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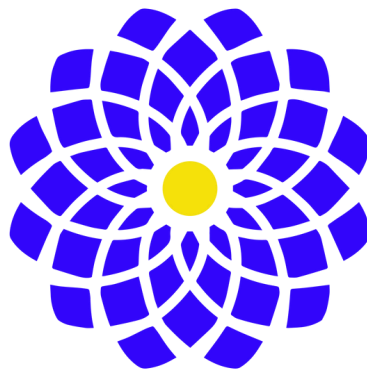
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# Table of Contents

---



**THE EDITORIAL** (Pg 6)



**BY MADARA RANMUTHUGALA: PERSPECTIVES ON SRI LANKA'S HIV  
POLICY FRAMEWORK** (Pg 8)



**BY VEDARALALAGE HALLAJ SHAFI LUKMAN HASSAN : VAPING WOES:  
ADDRESSING THE RESURGENCE OF TOBACCO CONSUMPTION  
THROUGH LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND POLICY PLANNING** (Pg 19)



**BY POORNIMA PREMARATHNE : PHOTO ESSAY - HOW PETTAH  
MARKET SHAPES ITS OWN MARKETING POLICY: A VISUAL  
INTERPRETATION OF ORGANIC COMMERCE** (Pg 27)



**BY A.A.V.D.P. WEERASINGHE : NATIONALISM AND NEOLIBERALISM:  
THE GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY DRIVING FAR-RIGHT MOVEMENTS** (Pg 34)



**BY REHANA THOWFEEK : REFLECTIONS FROM VISITS TO THE  
AUSTRALIAN PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION AND THE OFFICE OF IMPACT  
ANALYSIS** (Pg 44)



**BY THISURI ROJIE EKANAYAKE : THE CASE FOR BUS RAPID  
TRANSIT SYSTEMS: LESSONS FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD** (Pg 49)



7

BY JEREMY JOHN DE ZILWA : **A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A  
MERITOCRACY CREATED BY SRI LANKA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM** (Pg 55)

8

BY SHAYANI JAYASINGHE : **INTERVIEW WITH REHAN JAYAWICKRAMA  
- RELEVANCE OF PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION** (Pg 64)

9

BY MATHUSHA SABHANAYAKAM : **NATIONAL NUTRITION POLICY:  
STRENGTHENING INCLUSIVITY AND ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY** (Pg 73)

10

BY FIONA MIREMBE-KIGGUNDU & MR. HENRY SEBUNYA : **KEEPING  
CHILDREN IN SCHOOL DURING FUTURE PANDEMICS - NEVER SHOULD  
SCHOOLS CLOSE AGAIN** (Pg 80)

11

BY SHAYANI JAYASINGHE : **INTERVIEW WITH RANJITH RUBASINGHE  
ISSUES RELATED TO SRI LANKA'S TRANSPORT SECTOR AND POLICY  
PERSPECTIVES** (Pg 83)

12

BY SASANKAA GUNATHILAKE : **SOUTH ASIA'S STRUGGLE WITH  
GENDER PARITY - A PERSPECTIVE ON THE WORKFORCE INCLUSION  
POLICIES IN INDIA, SRI LANKA, AND BANGLADESH** (Pg 90)

13

BY GAYANI LAKMALI PATHIRAGE : **RETHINKING ELDERLY CARE  
POLICY IN SRI LANKA: POLICY INSIGHTS FROM JAPAN WITH A CASE  
FOCUS ON THE HAKUJUIKAI FACILITY IN HIGASHI-MURAYAMA** (Pg 95)



14

BY AMASHA FERNANDO : **REIMAGINING REFUGEE POLICY: LESSONS  
FROM THE ROHINGYA AND SYRIAN CRISES** (Pg 104)

15

BY SITHHARA GURUGE : **REGULATING AI-GENERATED ELECTION  
PROPAGANDA IN SRI LANKA: BARRIERS, TRADE-OFFS AND THE NEED  
FOR A NEW APPROACH** (Pg 108)

16

BY DULYANA WANIGASOORIYA - **SRI LANKA'S PATHWAY TO CLIMATE  
RESILIENCE** (Pg 114)

17

BY DR. VISULA ABEYSURIYA - **GENETIC SCREENING FOR  
PERSONALIZED HEALTH IN SRI LANKA: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE** (Pg 126)

Greetings from BALPP!

It is with immense pleasure that we launch the third issue of the Policy Tribune published by the Research Wing (RW) of the Bandaranaike Academy for Leadership and Public Policy (BALPP).

I am pleased to mention that this issue has dedicated itself to publishing the work of emerging scholars, providing them with a platform to share their research, build their academic profiles and celebrate their achievements. As Sri Lanka's first and premier institution on public policy education and leadership training, the BALPP is dedicated to empowering and encouraging emerging scholars to connect, collaborate and engage in scholarly discourses on policy planning, policy implementation, strategic leadership and ethical governance. In aligning with the core goals and objectives of the BALPP, the third issue of the Policy Tribune is dedicated to this cause by educating the public on policy and leadership related matters through the scholarly contributions of emerging scholars.

This issue features 17 submissions, including articles, policy briefs, a photo essay, two interviews and opinion pieces on contemporary policy challenges and governance related issues. These submissions reflect policy failures in diverse sectors ranging from education, nutrition, transport, climate change to disparities in governing systems at national and global levels and highlight strategies and guidelines that should be adopted by leaders and policy makers to address these disparities. Through such initiatives, we sincerely hope to empower young scholars to be more policy oriented and responsible citizens in their communities, workplaces and in the wider society.

Furthermore, we would like to extend our gratitude to youth-led civil society organizations and think tanks in Sri Lanka such as The Strivers' Network (TSN), Arutha, Child Action Lanka and Ugandan based NGO, Princess Project Initiative (PPI) for encouraging their team members to contribute to the Policy Tribune on contemporary policy and governance related challenges. The activities carried out by these organizations are admirable as they have managed to raise awareness and educate the public on contemporary issues relating to policy planning, leadership and governance through evidence-based research, scholarly discussions and advocacy.

We would also like to extend our gratitude to 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 endeavor was a very good learning experience for emerging scholars as they got the opportunity to be trained and mentored by experts and senior scholars from the fields of leadership and policy planning.

We would like to thank all the contributing authors for their dedication and strong commitment to making this publication a successful and meaningful one.

It is our pleasure 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 governance, leadership and public policy to contribute to the next issue of the BALPP Policy Tribune which is expected to be published in October 2025.

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# Perspectives on Sri Lanka's HIV Policy Framework

By Madara Ranmuthugala

Sri Lanka has maintained a low-level HIV epidemic since 1989, with prevalence consistently below 0.1%. Despite this, recent data signals concerning increases (NSACP, 2024). While the cause is unknown, possible causes might include increased testing, insufficient awareness campaigns, and mental stress due to economic and political constraints.

In 2023, seropositivity rose to 0.07% among 1,009,685 tested, compared to 0.03% in 2020. By the first quarter of 2024, 207 new cases were reported, raising the cumulative total to 5,912. This marked an increase from previous years, including 2023, which saw 165 new cases in the same period. Male-to-female ratios remained stark, hovering around 7:1 in recent years, compared to a significantly lower ratio of 3.4:1 in 2020. The trend reveals fluctuating testing numbers and increasing seropositivity rates, increasing from the historical 0.03% to 0.04% in 2021 and 0.06% in 2022. (Refer Figures 1 to 4).

**Figure 1: Seropositivity rate for 2023**

Reported HIV/AIDS cases 2023										
Quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the beginning of the quarter	HIV cases reported during the quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the end of the quarter	Reported young HIV cases (15-24 years)			Cumulative HIV cases by gender			Reported AIDS deaths
				M	F	TG	M	F	TG	
1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter	5,011	165	5,176	22	3	0	3,806	1,361	9	15
2 <sup>nd</sup> Quarter	5,176	181	5,357	26	3	0	3,968	1,379	10	13
3 <sup>rd</sup> Quarter	5,357	139	5,496	24	1	0	4095	1391	10	15
4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter	5,496	209	5,705	20	5	1	4272	1422	11	16
Reported HIV/AIDS cases 2023										
Quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the beginning of the quarter	HIV cases reported during the quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the end of the quarter	Reported young HIV cases (15-24 years)			Cumulative HIV cases by gender			Reported AIDS deaths
				M	F	TG	M	F	TG	
1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter	5705	207	5912	23	5	0	4452	1449	11	13
HIV/AIDS summary										
Male to female ratio of reported HIV cases in 2024 (1st Quarter)									7:1	
Cumulative AIDS deaths reported						AIDS related			723	
						Non-AIDS related			62	
Cumulative adjusted deaths among all HIV cases up to 2023										1,579
Cumulative vertically transmitted HIV cases reported										107
Cumulative foreign HIV cases reported										181
HIV positives cases from Immigration Health Unit						cumulative			37	
						for the quarter			1	
Total HIV tests carried out during 2023									1,009,685	
HIV Sero-positivity rate for 2023									0.07%	

Source: NSACP, 2024\*<sup>1</sup>

1 \*Author's note: Reported HIV/AIDS cases 2023 should read as Reported HIV/AIDS cases 2024 (in the second instance).

After an extended period of maintaining a seropositivity rate of 0.03%, a notable increase to 0.07% was observed in 2023 (Figure 1 above), based on a total of 1,009,685 individuals tested. Furthermore, data from the first quarter of 2024 takes the cumulative total to 5,912 cases, with the 207 newly identified cases, which represents a higher figure compared to previous years or quarters. Additionally, the findings indicate a male-to-female ratio of 7:1. The ratio underscores the Sri Lankan trajectory of more males being HIV-positive than females, a possible social reality that should be borne in mind when proposing legislation and programmes.

**Figure 2: Seropositivity rate for 2022**

REPORTED HIV/AIDS CASES 2022										
Quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the beginning of the quarter	HIV/ cases reported during the quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the end of the quarter	Reported HIV Cases with age 15-24 Yrs.			Cumulative HIV cases by gender			Reported AIDS deaths
				M	F	TG	M	F	TG	
1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter	4404	152	4556	18	01	0	3263	1293	0	14
2 <sup>nd</sup> Quarter	4556	130	4686	14	01	0	3377	1309	0	11
3 <sup>rd</sup> Quarter	4686	145	4831	13	02	0	3504	1327	0	19
4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter	4831	180	5011	23	02	1	3661	1341	9	22

REPORTED HIV/AIDS CASES 2023										
Quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the beginning of the quarter	HIV/ cases reported during the quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the end of the quarter	Reported HIV Cases with age 15-24 Yrs.			Cumulative HIV cases by gender			Reported AIDS deaths
				M	F	TG	M	F	TG	
1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter	5011	165	5176	22	3	0	3806	1361	9	15
2 <sup>nd</sup> Quarter										
3 <sup>rd</sup> Quarter										
4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter										

Male to female ratio of reported HIV cases in 2023		7.25:1
Cumulative AIDS deaths reported - AIDS related		663
non AIDS related		50
Cumulative adjusted deaths among all HIV cases up to 2022		1520
Cumulative vertically transmitted HIV cases reported		98
Cumulative foreign HIV cases reported		167
Immigration Health Unit- positives - Cumulative		31
For the quarter		0
Number of HIV tests carried out during 2022		966067
HIV Sero-positivity rate for 2022		0.06 %

Source: NSACP, 2023

In 2022 (Figure 2), the seropositivity rate among the 966,067 individuals tested—a figure lower than that of other years—was 0.06%. This percentage was lower than the rate observed in 2023 but higher compared to earlier years. Furthermore, except for 2022, the number of individuals tested in previous years exceeded that of 2023. By the end of the first quarter of 2023, the cumulative number of cases had reached 5,176, which included 165 new cases, a figure lower than the 207 new cases reported in 2024. The male-to-female ratio for this period was 7.25:1.

**Figure 3: Seropositivity rate for 2021**

REPORTED HIV/AIDS CASES 2021								
Quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the beginning of the quarter	HIV/ cases reported during the quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the end of the quarter	Reported HIV Cases with age 15-24 Yrs.		Cumulative HIV cases by gender		Reported AIDS deaths
				M	F	M	F	
1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter	3994	79	4073	11	01	2856	1217	10
2 <sup>nd</sup> Quarter	4073	69	4142	10	03	2912	1230	09
3 <sup>rd</sup> Quarter	4142	103	4245	10	02	3000	1245	14
4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter	4245	159	4404	21	01	3130	1274	16

REPORTED HIV/AIDS CASES 2022								
Quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the beginning of the quarter	HIV/ cases reported during the quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the end of the quarter	Reported HIV Cases with age 15-24 Yrs		Cumulative HIV cases by gender		Reported AIDS deaths
				M	F	M	F	
1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter	4404	152	4556	18	01	3263	1293	14
2 <sup>nd</sup> Quarter	4556	130	4686	14	01	3377	1309	11
3 <sup>rd</sup> Quarter								
4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter								

Male to female ratio of reported HIV cases in 2022		7:1
Cumulative AIDS deaths reported -	AIDS related	617
	non AIDS related	40
Cumulative adjusted deaths among all HIV cases up to 2022		1455
Cumulative vertically transmitted HIV cases reported		95
Cumulative foreign HIV cases reported		161
Immigration Health Unit- positives -	Cumulative	28
	For the quarter	01
Number of HIV tests carried out during 2021		1,068,309
HIV Sero-positivity rate for 2021		0.04 %

Source: NSACP, 2022

In 2021 (Figure 3 above), the seropositivity rate among 1,068,309 individuals tested was 0.04%, with a male-to-female ratio of 7:1. This rate represents a marginal increase of 0.01% compared to previous years. During the first quarter of 2022, 152 new cases were reported, a figure that aligns closely with the typical quarterly trend.

**Figure 4: Seropositivity rate for 2020**

REPORTED HIV/AIDS CASES 2020								
Quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the beginning of the quarter	HIV cases reported during the quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the end of the quarter	Reported HIV Cases with age 15-24 Yrs.		Cumulative HIV cases by gender		Reported AIDS deaths
				M	F	M	F	
1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter	3631	109	3740	09	01	2589	1151	10
2 <sup>nd</sup> Quarter	3740	76	3816	01	03	2646	1170	13
3 <sup>rd</sup> Quarter	3816	105	3921	12	00	2732	1189	11
4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter	3921	73	3994	09	01	2795	1199	18

REPORTED HIV/AIDS CASES 2021								
Quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the beginning of the quarter	HIV cases reported during the quarter	Cumulative HIV cases at the end of the quarter	Reported HIV Cases with age 15-24 Yrs		Cumulative HIV cases by gender		Reported AIDS deaths
				M	F	M	F	
1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter	3994	79	4073	11	01	2856	1217	10
2 <sup>nd</sup> Quarter								
3 <sup>rd</sup> Quarter								
4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter								

Male to female ratio of reported HIV cases in 2021		3.4 :1
Cumulative AIDS deaths reported -	AIDS related	576
	non AIDS related	17
Cumulative vertically transmitted HIV cases reported		93
Cumulative foreign HIV cases reported		153
Immigration Health Unit- positives -	Cumulative	24
	For the quarter	01
Number of HIV tests carried out during 2020		1,057,280
HIV Sero-positivity rate for 2020		0.03 %

Source: NSACP, 2021



Figure 4 indicates that in 2020, among 1,057,280 individuals tested, the seropositivity rate was 0.03%, with a male-to-female ratio of 3.4:1 and a total of 363 cases reported, averaging 91 cases per quarter. This figure is 56.1% lower than the number of cases reported in a single quarter of 2024. Furthermore, a comparison of the 79 cases recorded in the first quarter of 2021 to the 207 cases reported in the first quarter of 2024 demonstrates a 61.84% lower number.

The most prominent observations from the data are that a greater number of tests (1,057,280) were conducted in 2020 (but recorded the lowest seropositivity rate of 0.03%), whereas a higher number of individuals tested positive (207) in 2024 (recording a substantially higher positivity rates in one quarter of 0.07%). This highlights the need for further research to comprehensively understand the progression and dynamics of the illness over time. While the causes of these patterns are not clear, contributing factors may include enhanced testing mechanisms, reduced frequency of awareness campaigns, and societal stress caused by economic and political instability.

### **Governing Documents**

Sri Lanka's HIV-related interventions are governed by three key documents: the National HIV/AIDS Policy (2011), the National Policy on HIV and AIDS in the World of Work (2010), and the National HIV/STI Strategic Plan (2023–2027). These are informed by global frameworks, such as the United States National HIV/AIDS Strategy, WHO guidelines, ILO documents, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent policy.

This brief operates on the hypothesis that effective HIV policies require a balance between ground realities and a broader vision. While crafting such policies is complex, Sri Lanka's efforts reflect thoughtful consideration of these dynamics. Thus, the aim of this brief is to strengthen existing frameworks rather than critique them.

### **The National HIV/AIDS Policy of Sri Lanka**

The National HIV/AIDS Policy of Sri Lanka recognises HIV/AIDS as both a public health and a socio-developmental challenge, emphasising the need to strengthen and expand prevention efforts focused on behavioural change. Its objectives include reducing transmission through sexual contact, mother-to-child pathways, and blood products, as well as improving the quality of life for those infected or affected by HIV/AIDS by combating stigma and providing quality care and support. Stakeholders involved include the National STD/AIDS Control Programme, governmental and non-governmental organisations, civil society, professional groups, businesses, media, and individuals living with HIV/AIDS.

This ambitious programme focuses on the following priority areas and strategies:

- 3.1. Multi-sectoral approach
- 3.2. Prevention of sexual transmission through promotion of safe and responsible behaviours
- 3.3. Prevention of mother to child transmission
- 3.4. Prevention of transmission through blood and blood products

- 3.5. Surveillance, monitoring and evaluation
- 3.6. HIV testing
- 3.7. Counselling
- 3.8. Care and treatment of HIV/AIDS
- 3.9. Safety in health care settings
- 3.10. Prevention and control of other sexually transmitted infections
- 3.11. Addressing human rights issues
- 3.12. HIV/AIDS interventions in the world of work

Points 3.2–3.6, 3.8, and 3.10 address medical aspects, 3.7 psychological, and 3.12 professional. Points 3.1 and 3.11 offer a broader, more comprehensive view, aligning closely with the policy brief’s interest. It is noteworthy that Sri Lanka has encountered relatively few legal cases pertaining to HIV, which is important in terms of addressing human rights. Among the cases, two significant cases stand out: The landmark decision by the Supreme Court wherein the court prohibited discrimination within educational institutions and the Mihin Air case (discussed below). The Supreme Court ruling has played a pivotal role in mitigating discrimination against individuals living with HIV in schools and fostering a more inclusive environment within the educational sector (UNAIDS, 2016).

The opening statement “HIV/AIDS is a communicable yet preventable disease, which can lead to serious social and economic repercussions” highlights the government’s commitment to a holistic approach. Thus, 3.12 becomes part of the comprehensive approach, integrating the social and economic conditions impacting people with HIV and emphasising the disease’s multi-layered impact.

A multi-sectoral approach is essential for inclusivity and adoption of measures proposed by medical professionals. Establishing a robust support network of individuals and organisations is critical for ensuring people with HIV can access necessary services and care. This becomes particularly significant if behaviour change communication programs are central to promoting appropriate practices. (National HIV/AIDS Policy of Sri Lanka, 2011, p. 2). Further analysis of this multi-pronged strategy is therefore vital to enhance its effectiveness.

The policy, supported by successive 5-year strategic plans, prioritises prevention among high-risk groups while involving diverse social stakeholders (National HIV/AIDS Policy of Sri Lanka, 2011). Crucially, the National AIDS Committee oversees the national response alongside the National AIDS Council, which monitors interministerial support (p. 2). Additionally, provincial and district AIDS committees serve as multi-sectoral advisory bodies at local levels.

While the framework reflects an inclusive vision, its effectiveness hinges on clarity regarding the roles, mandates, and operational mechanisms of these committees and councils—questions the strategic plans must address.

## **HIV/AIDS in the World of Work**

The policy aims to prevent HIV among workers and their families, foster a stigma-free and supportive workplace, ensure access to care and treatment, and uphold the rights of those affected. Drawing from the "10 key principles of the ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work," it aligns with Sri Lanka's National AIDS Policy (National Policy on HIV and AIDS in the World of Work in Sri Lanka, 2010, p.7). Addressing local realities, the policy highlights gender equality, important given the challenges women face, such as caregiving responsibilities and gender-based violence.

The policy places the onus on the employers, requiring them to "take steps to ensure workers' rights, confidentiality of information regarding health issues including HIV and AIDS, treatment, care and support" (National Policy on HIV and AIDS in the World of Work in Sri Lanka, 2010, p.9). A key provision of the policy is the prohibition of employment-related HIV screening, relevant to the case against Mihin Air, where a prospective steward's HIV status was disclosed to Human Resources (Ranmuthugala, 2018). While the policy states that HIV is not grounds for termination, anecdotal evidence suggests otherwise, with reports of individuals losing jobs at various workplaces upon disclosure of their status (Ranmuthugala and de Silva, 2016). This discrepancy between policy and practice underscores the need for stronger enforcement and awareness.

However, principle 6.10 could pose problems. It "recognizes that PLHIV should have access to treatment, care and support and all workplaces shall develop a liaison with the government health care system for employees to benefit from services, such as antiretroviral therapy, and other organizations which provide care and support" (National Policy on HIV and AIDS in the World of Work in Sri Lanka, 2010, p.11–12). The policy requires employers to inform workers about available health services and provide reasonable accommodations, such as time off for treatment (National Policy on HIV and AIDS in the World of Work in Sri Lanka, 2010, p.11–12). However, challenges arise in maintaining discretion and secrecy while ensuring access to care. If employees are unwilling to disclose their health needs, a gap emerges in how employers can proactively support them.

These discrepancies highlight the importance of strategic plans addressing execution mechanisms. Clear guidelines for communication, confidentiality safeguards, and the establishment of support networks within workplaces may be crucial for bridging these gaps. Strengthening these provisions could ensure practical implementation without compromising employee privacy.

## **National HIV/STI Strategic Plan Sri Lanka, 2023–2027**

The strategy for 2023 to 2027 builds on both mentioned policy documents, with the following guiding principles:

1. Strategies based on evidence;
2. Human rights and reduction of stigma and discrimination;
3. Gender-based approach;
4. Meaningful involvement of people living with HIV;



5. Community participation and engagement;
6. Coordinated approach;
7. Multi-sectoral partnerships;
8. Transition and building national ownership and capacity for sustainability;
9. Quality improvement and quality assurance;
10. Leadership, political commitment and good governance

The National HIV/STI Strategic Plan (2023–2027) adopts a holistic approach, with its primary focus on prevention (strategy 1), diagnosis, treatment, and care (strategy 2), strategic information management (strategy 3), and health system strengthening (strategy 4). A supportive environment (strategy 5) receives only 20% weightage, which may be insufficient in a context with limited sexual and reproductive health education.

Notably, the plan establishes clear objectives and evidence-based interventions for each strategy. It entrusts implementation to STD clinics, coordinated by the NSACP, and outlines comprehensive actions, including integrating electronic patient information systems and ensuring interoperability with district clinics. It also emphasises improving medicine procurement, addressing demographic changes, and partnering with CBOs and NGOs. Additionally, initiatives like Know4Sure.lk meet the need for online engagement.

While numerous concrete actions reinforce the national policy, these examples demonstrate the strategic plan's capacity to translate policy into impactful, targeted measures.

Accepting that Strategies 1 to 4 are comprehensive (and peripheral to this brief's main interest), this brief now moves to the social component, considering Strategy 5 as requiring some scrutiny. It has these sub-divisions:

- SD 5.1 Create an enabling legal environment by removing punitive and discriminatory laws and policies which are barriers for HIV/STI prevention and control.
- SD 5.2 Strengthen policies to address stigma and discrimination among selected government ministries and institutions
- SD 5.3 Promote responsible media reporting on HIV/AIDS to advance health promotion, human rights and right to health.

The proposed major activity for SD 5.11 is amend “laws that criminalize KPs such as vagrancy ordinance, brothel ordinance, penal code 365, 365a” while the activity for SD 5.3 is to “create a group of media personnel as change agents.” Under SD 5.2, the proposed major activities are:

- “Advocacy to reduce stigma and discrimination in all relevant government institutions such as education, labour and institutions such as National Child Protection Authority and the Sri Lanka Police.
- Include human rights, right to health, HIV/AIDS and the negative effects of stigma and discrimination to the national response in pre-service and in service training programmes of Ministry of Health

- Include HIV/AIDS and the effects of punitive laws on the national response in relevant curricula.”

The action points in this section are weaker compared to earlier ones, with less emphasis and minimal space allocated. Political and economic components are absent, creating a gap in the document. While it addresses critical issues like stigma and discrimination and promotes human rights for PLHIV and KP groups (National HIV/STI Strategic Plan Sri Lanka, 2023–2027, p. 70), its commitments are vague and lack the detail found in other sections. The focus on legal aspects is commendable, but the plan overlooks employment and provides only minimal attention to workplace programs and migrant worker initiatives.

Unlike the comprehensive discussions in SD1, covering services, drug users, prisoners, IEC campaigns, and regional interventions, this section falls short in depth and scope. Some areas, particularly those aligned with this brief’s focus, require strengthening. Recommendations are needed to update the policies and strategic plan, considering the country’s evolving political and economic situation, to enhance the existing framework for 2023–2027 and lay a stronger foundation for future initiatives.

### **Practical Recommendations to Enhance Strategies, with Special Reference to Strategy 5**

To address gaps in Strategy 5 and make it more actionable, Sri Lanka could implement the following recommendations to foster a supportive and inclusive environment for people living with HIV/AIDS.

#### *1. Evidence-based stigma-reduction interventions*

- Launch community-led awareness campaigns using storytelling to promote understanding and empathy.
- Develop peer educator networks where trained individuals from key populations serve as advocates for inclusivity. Such networks are being conducted by local organisations and should be developed.

#### *2. Comprehensive monitoring framework*

- Establish monitoring mechanisms to be compliant with workplace policies.
- Use metrics like the number of stakeholders trained in anti-stigma practices and public perception surveys to measure progress.
- Assess media engagement to ensure stigma-sensitive messages are impactful.

#### *3. Multi-sectoral collaboration*

- Partner with media to create stigma-free narratives.
- Work with private companies to ensure discrimination-free workplace policies.
- Encourage faith-based organisations to support stigma-reduction efforts.

#### *4. Policy alignment and advocacy*

- Advocate for national policies that include anti-discrimination laws and align with global best practices like the UNAIDS "90-90-90" targets.
- Strengthening anti-discrimination laws to explicitly protect HIV-positive workers.

#### *5. Community-led monitoring and feedback mechanisms*

- Involve affected communities in monitoring initiatives using advisory boards and feedback forums to keep interventions grounded in real-world needs.

Other immediate and long-term strategies are proposed below to address the mentioned gap.

## **Recommendations**

Sri Lanka has made progress in preventing mother-to-child transmission and providing antiretroviral therapy, supported by community networks working with key populations. However, understanding the country's socio-political conditions is essential for planning the next strategic phase (2028–2032) or refining the current plan. Preliminary research through desk studies, interviews, and consultations can help integrate mechanisms addressing the political, social, and economic realities of Sri Lankan lives.

In the immediate term, incorporating sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education in schools is critical, despite cultural sensitivities, and this need is underscored by the Supreme Court ruling mentioned above. Normalising discussions around sexual health and rights can address the detrimental impacts of taboo treatment, ensuring youth understand their sexual needs and rights. Publicising free HIV testing services to destigmatise the process and promote accessibility outside Colombo can be done in collaboration with the medical system, leveraging midwives and nurses to share non-discriminatory information.

Expanding access to oral pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) could further reduce stigma and transmission rates because the availability of medication signals to the public that the disease is not inevitable. Awareness campaigns and pharmacist training can ensure proper usage and judgment-free service provision.

Long-term investments should focus on HIV-specific education, disseminated via social media to engage youth, complemented by traditional media. Evidence-based research, guided by a national research plan, is crucial to identify socio-economic and political pain points for strategizing. Ignoring these contexts risks disenfranchising those needing HIV-related services and limits the ability to predict hotspots.

Strengthening institutional structures is also necessary. A dedicated organisation for HIV-related matters could complement the NSACP's work, providing a community hub free from medical stigma and possibly supporting peer education as endorsed by the FPA and the Ministry of Health (FPA, 2025). Reviving the National AIDS Council and Committee, and placing their office in a community-friendly location, would enhance accessibility. Incorporating resources like a library alongside community-focused activities—such as games or even a café—could foster a supportive, uplifting environment, engaging equal stakeholders to assist the newly diagnosed or long-term patients. These measures could enhance Sri Lanka's HIV response framework.

Establishing a job bank could support employment searches, relieving a significant constraint for individuals and easing mental strain. This, in turn, may reduce stress-related health complications, lessening the burden on healthcare services. Additionally, expanding opportunities for involvement in local and international advocacy, including connections to regional hubs like Thailand, could foster empowerment and visibility. A robust and supportive network would enhance quality of life and promote mental well-being.



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# Vaping Woes: Addressing the Resurgence of Tobacco Consumption through Legal Frameworks and Policy Planning

By Vedaralalage Hallaj Shafi Lukman Hassan

On May 23, 1993, Brazilian Formula One champion Ayrton Senna crossed the finish line in Monaco. It was his third win that season driving the McLaren MP4/8, one of the most iconic cars of automotive racing. But just as iconic as the winner and the car were the livery and the sponsor: A famous Tobacco Brand. Whether via science suppression, corporate whitewashing or through the sponsorship of famous sporting teams for decades, powerful Tobacco Companies have fought against compelling science to preserve a market for their products (WHO, 2019) (Brero, 2013) (Grant-Braham & Britton, 2012).

For some time, however, it appeared that despite these efforts, the contributions of public health professionals still prevailed. Between 2010 and 2024, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported a 25% relative reduction in global tobacco consumption in individuals aged 15 or above (WHO, 2024). It is evident that public service announcements, health education and efficient public policy planning may have possibly spared Generation Z and Alpha from dependence on tobacco. However, this was not meant to be, as the progress towards a tobacco free society has now encountered a substantial new impediment: vaping.

## Understanding Vaping

Electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS) – also called e-cigarettes, vaporisers or vapes – are mobile battery-operated devices that heat a liquid ‘juice’ into an inhalable aerosol form. Marketed as healthier alternatives to combustion-based smoking options like cigarettes, these devices which were previously used exclusively by recovering smokers are now most attractive to younger consumers, with approximately 16000 different flavours in circulation globally, the highest of any tobacco-based product. The WHO emphasizes on its Technical note on call to action on electronic cigarettes that vaping has firstly, failed to aid smoking cessation, and secondly, increased nicotine dependence amongst youth due to greater accessibility, cheaper products and unparalleled customisability that facilitates perilously high levels of consumption in short time spans. Most concerning is that in many regions vape usage in the 13–15-year age group often exceeds that of those over 15 years (WHO,2024).

Such figures raise concern as vaping carries much of the same health risks as conventional tobacco, including increased risks of asthma, bronchitis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, hypertension, strokes and lung cancer. Vaping is also associated with a novel respiratory disorder known as e-cigarette or vaping associated lung injury (EVALI) along with more conventional injuries like accidental burns, shortness of breath and respiratory irritation (Niyas, 2023). Studies also suggest associations between vaping and adverse pregnancy outcomes (Deprato, et al., 2025).

These health concerns are exacerbated by the diverse and unregulated quality standards of vaping devices. Explosions are not uncommon, nor are unsafe chemical compositions, particularly due to the greater customisability of vaping fumes and devices.

While the world's major tobacco companies argue that the science on this matter is not definitive, the safety of ENDS remains dubious at best, as implied by recent decisions of the US Food and Drug Administration (Reuters, 2025) (Ali, et al., 2023)

The environmental impacts of vaping devices are also worthy of attention. ENDS possess much of the same scarce heavy metals and raw materials that are found in other electrical devices. Their inappropriate dumping risks polluting soil and water resources alongside misusing fast-depleting global mineral stores. The plastics associated with vapes and cartridges cannot be easily recycled, often discarded inappropriately and contributing to the mountains of plastic wastes humans continue to dispose of (Pourchez, et al., 2023). One does not have to talk of sea turtles, microplastics, food contamination or the economics of plastic pollution to elucidate how this negatively impacts both personal and planetary health. As single or limited-use disposable e-cigarettes rise in popularity, the prognosis of this issue looks ever bleaker. The languor of policymakers with regard to addressing this facet of vaping, does not bode well for the environment.

## **International Responses**

Policy and Legal Responses to the vaping issue vary across the glob

The United Kingdom has taken steps to legalise the sale and usage of vaping devices in a limited capacity, having currently registered over 67000 nicotine-containing vape products on the UK consumer market. This decision has been guided by the view to promote vaping as a method of weaning smokers from traditional cigarettes, though empirical evidence suggests that such programs have rarely been successful. Despite the legalisation of vaping, the UK has attempted to curtail youth vaping via health education schemes and regulations on vape flavouring, packaging, displays, advertising, etc. Notably such steps have been directed not only towards tobacco-derived vapes, but synthetic and non-nicotine vapes as well. The moves are in-line with recommendations forwarded by the WHO.

The United States of America also has a similar policy approach to e-cigarettes, legalising them but still bringing them under the purview of the US Food and Drug Administration through the 2021 amendment to the Prevent All Cigarette Trafficking (PACT) Act of 2009.

This also required all interstate parties involved in the vape trade to register with the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. Focus has primarily been on reducing the advertising and access to e-cigarettes to minors along with ensuring accurate and consistent labelling and transport practices. Despite this, monthly e-cigarette sales have increased 46.6% between January 2020 and December 2022 (Ali, et al., 2023) and they remained the most common tobacco product among American youths (Birdsey, et al., 2023). One must note however that though vaping is federally legal, punitive actions have been taken towards specific e-cigarette manufacturers for bad faith practices. Likewise, certain states also have varying degrees of vape bans.

Another noteworthy policy parallel would-be India. In May 2019, the Indian Council of Medical Research called for the complete prohibition of vapes in the interest of public health. (Chakma, et al., 2019) In December of the same year, an act passed in the Indian legislature made the production, importation, exportation, sale and advertisement of the same illegal. In doing so, India becomes one of few major global markets to restrict the sale of e-cigarettes. It is accompanied by Turkey, Oman and Iran among others. Nevertheless, studies suggest that both access and usage is still observed amongst youths, particularly more among the urban, educated young adults (Pettigrew, et al., 2023). While the act of banning is welcome, the practical reality of enforcement is more complex. More work needs to be done to achieve positive results.

However, India is the exception. As a branch of the more overarching tobacco empire, the vape industry participates in extensive and well documented lobbying practices, influencing many of the regulatory decisions listed above that may go against prevailing medical evidence (Watts, et al., 2024). They shape arguments and influence legislature, creating just enough of a window to build a profitable market.

### **Comparisons between Sri Lankan Policy and WHO Recommendations**

§ The WHO calls for vapes to be classified and controlled alongside other tobacco products. Sri Lanka has done so.

§ The WHO has recommended limited legalization with strict controls and restrictions on advertising. Sri Lanka has banned vaping outright.

§ The WHO considers vaping products to include tobacco, non-tobacco-based and non-nicotine devices. Sri Lankan law only extends to tobacco-containing vapes which is a legal loophole in the law.

§ The WHO recommends legal mechanisms to act decisively towards control of ENDS. Legal ambiguities limit Sri Lankan authorities from taking decisive action.

§ The WHO calls for a clear action plan to tackle vaping nationally and globally. Such a plan does not exist in Sri Lanka currently.

§ Strategies of both the WHO and Sri Lanka do not adequately address the environmental impacts of vape waste.



## **The Sri Lankan Situation**

In Sri Lanka, most vaping devices are classified as ‘tobacco products’ under Section 45 of the National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol Act No.27 of 2006. Their manufacture, import, sale and offer for sale were completely banned under Schedule II of the regulations introduced by the Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine in 2016. In principle, e-cigarettes and related products should have no place in the Sri Lankan market. However, in practice, they do.

This arises secondary to certain ambiguities in the existing legal regimes. Firstly, the 2016 regulation bans e-cigarettes containing tobacco specifically, providing a loophole for vapes that employ synthetic nicotine. Secondly, while the import and sale of vapes are banned, there is no penalty for possession or usage. Despite possession being *ex delicto*, authorities are not empowered to arrest or fine transgressors, being limited to confiscation of goods.

The situation is worsened by the dearth in knowledge regarding vaping and related practices, both among the older civilian population and among enforcement officials. Consequently, while formal importation of e-cigarettes does not occur, more insidious methods such as trafficking by foreign travellers take place within the country. Distribution then takes place via Facebook, WhatsApp and other social media platforms. Anecdotal evidence even exists of ignorant parents gifting such devices to their children. As governments procrastinate on addressing this emerging challenge, dealers and users grow increasingly open in their actions, making the work of social and healthcare workers much more challenging. Following the natural history of vape culture in other nations, e-cigarette usage may progress from being an urban trend into a more nationwide trend.

## **Recommendations**

The rise of vaping is a timely, legitimate public health concern. Like cigarettes, cigars, betel chewing, etc. its long-term health impacts may produce a significant burden to Sri Lanka’s already overworked and overtaxed health infrastructure, while concurrently threatening the progress achieved from decades of dedicated work carried out by Sri Lanka’s public health physicians.

However, the issue is one wrought with complexity, especially in the application of enacted policies. The law may be writ, but that does not mean the issue is addressed.

Still, two principal paths present themselves to the judicious policymaker: a complete ban or legalisation with strict regulations.

Let us examine the latter. This would be the route taken by the US, the UK and much of the Western world. It brings vaping in Sri Lanka from an illegal, underground activity into one that is legal, regulated and taxed. Proponents of the above strategy point towards possible economic benefits and the ability to better regulate the quantities, qualities and safety aspects related to vaping.

But is it worth it? A vast majority of the supposed economic benefits will be enjoyed by manufacturers, distributors and retailers of vaping devices. Any possible downstream health costs will be borne by the general populace, the taxpayer and the state. Even if vaping was legalized, it would have to be done under strict regulation and active enforcement. Oversight akin to that in the US and the UK it would be critical to ensure consistent quality, branding, labels and good faith marketing practices. Whether such a task is possible under an already bloated bureaucratic system is questionable.

To achieve better results, Sri Lanka should try to adopt an approach similar to that of India imposing a complete ban on vaping and its associated vices. It makes the position of the government clear; it empowers authorities to act decisively, and it emboldens the nation's commitment to eradicating tobacco use in its populace. Though bucking the global trend, it elicits a proactive approach to protecting youth from dangerous vices.

However, such an approach is not without risks and losses. Most obvious would be the lost income from the taxation of vaping goods. But the situation requires deeper observation. Keeping vaping illegal may leave the control of the market still in the hands of smugglers and under-the-counter retailers while hampering efforts to regulate vaping device standards, nicotine doses and circulation among the population. It can be argued that in holding firm to a rigid moralistic position, we surrender all ability to ameliorate the situation at hand.

Irrespective of what measures are taken to effectively address this issue, new regulations must be enacted meeting WHO standards. This would include reforming pre-existing laws to comprehensively cover tobacco, non-tobacco-based and non-nicotine e-cigarettes so that they fall under the jurisdiction of the National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol. Exceptions and ambiguities must be removed. Officers must be empowered to act on regulations.

The government must further pay adequate attention to the calls of the Sri Lanka Medical Association to address vaping via a focused action plan prioritizing health education, community engagement, social collaboration and efficacious public policy. Both the state and public health professionals must approach the youth who are at very high risk, leveraging social media and community organisations to best influence youth on the perils of vaping. Sri Lanka already enjoys a sufficiently robust system countering legal and illegal tobacco. The same must be extended to address vaping. Whether vaping is legalised or not, a populace well-educated about its danger is a nation that is better equipped to overcome these public health challenges.

The development of effective surveillance systems is also an imperative. Similar to pre-existing systems recording vaccine-related complications, snake and dog bites, disease prevalence and countless other measures of infection, morbidity and mortality, it is also advisable to record vaping related accidents, hospitalisations, deaths, etc. Doing so may provide Sri Lanka with the epidemiological framework to better monitor the progression of the issue and the efficacy of the policies while also creating the statistical bedrock that may serve as the political capital for sustainable policy planning, policy implementation and equitable resource allocation.

Finally, Sri Lanka could progress beyond the WHO recommendations and become a role model for other states by acting on legislature to govern the appropriate disposal of vaping related waste. Adopting legal measures and educating the public on the process of vape waste removal will contribute to the protection of the environment and the mitigation of so many environmental hazards, particularly caused by the heavy metals and plastics used extensively in the manufacturing process of e-cigarettes.

Nevertheless, passing laws alone is insufficient. Policy must be followed by practice. It is only with the partnership of government, medical professionals, policy makers, law enforcement authorities, community leaders and the public at large that the issue can be truly addressed. Vaping is an emerging issue in Sri Lanka which has socio- economic and health related concerns. Timely policy planning and implementation as well as awareness raising can curb the negative effects of it. Consequently, vaping remains an issue demanding our immediate attention.

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# *How Pettah Market Shapes Its Own Marketing Policy: A Visual Interpretation of Organic Commerce*

By Poornima Premarathne

In the busy streets of Pettah, where colonial architecture meets modern business, a masterclass in marketing takes place every day. No business school has ever taught this. These photographs show a living lab where marketing strategies have naturally evolved over generations. They are shaped by monsoon seasons, cultural rhythms, and the shared knowledge of traders who have honed their skills over decades of real-world experience. This historic market district functions like a living organism. Every vendor learns and teaches at the same time in an unspoken curriculum of business survival. Here, marketing policies are not created in boardrooms. They arise from necessity, respond to crises, and develop through a deep understanding of human behavior that only comes from direct commerce.



## **The Infrastructure of Accessibility**

The first image highlights a key marketing principle that Pettah has mastered: accessibility infrastructure. The wheel trolley, placed strategically on the street, represents more than just transportation. It acts as a mobile marketing unit that can adjust to foot traffic conditions, changing weather patterns, and customer density. This flexibility lets vendors respond quickly to market demands, shifting their business to where customers are most likely to engage.

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The phone numbers displayed prominently on the cart illustrate how traditional street vending has incorporated modern communication. This creates a marketing approach that connects old and new commerce methods.

### Spatial Psychology and Consumer Flow



The narrow corridor, filled with colorful fabric rolls, stands in stark contrast to the empty street of shuttered shops. This scene reveals Pettah's keen grasp of marketing psychology related to space and time. The fabric corridor shows how the market effectively uses "forced exposure." Customers must move through these closed spaces, leading to unavoidable interaction with the merchandise. The vertical stacking of goods enhances visual impact, while the narrow pathways slow down foot traffic. This increase in dwell time raises the chances of making a purchase.

On the other hand, the closed street scene highlights another key part of Pettah's marketing plan: the rhythm of commerce. The shuttered shops with their metal roll-down doors illustrate how the market works in cycles.

There are periods of intense activity, followed by strategic rest. This approach to timing creates anticipation and a sense of scarcity, making the busy times feel more valuable. The act of closing becomes part of the marketing strategy, as customers must plan their visits and purchases according to the market's natural schedule.

Together, these images demonstrate how Pettah has developed both spatial density—the immersive feel of the fabric corridor—and temporal scarcity—the planned closure periods—as complementary marketing tools. This creates an environment where products surround customers when the market is open. Meanwhile, the potential for closure adds a sense of urgency to the shopping experience.





## Strategic Positioning and Visual Merchandising



This sunglass vendor's setup shows smart location-based marketing. Located on a busy street corner, the three-tier display system maximizes visual impact. Street-level tables attract pedestrians at eye level, while vertical stands create a tall display visible from a distance. This layered approach increases the marketing footprint without needing more floor space, which is essential in Pettah's competitive market.

The bright red cloth backdrop serves as effective branding. It creates instant visual separation from nearby stalls and helps make the location memorable for returning customers. The corner setup allows for 180-degree customer engagement, facilitating interaction with foot traffic from various directions while maximizing conversion chances.

This illustrates how Pettah merchants have intuitively mastered visual merchandising, brand differentiation, and strategic positioning through hands-on experience instead of formal business training.

### Demographic Targeting Through Product Curation



The cap vendor's carefully chosen selection shows how Pettah merchants target customers based on demographics. The variety of caps and headwear, from casual baseball caps to more formal styles, reflects strategic product selection informed by a strong understanding of local market demographics. The vendor's location on the busy street, with neatly arranged inventory on makeshift tables, indicates that product presentation attracts specific customer groups.

The mix of styles and colors, along with the easy-to-access street-level display, suggests the vendor targets different age groups and income levels. The vendor's appearance and the informal yet organized setup convey affordability and friendliness to passersby. This inventory is not random; it's a thoughtful selection based on local preferences, seasonal demands, and the buying power of various customer groups who visit this area of Pettah.

This approach shows how merchants build customer profiles through daily interaction and observation, creating targeted product offerings without formal market research.

### **Multi-Sensory Marketing and Atmosphere Creation**



The busy street scene with the HAVELLS sign shows Pettah's skill in creating a vibrant market atmosphere. The market fosters an environment where various vendors benefit from shared foot traffic, energy, and the thrill of finding new things.

This strategy, where similar and supporting businesses are set up close to one another, creates a marketing boost that individual stores can't reach on their own.

The overwhelming mix of signs, colors, sounds, and activity contributes to the marketing appeal, giving customers an experience instead of just goods.

### **The Policy Framework Behind Commercial Activities**

What comes from these images shows an unwritten but effective marketing policy that Pettah has built over many years of commercial growth. This framework offers a smart alternative to traditional retail strategies. It creates competitive advantages by being flexible, drawing on collective strength, and using resources efficiently





### Adaptive Positioning:

Vendors can change their location and setup based on real-time market conditions, unlike fixed retail stores tied to long-term leases and set infrastructure. This flexibility allows them to respond quickly to foot traffic patterns, seasonal needs, and consumer preferences. The system works on an informal hierarchy, where established vendors keep prime spots while newcomers try out different positions. During busy times like festivals, the whole setup shifts as vendors work together on temporary expansions and pop-up structures. This creates a natural market efficiency that traditional retail cannot match.

### Collective Branding:

The market itself becomes the brand. Individual vendors benefit from Pettah's reputation for variety, affordability, and authenticity. Customers come not for specific stores but for the Pettah experience.

They know they will find competitive prices and genuine products. This shared identity spreads marketing costs across hundreds of vendors while greatly increasing their reach. When one merchant offers exceptional goods, it boosts the entire district's reputation. The brand supports itself and helps protect against the failures of individual businesses, creating a strong continuity that single establishments cannot match.

### Experiential Marketing:

Shopping turns into an adventure and a cultural experience that formal retail environments can't match. The variety of sights, sounds, and smells sparks emotional connections that change ordinary shopping into unforgettable experiences. The maze-like layout promotes exploration and discovery. At the same time, the abundance of choices gives shoppers a treasure hunt mentality. The unpredictability is also attractive to customers never know what they will discover or what deals may come from negotiation. This surprise factor encourages engagement, making the experience just as important as the items bought.

### Relationship-Based Commerce

The small scale encourages personal relationships between vendors and customers. This builds loyalty that goes beyond just price. Vendors recall preferences, give tailored advice, and offer flexible payment options. Regular customers enjoy special pricing and early access to inventory. As time goes on, these relationships turn into partnerships. Vendors get to know their customers' needs and situations, while customers share feedback and referrals. These builds switching costs and strong business ties that last beyond single transactions, creating supportive systems for both sides.



## Resource Optimization

Limited space and capital are maximized through display techniques, shared infrastructure, and competition among vendors. Vendors improve density merchandising so that every space serves multiple functions. Sharing infrastructure boosts efficiency across the district through combining lighting, security, and facilities management. Vendors in the area refer customers to each other, direct overflow business, and work together to solve logistical challenges. This collaboration creates efficiencies that traditional retail often gains only with costly management structures.

## The Innovation Within Tradition

These photographs show an interesting situation: a traditional market that has unknowingly developed marketing strategies that modern businesses spend millions to achieve perfection. Pettah's organic marketing approach shows that effective commerce comes from understanding human behavior, community needs, and cultural context instead of theoretical frameworks.



The market's success is not about following set marketing policies; it is about creating its own. These policies are flexible, responsive, and rooted in the reality of its customers' lives. In a time when businesses find it hard to create genuine customer experiences, Pettah Market has kept authenticity as its main marketing principle. This proves that the best marketing strategies often come from real commercial relationships and an understanding of the community.

This visual study shows that Pettah Market's marketing strategy is best described as "adaptive authenticity." It keeps traditional commercial values while continuously changing to meet the evolving needs of customers and market conditions.

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# Nationalism and Neoliberalism: The Global Political Economy Driving Far-Right Movements

By A.A.V.D.P. Weerasinghe

## Abstract

This article evaluates how global economic policies, and nationalist sentiments lead countries to adopt exclusive and protective measures. The combination of nationalist forces and neoliberal economic ruins allows right-wing movements to take power. The article uses case studies, qualitative research, and theoretical analysis to explain why these forces require nations to adopt far-right political movements. alongside theoretical frameworks such as Karl Polanyi's "double movement" and Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, to clarify why these dynamics push states toward authoritarian and protectionist policies. This article is centered around the key argument that far-right movements exploit cultural anxieties and economic grievances, exacerbated by neoliberal trade policies and globalization's disruptions, to promote exclusionary agendas that threaten liberal democracy. These dynamics drive far-right success across diverse global contexts. To offset this trend, proposed policies focus on economic equality and democratic reform. The research relies on peer-reviewed academic materials while fulfilling academic standards. Policymakers who address structural problems with neoliberalism and foster social unity can reduce nationalist resistance to create a fairer global system. The study underscores the urgent need for systemwide democratic protection to counter the exclusionary effects of nationalist and neoliberal policy combinations.

**Key words-** Theory of hegemony, Neoliberal trade policies, Liberal democracy, Nationalist resistance, far right movements

## Introduction

The global political structure has experienced an intense shift in recent years because right-wing populist movements now reject both democratic liberal principles and global economic collaboration. In short, neoliberal economic policies include deregulation, privatisation, and boosting growth through free markets, sometimes resulting in unfairness. Those with nationalist beliefs usually favour national identity and independence over becoming part of a unified world. As for right-wing politics, it often includes favouring conservatism, adopting anti-immigrant policies, and using tariffs to defend domestic industries.

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Far-right ideologies are substantially growing in support across multiple countries, including the United Kingdom with Brexit nationalism, but also in Hungary and Brazil, and the United States, where populism leads to authoritarian actions and exclusionary policies. The author asserts that neo-liberal economic policies with nationalist sentiments inside global economic systems are the main force behind far-right political strength. Far-right movements find their most favorable conditions when nationalist sentiment meets neoliberal economic failures resulting from inequality and breached social contract terms. As a researcher studying global political trends, the existing research into global political trends shows that different right-wing movements use neoliberal weaknesses and public anti-globalization sentiment to drive political choices toward right-wing protectionism. Democratic institutions face a threat while revealing an immediate requirement for systemic reforms that aim to fix economic inequality and regain public trust. The paper evaluates this claim by using research examples alongside established methodology, along with theoretical exploration and policy suggestions backed by data from validated academic publications and reports.

### **Case Studies**

Neoliberal policies involve deregulation, privatization, and free trade, often escalating inequality and loss of jobs . Right-wing politics promote conservative values, anti-immigrant stances, and economic protectionism. Populism appeals to groups who resent the influence of elites, while nationalist policies prioritize national sovereignty and cultural homogeneity, often opposing open borders and refugee acceptance. The recent growth of right-wing populism occurs worldwide yet demonstrates different shapes as Europe and the Americas witness it independently. The Fidesz party under Viktor Orbán has established power in Hungary by using nationalist policies combined with populist economic strategies.

The present Hungarian government led by Orbán has targeted both European Union integration and state-controlled industries while implementing extensive border fence construction and restrictive asylum laws to limit immigration into Hungary. (Kelemen, 2020). Orbán's narrative of "illiberal democracy" criticizes EU-driven neoliberal policies as undermining Hungarian sovereignty and economic stability, portraying them as elitist impositions that harm local workers.

Authoritarianism deepens through these policies, together with media control, which receives support among voters dissatisfied by the EU direction and globalization effects. The National Rally of France under Marine Le Pen found success by stressing economic concerns to people while portraying neoliberal globalization as an infringement on French national power. Deindustrialized areas in France and their voters find appeal in the anti-immigrant orientation of the party, coupled with its demand for protectionist measures. (Ivaldi, 2019). The political power of Italy's Lega party has risen under leader Matteo Salvini through their anti-EU stance and dissatisfaction towards economic conditions, which they popularly link to the immigration issue. (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Longo, 2021).

In the Americas, the United States and Brazil provide parallel examples. During his 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump emphasized his "USA First" policy framework, which gained popularity in the Rust Belt because residents based there experienced massive job losses from the deindustrialization caused by neoliberal trade policies, including NAFTA. (Autor et al., 2020; Brookings, n.d.). Through the combination of pro-economic nationalism and anti-immigrant stance, Trump managed to rally support among dissatisfied voters who were disappointed by current economic policies. His steel import tariff of 25% and Transpacific Partnership (TPP) withdrawal showed protectionist approaches while imposing trade barriers. (Smith and King, 2021). The Brazilian voters elected Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 because they demanded changes from corruption and economic stagnation, alongside opposition to neoliberal reforms. Voters dissatisfied with the previous administrations embraced his platform, which targeted international organizations along with racial and immigrant groups. (Hunter & Power, 2019). These case studies indicate how far-right movements utilize neoliberalism's economic failures and cultural anxieties to advance Isolationist approaches.

### **Methodology**

The research used qualitative methods and combined political economic elements and critical theory to analyze the development of right-wing populist movements. The research draws its content from peer-reviewed journals from JSTOR and Taylor & Francis, as well as from reputable web-based publications that guarantee credibility and exclude unverified sources. Two essential theoretical frameworks in this study are Karl Polanyi's "double movement" for understanding societal opposition to market growth and Antonio Gramsci's analysis of hegemony to explain neoliberal control and nationalist opposition. (Birchfield, 1999). Under this study, the case studies from Hungary, France, Italy, the United States, and Brazil are used to analyze global trends in the rise of far-right movements. This analysis combines qualitative data, such as trade policies and electoral trends, with theoretical ideas to understand how nationalism and neoliberalism contribute to this rise. Using an abductive approach, the research examines structural factors and supports its arguments with verified evidence, focusing on the qualitative aspects of the study.

### **Main Analysis**

Far-right movements utilize existing conditions in the global political economy that neoliberal policies, along with globalization, have established to achieve both power and promote policies of exclusivity. The analysis proceeds through essential dimensions in the following sections: Nationalism as a counterforce to globalization, neoliberalism's economic fallout, far-right exploitation of economic and cultural grievances, and theoretical perspectives on far-right dominance.

### **Nationalism as a Counterforce to Globalization**

The process of globalization strives to create prosperity via market interconnectedness, but it has caused nation-based pushbacks because it has resulted in cultural identity loss and economic breakdowns.



Capital and goods combined with population movements have disrupted traditional sovereign systems, referring to national governance structures and cultural frameworks that define a nation's autonomy and identity, thus creating resentment among communities who feel economically disadvantaged by global competition. This economic disconnection fuels fears of cultural identity loss, as communities perceive immigration as a threat to their national heritage, increasing nationalist sentiments.

Right-wing political groups use cultural insecurities to bring forth nationalistic messages about preserving pure national identities along with anti-globalization positions. European political parties, including France's National Rally and Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) create an immigrants-as-cultural-threat narrative to gain support from voters who fear globalization strips away their cultural identity. Further, as another example, the Fidesz party under Viktor Orbán has established complete rule in Hungary by using nationalist policies and strict immigration controls. (Mudde, 2019; Bíró-Nagy, 2021). The AfD slogan "Germany for Germans" finds success among struggling German regions because it merges cultural nationalism with economic complaints (Arzheimer, 2018; BBC News, 2020). The combination of cultural and economic nationalism forms the foundation of far-right political policies that shield domestic business operations. Through the Brexit referendum slogan "take back control," the public demonstrated their disagreement against EU open-market guidelines (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). Trump implemented tariffs and pulled out international trade agreements to support domestic industries because these policies responded to people who felt left behind due to the effects of globalization (Swanson, 2018). Through nationalist agendas, people find solutions to challenging global issues by using basic approaches.

### **Neoliberalism's Economic Fallout**

Neoliberalism has maintained dominance since the 1980s to create conditions that strengthen the far-right movement. The deregulation approach alongside privatization with market-driven growth through neoliberal policies sought to provide prosperity yet simultaneously created more inequality and resulted in cutting down public welfare programs. Governments chose to rescue corporations rather than support public welfare during the 2008 financial crisis, thus making elites lose public support. (Harvey, 2005). Social unrest intensified because workers lost their job protection alongside increasing employment uncertainties. Economic decline in the Rust Belt after NAFTA's neoliberal introduction through deindustrialization became a foundation for Trump's protectionist agenda. (Autor et al., 2020; Cozzolino, 2018). The European nations experienced increased poverty due to EU-imposed austerity measures during the Eurozone crisis, leading to enhanced support for protectionist platforms like Lega from Italy (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Liberto, 2024). Because neoliberalism has failed to create growth that includes everyone, right-wing movements gain a narrative about economic failure, which they use to fight for nationalist protectionist politics.

### **Far-Right Exploitation of Economic and Cultural Grievances**

Far-right movements use economic frustration together with cultural prejudice and create narratives that resonate with people who feel disconnected from society.

Their statements create an opposition between regular people and corporate elites and institutional authorities, including the EU and WTO. This results in blaming foreign immigrants for economic challenges. Shortcomings of the neoliberal system, such as increased income inequality, loss of jobs due to deindustrialization, and weakened social safety nets, following austerity measures and privatization, are some of the reasons most people are inclined to think that far-right movements are telling the truth and that globalization is harmful. These disparities in the system give opportunities to political leaders like Trump and Le Pen to present immigrants and international trade as negative influences on the local economy, thus alienating economically deprived communities.

Le Pen, Trump, and Bolsonaro, along with other leaders, portray themselves as defenders of national sovereignty in their fight against globalization. (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). Trump's anti-immigrant stance, paired with tariffs, framed foreign workers and trade as threats to American jobs, resonating in deindustrialized regions (Duche-Pérez et al., 2024). In Europe, Le Pen and Salvini link immigration to economic insecurity to justify protectionist and exclusionary policies (Ivaldi, 2019; Albertazzi et al., 2018). The far-right parties increase their public support during economic crises like the COVID-19 pandemic by promoting policies of border closures and nationalism (Bieber, 2020). Far-right movements often make use of both, economic and cultural grievances which are usually the core arguments for the justification of protectionism, such as high tariffs, trade barriers, and at the same time, authoritarian moves which include, for example, media control in Hungary or anti-immigrant laws in the U.S., to solidify their position and silence every opposing voice, using these tactics in their anti-globalization narrative.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Far-Right Ascendancy**

The following theoretical perspectives are useful to identify the structures that drive the right wing's rise to power. In Karl Polanyi's theory of the "double movement," the free market system, which is the essence of neoclassical economics or neoliberalism, through open international trade and the dismantling of all domestic market regulations aiming at full and rapid economic growth, resulting in the shifting of the balance of social and economic forces and brings about the phenomenon called a **double movement**. This can include various actions, such as the disenfranchisement of communities following negative impacts from the local economy, as we can see in the cases of Brexit and tariffs imposed by US president Donald Trump.

First, Polanyi refers to the push for free market reforms by various groups in society. Secondly, he talks about the counter-movements that necessarily and spontaneously mobilize against it (Levien and Paret, 2012). The far-right is an example of anti-globalization sentiment; besides, we can say that the far-right's struggle to retain the unity of one national identity advocating the majority and sidelining the minority that only causes divisions instead of having a true national blending is clearly visible in the case of Orban's anti-immigrant policies or Le Pen's cultural narratives.

The world has seen both Trump's implementation of tariffs together with Brexit's choice to reject EU trade regulations as examples of protectionist measures working to regain national control. (Rodrik, 2018; Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017).

When analyzing the strategies carried out by the IMF and the EU, it is evident that both institutions use neoliberalism to push out competing economic frameworks. This phenomenon can be analyzed by using Theory of Hegemony of Antonio Gramsci which emphasizes how institutions wield influence not just through their coercive power but also by framing their policies as the most sensible and beneficial paths for global development (Altınörs, 2017).

In summary, the far-right uses nationalist ideology to contend against neoliberal hegemony since it appeals to societal groups who have been left behind by the economic system. The elitist presentation of globalization allows these movements to unsettle prevailing ideologies so they can win the support from marginalized communities. Political organizations on the far right use the conflict between global markets and national sovereignty to push forward their political programs.

### **Policy Responses and Democratic Renewal**

To challenge far-right movements, efforts for addressing economic dissatisfaction and cultural tensions are essential. Policymakers must reduce inequality through progressive taxation, robust social safety nets, and investments in education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Scandinavian countries, with strong welfare policies, demonstrate resilience against far-right populism, suggesting inclusive economic policies can challenge nationalist ideologies (Rydgren, 2018). Also, labor protections combined with sustainable development efforts will lower economic uncertainties, which minimizes the basis far-right movements use to attract support (Meyer, 2018; United Nations, n.d.).

Furthermore, National unity depends on creating inclusive identities across the nation. Governments need to resolve social concerns related to xenophobia. It is generally triggered by the perception that there is competition from other parties when accessing resources. Programs that deal with resource distribution, like equal job training and economic opportunities for the locals as well as immigrants, can decrease tensions and promote community inclusion. Governments are in the best position to encourage cultural diversity and, at the same time, ensure that society is not in disarray. Public awareness campaigns and educational projects, which endorse diverse cultural values, are effective ways to counter the negative narratives about foreign migrants, and strengthen inclusive identities.

Establishing trust in democratic institutions requires transparency and strengthening of anti-corruption protocols (Richards, 2013; ID Coalition, n.d.). Internationally, the establishment of worldwide financial regulation and introducing policy solutions to climate change and enhancing fair-trade rules will strengthen multilateralism's role in battling nationalist isolationism.

Social welfare measures focused on by the EU reform would potentially diminish the strength of anti-EU far-right political parties (Telò, 2020). These measures can reduce the attraction of far-right ideologies, fostering a more balanced global political economy.

## **Conclusion**

The worldwide growth of right-wing radical movements arises from economic and nationalist pressures developing within contemporary worldwide economic systems. Nationalism functions as an opposing force to globalization because it opposes cultural and economic disturbances, although neoliberalism produces inequality and weakens social agreements, which far-right leaders capitalize upon. Right-wing radical groups use economic and cultural concerns to advance their exclusionary and protective policy initiatives in nations including Hungary, France, Italy, the United States, and Brazil. Polanyi's double movement theory and Gramsci's hegemony framework provide the theoretical frameworks to shape these arguments. The challenges caused by the emergence of the far right requires intervention by the state to rectify injustice and strengthen democratic institutions and shape diverse identities across societies. Structural changes such as progressive taxation, robust welfare states, and stable democratic institutions are imperative to effectively tackle economic injustices and rebuild confidence in the minds of citizens. Rise of radical right-wing groups and their activities would undermine liberal democracy as well as impact global cooperation if not regulated carefully.

## **Policy Planning and Future Ahead**

A proactive plan of action is needed to establish a robust and an equitable global system. This plan should include investments in education and vocational training that can prepare workers for modern economies, reducing job losses caused by deindustrialization. Policies to strengthen labor protections, including fair minimum wages and collective bargaining rights can ensure job security and address the impacts of deregulation. Sustainable development projects, such as green energy projects, can create jobs in regions affected by globalization. Reforming global trade agreements to prioritize labor rights and local economies can further restore confidence in multilateral systems. These measures collectively tackle economic disparities and uncertainties, fostering a more equitable and resilient global economy that undermines the adverse impact of far-right ideologies.

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# Reflections from Visits to the Australian Productivity Commission and the Office of Impact Analysis

By **Rehana Thowfeek**

In March, I visited two important Australian Government institutions in Canberra. This was part of a training program which I was attending. We visited two institutions: the Productivity Commission and the Office of Impact Analysis. I was curious to see how these institutions strengthen policymaking in Australia. I share my reflections from these two visits and some lessons for Sri Lanka.

## **Australian Productivity Commission**

The Productivity Commission (PC) is a government body. It gives independent research and advice to the Australian government. This covers various economic, social, and environmental policy issues. Besides the government commissioning the PC for inquiries into areas of interest, the PC also pursues its own areas of research to inform the public and policymaking.

Sri Lanka has considered a productivity commission model. The previous cabinet of Sri Lanka approved a plan (Economy Next 2023) to create a National Productivity Commission. The most important element of Australia's PC is its independence. The PC is safeguarded by its own legislation – the Productivity Commission Act – which is overseen by the Chair, Deputy Chair and Commissioners, all of whom are appointed by the Governor General for a fixed period. This fixed period strengthens the PC's independence as none are tied to any government or politician. The PC is financed by the government through budgetary allocations and has a permanent cadre. The PC reports to the Treasurer of the Australian Parliament. It also tables its inquiry reports there. The PC often updates the public about key research and policy issues.

## **Australia's Office of Impact Analysis**

The Office of Impact Analysis (OIA) is responsible for ensuring compliance with the Australian government's Impact Analysis (IA) framework. The OIA is nestled under the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The purpose of the IA framework is to ensure that policy proposals are evidence-based, backed by rigorous analysis to go with government decisions.

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The OIA guides Australian government institutions to prepare policy impact analyses that follow a predetermined outline ('Australian Government Guide to Policy Impact Analysis' 2023) covering the policy problem, the reason for government intervention in the problem, available policy options, likely net benefits, stakeholder consultations, recommendations on the best policy options, and evaluation metrics to measure success.

The OIA polices the quality of policy proposals presented by various government agencies to policymakers. Once an initial assessment is submitted to the OIA, the OIA provides feedback on whether the proposal meets the standards set out by the IA and suggestions on how the proposal can be improved to meet the standards. The proposing agency can then incorporate this feedback and resubmit a final assessment for the OIA to evaluate. Once the assessment is finalised, the OIA publishes its verdict on whether the proposal meets its standards or not.

While it is not mandatory that policy proposals receive a 'pass' from the OIA, in practice, for any policy proposal to be seriously considered it must pass the OIA's quality check. The OIA's assessment must also be annexed into the government bill tabled in parliament or in any changes to regulation. This process, although bureaucratic to an extent, helps ensure the robustness of decisions made by the government – something wholly lacking in Sri Lanka's policy-making space.

### **Lessons for Sri Lanka**

One of the main things that struck out to me was the systematic approach to policy making that seems to permeate the policy space in Australia. While I am no expert on Australian affairs and cannot claim that bad policy decisions have never been made, at the very least, it seems that all policy decisions, whatever they may be, involve a lot of thought and a high degree of scrutiny.

The IA framework, for instance, assesses the level of consultation that went into the policy proposal and its appropriateness for the issue at hand. This consultation process is vital as it ensures a wide range of views and feedback are considered in the policy process.

The IA framework also assesses the variety of policy options considered. This is beneficial as it forces policy writers to think beyond their initial remit, to consider other policy options to assess in comparison to their own. Sometimes, for instance, the 'perfect' policy proposal might have the highest impact, but might be very costly. By considering a variety of policy options, the policy thinker may find a 'near-perfect' policy proposal which has a high impact at a significantly lower cost. There is a higher chance of legislators considering such a policy since its cost implications are lesser.

Many Sri Lankan government agencies use this consultative process, but it's not always systematic. Sometimes it's done to check a box. None of the feedback is actually included in the policy proposal. In some instances, the same group is consulted, leaving no room for any diverse or opposing views to be heard. This creates an echo chamber. Only certain viewpoints are heard. This leads to non-inclusive policy decisions. As a result, these decisions often fail to meet their goals.

Another useful piece of the IA framework is the need to identify the net benefit of the policy option. This means identifying the wide variety of people and groups affected, assessing the economic, environmental, and other costs of the policy option, evaluating the equitable distribution of impacts, and conducting a cost-benefit analysis if necessary. The benefit of this is immense. It requires policy writers to consider a wide range of impacts, affected groups, and areas when designing policy.

We were lucky also to have visited the Australian Parliament and to attend Question Time during budget week. Another thing that struck out to me was how prepared legislators were for an informed debate. It was budget week in an election year, so some grandstanding was to be expected. Still, the debate remained informed. Both parties shared facts and figures, along with political jokes and tricks.

While Sri Lanka's new parliament shows promise, previous parliaments usually had brash, uninformed debate which ended up in baseless discussions. The difference is clear. It likely comes from my earlier point: a culture of systematic, evidence-based decision-making instead of ad-hoc policies.

When there isn't a clear way to think about policy, problems arise. If we don't consult many stakeholders or consider different impacts, policies can miss the mark. This often results in unfair and exclusive outcomes. The policy-making process is insulated from scrutiny and constructive criticism that can otherwise strengthen the quality of policy decisions made.

Sri Lanka is a good example of the detrimental impacts of ad-hoc style policy making, which is not transparent, widely consulted or scrutinised. The Supreme Court's decision on Sri Lanka's economic crisis found many elected officials and high-ranking public servants responsible for poor policy choices. These choices led to the worst economic crisis in recent history. The court noted:

*"It is pertinent to note, that when the tax revisions were introduced in December 2019, there had been no consultations or discussions with the officials of the Central Bank or the Monetary Board. Failure to embark on a study relating to the tax revisions and the possible adverse impact it would have on the Extended Fund Facility arrangement with the IMF, cannot be comprehended."* ('SC FR No. 195/2022' 2023)

Another good example is the overnight banning of chemical fertilisers. Again, they made this decision with little to no consultations, particularly without consulting farmers or tea growers – arguably two of the most affected groups. If this policy decision were hypothetically subject to the IA framework, it would have revealed the significant impact on crop yields and resulting income losses, as well as the impact on export revenues and import expenditure. Any rational decision maker would have avoided making such a decision. The policy proposal may never have 'passed' an IA review in any case either. Besides this, the lack of a consultative process also allowed for the deliberate misinterpretation of the policy decision. The ban on chemical fertilizer was presented as a way to boost organic farming.

However, the real reason was to cut down on Sri Lanka's fertiliser import costs as Sri Lanka was low on foreign exchange reserves at the time. If the matter was consulted, it would have been harder to conceal the real reason behind the ban as many parties would have been involved in the consultative process. Similar conclusions can be drawn about a range of decisions made by Sri Lankan policy makers; however, the two above illustrate my point clearly.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Poor policy-making processes lead to poor policy decisions. Poor policy decisions lead to poor outcomes, often with immense, long-term and disproportionate impacts on the poor and marginalised groups. The decision to cut taxes in 2019, for instance, done with limited consultations, triggered off an economic crisis that has had severe social implications (such as rising child malnutrition).

It's wise to think about using a systematic approach for policy making in Sri Lanka, especially at key places like the Ministry of Finance. An OIA-style office might not happen soon, but a similar framework can still work within current institutions. Such a strategy can be implemented by initially piloting an 'Impact Analysis Unit' within the Ministry of Finance or National Planning Department. The Unit can adopt a simplified version of Australia's IA Framework and target high impact policy reforms like tax, trade agreements or state-owned enterprise reform.

The unit can mandate pre-legislative scrutiny, for instance by requiring that bills are published online for a 30-day period to gather public feedback. Policy proposals which fail to show proper consultation can be rejected. The government can also seek support from bilateral or multilateral organisations to train public servants in undertaking assessments like cost-benefit analyses, risk assessments etc. In the medium to long-term as the process gets entrenched, an independent body which monitors the implementation of such frameworks would be necessary.

In addition to providing a more systematic approach to policy making, following a set framework for policy development ensures policy consistency and policy continuity. This is a significant positive for Sri Lanka as the lack of policy consistency (such as in taxation policy) has been identified as a primary barrier to foreign direct investment growth. Another advantage is improved transparency and accountability in policymaking. Transparent processes which gather views from a wide range of stakeholders can reduce policy inertia as well as corruption vulnerabilities.

Sri Lanka cannot afford any more ill-defined policies. Sri Lankans have been resilient in the face of recent weak policy decisions, but the fatigue has set in. With a sovereign default under its belt and 17 IMF programmes later, the time is ripe for a systematic approach to policy making.

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# The Case for Bus Rapid Transit Systems: Lessons from the Neighborhood

By Thisuri Rojie Ekanayake

Sri Lanka's bus system is in dire need of improvement. According to the latest available data from the National Council for Road Safety, in 2022 there were on average nearly five bus related accidents each day with a fatal accident occurring every two days<sup>[1]</sup>. Buses also lack comfort and accessibility as most models in Sri Lanka employ lorry chassis that fall short of modern passenger transport standards (Samarawickrama, 2025). Despite this, implementation of effective solutions has been limited as evidenced by the recycled budget proposals to improve the fleet in 2018, 2019 and 2024 that have fallen short during execution (Ekanayake, et al., 2024). Despite this, buses account for the largest transport share (~39 billion passenger/km) in 2024, and it plays a valuable role in facilitating public transport (National Transport Commission, 2024).

Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) systems have garnered attention as an urban transport solution that achieves goals such as efficiency, environmental friendliness, accessibility and affordability. Sri Lanka contemplated introducing a BRT system during the revision of the Western Province Megapolis Plan in 2015 (Silva, et al., 2016). However, it was not included in the final plan due to limitations in road size, traffic flow and the competing Light Rail Transit (LRT) project. In the subsequent decade, bus transport transformed in South Asia, particularly with the expansion of BRT projects in India and Pakistan. These cases provide valuable lessons for Sri Lanka as well.

## The BRT Concept

The concept of the BRT was first made popular by systems such as the TransMilenio in Bogota, Colombia and the system in Curitiba, Brazil. A BRT system is a system for bus-based travel that is efficient, safe, affordable, high quality and predictable. BRT achieves this through distinct features: dedicated bus lanes, off-board payments (fare collection before boarding), and level boarding (platforms at the level of bus floors for easy entry and exit). BRT systems are especially designed to operate in highly congested urban areas (Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, 2024).

[1][https://www.transport.gov.lk/web/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=29&Itemid=149&lang=en#type-of-vehicles-involved-in-accidents](https://www.transport.gov.lk/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=29&Itemid=149&lang=en#type-of-vehicles-involved-in-accidents)

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A bus system may have BRT-like features, but it must meet a minimum threshold to qualify as a BRT. A widely accepted standard created by the Institute of Transport and Development Policy presents a tiered scoring system (see Table 01). A bus system must achieve sufficient points under five broad criteria to be considered a BRT system. These are dedicated right-of-way, the location of the segregated busway within a roadway, off-board collection of fares, handling of BRT travel at intersections, and level-boarding platforms.

**Table 01: BRT Scores of systems across India and Pakistan**

BRT Standard Version	Country	City	System-Corridor	Corridor Length	Year Scored	Design Score	Total Score	Rank
2013	India	Ahmedabad	Janmarg - RTO-Maninagar	21.5	2013	74	68	Bronze
2013	India	Ahmedabad	Janmarg - Narol-Naroda	13.2	2013	78	72	Silver
2014	India	Ahmedabad	Janmarg - Sola-AEC	3.1	2014	74	65	Bronze
2013	India	Delhi	Delhi BRTS (closed) - Moolchand-Ambedkar Nagar (closed)	5.8	2013	42	30	BRT certified
2016	India	Indore	iBus - iBus Trunk Corridor	11.5	2017	71	68	Bronze
2016	India	Pimpri-Chinchwad	Rainbow BRTS - Corridor 2	14.5	2017	55	43	BRT certified
2014	India	Surat	Sitilink - Udhna - Sachin GIDC	10	2014	66	58	Bronze
2014	Pakistan	Islamabad-Pindi	Metro Bus - Twin Cities	22.5	2015	67	64	Bronze
2014	Pakistan	Lahore	Metro Bus - Green Line	27	2015	56	52	BRT certified
2016	Pakistan	Peshawar	Zu Peshawar - Chamkani-Hayatabad	27	2021	97	97	Gold

Source: Institute for Transport and Development Policy

## BRT in India

The introduction of BRT systems in India is associated with the National Urban Transport Policy in 2006. Many Indian cities established special purpose vehicles (SPVs) to strengthen institutional support for BRT operations. These SPVs are companies created by local governments to manage and operate BRT systems (Kathuria, et al., 2016). The first such systems were developed in the cities of Delhi and Pune. However, poor planning led to design limitations and implementation challenges (Institute of Transportation and Development Policy, n.d.). This led to widespread public discontent and the BRT in Delhi was eventually dismantled in 2016.

In contrast, the Ahmedabad BRT system initiated in 2009 was a far more successful attempt. There was a more systematic approach with dedicated lanes for BRT buses, better quality stations both in terms of physical infrastructure and service provision. It was also more responsive to local conditions (Rizvi, 2013). Following this success, BRT systems were implemented in other cities such as Rajkot in 2012, Indore in 2013, Surat in 2014 and in Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad in 2015.

## **BRT in Pakistan**

BRT systems were introduced in Pakistan after India, offering a solution to rapid urbanisation and the demands for efficient, affordable public transport (Fatima, 2023). Lahore launched Pakistan's first system in 2013. This was a component of a larger urban transport plan prepared with the support of Japan International Cooperation Agency and was completed with the expertise and support of the Turkish Government (Khan, Kamil and Ammar, 2022). Similar systems then spread to Rawalpindi-Islamabad, Multan and Peshawar.

BRT systems in Pakistan are affordable to most average riders at 16% of an average citizen's income (Fatima, 2023). The quality varies across systems with the system in Peshawar being the only one in South Asia to be awarded the gold standard (Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, n.d.). Pakistan's BRT systems have faced several criticisms with regard to politicization and discrepancies in funding. The Lahore Green Line was scrutinized for its association with the tightly contested 2013 election (Khan, Kamil and Ammar, 2022). The reliance on foreign funding for BRT systems raised concerns over sustainability. Yet expansion continues, including two new lines in Karachi (Business Recorder, 2024).

### **Lessons from South Asian BRT Systems**

Indian BRT systems are reputed for accessibility and safety via features including low-floor buses and surveillance cameras (Kathuria, et al., 2016). Pakistan's BRTs are seen favourably by users for their affordability and comfort. Post-pandemic, they are well regarded for their cleanliness as well (Saleem, et al., 2023). Sri Lanka stands to gain in such aspects through the successful introduction of a BRT system given the existing concerns of safety, accessibility and comfort.

Nevertheless, there have also been challenges in these South Asian cases. In India, delays occur in portions with mixed traffic lanes. Journey speeds were highest in Ahmedabad, and lowest in Delhi where it was discontinued (Kathuria, et al., 2016). Moreover, Delhi's BRT failure highlights the importance of public support; opposition from private vehicle users and media derailed its dedicated bus lanes. Furthermore, land acquisition in heavily congested areas led to further backlash underscoring the importance of route selection. In contrast, Ahmedabad's relative success stems from rapid implementation and multimodal integration. Recent dismantling of BRTs in other Indian cities, highlight additional issues such as poor ridership and shorter route length (Bansal, 2025).

In Pakistan aspects such as accessibility, coverage, environmental impacts and staff behaviour need improvement (Saleem, et al., 2023). Some BRT projects came at a cost to local communities and pedestrians. This included controversial land acquisitions and adverse effects on the walkability of some station areas due to the expansion of the motorway (Khan, Kamil and Ammar 2022; Nadeem, Matsuyuki and Tanaka, 2023). Critics also stressed the fiscal strain from construction debts and fare subsidies, questioning whether funds could have been better utilized to serve broader societal needs.

## Policy Recommendations for Sri Lanka

Nearly a decade has passed since the previous proposal for a BRT system along Galle Road was abandoned. Now, interest in BRT projects has resurfaced, especially in light of the cancellation of the LRT project, previously considered a competing initiative. However, lessons from countries such as India and Pakistan show the need for a careful and context-specific approach to BRT planning.

### Summary of Recommendations:

1. Commission a comprehensive, updated feasibility study for potential BRT corridors. This should consider not only passenger demand, traffic congestion, and cost, but also:
  - Public perceptions of residents and commuters through structured consultations.
  - A transparent land acquisition plan, including clear communication and compensation mechanisms, to avoid the setbacks experienced in India and Pakistan.
  - Sri Lanka's fiscal constraints, similar to Pakistan's, must be taken into account, aligning BRT decisions with broader national spending priorities.
2. Ensure strong connectivity to the proposed BRT corridor via an integrated feeder system to boost accessibility and prevent low ridership.
3. In parallel, upgrade the general bus system to make it more BRT-compatible:
  - Deploy low-floor, accessible buses as outlined in national budgets.
  - Enforce safety regulations, including complaint mechanisms and penalties for unsafe driving and poorly maintained vehicles.
  - Pilot digital fare collection systems that streamline payments to encourage a smooth transition into a BRT system which relies on digital payments for offboard fare collection. This can test for user-readiness and increases public familiarity with such processes.

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# A Critical Analysis of a Meritocracy Created by Sri Lanka's Education System

By Jeremy John De Zilwa

Sri Lanka's education system, despite its socialist foundation of "free education," harbors significant hidden costs that perpetuate inequality. Quality education in Sri Lanka remains accessible primarily through money, influence, or exceptional merit (measured through academic, aesthetic, or athletic ability). This analysis of Sri Lanka's educational system is critical because it reveals how deeply entrenched inequities have created a self-perpetuating cycle that undermines national development, wastes human potential, and perpetuates socioeconomic stratification. This report aims to reveal the failure of Meritocratic ideals and aims at fostering a discussion on connecting education to sustainable economic development.

The origin of a meritocratic system traces back to the Kannangara reforms of 1939. Contrary to popular belief, these reforms weren't primarily about providing free education. Rather, at the time, they were designed to create a meritocracy that would expand educational opportunities for children beyond an elite 15% to talented students from all socioeconomic backgrounds across Sri Lanka. Dr. C.W.W. Kannangara believed that there were clever minds from all strata of society and not merely within the privileged. Therefore, he endeavored to create equal opportunity for all children in Sri Lanka. The Grade 05 scholarship examination (G5SE) became the core instrument to take forward this vision (Karunanayake, 2021).

While Free education was the ultimate vision, Dr Kannangara faced the dilemma of not having resources that can provide quality education across the whole country. Therefore, the meritocratic approach was noble as it intended to harness talent from across the population and drive national progress. However, as Karunanayake (2021) explains, "The same strategy has been used and unaltered through seven decades of changing times." Despite Kannangara himself acknowledging that "An Education System grows rapidly out of date in a world of rapidly changing values," Sri Lanka failed to adapt its educational laws and strategies.

Over time, the system became corrupted, benefiting certain segments of society and creating institutionalized disparities in educational resources that include tangible facilities and teacher quality. Ironically, despite the promise of free education, the same middle-class and elite groups have continued to dominate the best schools and universities for decades, effectively using taxes to subsidize educational advantages for the wealthy.

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The resulting system creates fierce competition focused on performance, where "the opportunity to perform better" disproportionately favors children with more resources. While some children occasionally "succeed against the odds," their numbers have naturally diminished over the decades as little is done to improve the quality of education in underprivileged schools (Department of Examinations, 2023). Meanwhile, these ineffective schools continue to operate without meaningful reform, leaving many children neglected, excluded, and left behind.

This analysis aims to analyze the complex inequities that have emerged from this meritocratic system that prioritizes the "best" students while failing to address the needs of many of the nation's children that have been left behind in the schools that we just described.

### **Implications of the G5SE on Education Inequity**

Looking objectively at Sri Lanka's education system reveals a persistent pattern: for generations, the best students and teachers have been filtered out from disadvantaged schools (to better schools), without substantial efforts to improve the chances of children in underprivileged schools to succeed in benchmark examinations, starting with the Grade 5 scholarship. But what was the original purpose of the G5SE?

An IPS report (Abayasekara, 2019) highlighted the scholarship exam's failure to meet its two primary objectives:

1. Admitting academically talented students to well-resourced schools
2. Providing bursaries for bright but economically disadvantaged students

The report systematically breaks down how we have failed in these objectives. It reveals that only about 20% of students in National schools are scholarship recipients, while the remaining 80% were admitted from Grade 1 (Abeyasekara, 2017). This emphasizes that children from better circumstances occupy most available spaces in national schools regardless of merit, limiting opportunities for the meritorious scholarship recipients.

Furthermore, this research analyzed 8,278 schools of 10,155 and found that out of 33,163 Grade 5 scholarship recipients in 2017, only 74% moved to new schools, with most movements occurring from privileged to highly privileged schools.

The data presented in the paper clearly demonstrates that students from less privileged backgrounds face significant disadvantages:

- Compared to "Highly privileged 1AB" schools, qualification rates decline progressively across school categories: privileged schools (3% fewer qualifications), not privileged schools (4% fewer), underprivileged schools (5% fewer), and highly underprivileged schools (6% fewer)
- Lower-tier school types (1C, Type 2, Type 3) had 4-5% lower qualification rates compared to 1AB schools
- School resources directly correlate with success: schools with higher parent/Parent Teacher Association funds and more experienced teachers had 2% more students qualified.

- Schools facing challenges such as higher teacher leave and more non-teaching staff had significantly lower qualification rates (17% and 3% fewer qualifications respectively)

Evidence shows that this pattern continued in 2023, with upper-income male and female students performing better on the Grade 05 Scholarship Examination (Department of Examinations, 2023).

The bursary system also fails to reach many underprivileged students. Since 2015, to receive bursary funds, a child must be from a household earning less than Rs. 50,000 annually and score above the cut-off mark. Only about 36% of students who scored above the cut-off mark in 2015 were eligible for financial aid, indicating that most successful students were not truly underprivileged.

Participation rates reveal another dimension of inequality: while 95% of children from national schools sit for the exam, only 79% from underprivileged provincial schools (which accommodate the poorest students) take the exam. This lower participation stems from limited access to educational resources, lack of information about the exam's benefits, and lower expectations from parents and teachers.

This aligns with Ranasinghe and Hartog's (2002) findings that access to quality education in Sri Lanka remains largely determined by socioeconomic status, despite equity-focused policy rhetoric. Through Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) theoretical lens, this could be because students from underprivileged backgrounds develop a habitus that doesn't align with the educational system's expectations, leading them to "choose" not to participate because they perceive these opportunities as "not for them." Tragically, this perception may be realistic rather than merely pessimistic.

Abayasekara (2019) concludes that "the enabling environment and the structuring of the exam content do not ensure that its main target group, which is talented students amongst the poor, have a fair chance of taking advantage of the opportunities presented, thereby rendering the afore mentioned goals of the Grade 05 Scholarship exam unachievable."

### **Competition Fueled by Meritocracy**

The Grade 05 Scholarship Examination (G5SE) has evolved from its original purpose as a mechanism for identifying talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds into a systemic barrier that primarily serves to limit access to quality education. This evolution reflects a deliberate policy choice: rather than expanding educational quality across more schools, authorities have opted to increase the difficulty of the examination.

The evidence for this strategy is compelling. Between 2014 and 2023, the number of students sitting for the examination only increased from 327,648 to 332,949. Despite this relatively modest 1.6% increase in test-takers, the Ministry of Education significantly tightened the competition by making the examination progressively more difficult. As former Education Minister Bandula Gunewardene candidly admitted, "the test papers are designed to get the students to fail" (Sunday Times, 2014).

By limiting the number of successful candidates, the government reduces the pressure to expand capacity at prestigious schools and minimizes expenditure on bursaries (currently only 15,000 rupees per qualifying student). Furthermore, It is much easier and affordable (in terms of money and effort) to tighten the competition, rather than invest in improving the quality of education in more schools and sustaining it.

Abayasekera (2017) recognized that diminishing participation of underprivileged children in the G5SE is in part due to lower access to educational resources, including private tuition. Also, indicating that tuition has become necessary to pass the G5SE, because it has grown to become a very difficult examination (Pallegedara, 2012). Private tutoring significantly amplifies socioeconomic disparities in educational outcomes and its role in exam preparation raises concerns about the exam's ability to identify truly meritorious students irrespective of their circumstance (Bray's, 2013).

Karunanayake (2021) describes private tuition as "another way in which the elite undermine social justice," forcing families to supplement inadequate school education with private instruction. A needs assessment by Save the Children (2022) found that 30-40% of family income in low-income groups is spent on education while the private tuition industry generates an estimated 65 billion rupees annually (Perera, 2023). Not to mention, that the competitive pressure creates a market for cheating, as evidenced by the leaked G5SE questions in 2024 when "a government teacher, who also conducted tuition classes in the Alawwa area, had shared the question paper on social media as a model paper prior to the examination" (Kodagoda, 2024).

Those that are desperate to compete in these exams are predominantly middle-class families that naturally compete for social mobility, but at the cost of their children's mental health. Dr. Chaminda Weerasiriwardane (2024), [1] a medical officer and senior counselor at Teaching Hospital Kandy, reported treating 682 cases of children suffering from mental illness caused by exam pressure. He specifically identified the "fatigue brain" syndrome resulting from sleep deprivation as children are forced to prepare for the exam. Dr. Wickremesinghe, a former Specialist Psychiatrist at Kandy National Hospital, emphasized that pressure to perform well is often driven by schools' concerns about their institutional reputation rather than the wellbeing of children (Kuruluwansa, 2023).

Despite overwhelming evidence of the examination's harmful effects, attempts to reform or abolish it have repeatedly failed:

- The Technical Committee on Primary Education and Early Childhood Development (1996) recommended restructuring the examination (Sunday Times, 2014).
- The National Education Commission (NEC) in 1995 proposed reforms to restructure the examination to identify clever students as part of the 'National Education Policy-A Framework for Action on General Education'.

[1] The Life Traveler (2024) 'ශිෂ්‍යත්වය නිසා ඵලියට ආව ඇසිය යුතුම කතාවක් දරුවන්ට උගන්නන්න හඳුනා දෙමව්පියන්ට වෛද්‍යවරයෙක් කියයි', YouTube, 30 September. Available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3EJtFf1BRw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3EJtFf1BRw)

- In 1999, Exam Commissioner A.M.R.B. Amarakone led discussions about either abolishing the examination or amending it to reduce stress (De Mel, 2022).
- In 2014, Education Minister Bandula Gunewardena announced plans to replace the examination with a simpler test, but this was overruled by the then President Mahinda Rajapakse.
- A 2018 study by the National Institute of Education found that 66.5% of stakeholders agreed the examination should be abolished (NIE, 2018).

The Grade 05 Scholarship Examination represents a fundamental contradiction in Sri Lanka's education system. While ostensibly designed to provide opportunities for talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds, it has evolved into a mechanism that systematically excludes those same students while causing widespread psychological harm to children across all socioeconomic strata's that attempt to compete for the scholarship.

### **Investment over Rights in Education**

A meritocracy would prioritize education as an investment rather than being a right. It aims to identify the cleverest students and give them the opportunity to succeed. By doing so, we invested in children whom we thought had the potential to maximize economic gains in the future. Skilled individuals who are products of good quality education have the potential to contribute to economic growth of the country. However, Sri Lanka did nothing to ensure these expected social returns.

As the system that existed was unchecked, the system simultaneously underfunds provincial schools while directing resources to national schools that primarily serve the already advantaged (Education Forum Sri Lanka, 2021). This structural inequality manifests clearly in higher education access patterns. Students from privileged backgrounds predominantly access the most coveted university programs which are medicine, ICT, science, and engineering, because they have access to better teachers and resources throughout their educational journey (Lubienski et al, 2009). Many graduates who benefit from free education in Sri Lanka's leading schools and universities often migrate abroad for postgraduate studies or for higher paid employment opportunities, providing little return on the country's investment in their education.

Meanwhile, students from disadvantaged backgrounds face severely limited options. With fewer qualified teachers in rural schools, particularly in critical subjects like mathematics, science, English, and ICT, these students often had no choice but to pursue subjects in the arts stream at the Advanced Levels (Amarasuriya et al, 2009). Thus, we see the majority of students enrolling in arts, humanities, or social science degrees predominantly come from low-income, rural, disadvantaged families with parents not involved in professional work. The overproduction of unemployed university graduates lacking skills demanded by the private sector has created political problems on several occasions in our history. Governments had to routinely absorb these graduates into public service either to strengthen political party support or to prevent youth uprisings. Amarasuriya (2009) describes this as "dousing the fire" of potential social unrest.



While degrees in arts, humanities, or social sciences are inherently valuable, in Sri Lanka they are perceived as inferior because the state higher education has failed to maintain quality in these disciplines across the broader network of local universities. However, quality has conveniently been preserved in science, engineering, and technology programs which are traditionally accessed by the privileged thus creating a self-perpetuating cycle of inequality.

The Sri Lankan education system's intense focus on merit has also seeped into our culture and has created a troubling dynamic where teachers often show preference to invest time in teaching high-performing students while systematically neglecting those who struggle academically. This selective approach manifests in two harmful school cultures: either extreme complacency where school administration is weak and unmotivated teachers exist in schools, display symptoms such as absenteeism and serve in their perceived "dead-end" career postings, or toxic performance-driven environments where only the academically inclined students receive attention, while others are subtly pushed out to maintain impressive pass rates. This educational stratification in both environments has devastating consequences which result in high dropout rates, teacher transfer requests that deplete struggling schools of qualified educators, and students left behind lose positive peer influences that would otherwise elevate academic achievement. The system perpetuates a cycle where underprivileged schools become increasingly resource-starved, teachers develop progressively lower expectations for remaining students, and children face the impossible choice between enduring significant hardships to attend distant "better" schools or abandoning their education entirely for immediate income opportunities. All in all, disregarding a large number of children's right to access quality education.

### **Policy Recommendations to Reverse a Meritocratic System**

Sri Lanka's education system urgently requires a fundamental reimagining that moves beyond its current meritocratic structure, which has consistently failed disadvantaged communities. This "cream skimming" process where high-performing students are extracted from underprivileged schools has devastated communities left behind, and has created a downward spiral of diminished resources, teacher quality, and student outcomes.

To address this systemic failure, we must transform how we assess children. Rather than using exams to identify and select the best students, we should reframe assessments as diagnostic tools that identify children who need additional support. This approach holds teachers and schools accountable for ensuring that "all" children learn, and no one is left behind. It encourages educators to try different teaching techniques and find new ways to help children who learn differently, rather than labeling them as unteachable and excluding them (Stiggins, 2008). This perspective will also give us the opportunity to evaluate multiple forms of intelligence rather than privileging only certain types.

If the G5SE must remain, the primary objectives of the G5SE are to create opportunities for clever children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Abayasekara, 2019). The exam should exclusively be for children with economically challenged backgrounds (Ball, 2017).

The proposals made by the NEC and Examiners commissioner in 1999 to a) abolish the examination but to offer scholarships to children from underprivileged homes as determined through by Samurdhi recipients and/ or b) to amend the G5SE so that it becomes less stressful to a 10 year old with only 1 paper with IQ type of questions are still valid proposals today (De Mel, 2022).

Sri Lanka should cease the provision of universal free education to well-resourced schools and reallocate that funding selectively to schools that need it most, based on an "educational disadvantage index." This approach would increase the chances of children in underprivileged schools benefiting from scholarships while gradually developing more schools throughout the country to meet higher standards. The reallocated funding should also contribute to investing in stronger school administration and leadership. Additionally, we need to create incentives for quality teachers to serve in disadvantaged communities where they can better support children in challenging contexts.

Furthermore, Sri Lanka should introduce systems to monitor whether educational investments yield returns for the broader economy. We need to find ways to encourage or even ensure that beneficiaries of "the best that our education has to offer" directly contribute to the country's development. The Teach For All network provides a valuable model, offering top graduates fellowship opportunities to teach in high-need schools for two years while developing long-term solutions to educational challenges after the fellowship (Friedrich, Walter, and Colmenares, 2015).

As Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) wrote, systems entrenched in inequity naturally resist change unless there is consistent accountability to ensure progress. Therefore, we must implement mechanisms to regularly monitor and evaluate the impact of programs focused on equity and inclusion outcomes. By incorporating affirmative action strategies into our approach, we can address the root causes of educational inequality. This approach moves beyond merely providing "Purported" equal opportunity, as we have done with the Grade 05 scholarship, to actively promoting truly equitable outcomes for all Sri Lankan children.

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# Relevance of Public Policy Education



*Shayani Jayasinghe in conversation with the Former Chairman of the Weligama Urban Council, **Rehaan Wijeratne Jayawickreme** on the Relevance of Public Policy Education*

1. *Can you share with us as to what motivated you to follow a Post Graduate Diploma in Politics and Governance offered by the Bandaranaike Academy for Leadership and Public Policy?*

Hi Shayani! First of all, very good morning to you and also to the entire team at BALPP. Even though we have a local government election coming on, I think it's very important to note the special place that BALPP has in my heart because it gave me an opportunity to- you know-to pursue my higher education, even though I'm not technically that young anymore.

So, I've always believed that, you know, to make a meaningful sort of difference in the country, we first need to understand how and why the system works, because in Sri Lanka it's usually stuck to a script when you talk about policy. It's only speeches and promises. It never goes anything beyond that. You know, it never goes to a level where it is anything concrete or it's very rare that it happens. So, the BALPP gave me an opportunity to sort of deepen my understanding of political theory. It also helped me with governance frameworks and learn the intricacies of policy making. So, it gave me the tools that I sort of require to serve people more effectively.

It was a course that had a fantastic set of lecturers. Doctor Tara de Mel, she was amazing. Throughout the whole course as a director, we've had pretty well-known figures like Gihan De Chickera, who was also part of our learning curriculum and you know, we also had Dr. Janaki who is no longer with us. She was also a course advisor. So, I think overall it was very flexible also because it was not anticipated that there might be an election in the middle of the course but there was an election. So, during that whole time, rather than asking me to defer, the team at BALPP were very, very, very understanding of my situation and allowed me to hand over assignments online. So, I encourage anyone who wants to, you know, get their education level firm, you know, sort of having a firm sort of foothold, I encourage everyone to, you know, try and do this course because this is not the only course that BALPP offers. It also offers courses on International Relations and Civic Duties. So, I'm just saying that if you, whatever you need to study, the BALPP has it. Another thing is it's very cost effective.

That didn't matter a lot to me, but a lot of people who find it difficult to pay for their courses, you know, BALPP, also gives them some sort of relief here and there. So, if you want to know about public policy, if you want to know about how the country works, if you want to have the best public policy lectures that will be available for you from all the universities in Sri Lanka, I suggested you enroll yourself in this course.

*2. Thank you very much for your encouragement. So Mr. Rehan, do you believe that following such courses will help you and the youth in the country to develop a clear, clear understanding of public policy making and ethical governance practices? Do you think such courses have been instrumental in broadening your knowledge about public policy making and ethical governance?*

Absolutely Shayani. You are spot on because I think these courses sort of build awareness. It is not about what-but they also tell you why. So especially behind government actions, the policy framework behind government actions. BALPP nurtures critical thinking, which is like an absolute tool that you need in life in general. I just think that it emphasizes ethical leadership- you can be a good leader-you can be a bad leader -you can be an ethical leader. Ethics plays a big role in leadership. I don't think it just is a course that you do. But this course sort of brings out even hidden leaders within you. So you know, if you want to engage with the youth of this country because the youth now value transparency, they value accountability, they value long term thinking. So if you if you value these aspects about the youth and if you want to engage the youth in this space, the best thing to do is to start a course where the youth will actually believe that there will be a difference made. So, like I said, it's very important that we maintain a sense of transparency, accountability and also long-term thinking.

*3. So, in your opinion, why is it important for a country to maintain proper policy planning mechanisms?*

You know, without a sound policy planning mechanism, I think decisions become reactive instead of proactive. That is number 01.

When you talk about good governance- I am not saying that our government is good. When you look at a benchmark of governments- good governance demands that you anticipate challenges. That is number 01. You need to assess data. You also need to plan holistically. Holistically in the sense that it has to you know it has to be something that makes sense. It means something natural, something normal.

You know, and it also ensures a sort of consistency across governments, and it helps build trust in the public institutions. When people see policies that are delivered in real life.

If you look at the tariffs imposed on us by the United States government-44%. Lots of people say that nothing could have been done by the government because 03 or 04 months is not enough for trade negotiations. I agree with that.



But there are countries like Australia, for example, that only got slapped with a 10% tariff. One might wonder how we got 44% and a country like Australia got 10%. The reason being, the countries like Australia and the UK, they have been preparing for this since President Donald Trump's reelection, because this has been a campaign promise of his not just that came after he won. Ever since he was a primary candidate for the Republicans, he has been constantly talking about these tariffs. Now, one may wonder again. So how could we have prevented this? It is not about prevention; it is also about a little bit of cure. We could have made it seem like because at the end of the day we are stamping about 80 to 85% on tariffs on them. So, what we could have done was we could have made a policy with regard to the archive tax systems that we have, the Cess system that we have, the PAL system that we have, the very outdated VAT system that we have now, all this comes to one bunch known as policy. If we had a sound trade policy, we could have definitely avoided the high tariffs that we got, we could have agreed with them.

Now one more little example that I want to bring in is our health policy. Why is it that Sri Lanka has a really, really, really weak health policy? Or why does it have a very weak health system? It's because we have failed in our policy. Even our education is like that. We may have free education. In Sinhala we call it *Nidahas Adyapanaya*. We may have independent education, but what is the point when the citizens of this country don't know? If you ask them in Sinhala, "*Ogollonge Lamayi Wishvavidyaleta giyath kohomada wiyadam karanne?*" (Even if your children gain admission to university, how will they spend for their education?) if you go and ask them, then. You know, people don't have a knowledge. People know that the government gives this to them free. But they have no idea why it's free. So that's why it's really, really important that we have good public policy and that's why I used those two examples.

*4. So, in your opinion, what does public policy education play in promoting civic engagement and informed decision-making in society?*

As I mentioned before, you know studying public policy is absolutely essential when you try to demystify the decision-making process. It's a very, very, very essential thing that you must do, especially if you're studying public policy, because it sort of helps us understand: Number 01, how laws are crafted. Laws just don't come from the sky. Laws are also a direct result of good public policy or bad public policy.

Ok. Whether you get good laws or whether you get bad laws also depends on the one core thing which is public policy. So, it helps us to figure out what the laws are. It also, for example, gives you an idea after a budget, for example, that a country presents how that budget is allocated through policy, how all these are set in priorities. If anyone is interested in reform, change or development, always remember that this knowledge public policy is actually power. It is actually -you can call it power because it's the sort of bridge in your head.

Think that on one side is intention, in the middle is public policy, the other side is impact. So now if it's a bridge like that where you feel that intention is on one side and impact is on one side and you are in the middle, then that's not going to work.

So public policy has to be placed in this bridge right in the middle and impact and intention should be something that you find on the way. So public policy shouldn't be in the middle, where you have to decide whether you're going towards intention or impact. Public policy should be at the start of the bridge and while you're embarking on this public policy journey you should move towards impact, real change and intention.

*5. So now in your opinion, do you think that public policy education helps to foster leadership skills and strategic planning skills in the youth of the country?*

Ok so I am going to give a real-world example because I think that the youth of this country are, as you know, more than a sort of a lecture type interview would appreciate real world examples. I remember I when I was part of a Sri Lankan delegation to India where I traveled to most of the States. In India, we traveled to Gujarat. You know, we travelled to Karnatak. You know, we went to a few states. It was sponsored by the Indian government. I was accompanied by member of Parliament, Jeevan Thondaman, and Member of Parliament Kavinda Jayawardena. We represented the country. A very interesting incident happened when we were in Gujarat, we met this 37, I think it was about 37 or 36 or even younger, you know, having become a minister there in a provincial government is not like in Sri Lanka because those provinces are huge. When you look at Tamil Nadu, when you look at, you know, Gujarat, when you look at Karnataka, when you look at all these states, they are massive states.

So, it's not like being a Provincial Council minister here. So, the Provincial government minister that we met in India was a minister who was in charge of about 5 ministries, sports, industries, agriculture etc. Now, Gujarat is known for a very robust agricultural system. Also, a very robust way of collecting taxes. They have a very simplified way in which you collect taxes. Says in some of those states. So, we had a meeting with this young minister, a very impressive guy, you know, and also you know that Gujarat was also Prime Minister Modi's former stronghold.

So, he obviously picked a very strong man for Gujarat when he picked this minister. So, I asked this minister a question about agriculture.

Now Shayani, I don't want you to get political here. But you know that when you ask a Sri Lankan politician something, whether it's something they know or don't know, they will talk about hidden things, unknown things. They'll talk about everything, pretending that they know. So, when I asked this Minister a question about agriculture, do you know the answer he gave me? He said, “ Mr. Jayawickreme, I am a politician. You know I have no big school experience, you know, but people like me, the people thought that I was a great leader. So, I'm giving them leadership. But the question that you asked from me was about agriculture and for agriculture, we have appointed our own set of professionals-the best in Gujarat! It doesn't matter what party they are from, whether they are BJP, whether they are Congress. It doesn't matter where they are, they have been given responsibilities to uplift the standard of agriculture in my state. I can't answer this question, I will get my agriculture secretary to send you a detailed explanation about your question now”

The reason I mentioned this Shayani is that if you want to be a good leader, if you want to be a leader, that will be with the people. Always remember that leaders are human, and leaders don't have to know everything. But what is important is that you surround yourself with people that know, so that if there's a problem with agriculture, you can ask your agriculture expert. If you have a problem about health policy, you can speak to your health policy experts. But you can be a politician. You can get the votes but always remember that public policy is about surrounding yourself with good and effective leaders. So, I used that example to show you that public policy is important, but so is leadership that believes in entrusting responsibility to various other groups who will give you the knowledge that you need. So, I think that's really, really, really important.

*6. Mr. Rehan, now you also have studied public policy and showing a lot of interest and enthusiasm in this discipline called public policy education. So, if you look at the Sri Lankan context, have you noticed any barriers that students face when gaining access to public policy education in Sri Lanka? If so, what are those barriers?*

I think knowledge is key when it comes to these things. So usually sometimes it's not only about barriers, but it's also about the amount of knowledge that they have that these courses exist now. I think BALPP plays an amazing role in that because you know, I wouldn't have known that BALPP was doing a course on leadership, governance and public policy unless it was in front of my eyes. So, I saw it online. I saw it on Twitter and that's why I joined. I think at its core, public policy education should, you know, aim to build not only normal leaders, but empathetic leaders. You know, informed leaders, ethical leaders, I mentioned ethics a few times now because, you know, it promotes systems thinking, you know, encourages collaborative problem-solving skills. It helps learners understand the socio economic, cultural and historical context that shapes policy outcomes. So, I think all these things are accessible. But I would request the BALPP to do something more. You're already there when it comes to this, but I'm saying that the government of Sri Lanka should seriously consider funding your institution way more because I realized the quality of lecturers are so good.

When I was a student at St. Thomas's I was not studious. I only finished my O/L s at St. Thomas's. I haven't done my A levels. You know I'm not ashamed to say that because I was a rather naughty kid. I never did my A levels. But you know, I did my foundation studies in media and communication at Melbourne University of Business and Technology.

What really, really, really gave me a push was, you know, having a PGD ,because for a boy who did not complete O/Ls, to be able to go to Australia and do a minimum qualification and come back and do a PGD which is also equivalent to a master's, I think I only got that opportunity because of BALPP and because of that reason, the government, I think should not consider this just as a trust. They should really, really, really do their best in developing BALPP into a world class government educational Institute. I think BALPP and your foundation, I think, has all the necessary requirements and the courage and determination it requires for these sorts of courses to become famous.

## *7. How can public policy education be more accessible and inclusive for diverse populations?*

That's a really, really interesting question and something that I love to answer. Number one, we can start by decentralizing these programs. Sri Lanka has different communities, so we can offer modules in different languages, regional languages, regional languages in the sense Tamil and but not just in English, but English Sinhala and Tamil. You know, we can sort of leverage the digital platforms that we have to reach remote communities that don't have access to infrastructure, when it comes to Internet and all that and another very, very important thing that I think you guys do and I think it's amazing is I think scholarships and mentorships can also go a long way because of lots of people-lots of children need scholarships and mentorship. Then also because it sort of gives underrepresented groups to join and thrive in these programs, you know what I mean. It gives the opportunity for a boy studying at Jaffna Central or Jaffna Hindu College to come to Colombo and have the same sort of facilities that someone from Ananda or Nalanda or St. Thomas or Royal has. So, all this, I think, plays a big role, but my main point would be the offering of modules in different languages so that they're comfortable with all those languages- scholarships and mentorships. I think that's a solid way forward.

Then the second one- Also, you also asked me about, you know, how we can improve this. Right so another improvement to better serve students is - You know, studying should not always be about books. Now studying should be, I think, experimental. I think you need to experience studies. We need to move beyond textbooks. You know, we can bring in real world case studies, for example, so many policy decisions that have gone wrong in this country. For example, the Sinhala only policy where if you know sort of bread problems between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities in Sri Lanka. Let me just take a minute and talk to you about that, because if you want to know something that is different to any other system that we have, if you know what a real-world example of how bad public policy has affected the country and another solid example is the Sinhala Only Policy. The Sinhala only policy which was implemented by you know the leaders at that time, you know, it was ill-informed policymaking decisions that landed us in an ethnic and civil war that we had for over 30 years.

It was that one bad decision. So, all you need is one bad decision and that one bad decision cost us about 30 years of our life, which means that I would have been nine years old when the war first properly started. So, the reason I gave you that example is, how is that one bad mistake resulted something deeper. So that is one example that I wanted to use. So field visits- that I think BALPP did that throughout our course. They took us to Parliament. They took us to different sites, and it was first time learning. So, field visits and simulations along with internships. We should let students engage with local government bodies, community leaders and NGOs. So, I think once you do all that and once, we get involved with the local government, with community leaders and the NGOs, then you have a sort of rough understanding of how these public policies should be implemented. So that's how you would do it in real time. So, it has to be, like I said, a mix of everything, but it also has to focus on real world experiences where you engage with government bodies, community leaders and NGOs.

*8. So how can you encourage more students to follow courses on public policy?*

So that's very simple. You just have to show them how a policy affects every part of their lives. People of this country don't know that because we don't tell them. Politicians don't talk about public policy. Even politicians only talk about public policy when it serves their rhetoric. But we have to show them how it affects every part of their life. For example, we have to show a person who goes to buy a toothpaste or toothbrush. From this shop, a very basic thing we need to show them how having a good public policy is what affects all these decisions, why or how we can offer a toothbrush at a lower price than what they're offering in another country. Now everyone talks about Rice, right? Everyone talks about a shortage of rice. You know, Sri Lanka has so many paddy fields that we still talk about a shortage of rice. That's because we never talk to people about the price of rice that it takes to, for example to put it in a truck and send it from Anuradhapura to Colombo. People don't know that. These are why the rice prices fluctuate, that there's a transport cost. That's included in this.

We also need relatable role models in youth friendly platforms that encourage these concepts. When someone goes on Facebook and sees a politician speaking, they'll quickly swipe. But if they say, for example, Vasthi -a famous influencer - when they see them talking, they will pause and watch. So, you need to get these influencers involved. The government needs to get these influencers involved to spread the message, because sometimes it's nicer when influencers spread the message. I don't see that happening.

I'll give you a good example- Wild Cookbook. Sri Lanka's only You Tube channel with 10 million subscribers. The person who has the most amount of subscriber very recently, he said in a TV interview that the Sri Lankan Tourism Board has not even approached him once. Now you can see we have gold right next to us? You know, we don't need to go to the jewelry shop to buy the gold. We have the gold right in front of us.

We have that resource right in front of us, but we are not using that resource, but how many times can we use them if we want? You know, and he said that he will come and do this free of charge. So, you know, a lot of other countries do this really, really, really well. They look at the influencers, they look at social media trends and they use them because the youth don't like to listen to, you know, traditional type of politicians anymore. They need something new. They need something exciting, so I think using social media influencers is also a huge deal. Then also this is something I do personally because I think to expect change, we have to be the change. Through my own work, something that I promote is I show that politics aren't just for politicians. I try to make it seem like they are for everyone, so it's only when you get the public involved in public policy making decisions that you can change all of this. If not, I don't think this country will ever prosper. Everyone must do it. Not just the politicians. You, me, the people listening to, your institute, my household, your household, our community. Our village. Our town, our country. That's how it needs to be. We need to start this change from our homes.



*9. What is your long-term vision for empowering the youth of this country and encouraging them to contribute to efficient policy formulation and implementation mechanisms of the country?*

I started politics with a dream. I got that idea from my former boss. Someone who I miss very much. Someone who got me into politics. He's the one who encouraged me to start politics at a very low level, even though both my grand uncles were ministers, you know, very famous ministers, people who were not involved in any sort of corruption. General Ranjan Wijeratne, who was a former Defense Minister, was my grand uncle. Major Montague Jayawickrama was also my grand uncle. But Mangala Samaraweera- he told me this very interesting thing- he said "Don't try to do politics and end up where your grand uncles finished their politics." He advised me to start at the bottom and promised to help me start at the Urban Council. You know, when I first contested for the Urban Council, I had no idea I would be the mayor. I contested without the hope of becoming a mayor. So, I started off at a lower level. Why? Because that is how a politician initiates good public policy. You need to know. How much is a loaf of bread? You need to know in a village fair how much your Del Gediya [Ceylon Breadfruit] will be, or how much your mukunuwanna [leafy green vegetable] will be. I'm sad to say they don't know. They don't know how their mother goes to work in the morning and how she brings money home. They don't know how their father works three jobs a day and manages to pay a child's tuition fees. The children of this country, they think that everything is free of charge, so mentorship is very important.

I had a very good mentor, Mangala who taught me a lot. Mangala always said that we must always be dreamers for our country. We should never think that one person can't make a change. Change starts from the bottom and goes right to the top. Change doesn't always start from the top. Change has to start from the bottom as well, so my dream has always been to build a future where young people are not just heard. We need to make them an integral part of the decision-making processes. How do we do that? I'll tell you. You know, I have spoken about this before, so I'll say everything because this is the last question, I think you know that means we have to invest in education, which is number one. Number two, we have to invest in mentorship. I told you, like how Mangala was my mentor. We need to have mentors like that and mentoring programs, where the youth feel that they have their mentorships. Also, we need platforms where the youth can create or help create policy. You know for example. Have a Public policy team but also have an advisory team of under 35. Why do I say it should be under 35? Because the mind needs to work fast and you know the mind is not something that can stay idle, which is why they say politicians shouldn't do politics after the age of 60 or 65 because your mind slows down your cognitive abilities.

Which is why the world is now choosing younger politicians to represent them. They are looking at younger prime ministers and younger presidents is because the world is getting older in a sense. But the world is also getting younger because when older people pass away or when there are no older people, the only way you salvage it is by having a mix with the younger generation. So, I don't see any of that being present now.



I'll give you a good example - Your interview. You are interviewing me as a younger person. So, I can relate with you when I'm talking to you. But if you were a 60–70-year-old person who's talking to me, I won't be able to relate with you. So, I used you as an example because this is how it should be.

The older people or the senior citizens of this country should be there as mentors, to tell us where they went wrong. So that's very important as well. Then we have to mix. Now this is also very, very, very important. I think this is the most important part of this whole interview. We have to make space for all these individuals in the table, whether it be local councils or in the national parliament, grassroots movements, we have to create positions for people or young people, public policy shapers to come into these levels of politics, local councils. If your light is broken, who comes and fixes your light? You know, if your garbage is outside your house, who comes and takes your garbage? But that is not the most, the most important thing is not the collection of garbage, but people should wonder what they do with their garbage. You know, do you take your garbage, and dump it in a lake and you completely ruin the ecosystem? Or do you take it to a landfill? A sustainable landfill.

Oh, like in Colombo, do you take them to the incinerator, and you convert waste to energy? You need to know what happens with your garbage. The same with taxes, if you're a business owner of a tea boutique down Dambulla Road. If the Dambulla Maha Nagara Sabha [Dambulla Municipal Council] comes and tells you to pay a business fee or a business tax, you need to know what the tax is used for. Even if it's Rs. 700 or even if it is Rs.2, you need to know what it is used for. You should know this is going towards public infrastructure. This is going towards health care. This is going to the development of a transport system. These are going to universities, these are used to pay the salaries of a 1.6 million government officials etc. That is what we should be wondering, not just how policies are formulated but why were they formulated? Because then you can meaningfully contribute not only towards formulating policies, but also to change policies and trust me, we do this properly, Sri Lanka won't just be led by older people, it will be led and shaped by the public policy making youth of this country.

# National Nutrition Policy: Strengthening Inclusivity and Achieving Sustainability

By Mathusha Sabhanayakam

## **Abstract**

Sri Lanka's National Nutrition Policy (NNP) aims to ensure optimal nutritional status for all citizens. However, despite the existing comprehensive strategies, gaps remain in behavioral interventions, community engagement and grass root level participation, indigenous food systems and indigenous people related food security, raising concerns on technology and multi sectoral coordination. This policy paper analyzes Sri Lanka's NNP and proposes key additions that align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with an emphasis on the current gaps that needs to addressed, to enhance effective implementation, strengthen inclusiveness, and achieve long-term sustainability as well as to achieve the national targets within the global framework for improving Maternal, Infant and Young Child Nutrition (MIYCN) and overall nutrition and well-being of the different communities in the country including marginalized ,vulnerable and indigenous communities.

## **1.Introduction**

Malnutrition remains a public health challenge in Sri Lanka, despite the implementation of multi-sectoral policies and programs. The NNP of 2010 outlines a framework to achieve optimal nutrition through interventions targeting maternal and child health, food security, and inter-sectoral coordination (Ministry of Health, 2010). Yet, evolving nutritional challenges demand policy amendments that reflect local needs, cultural practices, and behavioral determinants. This paper presents a local policy perspective on Improving Sri Lanka's nutrition policy, based on identified gaps and emerging evidence.

## **2. Linking Nutrition with Development Sectors**

The NNP recognizes inter-sectoral collaboration, however, more explicit integration with climate change, environmental sustainability, digital based strategies to enhance the positive behavioral food consumption and community development are essential. These areas influence food systems and household access to nutritious food (FAO, 2021).

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Incorporating these into national policy can ensure that nutrition remains central to all development agendas. Prioritizing nutrition in climate, agriculture, water and sanitation, gender and other related programmes are important, and nutrition specific intervention also needs to be implemented. It is necessary to implement effective and efficient mechanisms of nutritional communication as the overall development and social harmony of the community depends on how well they can gain access to content that provides information on healthy eating and dietary guidelines. Integration of different strategies to improve the nutrition levels in the community such as home gardening, animal husbandry and other empowerment activities with Behavioral Change Communication (BCC) is also crucial to achieving intended objectives.

### **3. Behavioral Change Communication (BCC)**

Effective nutrition outcomes require not just knowledge dissemination but behavioral change. The current policy in place lacks proper focus on robust behavioral change mechanisms. Integrated BCC strategies grounded in social and behavioral sciences, such as the COM-B model (Michie et al., 2011), should be employed in mass media, schools, and community settings including the public places. Integration of people friendly communication mechanisms and considering the local language interpretations are equally important to make a positive attitude towards nutritional wellbeing.

### **4. Enhancing Community Participation and Empowerment**

While the NNP outlines community mobilization, actual implementation strategies for community empowerment especially among women are underdeveloped. Strengthening women's leadership and participation in nutritional programs, forming mother-support groups, and conducting grassroot level dialogues can help to strengthen community engagement (UNICEF, 2020). Furthermore, the incorporation of a proper monitoring and evaluation system to examine the progress of grass root level nutrition programs is also crucial. Training sessions should be carried out by experts regularly to enhance the skills and working capacities of the health workers, community leaders and other community members. All these strategies help to strengthen the participatory approach to identify nutrition related problems, facilitate community participation for deriving solutions and implementation of guidelines which are culturally and socially accepted by all community members. If implemented properly, this mechanism is beneficial in achieving maximum productivity rather than the top to bottom policy making strategy.

### **5. Evidence-Based Policymaking and Digital Integration**

Policy decisions must be made by using evidence-based data. The use of digital tools, such as mobile-based surveys, GIS mapping, and nutrition dashboards, can support people-centered monitoring and responsive policy adjustments (WHO, 2021). Frequent survey-based data collection on food consumption, emergency-based data collection techniques and feedback systems on nutrition supplements such as Thriposha will provide insights into the status of the policy decisions that were taken. Public awareness campaigns and promotion materials need to be prepared by paying attention to the level of knowledge of people.

They should be attractive and aim at empowering the community through proper education and awareness raising programs. The National Food Based Dietary Guidelines (FBDG) issued by the Ministry of Health provides context-specific advice and principles on healthy diets and lifestyles. Though this document has been instrumental in providing guidelines on nutrition to the Sri Lankan population, its usage in the public health sectors, and clinical settings are limited. Therefore, prioritizing the effective implementation of the guidelines embedded in this document will be instrumental in strengthening the policy making process.

## **6. Strengthening Multi-sectoral Coordination**

Although structures like the National Nutrition Secretariat (NNS) exist, coordination between provincial, district, and divisional levels remains inconsistent. Strengthening these through clear reporting mechanisms, joint planning, and regular multi-stakeholder reviews can ensure coherence in delivery.

## **7. Addressing Food Security and Indigenous Food Systems**

Sri Lanka's food and agriculture policies must align with nutritional goals. Strategies such as home gardening, use of underutilized lands, and reduction of post-harvest losses can ensure year-round access to diverse foods (Herforth et al., 2019). Moreover, indigenous communities' food cultures and nutritional rights should be preserved and promoted through culturally sensitive interventions. Nutrition based guidelines and knowledge provision need to be based on cultural and socially appropriate way.

Though rich in nutrients, fruits and vegetables are perishable commodities. Therefore, proper mechanisms should be incorporated to reduce loss and damage during production, transport, distribution and sale of perishable food commodities.

## **8. Special Consideration for Vulnerable Groups including Indigenous people, LGBTQ+ Communities and Individuals with Disabilities**

The NNP should broaden its scope to include nutrition guidelines for elderly and other vulnerable groups, with guidelines for institutional and home-based care settings. Additionally, targeted programs for individuals with disabilities and marginalized communities should be included to ensure equity. Separate guidelines for nutritional care processes must be designed and implemented to address the key nutritional problems among vulnerable groups. In addition, specified services such as home visits and community meetings should be arranged to gather ideas and feedback from vulnerable groups that need to be taken into consideration when designing any type of nutrition-related policies and practices.

## **9. Maternal, Infant, and Young Child Nutrition (MIYCN)**

Sri Lanka has committed to the Decade of Action on Nutrition and aligned its targets with SDGs. To meet these, policies should promote breastfeeding-friendly environments, regulate infant formula marketing, and support working mothers through lactation incentives and breastfeeding spaces (WHO, 2023).

Policy interventions must be established to regulate the marketing, promotion, and use of infant milk formulas, ensuring that such products do not undermine breastfeeding practices. Simultaneously, comprehensive measures should be introduced to promote, protect, and support breastfeeding as the optimal source of infant nutrition, in alignment with the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and national health guidelines.

Early childhood care settings, such as daycare centers, play a crucial role in shaping the health, nutrition, and personality development of young children, especially during the critical phase of growth and development. In Sri Lanka, there is an urgent need to strengthen the regulatory framework governing these facilities to ensure they uphold national standards for child health and safety. Regulatory reforms should mandate minimum requirements for infrastructure, hygiene, food safety, and nutrition service delivery. This includes the integration of structured training programs for caregivers on optimal complementary feeding practices, appropriate portion sizes, age-specific dietary requirements, and the identification and management of feeding-related emergencies through basic first aid protocols.

In addition to regulatory strengthening, the development of child-friendly care centers must be prioritized. These centers should be guided by comprehensive food and nutrition consumption policies that emphasize safety, accessibility, and inclusivity. Guidelines should be tailored to reflect national nutrition goals and be responsive to the sociocultural context, ensuring that children receive not only nutritionally adequate meals but also a nurturing and secure environment that supports healthy eating behaviors. Implementing such measures aligns with global recommendations from organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund), which advocate for quality early childhood care services as part of integrated strategies to reduce malnutrition and promote lifelong health equity (WHO, 2020; UNICEF, 2019). These improvements can also support working mothers, contribute to the prevention of early childhood malnutrition, and build resilience in vulnerable communities. Paternal contribution towards child growth as well as active family participation and engagement in child development must be promoted in nutrition related programs.

## **10. Child and School-based Nutrition Interventions**

Strengthening the mid-day meal program in terms of dietary diversity, food safety, and behavior change education can enhance its impact. Policies should also regulate unhealthy food outlets near schools, incorporate nutrition education into curricula, and promote child-led advocacy through competitions and campaigns (WFP, 2022). The national mid-day school meal program should be strengthened by enhancing its quality, expanding its geographic coverage, and ensuring greater dietary diversity. Attention must be given to the nutritional value of ingredients, culturally appropriate and safe cooking methods, and the visual appeal of meals served. These improvements are critical for fostering a positive relationship between children and food, which can influence lifelong dietary behaviors.

## **11. Physical Activity and Healthy Environments**

Nutrition and physical activity are interconnected. Constructing walking paths, cycling tracks, and recreational spaces can promote community-level physical health.

Moreover, awareness banners in public spaces such as transport hubs, markets etc. should be prioritized to educate the public on the importance of healthy lifestyles and eating habits.

## **12. Food System Regulations**

To improve national diets, policies must limit the importation of ultra-processed foods, introduce taxation on unhealthy food and beverages and introduce healthy alternatives. Moreover, food safety standards across storage, transport, and preparation must be strictly enforced to minimize post-harvest loss and contamination (Global Panel, 2020).

## **13. Monitoring and Evaluation**

Establishing a centralized monitoring system that maps food outlets, tracks household food wastage, and monitors community-level nutrition indicators is necessary. These insights can drive targeted interventions and foster transparency and accountability in policy planning and implementation.

## **Conclusion**

Sri Lanka's National Nutrition Policy lays a strong foundation to promote healthy dietary practices within the community; however, achieving nutrition equity and sustainable development goals requires dynamic, inclusive, and evidence-driven policy decisions. By addressing behavioral, structural, cultural, and environmental determinants, the proposed enhancements can accelerate the country's progress toward fulfilling national and global nutritional goals.

## **Recommendations**

### **1. Inclusiveness of Gender Diverse Groups, Indigenous Groups and Marginalized Groups in the Policy Framework**

Prior research and concise identification of the nutrient needs, nutrition related service delivery and prioritization of the nutritional needs of the above communities in policy dialogues and decisions are crucial. Moreover, designing a separate policy framework, and formulating strategies to ensure that their nutrition needs are met, establishing nutrition promoting supportive environment among those communities, encouraging open discussion and community participation and integrating different healthcare promotional activities such as ensuring their sanitation, hygiene, reproductive health, mental well-being and other health-related aspects.

### **2. Align Recommendations with Global Frameworks**

To achieve progress in policy implementation, steps should be taken to connect local policies and proposed interventions with international frameworks such as the UN SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), WHO Global Nutrition Targets and UNICEF's Conceptual Framework on Malnutrition. It is also necessary to study similar policies and strategies adopted by other countries and incorporate suitable policies and strategies from them into the local context. Moreover, existing policies should be updated by paying attention to the emerging nutritional needs, changes in communication strategies and the latest technological advancements for the betterment of the nutritional well-being of the community.



### **3. Provide More Specific and Actionable Policy Suggestions**

It is crucial to adopt nutrition and healthcare policies which are more progressive and productive through community-based awareness and nutrition promotion initiatives that involve the participation of peer-based community groups which are useful in building confidence, strengthening social safety, challenging social stigma and developing problem solving and decision-making abilities of the community. Such initiatives will be fruitful in improving the overall nutritional wellbeing of diverse groups and communities within the society.

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# Keeping Children in School During Future Pandemics - *Never Should Schools Close Again*

By Fiona Mirembe-Kiggundu/ Executive Director “Transforms Lives in Uganda through Education” in collaboration with Mr. Henry Sebunya

*Project Princess Initiative is a Girlchild Empowering organization that educates, supports empowers and transforms lives through education. The project focuses on education as a means to change mindsets, communities and the nation one Girl at a time. The initiators of the project believe that education throughout the world must be a constant effort and thus advocating for school doors to never be closed to students ever again.*

## 1: BACKGROUND

COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted Uganda's education system, leading to the world's longest school closure globally lasting nearly 22 months from March 2020 to January 2022. This extended closure affected around 15 million students, exacerbating existing educational challenges and introducing new obstacles. The prolonged school closures significantly increased dropout rates, particularly among vulnerable groups. The National Planning Authority (NPA) indicated that up to 30% of students particularly girls and children did not return to school due to factors such as early pregnancies, early marriages, child labor, and economic hardship. Additionally, a report highlighted a 22.5% increase in pregnancies among girls aged 10 to 24 between March 2020 and June 2021, further contributed to school dropouts.

Several factors contributed to the rise in school dropouts during the pandemic: **(1) Economic Hardship:** The economic downturn forced many families to prioritize immediate financial needs over education. Children, especially boys, entered the labor market to support their families, while girls faced increased domestic responsibilities. **(2) Teenage pregnancies and early marriages:** The closure of schools removed a critical protective environment, leading to a surge in teenage pregnancies and early marriages, particularly in rural areas. **(3) Limited access to alternative learning:** While some educational materials were provided for home-based learning, many students, especially in rural regions, lacked access to these resources, leading to disengagement and eventual dropout.

This experience has emphasized the need for adaptive and inclusive learning solutions that ensure continuity of education during future public health emergencies. As a nation, we must prioritize resilient education systems and commit, “*never ever to close schools again*”.

## 2: STRATEGIES

**We at Project Princess Initiative (PPI), propose alternative strategies for keeping children in school during future pandemics which require a mix of flexible learning approaches, health measures, and strong community support.**

To mitigate similar challenges in the event of future pandemics, a comprehensive approach is essential:

**STRATEGY 1: Promote home-based learning by providing students with home learning materials and establishing community-based learning hubs to ensure that education continues even when traditional classrooms are disrupted.** Home learning materials such as printed worksheets and booklets, radio and TV programs, storybooks or solar-powered audio lessons, and parental involvement support self-paced learning, especially in rural or low-connectivity areas. Meanwhile, community-based learning hubs offer small, safe, and structured environments where children can engage with peers, receive guidance from trained facilitators, and access basic learning tools. These hubs can be hosted in churches, community centers, or even under trees bringing learning closer to children and reducing dropout rates during crises. This approach promotes equity, resilience, and educational inclusion.

**STRATEGY 2: Safe In-Person Schooling:** Enhance health measures through regular sanitation, masks, ventilation, soap and handwash, sanitization, physical distancing when needed. Organize smaller class sizes to avoid overcrowding and contact among pupils. Develop staggered schedules or rotating in-person days to reduce crowding. Develop rapid response plans for any outbreaks to curb widespread.

**STRATEGY 3: Health and Safety Measures:** Schools should establish and implement strict health and sanitation protocols to ensure a safe learning environment, routine health screenings, and mental health support to ensure both physical and emotional well-being. Schools should promote vaccination campaigns and health education for further prevention of disruptions.

**STRATEGY 4: Mental Health and Social Support through Counseling services:** Schools should offer online and in-person options for students struggling with isolation. Peer interaction: Implement virtual clubs, study groups, and interactive lessons to maintain social connections.

**STRATEGY 5: Transparent communication:** Schools should regularly update families on health measures and educational plans.

**STRATEGY 6: Community and Parental Engagement:** Provide support for parents through workshops on homeschooling strategies and mental health support. Provide economic/financial assistance or incentives to families to reduce the economic burden and discourage child labor and early marriages. Collaborate with community leaders and organizations to raise awareness about the importance of education and to create support systems for at-risk children. Partner with local organizations including NGOs, CBOs, community libraries, and community centers to provide alternative learning spaces for students.

**STRATEGY 7: Develop Flexible attendance policies:** (1) **Adaptive grading and exams:** Adjust expectations to accommodate disruptions. (2) **Allow asynchronous learning:** Recorded lessons/webinars for students who can't attend live sessions.

Develop and enforce policies that protect students from exploitation and ensure continuity of education during crises.

**STRATEGY 8: Introduce Open-Space Classes (OSCs):** One innovative and context-relevant approach is the introduction of Open-Space Classes (OSCs) which is a flexible, outdoor-based model of learning designed to minimize health risks while maintaining student engagement and access to education. OSCs utilize school compounds, school pitches, community grounds, and shaded open fields to conduct physically distanced, safe, and participatory learning sessions. This approach addresses both the need for COVID-safe environments and the cultural familiarity with outdoor community learning practices in Uganda.

Key features of OSCs:

- Small learning clusters (15–20 students) led by trained local educators.
- Rotational schedules to reduce crowding while maximizing reach.
- Integration of local content and life skills, delivered through storytelling, music, and visual aids.

**STRATEGY 9: Engaging the public (parents, guardians, religious, cultural and local leaders) in safe, localized learning options ensuring education continuity during pandemics or emergencies.** These stakeholders are trusted figures in their communities and play a critical role in mobilizing support, identifying safe learning spaces, and reinforcing the value of education even in crisis. By engaging parents & guardians in home-based learning and monitoring and working with local leaders to organize community learning hubs or open-air classes, education becomes more inclusive, accessible, and culturally accepted. Their involvement fosters ownership, accountability, and cooperation, creating a strong community-based safety net that keeps children learning safely and consistently.

**STRATEGY 10: Sensitize the Public (Parents, Guardians) on pandemics:** Pandemics like COVID-19 are global health emergencies that affect every aspect of life (health, economy, and education). They spread quickly and can overwhelm communities if not properly managed. It is important for everyone to stay informed, follow health guidelines, and support one another. Simple actions like handwashing, wearing masks, and getting vaccinated can save lives. Communities must also work together to protect vulnerable groups, ensure access to accurate information, and maintain essential services like education. With unity, awareness, and preparedness, we can reduce the impact of pandemics and build resilience for the future. **“Prevention starts with you, stay safe, stay informed”.**

### **3: CONCLUSION**

A combination of these strategies ensures that education continues, whether in-person or remotely, without significant learning loss. By implementing these initiatives, Uganda can bridge the digital divide, making education more accessible and resilient against future disruptions. As a nation, we must prioritize resilient education systems and commit, “never ever to close schools again”.

# *Issues Related to Sri Lanka's Transport Sector and Policy Perspectives*



*Shayani Jayasinghe in conversation with **Ranjith Rubasinghe**, Engineer, former Secretary of the Ministry of Transport and former Director - Sri Lanka Telecom*

### *1. What are the current challenges that Sri Lanka's transport sector is facing?*

I'm actually passionate about this sector beyond my official contribution, because as a citizen I understand the requirement of a good transport system that actually defines the country's efficiency, So, it is not only mobility, but it actually carries the entire country to the next level.

So, I'm very, very glad that you have paid attention to this sector and tried to create a platform to discuss the policies of the transport sector and how we can improve. So, I think your question is about current challenges and how we can address them. So, I see the biggest issue is that we have is an isolated public transport network. So, this is the major reason we have low quality transport in the country. So, we operate railway network separately, we operate the bus network separately and even the buses we have, there are the central, inter provincial and provincial networks. There is no proper synchronization among those public transport networks at all at the moment, so that actually creates bigger issues that we experience day by day and also, I think the one big issue is that we don't have a lasting solution. We are served by unregulated taxi services. So, there is a gap in connectivity as well. These are major, major things that relate to so many other issues. Apart from that of course, as you know, the transport infrastructure we have is very old, especially buses are at least 10-20 years old. We have locomotives which are more than 50 years old. I think they should be in museums, not on the tracks. So that's, that's the level of transport we have.

The other issue is traffic. I think this is due to lack of strategy and proper policy planning. because the most important thing we have to do is to be able to manage our fleet whether private or public with the infrastructure availability or capacity of the road. So, if you don't have a strategy to manage these two together, then we will ultimately end up in a very bad state. A centralized strategy or a policy is a key to this matter. It is something which we actually don't have. Then fuel dependency- we are running mostly on high-cost fossil fuel. Finally, I want to talk about safety. We lose a minimum of seven citizens per day from accidents. It is almost 10. We reached 300 per annum. It is a very pathetic situation which we are not actually trying to find a solution. So, road safety is something that we need to talk about when discussing challenges in the transport sector.



*2. In your opinion, what are the structural changes that are needed within the Sri Lankan public transport sector to enhance convenience, reliability and safety?*

I think that's very relevant. I think it's important that we should look at the entire sector together. It's not only public transport because I think we have to pay our attention to the transport modes that the public is currently using. The majority use private transport. If I tell you the numbers, only 6% of passengers use railway transportation. Only 0.6% of goods are transported on railways. This is the pathetic situation on railway transportation. The most efficient mode of transportation is the railway, but only 0.6% use it. So, this is where the problem is. We as a nation, should think about the entire transportation sector. Answering your question, so if you are talking about transport, the biggest issue is we don't have a centralized approach. We have the National Transport Commission and we have the Railway Department and we have provisional transport commissions and several sectors which are unregulated, like taxi services. So, we need a unified authority. I think that's the whole requirement at the moment because we have very good examples, like say for example, Controlling transport in London is similar to controlling the entire transport system in the country. That actually paved the way to create integrated networks so that you can plan a journey end to end.

The biggest issue now in public transport is that you can't plan a journey. If you want to go from X to Y. You should be able to know before you start on the journey, the time that you are entering the first location. The modes that you use. For example, you will take a taxi to the bus station and take a bus to the railway station. The longest distance is traveled by train and then the last mile. The way that you go. So, you should be able to plan the entire journey and have the confidence that you will reach the destination on time. You reach the destination on time so you can plan your journey. But unfortunately, due to lack of unified approaches in transport network planning, we don't have a solution as such. The requirement at the moment is to have a unified authority to bring all these networks under one roof. This includes the road infrastructure as well. So, investment is the key. I don't think we have the capacity.

We must bring private investments into the transport sector. That is another important factor for modernizing the transport sector. Then safety standards- we actually need regulations to maintain safety as safety is very important for vehicles as well as the public, people and then technology, I don't think that we use any technology efficiently. I can remember during my time; we tried to implement the railway ticketing system. So yeah, we have proposed e-ticketing for buses and various other technological solutions for modernizing and digitizing the transport sector.

I think that bringing technology into the transport sector is another important change that the sector should experience immediately.

*3. What role can technology play in improving accessibility and inclusivity in the transport sector?*

So, I think technology plays a critical role because now people have got used to digital life. I think it is more convenient to use your smartphone than anything else at the moment.

It can become part of your life or even part of your body. Now you can't even live without your mobile phone in your hand. We need an intelligent transport system where people can actually track online.

Through E-ticketing systems, we should be able to purchase tickets online or from the phone. That is one area where we can actually make sure that the digital solutions can be integrated into the transport sector. The second is implementing rules and regulations for using digital solutions. We introduced this spot fining and demerit solutions. Currently we don't have a way of recognizing or identifying the number of traffic violations by an individual driver. Anybody can do a violation and pay your fine and it's done. There are no records, So, what is very important is that we track the frequent violations because then you give him a kind of punishment or a driving lesson at a certain point. So, this is actually well planned as a demerit system online, so that you can pay your fine on the spot. So, I think these are the other areas where digital integration is important to implement rules and regulations of the system and the third is optimizing traffic management. There are many AI solutions now not like those days to manage the traffic.

As per World Bank estimates, the lost productivity is more than a billion due to traffic congestion. If you can utilize proper digital AI tools to optimize or manage traffic, you will actually be saving money and the efficiency of our system. So, these are areas where we can actually bring in technology. It's important to plan and strategize the entire network and develop the infrastructure that is needed. I believe that technology will help in maintaining a better system and we should implement that because there are no shortcuts.

*4. What are the key policy gaps that need to be addressed to meet the evolving needs of the transportation sector in the country?*

One thing is that we don't have an updated policy. I think we have a policy which was approved in 2009. This is more than 16 years ago or more, so which is completely outdated. So, I think I can remember we tried to bring up an updated policy. We drafted one and we just wanted to get the approval.

One important thing is we need to have a proper policy now. This is a requirement because we are now talking about different modes of transportation technology, integrated solutions for transportation and also, we are thinking of bringing electric vehicles into the transportation network. So, E mobility is something that is very crucial. So, we have to have an updated and a properly thought after process or a policy put into that's something. So then once we have a proper policy, then we can think of the gaps. I think the biggest issue is enforcing the gaps. I don't think that we are enforcing proper rules. For examples we have passenger remixes in buses. Do you think that we are sticking to it? No. Do we maintain standards for seat size of buses? No.

There are so many that we are not actually implementing even though we have them in our policies and guidelines, so enforcement gaps are very crucial. Even if we have a policy and we are not implementing that, we'll actually have to find mechanisms to implement it.

If I take this as an example, now you can't widen the road and expand the infrastructure in Colombo because of the congestion. We have to plan the number of vehicles entering Colombo City. Are we actually thinking about it when we are opening up the vehicle import market? That is something we need to address. These are the enforcement gaps which I am talking about. We need a proper policy, and it should be implemented and enforced for better results.

*5. How can the government effectively implement and enforce transport policies to ensure the effectiveness of the Transportation sector?*

We have to have a transport policy that can be properly enforced and also policies not only for transport but for urban planning as well. We have to plan a city, thinking about the transportation, which we are not doing. We have to be inclusive. So, we have to think of bringing everybody into the public transport system. I wanted to bring it to the attention of the government. The government has a role to play because the government should actually take the initiative of bringing the policy. Transport and highways are one of the items that are at the top of the list. But I think we have to fast track and enact the policy by and then make sure that it is approved and has the proper validity or recognition.

The other important thing is the public. The good transport system will not only depend on the tools and regulations and the policies. Behavior of the public will play a bigger role. I think people's attitude and the way that they actually behave are very important, including drivers, so say for example, road safety is completely dependent on the driver. The reckless driving on the roads. Please help me address this. The government can introduce those regulations, but it is the behavior and the quality that matters. The quality of the bus is within the bus. It will actually depend on the way that you actually use the facility. The way you travel is important. So, the public and the government should together develop an integrated approach strengthen the transport network.

*6. What role can the private sector play to ensure enhanced convenience, reliability and safety of the public transportation sector of the country?*

We need the capital. The biggest issue in the industry at moment is capital. We need money to develop the sector. So, we should be able to bring the private-public partnership to develop the transportation networks. We took several decisions, but they need to be taken to the next level.

By doing that, we will not only bring money, but we will bring that private sector efficiency to the public transfer network. So, that is something that we should actually implement immediately. Rather, the government by itself, managing and funding the private public transport sector, we should actually bring in the private sector as much as encouraging them and supporting them in different ways to enter the transport sector and take it to the next level so they can actually bring in digital tools and planning into the sector.

So, what I can remember is that we had this project called Station Plaza. We were planning to develop the stations as business hubs so that the private sector can get involved in improving the infrastructure in the stations.

The stations can become business centres. They can collaborate with the hospitality sector, and it can become a hotel to provide accommodation.

*7. So, in your opinion, how can we get the community involved in this procedure to improve the efficiency and sustainability of the public transport of the country?*

Now if you see people prefer private vehicles. They like to travel by their own car. Why are we not actually trusting the public transport network? So, we have to think faster. We have to think of bringing people using private vehicles to the public transport system which actually can give immense benefit to the public. If we can do that, we can actually reduce the number of vehicles so that traffic congestion will improve and the quality of public transportation will also improve because buses will travel faster. So, you can actually think of a better solution. So, you can't actually take the public transport separately and give solutions without addressing this whole matter to improve the efficiency of public transportation. It requires managing the entire sector. The responsible behavior of the people is very important. Yes. Once we do that, you have better and faster mobility. The most important thing is driving- the driver's attitude. I think reckless driving is something people should pay attention to. Also, the accessibility to equipment.

We have failed to talk about the facilities available as well as about the inclusiveness of the transport sector, which is very important.

People will not actually take public transport as their own mode of mobility. There is a gap that needs to immediately address the public's attitude towards public transportation. That will help with the creation of a better country. So that people will not actually damage the vehicles or the equipment which they used to travel, they will learn to maintain better discipline. That will help to improve the transport system so that actually will help to improve the trustworthiness of the sector. Anybody would love to travel. So, your behavior will help the rest of the people to love public transportation, so we have to make some effort to educate the public. That will help improve the quality of the sector.

*8. Despite these challenges, have you seen any positive changes or any improvements in Sri Lanka's Transport sector in recent times?*

I don't think that we have done enough. But it's actually serving the needs, so we can say it is doing something. However, I don't think that we can be happy with what we have been doing during the past. I think it's important to discuss what we can do first and why and how we can improve the system. I will tell you what I did last year when I was the secretary of the ministry. We actually had a comprehensive look at the entire sector, so we then introduced national transport policy, including EV policy as well, so that we will work on the transport policy and the strategy as well.

Then actually, we were focusing on mode shifting. We want to have the people from private cars to walking to buses and trains then we focused on shifting goods from lorries to train. We introduced a program called Pravesha.

It was aimed at improving convenience in using public transport. We also introduced Saara which was about improving goods mobility to lorries and trains. We introduced such initiatives for an integrated digital transport system.

We used digital solutions to provide information on timetables, locations and other standard services for buses so that track and plan their journeys. We also spoke about transforming fleets. I remember we issued guidelines for buses considering the inclusivity such as limousine buses and other standard buses. We were planning to introduce a similar model for railways.

*9. What can we learn from global experiences to modernize and improve our public transportation sector?*

I think this sector has gone to a different level. Rest of the world let's say Japan; their punctuality is more than 99%. Almost all the trains are on time, so this is because of rigorous maintenance and upgrading. So, this is something that we need to learn. We might not be able to actually achieve 99% punctuality on trains, but at least reasonable punctuality that is something that we need to learn from Japan. Take India for an example, India has converted the entire airway network from internal combustion engine to electric locomotives. So, something that we should try to understand and learn from them.

How do they do that? That will actually improve the efficiency of the environment, because there are a lot of important aspects in converting internal combustion into electric engines. That is the Indian experience that we need to bring in. Singapore is operating electronic boat rides which actually is priced based on the condition.

Why can't we just bring something similar to Colombo so that you can actually encourage people to shift from one place to another from boats? We have a flat ground in Colombo. Why don't we introduce things such as cycling and walking/jogging tracks for short distance? These are a few things that I thought is important to highlight.

*10. How can Sri Lanka's public transportation sector be made more sustainable in the long term while ensuring affordable, reliable, and convenient transportation for all Sri Lankan citizens?*

I think the transport sector should actually be in the heart of the public. The public should start to trust the public transport system. I think that is the key requirement to become sustainable. That is something that we need to think about.

So, if you take that approach, how can we make public transportation a trustworthy service for the public? So, reliability matters. We should be on time, and it should actually have a proper timetable, and it should be strictly followed so that reliability matters. The number of buses available also matters.

You will need a 10-minute interval if you need to search for a bus so you can actually make sure that you will have an option to go.

So, availability matters and then convenience and comfort matters. The facilities of the bus or train which you are travelling in matters. Those are key things that we need to take into account when you are talking about sustainability and public transport. Being apart from the transportation sector, the public transportation sector must be sustainable, you have to think of low-cost solutions. For example, shifting from diesel to electric. It has financial benefits as well.

Also, we must think about urban planning when we are planning. We need to have a plan and keep transportation requirements in mind. Those are key things which we need to take into account when we are talking about sustainability in the transport sector. So, I think if you can do that that we will have a very comfortable, convenient transport system. But remember that the transport sector should be able to win the heart of the people. You need to make an effort to achieve all of this. That is my opinion.



# South Asia's Struggle with Gender Parity - A Perspective on the Workforce Inclusion Policies in India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh

By Sasankaa Gunathilake

Despite notable developments in education and economic progression, South Asia continues to grapple with significant gender disparities in workforce participation. This paper examines the workforce inclusion policies of India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh analyzing their effectiveness and identifying persistent challenges. Through a comparative lens, the study highlights the socio-cultural, economic, and policy-driven factors influencing gender parity in these nations.

## Introduction

Gender parity in the workforce is not just a matter of social justice; it is also a critical component of sustainable economic growth. South Asia, home to a significant portion of the global population, continues to record some of the lowest female labor force participation rates in the world. In response, countries such as India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have introduced a range of policy measures aimed at improving women's access to economic opportunities. India's Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act of 2017 and the recently passed Women's Reservation Bill (2023) represent efforts to support women both in employment and political representation. Similarly, Sri Lanka's National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (2023) seeks to mainstream gender considerations across all sectors while Bangladesh has implemented the National Women Development Policy (2011) and fiscal incentives to encourage diversity in hiring practices. Despite these initiatives, the effectiveness of such policies remains inconsistent, constrained by implementation challenges and persistent socio-cultural barriers. This paper aims to critically examine the workforce inclusion strategies of these three nations evaluating their achievements and limitations in advancing gender equality.

## India's Policy Initiatives and Persistent Challenges

India has undertaken several initiatives to enhance women's participation in the workforce. The recent passage of the Women's Reservation Bill which allocates one-third of seats in the lower house and state legislatures to women mark a significant step towards political empowerment (Time, 2023). Yet this political advancement has not translated into substantial economic inclusion. India's female labor force participation rate remains alarmingly low, with estimates placing it at around 30% (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024.).

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Several factors contribute to this disparity. Societal norms and safety concerns often discourage women from seeking employment, especially in urban areas. Moreover, the lack of supportive infrastructure such as childcare facilities and safe transportation further shrinks women's ability to engage in the workforce (FSG, 2022). While policies exist, their implementation and the societal acceptance of women in various professional roles faces significant hurdles.

### **Sri Lanka - Educational Attainment and Workforce Participation Mismatch.**

Sri Lanka boasts high female literacy rates and significant educational achievements among women. Despite the educational attainment, female labor force participation remains low with only 36% of women of working age engaged in paid employment as of 2019 (UN Women, 2022). In response to this disparity, the government introduced the National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in 2023, which aims to integrate gender considerations into national planning, promote female economic empowerment and eliminate structural barriers to employment (UNFPA, 2023). The policy has initiated several multi sectoral actions including enhancing access to vocational training, expanding support for women entrepreneurs, and introducing gender-responsive budgeting to improve resource allocation for women's development. Although its impact is still unfolding, the early outcomes include increased funding for female led microenterprises and the incorporation of gender audits in public sector employment practices. It signals a more systemic approach to improving women's participation in the workforce.

Nevertheless, Women often face wage disparities, earning 30-36% less than their male counterparts, and are underrepresented in high paying sectors like IT and finance (Borgen Project, 2024). Initiatives like the **Amba Yaalu** resort, entirely staffed and operated by women showcase efforts to break gender barriers in the Tourism and Hospitality industry (AP News, 2025).

### **Bangladesh - Progress amidst Structural Constraints.**

Bangladesh has made notable progress in promoting gender inclusion. The government has formed an inter-ministerial “Gender and Skills Taskforce” to spearhead efforts in ensuring gender mainstreaming in the labor market through technical and vocational education and training (ILO, 2025). Additionally, Bangladesh offers tax incentives to businesses that hire transgender individuals (Them, 2021). The businesses that employ transgender workers are eligible for a 5% corporate tax rebate, incentivizing the private sector to create inclusive workplaces (Them, 2021). This measure reflects a broader attempt to mainstream the transgender community into the formal economy and reduce socio economic marginalization.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain. Women in Bangladesh's garment sector, which constitutes a significant portion of the female workforce often face limited opportunities for career advancement and systemic issues rooted in cultural norms (Ethical Trade, 2025). Efforts to promote female leadership and provide mentorship opportunities are crucial in addressing these disparities (World Bank, 2023).

## **Policy Recommendations**

The experiences of India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh emphasize the complex interplay between legislative intent and societal realities in achieving gender parity in the workforce. Irrespective of the introduction of targeted policy interventions, the translation of these measures into tangible outcomes remains uneven. This is largely due to deep-rooted sociocultural norms, persistent safety concerns, infrastructural deficits, and institutional inertia. To mitigate these challenges and accelerate progress towards inclusive labor markets, the following policy recommendations are proposed.

### **1. Strengthen Workplace and Public Safety Measures**

Safety concerns are a significant barrier to women's workforce participation across South Asia. Governments must prioritize the development and enforcement of comprehensive safety frameworks that encompass both the formal and informal sectors. This includes establishing secure public transportation systems, well-lit commuting routes, gender-sensitive urban planning, and workplace harassment redressal mechanisms. Enhancing the enforcement capacity of existing legislation such as India's Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013), is also imperative. Without a secure environment, even well-designed policies are unlikely to achieve meaningful improvements in female labor force participation.

### **2. Encourage Flexible Work Arrangements**

Rigid work schedules continue to marginalize women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities. Policymakers and employers must institutionalize flexible work options including remote work, part-time employment, and flexible hours. These alternatives can significantly enhance women's ability to manage professional and domestic roles simultaneously. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the viability of remote work; institutionalizing these practices post-pandemic could serve as a transformative step in reducing structural barriers to female employment.

### **3. Expand Access to Affordable and Quality Childcare**

One of the most critical yet under-addressed aspects of workforce inclusion is the availability of dependable childcare services. States must invest in a robust public childcare infrastructure, particularly in urban and peri urban areas where female labor participation is growing. Public-private partnerships can be leveraged to scale up early childhood education and care services. Additionally, legislation mandating on-site childcare facilities in large organizations as seen in Bangladesh's garment sector should be expanded and enforced more rigorously across all industries.

### **4. Address Wage Inequities through Legislative and Structural Reform**

Gender-based wage disparities persist in South Asia with women earning significantly less than their male counterparts for comparable work. To address this, governments must ensure the effective enforcement of equal pay legislation alongside initiatives that promote wage transparency. This could include mandatory reporting of pay scales disaggregated by gender and sectoral audits. Furthermore, awareness campaigns and legal literacy programs are necessary to empower women to claim their economic rights and seek redress in instances of wage discrimination.

## **5. Promote Women's Leadership and Career Advancement**

The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles limits their influence in shaping workplace cultures and organizational policies. Targeted interventions, such as mentorship programs, leadership development initiatives, and gender quotas in senior management, can facilitate the advancement of women in professional hierarchies. Governments and businesses should collaborate to establish career pipelines that nurture female talent from entry-level to executive positions. This effort should be supported by mandatory gender sensitivity training for managerial staff, and by policy advocacy that promotes transparent promotion criteria and inclusive succession planning frameworks.

Achieving gender parity in the workforce across South Asia requires more than piecemeal reforms. It calls for an integrated, gender sensitive approach that dismantles structural barriers while promoting individual agency. Although India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have made commendable strides through various legislative and programmatic efforts, these measures must be continuously evaluated and recalibrated to address emergent challenges.

A coherent strategy encompassing safety, flexibility, support infrastructure, pay equity and leadership empowerment will be critical to fostering an inclusive economic environment. Only through such a multidimensional approach that these nations can transform from policy intent initiatives to policy impact initiatives ultimately advancing towards a more equitable and resilient future. To accelerate this progress, regional cooperation platforms such as SAARC should be mobilized to facilitate knowledge exchange, harmonize policy frameworks, and foster collective accountability in advancing gender inclusive development.

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# Rethinking Elderly Care Policy in Sri Lanka: Policy Insights from Japan with a Case Focus on the Hakujukikai Facility in Higashi-Murayama

By Gayani Lakmali Pathirage

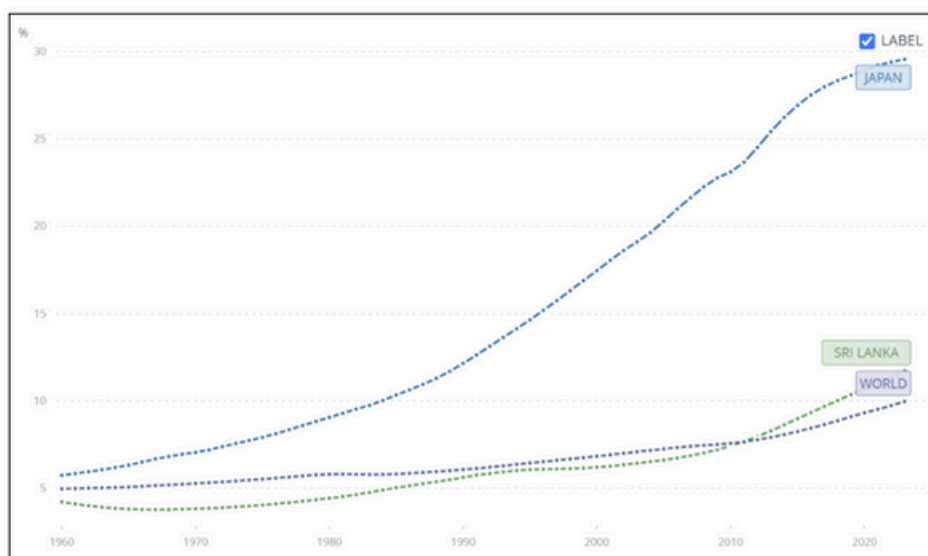
## Introduction

Population aging as a global phenomenon poses significant challenges for the field of public policy, particularly in the health and welfare sectors, with the increasing aging population worldwide. As Pushkar and Yasuhiro (2009) emphasize “the definition of aging as a social problem is not an objective crisis of demography, but a crisis in the significance of biological aging, family relationships, and relations between individuals and the state”.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the proportion of the world’s population over 60 years will nearly double from 12% to 22% between 2015 and 2050 while 80% of older people will be living in low- and middle-income countries in 2050. Figure 1 shows the trends of population ages 65 years and above (% of total population) in the world, Japan, and Sri Lanka from 1960 to 2023.

Japan, the world’s second most-aged society (World Bank, 2023), has pioneered various policy innovations and facility-based care models to address this issue. In contrast, Sri Lanka is experiencing a rapid demographic transition with the increasing aging population over time, without yet establishing proper comprehensive institutional responses.

Figure 1: Population ages 65 and above (% of total population) - Japan, Sri Lanka, World



Source: World Bank, 2023

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Therefore, this paper explores Japan's elderly care system, with a particular focus on the Hakujuikai Facility in Higashi-Murayama, Tokyo as a model for best practices. Drawing on comparative insights, it argues for the urgent rethinking of Sri Lanka's elderly care policy to ensure dignity, quality of life, and community support for its aging population. In the case of the Hakujuikai Facility in Higashi-Murayama, data were collected through direct observations, lecture sessions, and discussions with staff members, while broader insights into Japan's elderly care system were drawn from a review of relevant literature.

### **Elderly Care in Japan: A Policy Overview**

According to statistics from the World Bank and Figure 1, 29.6% of Japan's population is aged 65 and older as of 2023. However, elderly care policies in Japan have a long history that has developed gradually, as the issue of an aging society has become increasingly challenging. During the pre-World War II period, only low-income elderly individuals were eligible for Japan's social security benefits. At that time, benefits for elderly people were extremely limited, and there was no legal system in place targeting the elderly in general from the Meiji Period to World War II, except for the poor relief system. In 1874, the Poor Relief Regulation was enacted as the first legislation, enabling severely poverty-stricken individuals over 70 years of age—who could not work due to serious illness and senility—to receive three cups of rice a day for a single man and two cups per day for a woman as a mutual assistance system from neighborhoods and friends, not from the government (Masuda and Kojima, 2001). Then, in 1929, the Poor Relief Law, which was more advanced legislation compared with the Poor Relief Regulation, was enacted, making the national government responsible for providing relief.

After World War II, there is significant progress in elderly care policy formulation. With the enactment of the National Health Insurance Law in 1958, the National Pension Law in 1959, and the Welfare Law for the Elderly in 1963, the focus of social security policies in Japan shifted towards poverty relief to the welfare of elderly people. The Welfare Law for the Elderly enacted in 1963 was a milestone legislation in the elder care system in Japan that formalized the national and local government's responsibilities for elderly welfare. Under this law, special elderly nursing homes and care homes for elderly individuals who lacked family support or the ability to live independently, and in-home assistance services such as help with bathing, toileting, and meals for elderly people who preferred to live at home but required support were introduced. Then, between the mid-1960s and early 1980s, Japan expanded its social protection system by enhancing benefits under the medical insurance and pension programs. During this period, new welfare services were also introduced, including short-term residential care in 1978 and daycare services in 1979. A particularly significant reform was the implementation of a medical service system that offered free healthcare to all elderly citizens. While this policy greatly expanded access, it also triggered a rapid escalation in healthcare expenditures. In response, the government enacted the Health and Medical Service Law for the Elderly, which introduced a system of partial cost-sharing to ensure financial sustainability.

Furthermore, to enhance both institutional and home-based healthcare services for the elderly, the Japanese government implemented the Ten-Year Strategy to Promote Health and Welfare for the Elderly - commonly known as the Gold Plan - in 1990, followed by the New Gold Plan in 1995.

Table 1: Main Goal of the Gold Plan (National Plan)

	1989	1992	2000
<b>For Community Care</b>			
Home Helper (persons)	31,405	46,405	100,00
Short Stay (beds)	4,274	15,674	50,000
Day service Center	1,080	3,480	10,000
Center for supporting the family caring	0	1,200	10,000
<b>For Institutional Care</b>			
Special Nursing Home (beds)	162,000	*171,267	240,000
Half Way House of Health Care (beds)	27,811	*42,061	280,000
Care (or Service) House (persons)	200	*715	100,000
Welfare Center in Sparsely Populated Area	0		400

\* 1991

Source: Yoshihara, 2010

Each municipality and prefecture was required to develop its own five-year plan aligned with the objectives of the national strategy.

Additionally, deliberations surrounding the development of a long-term public care insurance system resulted in the enactment of the Long-Term Care Insurance Law in 1997 and implemented in 2000. It marked a major reform in Japan's approach to elderly care and replaced the earlier welfare-based model with a social insurance system that emphasized universal access, user choice, and community-based services. This Long-Term Care Insurance system in Japan is founded on four fundamental principles (Pushkar and Yasuhiro, 2009):

1. **User-Centered Access:** Elderly individuals should have the right to access both in-home and institutional care services based on their personal needs and preferences, without stigma or restriction, regardless of their income level or family circumstances.
2. **System Integration:** The system aims to unify the previously separate welfare services and the Health Services System for the Elderly, creating a more streamlined and cohesive framework for care provision.
3. **Promotion of Private Sector Participation:** Unlike the traditional welfare model where municipal governments select and contract service providers, the new system eliminates government contracting. This reform enables equal conditions for both public and private providers, fostering fair competition and service diversification.
4. **Implementation of Care Management:** A key feature of the system is the introduction of "care management", a coordinated approach to planning and delivering a comprehensive set of services tailored to the individual needs of each elderly person.

In 2008, Japan introduced a new medical insurance program targeting individuals aged 75 and above, as part of broader efforts to contain the country's escalating healthcare expenditures. Moreover, Japan's Orange Plan (2013) and the subsequent New Orange Plan aimed to enhance dementia care by promoting early intervention, training care providers, and improving coordination between medical and long-term care services through dementia care coordinators (Thakur, 2018). In 2012, Japan launched a Community-Based Integrated Care System to integrate medical, nursing, and daily living services for the elderly. The Comprehensive Community Care System in 2017 further strengthened this integration, ensuring continuous and accessible care.

Overall, Japan's elderly care policies, including integrated care systems and innovative reforms, aim to provide comprehensive support though the country continues to face challenges such as a rapidly aging population and the need for sustainable care solutions.

### **Case Study: Hakujujikai Facility in Higashi-Murayama**

The Hakujujikai Elderly Care Facility stands out as a leading example of community-focused elderly care within Japan's broader policy landscape. Established with the mission of providing holistic, human-centered care, Hakujujikai integrates medical, residential, and recreational services under a model emphasizing dignity, emotional well-being, and active engagement.

The welfare facilities for elderly individuals at Hakujujikai in Japan have evolved with the following key features to address the physical and mental challenges faced by the elderly:

- **Special Nursing Care Home:** The Hakujuji Home, established in 1967, provides residential care for individuals certified as requiring care level 3 or higher under Japan's long-term care insurance system. Initially designed for 50 residents, it has expanded its capacity to 170. The facility integrates various welfare and healthcare components, including hospitals, residential care support, home-visit care stations, and a community comprehensive support center.
- **Daytime Care Facility:** This facility offers daily services to elderly individuals, including meals, public bath facilities, and therapeutic activities such as functional therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy. It serves both generally healthy elderly people and those with dementia. The Hakujuji Home's daytime care facility can accommodate 50 normal elderly people and 10 dementia patients.
- **Community Comprehensive Support Centre:** The center focuses on four main areas: care and prevention management, comprehensive consultation and support programs, rights advocacy, and continuous care management support.
- **Consultation Centre:** This center supports individuals requiring nursing care under the long-term care insurance system and their families. It provides home service plans aimed at improving the physical and mental well-being of elderly people. Care Managers, certified in long-term care support, coordinate these services with the relevant parties.
- **Small-Scale Multi-Functional Home Care Facility:** This facility combines day care, home visits, and overnight stays to support elderly individuals living at home. Currently, the service is available only to residents in urban areas and is offered on a monthly basis.
- **Short Stay Facilities:** Short-term residential care is available for elderly individuals assessed as needing assistance or requiring nursing care level 5, who are living at home. The duration of the stay is determined by the individual's home care plan. The Hakujuji Home has a short-stay capacity of 12 people.

- **Family Associations:** Established in 1976, the Hakujuji Home Family Association aims to enhance the quality of care for elderly residents and their families by involving them as stakeholders in the home care process. The association organizes various activities and events based on the daily lives of the elderly, and updates are shared through a blog.
- **Other Facilities:** In addition to the above-mentioned services, the following welfare facilities are provided to support elderly care in Japan:
  - Free and low-cost medical care and hospital facilities
  - Home-visit nursing care stations
  - Care helper stations
  - Community-based services
  - Dementia-friendly communal living care.

These integrated facilities aim to offer comprehensive, accessible, and personalized care, improving the overall quality of life for elderly individuals in Japan.

### **Elderly Care Policies in Sri Lanka and Its Challenges**

According to World Bank statistics, the proportion of Sri Lanka's population aged 65 and over has risen steadily - from 4% in 1960 to 7% in 2010, reaching 12% by 2023. Sri Lanka is experiencing one of the fastest aging trends globally, occurring alongside significant social, economic, cultural, and environmental transformations that undermine traditional caregiving practices and support systems (Perera, 2011).

In this context, Sri Lanka has also taken steps to address the issue of population aging by implementing several key policies aimed at promoting the welfare of the elderly as follows:

- **1986 - HelpAge Sri Lanka (HASL):** Established following the 1st World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna in 1982, HASL focuses on healthcare, social services, and economic security for older persons (HelpAge Sri Lanka, 2012).
- **2000 - The Protection of The Rights of Elders (Act No. 9 of 2000)** and established the following (Ministry of Social Services & Social Welfare, 2006);
  - Creation of a Statutory National Council for Elders and Secretariat
  - Maintenance Board for determination of claims from Elders
  - National Fund for Elders
  - Protection of Rights of Elders
- **2006 - National Charter for Senior Citizens and National Policy for Senior Citizens Sri Lanka**
- **2010 – National Plan of Action on Ageing (2012–2021)**
- **2011 – Protection of the Rights of Elders (Amendment) Act, No. 5 of 2011**
- **2017 – National Elderly Health Policy**

Although Sri Lanka has introduced various policies to support elderly welfare, significant gaps and unmet needs remain in the implementation and scope of elderly care.

Currently, Sri Lanka relies heavily on familial caregiving, rooted in cultural and religious traditions that emphasize filial duty. However, urbanization, migration, and smaller family structures are increasingly weakening traditional support systems. Institutional care facilities are limited in number, often under-resourced, and viewed with social stigma. With this practical scenario, the key policy gaps include:

1. Absence of a comprehensive elderly care framework: No equivalent to Japan's Long-Term Care Insurance system exists.
2. Lack of formal caregiving standards and training: Most caregivers operate without professional certification or systemic support.
3. Inadequate public funding and private sector engagement: Elderly welfare remains marginal within national budgeting priorities.
4. Limited community-based care options: Most services are either institutionalized or informal, with minimal integration into local communities.
5. Weak Integration of Health and Social Services – Elderly care services are often fragmented, lacking coordination between healthcare and social support systems.
6. Limited Awareness and Advocacy – Public awareness about elderly rights, mental health, and support services remains low.
7. Policy Implementation Gaps – Even where policies exist, practical implementation and monitoring remain weak due to resource constraints and administrative inefficiencies.

If unaddressed, these gaps will exacerbate vulnerabilities among Sri Lanka's elderly population, increasing health burdens, social isolation, and economic dependency.

While policy gaps and institutional shortcomings are clearly identifiable, Sri Lanka's cultural context also presents unique barriers to reforming elderly care. Traditional values deeply rooted in religious teachings and family obligations create strong expectations that children must care for aging parents at home and within the community. Unlike Japan, where institutional care has become socially accepted over time, many Sri Lankan families still perceive placing elders in care facilities as abandonment. Moreover, religious beliefs about karma (principle of cause and effect), aging, and death further shape attitudes toward formal care. Understanding these cultural and societal dynamics is crucial to designing policies that are not only effective but also socially acceptable.

### **Policy Recommendations: Lessons for Sri Lanka**

Based on the Hakujujikai facility and Japan's broader elderly care system, several key lessons emerge for Sri Lanka in shaping a more effective and sustainable elder care policy framework as follows:

#### **1. Integrated Care Model**

Japan's elder care system, particularly through facilities like Hakujujikai, showcases an integrated approach combining healthcare, long-term care, and community support services. Sri Lanka should move towards an integrated service delivery model that links medical, social, and long-term care systems under a unified framework.

## 2. Decentralized and Community-Based Services

Japan emphasizes localized care through community comprehensive support centers and small-scale multifunctional home care units. Sri Lanka could benefit from strengthening local-level institutions and establishing community-based elderly care centers that allow aging in place.

## 3. Integrate Multi-Sectoral Collaboration

Japan's elderly care model involves government coordination with private, nonprofit, and community actors. Engage Sri Lanka's private sector, NGOs, and community groups under government oversight to broaden service reach and improve quality, especially in service provision and home-based care.

## 4. Comprehensive Long-Term Care Insurance System

Japan's long-term care insurance ensures financial sustainability and equal access to services regardless of income. Sri Lanka should explore a contributory long-term care financing model or expand the existing social protection schemes to support future elderly needs.

To strengthen long-term care financing without increasing public resistance, Sri Lanka should adopt a gradual, multi-pronged strategy instead of introducing new taxes. This could include reallocating resources within the existing health and welfare budgets to prioritize elderly care, especially for cost-effective, community-based services. Collaborations with NGOs, private providers, and religious institutions under government oversight can expand service delivery efficiently. Additionally, establishing a national elderly care trust fund with voluntary contributions from the Sri Lankan diaspora, potentially matched by state or donor support, can provide supplementary funding. Encouraging innovation in low-cost care models such as mobile care units, which are specially equipped vehicles that deliver medical check-ups, nursing services, and basic treatments directly to elders in their homes or communities, and elder-friendly home support, which includes home modifications, delivery of assistive equipment, and regular visits by trained care workers would further reduce the long-term financial burden. These approaches would allow Sri Lanka to move toward a sustainable, inclusive long-term care system without imposing additional direct costs on its citizens.

## 5. Geriatric Training and Workforce Development

Japan places a strong emphasis on care management and skilled personnel, such as certified care managers. Sri Lanka needs to invest in training programs for caregivers, nurses, and social workers specializing in geriatric care.

## 6. Foster Positive Attitudes toward Institutional and Community Care

Japan promotes dignified aging through community-based facilities and social acceptance. Launch awareness campaigns in Sri Lanka to destigmatize institutional care and highlight models of respectful elderly support.

## 7. Pilot Projects and Gradual Scaling

Begin with pilot projects in Sri Lanka's urban and semi-urban areas to evaluate feasibility, refine approaches, and scale based on evidence.



By learning from Japan's comprehensive and community-centered elder care approach, Sri Lanka can gradually build a more inclusive, sustainable, and dignified system that addresses the evolving needs of its aging population.

## **Conclusion**

The demographic shift toward an aging society is inevitable in Sri Lanka. As the traditional family-centered caregiving model weakens, the country must proactively design structured, sustainable elderly care policies. Japan's comprehensive framework and the best practices exemplified by the Hakujikai Facility offer valuable lessons. Rather than replicating Japan's model wholesale, Sri Lanka should adopt a contextualized approach that balances formal institutional care with community-based initiatives. Strategic policy reform, professionalization of caregiving, and multi-sectoral collaboration are essential to ensuring that Sri Lanka's elderly population can age with dignity, security, and social inclusion.

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# Reimagining Refugee Policy: Lessons from the Rohingya and Syrian Crises

By Amasha Fernando

Currently, over 100 million people have been forcibly relocated worldwide, creating an unprecedented refugee crisis. The Rohingya exodus from Myanmar and the displacement of Syrians after civil war are two of the most heartbreaking examples. Both crises highlight the shortcomings of regional and international refugee frameworks and the pressing need to change refugee laws to create a more sustainable and compassionate future.

- **The Rohingya Crisis: Systemic Neglect and Statelessness**

For many years, the Rohingya, an ethnic minority in Rakhine State, Myanmar, who are primarily Muslim, have faced systematic violence and marginalization. More than 700,000 Rohingya were forced into neighbouring Bangladesh during the 2017 military campaign (Mahmood et al., 2017). However, the Rohingya are imprisoned in overcrowded camps with little access to healthcare, work, or education in Bangladesh, which is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention (South & Lall, 2018). Resource depletion, environmental damage, and escalating host community conflicts are all results of encampment policy (Ullah, 2016).

Despite its importance, international humanitarian aid is frequently dispersed. Response processes are dominated by large international NGOs, which marginalize local civil society organizations and lower community involvement (Wake & Yu, 2018). Furthermore, even though the crisis is occurring within ASEAN's borders, no regional action has been taken because of the organization's non-interference policy and lack of a defined structure for refugee protection (McBeth, 2017).

- **The Syrian Refugee Crisis: Political Reluctance and Vulnerable Systems**

More than 13 million people have been displaced in the Middle East as a result of the Syrian civil conflict. Approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees reside in Lebanon alone, placing a burden on the country's social and economic structure (El-Ghali et al., 2019). Systemic underfunding, overcrowding, and teacher burnout have impeded the implementation of policy frameworks aimed at integrating Syrian children in Lebanese public schools (Watkins, 2016).

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With little assistance from the international community, the majority of Syrian refugees have been taken in by Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Some Western countries, such as Canada, responded by implementing creative approaches, such as the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program, which has enabled citizens to provide direct assistance to refugees who have been resettled (Labman & Pearlman, 2018). However, these initiatives fall short of the scale required and highlight the disproportionate burden placed on host countries in the Global South.

### **Moving Toward a Sustainable and Inclusive Refugee Policy**

Important lessons can be learned from the Syrian and Rohingya disasters. Rethinking refugee policies that prioritize long-term resilience, rights, and dignity over immediate help is crucial. There are five clear policy imperatives.

#### **Legal Acknowledgment and Rights-Based Methods**

In order to domesticate refugee rights inside their legal frameworks, host states must be urged to adopt the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Particularly in Bangladesh and Lebanon, the absence of legal recognition exposes refugees to exploitation and statelessness (Cheung, 2011; Ullah, 2016).

#### **Community Involvement and Local Integration**

Policies that host refugees should incorporate them into the educational and economic systems of their host communities. Effectiveness and social cohesion can be improved by empowering local actors and guaranteeing refugees' involvement in program design and execution (Wake & Yu, 2018).

#### **Regional Collaboration and Shared Responsibilities**

Frameworks for refugees that enable coordinated regional responses must be established by ASEAN and Arab League countries. Mechanisms for burden-sharing and regional solidarity can increase political responsibility and efficiency (McBeth, 2017; Zetter, 2015).

#### **Pathways for Sustainable Resettlement**

Developed countries should raise resettlement quotas and develop flexible legal migration channels, especially for protracted refugee situations. Although Canada's sponsorship approach shows promise, it must be expanded and embraced by other nations (Labman & Pearlman, 2018).

#### **Taking Care of the Fundamental Causes**

Any all-encompassing refugee strategy must address war, persecution, and inequality at their root to prevent forced displacement. International accountability systems and multilateral diplomacy are crucial (Barakat & Milton, 2015)

- **Implications for Sri Lanka: Local Lessons from Global Crises**

Although geographically distant from the Rohingya and Syrian crises, both crises have implications that resonate in Sri Lanka's socio-political landscape.

The projection of refugee crises to local concerns in Sri Lanka highlights the need for public debate, policy preparedness, and communal resilience.

### **Interfaith Tensions and the Rohingya Presence in Sri Lanka.**

Sri Lanka had temporarily served as a transit location for UNHCR-protected Rohingya refugees, as most significantly, a group of them was placed in a place of safety in Dehiwela in 2017. The event triggered protests organized by ultra-nationalist Buddhist monks, eventually culminating in a forced incursion into the refuge through the use of violence. The government forced the refugees to be relocated out of there into a safer location (Al Jazeera, 2017). Although Sri Lanka is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the event drew attention to a growing need to establish a building block on protection and asylum management. Even more broadly, it drew attention to concerns about whether refugee issues can threaten interfaith harmony and national security if not managed sensitively and openly.

### **Managing External Conflicts and Promoting Social Cohesion.**

While not immediately applicable to the Rohingya challenge, post-conflict rebuilding in regions like Gaza has parallel relevance as the rebuilding process starts. Sri Lankan expertise in construction and labour could play a role, creating economic opportunities. However, domestic sensitivities regarding international conflicts can also entail risks. It is important to manage global crisis narratives—especially religious or ethnic ones—to prevent backlash against minority groups such as Sri Lanka's small Jewish community, as well as to protect tourism and international cooperation.

### **Field Engagement and Academic Opportunities**

These crises also offer learning and participation possibilities for Sri Lankans interested in refugee studies, humanitarian intervention, and migration policy. While fieldwork in these contexts is risky, it can enrich scholarly discourse and create practical knowledge. Sri Lankan research centres and universities can consider joint research programs, policy simulation exercises, and internships with international agencies to build capacity in the management of migration and refugee rights advocacy.

The shortcomings of the current international refugee regime are brought to light by the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises, particularly when responses are dispersed, politically limited, and unduly dependent on humanitarian assistance. Refugee policy needs to change from reactive containment to proactive protection, focusing on integration, rights, and dignity. We can only create an international system that genuinely protects the right to asylum by implementing structural changes, fostering regional collaboration, and having a long-term vision.

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# Regulating AI-generated Election Propaganda in Sri Lanka: Barriers, Trade-Offs and the Need for a New Approach

By Sithhara Guruge

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 2024, Sri Lankan Facebook feeds erupted with a report by the “United Nations Human Rights Council” (UNHRC) which predicted based on a supposed survey of 2 million voters that there would be a decisive victory for candidate of the SJB (Samagi Jana Balavegaya), Sajith Premadasa in the upcoming Presidential Election, a 339% surge in votes for the NPP (National People’s Power) and the collapse of the SLPP (Sri Lanka Podu Jana Peramuna) (Hattotuwa, 2024). This incident was the first of its kind and resulted in the United Nations issuing an official clarification regarding the circulation of a fake report. Then, just two days after the Presidential Election, TikTok ignited with a Deepfake clip where Rohana Wijeweera who is the founder of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the newly elected President Anura Kumara Dissanayake were smiling heartily at each other as they walked down a street with their hands on each other’s shoulders (Rest of World, 2024).

According to the analysis by Dr. Sanjana Hattotuwa (2024), the fake report was a hyper-partisan operation that attempted to exploit the legitimacy of the UN in Sri Lanka; and the Deepfake clip can be construed as an attempt to reshape historical narratives by whitewashing the haunting troubles of the 1980s. These were not isolated pranks nor were they harmless mischief, because these incidents revealed how unregulated AI-generated Election Propaganda can hijack our sense of reality and undermine trust in every vote. It sets a dangerous precedent as Sri Lankans through their online commentary have been observed to take such AI-generated Election Propaganda at face value without much inquiry into its provenance (Hattotuwa, 2024).

Despite the growing influence of AI-generated Election Propaganda and the evident threat it poses; the Sri Lankan Government’s response has remained inadequate with little tangible progress towards addressing this emerging problem. Against this backdrop, the purpose of this opinion piece is to investigate why Sri Lanka finds it challenging to adopt a regulatory policy to combat AI-generated Election Propaganda. By doing so, the scope of this opinion piece is two-fold: firstly, it examines six key barriers that obstruct regulatory efforts; and secondly, it critically assesses whether the very premise of adopting a regulatory policy is the best way forward considering these identified barriers. Moreover, this opinion piece is informed by interviews conducted with policy and legal experts, alongside relevant secondary sources such as web reports, scholarly articles and policy documents.

What is really meant by ‘propaganda’? At its core, propaganda is a calculated, intentional and methodical attempt that is aimed at manipulating the cognition and behavior of a particular target audience (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2012). Here, the goal is to twist how people see the world so that it benefits the agenda of the propagandist. When we look at the history of propaganda, it reveals a very simple but clear formula: political propagandists have utilized a variety of tools to manipulate their target audience’s thought process. Such tools of delivery range from print media, radio, television, movies and cinema to contemporary tools such as social media, encrypted messaging apps and AI technology. Each innovation has simply broadened the delivery toolkit, and today the latest tool of delivery is Generative AI which facilitates both the creation and dissemination of “seemingly new, meaningful content such as text, images, or audio” (Feuerriegel et al., 2023, p. 111).

If not addressed, AI-generated Election Propaganda can be used to influence the opinion of the voters by misrepresenting the truth or by spreading half-truths or by spreading false content disguised as the truth. This poses a serious threat to electoral integrity in ways that were previously unimaginable as it manipulates and changes the thought process of the voting population by blurring the line between fact and fiction. The average reader who would fact check or use specialized tools to go on a voyage of discovery in order to verify if the content is in fact true or false is likely to be limited. As such it would cause widespread confusion among the voting population which can severely undermine the citizens’ fundamental right to vote. Even though the causation of harm is clearly made evident; the question of regulation is still left unanswered in Sri Lanka. Currently, the facts at hand present a situation where the adoption of a formal regulatory policy is hindered by the existence of certain key barriers.

The first barrier is capacity. While ICT professionals with the relevant technical knowledge can be found in Sri Lanka, there still remains only a very few number of experienced personnel who have the prowess and experience to comment and actually shape a feasible regulatory policy. A notable fact that cybersecurity expert Mr. Asela Waidyalankara (Interview conducted on March 31, 2025) brought up and which I also agree about is that countries like Singapore have specialized and trained in-house specialists to deal with these types of issues; and this is something that Sri Lanka unfortunately lacks. Also, in tandem with this is the lack of institutional capacity. It is easy to presume that this area would fall under the purview of the Election Commission. Yet, I firmly refute this presumption because we cannot expect the Election Commission to handle every election related issue. It is simply not realistic as the Commission is already under immense pressure to fulfill its primary mandate of conducting free and fair elections. On the other hand, even if a regulatory policy is created and the number of personnel is increased, there is once again a clear deficit of specific technical expertise and digital forensic experts who have the ability to detect such content.

Secondly, Sri Lanka is a highly politically driven country and as evidenced by the past, regulation has been more reactive in nature than proactive. While it can be argued that the system is designed in such a way so that it leaves room for maneuver, it also acts as a significant barrier. It remains clear that politicians would be the most affected segment in society if regulation is adopted.

So, the probability of them willingly taking up such an issue that will limit their election campaigning strategies is highly likely to take a back seat. Thirdly, while the digital literacy rate of Sri Lanka is reported to be 63.8% for the population aged 5 to 69 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2023), this cannot be equated to include AI literacy. Generative AI is advancing at a very rapid pace and the AI literacy of the people in Sri Lanka across various demographics and geographic locations may pose a significant barrier. Because if the people themselves are not literate, it makes such populations highly vulnerable to manipulation. This in turn might stall the demand for a regulatory policy as it would not surface from the general public and would be limited to the consensus of the experts.

Fourthly, while existing legal statutes such as the Computer Crimes Act No. 24 of 2007 and the Personal Data Protection (Amendment) Bill of 2025 can be interpreted to cover the regulation of such AI-generated Election Propaganda; the vague and ambiguous nature of the Online Safety Act No. 9 of 2024 in itself poses a contradiction in the use of available legal infrastructure. It also poses a question of how well the foundational roots for such a regulatory policy can be supported in the presence of such questionable laws; and this prompts a thought on whether the existing laws on social media and data protection should even be considered as a foundational guideline for AI and election related regulations.

The fifth factor deals with the allocation of financial resources. The gaps in financing also hinders the adoption of a regulatory policy, because at the moment the priority is to follow the IMF's debt reconstruction plan and to prevent the country from falling into another economic crisis. So whether priority will be given towards funding and staffing personnel needed to combat AI-generated Election Propaganda and whether a policy making body representative of all socio-ethnic classes in Sri Lanka would be convened remains uncertain. Lastly, the tension between protecting individual rights and ensuring transparency could in itself turn into a major barrier. Regulatory measures such as AI content labelling, performing algorithmic audits or maintaining Deepfake detection logs may clash with fundamental rights such as the freedom of expression and privacy. In Sri Lanka the situation is more severe because there is a history of misusing the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act to suppress political dissent (Sri Lanka Brief, 2019). This is further complicated by the vagueness and censorship powers mandated to the government under the Online Safety Act No. 9 of 2024.

Acknowledging these barriers raises another critical question: is a formal regulatory policy the best solution for Sri Lanka at the moment? This question can be unpacked into two separate arguments. Firstly, Sri Lanka has only published its first National AI Strategy. While the strategy does not include a section pertaining to elections, it can be justified since it was only the first document to be drafted. So we need to give more time so that the government can introduce a second or third National Strategy which addresses issues related to elections. Thereafter, we can possibly focus on contemplating the General Regulation of AI. It is only then that a discussion that dives into specifics, such as the regulation of AI-generated Election Propaganda can be taken up.

Secondly, as noted by cyber security expert Mr. Asela Waidyalankara (Interview conducted on March 31, 2025) and ICTA Policy Division Head, Mr. Chanuka Wattegama (Interview conducted on April 8, 2025) the influence that Sri Lanka can have over AI Companies like OpenAI and Social Media companies like Meta, TikTok and Platform X is very limited due to its status as a small power in global affairs. This exertion of influence is complicated because AI developments are not centralized but decentralized amongst a very large number of market players. So, the ability to regulate each and every AI developer becomes an impossible task. Both experts advocate for a harmonized set of rules. Upon considering regional cooperation to exert regulatory pressure, it must be noted that the geo-political situation of the South Asian region is quite different to that of the EU (European Union) and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries. On one hand, the South Asian region is Indo-Centric; and on the other hand, the long history of political, religious and territorial disputes between India and Pakistan creates an environment where regional cooperation remains uncertain and very ambiguous.

Thus, it becomes crucial to consider what a future regulatory policy could look like for Sri Lanka. Such a framework need not reinvent the wheel and may begin by focusing on key areas such as detection, traceability and mandatory labeling of AI-generated content; the creation of a rapid response digital task force to flag and fact check suspected content specifically during the election period; and the establishment of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) or other formal agreements with social media platforms and major AI developers to identify and limit the virality of harmful AI-generated Election Propaganda during critical campaign periods. Furthermore, Sri Lanka can experiment with soft enforcement mechanisms by partnering with media houses, civil society groups and online content creators to use satire, parody and public ridicule as tools to sanction domestic political actors who violate the proposed regulatory policy.

### **Lessons from Global Experiences**

To make this a success, inspiration can be drawn from Taiwan's "Humour over Rumour" strategy which successfully curbed misinformation during the pandemic (Mahdawi, 2021). Such a culturally attuned approach can reinforce civil norms and build resilience against manipulation without resorting to legal enforcement mechanisms. Moreover, valuable lessons can be drawn from other states such as Ireland's 2024 voluntary framework which guided political communication and tackled deceptive AI content (Irish Legal News, 2024); and Estonia's approach which balances strong protections for internet freedom and user rights with targeted restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of hostile propaganda and disinformation (Freedom House, 2023). Such examples showcase that Sri Lanka also has the ability to adopt strategic and proportionate interventions that are both feasible and effective despite the existence of the above discussed barriers.

### **Suggestions for Improvement**

However, in the short term, Sri Lanka could begin by launching an AI Electoral Integrity Working Group composed of legal experts, digital specialists, civil society experts, policy makers, media experts and election officials. Alongside this, public awareness campaigns can be initiated in order to build AI literacy amongst the voting population.

Moving forward, Sri Lanka must also invest in low-cost digital verification tools and AI content verification portals that can empower the public to navigate the complexities of AI-generated Election Propaganda. Such steps play a crucial role in building public capacity to identify manipulated content and support informed decision-making during elections. As pointed out by Attorney at Law and Technology Law Specialist Ms. Thanuki Goonesinghe (Interview Conducted on April 6, 2025) such efforts should leverage existing institutional platforms. For instance, she explained how the Election Commission's Dispute Resolution (EDR) Mobile App could be enhanced to include a real-time alert system that delivers timely and reliable fact checked clarifications directly to registered users.

Thus, ultimately the choice before Sri Lanka is not whether regulation is necessary, but whether it will act early and with enough wisdom to overcome these barriers and safeguard its electoral integrity before the next wave of AI technology outpaces the public's ability to respond.

In conclusion, contemplations concerning the adoption of a regulatory policy pertaining to AI-generated Election Propaganda in Sri Lanka remains constrained by six interlocking barriers: capacity gaps, political self-interest, low AI literacy, legal ambiguity, resource constraints and rights vs transparency tensions. Overcoming these barriers will require an incremental and multi-stakeholder approach. Hence, efforts made to devise a practical remedy that can overcome these barriers, must be treated as a separate research-intensive project supplemented by expert interviews, field level pilot studies and multi-stakeholder consultations.

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# Sri Lanka's Pathway to Climate Resilience

By Dulyana Apoorva Wanigasooriya

## Executive Summary

Climate resilience is no longer optional; it is a national imperative for Sri Lanka.

This policy brief evaluates the country's current vulnerabilities and resilience efforts in the face of intensifying climate risks. It begins by defining the concept and importance of climate resilience, followed by a detailed exploration of thematic sectors crucial to resilience: food and agriculture systems, water and ecosystems, urban environments, coastal zones, and critical infrastructure.

The brief identifies Sri Lanka's low emissions contribution, yet high exposure to climate threats, and calls for integrating climate-smart strategies into national development. Through sector-wise analyses, the document highlights effective technologies, practices, and governance frameworks, supported by science and local knowledge.

Key proposals include:

- Mainstreaming climate-smart agriculture and adaptive technologies
- Implementing ecosystem-based water and coastal management
- Future-proofing infrastructure and urban development
- Strengthening governance, finance, and local capacity

Together, these measures chart a path toward a resilient and sustainable Sri Lanka

## Introduction: Understanding Climate Resilience

### *What is Climate Resilience?*

Climate resilience is the ability of social and ecological systems to anticipate, adapt to, absorb, and recover from climate-related shocks and stresses (Denton et al., 2014). Though intangible (Subiyanto et al., 2020), it plays a critical role in safeguarding lives, livelihoods, and ecosystems.

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**About the Author** Dulyana Wanigasooriya is a medical undergraduate at the University of Colombo with a deep interest in neuroscience, climate resilience, and citizen science. He contributes to biodiversity conservation initiatives through the Young Zoologists' Association and Wildlife and Nature Protection Society of Sri Lanka.

By integrating adaptation, mitigation, and recovery into development planning, climate resilience helps ensure sustainable progress, reduce vulnerability, and protect communities from escalating environmental threats.

### *Sri Lanka's Climate Vulnerability and the Need for a Resilient Strategy*

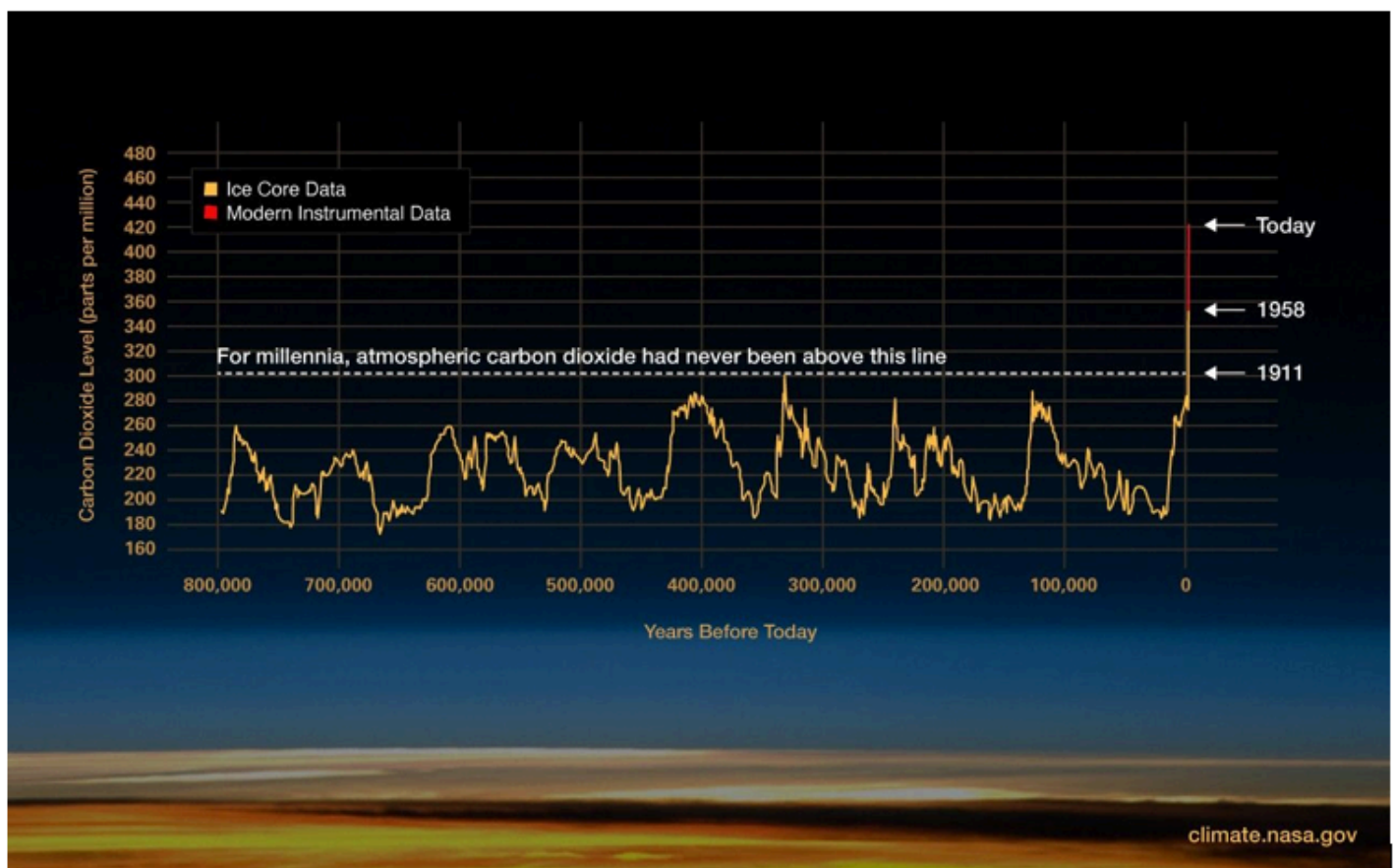
Located in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka's warm, wet climate, marked by high temperatures and erratic weather, makes it extremely vulnerable (Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre, 2022). It ranked 88th in the Climate Risk Index 2022 (Climate Risk Index 2025, 2025), with agriculture, water security, urban infrastructure, health, and the economy already impacted. The urgency for a national resilience strategy is clear (Ministry of Environment, n.d.).

## **Key Thematic Areas for a Strong Climate Action Plan**

### A) Climate Change: Past, Present, and Future

#### a) Anthropogenic Climate Change: Causes and Trends

Though Earth's climate has always evolved, today's warming is unprecedented over the last 10,000 years. Scientific consensus confirms human activity is the dominant cause, with visible global effects such as melting ice sheets (Cermak, 2024).



*Image source: (Cermak, 2024)*

#### b) Sri Lanka's Contributions to Climate Change and Mitigation Strategies

With just 1.02 tons of GHG emissions per capita in 2010 and a global contribution of 0.03% (2019), Sri Lanka is a low emitter (Ministry of Environment, 2022). However, Sri Lanka has pledged to achieve 4% unconditional and 10.5% conditional reductions by 2030.

Some of the goals intended to achieve by Sri Lanka include:

- 70% renewable energy by 2030
- Carbon-neutral electricity by 2050
- 32% forest cover by 2030

Though efforts like organic farming and e-mobility are underway, the failed 2021 organic farming transition underscores the need for gradual, evidence-based policies (Handunnetti, 2022).



Image source: [Circular economy: definition, importance and benefits | Topics | European Parliament](#)

### c) Potential Future Scenarios: Examining the 1.5°C and Higher Pathways

Sri Lanka is highly vulnerable to climate risks that include erratic monsoons, droughts, floods, and sea-level rise. Thus, scenarios beyond 1.5°C of global warming would drastically affect biodiversity, food security, and coastal communities. This further emphasizes the need for climate-smart development in the country while maintaining an upward economic trajectory. (Ministry of Environment, 2022)

B)Impact Areas: Aligning with UNFCCC’s Climate Resilience Pathway

01) Resilient Food and Agriculture Systems

Impact of climate change on food security

Climate change threatens Sri Lanka’s food security by disrupting agriculture, which employs 30% of the workforce and supports 02 million small-scale farmers. Erratic rainfall, droughts, rising temperatures, and soil degradation reduce yields and threaten livelihoods, nutrition, and export income (Ministry of Environment, 2022; Premalal et al., 2013). To build resilience, Sri Lanka must adopt sustainable, low-emission farming and agroecological practices that support climate adaptation while securing food systems and rural economies.

Implementation Notes

Strategy	Description	Advantages / Climate Benefits	Supplementary Policy / Implementation Notes
<b>Climate-Adaptive Crop Varieties (Supplementary)</b>	Use of stress-tolerant, drought/heat-resistant, and short-duration crop varieties developed via conventional breeding or wild relatives (e.g., <i>Oryza officinalis</i> , wild <i>Cicer</i> species).	- Reduces yield losses from heat/drought- Enhances genetic diversity and resilience- Preserves flowering behaviour under heat	Support seed banks, pre-breeding programs, and incentivize use of climate-resilient varieties (Dempewolf et al., 2014; Vala et al., 2024)
<b>CRISPR and Genetic Engineering</b>	Use of biotechnology tools like CRISPR-Cas9 to introduce adaptive traits in crops.	- Accelerates development of climate-adaptive traits- Reduces input dependency	Establish regulatory frameworks and bioethics policies for safe genetic innovations (Vala et al., 2024)
<b>Precision Agriculture Tools</b>	Use of drones, remote sensing, and AI for soil, crop, and weather monitoring to optimize farm decisions.	- Improves input efficiency and yield- Enables real-time response to climate threats	Provide access to digital tools, AI platforms, and weather-based advisories to smallholders
<b>Smart Irrigation Technologies</b>	Drip and sprinkler systems improve water efficiency and cope with erratic rainfall.	- Saves water and reduces evapotranspiration loss- Reduces energy use	Promote government subsidies and technical support for micro-irrigation adoption

<b>Soil Health Restoration</b>	Use of biofertilizers, organic matter, and cover crops to reverse degradation.	- Restores soil fertility and carbon sequestration- Enhances drought resistance	Encourage organic certification programs and soil health missions
<b>Agroecological Practices</b>	Techniques such as agroforestry, rice-fish systems, and conservation farming.	- Improves biodiversity, microclimate, and water retention- Buffers against climate shocks	Support farmer-led trials and local knowledge integration into national plans
<b>Integrated Pest &amp; Disease Management (IPM)</b>	Combines climate-specific biopesticides, disease-resistant varieties, and crop surveillance.	- Reduces pesticide reliance and pest resurgence- Limits pathogen spread under warming climates	Fund climate-adapted IPM research and training programs
<b>Risk Diversification</b>	Crop/income diversification, insurance schemes, and off-farm livelihood options.	- Spreads climate risk- Increases household economic resilience	Support microinsurance, crop failure coverage, and vocational training
<b>Technology + Policy Integration</b>	Bridging innovations with farmer education, R&D partnerships, and enabling policies.	- Accelerates scaling of climate solutions- Improves rural adaptive capacity	Invest in public-private R&D, local extension networks, and inclusive policymaking (Vala et al., 2024)

## 2) Resilient Water and Natural Ecosystems

### Strategic Interventions

<b>Policy Area</b>	<b>Key Actions</b>	<b>Climate Resilience Outcomes</b>
<b>Integrated Water Governance</b>	Promote localized watershed approaches blending traditional and scientific knowledge. Strengthen cross-sector coordination and data systems. ( <i>Basuki et al., 2022; Oyebande &amp; Odunuga, 2010</i> )	- Informed water planning - Improved drought/flood response - Enhanced policy coherence
<b>Ecosystem Restoration</b>	Rehabilitate wetlands and mangroves using native species. Prevent land conversion in sensitive zones. Integrate goals into national commitments. ( <i>Krauss et al., 2022; Oyebande &amp; Odunuga, 2010; Basuki et al., 2022</i> )	- Natural flood mitigation - Coastal protection - Biodiversity recovery



<b>Nature-Based Adaptation</b>	Apply ecosystem-based solutions such as green infrastructure, traditional irrigation systems, and natural buffers. <i>(Oyebande &amp; Odumuga, 2010; Basuki et al., 2022)</i>	- Multi-benefit outcomes (adaptation, mitigation, biodiversity) - Cost-effective and sustainable solutions
<b>Institutional &amp; Monitoring Systems</b>	Align adaptation actions with national strategies (NAPs, NDCs). Strengthen multi-level monitoring and evaluation. <i>(Basuki et al., 2022)</i>	- Clear accountability - Effective implementation tracking - Scalable interventions
<b>Community &amp; Knowledge Inclusion</b>	Empower local and Indigenous knowledge systems. Support inclusive planning, education, and stewardship. <i>(Basuki et al., 2022; Oyebande &amp; Odumuga, 2010)</i>	- Socially inclusive adaptation - Strengthened local ownership - Culturally relevant resilience pathways

### 3) Resilient Cities

Policy Area	Key Actions	Climate Resilience Outcomes
<b>Integrated Urban Planning</b>	Combine climate adaptation and mitigation strategies in urban design and development. Incorporate green infrastructure like urban forests, green roofs, and wetlands to reduce heat and flooding. <i>(Cui et al., 2024; Oyebande &amp; Odumuga, 2010)</i>	- Reduced urban heat island effect - Improved flood management - Enhanced urban sustainability
<b>Multi-sectoral Governance</b>	Coordinate across sectors to address heatwaves, flooding, and infrastructure stress. Align urban planning with national adaptation frameworks for coherence. <i>(Basuki et al., 2022)</i>	- Coordinated emergency response - Strengthened policy integration - Efficient resource allocation
<b>Community Engagement</b>	Involve local communities and integrate Indigenous knowledge in resilience planning. Conduct education and stewardship programs. <i>(Oyebande &amp; Odumuga, 2010)</i>	- Increased social resilience - Local ownership of adaptation measures - Inclusive, culturally relevant solutions
<b>Heatwave Risk Management</b>	Use cool materials such as reflective pavements and green roofs. Expand urban greening through trees and parks to enhance evapotranspiration. <i>(Santamouris, 2014; Cui et al., 2024)</i>	- Reduced health risks and heat stress - Lowered economic losses due to



		productivity decline and infrastructure damage
<b>Flood Risk Management</b>	Implement sponge city concepts (permeable surfaces, bioswales). Restore wetlands to absorb excess runoff. ( <i>Basuki et al., 2022; Krauss et al., 2022</i> )	- Reduced urban flooding - Improved stormwater management - Enhanced ecosystem services
<b>Infrastructure Adaptation</b>	Use climate-resilient materials (heat-resistant asphalt, elevated structures). Employ smart monitoring and early warning systems. ( <i>Cui et al., 2024</i> )	- Prolonged infrastructure lifespan - Early detection of climate threats - Minimized service disruptions
<b>Smart Technologies &amp; Nature-Based Solutions</b>	Deploy IoT sensors for real-time climate data. Use AI-driven urban designs to optimize shade and ventilation. Restore mangroves and riparian buffers for coastal and water flow regulation. ( <i>Cui et al., 2024; Basuki et al., 2022; Krauss et al., 2022</i> )	- Enhanced climate monitoring - Optimized urban microclimates - Strengthened natural defences
<b>Disaster Preparedness &amp; Response</b>	Establish early warning systems for heatwaves and floods. Develop community-based programs targeting vulnerable groups. Set up cooling centers and emergency shelters. Align city policies with National Adaptation Plans. ( <i>WHO, 2020; Basuki et al., 2022; Cui et al., 2024</i> )	- Reduced disaster impacts - Improved community readiness - Integrated, effective emergency management

#### 4) Resilient Coastal Zones & Oceans

Policy Area	Key Actions	Climate Resilience Outcomes
<b>Ecosystem Restoration</b>	Restore mangroves, coral reefs, and oyster beds to protect coasts and support biodiversity. ( <i>Sarker et al., 2019</i> )	- Stronger natural barriers - Healthier coastal ecosystems - Sustainable livelihoods
<b>Diversified Coastal Livelihoods</b>	Support aquaculture, seaweed farming, and marine ecotourism as low-carbon, climate-resilient income sources. ( <i>Sarker et al., 2019</i> )	- Reduced economic risk - Resilient communities - Sustainable marine resource use

<b>Technological Adaptations</b>	Introduce floating farming, salt-tolerant aquaculture, and marine renewable energy to lower climate risks and create new opportunities. <i>(Sarker et al., 2019)</i>	- Lower vulnerability - New green jobs - Improved adaptation capacity
<b>Marine Spatial Planning &amp; Governance</b>	Improve ocean governance and use marine spatial planning to balance growth with conservation. <i>(Sarker et al., 2019)</i>	- Coordinated resource use - Balanced economy and environment - Long-term ecosystem health
<b>Vulnerability Assessments</b>	Conduct detailed assessments of coastal and marine climate risks to guide smart adaptation choices. <i>(Sarker et al., 2019)</i>	- Focused planning - better decisions - Efficient resource use
<b>Community Engagement &amp; Ocean Literacy</b>	Boost local knowledge, provide access to climate tech and finance, and support community climate insurance. <i>(Sarker et al., 2019)</i>	- Empowered communities - Stronger local resilience - Inclusive adaptation
<b>Policy &amp; Institutional Strengthening</b>	Align Blue Economy policies with climate goals for consistent and effective resilience efforts. <i>(Sarker et al., 2019)</i>	- Clear governance - Sustainable growth - Strong national resilience

## 5) Resilient Infrastructure & Services (Transport, Energy, Industry)

Policy Area	Key Actions	Climate Resilience Outcomes
<b>Climate-Proofing Infrastructure</b>	Integrate adaptation into national infrastructure planning by designing assets to withstand future climate conditions, not just historical patterns. <i>(Kennedy &amp; Corfee-Morlot 2012)</i>	- Enhanced durability - Reduced service disruptions - Long-term operational reliability
<b>Renewable Energy Transition</b>	Accelerate renewable energy deployment with supportive policies, incentives, and grid modernization to decarbonize power systems and supply chains. <i>(Corfee-Morlot et al., 2012)</i>	- Lower emissions - cleaner energy supply - Increased system resilience
<b>Low-Carbon Transport Solutions</b>	Invest in public transit, EV infrastructure, and shift towards rail and non-motorized transport modes to cut emissions in the transport sector. <i>(Corfee-Morlot et al., 2012)</i>	- Reduced transport emissions - Improved urban air quality - Sustainable mobility
<b>Governance &amp; Public-Private Partnerships</b>	Embed low-carbon, climate-resilient standards in PPP frameworks to align private investments with national adaptation and mitigation goals. <i>(Kennedy &amp; Corfee-Morlot, 2012)</i>	- Aligned investments - Improved project sustainability - Strengthened public-private cooperation

<b>Policy &amp; Market Reforms</b>	Implement carbon pricing, phase out fossil fuel subsidies, and reform procurement policies to prioritize green infrastructure investments. <i>(Corfee-Morlot et al., 2012)</i>	- Clear market signals - Increased green investment - Accelerated low-carbon transition
<b>Innovative Financing Tools</b>	Scale green bonds, blended finance, and guarantees to lower risks and attract institutional investors for climate-resilient infrastructure projects. <i>(Kennedy &amp; Corfee-Morlot, 2012)</i>	- Expanded finance access - Lower investment risk - Mobilized private capital
<b>Capacity Building &amp; Knowledge Sharing</b>	Strengthen technical and administrative skills at national and local levels to design and manage resilient infrastructure. <i>(Corfee-Morlot et al., 2012)</i>	- Improved project delivery - Enhanced resilience expertise - Better adaptive management
<b>Integrated Infrastructure Planning</b>	Use systemic, cross-sectoral planning recognizing interdependencies (energy-water-transport nexus) to maximize resilience and sustainability. <i>(Kennedy &amp; Corfee-Morlot, 2012)</i>	- Synergistic solutions - Resource efficiency - Holistic climate resilience

## Policy Recommendations: A Roadmap for Implementation

### • Short-Term Actions (0–3 Years)

Focus: Rapid deployment, pilot programs, enabling environmental systems

### Agriculture & Food Systems

- Promote climate-resilient crop varieties via traditional breeding programs
- Scale precision agriculture tools (drones, AI, remote sensing) for smallholder farmers
- Support diversified livelihoods through microinsurance and vocational training

### Water and Ecosystem Governance

- Adopt integrated watershed planning at regional and local levels
- Restore wetlands and mangroves using native species in priority zones
- Institutionalize community-based monitoring and Indigenous knowledge integration

### Urban Resilience

- Implement green infrastructure such as urban forests and green roofs in cities
- Roll out early warning systems and community disaster preparedness programs
- Introduce reflective materials and cooling centres to reduce heatwave impacts

### Coastal and Marine Systems

- Restore coral reefs and mangroves for natural coastal protection
- Support seaweed farming and climate-resilient aquaculture pilots
- Launch ocean literacy campaigns and community stewardship programs

### Infrastructure, Energy & Transport

- Embed climate-resilient standards in existing infrastructure upgrades
- Expand EV charging infrastructure and public transport access
- Establish PPP guidelines aligned with climate adaptation and mitigation targets

- **Long-Term Actions (3+ Years)**

Focus: Systemic reforms, capacity building, structural investments

## **Agriculture & Food Systems**

- Advance CRISPR and biotechnology-based breeding for climate-adaptive crops
- Scale smart irrigation (drip/sprinkler) with national subsidies and training
- Institutionalize agroecological practices in national agricultural policies

## **Water and Ecosystem Governance**

- Develop a national ecosystem restoration strategy with binding targets
- Integrate nature-based adaptation into national budgeting and NDCs
- Build multi-level data and M&E systems for ecosystem resilience tracking

## **Urban Resilience**

- Adopt “sponge city” concepts into urban master plans
- Deploy smart city platforms for real-time climate and infrastructure data
- Strengthen cross-sectoral urban governance for heat and flood response

## **Coastal and Marine Systems**

- Establish marine spatial planning frameworks and enforce coastal zoning
- Introduce marine renewable energy technologies and floating farms
- Align Blue Economy development with long-term resilience and biodiversity targets

## **Infrastructure, Energy & Transport**

- Mandate climate-proofing in all new infrastructure projects
- Achieve grid modernization to support 100% renewable energy goals
- Implement carbon pricing and green public procurement reforms

## **Conclusion**

To secure a sustainable future, Sri Lanka must rapidly transit from vulnerability to resilience. This requires bold, integrated, and inclusive policy actions. Among the highest-priority measures are:

- Scaling climate-resilient agriculture through biotechnology, digital tools, and ecosystem restoration
- Embedding nature-based solutions in urban and coastal planning to reduce disaster risk and protect biodiversity
- Reforming infrastructure governance to adopt future-climate-ready standards and low-carbon transitions
- Mainstreaming inclusive knowledge systems—from Indigenous stewardship to digital forecasting—in local governance
- Unlocking finance and private sector alignment via green bonds, PPPs, and resilience-linked incentives

These interventions must be embedded within national development strategies and empowered by strong institutions, data systems, and community engagement. With decisive leadership and global cooperation, Sri Lanka can transform climate adversity into opportunity, ushering in a resilient, inclusive, and prosperous tomorrow.

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# Genetic Screening for Personalized Health in Sri Lanka: A Policy Perspective

By Dr. Visula Abeysuriya

## Introduction

Genetic screening has emerged as a transformative approach in personalized healthcare, enabling early disease detection, risk assessment, and tailored therapeutic interventions (Collins and Varmus, 2015). With advancements in genomic technologies, countries worldwide are integrating genetic screening into their healthcare systems to enhance patient outcomes and reduce the burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) (Ginsburg and Phillips, 2018). Sri Lanka, as a developing nation with a unique demographic and epidemiological profile, stands to benefit significantly from implementing genetic screening programs. This policy paper examines the potential of genetic screening for personalized health in Sri Lanka, highlighting its benefits, challenges, ethical considerations, and policy recommendations.

## The Role of Genetic Screening in Personalized Health

Genetic screening involves the systematic examination of an individual's genetic material to identify predispositions to specific diseases, such as cancer, cardiovascular disorders, and genetic conditions like thalassemia and cystic fibrosis (Manolio et al., 2013). In a personalized healthcare model, genetic screening provides valuable insights into an individual's genetic risk, enabling early interventions, targeted treatments, and lifestyle modifications to prevent disease progression (Knoppers et al., 2018). Countries that have integrated genetic screening into their healthcare frameworks have reported improved patient outcomes and cost savings due to early diagnosis and precision medicine (Gostin et al., 2017).

## The Burden of Non-Communicable Diseases in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka faces a growing burden of NCDs, accounting for over 80% of total deaths in the country (Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka, 2022). Genetic predispositions play a significant role in the development of diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and cancer. Implementing genetic screening in Sri Lanka's healthcare system can aid in identifying at-risk individuals, thereby facilitating early interventions and reducing long-term healthcare costs (Jayasekara, Weerasinghe and Abeykoon, 2021).

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However, this potential must be balanced with the practical and ethical concerns of access and affordability. Screening for risk factors using conventional tools like BMI, lipid profiles, or fasting glucose remains significantly more affordable and accessible than genetic testing. There is a real risk that introducing high-cost genetic screening without financial safeguards could exacerbate health inequities.

Additionally, genetic screening can improve neonatal and prenatal care by detecting inherited disorders, allowing for early therapeutic interventions (Weerasinghe and Fernando, 2019).

### **Important Genetic Disorders and Opportunity Costs**

Mass genetic screening for conditions such as thalassemia can offer population-wide benefits. Sri Lanka has already piloted premarital thalassemia screening in selected regions with promising outcomes (Amarasinghe et al., 2022). Targeted national expansion of such screening, especially among high-risk populations, may be more cost-effective than individualized whole-genome sequencing.

Opportunity costs must be carefully considered. Resources allocated to high-cost, low-frequency personalized testing could potentially yield higher population benefits if redirected toward scalable public health measures or essential services. A comparative cost-benefit analysis is crucial to determine whether resources should focus on broad population-based preventive programs or selective precision medicine interventions.

### **Current Status of Genetic Screening in Sri Lanka**

Despite the potential benefits, genetic screening is still in its infancy in Sri Lanka. Genetic services are primarily available in tertiary healthcare institutions and research settings, with limited accessibility to the general population (Perera, Senanayake and Ranasinghe, 2020). The lack of infrastructure, trained personnel, and public awareness has hindered the widespread adoption of genetic screening programs. Furthermore, there is no national policy or regulatory framework governing genetic testing and data privacy, raising ethical and legal concerns regarding the misuse of genetic information (Senanayake, Perera and De Silva, 2022).

### **Challenges in Implementing Genetic Screening in Sri Lanka**

- **Limited Infrastructure and Resources-** Genetic testing facilities are scarce, and there is a shortage of trained genetic counselors and laboratory personnel.
- **Cost and Affordability-** Genetic screening remains expensive, making it inaccessible to a large portion of the population. Government subsidies or insurance coverage would be essential for equitable access.
- **Ethical and Legal Concerns-** There is no established legal framework to regulate genetic data usage, raising concerns about discrimination in employment and insurance based on genetic information.
- **Public Awareness and Acceptance-** Many individuals are unaware of the benefits and implications of genetic screening. Misinformation and cultural beliefs may also contribute to resistance against genetic testing.

In addition to the above, comparative cost-effectiveness evaluations of genetic versus conventional screening tools are absent in Sri Lanka.

Without this data, policy decisions may be skewed towards high-visibility innovations rather than sustainable, equitable interventions.

### **Ethical Considerations in Genetic Screening**

Informed consent, genetic privacy, and legal protections are essential. Furthermore, screening fetuses for genetic disorders such as thalassemia introduces serious ethical and legal concerns, especially where termination of pregnancy may be considered. These raise questions of disability rights, reproductive autonomy, and cultural acceptance.

Ethical governance frameworks must anticipate such dilemmas and include representation from ethicists, clinicians, legal scholars, and community leaders.

### **Policy Recommendations for Implementing Genetic Screening in Sri Lanka:**

- **Development of a National Genetic Screening Program-** The Ministry of Health should establish a national program to standardize genetic screening services, ensuring equitable access across all regions based on priority health issues and opportunity costs
- **Infrastructure and Capacity Building-** Investment in laboratory facilities, training programs for healthcare professionals, and public-private partnerships will be essential for scaling up genetic screening.
- **Incorporation into Universal Healthcare-** Genetic screening for a few high priority health issues should be included in Sri Lanka's Universal Health Coverage scheme, with financial support mechanisms to make it affordable.
- **Implementation of Legal and Ethical Frameworks-** Policies should be enacted to regulate genetic data privacy, prohibit genetic discrimination, and establish guidelines for ethical genetic research and clinical applications.
- **Public Awareness and Education-** Once service developments are on track nationwide awareness campaigns should be conducted to educate the public on the benefits and implications of genetic screening, promoting informed decision-making.

Specific focus should be given to publicly funded, condition-specific screening, such as for thalassemia, where the costs and benefits are clearly established.

### **Conclusion**

Genetic screening presents a transformative opportunity for personalized healthcare in Sri Lanka. However, it must be introduced within a strategic, ethical, and cost-aware framework. While Sri Lanka can benefit from genomic medicine, it must also safeguard equity, accessibility, and system sustainability. Policies must weigh population benefit against individual personalization, emphasizing prioritized conditions with clear cost-effectiveness and social acceptance.

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# Cover Story

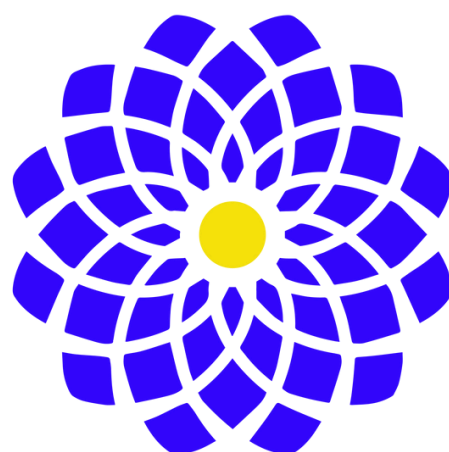


*The School of Athens ( or Scuola di Atene) by the Italian Renaissance artist Raphael.*

Raphael's School of Athens is more than a tribute to classical philosophy : it's a portrait of leadership through ideas. Painted at the height of the Renaissance, it brings together the great thinkers of antiquity ; Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and others - each engaged in spirited debate, each representing a different way of understanding the world. The fresco becomes a gathering of minds across time, a reminder that progress begins with conversation and disagreement.

This image speaks to the essence of public leadership ; not power for its own sake, but the ability to listen, reason, and seek truth. The painting doesn't just show thinkers; it shows a community built on ideas. In doing so, it captures a deeper truth: that good governance and lasting policy are shaped not by force, but by wisdom, humility, and the courage to ask hard questions.





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