply with me in discussions on organising savings groups. We spent long hours in my house and sitting with women's groups.

This gave birth to the start of the women's savings groups within communities. Groups of 5 to 10 women saving 5 rupees a week and giving loans to each other. The groups started small enterprises such as making food and buying and selling vegetables. Living conditions were extremely harsh—shacks for shelter, getting children to school with no addresses for their homes, and incomes from day-to-day uncertain work. The resilience of women in these conditions was extraordinary. Both of us believed in their capacities to secure their families and their drive to improve.

As I write today, those small beginnings have grown into one of the strongest women's social movements in Sri Lanka, now known as the Kantha Bank, with over two hundred thousand members. Nandasiri is now honoured as one of the greatest leaders of social movements.

The Million Houses Program which was country wide had a major impact on the transformation of lives of the very poor. The Rural program was called Village Reawakening. Reminds me of Malindi, my daughter six years old at that time asking me "Apuchi, why reawakening? Have they been sleeping all this time?"

Every reawakened village's name ended with "Gama"(village) and every urban settlement ended with "Pura". One remarkable characteristic of Premadasa is that he never believed in laying the foundation stone or "Mul Gala" like all politicians do. Instead, he celebrated the completion of the project in grand style. These were called opening ceremonies. Cutting ribbons, hoisting flags, have tea in one of the houses, a public meeting and finally a drama. Simon Nawawattegama's Suba saha Yasa was the most popular since Simon had the artistic skill to adapt it to local situations and to what the politicians before him stated. It was hilarious.

During the course of implementing the Million Houses Programme (MHP), the professionals and staff of the NHDA underwent a significant degree of "unlearning and relearning." They had to unlearn what they had been taught at universities and schools and relearn from the people they were meant to serve. This process led to some of the most innovative approaches to support people in making decisions on their own behalf, as elaborated below. The biggest challenge in this process was the transformation of professionals from being prescriptive to becoming supportive. This change of roles was fundamental:

The People's Process of Housing practiced in the MHP placed people at the center of the process, meaning they were at the heart of decision-making and action. The natural extension of decision-making and action was responsibility. People became responsible for their decisions and actions, which effectively transformed them from objects of development to subjects of their own development. This transformation went beyond meeting their housing needs; it empowered people to overcome their problems with confidence and dignity.

Gam Udawa 1989.
Uva Province was selected for President Premadasa's 1989 Gam Udawa, with Mahiyangana as the center. Although I was leading urban programs, President Premadasa chose me to head the village housing reawakening program.

Reflecting on this, I believe he picked me because of my Uva roots and historical ancestry. He had a knack for choosing the right person for a specific task. We had only six months for planning and preparation. Susil and I took an old jeep and traversed the region, meeting people and local administrators to identify needs and priorities. I then developed a regional plan with service centers connecting to villages.

The villages from Badulla to Mahiyangana were incredibly remote and underdeveloped. It was a revelation to me that people in my own region lived in such conditions. It was also an eye-opener regarding the British colonial impact: they planted tea on prime lands and pushed the indigenous people to marginal villages in the valleys. We discovered long-lost villages in the middle of picturesque tea plantations in Badulla, Passara, Welimada, Haliella, and Haputale, most of which were inaccessible. People farmed with ancient tools made of rocks and lacked access to clinics. Estate clinics were limited to estate workers, forcing villagers to bypass them for town clinics.

My dedicated colleague Jayaratne (Jaya) and I often walked over mountains and valleys, sometimes for more than seven kilometers, to reach these villages and witness subsistence living. There were encouraging moments too. We met a young woman carrying a three-month-old baby. When we asked if the baby was vaccinated, she produced the vaccination card, revealing she had walked two days over mountains to a clinic. This realization of the importance of vaccination was overwhelming. Inspired by the villagers' efforts, Jaya undertook a services mapping project. We discovered that government survey maps were unhelpful as they lacked the footpaths villagers used. We made sketches linking people to clinics, schools, and markets.

This was during the JVP insurrection of 1989. Priorities included access to markets for their produce and getting children to schools and clinics. Water was abundant, with streams everywhere. We managed to help more than 30,000 families in six months despite political instability. Ceremonies were conducted by us, with officials singing the national anthem, hoisting flags, and opening plaques. One politician, Imtiaz Bakir Marker, dared to join us. He was given an old government car, a Peugeot, which broke down in Mahiyangana. I brought him to my home in Bandarawela and had my old driver Piyadasa take him to Colombo.

I cannot forget the deep devotion of my driver Piyadasa. He was always there ready with whatever was needed like an umbrella, torch or whatever. He always never forgot to buy a Double Distilled bottle and hide it in the boot of the car. At sunset after work we stopped in the bund of Sorabora lake and pulled out the Double Distilled from the car and enjoyed the day's hard work thinking about the achievements of the day. Sometimes, if Piyadasa gets too drunk I take the wheel and manage to get to Banadarawala eventually with 2 more stops for refueling our spirits. NHDA had a guesthouse in Bindunu Wewa not far from my house in Bandarawala. This guesthouse had a telephone which made me go regularly and call and affirm my wife that I was in one piece. One of these nights while I was making a call, we heard gunshots very close to the Guesthouse.

We had no idea what was going on, but Piyadasa and I got back to the car and drove back to my village Kabilawella. I finished the balance of the Double Distilled and went to sleep after eating some home-cooked food. Next morning, a whole crowd of people were outside my door saying that there is a 'head' at the junction 500m up from my house. "A head!!?!?!" I exclaimed for that they replied, "Ow Mahattaya, Oluwak(Yes Sir, a Head)". I ran up to the junction, and to my horror I found a head impaled on a pole. On enquiry from the people who surrounded it was said that it was a corrupt CTB(Ceylon Transport Board) official who was killed by the rebels. I left it to that, and I had to go on with whatever was on my plate.

Another episode, of the 1989 Gam Udawa which I wish to put on record is when one fine day Piyadasa and I were driving to the office in Badulla. We were in a white Mitsubishi . At Hali Ella Central College there was a huge group of students protesting. They threw tar at my vehicle. Naturally, the shutter was down (as up country was always cold) and I was covered in tar. My eyes started hurting while Piyadasa drove past them and managed to take me and my vehicle past them.

Fortunately, there was a hospital nearby and there was a kind doctor called Ratnayake who quickly attended to my eyes. The doctor was from my hometown(Banadarawala) and he knew who I was. Piyadasa had escaped the whole Tar scene, and he was ok. We drove back to Banadarawala. Piyadasa managed to clean the car and we proceeded back to Colombo. I was totally devastated. Later on, I learnt that they misidentified me as a politician from Welimada who also had a beard and hair like me.

February 1988

After Gam Udawa 1989, I had to take a break. I was exhausted and under threat. So, I was given leave by President Premadasa to go and teach in DPU (Development Planning Unit) at the University of London as a visiting lecturer. DPU was a great place, and the closest station was Tottenham Court. Pat Wakeley asked me to come and stay with him. He had a room in his basement with a separate entrance. Pat always insisted that I carry a glass of Scotch to the shower. His wife's name was Beatrice. We enjoyed evenings of intellectual discussions about people and learning from people while the Scotch was only 8 British Pounds.

I had to look for jobs since my teaching position wasn't permanent. I called my old friend Hosaka in Bangkok, UN ESCAP getting up at 4 o' clock in the morning. He told me that he was waiting for me with a job.

About the Author

Mr. Lalith Lankatilleke is an Architect-Planner by profession, with over 40 years of experience in the field of people's development. Of these, he has been with UN-Habitat for 36 years working in several countries in Africa and Asia. He is fondly called the father of the People's Process of development in recognition of the innovative approaches he developed in placing people at the centre of decision making in planning and housing.

Improving Access to Education through Technology in Low-income Countries

By Mr. Thulith Edirisinghe

Since 2020, I have been committed to bridging educational disparities in Sri Lanka through technology-driven solutions through my work as an educational consultant. Amidst significant challenges, including a decline in public education spending to approximately 1.5% of GDP by 2022—one of the lowest globally (Public Finance) I have focused on leveraging technology to enhance learning outcomes and promote equity in education.

From studying successful global educational systems, I've observed that the teacher-to-student ratio and per-student investment are key in driving effective learning outcomes. Education spending per student varies significantly worldwide, reflecting the disparity in resources between countries. For instance, in the United States, the average investment per student in primary and secondary levels is around $15,500, while post-secondary spending averages $37,400 (National Center for Education Statistics). In Sri Lanka, however, limited public funding constraints educational spending per student to approximately 1.5–2% of GDP ($295 USD per year) (World Bank Data), which impacts access to quality resources and teacher support, particularly in rural, low-income, and special-needs contexts.

The pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) varies significantly across countries, reflecting differences in educational resources and policies. In Sri Lanka, the PTR at the primary level is approximately 26:1, meaning there are about 26 students for every teacher. This is higher than in countries like Finland, where the PTR is around 14:1, and the United States, with a PTR of approximately 15:1. India's PTR stands at about 24:1, while Singapore maintains a ratio close to 16:1 . These disparities highlight the challenges faced by countries with higher PTRs, as larger class sizes can impact the quality of education and individual attention each student receives. Efforts to reduce PTRs are often linked to improved educational outcomes, emphasizing the importance of adequate teacher recruitment and retention strategies.

However, given Sri Lanka's economic constraints, it's impractical to significantly increase per-student spending.

About the Author Mr. Thulith Edirisinghe is a Mechanical Engineer who is the Co-Founder and CEO of Meu Labs.Thulith is dedicated to leveraging his diverse expertise to drive positive change. Meu Labs is an educational initiative that aims to transform traditional learning environments by fostering innovation and creativity among students.

Instead, leveraging technology presents a promising way to bridge these gaps and provide a more equitable education for all. The following sections examine how targeted technological integration can support students, teachers, schools, and government in advancing educational quality across Sri Lanka.

Empowering Students through Digital Learning

Yuval Noah Harari, a historian and author of Sapiens and Homo Deus and many other bestselling books, argues that advancements in biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and genetic engineering are moving humanity toward a new evolutionary phase. Harari's concept of "Homo Deus" highlights that those who adapt to and engage with emerging technologies will have a distinct advantage in this evolving world. Technology transformations have particularly impacted the way we humans live. For example, our reliance on computers / smartphones, the internet and also tools brought forth through industry 4.0 such as AI, Robotics and IoT have significantly improved the ability of human beings. This insight underscores the urgency for Sri Lanka's public education system to modernize its resources. Without access to current educational technology, students in government schools will not only struggle to compete against their peers in private institutions and students across the world but also against their own species in a future driven by technological literacy, digital innovation and the 'digital human'. Addressing these technological disparities is not just important; it is imperative for ensuring that all students have the opportunity to thrive in a world that is in constant flux.

Providing access to smart devices and internet connectivity is a substantial step toward broadening learning opportunities.Technology also has the potential to make education more inclusive.

In Sri Lanka, students in rural or underserved areas often face challenges in accessing the specialized resources and qualified teachers more common in urban schools. Digital solutions, however, can help bridge this gap by providing high-quality content across geographic boundaries. Virtual classrooms, recorded lessons, and online resources allow students in remote areas to learn from skilled educators, offering them similar educational opportunities to their urban peers. This approach can help reduce educational inequities and expand access to quality instruction nationwide.

It's not necessary to look to foreign education systems to realize how much improvement is needed in Sri Lanka's public sector; even comparing it to the country's own private educational institutions reveals significant gaps. As an education consultant for international schools in developing advanced STEAM curriculums, I have observed that technology integration—such as mandatory tablet use and digital resources—is standard in these schools, equipping students with essential skills from an early age.

While integrating technology into education is crucial, it's equally important for the government to ensure that students and teachers can use these tools safely and responsibly.

This requires implementing strong measures for digital safety and educating both students and teachers on digital etiquette. Providing training for educators on managing online classrooms, identifying potential cybersecurity threats, and promoting respectful digital interactions is essential. Additionally, creating secure online environments with appropriate content filters and privacy protections will help minimize risks. Addressing issues like managing screen time and preventing digital addiction is also vital. Implementing guidelines and programs to promote healthy digital habits can help prevent excessive screen use, which has been linked to various health issues. These steps are vital to fostering a positive digital learning experience, equipping students not only with academic knowledge but also with the skills needed to navigate the digital world safely and responsibly.

Enabling Teachers with Digital Skills for Maximized Teaching Impact/Equipping Teachers with Digital Skills for Effective and Enhanced Teaching
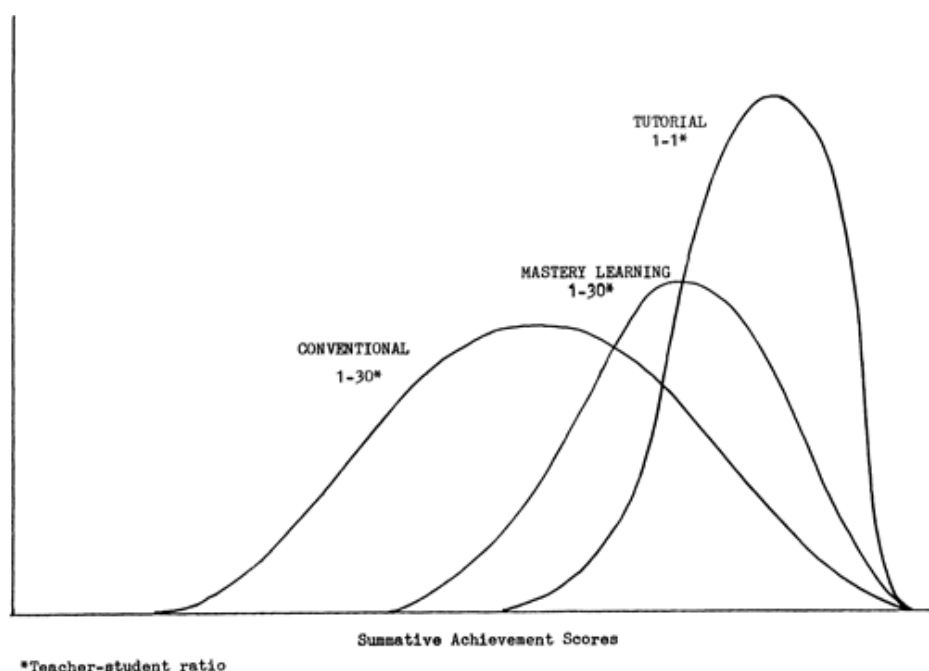

Figure 1: Comparison of student achievement distributions under conventional instruction, mastery learning, and one-on-one tutoring, illustrating the significant performance gains associated with personalized tutoring.

Teachers are pivotal in transforming education, and equipping them with digital skills is essential for effective teaching in modern classrooms. In 1984, educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom identified the "2 Sigma Problem," (MIT) observing that students receiving one-on-one tutoring performed two standard deviations better than those in traditional classroom settings, highlighting the effectiveness of personalized instruction. However, providing individual tutoring to all students is impractical due to resource constraints. Bloom thus challenged educators to develop group instructional methods that replicate the benefits of one-on-one tutoring to enhance educational outcomes on a larger scale.

In Sri Lanka, with a teacher-to-student ratio of approximately 1:40, teachers face significant challenges in offering personalized attention. Addressing this issue solely through increased hiring is difficult due to economic limitations. However, optimizing teachers' time and responsibilities can make a substantial difference.

By leveraging technological tools, educators can streamline administrative tasks and deliver standardized content efficiently, allowing teachers to focus more on individualized instruction. This approach enables educators to provide tailored feedback and adapt teaching methods to meet each student's needs, thereby enhancing the overall learning experience.

Government schools in Sri Lanka are not entirely lacking in technological resources; devices like tablets, projectors, and IT labs are present in many schools but often remain underutilized due to a lack of necessary training for teachers to incorporate these tools effectively into their lessons. Integrating teacher training programs or globally recognized certifications, such as the International Computer Driving License (ICDL), can provide teachers with foundational skills in using digital tools effectively. Technology can be one of a teacher's best tools, whether it's using multimedia to make lessons engaging, recording classes for easy access, or leveraging AI for grading and personalized feedback.

Integrating advanced educational technologies can significantly enhance personalized learning experiences. Platforms like Khan Academy have developed AI-powered teaching assistants, such as Khanmigo, which monitor student progress and provide individualized instruction, activities, and recommendations. Similarly, language learning applications like Duolingo have successfully utilized AI to tailor lessons to individual learners' needs, improving engagement and outcomes. Incorporating such AI-driven tools into Sri Lanka's Teaching English as a Second Language (TEASL) curriculum could offer customized support to students, addressing their unique challenges and promoting more effective language acquisition. This approach aligns with global trends in education, where AI is increasingly used to provide personalized learning experiences and bridge educational gaps. (Khanmigo) (Duolingo Blog)

Through various interactions with teachers during student workshops, teacher training sessions, and curriculum consultations, it has been observed that many government teachers spend excessive time on repetitive administrative tasks such as grading and reporting, which could be automated, allowing them more time to focus on teaching. Mapping out non-teaching tasks and implementing digital tools and automation to streamline teachers' responsibilities is hence important. For a transitional period, where teachers might not yet be fully equipped with digital skills, undergraduates or unemployed tech graduates can be offered temporary jobs to assist teachers, handling administrative duties and freeing educators to focus more on teaching and student engagement.

Revitalizing School Infrastructure with Modern Learning Spaces
In my work with rural schools, I've observed that resources like tablets and IT labs are often underutilized, frequently stored away due to a lack of training. Structured programs to train both students and teachers in using digital tools are essential to address this issue.

Sri Lanka's schools are currently equipped with outdated IT labs, remnants of the third industrial revolution, which no longer meet the needs of a world that has advanced into the fourth industrial revolution. This new era integrates advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, the Internet of Things (IoT), 3D printing, blockchain, and biotechnology.

Consequently, global education systems are shifting from static computer labs to dynamic "makerspaces." These spaces incorporate tools like 3D printers, robotics kits, and coding software, fostering hands-on learning that prepares students for future careers in technology and STEM fields.

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To incorporate this in Sri Lanka, introducing portable makerspaces within school zones could revolutionize access to STEM education. Investing in resource-heavy projects like STEM labs, makerspaces, or innovation centers does not have to be massive. If the government invests in portable makerspaces, they could serve as shared resources within each school zone, eliminating the need for extensive infrastructure investments in every school. Meu Labs, the educational institute I co-founded, is currently pioneering Sri Lanka's first fully-equipped portable makerspace with international funding from Scratch.org under their Equitable Creative Coding Resource (ECCR) program. This initiative aims to make high-quality STEM education more accessible, particularly for under-resourced schools, providing students with valuable opportunities for creativity and innovation. This approach could also address the disparity in funding and resources between urban and rural educational zones.

Moreover, for developing countries like Sri Lanka, which may not be at the forefront of technological innovation but are focused on adapting existing technologies, staying up-to-date can offer a significant advantage through a process known as technology leapfrogging. (Brookings Institution) This concept allows countries to bypass slower, traditional stages of technological development and instead adopt the latest, most advanced solutions available. Technology leapfrogging offers a smart method to incorporate technology into our education system by bypassing costly, traditional tools and adopting advanced digital solutions directly. For instance, instead of investing in outdated computer labs or textbooks, schools can introduce tablets, portable makerspaces, and e-learning apps as more up-to-date tools.

Additionally, instead of restocking school libraries with physical books, schools can invest in e-readers and subscribe to digital journals and libraries. This approach provides students with access to hundreds, if not thousands, of books, significantly expanding their reading options. Platforms like ePlatform offer extensive collections of eBooks and audiobooks tailored for school libraries, enabling students to access a wide range of literature and educational materials digitally. (Eplatform)

Creating Government Policies that Prioritize Digital Transformation in Education
Advancing education requires a collaborative effort among students, teachers, schools, and the government. This partnership is essential for developing supportive policies, introducing innovative pedagogies, and implementing technological solutions that foster a conducive learning environment in the digital age.

For Sri Lanka, a paradigm shift is necessary: viewing technology not as a cost but as an investment in future generations. A future-ready education system is attainable through a unified approach that integrates policy, resources, and updated teaching methods.

This transformation will empower students nationwide to access quality education, bridging gaps traditionally imposed by economic constraints.

The Sri Lankan government has recognized the importance of digital transformation in education. Although being a source of nationwide hot debates, The National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) 2023–2033 outlines strategies to modernize the education sector, emphasizing the integration of digital tools and methodologies. This framework aims to revisit teaching, learning, and credentialing rules, redefine governance structures, and optimize investments and resources to support sustainable educational transformation. (Ministry of Education)

Additionally, the Policy for Digital Transformation of Education, published in 2022, provides a comprehensive roadmap for integrating digital technologies into the educational landscape. It addresses critical areas such as infrastructure development, teacher training, curriculum enhancement, and equitable access to digital resources. The policy emphasizes the need for a coordinated effort among stakeholders to ensure the successful implementation of digital initiatives in education. (ICTA)

Implementing these policies requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders. The government must allocate adequate funding and resources to support digital initiatives, including upgrading infrastructure, providing devices, and ensuring reliable internet connectivity. Teachers need comprehensive training to effectively integrate digital tools into their teaching practices, fostering an environment that encourages innovation and adaptability.

Furthermore, collaboration with private sector partners and international organizations can provide additional support and expertise. Public-private partnerships can facilitate the development and deployment of digital learning platforms, while international organizations can offer technical assistance and share best practices from other countries.

By prioritizing digital transformation in education through supportive government policies and collaborative efforts, Sri Lanka can create an inclusive and equitable education system that prepares students for the challenges and opportunities of the digital age.

To conclude, while digital transformation holds significant promise for enhancing Sri Lanka's education system, it is not a panacea for all challenges. A comprehensive national education strategy must also address fundamental issues to create a holistic and equitable learning environment. Implementing student meal programs can ensure that children are well-nourished, directly impacting their ability to learn effectively. Providing basic necessities such as uniforms, textbooks, and stationery is essential to remove barriers to education. Investing in teacher training and restoring the dignity of the teaching profession are crucial for delivering quality education. Developing schools outside Colombo can reduce regional disparities, while restructuring Scholarship , GCE O-Level, and A-Level examinations can better align assessments with modern educational goals.

Expanding capacity in tertiary education and enhancing vocational training programs can offer diverse pathways for students, catering to varied interests and aptitudes. Additionally, implementing measures to curb brain drain is vital to retain talent within the country. By integrating these multifaceted approaches, alongside technological advancements, Sri Lanka can build a robust and inclusive education system that prepares its students for the complexities of the future.

Youth Empowerment, Policy Making and Health Sector Reforms

Professor Vajira Dissanayake

Interviewed By Ms. Shayani Jayasinghe

This segment features an interview with Professor Vajira H.W Dissanayake conducted by Shayani Jayasinghe/ Research Associate of the BALPP, Colombo.

Professor Vajira H. W. Dissanayake is the Dean of the Faculty and the Chair and Senior Professor of the Department of Anatomy, Genetics, and Biomedical Informatics of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo. Prof. Dissanayake has held many leadership and advisory positions in the field of medicine in Sri Lanka and globally. He was the President (in 2012) of the Sri Lanka Medical Association. He was also the President (from 2016 to 2019) of the Commonwealth Medical Association.

He is the current President of the Sri Lanka Medical Council and the Registrar of the Ceylon Medical College Council –organizations that regulate the education and practice of medical, dental, and allied health professions in Sri Lanka. In recognition of his scientific achievements, he was elected a Fellow of the National Academy of Sciences of Sri Lanka in 2013 – the youngest fellow of the Academy at that time, a Fellow of the International Academy of Health Sciences Informatics in 2020, a Fellow of the Commonwealth Medical Association in 2023, and a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, London in 2024. He was conferred the Sri Lankan national titular honour of Vidya Jyothi in 2019 by His Excellency the President on the recommendation of the Sri Lanka Medical Association.

During the interview, Professor Dissanayake emphasized the need to formulate effective policies and strategic guidelines to address the challenges concerning the health sector of the country. He also emphasized the necessity of empowering and educating the youth in the country to get actively involved in policy formulation, policy implementation and raising awareness on critical issues.

Here are some of the most important issues highlighted by Professor Dissanayake during the Interview:

1) Can you speak a little bit about the MOU signing ceremony for the establishment of the World Young Leaders Academy? What actually motivated you to be part of youth empowerment?

As a Professor of a University, working with young people, we are always motivated to promote them in various ways and not just academic excellence but also in sports and leadership. We also like to see them taking leadership positions in various organizations, even country-level, national-level and so on. Actually, on that note, my mind goes back to the year 1991, when I was a first-year medical student, I went to meet the Dean of the Medical Faculty at that time, Professor Kodagoda. I was one of the members of the Student Union. Student Unions usually make various demands from the Deans and Vice Chancellors and so on. I also made some demands from Professor Kodagoda and he said, "Vajira you are sitting there because you were born after me but if you were born before me, I will be sitting there and you will be sitting here". So, thirty years later, I am sitting at the same seat as the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and talking with the student union leaders. I related this story to them to mention how circumstances lead you to be in certain positions.

It is always important to recognize the role of the youth and their position in leadership one day in future and to promote them in that direction. My motive is to always to promote young people to get into leadership positions. Talking about the event you mentioned, I work as an advisor to an organization called the Interaction Council of Former World Leaders. This is an organization made up of 40 former world leaders. The organization meets every year in various capitals of the world. Few months ago, they met in Beijing, China. At that point, they established a Global Extensional Threats Board. That board looks at the threats faced by humans, threats to our existence and how to deal with them. That was what the board looked at and I came from the medical field. My expertise is what we call now Digital Health. It looks at how we can use technologies to overcome those threats to our existence. So, that is why I was there. The events there was the signing of the MoU between the Interaction Council and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology to establish the World Young Leaders Academy. That is how I happened to be there on that day.

2) In your opinion, what are the main issues or challenges concerning the youth of Sri Lanka? Also, how will initiatives such as World Young Leaders Academy help to address these issues?

So, basically the MoU signing ceremony took place during that day. Still the organization has not launched itself officially. That will happen in the future. We need to wait until it happens in terms of, I guess talking about what their activities are, I don't hold any leadership positions in that organization. So, it will be premature for me to talk about their activities. I will talk broadly on the topic you just mentioned. So, in terms of the challenges that the youth in our country face... There are some structural issues in our education system which make our primary and then the secondary education system prolonged. In other parts of the world, we have students entering medical faculty or any other program in the university at the age of 18. According to our setup it is 20 when they enter universities. They spend another 4-5 years and by the time they come out they are 27 or 28.

You spend a lot of your productive youth time in education. We need to really relook into the overall structure of our education system so that the youth of our country can enter medical school or any other stream of study that they want to when they are 17 or 18. Then when they come out, they are in their early 20s. Then they can enter the workforce of the country in their mid-20s and have a prolonged productive life. That is one of the major challenges in terms of our human capital development, the expectations of the youth and so on. So, that needs to be addressed. My daughter just got into medical school at the age of 20 for the first time you know. That was the same with us too. But things are changing now where people from other parts of the world get into university early. Why is it necessary? Because unlike in the past, the youth are much more empowered, much more educated. They are aware of world trends as well as technology, and other opportunities they have very early in their lives. Because of access to technology, knowledge is at their fingertips. Because of the internet and other resources, they are much more aware of job opportunities. Much more prepared to take up responsibilities early. So, therefore we need to create that opportunity for them. Not having that is a major challenge for our youth.

Then the other challenge which I would like to highlight is that, in our you know education system there is more emphasis on rote learning and less emphasis on soft skills in terms of communication, writing, social development, literature, society driven activities. Even in terms of leadership. In universities, we have nearly 12 student organizations that are very active. Doing a lot of work with marginalized groups. They take up leadership positions in these organizations at different stages of their time in the faculty. I find the same set of leaders, moving from one organization to another and taking leadership. It is not that leadership is wasted. Everyone in their workplace has a leadership role to play. It is so very important that it is done. You take leadership because it is not something that is confined to those in higher positions. It should come within your workplace, your own house. You can start cleaning your own bedroom. It should begin there.

So, I used to go to school very early. Another friend of mine, we used to go to school very early and sweep the classroom. This was at Royal College. There was a sweeping register. But we didn't mind that. Whoever who went to class early used to sweep the class. So, we used to take leadership in that. Then, after joining university, I took up these various positions. My friend studied law and is in a similar position currently. I think that comes in. You need to basically teach people to take leadership bringing about change, bringing about a better environment for everybody. That must be inculcated in our students, our youth very early. I would like to highlight these aspects. To take up leadership positions, it is important to have those skills, interpersonal skills, writing, speaking and all of that is so very important. You need to build up that holistic thing. Developing soft skills, social skills is very important. Challenges as I highlighted is that we must encourage our youth to take up leadership positions by finishing their formal education and joining the labor force at an early stage. Then develop their soft skills and social skills. In today's context it is important to look at emotional intelligence. To see if they are ready to embark on a fulfilling life where they are also content and happy. Also, they can create an environment where they can make others happy. That is what we should be aspiring for.

3) Do you have any suggestions or ideas to promote youth empowerment programs in Sri Lanka in a more meaningful and effective manner?

Traditionally we have failed in imparting a sense of duty and responsibility in our youth. We have been a welfare state. We have free education. We have free healthcare. Subsidies that everybody benefits from across the board. That was the kind of state we were prior to the economic crisis. We have kind of grown to depend on what somebody else can give us rather than what is the duty we have towards the society that nurtured you. What is the service that you can give back to society. A sense of service and duty is very important. For example, as you know, we are being hit with a migration crisis. It is just not Sri Lanka. I worked with the Commonwealth Medical Association, and I led that organization from 2016-2019. From 2020 to the end of this year, I am also leading another organization called Commonwealth Health Professionals and Partners Alliance.

Actually, what we see is that young people lack a sense of duty and responsibility. There is a lack of commitment from young people who are coming in to serve an institution and help it develop. If you ask me what motivated me to serve the University of Colombo for all these years...... When I entered the university, I achieved many things. I knew that I wanted to be a doctor. I had to ask myself the question. What am I going to do at the end of the day when I become a doctor? Then at that time, I realized that my passion is about genetics. Those days the word genomics was not there. It was not a fashionable field at all in the 1990s. I had this passion. Something motivated me to do this. I decided that I wanted to do it here. Another person would have thought that Sri Lanka does not have the technology, and I must go somewhere. I wanted to stay here and develop something here. So where does that sense of commitment come from? I think it comes from your parents. You have a sense of duty and responsibility to serve your country. So, my wife and I, we make it a point to sit together with our children for dinner.

So, the point of discussion is what is your duty and responsibility. Children need to have that sense of duty and responsibility. You really need to emphasize on that. Our institutions are suffering because we are lacking that. If you talk to anyone who is heading public organizations, they will say that the staff lack commitment to take our institutions forward. As I said, it is not purely a Sri Lankan phenomenon. It is all over the world. In different forms... So, therefore, we need to really emphasize on this. The people who have really mastered these are the Japanese. The Japanese have a real sense of duty to their people and country. We need to learn from them and see if we can impart those values in our people as well.

4) Have you seen any positive changes / improvements in attitudes and behavior of young people after participating in youth empowerment and leadership programs?
I think in terms of .... so in our universities for example.....who are the students who get into leadership whether it be through student unions, whether through various service associations? If I were to talk about the various leadership opportunities that students in my medical school have... They have the opportunity to work with Rotaract Club, Zonta Club ... Then all kinds of other organizations like they have a Wildlife and Photography Association.

Then we have an Anatomical Society which is not only confined to Anatomy, but they also have the opportunity to engage in arts. They even have Halloween parties and all of that. So, it helps to bring out creativity in different ways. There are the religious Associations also- the Buddhist, Catholic, Muslim Majlis and Hindu Associations so on

Then at University of Colombo, we have more than 27 sports where they can learn about leadership. There are various ways in which they can leadership. Conventional ways such as student unions and so on. I have noticed that students who take leadership in such ways are likely to perform well in academics and in the longer run to succeed professionally. If you look at them in the current day scenario where there is so much discontent and unhappiness and so on, those people in leadership positions as youth are more content people. They have lot of positivity. Of course, that the work that they do supports rest of the student community as well as beyond.

5) Have you seen any measurable results in terms of increased civic engagement and community involvement among young people who have been actively involved in youth empowerment programs and community service?

In our faculty, one of the most interesting social service projects that our students are engaged is Wassana Diyawara. That is a project by the entire student community, but it is run through the Medical Student's Buddhist Association. It has the participation of everyone. Not only the Buddhists. The top 200 students of the biology stream come to this faculty. So, we have the best brains in the country with us. What they do is that they go to a school in a rural area and work with that school for about 06 months. During those 06 months, they improved the infrastructure of the school and start working with O/L students of that school and help them prepare for the exam and so on. In addition to that they also work with a religious place and help to develop the infrastructure of it. This project is now coming to its 20th year completed voluntarily by the students with the support from staff and other alumni and so on. Every year I have seen that project is going from strength to strength where I have seen not only infrastructure of schools developed but also in terms of outcome, I can tell you that we were working with a School in the South called Gothami Kanishta Vidyalaya in Kataragama. In that school usually only 2-3 students get through the O/Ls. But last year more than 20 got through the O/Ls last year. This has been due to the coaching and mentoring of our students. This has been one of the unique programs which I have seen happening.

If I were to tell you about another very very impactful project done by our Rotaract Club ; they wanted to improve the sign language skills of medical students. It is not something that we even teach in medical schools. Students on their own developed this online program on teaching sign language to medical students. So far more than 3000 students from all over the country and also those outside the country have taken that course. You can really see the impact of that. I don't know sign language. I was never taught that. You never know someday I might find time to study sign language. Imagine doctors who are now going out being empowered to use sign language.

That would mean that if there is anyone low in hearing, then you can use sign language and communicate with that person. So, 2000 doctors who are going out to the field are empowered by that skill which was not there before. So, these are some of the measurable skills that we can build in young people through these leadership initiatives.

6) Now I would like to take your attention towards health policy concerns in Sri Lanka. In your opinion, what are the major challenges concerning the health sector of Sri Lanka?

So, if you look at the health sector broadly, and if you want to look at the future, you need to first of all look at several areas. First, what we call Demographics of our population. We have a population which is fast ageing. Our elderly population is rising rapidly. In fact, we are the second fastest ageing population behind Japan. That was what we used to say 20 years ago. It is true today. We are ageing very fast. All of us know that. For example, many of our families- now when I talk to my colleagues who have parents living beyond 80s and 90s. That was not the case long long time ago. That is one dynamic change. We have a lot of people living longer and very few young people to look after them.

Another dynamic that came after Covid is that our birth rates are falling. So, prior to Covid, we had 360,000 babies born in our country every year. I believe that in the past two years, that number went down to about 280,000 and that is almost ¼th reduction of the birth rates. That is alarming. It has implications for the health sector, labour force and future economic growth. So, we need take into account, what we call the demographics of the country and demographic transition of the country that we are undergoing now. Add to that of course the 3rd thing- we have is lots of migration that is affecting our demographics as well. Any health sector should take into consideration the demographics of the population when deploying resources. For example, if our birth rates have gone down, in another a five years' time, we might have to reduce the resources required to look after our children because the number of children has gone down. Then because the number of elderly people is increasing, we need to deploy more resources in that direction. These are things that we need to look at in terms of demographics.

Then, we have to look into another indicator. The burden of disease in the country. In the past, we had a lot of people affected with infectious disorders and conditions like Malaria and the vaccine preventable diseases. We managed to eliminate all those infectious disorders. Now, we are basically on that kind of front, where we are left with the common colds and the flus and left over of the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, maybe Dengue as a public health problem. But our burden of noncommunicable diseases have gone up rapidly. So, if you take diabetes, we have gone to the extension of saying that 25% of our population has diabetes, prediabetes and so on. Today, I heard that the number is projected to go up to 1/3rd of the population pretty soon. So, what is the difference between communicable diseases and non-communicable diseases? Non communicable diseases cannot be cured. You have to live with them. If you have diabetes, very few people have a reversal of it. You develop high blood pressure. You have to live with it. If you develop dementia, you have to live with it. If you get a stroke you have to live with it. These are becoming lifelong disorders and the cost of looking after people with non-communicable diseases is very high and the number of resources you require is much more.

The second challenge we face is how do we deploy our health services to deal with different dynamics of the burden of disease. As our population ages, there will be more and more people with non-communicable diseases. So, we need more resources to look after them.

The third challenge is the challenge of healthcare manpower. At the moment, the other organization which I head is Sri Lanka Medical Council. We register all categories of healthcare staff. There are a lot of nurses. If you go to the other categories of staff that are required in the healthcare services, the numbers are very small. We have a lot of doctors who are capable of providing a good service. There are lots of nurses as well but when it comes to other categories of staff like pharmacists, medical laboratory assistants, scientists the numbers are low. If you go to other smaller categories like speech and language therapists, physiotherapists and so on..... We have about 14 categories that we have recognized and register. The numbers are less than 1000. Some of them in those categories are less than 100. We have a huge manpower crisis. It is there in other countries such as UK, New Zealand and Australia. So, what is happening is that our healthcare people are migrating to these countries for higher salaries. Our problem is getting worse. In fact, in the past 2 years, more than 2000 doctors went to Australia. Another 200 specialists went. As a result of this, it has become a huge challenge. There are certain provinces in Sri Lanka, that there is only 01 person for that specialty. I recently recruited a psychiatrist practicing in the Uva Province for my faculty. The Health Ministry refused to release him saying that he is the only psychiatrist for that province. This is the next crisis that we are facing.

The fourth is about supply chains. The hullabaloo if I may call it is about drug procurement. It is an issue related to supply chains. The supply chains broke down during Covid. Fixing it has become challenging. It has not only a challenge for Sri Lanka. I went to Samoa recently for the CHOGM meeting. I participated in several round table discussions. One of them dealt with this issue of maintaining supply chains. It is a huge challenge for many many countries. We need to look at several models to overcome them. That is very important. People complain that drugs are expensive. Yes. They are expensive if you are purchasing for a small population. For example, if the governments of South Asian countries can get together and give up a large order to pharma companies, then the production cost and prices will come down. We have to come up with pooled procurement mechanisms that would be a good solution.

A few years ago, I used to serve on the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Health which is based at the Commonwealth Secretariat in London. So, the Commonwealth was working towards the Commonwealth pooled procurement mechanism. Countries could get together and place orders and so that everyone benefits from the low prices when you make bulk purchases. These for various reasons have not taken off the ground. It is important for countries like us that have the need to push for these things internationally. So, that is so very important. Therefore, that is what we should be looking at. What the patients see is the drugs. But for doctors- we see challenges in everything and not only drugs. What about the hospital consumables? From the needle to the syringe and other instruments that we use in the hospitals- those are very challenging to obtain due to supply chain issues. In the laboratories, we find it immensely challenging to perform laboratory tests without them.

If you go to private hospitals and look at the price of tests, they have gone up more than the price of drugs. That is because of the difficulty in obtaining the relevant resources. So, I mentioned four challenges to you. The fifth challenge is regarding technology.

Today the health sector is very very technology driven. Digitalization is there. Also, there is the integration of Artificial Intelligence and so on. Fortunately for us, I can get some credit there because I was involved in producing the work force. We were the second country in the world to establish Biomedical and Health Informatics as a medical specialty. The first country was the US. We were the second country. The program was started by me actually at the University of Colombo. We started to produce doctors and train doctors to become biomedical and Health Informatics specialists. As a result of this, we have an excellent workforce in the Ministry of Health. A group of doctors who are taking leadership in this. These doctors have pioneered in digitalizing the health sector of the country. We have a Digital Health Blueprint. We have various international partners, donors such as the ADB who are willing to fund the digitalization process. What we really need is to scale up. So, I see that there is a very promising future there. There is the capacity and capability to do it. There is also willingness from the Ministry of Health. The manpower that is required to do it is there. I just had the opportunity to bring it to the knowledge of Dr. Hans Wijesuriya who was recently appointed as Advisor to HE the President. So, we hope that we can do that rapidly. The benefits of digitalization of the health sector and integration of AI can be enjoyed by patients. I focused on Digitalization, but it comes in the broad context of Health Technology assessment. It is not only digitalization and AI but also things like -robotics, robotic surgeries. There are other technologies that need to be integrated. Another field that I have championed is, integrating genetics and genomics technology to the health sector. These are the areas that we really need to focus on as we go forward. So, it comes in the broader context of health technology, health technology assessment and appropriate deployment of these technologies. That is an area we have been working on. I hope that these changes can be brought about in the future. So, that is the fifth item.

Finally, for all these to succeed it is important to focus on health financing. It is a very broad area. We have a unique situation in our country where we have a coexisting national health service and private health service. The dynamics of the two are different. The national health services take the burden of the in-patient services, whereas the private health services take the burden of the outpatient services. So, therefore the entire gamut of issues related to health financing should be looked into. During the past year, 2023, the government at that time couple of years ago – the cabinet set up 12 committees to look into reforming the finances of different sectors. The health sector was one of them. I was a member of one of the committees under the directorship of the Director of National Planning at that time. We looked at health sector reforms and finances and so on and gave a report to the government in 2023. The report got approval from the cabinet, and we expected that it would be translated into the budget for 2024. Unfortunately, 2024 became a year of elections. It is not a year you would work on policies and welfare. It became a different budget altogether. So, none of our recommendations got into the budget.

Actually, these are the things that we should all be working on. What are the health sector reforms? What are the reforms that we should bring in in terms of financing of the health sector that we should look at? Broadly speaking, those are the six areas that we should be focusing on.

I must say that the people of the country do not know the value of the health services that they have. Our health services are second to none in the world. I would go as far as saying that you would get better care here than what you get at the NHS or even the US Health system. I have been a patient in the NHS. I have never been a patient in the Sri Lankan health services. I went to the UK and fell ill and had to be in the NHS. I know the service that I got there and the services that I would have got here. I would in fact say, that I would have got better care in Sri Lanka than what I got at the NHS. Because of the access to resources, the promptness of our staff is second to none. Our health services are free. Even for a country like us that is in an economic crisis, for you to go to a hospital and get an MRI scan or even a brain surgery free of charge would be unheard if you were living in another country. We have more than value for money in the country in terms of the health service. We need to work towards preserving it. While acknowledging that there is a health financial crisis, we need to ensure that the private and public sectors can coexist, those who can afford to pay and get their services from the private sector- it will release the burden from the government. The scarce resources can be put to the benefit of those who can't afford private care or insurance. So, I have dealt with the 06 areas that are challenging as well as provide opportunities as we move forward.

7) What role can medical professionals play in formulating and implementing effective policies and strategies to improve the health sector of the country and provide good quality healthcare services?

Well... the medical professionals have been taking the leadership in formulating policies and strategies. Those policies and strategies are there. What we lack probably is a proper implementation plan and a plan of action. What I would say is a country wide strategy and a plan of action for implementation. That also has to come with finances lined up. You can have excellent policies. Unless you have a strategy and a plan of action for implementation you really cannot go forward. If any policy is to go forward, the finances have to be identified as well. Unfortunately, what happens is that it depends on how much money the government can allocate for that. In the current scenario, 80 % of tax revenue goes to pay salaries. So, you have a real challenge in channeling money. The government will have to look at into alternative sources of revenue- coming from international development partners and others.

The current situation in Gaza, Ukraine and other places is also diverting the attention of international partners towards those parts of the world. In a way, we are left alone. So, going forward we need to really look at health professionals working very closely with the government to ensure that the allocation of finances is done in a very meaningful and strategic way, so that it will translate into proper value for money as it were. To answer your question, I can say that the health professionals are playing that role.

They are involved with policies and strategies and preparing plans of action and so on. But the financing and the real allocation of money is beyond their control. That is with the Finance people. The role which we can perhaps play is more of an advocacy role with the Finance people- to ensure that the appropriate finances are done properly.

8) What type of a role can the private sector and Non-profit organizations play in effective policy making and implementation?

The bottom line is that we need policies that transcend the public- private, profit-non-profit boundaries. We need to identify the roles of these sectors as well as, if necessary, how these three sectors can be regulated. How can these three systems co-exist and work together? How do they interact and work with each other? What are the private -public, private-private, private-non-profit, public-non-profit relationships? How are these relationships managed? No one is talking about these. So, we need to really have that dialogue. The only dialogue which we are having now is one about controlling prices in the private sector. That is the only focus of attention. We got to go beyond that. We need to look at the private ecosystem, the public ecosystem, the non-profit ecosystem and how we all can work together for the betterment of the people. That is something we need to look at. Always, if we approach it from an equity kind of view, if those who can afford to go to the private sector and those who are not able to, can receive services from the public sector, that would be a nice co-existing model. Then the NGOs can come in when the public sector is overwhelmed and take some of the burden off the public sector by providing free services and so on. There has to be better discussion about all three sectors and how all three sectors can co-exist. We need to have a better dialogue.

9) Do you believe that the current youth empowerment programs in Sri Lanka can play a vital role in addressing policy gaps within the health sector of Sri Lanka?

I think knowledge of the youth on policies is lacking in the country. We as a country, have not been policy driven for a long time. Let me be anecdotal here. After the financial crisis, the parliament at that time decided that there should be one national policy where everyone should be working on. They invited a lot of officials Few of the Deans were also invited. I was also invited. I went there as the Dean of the Colombo Medical Faculty. Believe it or not, these are historic things that the general public of this country might know but I didn't know until I got involved in the process. In 1956 or so-I think- Yes – definitely in the 50s- under the leadership of Gamini Corea- you may have heard of him... he was the Chairman of UNCTAD. Under his leadership, there was some legislature that was formulated under him to have a National Planning Commission for the country so that the country could work towards long term plans. Whoever came into power has not taken it forward. It could be that we have long term strategies, plans.... From time to time, you have different managers to carry out the plan. You know what happened cum 1959 with all the political changes, it went to the back burner. I think growing up as a young person, I have never seen any concerted effort to educate the public, the young people on policies, strategies and plans of action working together. I don't think the current youth empowerment programs educate the youth in these areas.

In fact, I can just talk about the Health Sector. In the medical faculties, we teach students about disorders, diseases and how to treat them and so on. We never teach them about health sector financing. We don't teach them about health policies and so on. There is an entire field called health system sciences which is now coming to the picture. Therefore, you got to start teaching our next generation on the importance of policies, strategies and plans of action. The fact is that leadership comes with that. Leaders should be working on policies, strategies and plans of action. Whereas the administrator's role is to ensure that those plans of action are administered properly, and strategic goals are met. The roles of these individuals have been undermined because the politicians are now playing the role of administrators. I hope there will be changes in future and as a result of that the people have also lost track of what is expected from politicians, what is expected from leaders, what is expected from administrators and finally what is expected from the people. So, there is a need to define roles, define policies. There is a need to work with policies and so on. These should be imparted to young people. I don't see that happening in an organized way or in a pervasive way. There may be various programs that do that. But not on a large scale.

10) What can we learn from global experiences?

I really had the opportunity to engage with various health systems. During my time in the Commonwealth every year, I had the opportunity to attend the Commonwealth Health Minister's meeting which takes place in Geneva on one before the last Saturday of the month. So, I have attended that for many years. So, I had the opportunity to engage with high-ranking officials from Commonwealth countries. There are 56 Commonwealth countries. Also, beyond that. Other countries as well...I have had interactions with many health ministers for example the Health Minister of India. The one who later became the Chairman of the Bharathiya Janatha Party, and he has come back as the Health minister again I guess. You asked me what we can learn from other systems? Let me relate a nice story to you. A few years ago, in 2016 or 2017 at the Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting, the keynote address was given by – there is an international organization called the Group of Elders- at that time the chair of that was an African lady- I can't remember her name. She spoke for 20 minutes and on 06 occasions she said, "Why can't our countries be like Sri Lanka? why can't our health services be like Sri Lanka?" I felt so proud. The Health Minister at that time was Dr. Rajitha Senaratne. He was also there and was feeling very proud.

That is the highest aim in which our health services are held. All the indicators that are completely showing a different picture. The rest of the world is learning from us on how to provide good quality healthcare to the people. As I said before, in the digitalization process we are the second country in the world after the US to recognize health informatics as a specialty. I have been invited to give a talk to an Asian group of people on how and what motivated us work like this and what they can learn from us.

Now, what can we learn from rest of the world? How they have deployed health technologies in an efficient way. Currently, because of the lack of health technology assessment in our country, we are deploying technologies in an irrational way. The health sector has recognized this.

Last year, the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo was funded by the ADB and WHO to start a Centre for Health Systems Policy and Innovation. The first activity at that centre was to introduce a course on deploying Health Technologies. We work with different institutions. One is the George Institute which is based in Sydney, Australia. There is another- Institute for Global Health. We collaborate with them. The chief scientist there is of Sri Lankan origin- David Peiris. David and I are the co-leads at that centre. The first thing we did was to start a course on Health Technology Assessment so that our leaders in the health sector can learn to evaluate and use the appropriate technology. Another thing which we can learn from the West and other countries is proper implementation of sciences. The implementation of sciences in other countries has matured but not so in our country. The second course that we deployed was the Implementation of Sciences. These are two definite areas that can bring value to our country and help us learn from other countries. These were the first two areas introduced by the new Centre for Health Systems Policy and Innovation which we started at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo. We are bringing these good practices from abroad and ensuring that our people follow them.

11) Finally, what are your suggestions and policy recommendations to improve the quality and standards of the health sector of Sri Lanka?

Basically, let me tell you about something that was done recently. I would say-A very important policy related matter that happened recently. At the end of the day, whatever public services that we provide should meet the expectations of the recipients- the public. There was for the past so many years- before 20 years – A charter for patients' rights was not approved by the parliament. It had never gone to the parliament chamber because there was no agreement on what this document was. In a resource concerned setting, if you put so many rights in front of you, if you can't ensure that those rights are not met, then there will be lot of backlashes on the health services. A year ago, this document was taken out, and it was relooked at in the current context of providing health care in the context of a resource constraint setting. It was relooked on in the context of patient safety because it was also the kind of concept that is now taking global center stage. So, we got the final draft of the charter for ensuring patient safety and well-being approved by the Sectorial Oversight Committee for Health in Parliament. That was then tabled in Parliament. This is a very important document which articulates what we can achieve to provide a more acceptable healthcare service to the people that will fulfill the expectations of the people and ensure that the healthcare professionals- doctors, nurses, midwives and pharmacists and so on can work in an environment where their duties and services are known to the public.

That is a very important document. I think when we spend time preparing documents like this, we need to take it out and have further discussions on how to implement them properly. For me, it is a very important starting point for us. It is a guiding document for us. It has a long history. First document on patients' rights came in Sri Lanka in 1995 from the Sri Lanka Medical Association (SLMA) which I was president in 2012.

In 2012, I used the document which SLMA produced as a guiding document for my presidential year. The current document approved by parliament is something which we can take out and look at because the most important thing now is that, during the past few years, the trust in the health services was lost in the eyes of the people. So, we need to reestablish that. That is so very important. I mentioned before 06 areas that need to be addressed-demographics, burden of disease, health technology, workforce, health financing and supply chains. We need to streamline these 06 challenges. Each one has its own set of different challenges, so, we need to identify them and address them as we go on.

So, this is my overview of the health sector. These are not difficult challenges to overcome. We need a group of people who can work concertedly on these things.
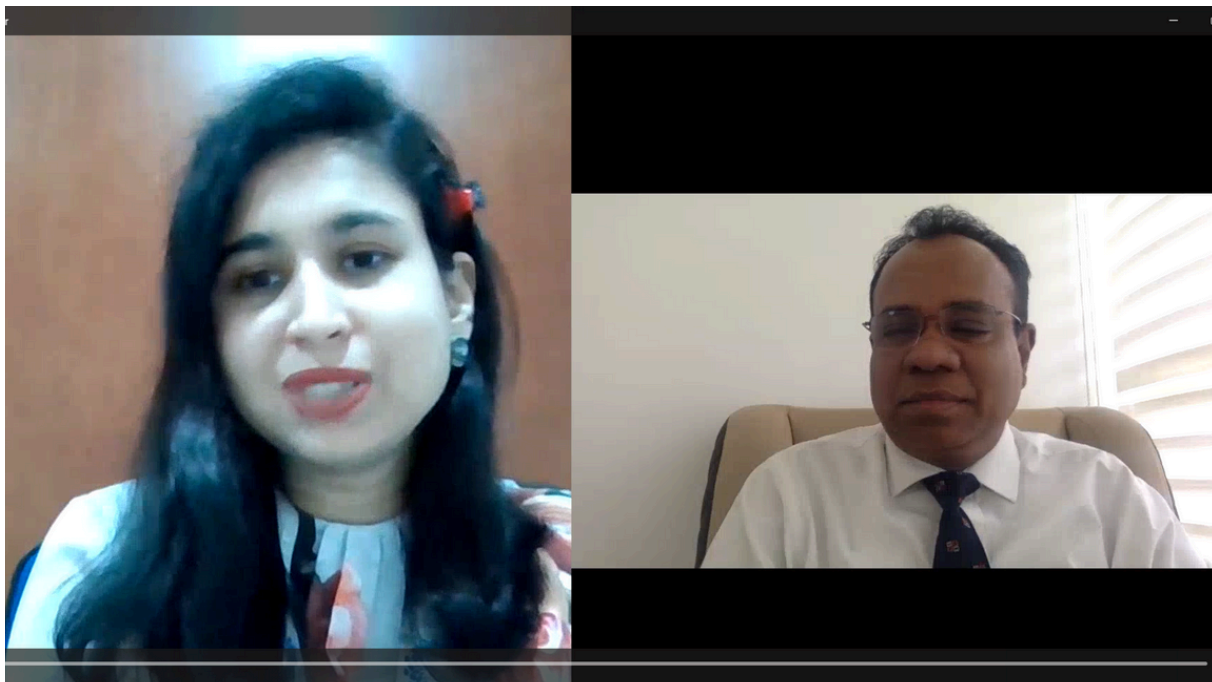
A Sustainable, Future-proof and Visionary Energy Policy for Sri Lanka

By Mr. Parakrama Jayasinghe

Introduction

Having faced both destructive energy shortages and unprecedented and damaging increases in consumer tariff in the past two years, it is essential that Sri Lanka at least now arrive at a Sustainable Visionary, Future Energy Policy which is able to confidently face any future challenges. The unique advantage of leveraging on undoubted abundant national renewable energy resources of Sri Lanka, already commercially proven to be technically, financially and environmentally feasible, be embraced as the only way forward to escape the decades long trap of over dependence on fossil fuel and the Balance of Payment issues.

Sri Lanka has emerged from being a nation dependent of foreign sources for its energy needs at present and in the foreseeable, to become an energy rich nation with officially quantified resource potential, far exceeding even future energy demand for many decades ahead.

In addition, the uniqueness of Sri Lanka in the variability of energy resources as well as the physical geographical distribution vis- a- vis the demand centers should not be overlooked. Thus, blind application of concepts and strategies used elsewhere is a road to disaster.

It is also inevitable that visionary and courageous development of this bonanza of nature of abundant indigenous renewable energy could be the means of achieving the much-needed prosperity for all citizens of Sri Lanka.

This change is only possible by a paradigm shift in the way energy resources and supplies are viewed, which accepts that:

- **The nation's energy resources belong to the people and the benefits of their utilization must primarily flow to the people.**

About the Author Mr Parakrama Jayasinghe is a Chartered Mechanical Engineer with a BSc Eng (honours) degree from the University of Peradeniya. He is fellow of the Institution of Engineers Sri Lanka and a Member of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, London.

- It is no longer true that the energy sector development need be the purview of the largescale entrepreneurs, either in the state or private sector, particularly in the electricity sector, requiring very large capital investments, nor is there a need for large power plants remote from load centers.

- While Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) are welcome to the development of Renewable Energy (RE,) the terms must be on the basis of already existing BOI regulations, whereby the investors could be confident of a fair return on investment. Under no circumstances should we pay Dollars for our own RE resources.

- The recent developments in technology have obviated the need for centralized power generation needs and the distributed smaller scale generation is already proven to be more viable, economically, environmentally and socially, in the electricity sector and the adoption of EVs for transport coupled with own solar energy will enable the commuters to escape the clutches of fossil fuels for good. The economic and technological environment is already present and is gaining ground daily. This must be recognized as an integral component of any future energy policy.

- National Security is closely linked to national Energy Security. This can be guaranteed only by ensuring that the energy industry remains in control of the national entities, both public and private.

- The main consumers of energy are for electricity generation and for transport fuels. It is imperative that any energy policy should consider at least these two sectors concurrently. A policy framework for EV mobility has been submitted to the Ministry of transport by the end of 2023. This has not received any attention so far nor has it been discussed with the Ministry of Power and Energy.

Current Status of the Energy Sector

Sri Lanka not having any proven fossil fuel resources, have had to depend entirely on imported fossil fuels for transport fuels and an increasing share of power generation on fossil fuels including coal. This has hitherto kept Sri Lanka trapped in the Fossil Fuel trap[1] with grave impacts on the Economy, Balance of Payment and the Economy as clearly illustrated by the recent events.

Mankind's use of fossil fuel

We too are trapped in the blip - Not wanting to get out ?
" Renewable Energy - The Key to get out of the trap"

400 Years

Beginning of Civilization

5000 Years hence

5000 Years ago   Now

1/28/2024   7

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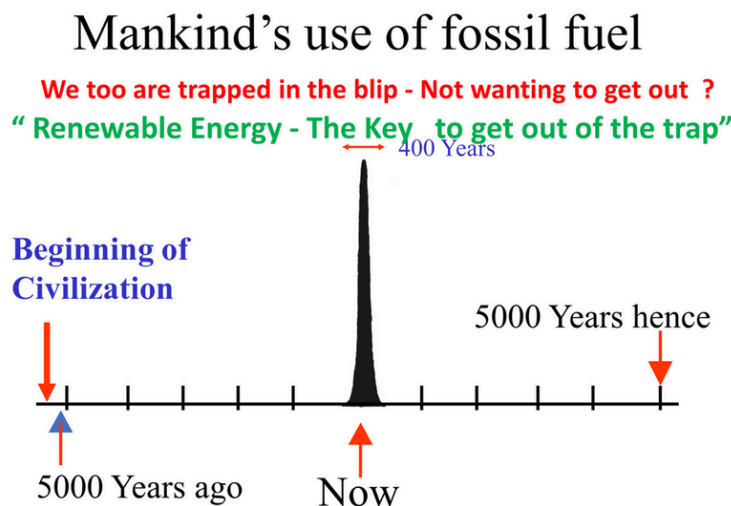
The world has recognized this trap, and many countries have already embarked on a journey to shed their dependence on fossil fuels for energy. In case of Sri Lanka this has led to severe pressure on the balance of payments bleeding nearly US $ 5000 million on the scarce foreign exchange earnings. This accounts for 25% of the import bill and the ability of the traditional exports to meet this expense was surpassed many years ago. By year 2010 the deficit had to be financed mainly through the remittances from the middle east.

Foreign exchange requirement
for Fossil fuel-based generation
of Electricity [1]
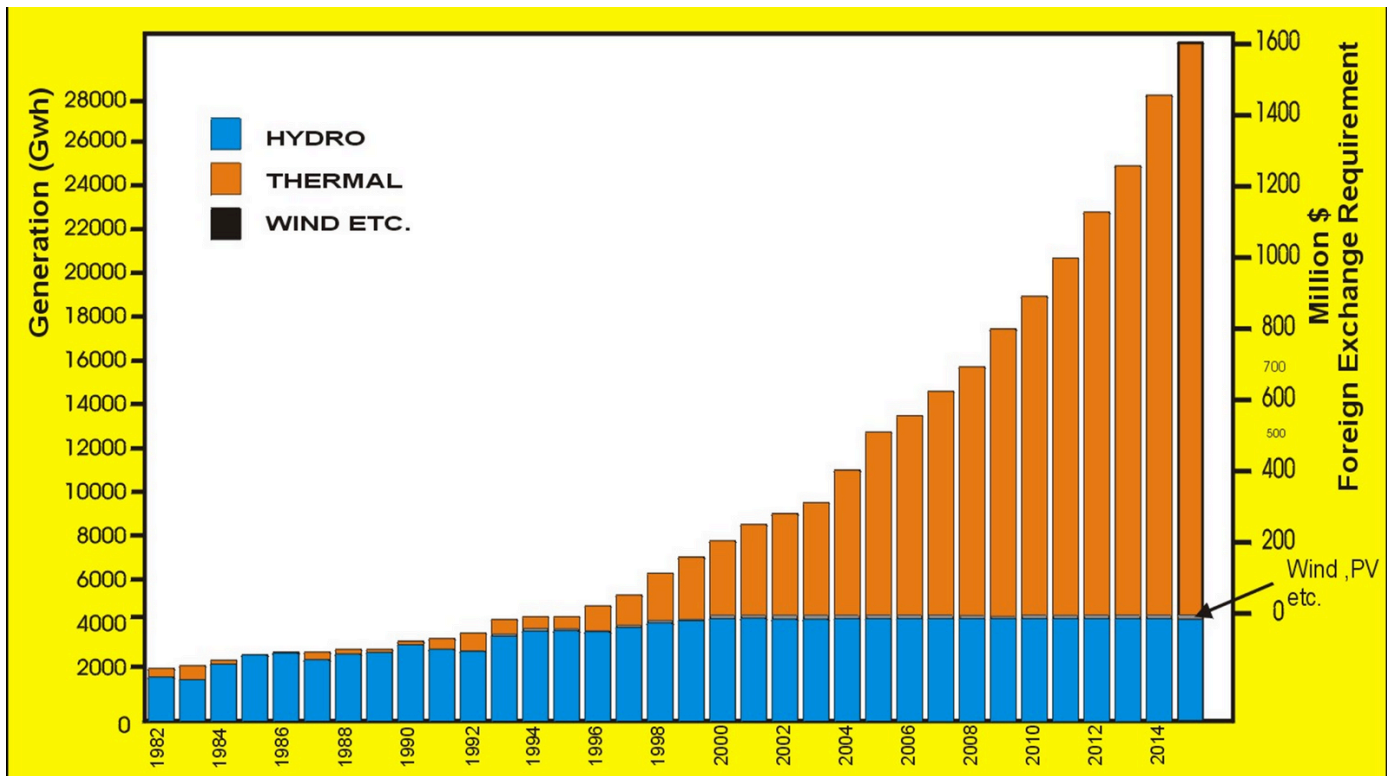
By the year 2010 the earnings from traditional export crops could not match the dollars needed for import of fuels.

Although the contribution from RE sources and the FE earnings from traditional exports, have grown over the years the cost of the fossil fuel imports too has grown nearing US$ 5000 Million in the recent years.

Sri Lanka is fortunate that with the significant advances in commercially proven technologies and commercial circumstances, our own well documented substantial renewable energy resources have now reached the stage of practically and economically exploitable stage and the first steps have already been taken.

An Energy Rich Nation
Thus, Sri Lanka has emerged from being a nation dependent on foreign sources for its energy needs at present and in the foreseeable future, based on current policies and strategies, to become an energy rich nation with quantified resource potential, far exceeding even future energy demand for many decades ahead.
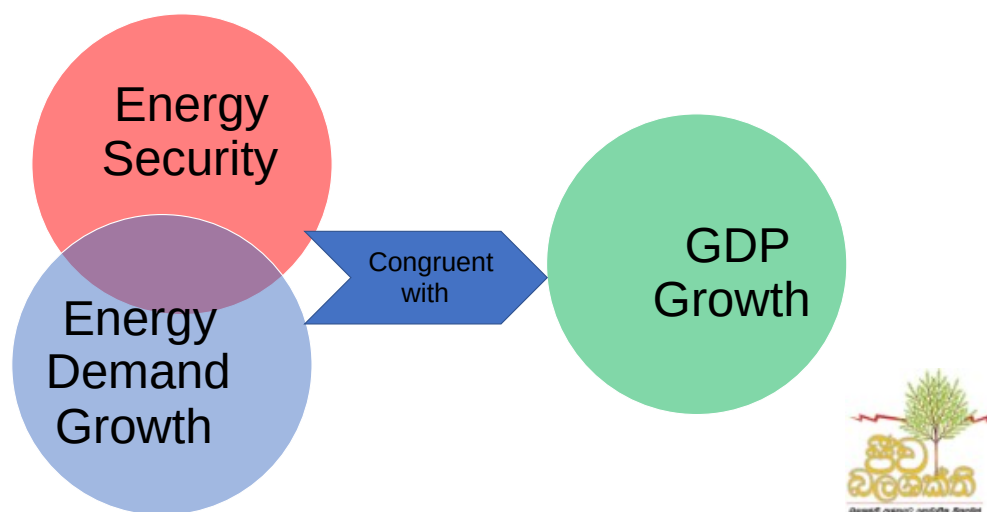
Achieving this status which is essential to both escape from the "Fossil Fuel Trap" and to leverage the exploitation of the indigenous natural energy resources for economic advancement, well beyond the mere sustainability of energy supplies for other sectors of economy, requires a visionary future energy policy and firm strategies. These changes are urgently needed to arrest the continued dependance on imported fossil fuels and the consequent drain of foreign exchange and the pressure on the Balance of Payments.

The concurrent and most significant benefits to the nation on many fronts by such visionary policies will be the driving force to encourage urgent action by any future administration as spelled out later on.
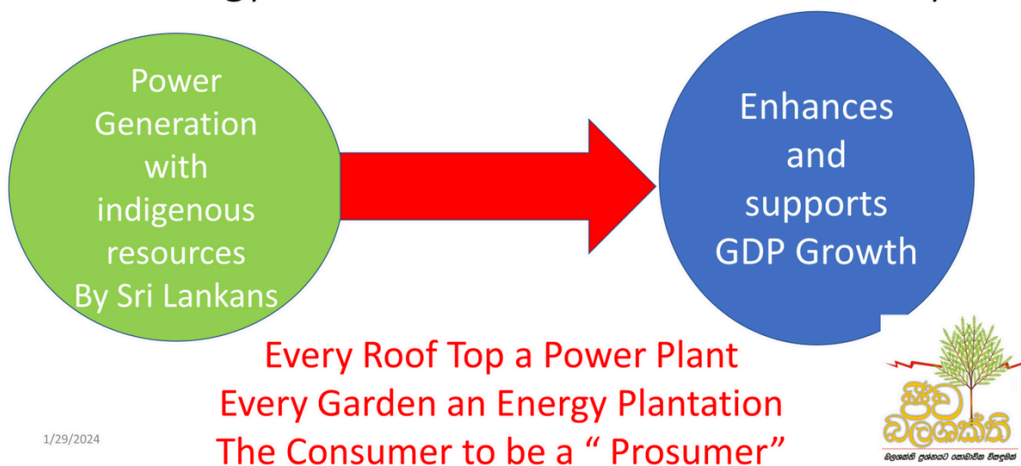
A Paradigm Shift on the Perceptions on Energy
There is an urgent need to review the way that energy supplies are viewed at present, in relation to is impact on the economic growth, society needs and the people by those entrusted with the planning, administration and management of the National Energy Supplies. This Paradigm Shift is illustrated by the two charts below on the current status and the desired change.[1]

The Conventional Wisdom!!

Energy Security

Energy Demand Growth

Congruent with

GDP Growth

A New Paradigm !!
The Energy Sector to be a Sri Lankan Industry

Power Generation with indigenous resources By Sri Lankans

Enhances and supports GDP Growth

Every Roof Top a Power Plant
Every Garden an Energy Plantation
The Consumer to be a " Prosumer"

1/29/2024

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This change in paradigm entails the recognition of these very important issues
- The nation's energy resources belong to the people and the benefits of their utilization must primarily flow to the people.
- It is no longer true that the energy sector development need be the purview of the large scale entrepreneurs, either in the state or private sector, requiring very large capital investments
- The recent developments in technology have obviated the need for centralized power generation needs, and the distributed smaller scale generation is already proven to be more viable, economically, environmentally and socially, in the electricity sector and the adoption of Electric Vehicles (EVs) for transport, coupled with own roof mounted solar energy systems will enable the commuters to escape the clutches of fossil fuels for good. The economic and technological environment is already established and is gaining ground daily. This must be recognized as an integral component of any future energy policy. The policy statement in the last National Energy Policy published in the gazette in Aug 2019 called for 25% of the light vehicle fleet to be EVs by 2023. But hardly any attempt has been made to achieve this objective.
- However, the ban on import of vehicles due to the economic downturn has provided a golden opportunity to step in the correct direction, once such ban is lifted , by allowing only EVs to be imported. The potential benefit is not only economic and environmental , as this would be a positive step towards reducing the present drain of foreign exchange amounting to nearly $ 5000 Million annually [2]
- **National Security is closely linked to national Energy Security. This can be guaranteed only by ensuring that the energy industry remains under control by the national entities both public and private.**

The relevance of energy security on National Security.

National Security of a nation depends on the non-dependence on external sources for the following
1. Food
2. Defense
3. Education
4. Health
5. Shelter
6. **Energy**

The fast-changing lifestyles and other imperatives have made the non-dependence on Energy to be perhaps the primary element to be targeted, with its central role in ensuring the development of all other sectors. Energy is the universal currency world over. In Sri Lanka's context access to clean and affordable energy as stipulated as Sustainable Development Goal SDG 7, will be the main contributor and catalyst to the development of the other sectors of economy without exception. It is inevitable that with the rapid changes in technologies world over which sooner than later , will have to be accepted and adopted by Sri Lanka , Electricity the most preferred form of energy, will gain dominance.

While Sri Lanka is very advantageously placed to embrace this change, polices are urgently needed to elevate the present 14% share of electricity in the national primary energy mix rapidly.

Sri Lanka is presently woefully dependent on external resources to meet the demands of all these sectors, due to the continued lack of vision by the successive governments and necessary policies and action plans towards the obvious change needed.

At least in case of the Energy Supplies and Services Sri Lanka is at the threshold of a positive change, at present in the Energy Sector (Not limited to Electricity) , where we can gain the status of none dependence in a relatively short time, by the adoption of progressive polices. The recognition of both the extent of the indigenous renewable resources of energy that Mother Nature has bestowed on us and the adoption of firm policies and strategies to meet the energy demands in the near and long term, by Sri Lankan entrepreneurs is therefore essential.

The policy statements made by past administrations have proven to be mere rhetoric, not reflected in the executive actions ground nor leveraged on the positive trends in the sector, for the benefit of Sri Lankan people. Such policy manifestoes have been just words and empty promises, as has been the unfortunate experience of the citizens of Sri Lanka in the past.

Energy and Climate Change
The increased recognition and awareness worldwide on the ever-increasing threat of Climate Change the negative impacts of which are increasingly felt by Sri Lanka as well. Sri Lanka cannot expect to ignore its global responsibilities by continuing the use of fossil fuels which is the major contributor to the global warming. In addition, in the present situation with Sri Lanka facing severe foreign exchange crisis and balance of payment problems, the severe drain of foreign exchange for the import of fossil fuels cannot be allowed to continue unchecked.

The importance of an adequate and affordable supply of energy is imperative for economic development and does not need any elaboration. This is embodied in the Sustainable Development Goal No 7 – Access to Clean Energy at Affordable Prices,[3]Sri Lanka has ratified the Sustainable Development Goals and out of the 17 SDGs, the SDG 7 if properly developed has a great influence on many of the other SDGs for Sri Lanka's under the present circumstances. It is urgent to recognize and adopt policies and strategies to gain from this reality. The pursuit of renewable energy as detailed would automatically have a beneficial effect on the balance of 16 SDG targets as well.

While Sri Lanka is still categorized as a low emitter of carbon with less than 1 ton per capita, against the global average of 19 tons per capita, Sri Lanka cannot ignore its international commitments to reduce emissions. It must be recognized that the adoption of indigenous renewable sources of energy, which are essentially carbon neutral, has the dual advantage of being the most economically advantageous option, as well as the means of exceeding the international commitments made by way of the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) submitted to the UNFCCC by the Ministry of Environment.

As such Sri Lanka need not pay any specific attention to contribute positively to the Climate Change efforts if the logical change to renewable energy is adopted as national policy. We can easily meet the commitments already made under the NDCs (Nationally Determined Commitments) submitted to the UNFCCC.

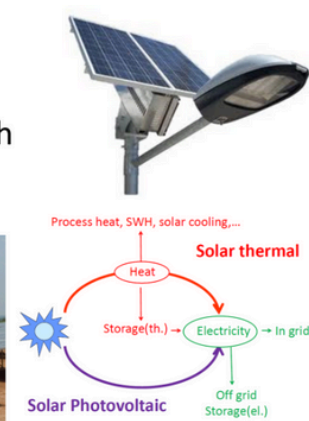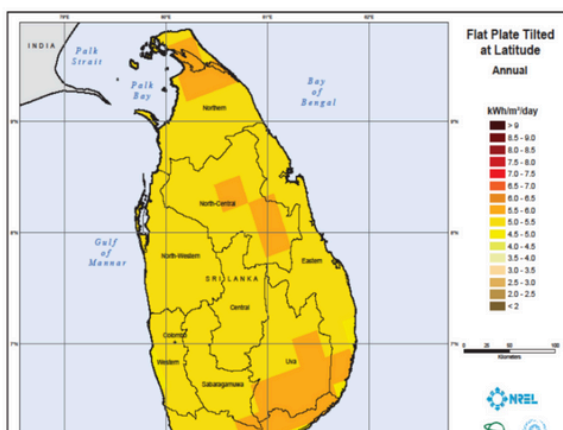**The Renewable Energy Options of Sri Lanka**

Mother Nature has Endowed Sri Lanka with an Abundance of Solar Energy.

The earth receives enough solar energy in one hour, adequate to meet the entire energy needs of the world for a year. In this equation Sri Lanka is placed in a most advantageous position being a tropical island with over 200 days of sunshine annually anywhere in the country, with a very high intensity of solar radiation as published in the documents of the Sustainable Energy Authority, of 1700 kWh/m2 over most of the country. Those who have opted to install roof top solar PV, can safely expect the generation to be 110 kWh/kW/month, averaged over the year including the cloudy and rainy days. This will increase over the years with the current advances in the technologies and increased efficiency of the solar panels [4].

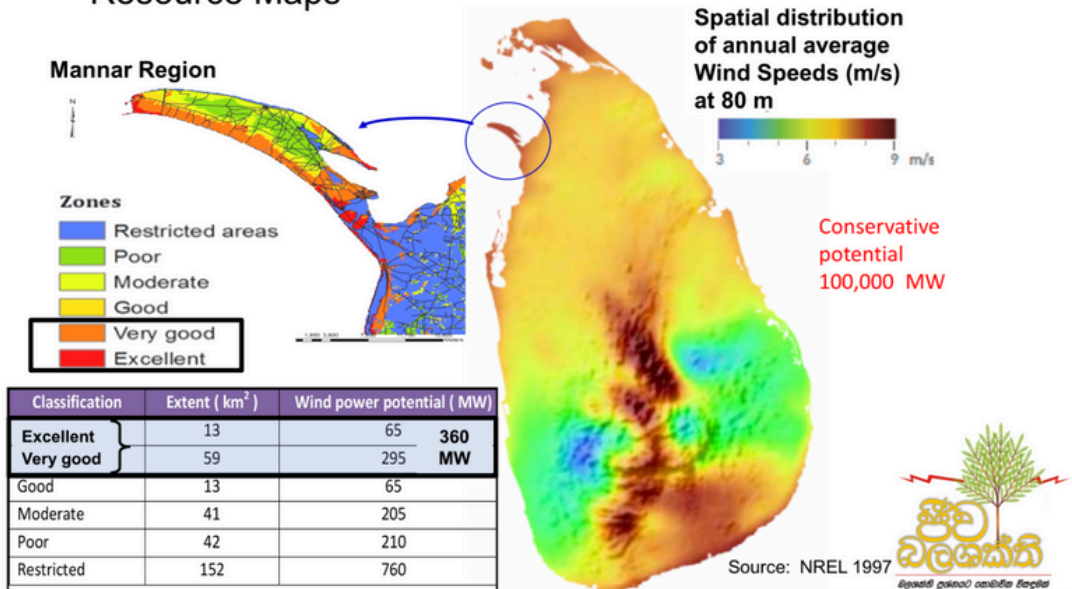The two charts below illustrate the same.

WIND ENERGY RESOURCE

Resource Maps

Mannar Region

Zones
- Restricted areas
- Poor
- Moderate
- Good
- Very good
- Excellent

Classification	Extent (km²)	Wind power potential (MW)	
Excellent	13	65	360
Very good	59	295	MW
Good	13	65	
Moderate	41	205	
Poor	42	210	
Restricted	152	760	

Spatial distribution of annual average Wind Speeds (m/s) at 80 m

Conservative potential 100,000 MW

Source: NREL 1997

The Sri Lanka Sustainable Energy Authority has confirmed this potential with the quantification of viable potential of this bounty of nature of

• The On Shore and Offshore wind Potential – 102,000 MW

• The Solar Potential - 106,000 MW

• We need only 10,000 MW to meet the domestic needs even in 2030

• The excess potential can be monetized for much needed earning of foreign exchange

The Special Relevance of Bio Energy

The yet to be formally and actively recognized resource and focused for development is the Sustainably grown bio mass (Dendro) Energy already proven on the ground, and a source of firm power with multitude of spin off benefits with a potential to add at least 2500 MW of firm power as reported by ADB[5] and JICA.[6] This is equivalent to 12,500 MW of solar power or 7500 MW of wind power, being a firm source of energy available 24/7 throughout the year unlike the intermittent nature of Solar and Wind.

Gliricidia to Electricity The Role of Dendro

ADB and JAICA Projections
2500 MW
BEASL Estimate 4000 MW

Biomass Energy derived from trees and agricultural waste, releases the solar energy absorbed through Photosynthesis and stored as chemical energy in the trees. This natural storage is energy from the sun absorbed over the last year or two, unlike the million years that were required to store the solar energy in the form of fossil fuels, be it natural gas, coal or oil, and is therefore truly renewable and does not contribute to global warming.

In Sri Lanka the technology is already proven for the sustainable generation of short rotation coppicing trees such as Gliricidia , Ipil Ipil and Bamboo as well as several agricultural wastes as the fuels for bio energy. Thus, the carbon dioxide released during power generation is reabsorbed in the next batch of trees within two years. Also, any accusations of destruction of forests for this resource is totally unfounded.

Sri Lanka is well endowed with the ingredients necessary to develop biomass as a major contributor to the energy sector. However, this sector remains in the non-formal sector without the due recognition of its immense value by the relevant authorities and economic planners. Accordingly, there is no established supply chain or market mechanisms. The methodologies for such sustainable utilization of the biomass resource are already known and established and need to be widely practiced.

What is more important in the national context is the multiple benefits of development of Bio Energy particularly focusing on Gliricidia is the multiple benefits that would accrue, particularly to the rural economy as illustrated below.
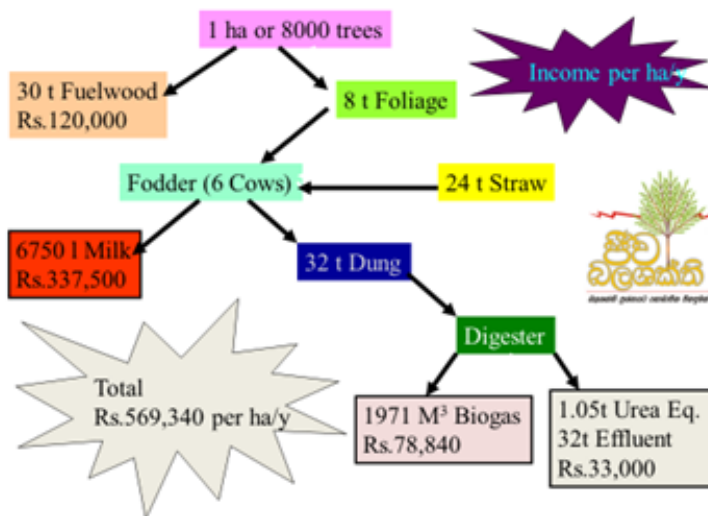
Annual Income Potential from 1 ha of Gliricidia Plantation
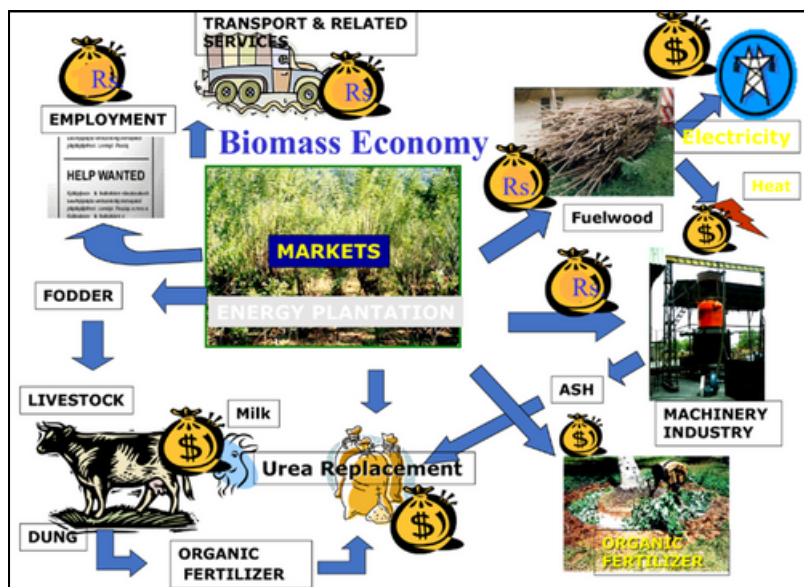
Multiple Spin off Benefits from Bio Energy Development [8]

Solar Energy for Poverty Alleviation

While Bio Energy Development offers the means to rural economic development with multiple other benefits, there is large investments needed for the development of power plants which are essential to trigger the market

However, the Roof Top Solar PV systems offer an immediate means of exploiting the synergy of electricity generation and poverty alleviation. This possibility is amply supported by the current visionary provisions in the Surya Bala Sangraamaya and has already demonstrated the effectiveness of the program targeting the middle and high-level consumers generating over 1200 MW of electricity.

This can be extended to the low-end consumers too with the laudatory impact of parallel poverty alleviation to raise them above subsistence level exitance. The necessary funding can easily be generated as can be demonstrated by a financial analysis. The benefits would flow to the CEB by avoiding the need to subsidize the consumer tariff to this segment as well as to the State by minimizing the demand for financial assistance for poverty alleviation. The spin off benefit is the reduction of the equivalent amount of oil-based electricity generation and the concurrent drain of foreign exchange. These are true monetary benefits easily calculated using data available in the public domain.

Demand Side Management – Nega Watts are far Cheaper than Mega Watts

The virtual power potential of Demand Side Management which effectively diminishes the demand for new additions to generation capacity, without any lowering of the utility or convenience of access to electricity, deserves focused and urgent attention, with its advantage of instant contribution with minimal or zero costs. The studies already done by the Sustainable Energy Authority have already quantified the potential positive impact. Two immediate steps that can be taken are:
- Replacement of all incandescent bulbs and CFL bulbs for general lighting by LED bulbs made available at reasonable costs

- Incentivize the replacement of present old and inefficient electric motors with energy efficient motors

- The obvious financial benefits of this change can justify a highly subsidized sale of the LED bulbs as adopted in many countries including India

The Economic and Financial Implications of Fossil Fuel Dependence

The energy sector presently made so dependent on imported fossil fuel both for electricity and transport mainly, has created grave negative impacts on the national economy.Sri Lanka spends over $ 4000 Million annually for import of oil and coal at present.

While the depressed oil prices in the past few years lowered this from the over $ 6,000 Million spent in the early years of this decade, this would change adversely in the near future considering the very unsettled political conditions in the middle east. It is also necessary to recognize that the US $ 6000 Million equated to only Rs 678 Billion in 2010, the current bill of US $ 4,500 costs Sri Lanka Rs.1,350 Billion [2].
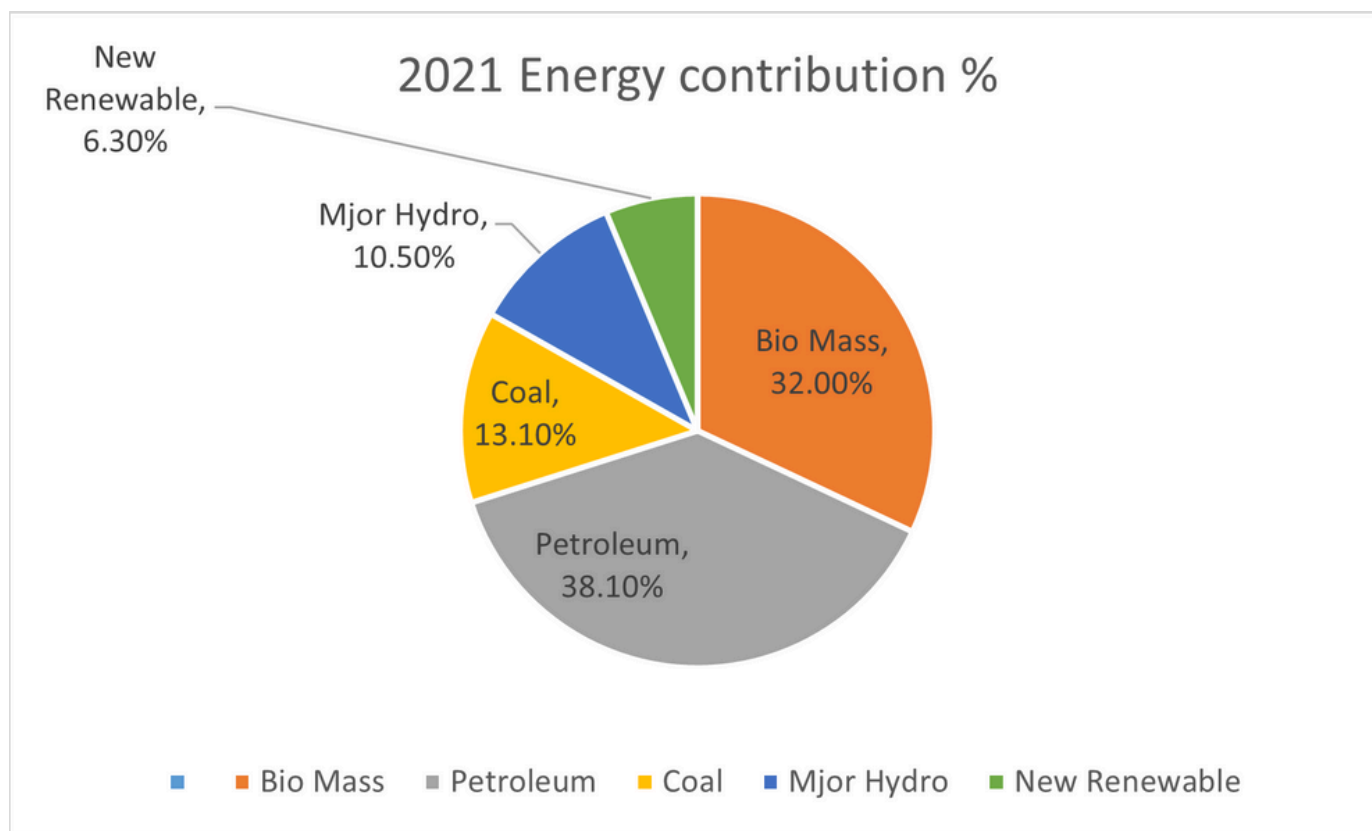
Energy is not Electricity alone – The contribution to national energy mix in 2021[7]

While some positive changes are happening in the electricity sector such as decision not to implement any more coal power plants, the transport sector which consumes over 75% of the imported fossil fuels have remained near 100% dependent on imported fossil fuels impacting greatly on the balance of payments and pressure on the parity rate.

The forecast for the future [8]

Forecast Demand Growth till 2040
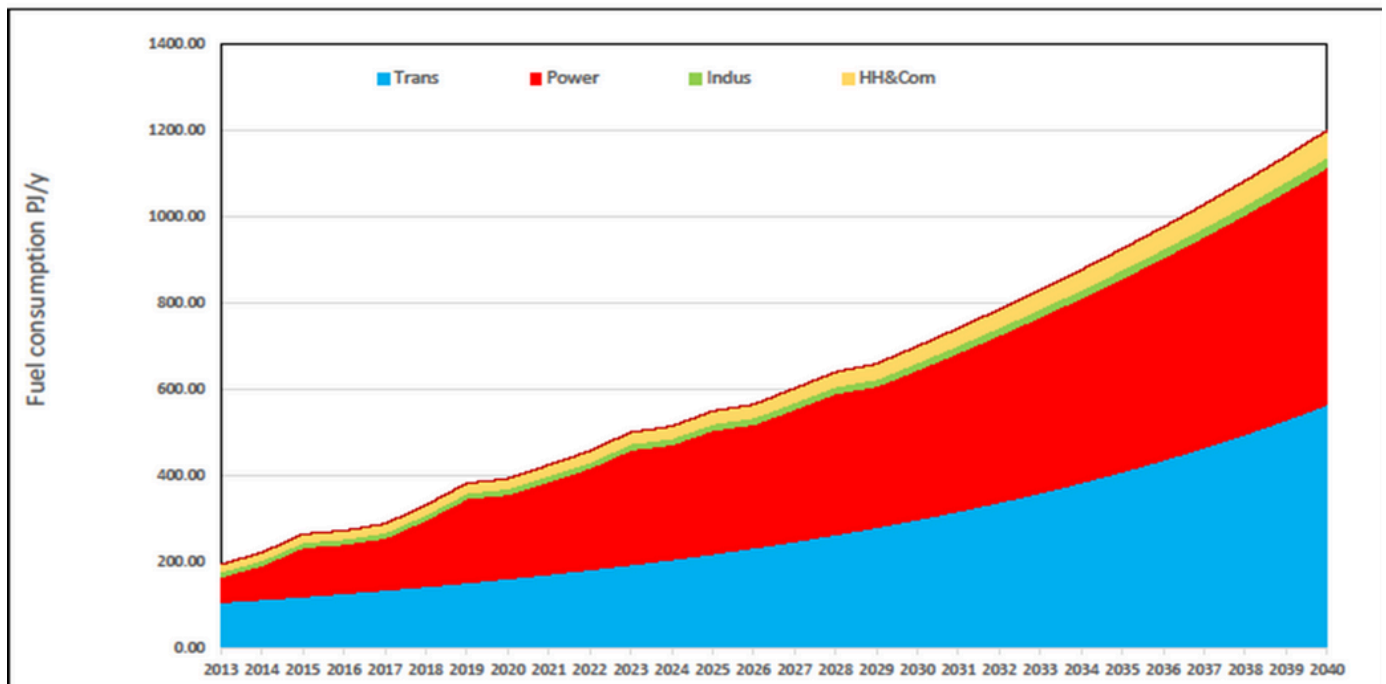
The present policies and strategies as depicted above will continue to plague the country with dependence on imported fossil fuels and the resultant negative consequences. The time is right, and the opportunities are available to escape from the trap through electrification of the transport sector, both passenger vehicles and rail transport.

Of the other forms of energy illustrated in the chart above, the largest segment is occupied by the transport sector, which is totally dependent on imported fossil fuels. While the economic impact by this total dependence is not directly felt by the populace, the obvious negative impact on the balance of payments and the parity rate is evident. This has an immediate impact on all segments of the economy and the cost of living of all citizens.

Proposed themes for a Future Energy Policy and Strategies
- Energy is not only electricity, which at present provides only 12-14 % of the primary energy demand. Therefore, a holistic energy policy covering all forms of energy demand and supply shall be developed with high emphasis of maximizing the use of indigenous resources

- The double advantage of decarbonizing the energy sector, the primary contributor to the ever-increasing climate change impacts, even in the local scene, and the economic advantages to be gained by weaning away from imported energy resources, the target of achieving 100 % RE at least by year 2040 should be pursued aggressively with challenging intermediate targets.

- Although Natural Gas has a relatively less negative impact on the environment and has greater flexibility of usage, which could have made it an attractive choice to be integrated to the national energy mix, there is complete lack of clarity as to how the natural gas is to be procured. In addition, the widespread use of even imported LNG requires a complex infrastructure which cannot be put in place for many years and at great expense. The promise of natural gas from Mannar still remains elusive, due to the world gas price dynamics and there is no indication of it being commercially exploited for many years to come. Thus, much deeper and unbiased evaluation of the pros and cons of adopting Natural Gas as a viable component of the energy mix with long term viability is required.

- In particular it would be fool hardy for Sri Lanka to think of using Natural Gas as a replacement of petrol and diesel in transport. This is particularly so due to the lack of any certainty of the source of supply as well as the lack of infrastructure. On the other hand, why continue the use of the Internal Combustion engine with an overall efficiency of less than20% when an electric vehicle operates at near 90% efficiency in addition to many other advantages.

- No more coal power plants will be planned or implemented as per Govt policy. However, the Norochcholai coal power plant should be made 100% compliant with the environmental and other regulations within one year and should be managed to provide the maximum return on the heavy expenditure already incurred. Unless steps are taken to introduce renewable fuels like Biomass or natural gas from Mannar, it should be allowed to be decommissioned as early as possible.

- Surya Bala Sangraamaya on roof top Solar PV should be strengthened with the achievement of the next target of 2000 MW added in five years and expanded towards the One Million Households thereafter. Incentivized tariff system should be introduced to encourage householders to add storage batteries to enhance the utility of the systems into the nighttime peak hours. For this purpose, the present punitive duties and other levies imposed on deep cycle batteries need to be relaxed.

- Solar Parks of capacity over 5 MW to benefit from economies of scale and to encourage local investors should be encouraged by fast-track approvals and support from the utilities and transparent and pragmatic tender procedures and quick awards. Additional tariff systems should be introduced to add adequately sized battery storage systems. The use of the substantial number of irrigation tanks and lagoons for floating solar PV parks is a natural option for the expansion of the utilization of the solar energy resource. This would also eliminate the objections for use of lands for large scale solar parks. The necessary technologies are already available, and the added advantages of floating solar PV are well recognized.

- Ensure the development of 1000 MW of dendro power by providing access to lands for energy plantations by the developers and facilitate the monetizing of the value of Gliricidia leaves as a fodder and fertilizer. Thus, would maximize the overall benefits to encourage the expansion of planting by householders and small farmers, creating a vibrant rural economy linked to energy. Each 10 MW dendro power plant will infuse Rs. 1,000,000,000 annually to the rural economy by the sale of fuelwood alone

- The transport sector totally dependent on imported oil is a severe drain on foreign exchange. Therefore, rapid conversion to electric vehicles is to be undertaken with the removal of all import duties and other levies on electric vehicles. A target of 25% of all new registrations by 2025 and 50% by 2030 to be set for both privately owned vehicles and public transport vehicles.

- A concurrent local industry for the conversion of the existing fleet of three wheelers and private vehicles should be facilitated which will generate high tech employment opportunities.

- The already planned electrification of the railway from Veyangoda to Panadura should be implemented urgently as a Sri Lankan project. The Institution of Engineers has performed a detailed study on the viability of this proposal. The scope of electrification to be expanded to other segments of the railway after due study.

- An alternate means of achieving this objective and expanding further to cover the entire railway network is now emerging with the development of Green Hydrogen Technologies. The Railway department can even be non-dependent on the national grid by this means and perhaps at a lesser capital cost. This proposal gains feasibility by the fact that majority of the locomotives are Diesel Electric, requiring only a change of fuel from Diesel to Hydrogen.

- Challenging targets to be set for demand side management of all forms of energy, with incentives provided for achieving a target of 20% savings by 2025 on electricity. All new building approvals are to meet the mandatory energy efficiency targets set by the SLSEA.

- The role of the PUCSL as the regulator for electricity petroleum and water to be strengthened by providing total independence and mandatory compliance by the responsive utilities and other service providers

- The achievement of the targets for decarbonization and integration of RE to the national grid should be the responsibility of the Utility and the SLSEA. The mandate for removal of barriers and harnessing the support of private sector investors and developers should be given to the utility with the SLSEA performing the role of facilitation they are mandated to do.

- The investments of private sector for all forms of energy investments to be attracted by totally transparent tender systems and transparently predetermined feed in tariff system, where applicable for projects up to 10 MW capacity under the regulations of the SLSEA, and needed to reach early maturity of an indigenous energy industry

- The Concept of "ProSumers" where the consumers themselves will also be power producers should be encouraged in order that the energy industry is democratized not limited to a small number of large investors local or foreign.

- The over six million low end electricity consumers with less than 120 units per month consumption with two million Samurdhi recipients must be brought into the scheme with the dual benefit of adding to the RE energy target as well as to bring them above the poverty levels no longer in need of Samurdhi receipts.

Some of the above proposals can be implemented immediately under the prevailing laws and regulations. For example, the Surya Bala Sangraamaya has contributed over 1000 MW of additional energy to the grid in a short period and can easily attain the set targets well ahead of time targets set. It has the greatest advantage of total investment by the private sector with no burden on the state treasury. However, a firm long-term national energy policy, not limited to electricity, is an urgent and essential need to ensure that the other proposals too can be implemented in the short to medium term.

The Path is Clear—RT Solar is leading the race
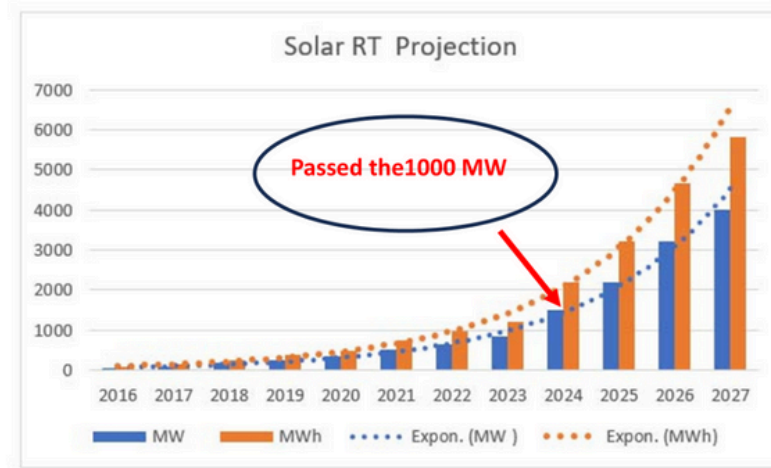
Source: Past data from SLSEA   Graph 3

Specific Policies and Strategies to be Adopted:

Financing the Policies and Strategies

In line with the prime need to ensure that the energy industry remains under the control of Sri Lankan entrepreneurs, the development required should be financed as far as possible through the local banking sector. The often-repeated lament that large foreign investments are required to enable the expansion of the renewable energy contribution is largely based on the misconception of continuing the myth of large-scale centralized generation facilities. This is no longer true, and the very nature of our sources of renewable energy, lends themselves admirably for distributed generation in scales easily financed by the local entrepreneurs and banking sector, and obviates the need for expensive long transmission lines proposed. Such distributed generation will be done closer to the load centers and thus avoid unnecessary transmission losses, while utilizing existing transmission and distribution infra structure, perhaps with low-cost improvements.

Any collaboration with foreign investors while welcome must be on terms acceptable to Sri Lanka, without in any way compromising the status of national control of the energy sector. Under no circumstances should renewable energy be purchased for foreign currencies. This would be tantamount to our having to buy our own solar and wind power paying foreign exchange. The tariff shall be paid in rupees, and the investment and profits gained may be repatriated under the existing BOI approved methodologies. It is best to allow the private sector developers to seek such foreign assistance.

Immediate Policy Changes Proposed

- Declare a firm policy of reaching 80% Renewable Energy in the electricity sector by 2030 as per Original Policy Statement in the Parliament. This requires that there can be no more fossil fuel-based projects to be implemented.

- Make this policy mandatory to be followed by all ministries, departments and agencies and instruct the CEB to immediately make this provision in their LTEGP with specific year by year milestones to be achieved.

- The onus of ensuring the upgrading of the grid to absorb all the RE projects currently approved by the ministry and intimated to the CEB as well as the targeted roof top Solar PV under the Surya Bala Sangraamaya, and solar parks for which RFPs have been issued, to be with the CEB and to be officially communicated as a directive.

- Accept and act upon the recommendations of the Cabinet Memo No 36/2005 declaring Gliricidia as the fourth plantation crop, in order that the energy sector becomes a people's industry with multiple benefits to the rural economy.

- Identify clearly the R E projects that the CEB can handle with a declared and competitive cost of generation, on the same basis as the IPPs without any subsidies

- All other projects to be facilitated for implementation by the private sector, by competitive tender where practical or through the NCRE system via the SLSEA for projects up to 10 MW capacity.

- Considering the large extents of suitable water bodies available, all future Solar Parks to be Floating Solar PV, other than projects already approved for which adequate lands have been identified and secured.

- No more fossil fuel-based power plants to be planned or installed as this would defeat the goal of 80% RE target by 2030

- It is very unlikely that a terminal for the import of LNG can be set up in time to operate the 300 MW plant already nearing completion, and it is totally unacceptable now to operate the plant with diesel in the interim as currently proposed. Unless Natural Gas from Mannar can be developed, cancel all other projects planned for use of imported LNG.

- Make it mandatory for a joint program to be executed between the CEB and the Dept of Irrigation and Mahaweli Authority, to ensure that the water releases from the multipurpose reservoirs are done in a manner such that no water is released without concurrent power generation. The water release to be made during the peak times as far as practicable.

- Initiate proposals to construct floating solar projects on the Hydro reservoirs leveraging on the grid infrastructure already available, thus saving the water for use during the peak hours only

- Collaborate with the Ministry of Transport and declare and early target to reach 100% electrification of transport.

- Implement the target of 20% light vehicle electrification by 2022 as proposed in the Gazette National Energy Policy dated Aug 2019. (Ref 8 Section 4.5 -5f, and Ref 1 Pg 57)

- The development of EV charging stations with the collaboration of the private sector to install country wide charging stations powered by Solar to be incorporated in the CEBs LTEGP and implemented with year-by-year targets.

- Remove the current punitive import duties and other charges at point of import of EVs and Storage batteries and recover any loss of income by increasing the duties on petrol and diesel vehicles.

- Impose a carbon tax per liter/kg on all fossil fuels including coal. Reserve the proceeds for development of RE projects only. A punitive tax to be imposed on petrol to discourage the use of private petrol vehicles and attract them to use public transport

- Implement urgently the much-discussed proposal to import 200 buses operating on electricity with planned expansion to increase the fleet.

Specific Activities to be Undertaken

A.   Electricity Sector Immediate Steps
1. Take urgent action to accelerate the roof top solar PV systems under the Surya Bala Sangraamaya so that the dependence on even the currently installed fossil fuel power generation is minimized. The initial exchange required for the import of capital equipment will be more than offset by the saving of the import of equivalent amount of fossil fuel. The encouragement of 16-hour generation capacity by adding limited battery storage with enhanced tariff to be paid for exports during the peak hours will further enhance this benefit.

2. The target of adding 2000 MW of Roof top solar in five years to be ensured.

3. Plan for all water releases from the irrigation reservoirs to be done with concurrent power generation where power plants are installed

4. Make use of the focused attention on Home Gardens to encourage and facilitate the concurrent planting of Gliricidia and other short rotation coppicing trees. This does not require either capital or new lands. However, it will create the essential resource for the dendro power generation, which has a multitude of benefits as well as being a firm source of power.

5. Install power plants at all major irrigation reservoir outlets as practiced at Uda Walawe and Inginiyagala. A detailed evaluation of the potential to be carried out to be incorporated to the future generation plans.

B. Thermal Energy Sector

1. Achieve a contribution of 90% by biomass for thermal energy in industries by promoting and facilitation of cultivation of Gliricidia and other sustainably grown fuelwood, which are already available albeit not in the formal supply chains.

2. Encourage all tea factories to be self-sufficient on electricity and thermal energy using roof top solar PV and Gliricidia/Caliandra plantations. The bought leaf factories to convert their leaf suppliers to be fuel wood suppliers as well.

3. Recognize the synergy between agriculture and energy with sustainably grown fuel wood as exemplified in the Cabinet Memo 36/2005, and promote the plantation of Gliricidia and other sustainably grown species as an integral component of the present promotional program for home gardens

4. Remove restrictions on transport of Bamboo to enhance the fuelwood supply for energy

C. Transport Sector

1. All major highways and roads and associated facilities to be made to favor public transport rather than the present private vehicle bias. The bus lanes are to be reserved on a 24-hour basis. A concurrent levy on private cars entering the municipal areas to be instituted to promote the changeover.

2. Ban import of any more petrol and diesel driven busses, cars and three wheelers and motorcycles

3. Move towards electrification of transport commencing with the target of 25% of light vehicles by 2025 as per the current National Energy Policy Announce a target year for 100% electrification. Commence with the electrification of Three wheelers and two wheelers

4. Electrify the railways with the present plan for the Veyangoda Panadura section expedited. Other sections to be brought in as early as feasible

5. Commence study on feasibility of adopting Green Hydrogen as the means of converting the Diesel Electric Locomotives to Hydrogen electric locomotives.

6. Promote and facilitate the conversion of existing three wheelers and private cars to electricity. This has been practically proven.

D. Demand Side Management

Institute an aggressive Demand Side Management (DSM) program for all sectors on both electricity, thermal energy and fuel by

- Distribution of LED bulbs in exchange of incandescent bulbs and CFL bulbs to all domestic consumers at a discounted price. The present market prices do not encourage the changeover, particularly to the low-end consumers who are heavily subsidized and contribute mostly to the peak hour demand.

While many of these actions can be taken with immediate effect, the empowerment of relevant sections to adopt the many progressive policy initiatives already taken would be an added encouragement for decisive action. Some of these policies are listed below.

- National Policy Framework to reach 80% Renewable Energy in the electricity sector by 2030 [9]

- The target under the Suryabala Samgraamya to reach 1,000,000 of roof top solar PV

- Ministry Directive to the CEB to proceed with identified Renewable Energy Projects   '

- Recommendations of the Cabinet Memo No 35/2005 declaring Gliricidia as the fourth plantation crop.

- Focused facilitation on development of Dendro power

- Implement the target of 20% light vehicle electrification by 2025 as proposed in the Gazette National Energy Policy

- Impose the already decided carbon tax on the basis of a levy per liter/kg on all fossil fuels including coal. Reserve the proceeds for development of RE projects only

- Reinforce the implementation of Bus Lanes on all major roads

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Championing our Changemakers: Insights from a Young Social Entrepreneur

By Mr. Rivi Wijesekara

Sri Lanka stands at a pivotal moment, with an opportunity to embrace a future where young changemakers lead the way. The country's social sector is witnessing a burgeoning interest in social entrepreneurship, particularly among youth who aspire to create impact-driven businesses. These young social entrepreneurs are poised to address key societal challenges, from unemployment to socio-economic inequality, by leveraging innovative solutions that combine economic activity with social good.

A study by Bublitz et al. (2020) highlights that fostering youth-led social enterprises is not only about addressing pressing social needs but also about cultivating an ecosystem that supports upward mobility and economic inclusion. In Sri Lanka, this ecosystem is gradually taking shape, fueled by the passion and drive of its youth. This article explores how nurturing this potential can lead to transformative outcomes for both young individuals and the nation as a whole.

Understanding the Social Entrepreneurship Landscape in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's social sector has traditionally been characterized by community-based initiatives, often led by NGOs and charitable organizations. However, a shift towards social entrepreneurship is gaining momentum. Unlike traditional charity work, social entrepreneurship prioritizes sustainability, scalability, and the empowerment of local communities. This aligns with the findings of Nimeshi & Surangi (2023), who emphasize the critical role of social entrepreneurs in filling gaps left by the state and private sectors.

The rise of social entrepreneurship is particularly significant in the context of youth unemployment. In recent years, high levels of youth unemployment have prompted a search for alternative pathways to economic stability. According to Achkasova (2023), social entrepreneurship presents a viable solution by not only creating jobs but also empowering young people to take charge of their economic destinies.

About the Author   Rivi Wijesekara is a social entrepreneur who is the Founder and Executive Director of The Striver's Network, a youth-led nonprofit striving to empower Sri Lanka's next generation of underserved high-achievers to pursue a world-leading global education.

Potential for Upward Mobility through Youth Entrepreneurship
Youth in Sri Lanka face a range of barriers to employment, from a competitive job market to a skills mismatch between education and industry demands. These challenges are not unique to Sri Lanka; Ferdousi et al. (2022) demonstrate that in neighboring South Asian contexts like Bangladesh, social entrepreneurship has proven effective in fostering youth development through skill-building and business creation.

In Sri Lanka, social entrepreneurship is increasingly seen as a pathway for upward mobility. Young social entrepreneurs are not only gaining financial independence but are also breaking free from the constraints of traditional career paths. By creating their own ventures, they are empowering themselves and their communities, often in regions where conventional employment opportunities are scarce. Zulfiqar et al. (2019) note that opportunity recognition is a critical skill for aspiring social entrepreneurs, enabling them to identify gaps in the market and develop solutions that serve marginalized communities.

Challenges and Opportunities in Nurturing Young Changemakers
Despite the potential, young social entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka face numerous challenges, from limited access to capital to a lack of mentorship and infrastructure. Research by Sukumar et al. (2022) highlights the importance of supportive government policies and educational programs in nurturing the entrepreneurial spirit among young students. In Sri Lanka, initiatives such as entrepreneurship hubs, incubators, and university-led programs are beginning to address these gaps, yet more needs to be done to create a robust support network.

Mentorship, in particular, has proven to be a game-changer. Santini et al. (2020) emphasize that intergenerational mentorship—where older entrepreneurs guide young people—can bridge experience gaps and build confidence. In Sri Lanka, fostering these mentorship opportunities can help young changemakers navigate the complexities of entrepreneurship and sustain their ventures.

The Role of Higher Education and Training
Education plays a critical role in fostering social entrepreneurship. Roslan et al. (2020) point out that universities are key sites for entrepreneurial training, yet they often face challenges in integrating social impact into their curricula. In Sri Lanka, expanding access to education that prioritizes social entrepreneurship is crucial. Curricula that blend business acumen with social consciousness can equip the next generation of changemakers with the skills they need to thrive.

Sri Lanka's higher education institutions are beginning to adopt this approach, with some universities such as the Open University of Sri Lanka (Advanced Certificate Programme in Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management) offering dedicated courses on social enterprise. These programs can be instrumental in equipping young people with the knowledge and skills necessary to identify community needs, develop sustainable solutions, and lead ventures that balance profit and purpose.

A Personal Journey: The Strivers' Network

My own journey as a social entrepreneur began with the founding of The Strivers' Network (TSN), a youth-led platform dedicated to empowering young people in Sri Lanka through networking, mentorship, leadership development, and advocacy. Starting TSN was a response to a gap I observed in Sri Lanka's youth development landscape—a lack of a platform for young people to achieve upward mobility through world-leading education and collaborative projects.

The TSN Family

The experience of leading TSN has been transformative in a way that no academic experience will ever be. It opened doors to a community of like-minded individuals and mentors who guided me in navigating the challenges of entrepreneurship and professional life. Through this platform, I witnessed firsthand the power of peer support and collective action, as young people from diverse backgrounds came together to drive change. This experience echoes the findings of Chandra & Kerlin (2020), who stress the importance of context-specific support systems that cater to the unique needs of social entrepreneurs.

The Road Ahead: Building an Ecosystem for Young Social Entrepreneurs

To sustain the momentum of youth-led social entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka, it is essential to build a supportive ecosystem. This involves collaboration between government, private sector, academia, and civil society. Investments in training, access to finance, and mentorship will be key components of this ecosystem. Furthermore, fostering a culture that values social innovation and celebrates entrepreneurial successes can inspire more young people to take the leap.

The impact of youth social entrepreneurs extends beyond economic gains. They are community leaders, role models, and agents of change who challenge traditional norms and redefine success. As Bublitz et al. (2020) note, the ecosystems that support youth social entrepreneurs need to be inclusive and adaptable to changing social dynamics.

Recommendations for Supporting Young Changemakers

To fully realize the potential of Sri Lanka's young social entrepreneurs, stakeholders must take concerted action:

1. Expand Access to Funding: Create dedicated funds and grants for youth-led social enterprises, particularly those operating in marginalized communities.

2. Strengthen Ecosystems: Establish innovation hubs and incubators that provide resources, mentorship, and networking opportunities.

3. Promote Inclusivity: Ensure that initiatives are accessible to all, with a focus on empowering women, NEETs, and individuals from rural areas.

4. Enhance Policy Support: Advocate for policies that simplify regulatory processes, provide tax benefits, and encourage PPPs.

5. Foster a Culture of Collaboration: Encourage partnerships between young entrepreneurs, academia, NGOs, and the private sector to share knowledge and resources.

Sri Lanka's future lies in the hands of its young people, and social entrepreneurship offers a powerful avenue for harnessing their potential. By supporting young changemakers, the country can tackle pressing social challenges while simultaneously fostering economic growth. This dual impact—addressing societal needs while empowering individuals—makes social entrepreneurship a unique and promising strategy for the future.

The journey is far from over, but the path is clear. It is a path that requires collaboration, investment, and a collective commitment to empower young people to lead the way. Together, Sri Lanka can move toward tomorrow, championing a generation of changemakers who will shape a brighter and more inclusive future.

To learn more about my work at The Strivers' Network, visit our website at www.thestriversnetwork.org.

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Reforming Sri Lanka's Secondary School Examinations: A Comparative Study

By Mr. Kugan Ganan, Mr. Chethana Janith, Ms. Izra Muhsin, Mr.Rivi Wijesekera

Executive Summary

Sri Lanka's current secondary school examination system relies heavily on high-stakes standardized testing, which often prioritizes memorization over deeper learning. This policy brief examines the limitations of this approach, particularly its impact on student well-being, equity, and future preparedness. By comparing Sri Lanka's system with international examples from countries like Finland, Singapore, and Iran, as well as the International Baccalaureate, we propose a hybrid model that combines traditional exams with continuous and diversified assessments. This shift aims to create a more balanced, equitable, and skill-oriented evaluation system, ultimately fostering better educational outcomes for all students.

Introduction

Sri Lanka's education system is characterized by high enrollment rates and literacy, yet its assessment methods remain predominantly exam-oriented. Critics argue that this approach fosters a culture of rote learning, limiting students' development of critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Research suggests that diversifying assessment methods can enhance educational quality, reduce inequalities, and better prepare students for the demands of a modern economy. This policy brief draws upon research and international case studies to suggest reforms that are aligned with global best practices.

Background

1. The Context of Examination in Sri Lanka

Historically, Sri Lanka has depended on national standardized exams, such as the G.C.E. Ordinary Level and Advanced Level, to determine student progression and university entrance (Premaratne, 1976). This model has led to several challenges:

- **Stress and Anxiety**: A single exam significantly influences future opportunities, resulting in undue stress and exam-related anxiety among students.

- **Equity Concerns:** Disparities in access to resources, quality of teaching, and private tutoring exacerbate inequalities, with marginalized groups often underperforming.

- **Skill Gaps:** Employers and higher education institutions note a disconnect between the skills tested in these exams and the competencies needed in higher education and the job market (Aturupane, 2009).

2. Shortcomings of High-Stakes Examinations

Research in countries with similar high-stakes systems, such as Iran and South Korea, highlights how exam-oriented education can negatively impact learning outcomes:

- **Focus on Memorization:** Exams often prioritize factual recall over deeper understanding, a trend critiqued in Holme et al. (2010), which noted that high-stakes exams often sacrifice critical and analytical skills in favor of rote learning.

- **Narrow Assessment Scope:** The current format fails to assess non-cognitive skills like collaboration, communication, and creativity, which are increasingly valuable in the global job market (Cerdeira et al., 2018).

- **Streaming and Silos:** The current A/L streaming system in Sri Lanka segments students into narrowly defined academic tracks, such as Science, Commerce, and Arts, unintentionally limiting students' exposure to interdisciplinary learning.

Comparative Analysis and International Insights

1. Portugal: Integrating Internal Assessments
Portugal's reform experience, as discussed by Cerdeira et al. (2018), involved supplementing national exams with internal evaluations conducted by teachers. These internal scores have proven to be a strong predictor of student success in higher education. This mixed approach could inspire Sri Lanka to incorporate coursework-based assessments, which have been shown to be more equitable and comprehensive.

TABLE 3 Predictors of the (standardised) components of the access score when applying for a Bachelor

	Secondary school (SS) exams score (standardised)	SS internal score (standardised)
SS public	−.188*** (.021)	−.356*** (.020)
SS public and private	−.241*** (.035)	−.216*** (.034)
SS academic track	.352*** (.014)	.417*** (.014)
Male	−.012 (.014)	−.150*** (.013)
Parents' education	.032*** (.002)	.028*** (.002)
Constant	−.374*** (.027)	−.198*** (.027)
No. obs.	23,632	23,632
R²	.057#	.080#

- Figure 1: Adapted from Cerdeira et al. (2018)

2. Finland: Emphasizing Continuous and Formative Assessment

Finland's education system, where students consistently score higher than the OECD average in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (PISA 2022 Results (Volume I and II) - Country Notes: Finland, 2023), is internationally renowned for its focus on formative assessments and low-stakes testing. Finnish schools use continuous assessments, peer reviews, and project-based evaluations, emphasizing learning over ranking. Studies by Kupiainen et al. (2016) confirm that such a system supports lifelong learning skills and reduces exam pressure.

3. Singapore: Evolving the Exam Culture

While Singapore has traditionally emphasized standardized testing, recent shifts towards holistic education, particularly Assessments for Learning (AfL), demonstrate the potential of balancing exams with formative assessment.

Table 1. Brief overview of the different assessments.

	Diagnostic Assessment	Assessment for Learning (Formative Assessment)	Assessment of Learning (Summative Assessment)
Definition	Used for collecting data on students' current knowledge and skills, and what students already know (e.g., on a certain topic)	Used for deciding where students are in their learning, where they need to go and what to do next through an on-going process of gathering and interpreting the evidence	Used for measuring and reporting on what students have learnt after the completion of unit or course, usually presented as a grade or mark
Purpose	Assess prior knowledge, skills, etc.	Monitor learning and provide feedback to improve learning and teaching	Evaluate students against particular benchmark
Timing	Occurs before instruction	Occurs during the instructional process throughout a unit or course	Occurs at the end of instruction, a unit or course

Figure 2: Adapted from Wont et al. (2020)

A landmark review by Black and Wiliam (1998), which examined 250 studies, brought AfL (as defined in Figure 2) into prominence with the findings that it promoted student learning and increased student achievement. As noted by Wong et al. (2020), Singapore has reduced the weight of standardized exams in favor of project work, school-based assessments, and skill-building initiatives, promoting a well-rounded educational experience.

4. Iran: Challenges of High-Stakes Testing

Research by Moradi et al. (2019) on Iran's high-pressure university entrance exams revealed the need to diversify assessment approaches to reduce stress and broaden educational focus. Their recommendations include integrating coursework and vocational assessments, a strategy that Sri Lanka could adopt to create more pathways to higher education.

5. International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme

The IB Diploma Programme (IBDP) is a globally recognized educational framework emphasizing critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and rigorous academic standards. It has demonstrated success in fostering academic excellence and preparing students for higher education, as evidenced by Shukur (2023), who observed its positive long-term effects on students' academic achievements in an international school in Erbil.

The program's emphasis on inquiry-based learning and holistic assessments could address Sri Lanka's need for a balanced evaluation approach.

Kucharska (2023) highlights how integrating the IBDP within state schools in Poland provides an alternative to traditional systems, promoting inclusivity and global-mindedness. This model could inspire Sri Lanka to pilot the program in select public schools, blending international standards with local educational needs. However, challenges related to resource allocation and training, as noted by Awang et al. (2019), must be addressed to ensure sustainability.

Additionally, Steiner-Khamsi and Dugonjić-Rodwin (2018) emphasize the transnational appeal of IB programs in enhancing public education credibility. Sri Lanka could leverage this accreditation to attract international collaboration while fostering equitable access to quality education.

Integrating the IBDP into Sri Lanka's secondary education reforms could provide students with diversified pathways, encourage lifelong learning, and reduce dependence on high-stakes exams.

Potential Benefits for Sri Lanka:
- **Holistic Development:** The IBDP's emphasis on a broad curriculum, including sciences, arts, and humanities, ensures students develop diverse skill sets, preparing them for varied career paths and fostering adaptability.
- **Critical Thinking and Research**: Core elements like Theory of Knowledge (TOK) and the Extended Essay (EE) encourage analytical skills and independent research, aligning with the global shift towards knowledge-based economies.
- **Global Competence**: The program's international orientation nurtures cultural awareness and collaboration, vital for global citizenship.
- **Pathway to Higher Education**: Universities worldwide highly regard the IBDP due to its academic rigor and emphasis on self-directed learning, providing Sri Lankan students with enhanced access to global higher education opportunities.

Implementation Challenges:
- **Infrastructure and Training Needs**: Adopting the IBDP would require substantial investment in teacher training, classroom technology, and assessment frameworks to meet its demanding standards.
- **Cost and Accessibility**: The IBDP's implementation costs might limit access to urban and elite schools, potentially widening educational inequities unless subsidies or public-private partnerships are established (Steiner-Khamsi & Dugonjić-Rodwin, 2018).
- **Curriculum Alignment**: Adapting the IBDP's global curriculum to align with Sri Lanka's national education goals and cultural context poses a significant challenge (Awang et al., 2019).

Policy Options

Option 1: Retain the Current System with Adjustments

The first option focuses on maintaining the existing examination system, which is heavily reliant on standardized, high-stakes testing, with minor modifications to enhance its effectiveness. These adjustments include integrating practice assessments, increasing the frequency of feedback mechanisms, and introducing formative evaluations during the academic year. Such changes aim to improve teaching and learning outcomes without disrupting the traditional structure familiar to educators and students.

The primary advantage of this approach is its minimal disruption to the current system. Teachers, students, and administrators would not face significant upheaval, and the continuity would reduce resistance to reform. Moreover, it preserves the focus on measurable outcomes, making it easier to track student performance at a national level.

However, this approach has significant limitations. It fails to address the underlying challenges of inequity and stress. For instance, high-stakes exams disproportionately impact students from disadvantaged backgrounds who lack access to adequate preparatory resources. Additionally, the emphasis on rote learning stifles critical thinking and creativity, skills essential for 21st-century workplaces.

Option 2: Adopt a Hybrid Model of Assessments

The hybrid model blends high-stakes exams with continuous assessments, such as project work, class participation, and presentations. This approach draws on successful international practices, where a balanced evaluation system measures both academic knowledge and soft skills. A 60% focus on traditional exams and 40% on coursework could provide a fairer platform for students with diverse strengths.

This model significantly reduces examination pressure by distributing assessments throughout the academic year. It encourages skill development, including teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. Additionally, it creates a more equitable system by enabling students from disadvantaged backgrounds to excel in non-exam components, thus reducing the disparity caused by resource limitations (Proposals to Make Sri Lanka's National Examinations More Relevant — Sri Lanka Education Forum — Catalyzing Policy Reforms, 2023).

Despite these benefits, implementing a hybrid model presents challenges. Standardizing continuous assessments across a diverse range of schools is complex and may lead to inconsistencies. There is also a risk of subjective grading in coursework evaluations, necessitating robust teacher training and monitoring systems.

Option 3: Shift to a Fully Holistic Assessment System

A holistic assessment system eliminates the reliance on high-stakes, end-of-year exams and adopts formative and summative evaluation methods. This includes project-based learning, oral examinations, and peer assessments. Inspired by global education leaders such as Finland, this system aims to cultivate critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration.

This approach represents a transformative shift in education, encouraging deep learning and reducing student stress. It aligns with global trends emphasizing lifelong learning and adaptability in a rapidly changing world. Furthermore, it addresses equity by allowing students to showcase their abilities through various mediums.

However, this transition requires significant investments in teacher training, curriculum redesign, and infrastructure development. Schools in rural and underfunded areas may struggle to implement this system, exacerbating existing inequities if not addressed comprehensively.

Recommendations

Based on the comparative analysis of the three options, a phased approach integrating elements of Options 2 and 3 is recommended. This would allow for a gradual transition, minimizing disruptions while addressing systemic flaws.

Pilot a Hybrid Assessment System

A pilot project should be initiated in a diverse selection of schools across Sri Lanka, incorporating a 60% traditional exam and 40% coursework model. This will provide valuable data on the feasibility, challenges, and impact of the hybrid system. Pilot schools should include urban, suburban, and rural institutions to ensure the model's adaptability across varying contexts (Proposals to Make Sri Lanka's National Examinations More Relevant — Sri Lanka Education Forum — Catalyzing Policy Reforms, 2023).

- Introduce Interdisciplinary Subject Combinations: Allow students to combine subjects across streams (e.g., Mathematics, Economics, and Environmental Science) to foster a well-rounded education.
- Incorporate Project-Based Assessments: Replace exam-centric evaluation with assessments that emphasize interdisciplinary projects and problem-solving, encouraging collaboration and creativity.
- Expand Access and Resources: Provide equitable access to all streams across rural and urban areas by improving resources and teacher training.
- Promote Modular Learning: Implement a credit-based modular system where students can explore multiple disciplines without being confined to a single stream.

Invest in Teacher Training

To ensure the success of any new assessment system, professional development programs for teachers must be prioritized. Training should focus on new grading methods, curriculum adaptation, and best practices for conducting continuous assessments. A national training framework can standardize these efforts, drawing from successful global models such as those used in Singapore (Peter, 2024).

Enhance School Infrastructure

Schools must be equipped with adequate resources to implement coursework-based assessments effectively. This includes providing access to digital tools, creating collaborative learning spaces, and ensuring consistent internet connectivity in rural areas. Targeted investments should aim to bridge the resource gap between urban and rural schools.

Phase-Out High-Stakes Testing Gradually

The reliance on high-stakes exams should be reduced over time, allowing the education system to adapt to holistic assessment methods. Drawing lessons from countries like Finland, which phased out traditional exams over several years, Sri Lanka can implement gradual reforms without overwhelming the system.

Support Underperforming Students

Targeted interventions should be introduced for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These may include subsidized tutoring, mental health services, and extracurricular programs that foster well-rounded development. This will ensure that reforms benefit all students equitably, reducing the risk of further marginalization.

Implementation Strategy

Phase	1. Planning and Capacity Building	2. Pilot Programs and Evaluation	3. Nationwide Rollout and Monitoring
Duration	1 year	2 years	3-5 years
Activities	Forming a national task force, setting benchmarks, developing pilot programs, and teacher training.	Implementing pilots in diverse school settings, collecting data, and conducting evaluations.	Expanding reforms based on pilot outcomes, continuous professional development for educators, and monitoring impacts through standardized yet flexible metrics

Conclusion

Sri Lanka has the opportunity to reform its secondary school assessment system by adopting a more balanced and inclusive approach. Learning from international experiences, the proposed hybrid model aligns with global trends and addresses local challenges. Such reforms promise to reduce exam-related stress, promote equitable access to education, and cultivate the skills necessary for a rapidly changing world.

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Economic Analysis of Sri Lanka's Health Sector Crisis

By Ms. Mariyam Samad, Mr. Dulyana Wanigasooriya

Executive Summary

Sri Lanka's health sector is now at a critical juncture due to the severe economic crisis Sri Lanka faced in 2022. Ongoing challenges include insufficient funding, shortages of essential medicines, declining public trust, and workforce emigration. This policy brief focuses on the current status of Sri Lanka's healthcare from an economic perspective and the impact of the crisis on healthcare delivery and healthcare financing within the country, while also providing potentially actionable policy recommendations to address these issues and improve crisis management within the sector.

Background

Sri Lanka's healthcare sector, of which the majority has long relied on government funding since the early 20th century, is now grappling with severe challenges stemming from the country's economic instability. Public healthcare covers approximately 95% of the country's in-patient and 50% of out-patient care. [9] Yet, the healthcare expenditure, at just 3.8% of the GDP, lags far behind the global averages between 5-12.5% [7], limiting infrastructure, medicine, and workforce retention resources. Sri Lanka's economic downturn has also heightened disparities between public and private healthcare, leaving vulnerable communities with comparatively limited access to essential services.

Key Issues and Evidence Analysis: Economic Turmoil and Healthcare in Crisis

1. Economic Impact on Healthcare Infrastructure

Government healthcare allocations have been dwindling, forcing hospitals to defer modernization while facing maintenance issues. Because of this reduced funding, many hospitals rely on outdated equipment, compromising service quality. [7] [2]

Over-reliance on foreign aid is another prominent issue, introducing vulnerabilities to the system as the funding is neither sufficient nor consistent enough to support the country's long-term requirements. [1]

2. Access to Essential Medicines and Supplies

Recent import restrictions and financial constraints have led to supply chain disruptions of medicines, which paved the way to critical shortages of essential medicines and delayed treatments, thus often causing life-threatening delays to the treatments of patients who require chronic care or urgent surgeries. Patients suffering from conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and mental health disorders have reported difficulties in accessing their medications, which has further exacerbated their health issues. [6] [2]

Also, access to primary healthcare has declined at the national level, from 95% in 2019 to 82% in 2022/2023, where rural areas have been hit the hardest. [3]

3. Healthcare Workforce Challenges

A brain drain of the local healthcare workforce has been observed within the past few decades, which surged with the recent economic crisis. This continued emigration of skilled healthcare professionals, who seek better opportunities abroad while avoiding low salaries and poor working conditions within the local healthcare system, has left local systems under-resourced, while the remaining staff is facing excessive burnout. [5] [4] [2] Among Sri Lanka's undergraduates and new graduates in the medical sector, 24% of them have indicated a desire to emigrate, with the underlying reasons being the requirement of a better quality of life, higher incomes, and the availability of better medical services overseas, while also seeking career development and social security. [7].

4. Erosion of Public Trust

The continuation of service shortages, inequities, and overcrowding in public hospitals have reduced the public's trust in the local healthcare system, with the public increasingly becoming skeptical of public health interventions and patients becoming more hesitant to seek care from the public health system. [7] [2]

5. Mental Health and Social Strain

Vulnerable populations within the country, particularly in rural areas, are experiencing more intense mental health challenges due to general healthcare inaccessibility and the social strains upon them, where societal stigma prevents them from seeking help from the already limited services that exist. The rise of mental health issues within the country due to the recent economic crisis, including increased rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders, is another problem the local healthcare system needs to resolve while already restricted by ongoing economic and workforce constraints. [5] [6]

6. Maternal Health Crisis Amidst Instability

In terms of maternal and child health, the crisis has hindered access to prenatal and postnatal care, increasing the risks associated with childbirth and child health outcomes. The economic instability has led to growing concerns in health-seeking behavior among pregnant women, as many are unable to afford transportation to healthcare facilities or the costs associated with care. The shortages of essential medicines during childbirth, such as Oxytocin injections, exacerbated the issues further as it disrupted the smooth flow of these crucial operations which cannot be delayed [9].

Policy Options and Recommendations

Prescription for Change: Policy Interventions and Global Lessons to Revive Sri Lanka's Health Sector

Strengthening Primary Health Care

Primary healthcare forms the backbone of a country's health system, encompassing services that address individuals' and communities' most common health needs. By emphasizing preventive care, Sri Lanka can reduce the pressure on secondary and tertiary healthcare facilities, which often bear the brunt of resource constraints during crises. Preventive care includes vaccinations, early disease screenings, and health education programs that mitigate the incidence of severe illnesses requiring advanced medical intervention.

One critical approach to enhancing primary care is task shifting. Task shifting involves delegating specific responsibilities traditionally performed by highly trained professionals to mid-level or community healthcare workers. This strategy ensures wider healthcare access without overburdening specialists, especially in underserved rural areas. For example, trained community health workers could assist in monitoring chronic diseases like diabetes and hypertension, enabling hospitals to prioritize critical care. [8] [2]

Reforming Healthcare Financing

Financial constraints are a significant barrier to an equitable healthcare system in Sri Lanka. A key solution lies in reprioritizing budget allocations. While defense and infrastructure often receive substantial portions of the national budget, redirecting these funds toward health can better protect vulnerable populations during economic crises. Internationally, countries facing similar challenges, such as Greece during its financial crisis, successfully reallocated funding to stabilize their healthcare systems [1] Raising healthcare spending to at least 5% of GDP in line with global benchmarks would thus potentially improve the strength of our healthcare system overall. (WHO) Introducing Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) is another effective financing strategy. Through PPPs, private organizations can provide funding, expertise, and resources to improve healthcare services. These partnerships often ensure that essential healthcare remains accessible and affordable while leveraging the efficiency of private sector operations. [8] Also, prioritizing funding for essential medicines, infrastructure upgrades, and workforce development might be a key factor that would enable more effective crisis management in the long run.

Universal Health Coverage (UHC)

Universal Health Coverage (UHC) refers to ensuring that all individuals have access to quality health services without facing financial hardship. It is a cornerstone of equitable health systems and critical to addressing Sri Lanka's health sector crisis. UHC involves two main dimensions: expanding access to essential health services and offering financial protection against healthcare costs.

For Sri Lanka, leveraging its existing free healthcare system to adopt insurance-based models can help bridge gaps in access and affordability. National health insurance schemes have been successfully implemented in Thailand and Ghana, which pool resources and distribute risks across populations. [13]

For example, Thailand's Universal Coverage Scheme (UCS) replaced fragmented healthcare systems with a tax-funded model offering comprehensive outpatient, inpatient, and preventive care. This model significantly reduced out-of-pocket expenses and enhanced equity, although it has faced sustainability issues due to heavy reliance on public funds and increased pressure on healthcare facilities. In contrast, Ghana's National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) employs a mixed-financing model, combining taxes, premiums, and donor contributions. It has improved access to services, particularly in rural areas, but struggles with coverage gaps for informal workers, administrative inefficiencies, and overdependence on external funding. [15]

Drawing from these examples, Sri Lanka could consider a tax-based system for equity or a mixed-financing model to mobilize resources while using subsidies to protect low-income populations. [1] [2] Expanding affordability through targeted subsidies for essential medicines and life-saving procedures could also prevent impoverishment due to healthcare costs while ensuring equitable resource distribution and sustainability.[2]

Optimizing Supply Chains
One of the immediate impacts of Sri Lanka's economic crisis has been disruptions in the supply of essential medicines and medical equipment. A centralized procurement system for medicines can address these challenges. The government can negotiate lower prices and improve inventory management by aggregating demand and minimizing wastage and stockouts. [2] Encouraging local manufacturing of generic medicines is another long-term solution. Domestic production reduces dependency on imports, which are often subject to currency fluctuations and trade restrictions. Incentivizing pharmaceutical companies through tax benefits or subsidies can foster a robust local production ecosystem. [8] [2]

Also, investing in training a well-trained professional technical workforce to control the public health supply chains, through training and certification programs, as demonstrated by Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Rwanda, would be an essential step in optimizing the supply chains and ensuring proper delivery of medical supplies that meet the demands of the healthcare workforce. [10] Strengthening infrastructure, data systems, and regulatory frameworks is essential for efficiency. Governments should collaborate with the private sector and NGOs, to ensure better logistics and storage. Monitoring mechanisms and continuous professional development will further improve the management of supply chains, especially in underserved regions, ensuring the timely delivery of essential healthcare services. [11] [12]

Leveraging Digital Health Solutions
Digital health offers innovative solutions to mitigate resource limitations and improve service delivery. Telemedicine—the remote provision of healthcare services via digital platforms—has gained global traction, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Expanding telemedicine in Sri Lanka can bridge the gap between urban healthcare providers and rural patients, reducing the need for costly and time-consuming travel [8] Furthermore, robust data collection and analysis systems can enable data-driven decision-making in health policy.

For instance, real-time data on disease outbreaks or medicine shortages can help authorities allocate resources effectively and respond proactively. [2] Digital health solutions also alleviate healthcare system burdens by optimizing patient and provider interactions. For example, Malawi's Health Center by Phone initiative connects patients with trained health workers via calls or texts, offering symptom self-assessment, reliable health advice, and referrals. This reduces unnecessary hospital visits and exposure to infections while supporting health worker training and enhancing data visibility. Such scalable, cost-efficient models demonstrate the potential of telehealth to transform healthcare delivery and inform policy in Sri Lanka and beyond. [10]

Building Long-Term Resilience
Beyond immediate interventions, Sri Lanka needs to strengthen its health system's capacity to withstand future shocks. Developing crisis preparedness frameworks is essential. This includes creating emergency funding mechanisms, training healthcare workers for disaster response, and ensuring the availability of essential medical supplies during crises [8] Finally, policy continuity is crucial. Reforms introduced during the current crisis must be institutionalized to ensure they become part of the country's long-term healthcare strategy. Lessons from past crises indicate that temporary measures often fail to deliver sustained improvements if not integrated into broader policy frameworks [1] [2]

Addressing Mental Health Needs
To address the rising mental health needs within the country, increasing funding for community-based mental health programs would be a more efficient program while also bringing more closure to the patients. Also, partnerships with NGOs and religious institutions to promote mental health awareness in culturally sensitive methods would be a better approach to solving the mental health crisis within the country [5] [2]

Workforce Retention and Development
Offering financial incentives, and scholarships, and improving career development opportunities for healthcare workers, particularly those in underserved areas, can significantly help retain the local healthcare workforce. Expanding training programs to increase the number of healthcare professionals, including doctors and nurses, is another critical step. As seen in the NHS's initiatives, addressing burnout through mentorship, career development, and improving work-life balance is essential for retaining healthcare professionals. [11] Additionally, countries like Rwanda and Ethiopia have seen success in retention by implementing workforce support initiatives, offering professional development programs, and better incentives. [12]

Rebuilding the Public Trust
Regular updates on public healthcare reforms, alongside crisis management efforts, would work to increase awareness of government healthcare programs while also building partnerships and trust with the local communities in the healthcare system. Furthermore, enhancing regional preventive care services, such as vaccination programs and mental health awareness programs would further help in building public trust within communities [7] [5]

Financial Recommendations: Allocation of Increased GDP Share

While the preceding sections focused on different policy recommendations and suggestions, this section specifically highlights our financial strategies and recommendations, focusing on and emphasizing optimally allocating a potentially increased GDP share reserved for the local healthcare sector's development, while discussing recommendations that align with each of those topics as well.

- Strengthening Primary Healthcare
    a. Expand task-shifting programs to empower community healthcare workers, particularly in rural areas.
    b. Fund preventive healthcare initiatives, including nationwide vaccination drives, early disease screenings, and health education programs.

- Optimizing Supply Chains
    a. Establish a centralized procurement system for essential medicines and medical equipment to reduce costs and ensure availability.
    b. Invest in local pharmaceutical production to decrease reliance on imports, with incentives like tax benefits for manufacturers.
    c. Develop technical training and certification programs for a professional supply chain workforce, while working on infrastructure development that allows for a better supply chain of medical supplies to and within the country.

- Workforce Retention and Development
    a. Increasing Healthcare Workforce Production and Community Support: Doubling annual enrollment in medical faculties by 2030, targeting to meet the increasing demand for healthcare professionals in rural areas [11]
    b. Offer financial incentives, scholarships, and career development opportunities to retain healthcare workers.

- Digital Health Solutions
    a. Enhance telemedicine platforms to improve healthcare access in remote areas.
    b. Invest in data collection and analysis systems for evidence-based policymaking.

- Mental Health Programs
    a. Support community-based mental health initiatives, integrating them into primary care frameworks.

- Crisis Preparedness and Resilience
    a. Strengthening medical reserves: Establishing a national medical reserve.
    b. Develop emergency funding mechanisms to procure medical supplies during crises.
    c. Train the healthcare workforce in disaster management and preparedness.

Financial Recommendations: Allocation of Increased GDP Share

While the preceding sections focused on different policy recommendations and suggestions, this section specifically highlights our financial strategies and recommendations, focusing on and emphasizing optimally allocating a potentially increased GDP share reserved for the local healthcare sector's development, while discussing recommendations that align with each of those topics as well.

- Strengthening Primary Healthcare
  a. Expand task-shifting programs to empower community healthcare workers, particularly in rural areas.
  b. Fund preventive healthcare initiatives, including nationwide vaccination drives, early disease screenings, and health education programs.

- Optimizing Supply Chains
  a. Establish a centralized procurement system for essential medicines and medical equipment to reduce costs and ensure availability.
  b. Invest in local pharmaceutical production to decrease reliance on imports, with incentives like tax benefits for manufacturers.
  c. Develop technical training and certification programs for a professional supply chain workforce, while working on infrastructure development that allows for a better supply chain of medical supplies to and within the country.

- Workforce Retention and Development
  a. Increasing Healthcare Workforce Production and Community Support: Doubling annual enrollment in medical faculties by 2030, targeting to meet the increasing demand for healthcare professionals in rural areas [11]
  b. Offer financial incentives, scholarships, and career development opportunities to retain healthcare workers.

- Digital Health Solutions
  a. Enhance telemedicine platforms to improve healthcare access in remote areas.
  b. Invest in data collection and analysis systems for evidence-based policymaking.

- Mental Health Programs
  a. Support community-based mental health initiatives, integrating them into primary care frameworks.

- Crisis Preparedness and Resilience
  a. Strengthening medical reserves: Establishing a national medical reserve.
  b. Develop emergency funding mechanisms to procure medical supplies during crises.
  c. Train the healthcare workforce in disaster management and preparedness.

Short-term actions and long-term solutions

(A) Short-term actions
1. Establish an emergency funding mechanism for the immediate procurement of essential medicines.
2. Conduct rapid nationwide mental health screenings to identify and address critical cases.
3. Enhance digital healthcare platforms like telemedicine to ensure continuity of care.

(B) Long-term solutions
1. Build sustainable reserves of essential medicines.
2. Develop a robust framework for retaining healthcare professionals through competitive salaries and professional development opportunities.
3. Institutionalize CHW programs and implement scalable workforce production policies.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka's healthcare sector is currently in a state of crisis following the country's recent economic downturn in 2022, which exacerbated long-standing issues like underfunding, medicine shortages, and workforce emigration. Public trust in the system has considerably eroded over time, and disparities between urban and rural healthcare access have deepened, leaving vulnerable populations within different socio-economic groups disproportionately affected. To address these challenges, our key policy recommendations include increasing healthcare expenditure, strengthening primary healthcare, optimizing supply chains, and leveraging digital health solutions. Additionally, fostering workforce retention, expanding mental health services within the country, and rebuilding public trust through transparency and improved preventive care on a regional level are essential steps. By adopting these measures, Sri Lanka can build a more equitable and resilient healthcare system capable of withstanding future crises.

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What & Who is Education for?
A Philosophical Exploration

By Mr. Rivi Wijesekara

Education is a powerful tool that shapes the identity, culture, and socio-economic future of a nation. In the context of Sri Lanka, the evolution of the education system reflects a tapestry of colonial legacies, socio-political movements, and philosophical questions about the very purpose of education. This article delves into the historical milestones of Sri Lanka's educational journey, such as the introduction of free education by C.W.W. Kannangara and the Sinhala Only Act under S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, while also exploring the philosophical underpinnings of education. By examining these key moments and using global theoretical perspectives, this article aims to explore who education is truly for and what purposes it should serve.

The Foundation of Free Education: C.W.W. Kannangara's Vision
In the early 20th century, Sri Lanka's education system was heavily influenced by its colonial past. Access to quality education was largely limited to urban elites, creating significant socio-economic disparities. Enter C.W.W. Kannangara, often celebrated as the "Father of Free Education" in Sri Lanka. In the 1940s, Kannangara championed a series of reforms that introduced free education from primary to tertiary levels, aiming to democratize access to knowledge and foster upward mobility.

Kannangara's vision resonated with what education researcher Gert Biesta (2008) calls the need to shift from a focus on mere "measurement" of learning outcomes to understanding education's deeper purpose. For Kannangara, education was a vehicle for national development and individual empowerment, emphasizing both practical skills and civic responsibilities. His policies laid the groundwork for a more inclusive society, echoing Biesta's (2008) call to reconnect with the question of purpose in education.

Education as a Means of Economic and Social Mobility
Kannangara's reforms were not just about accessibility but also about the content and language of education. English, as the medium of instruction, had been a barrier for many rural students. Kannangara's introduction of mother-tongue education was intended to reduce this barrier, reflecting a philosophy that learning should be culturally relevant.

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This aligns with Broudy's (2017) concept of "types of knowledge" and the purposes education should serve: not just intellectual and vocational, but also cultural and moral development. However, the philosophical ideals behind free education encountered challenges in practice. The rapidly expanding system struggled with resources and teacher quality, reflecting a broader debate highlighted by Bowles (1978): the tension between education as a means of enlightenment and as a tool for economic production. In Sri Lanka, education became a ladder for social mobility, but the focus often shifted to achieving economic ends, sidelining broader educational values.

The Sinhala Only Act: Language, Identity, and Exclusion

The introduction of the Sinhala Only Act in 1956 by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike marked another significant milestone in the history of Sri Lankan education. The Act made Sinhala the sole official language, replacing English and aiming to promote national unity and cultural identity. While it intended to provide greater access to government jobs for the Sinhala-speaking majority, it also marginalized the Tamil-speaking population, sparking ethnic tensions that would eventually culminate in decades of conflict.

This decision underscores the complexity of education's role in shaping identity. By favoring one language over another, the policy demonstrated how education can both unify and divide. It aligns with Sant's (2019) critique of education's potential to serve hegemonic interests, highlighting the dangers of a system that prioritizes certain groups over others. The language policy, though framed as a move towards greater inclusion, effectively excluded a significant portion of the population from opportunities and participation in the public sphere.

The Purpose of Education: A Philosophical Debate

Education's purpose has always been a subject of philosophical debate. John Dewey, a prominent educational philosopher, emphasized the role of education in cultivating democratic citizens. For Dewey, schools should not just prepare students for work but also active participation in a democratic society (Schutz, 2001). In Sri Lanka, the debate over the purpose of education has mirrored these global discussions.

The introduction of free education and the Sinhala Only Act was underpinned by visions of education as a tool for national development and cultural identity formation. Yet, as the global economy changed, so too did the emphasis on Sri Lanka's education system. The focus gradually shifted from civic and cultural development to economic productivity, reflecting global trends toward neoliberal policies that prioritize skills and workforce development, as highlighted by Jacobson's (2016) critique of the realities of 21st-century capitalism.

Education for Human Flourishing vs. Market Demands

In recent years, the conversation about the purpose of education has expanded to include the concept of "human flourishing." This perspective, promoted by education theorists, posits that education should aim not just to prepare individuals for the labor market but to cultivate well-rounded, critical thinkers capable of contributing to the greater good (Education for Human Flourishing - NCEE, 2022). In Sri Lanka, this raises questions about how well the current system aligns with these ideals.

The shift towards standardized testing and measurable outcomes, influenced by global trends, risks narrowing the educational experience. In the Sri Lankan context, this focus has often translated into a high-stakes exam culture, where students are groomed for passing tests rather than for holistic development. This echoes Biesta's (2008) warning about the dangers of an "age of measurement" that loses sight of education's deeper purposes.

Towards a Democratic and Inclusive Education

For education to truly serve all citizens, it must be democratic and inclusive. This requires a system that values diverse types of knowledge and perspectives, an idea emphasized by Broudy's advocacy for multiple educational purposes. In Sri Lanka, the challenge remains to balance the demands of economic development with the need for civic and cultural education. The rise of private tuition classes and the focus on competitive examinations suggest a system leaning towards economic imperatives rather than democratic ideals.

Regmi's (2016) call for "popular education" critiques the hegemony of capitalist-driven models and advocates for an education that empowers individuals and communities. In the Sri Lankan context, this means revisiting the foundational principles of Kannangara's reforms while adapting to contemporary challenges.

Conclusion: Reconnecting with the Purpose of Education

As Sri Lanka moves forward, the question "What & Who is Education For?" remains central. The country's educational journey, from Kannangara's vision of free education to the linguistic shifts under Bandaranaike, illustrates the tensions between inclusivity and exclusion, economic goals, and human flourishing. Reconnecting with the philosophical roots of education—cultivating a just, democratic, and inclusive society—requires rethinking the current focus on exams and employability.

Education, as Dewey argued, should empower individuals not only to succeed economically but also to engage as thoughtful, active citizens (Schutz, 2001). In Sri Lanka, this means creating a system that nurtures curiosity, critical thinking, and a sense of shared purpose. By revisiting the foundational ideals and adapting them to contemporary realities, Sri Lanka can shape an education system that truly serves all its people, fostering both personal and societal growth.

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Opportunities for Digitalization of Sri Lanka's Public Sector

By Ms. Aknara Fonseka, Mr.Viduranga Landers

Executive Summary

The digitalization of Sri Lanka's public sector is pivotal for enhancing governance, improving public service delivery, and stimulating sustainable economic growth. Despite the ambitious goals set forth in initiatives like the National Digital Economy Strategy 2030 towards building a digital economy by fostering innovation, the country faces persistent challenges such as infrastructure gaps, low digital literacy, and cybersecurity concerns. However, significant opportunities exist to increase efficiency, foster citizen engagement, and position Sri Lanka as a regional digital leader. This policy brief recommends strategic investments in digital infrastructure, educational reforms to enhance digital literacy, the implementation of robust data protection laws, and cross-sector collaboration to ensure an inclusive and secure digital transformation.

Background

Sri Lanka aspires to transform into a digitally empowered economy by 2030, as outlined in the National Digital Economy Strategy 2030 (Ministry of Technology, 2023). The strategy focuses on enhancing digital infrastructure, promoting innovation, and increasing the digital economy's contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Current efforts include digitizing government services and investing in broadband expansion. However, progress has been uneven due to disparities in infrastructure and varying levels of digital literacy nationwide. Chanuka (2024) discusses these challenges emphasizing Sri Lanka's digital literacy rate of only 46% and rural internet usage lagging at 35%, which limits the ability of many citizens to engage with e-governance and digital services.

Learning from global leaders like Estonia and Singapore provides valuable insights into successful digital transformation. Estonia's e-Residency program and X-Road platform have streamlined public services and data exchange, offering a secure and interoperable system for digital governance (Sandaruwani, 2021). With 93.2% of Estonian households having internet access and high digital literacy rates, Estonia's robust digital infrastructure sets a benchmark for nations like Sri Lanka, which seeks to advance its own digital ecosystem (Statistics Estonia, 2023). Estonia's focus on privacy and its decentralized data architecture present scalable models for Sri Lanka to emulate, particularly in creating transparent and efficient public services.

Learning from global leaders like Estonia and Singapore provides valuable insights into successful digital transformation. Estonia's e-Residency program and X-Road platform have streamlined public services and data exchange, offering a secure and interoperable system for digital governance (Sandaruwani, 2021). With 93.2% of Estonian households having internet access and high digital literacy rates, Estonia's robust digital infrastructure sets a benchmark for nations like Sri Lanka, which seeks to advance its own digital ecosystem (Statistics Estonia, 2023). Estonia's focus on privacy and its decentralized data architecture present scalable models for Sri Lanka to emulate, particularly in creating transparent and efficient public services.

Singapore's Smart Nation initiative emphasizes citizen-centric services and ensures digital inclusion through innovative technologies. Initiatives such as digital ID integration, seamless public service access, and real-time payment platforms underline the importance of a user-friendly approach to digital governance (Digital Blueprint Singapore). Singapore's success in fostering public-private collaboration offers a pathway for Sri Lanka to bridge gaps in technology adoption and achieve widespread digital literacy.

Additionally, India is also an emerging global leader with advancements in digital infrastructure. Notably, initiatives like the Aadhaar system and the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), have laid a foundation for broader technological integration. Aadhaar, a unique digital identity program, has reshaped the citizenship and welfare landscape, enhancing access to services and enabling the government to deliver benefits more effectively (Chaudhuri & König, 2017). UPI, which revolutionized digital payments, has not only streamlined financial transactions within India but also positioned the country as a leader in digital financial inclusion (George et al., 2023). These technologies have influenced Sri Lanka, with collaborative efforts aimed at fostering a stronger digital impact in the region. Programs supported by organizations like the UNDP are working to leverage India's expertise to drive Sri Lanka's digital transformation. By introducing UPI-based solutions and drawing on India's experience in digital identity management, Sri Lanka can enhance its financial systems and expand access to essential services (UNDP, 2024).

Challenges and Opportunities

As Sri Lanka approaches a turning point in its digital journey, the digital world stands ready to redefine its society and economy. However, this comes with its own challenges rooted deeply in the country's economy and infrastructure:

- Infrastructure gaps: As highlighted by Wattegama (2024), internet usage in urban areas stands at 45%, while only 35% of rural populations have access, underscoring the unequal broadband access and affordability. This gap extends to mobile phone ownership, with 84% of urban residents owning a mobile device, compared to just 77% in rural regions. Additionally, computer ownership shows a similar disparity, with 35.6% of urban households having a computer, versus only 20.3% in rural households. This infrastructure gap creates a cycle of exclusion, preventing many communities from benefiting from digital advancements, while others move ahead.

- Skills shortages: The National IT Workforce Survey (2019) projected an annual shortfall of 12,140 technology graduates, highlighting a critical skills gap in Sri Lanka's digital transformation efforts. Beyond technical expertise, language and soft skills are equally vital for a thriving digital sector. However, only 22% of Sri Lankans above the age of 15 are proficient in English, and just 46% demonstrate digital literacy (Wattegama 2024), highlighting the need for targeted educational initiatives to bridge these gaps and build a workforce equipped for the demands of a digital country.

- Low trust in digital services: As Sri Lanka's digital footprint grows, a lack of developed regulatory frameworks and insufficient protection for personal data reduce public confidence in digital platforms. While 26% of internet users in Sri Lanka have accessed government information online, only 2% have interacted with government officers through web-based platforms, and just 4% have conducted transactions with the government (Wattegama 2024). This lack of trust in digital services, along with a limited understanding of how personal data is protected, creates resistance to the adoption of e-governance tools and other digital platforms. If not addressed, these issues could deepen the divides already in place, leaving vulnerable populations further behind in an increasingly digital country.

Amid these challenges, Sri Lanka holds significant potential for rapid digital transformation, as the country is well-positioned to digitalize both its public and private sectors. Wijesinha (2023) discusses the strong growth prospects of Sri Lanka's IT services sector, which has been expanding at an impressive annual rate of 14.7% from 2018 to 2020 and now contributes 7.8% of total national exports. This progress highlights the sector's capacity to drive economic growth and innovation. At the same time, the integration of digital technologies into public services can revolutionize governance by enhancing efficiency, transparency, and accessibility. Notably, in 2023 individual internet usage in Sri Lanka increased by 3.9%, outpacing the global average of 1.8%, while mobile penetration soared to 148%, accompanied by significant growth in social media usage (Wattegama 2024). These advances are the first steps in streamlining e-governance initiatives and automating administrative processes, which aim to reduce bureaucratic delays and improve trust in public institutions (ICTA, 2024). As digital platforms become more accessible, citizens can expect a more responsive government, allowing them to participate actively in decision-making and be part of a more inclusive digital future.

Enhanced access to education and healthcare is another significant opportunity. Digital platforms can bridge gaps in essential services, especially in rural areas, through e-learning and telemedicine initiatives (Ministry of Health, 2023). Furthermore, Sri Lanka's strategic location positions it to become a regional leader in digital innovation, potentially serving as a hub for IT outsourcing and digital commerce (Ministry of Technology, 2023).

Policy Recommendations
To fully harness the potential of digitalization, Sri Lanka needs to implement a comprehensive set of policy recommendations that address the identified challenges while leveraging the opportunities.

Firstly, investment in digital infrastructure is crucial. The government should expand broadband coverage and improve affordability, particularly focusing on rural areas to bridge the urban-rural divide (Ministry of Technology, 2023). This expansion should include investing in fiber-optic networks and promoting competitive pricing models to make internet access more accessible to all citizens.

In terms of skills development, implementing nationwide digital literacy programs is essential. These programs should aim to upskill professionals and provide training in emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, and the Internet of Things (IoT) (Wattegama, 2024). Additionally, language training to improve English proficiency can help mitigate language barriers that limit access to digital resources.

Supporting innovation is another critical area. The government should fund research and development in cutting-edge technologies and create an environment that fosters entrepreneurship and startup growth (Ministry of Technology, 2023). Incentives for private sector investment in technology can also stimulate innovation and economic growth.

Inclusivity must be at the heart of digital transformation efforts. Bridging the digital divide requires providing subsidized internet access and devices to underserved communities (Wijesinha, 2022). Establishing community digital centers equipped with training resources can empower rural populations and marginalized groups (Nandasara & Mikami, 2014). Ensuring that government digital services are available in multiple languages and accessible formats will make them more inclusive and user-friendly (Ministry of Education & ICTA, 2023).

Educational reforms are vital for long-term success. Integrating digital literacy into the national curriculum from primary education upwards can build a foundation for a digitally competent workforce (Ministry of Education & ICTA, 2023). Teacher training programs should be enhanced to improve educators' digital competencies, enabling them to effectively teach and engage students in a digital environment (Rajaguru, 2021). Exploring the use of AI in education can also personalize learning and address individual educational challenges (Thilakarathna & Godage, 2024).

Governance improvements are necessary to build public trust. Enacting comprehensive data protection laws will safeguard personal information and enhance confidence in digital platforms (Wattegama, 2021). Strengthening cybersecurity infrastructure and protocols can mitigate risks associated with increased digitalization (Ministry of Technology, 2023). Implementing secure digital identity solutions for citizens can streamline access to services and reduce fraud (ICTA, 2022).

Finally, fostering collaboration across sectors is essential. Public-private partnerships can leverage resources and expertise, driving innovation and efficiency (Rassool & Dissanayake, 2019). Engaging communities in the design and implementation of digital initiatives ensures that solutions meet local needs and are more readily adopted (Gamage & Halpin, 2007).

International cooperation with global entities allows Sri Lanka to adopt best practices and access technological advancements (Hanna, 2007).

Conclusion

Digital transformation is crucial for Sri Lanka's future, offering the opportunity to address longstanding challenges and build a more inclusive, efficient, and sustainable society. By tackling gaps in infrastructure, bridging skill shortages, and building trust in digital services, Sri Lanka can unlock the potential of technology to drive growth across sectors. Drawing inspiration from global success stories, like those of Estonia and Singapore, and implementing comprehensive, inclusive policies, will ensure that the digital journey benefits all citizens, leaving no one behind. This transformation is not only a necessity but an opportunity to position Sri Lanka as a regional leader in digital innovation.

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Addressing The Mental Health Crisis among Sri Lankan Youth

By Ms. Aknara Fonseka, Mr. Rivi Wijesekara

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Mental health among students and youth is an escalating global crisis that demands immediate attention. The prevalence of anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges is alarmingly high, exacerbated by factors such as academic pressure, social stigma, and systemic inadequacies in support infrastructure. For Sri Lanka, a nation emerging from decades of civil conflict and grappling with economic and social upheavals, these challenges are even more pronounced among its student and youth populations. Academic stress, driven by an intensely competitive education system, further compounds these issues creating a relentless cycle of pressure and emotional strain that significantly impacts mental well-being.

Drawing on studies from Sri Lanka and global perspectives, this article explores the crisis's dimensions, its root causes, and potential strategies to address it. Understanding the factors at play is essential for fostering a healthier and more resilient generation.

The Mental Health Landscape in Sri Lanka

Prevalence of Mental Health Issues
Adolescence and young adulthood are critical stages for emotional and psychological development. In Sri Lanka, studies reveal alarming rates of mental health issues among youth. A 2010 study by Rodrigo et al. identified high levels of anxiety and depression in adolescent students driven by academic pressure, familial conflict, and lack of supportive environments

The Sri Lankan context adds unique stressors that exacerbate these issues. The 30-year civil war, which ended in 2009, left significant psychological trauma in the North-East with a 2014 study reporting emotional and behavioral problems in 13.8% of primary school children (Shoiba et al, 2022). The 2004 Tsunami also profoundly impacted children's mental health, with 40.9% of adolescents meeting the criteria for PTSD due to trauma such as property destruction, loss of loved ones, and life-threatening experiences (Wickrama and Kasper, 2007).

More recently, the Easter Sunday bombings in 2019 killed over 250 people creating widespread fear and insecurity (Shoiba et al, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic added to these challenges. A study conducted in Eastern Sri Lanka revealed that 75% of school students experienced heightened stress and anxiety during the pandemic due to closed schools, physical isolation, and disruptions in their daily lives (Shoiba et al, 2022). Similarly, a survey of medical undergraduates during the pandemic found:

- 40.8% experienced depressive symptoms
- 34.0% reported anxiety
- 24.7% showed elevated stress levels

In addition to this, suicide remains one of the most pressing mental health concerns in Sri Lanka. Approximately 4,000 people die by suicide annually, with the majority of victims aged 15 to 44 (Rajasinghe, 2023). Common triggers include social stigma, substance abuse, and limited access to mental health resources. Furthermore, economic hardships including unemployment and poverty amplify the stress on young people, leaving many feeling trapped with limited opportunities and support.

These statistics underscore the urgent need for Sri Lanka to address mental health challenges among its youth. Comprehensive strategies, such as enhancing school-based counseling services and expanding community mental health programs, are essential for improving the psychological well-being of young Sri Lankans.

Cultural Stigma

One of the most significant barriers to addressing mental health issues in Sri Lanka is cultural stigma. Mental health is often misunderstood, with individuals labeled as "weak" or "unstable" if they seek help. Such stigmatization discourages students and young adults from discussing their struggles or accessing professional care. As Ginige et al. (2021) point out, mental health literacy among teachers, parents, and students is strikingly low in many parts of Sri Lanka.

As discussed by Samarasekare et al. (2012), many individuals in rural Sri Lanka avoid seeking Western medical treatments for psychiatric conditions, instead turning to religious rituals and cultural practices due to stigma and limited awareness of mental health. While these alternatives may offer temporary placebo effects, they fail to address underlying issues, leading to the recurrence or worsening of mental health problems.

Key Contributors to the Crisis

Academic Stress and High Expectations

Sri Lanka's education system is highly competitive, with examinations such as the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level and Advanced Level determining students' futures. This pressure to excel academically often overshadows other aspects of development. Hillman (2016) argues that the relentless pursuit of academic success, coupled with insufficient support for emotional well-being, can lead to burnout and mental health deterioration. For Sri Lankan students, these issues are further intensified by a lack of comprehensive mental health services within schools and universities.

Even in schools that do offer counseling services, they often neglect broader well-being by prioritizing academic results over holistic development. Schools typically assess how mental health issues affect academic performance but fail to consider the broader impact on students' lives, such as relationships, confidence, and self-growth.

Lack of Mental Healthcare Resources within Educational Settings
Many schools in Sri Lanka lack trained counselors or accessible mental health professionals. Often, the individuals fulfilling these roles are unqualified teachers who lack formal training in psychology or counseling. Additionally, their primary responsibilities as educators, such as teaching, lesson planning, and administrative duties, limit the time and focus they can dedicate to supporting students' mental health needs. This dual role compromises the quality of mental health care provided and underscores the need for a dedicated, trained workforce in schools. Meanwhile, there are qualified psychology graduates in the country who remain unemployed, highlighting a disconnect between available resources and their allocation. Bridging this gap by creating pathways to employ these graduates in schools could significantly improve the quality and availability of mental health support in educational settings.

Another critical yet overlooked aspect is the importance of confidentiality in counseling services. A lack of trust in the system, particularly concerns over breaches of confidentiality, discourages students from seeking help. Without guarantees of privacy, young people may hesitate to discuss their struggles, leaving issues unaddressed. Implementing strict penalties for breaches of confidentiality is essential to rebuild trust and ensure students feel safe accessing support services

Economic and Social Pressures
The economic instability in Sri Lanka, exacerbated by the recent financial crisis, has profound implications for young people. Uncertainty about job prospects and financial struggles within families contribute to chronic stress and feelings of hopelessness. VanderLind (2017) highlights how financial hardships can negatively impact students' learning outcomes and mental well-being.

Social Media and Globalization
While globalization and digital technology have brought new opportunities, they have also introduced challenges. Social media platforms create environments where young people compare themselves to unrealistic ideals, fostering feelings of inadequacy and loneliness. Holm-Hadulla and Koutsoukou-Argyraki (2015) note that the globalized world's competitive and interconnected nature exacerbates these issues, particularly for students already facing cultural or economic challenges.

The study by Inthusha and Kajananthan (2023) highlights that social influences, social media use and internet addiction significantly increase cyberbullying behaviors among Sri Lankan university students. These behaviors heighten mental health challenges, particularly for vulnerable youth coping with cultural and economic difficulties.

Lessons from Global Practices

Early Interventions and Preventive Strategies

Hillman's (2016) work emphasizes the importance of early intervention in addressing mental health issues among students. The studies Hillman has presented in her work show that three-quarters of all mental illnesses manifest before the mid-20s, and this critical window for intervention should begin in school environments. Proactive measures such as regular mental health screenings, stress management workshops, and peer support groups can help mitigate problems before they escalate. Singapore's approach, as detailed by O'Brien et al. (2008), offers valuable insights. By integrating mental health promotion and counseling services into higher education institutions, Singapore has created a more supportive environment for its students.

Accessible Counseling Services

The establishment of accessible mental health services within educational institutions is critical. Holm-Hadulla and Koutsoukou-Argyraki (2015) advocate for comprehensive counseling programs tailored to students' specific needs. In Sri Lanka, this could involve training school counselors to address cultural stigmas and provide a safe space for students to discuss their issues without fear of judgment. Another suggestion would be to use social and mass media to create awareness about the said stigma, as it provides easy access to a large target population.

Enhancing Teacher Mental Health Literacy

Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping students' mental health outcomes. Ginige et al. (2021) demonstrated that targeted training programs could significantly improve teachers' ability to identify and support students experiencing mental health challenges. Expanding such programs across Sri Lanka would equip educators with the tools to act as frontline responders.

Recommendations for Sri Lanka

1. Policy Reforms

To address the mental health crisis, Sri Lanka's policymakers must prioritize systemic reforms:
- Integrate Mental Health Education: Embed mental health awareness into school curricula to normalize discussions around psychological well-being.
- Establish National Standards: Develop guidelines for mental health services in educational institutions, ensuring consistency and quality.

2. Infrastructure Development

Building a robust support system within schools and universities is essential:
- School-Based Counseling Services: Allocate resources for training counselors and establishing mental health centers within educational institutions.
- Digital Platforms: Leverage technology to provide remote counseling and mental health resources, particularly for students in rural areas.

3. Community and Cultural Initiatives

Addressing cultural stigmas requires a community-driven approach:

- Awareness Campaigns: Launch nationwide initiatives to destigmatize mental health issues, using media and youth influencers.
- Parental Engagement: Educate parents about the importance of mental health and how to support their children effectively.
- Facilitate Youth Social Responsibility Programs: Design and implement initiatives where students engage in community projects, fostering a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

4. Academic Reforms

Redesigning the education system to reduce undue stress is crucial:

- Holistic Assessments: Move away from examination-centric evaluations toward more holistic approaches that consider extracurricular activities and life skills.
- Flexible Learning Pathways: Provide diverse academic and vocational options to reduce the pressure of conforming to traditional career paths.
- Encourage Recreational Activities: Mandate the inclusion of regular recreational periods within school timetables to promote relaxation and reduce stress. These activities can include art, sports, and music programs tailored to students' interests and needs.

The mental health crisis among Sri Lankan students and youth is a complex issue requiring a multi-pronged approach. By learning from global best practices and addressing the unique challenges faced by Sri Lankan youth, the country can create a future where mental health is no longer sidelined. Hillman's (2016) call to action—viewing mental health as integral to education—should serve as a guiding principle for policymakers, educators, and communities. With concerted effort, Sri Lanka can pave the way for a generation that is not only academically accomplished but also emotionally resilient.

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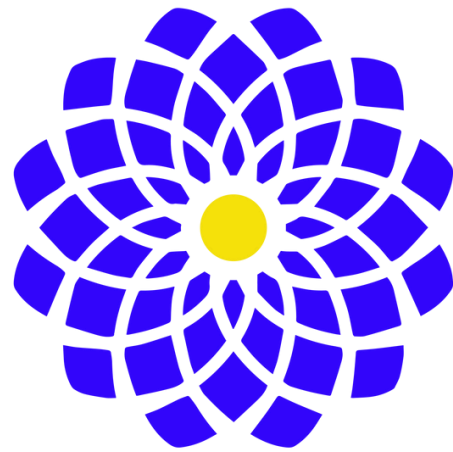
Signing of the U.S.Constitution painted by Junius Brutus Stearns

"*We the People...*"

The signing of the United States Constitution on September 17, 1787, stands as a defining moment in the annals of leadership and public policy. Forged in the crucible of compromise, the Constitution emerged not merely as a legal document but as a testament to the power of visionary leadership committed to reconciling disparate interests for a common purpose. It underscored the necessity of creating enduring frameworks to manage the delicate balance between liberty and order, individual rights, and collective governance.

For leadership, the Constitution offers a case study in the art of navigating complexity. Figures like George Washington, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton exemplified how leaders must rise above personal and factional interests to champion the broader public good. Their actions illuminated the enduring truth that great leadership requires foresight, resilience, and the ability to inspire trust across deep divides.

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