Sri Lanka - Credit to the artist - Tanbelia

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Table of
Contents

INSIDE

Our Promise

- To educate and train students to become pioneers and catalysts of change, as forward-thinking and socially responsible leaders & decision-makers in multiple disciplines.

- To facilitate understanding on policy-making, policy-analysis and policy-implementation, based on the analysis of scientific research and empirical data.

- To offer nationally & globally relevant multidisciplinary academic programs, which are founded on creativity and analytical rigor.

- To provide a platform for public discussion & debate, and to serve as a think-tank, which contributes towards resolving national issues from diverse perspectives.

- To create a group of innovative and committed professionals who will challenge existing norms and systems, and contribute towards the holistic development of the nation.

Greetings from BALPP!

The Research Wing of the BALPP is pleased to launch the current issue of the Policy Tribune as its first issue for the year 2026. The BALPP Policy Tribune functions as a dynamic platform for scholars and professionals to disseminate their research and actively engage in informed scholarly discourse on policy formulation, policy implementation, ethical governance, and strategic leadership.

When observing current local and global developments, it is evident that they reflect pervasive policy incoherence and notable leadership deficits. The deepening crisis in Venezuela underscores the consequences of prolonged political stalemate and fragmented international engagement, while the escalation of tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan reflect the limitations of external mediation and the fragility of regional security architectures. Escalating tensions in the Middle East have narrowed the space for conflict de-escalation and weakened prospects for cooperative regional governance. The ICC T-20 Cricket World Cup 2026, though celebratory in nature, also raises important questions about sportsmanship, ethical leadership, and the symbolic role of sports in shaping national and global narratives. Similarly, India's AI Summit 2026 reflects how policy frameworks for artificial intelligence are evolving, alongside the governance challenges and leadership strategies necessary for equitable and safe deployment of AI and emerging technologies.

During the February 2026 snap election of Japan, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party(LDP) secured a historic two-thirds supermajority in the lower house of the National Diet, showing how strong leadership can mobilize public support and provide a clear mandate for decisive policymaking. Yet the election also highlights persistent challenges such as tactical snap elections and contested policy agendas demonstrating that effective governance requires transparent, coordinated, and resilient institutional frameworks beyond electoral victories. At the domestic level, massive devastation caused by Cyclone Ditwah reveals gaps in Sri Lanka's disaster preparedness, climate resilience, and coordinated recovery planning, exposing how reactive rather than anticipatory governance continues to dominate policy responses. Also, Sri Lanka's new rent policies illustrate the complex balance between market regulation policies, social protection, and accountability. All the above issues underscore a recurring pattern of leadership deficits, characterized by inadequate institutional coordination, fragmented policy formulation and execution, and insufficient engagement in multilateral cooperation. These challenges call for a renewed commitment to principled global policy leadership grounded in accountability, transparency, resilience, and strategic decision making.

Therefore, the current issue of the Policy Tribune features a collection of articles, policy briefs, opinion pieces and an interview on leadership and policy related themes, fostering constructive discussions on contemporary policy and governance issues. Through such initiatives, we sincerely hope to educate the public to be more policy oriented and responsible citizens in their professional lives, communities and in the wider society.

The independent panel of reviewers played an important role in this process by providing constructive feedback and encouraging authors to produce good quality manuscripts. We are forever grateful for their continuous guidance in making this publication a successful and meaningful one. We would also like to thank all the contributing authors for their strong commitment and untiring efforts towards a meaningful dialogue on public policy and leadership.

We warmly invite all readers to explore the latest issue and share their feedback to help us enhance future editions. We look forward to engaging in a productive dialogue on strategic leadership, ethical governance, and evidence-based policymaking.

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The Curious Case of the the National List in Sri Lanka: Historical Origins and Patterns of Misuse

By Krishakar Prabaharan

Introduction

Sri Lanka's integrity as a representative democracy depends significantly on the effective functioning of its proportional representation electoral system. However, legal ambiguities have often made this system vulnerable to political manipulation, particularly through the operation of the National List.

This article traces the historical evolution of Sri Lanka's parliamentary structure and the origins of the National List. It identifies legal contradictions that enable the misuse of the National List and proposes policy recommendations aimed at strengthening accountability and transparency. The paper argues that the misuse of the National List reflects not merely legal ambiguity but a deliberate political practice that allows stalled political careers to be revived through indirect parliamentary entry. The analysis draws on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include constitutional provisions, electoral data, and judicial precedents, while secondary sources consist of web-based materials, policy reports, and media publications.

Early Parliamentary Governance and the Senate

The recommendations of the Soulbury Commission led to the establishment of a bicameral legislature following independence. Parliament initially consisted of the House of Representatives and the Senate, with Senators appointed by the Governor-General to provide legislative oversight and represent national interests (Ministry of Defence, 2024).

The Governor-General was tasked with appointing individuals who had rendered distinguished public service or achieved eminence in professional, commercial, industrial, or agricultural life (Lanka Law, 2025). This mechanism ensured that parliamentary deliberations benefited from technical expertise and professional experience that were not necessarily subject to electoral competition.

Lessons from the 1956 Parliamentary Elections

The 1978 constitutional reforms replaced the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) electoral system with proportional representation following the abolition of the Senate and the establishment of a unicameral legislature (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2025).

About the Author Krishakar Prabaharan is an independent researcher holding a dual BBA (Hons.) in International Business and Management. A former Model UN participant and current coach, he has also interned at Sri Lanka's Ministry of Fisheries, experiences that have strengthened his interest in governance and public policy. His work focuses on institutional processes and their impact on civil society and representation in systems of governance

The 1956 general election demonstrated the structural weaknesses of the FPTP system. The Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike secured 39.5 percent of the vote and won a parliamentary majority with 51 seats (Kusaka Research Institute, 2009). In contrast, the United National Party (UNP) received approximately 28 percent of the popular vote but secured only eight seats. Similarly, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party obtained 10.4 percent of the vote yet won fourteen seats.

These results highlighted severe distortions in representation caused by uneven district magnitudes and the predominance of single-member constituencies. Concentrated regional support produced disproportionately favorable outcomes compared to broader but geographically dispersed support.
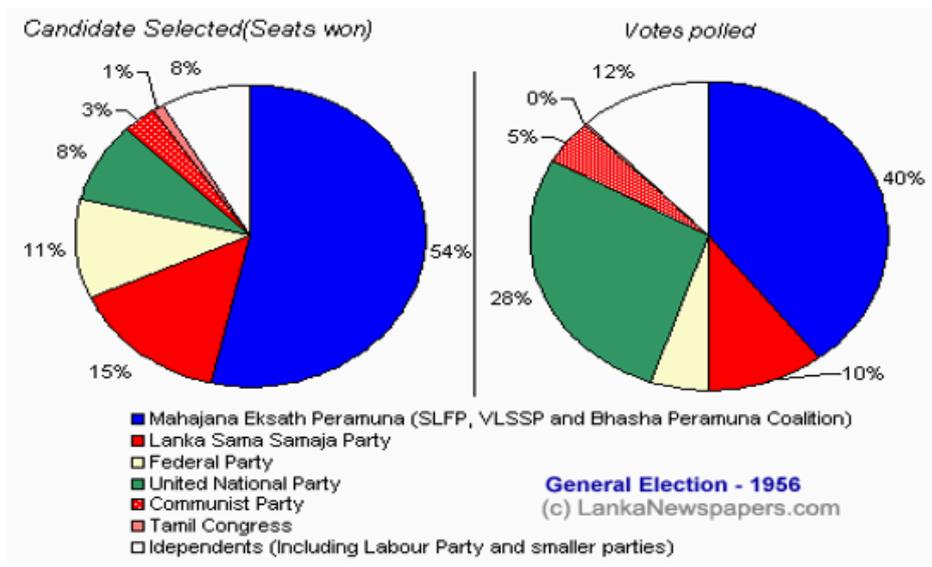
Figure 1: The Results of the 1956 Ceylonese Parliamentary Elections (LankaNews, 2013)

The Emergence of the National List
Electoral reform was therefore considered essential. Drawing partly on Westminster traditions, the National List was introduced in 1988 as part of the proportional representation system (Lanka Law, 2025).

The National List was intended to allow the inclusion of individuals unlikely to succeed in competitive elections but capable of contributing specialized knowledge or representing underrepresented groups. The legitimacy of the mechanism rested on its role as a complement to the electorate's mandate rather than as an alternative route to political office.

A notable example is the late Hon. Lakshman Kadirgamar, an internationally recognized legal scholar and later Minister of Foreign Affairs, whose appointment illustrated the potential value of technocratic expertise within political leadership. (LKI, 2025).

In practice, however, the National List has deviated significantly from its intended purpose. Article 99A of the Constitution introduced provisions that allowed considerable discretion in appointments. The Article states that persons qualified for election to Parliament include those whose names appear either on the National List or on nomination papers submitted for electoral districts (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2001).

This provision has enabled party secretaries to appoint defeated candidates and, in some instances, individuals who were not originally nominated. Such practices circumvent electoral rejection and transform the National List into a mechanism for consolidating political influence rather than expanding representation.

While critics frequently focus on defeated candidates gaining entry through the National List, the underlying problem is broader. Both political figures and technocratic appointees bypass direct electoral endorsement. The fundamental issue is therefore the absence of institutional safeguards ensuring that National List appointments serve the public interest.

Supporters argue that voters endorse political parties rather than individual candidates, thereby granting parties discretion in allocating National List seats. However, the opacity surrounding nominations undermines democratic accountability and prevents voters from meaningfully assessing how their electoral support is utilized.

Patterns of Misuse in Contemporary Times and Legal Contradictions
The appointment of Dhammika Perera in 2022 as a National List MP raised significant concerns, as the seat was filled by a political appointee rather than a subject-matter expert, undermining the National List's intended purpose of bringing professionals into Parliament. Critics argue that such appointments, of individuals who did not contest the election, subvert the democratic process and prioritize political maneuvering over public trust, accountability, and transparency (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2022).

Although the constitutionality of the appointment was questioned, it was defended on the basis of Section 64(5) of the Parliament Elections Act No. 1 of 1981, which permits the nomination of any party member to fill a vacancy (CommonLII, 2025). This provision conflicts with Article 99A and undermines the constitutional framework governing National List appointments.

Similar controversies surrounded the appointment of Basil Rajapaksa after National List MP Jayantha Ketagoda vacated his seat (Kotelawala, 2021). Rajapaksa's dual citizenship status also raised constitutional concerns under Article 91(d)(xiii), which prohibits dual citizens from serving as Members of Parliament (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2001; Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2021).

More recently, the appointment of Ravi Karunanayake as a National List MP in 2024 generated significant controversy. The United National Party alleged that the nomination was made without consultation or approval within the coalition framework (Ada Derana, 2024; The Morning, 2024).

Ironically, former President Ranil Wickremesinghe himself returned to Parliament through the National List after electoral defeat in 2020 before later becoming Prime Minister and President during the 2022 political crisis (East Asia Forum, 2022).

These examples reinforce the perception that the National List operates as a mechanism for political survival rather than democratic representation.
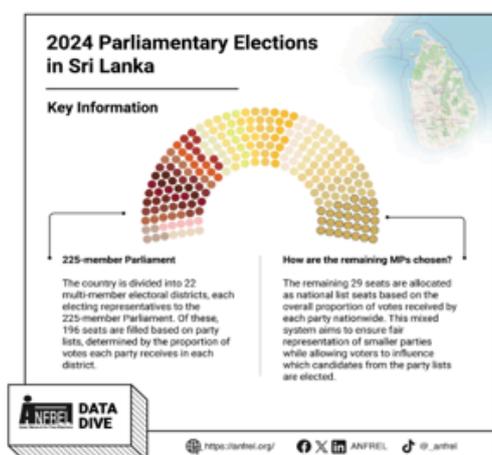
Figure 2: The current composition of the Sri Lankan Parliament (Asia Network for Free Elections, 2024)

Judicial Interpretation and Democratic Principles
Judicial precedent demonstrates that democratic principles should guide constitutional interpretation. In Saravanamuttu and Edrisinha v. Dissanayake and Weerawanni (2002), the Supreme Court held that where two interpretations of a law are possible, courts should favor the interpretation consistent with democratic principles (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2007). Under Article 99A, allowing defeated or non-nominated candidates to assume parliamentary seats runs counter to the electorate's mandate. The fundamental problem is not legal ambiguity, but insufficient enforcement.

Policy Recommendations
Restoring the credibility of the National List requires institutional reforms that enhance transparency and accountability.

Recommendation 1: Strengthening Accountability
The Election Commission should be empowered to enforce compliance with statutory requirements.

Political parties must:
- Submit finalized lists of National List candidates within the nomination period
- Ensure that individuals not included in the original list are deemed ineligible
- Publish candidate lists promptly to enable informed voting decisions

Recommendation 2: Constitutional Reform

The Constitution should be amended to explicitly prohibit defeated candidates from being appointed through the National List.

This reform would prevent the National List from being used to revive political careers rejected by voters.

Recommendation 3: Electoral Oversight Mechanisms

An Electoral Fairplay Committee should be established under the Election Commission to strengthen oversight.

The Committee would:
- Require publication of finalized National List nominees before elections through a gazette
- Require parties to submit nominees' academic and civic qualifications
- Empower the Commission to disqualify non-compliant nominees

Conclusion

The National List has evolved from a mechanism intended to introduce expertise into Parliament into a tool for political survival. While the system was introduced alongside proportional representation to correct distortions under the FPTP system, legal loopholes and weak enforcement have undermined its purpose.

Although Article 99A allows party nominations, judicial precedent demonstrates that democratic interpretation should prevail. The misuse of the National List reflects enforcement failures rather than constitutional inevitability.

Reforms that close existing loopholes, prohibit defeated candidates from appointment, and strengthen oversight mechanisms are essential to restoring public confidence. The National List must return to its original purpose as a mechanism for incorporating qualified individuals into Parliament.

Only through such reforms can proportional representation function effectively and produce a legislature that genuinely reflects the needs of the Sri Lankan society.

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The Regulation of Election Campaign Expenditure Act : A Policy Tool for Combatting Corruption

By Isuri W. Siriwardhana

Introduction

Political corruption remains one of the most pervasive challenges in the contemporary world, significantly affecting the processes of policy formulation and implementation within states. It has undermined democracy, weakened good governance, distorted the public will, and eroded trust in political institutions. Sri Lanka is no exception; since the inception of representative democracy, the country has experienced persistent and severe political corruption. In particular, the introduction of the proportional representation system and the preferential voting system in 1977 brought significant changes to the electoral process and political institutions. However, these reforms also contributed to the expansion of political corruption by intensifying competition among candidates and increasing the cost of electoral politics.

In response to political corruption, both states and international bodies have introduced advanced policy tools to address this challenge. By taking a progressive step, Sri Lanka introduced the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No.3 of 2023, which aims to play a leading role to fight against political corruption. Against this backdrop, this article explores following research questions:

- Why was legislation necessary to regulate election campaign financing in Sri Lanka?

- How effective has the implementation of the Regulation of Election Campaign Expenditure Act No. 3 of 2023 been in curbing election campaign finance-related corruption in the 2024 elections?

- What gaps exist in the Regulation of Election Campaign Expenditure Act No. 3 of 2023?

- What reforms could improve its' enforcement and impact?

In this context, the study pursues several key objectives. First, it seeks to identify the principal international and regional legal instruments and mechanisms designed to combat political and electoral corruption.

About the Author   Isuri W. Siriwardhana is a Senior Researcher and lecturer at the Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies (BCIS) Colombo, Sri Lanka. She has read for her Bachelor's and Master's Degrees in Political Science at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

Second, it aims to examine the key provisions of the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No. 3 of 2023, and to evaluate its effectiveness as a policy tool for addressing election campaign–related corruption in Sri Lanka. Third, the study analyzes the implementation of the Act during the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections and identifies its major shortcomings. On this basis, the study proposes policy recommendations to address the identified shortcomings.

This study employs a qualitative legal-policy research design, combining doctrinal legal analysis with normative and policy evaluation. It draws on key international and regional anti-corruption instruments, including UNCAC, UNGASS, Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Delhi Declaration on Political Finance Regulation, to conceptualize corruption in election campaign finance. The research further analyzes the **Regulation of Election Campaign Expenditure Act No. 3 of 2023** in Sri Lanka, evaluating its implementation during the 2024 Presidential and Parliamentary elections. Using official reports from the Election Commission of Sri Lanka, the study examines expenditure limits, institutional capacity, accountability mechanisms, and resource constraints, identifying gaps in enforcement and providing evidence-based policy recommendations to strengthen oversight of election campaign financing.

Combating Political Corruption: International and Regional Tools
Corruption in the wider understanding refers the "abuse of entrusted power for private gain" (Jackson and Moreno, 2016). Political corruption specifically refers to corruption that occurs within two dimensions of the political process: during the process in which politicians are elected and the process in which policy is formulated (OECD 2015; Amundsen 1999). Following this. Transparency International divides the concept of political corruption into two as things that facilitate corruption in the electoral process and policy formulation process (Jackson and Moreno, 2016: 06). Further, electoral corruption has two main types *[1]*: corruption in the electoral process and electoral fraud (Jackson and Moreno, 2016: 06). Key causes of corruption in the electoral process are corrupt campaigning including violations of campaign laws, deceptive campaign tactics, and vote buying. Additionally, practices such as ballot stuffing, impersonation, and misreporting contribute to the occurrence of electoral fraud (Jackson and Moreno, 2016: 06).

Among the different forms of political corruption, corruption related to political finance emerges as a major global concern due to its pervasive impact on democratic processes. Political finance refers to both the (legal and illegal) financing of ongoing political party activities and electoral campaigns -in particular, campaigns by candidates and political parties, but also by third parties (Falguera, Jones, Ohman, 2014: 02).

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[1]This study focuses on corruption within the electoral process, which represents one dimension of political corruption. Corruption related to policy implementation is not addressed in this study.

According to Hamada and Agrawal (2020), inadequately regulated political finance, is one of the most widespread forms of corruption and it has exploited entry points for narrow private interests to exert undue influence over political processes and institutions (Hamada and Agrawal, 2020). Consequently, corruption in political finance erodes public trust, weakens the integrity of democratic institutions, and stifles fair competition (Hamada and Agrawal, 2025:07).

International and regional organizations have implemented various mechanisms to prevent political corruption. The United Nations (UN) introduced the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** in 2015 as a global blueprint for achieving peace and prosperity for both people and the planet. Comprising seventeen (17) goals and 169 targets, the SDGs aim to eradicate poverty and inequality, protect the environment, and ensure that all individuals enjoy health, justice, and prosperity. **Goal 16** emphasizes the importance of providing access to justice for all, eliminating corruption, and establishing accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels *[2]*. In particular, **Target 16.5** calls for a substantial reduction in corruption and bribery in all forms *[3]*, underscoring the crucial role of anti-corruption efforts in promoting peace and prosperity worldwide.

The **United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC)**, adopted in 2004, is a key international instrument that promotes transparency in political finance. **Article 7.3** of the UNCAC stipulates that "each state party shall...consider taking appropriate legislative and administrative measures...to enhance transparency in the funding of candidatures for elected public office and, where applicable, the funding of political parties."*[4]* Similarly, the **Political Declaration of the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Corruption (UNGASS)** underscores the responsibility of member states to ensure transparent elections *[5]*. It calls for measures that safeguard electoral integrity, strengthen accountability, and increase transparency in political campaigns and party financing, thereby preventing corruption and fostering public trust in political institutions.

In the South Asian context, the Delhi Declaration on Political Finance Regulation 2015, was introduced as a significant regional initiative aimed at addressing corruption in political finance. Paragraph B1 of the declaration states that "in order to strike a balance between the need for a healthy competition and the level playing field, the [political finance] regulations should be realistic, protecting every legitimate need of political parties, candidates, and the citizens. These should consider the realistic costs of campaign materials, services, and advertising" (International IDEA, 2016:48).

[2] https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda
[3] https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda
[4] https://www.unodc.org/documents/brussels/UN_Convention_Against_Corruption.pdf
[5]https://ungass2021.unodc.org/ungass2021/en/politicaldeclaration.html#:~:text=At%20its%20special%20session%20on,to%20effectively%20addressing%20challenges%20and

However, in Sri Lanka, the absence of a comprehensive political finance regulatory framework created opportunities for political parties and candidates to engage in unchecked corruption, which has severely undermined policymaking, policy implementation, transparency, and accountability in governance. In particular, the lack of campaign finance regulations for nearly four and a half decades has destabilized the quality and standards of democracy, weakened the political party system, and eroded electoral integrity. As a progressive step, Sri Lanka enacted the **Regulation of Election Campaign Expenditure Act, No. 3 of 2023**, to regulate election campaign financing. Although the Act does not address all dimensions of political finance, it represents a significant step forward by prioritizing the regulation of campaign expenditures by political parties and candidates.

Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No.3 of 2023 as a Key Policy Framework for Combatting Election Campaign Corruption in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka enacted the **Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No. 3 of 2023** to address a longstanding gap in the institutionalization of the political party system by regulating election campaign expenditures. The Act empowers the **Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL)**, along with other oversight bodies, to monitor and enforce compliance with campaign finance regulations. According to Hamada and Agrawal (2025), the regulation of election campaigns involves key components such as policies on donations, expenditure, reporting, disclosure, and oversight mechanisms. In line with these principles, the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act consists of ten (10) sections covering the primary components of political finance, including policies on donations, campaign expenditure, reporting requirements, disclosure obligations, and oversight procedures. **Section 2** of the Act applies to all elections conducted under the **Local Authorities Elections Ordinance (Chapter 262), Provincial Councils Elections Act, No. 2 of 1988, Parliamentary Elections Act, No. 1 of 1981, and Presidential Elections Act, No. 15 of 1981.** Recognized political parties, independent groups, and individual candidates are required to comply with the rules, regulations, and expenditure limits established by the Act.

Placing spending limits on political parties and candidates is a crucial measure for mitigating corruption risks in political finance (Hamada and Agrawal, 2025: 23). Such limits help control unnecessary expenditures and ensure a level playing field for all candidates and political parties. The Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No. 3 of 2023, introduced provisions to enforce these limits. Under Section 3 of the Act, the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) is responsible for determining the maximum expenses that political parties, independent groups, and candidates may incur within five days of receiving nominations. Section 4 stipulates that these entities must not exceed the prescribed spending limits during the election campaign. In cases of illegal expenditure, relevant authorities may impose penalties under the law, unless a candidate can demonstrate that any excess spending occurred without their sanction or connivance.

In the context of election campaigns, regulating donations is essential to mitigate corruption. Such influence can be understood as 'donor-based corruption', where wealth is provided as a funding mechanism in exchange for political services (Power et al., 2024). Unregulated campaign donations can facilitate clientelism and patronage politics, undermining policymaking and implementation. To prevent this, robust donation regulations are necessary.

The Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No. 3 of 2023, introduces specific limitations on campaign finance. **Section 5** prohibits political parties and candidates from accepting funds from public enterprises, government agencies, or businesses established under the **Companies Act, No. 7 of 2007**. Donations from foreign governments, international organizations, or companies with at least 50% foreign ownership—either direct or indirect —are also prohibited. Additionally, contributions from undisclosed individuals are not permitted.

The Act establishes comprehensive reporting, disclosure, and oversight mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability. **Section 6** requires candidates to document all expenditures, including contributions received, within 21 days of the election. It mandates the disclosure of how parties and candidates raise and spend campaign funds. **Section 7** grants returning officers authority to publish notices related to receipt of returns and declarations for local authority, provincial council, and parliamentary elections, while the ECSL publishes presidential election returns. Both the ECSL and District Secretariats make expenditure reports publicly accessible and accept complaints within ten days. Section 8 outlines offenses for illegal practices, with a maximum penalty of Rs. 100,000, suspension of civic rights for three years, and possible removal from office through an election petition. These provisions create a legal framework to address violations effectively.

The Act balances the need to reduce corruption with the preservation of democratic principles. It allows political parties and candidates to communicate with voters while adhering to financial limits, thereby strengthening transparency and accountability in Sri Lanka's election campaigns.

Implementation of the Election Expenditure Act, No.3 of 2023: Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka-2024

The Act was applied during the Presidential and Parliamentary elections of 2024. In accordance with the provisions and guidelines of the Act, the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) imposed expenditure limits on presidential candidates. On Friday, 16 August 2024, under **Section 3** of the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, the ECSL issued **Gazette Notification No. 2397/66**, which specifies that candidates are permitted to spend Rs. 109 per elector on election propaganda activities.

Table: Allocated Finance by the Election Commission for the Presidential Election 2024

Serial No.	Description	Limit of Expenditure (Rs.)
01.	Amount allocated to the contesting candidate at the Presidential Election -2024	1,120,979,151.60
02.	The amount that could be incurred by the recognized political party or the elector who nominated the candidate	747,319,434.40
	Total	1868,298,586.00

Source: Gazette No 2397/66, Friday, August 16, 2024

The gazette outlined two categories of election expenditure. Under the new regulations, each candidate was permitted to spend up to a maximum of Rs. 1.8 billion, of which only 60 percent (approximately Rs. 1.12 billion) could be spent directly by the candidate. The remaining 40 percent (around Rs. 747.3 million) was allocated for expenditure by the candidate's nominating political party (Borham, 2014).

A total of thirty-eight (38) candidates contested for the 2024 presidential election. Of these, thirty-five (35) candidates and twenty-eight (28) political parties submitted their election campaign expenditure reports in compliance with Section 3 of the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No. 3 of 2023. However, three (03) candidates and ten (10) political parties failed to submit their election campaign expenditure reports within the stipulated timeframe, prompting the Sri Lanka Police to initiate legal action against them (Performance Report of the Election Commission, 2024: 23).

The Parliamentary Election in Sri Lanka was held on 14 November 2024 in accordance with the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No. 3 of 2023. In compliance with this Act, candidates were required to conduct their election campaigns within expenditure limits determined by the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL). Accordingly, the ECSL issued Gazette No. 2406/03 on 15 October 2024, specifying the maximum permissible campaign expenditure for candidates contesting the 2024 Parliamentary Election.

Table 02: Allocated Finance by the Election Commission for the Parliamentary Election 2024

	District	Number of Registered Electors	Maximum Limit of Expenditure per elector (Rs.) (i)	Total authorized amount (Rs.) (ii)	Amount to be incurred by a candidate (Rs.) (iii)	Amount to be incurred by a political party/independent group (Rs.) (iv)	Amount to be incurred by a National List candidate (Rs.) (v)
1.	Colombo	1,765,351	114	201,250.014	5,750,000	79,493,756	34,698
2.	Gampaha	1,881,129	110	206,924,190	5,643,387	81,735.055	35,677
3.	Kalutara	1,024,244	108	110,618,352	4,740,787	43,694,249	19,072
4.	Kandy	1,191,399	108	128,671,092	5,146,844	50,825,081	22,185
5.	Matale	429,991	107	46,009,037	3,450,678	18,173,570	7,933
6.	Nuwara Eliya	605,292	110	66585,120	3,631,752	26,299,937	11,480
7.	Galle	903,163	109	98,444,767	4,922,238	38,885,683	16,973
8.	Matara	686,175	109	74793,075	4,487,585	29,543,265	12,895
9.	Hambantota	520,940	111	57,824,340	3,469,460	22,840.614	9,970
10.	Jaffna	593,187	100	59,313,700	3,954,580	23,430,887	10,227

11.	Vanni	306,081	82	25,098,642	1,673,243	9,913,964	4,327
12.	Batticaloa	449,686	110	49,465,460	3,709.910	19,538,857	8,529
13.	Digamadulla	555,432	113	62,863,816	3,765,829	24,791,707	10,821
14.	Trincomalee	315,925	115	36,331,375	3,114,118	14,350,893	6,264
15.	Kurunegala	1,417,226	107	151,643,182	5,054,773	59,899,057	26,145
16.	Puttalam	663,673	109	72,340,357	3,945,838	28,574,441	12,472
17.	Anuradhapura	714,862	110	81,604,820	4,080,241	32,233,904	14,070
18.	Polonnaruwa	315,302	109	38,291,918	2,871,894	15,125,308	6,602
19.	Badulla	705,772	109	76,929,148	3,846,457	30,387,013	13,264
20.	Monaragala	399,166	110	43,908,260	2,927,217	17,343,763	7,570
21.	Rathnapura	923,736	110	101,610,960	4,354,755	40,136,329	17,519
22.	Kegalle	709,622	108	76,639,176	3,831,959	30,272,475	13,214

Source: Gazette No.2406/03, Tuesday, October 2024

According to the gazette, the highest campaign expenditure limit was allocated to the Colombo District at Rs. 115 per voter, while the lowest allocation was assigned to the Vanni District at Rs. 82 per voter. In the 2024 Parliamentary Election, a total of 8,361 candidates contested under recognized political parties. Of these, 7,505 candidates submitted their election campaign expenditure reports. Among the 690 independent candidates, 556 submitted their election expenditure reports. Similarly, out of 527 National List candidates, 453 complied with the requirement to submit election expenditure reports (Performance Report of the Election Commission, 2024: 32).

The introduction of the Act marks a significant improvement in the institutionalization of the party system in Sri Lanka after more than four and a half decades. By bringing all political parties under a single spending cap, the Act has helped to create a more level playing field for both political parties and candidates. Furthermore, imposing expenditure limits has curtailed vote-buying practices and reduced opportunities for corruption associated with excessive campaign financing.

From 1977 until the introduction of the Act in 2023, there was no formal mechanism for public scrutiny of election campaign financing, resulting in limited transparency and accountability. With the implementation of the Act, citizens are now entitled to access information on election campaign expenditure, making it an important policy instrument for reducing corruption. This enhanced transparency in election campaign finance and strengthened public trust by increasing confidence in the integrity of the electoral process in Sri Lanka.

To facilitate legal enforcement, the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) submitted the names of candidates who failed to submit their expenditure reports for the parliamentary election. Acting in its oversight capacity, the Sri Lanka Police initiated legal proceedings against those candidates.

Addressing the Gaps in the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No.3 of 2023

Sri Lanka has introduced a significant anti-corruption policy in election campaign financing through the Regulation of Election Campaign Expenditure Act, No. 3 of 2023. However, achieving the Act's intended outcomes requires addressing the existing shortcomings in its implementation and enforcement.

A key policy challenge concerns ensuring effective compliance by candidates and political parties with the expenditure limits and reporting obligations stipulated in the Act. In practice, many political parties particularly established mainstream parties initiate campaign activities several months prior to the submission of nominations, operating outside the officially recognized campaign period. As a result, the current regulatory framework inadequately captures campaign-related expenditures incurred during this pre-nomination phase, thereby undermining the effectiveness of expenditure controls (Dullewe, 2024). Addressing this issue requires policy reforms aimed at redefining and extending the regulated campaign period, as limiting campaign activities to a narrowly defined timeframe remains difficult given Sri Lanka's long-standing political practices.

The Act does not include provisions to regulate or limit the spending of third-party individuals or groups who are not official candidates or political parties but organize campaigns or conduct promotional activities on behalf of their preferred candidates or parties. The absence of spending limits creates the potential for undue third-party influence in the electoral process. Political parties and candidates often heavily rely on such third parties, which can compromise the decision-making process, as elected officials may feel pressured to prioritize the interests of these external actors over the broader public interest. Addressing this regulatory gap is essential to ensure that campaign financing remains transparent, equitable, and accountable.

One of the main components of political finance is public finding, which refers to funds donated by the state for political parties to do the election campaign. In accordance with Section 127(3)(a)(b) of the Parliamentary Election Act No.1 of 1981, Sri Lanka offers public funding to political parties [6]. However, both Acts [7] lacks section to regulate funds provided by the state. In particular, there is no regulatory mechanism to determine how these public funds have been utilized by the parties that received it. "In some countries, reporting is limited to how public funding was spent. In this case, reporting requirements that apply to all recipients of public funds also extend to political parties" (OECD, 2016:66).

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[6] See the section 127 of the Parliamentary Election Act No. 1 of 1981 for more information.
[7] The Parliamentary Election Act No.1 of 1981 and Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No.3 of 2023.

Moreover, monitoring election campaign expenditures remains a challenging task. The ECSL has faced difficulties in effectively tracking and analyzing the campaign expenditure of political parties and candidates. While the law provides a framework, its successful enforcement heavily depends on ECSL's ability to thoroughly evaluate financial reports a complex process, particularly as this is the first time ECSL is undertaking such a responsibility (ANFREL, 2024:11).

The absence of auditing the submitted election expenditure reports is another critical gap. The verification and audit of financial records are effective measures to spot irregularities of financial flow in politics and should be conducted by auditors and specialized experts" (OECD,2016:67). However, in Sri Lanka, there is no formal auditing method. As a result, there is no reliable method to verify the authenticity of the expenditure reports submitted by political candidates.

Conclusion

Political corruption, especially in election campaign financing, poses a significant threat to democratic governance by distorting political competition, undermining accountability, and eroding public trust in political institutions. Sri Lanka's experience reflects similar challenges with the nearly four and half decades-long absence of a comprehensive legal framework to regulate political finance, mainly in the financing election campaigns. Against this backdrop, the enactment of the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No. 3 of 2023, represents a significant milestone in Sri Lanka's efforts to combat election campaign corruption and strengthen electoral integrity.

There are international and regional legal instruments to address the election campaign corruption - such as the UNCAC, the SDGs, and the Delhi Declaration on Political Finance Regulation. These institutional frameworks have been providing crucial guidelines in regulating finance in election campaign. Sri Lanka's enactment of the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act No. 3 of 2023 aligns with these global and regional standards by introducing expenditure limits, reporting and oversight mechanisms aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability in election campaign financing. The implementation of the Act in the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections is a significant attempt made by Sri Lanka to address corruptions in the campaign finance. According to information provided in the study, introducing of the election campaign expenditure cap has made an attempt to provide a level playing field for candidates and parties. Further, positive responses from political parties and candidates in submitting expenditure reports show that majority of political candidates have adhered to the regulations enacted by the Act. Imposed legal actions against candidates who did not submit election campaign expenditure reports is another crucial step Sri Lanka has taken to ensure the accountability. Further, the Act has guaranteed the public scrutiny of the election campaign expenditure reports which allowed citizens' participation in the process.

The study also identifies significant shortcomings of the Act. In particular, there is no mechanism to regulate pre-nomination campaign expenditures, the absence of regulation and controls on third-party donation and spending, the absence of provisions to regulate public funding allocated to political parties are important to address. Further, weak monitoring capacity within the ECSL, and the absence of a formal auditing mechanism to verify expenditure reports are key shortcomings identified in this study. It is essential to address these gaps in the Act to ensure the corruption free election campaign process.

The Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No. 3 of 2023 constitutes a progressive policy intervention, yet it should be viewed as an initial stage rather than a comprehensive solution to address election campaign corruption in Sri Lanka. Addressing the shortcomings of the Act by bringing amendments could enhance institutional capacity for monitoring, auditing and extending regulations to cover all relevant actors and phases of the election campaign process. These amendments are crucial to ensure its long-term effectiveness. By doing so, Sri Lanka can guarantee less corrupted election campaign process and ensure electoral practices with international best standards and fostering a more transparent, accountable, and democratic political system.

Policy Recommendations
1. **Extend Regulatory oversight into the Pre-nomination Period:**
Amend the Election Campaign Expenditure Regulation Act. 3 of 2023 to formally include the pre-nomination period within its regulatory scope and require political parties and potential candidates to report all campaign-related income and expenditure incurred before official nominations open.

2. **Define and Regulate Third-party Participation in Election Financing:**
Amend the Act to provide clear definition to identify third parties and impose a limit for third party donations for election campaign. It will help to identify the third parties who can provide financial assistance for election campaigns and ensure transparency in the third-party donations.

3. **Mandate Disclosure of Direct Public Funding (DPF) Usage:**
Sri Lanka provides DPF for political parties under the Parliamentary Election Act No 01 of 1989. However, both Acts (Parliamentary Election Act No 01 of 1989 and Election Campaign Expenditure Regulation Act No 03 of 2023) do not provide regulations to disclose on DPF. Furthermore, neither Act provides a mechanism to monitor how recipients of DPF utilize these resources. Therefore, the legislation should include a requirement for DPF recipients to submit detailed spending reports to the Election Commission.

4. **Establish a Centralized Campaign Finance Tracking System:**
The Act should introduce a comprehensive tracking system to identify the sources of political donations and election campaign expenditure. It will ensure transparency in campaign finance donations and expenditure.

5. **Strengthening Institutional Capacity of Oversight Bodies:**

Provide human and technical resources to the Election Commission of Sri Lanka and other oversight institutions is essential to enhance the smooth and effective implementation of the Act.

6. **Introduce a Mandatory Auditing Mechanism for Campaign Expenditure Reports:**

Establishing an independent auditing framework that authorizes the Election Commission is crucial to guarantee the accuracy of the election campaign expenditure reports submitted by the candidates.

7. **Enhance enforcement and sanctions for non-compliance:**

Amending the Act and introducing timely, enforceable sanctions is essential to ensure that political parties and candidates comply with its provisions.

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Engaging Children and Young People in the Dialogue of Education Reform

By Dileepa Manawadu

Introduction

Education reform is once again in the spotlight in Sri Lanka. Announcements of curriculum changes have sparked heated debates among teachers, parents, and policymakers. Unions protest when they are left out. Industry leaders demand that schools and universities produce employable workers/graduates. Academics propose theories and models. Yet one group is consistently absent from the table: children and young people themselves.

This is not simply a blind spot—it is a structural failure. Children are the primary stakeholders of education, yet they remain sidelined when decisions are made about what they learn, how they are assessed, and what kind of environment school should be. Reform without them is not only incomplete; it risks being irrelevant, unsustainable, and unjust. If Sri Lanka is serious about building a democratic, equitable, and future-ready education system, it must treat children and young people as partners, not passive recipients.

The Roots of Reform: Democracy and Equality

Sri Lanka's legacy of education reform stretches back to **the Kannangara Report** of the 1940s. *[1]* The report, which laid the foundation for free education, identified three interdependent aims of education: mental development, culture (including character), and efficiency. These aims were grounded in the democratic principle of equality.

Kannangara argued that while individuals differ in abilities, they are fundamentally equal as moral beings. In a democracy, education must enable every boy and girl to achieve their fullest physical, mental, and moral development, while contributing to the common good. This vision was not merely about producing workers for the economy; it was about cultivating citizens for a sovereign democracy emerging from four centuries of colonial rule.

Later Visions: NEC, Delors, and Global Goals

Fast forward to recent decades, and similar ideals resurface. **The National Education Commission's (NEC) National Education Policy Framework 2020–2030** envision the creation of "a holistic, progressive and life-long learner for a cohesive, peaceful, patriotic Sri Lankan society attuned to face local and global challenges." *[2]*.

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It has 08 National Education Goals that are comprehensive and well-defined. However, it is doubtful that the children themselves know anything about it, and how or why they were thus developed.

On the global stage, **the Delors Report (1996)**, *Learning: The Treasure Within*, emphasized that education must rest on four pillars: *learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. [3]* It stressed lifelong learning, education for sustainable development, and democratic participation. Importantly, it argued that education is humanity's best hope for peace, freedom, and justice. Nearly 30 years later, schools still struggle to find meaningul reforms to translate these 4 pillars of learning to tangible, practical experiences.

Youth Demands for Participation
Despite these lofty principles, one crucial element has consistently been missing: the participation of young people themselves.

The Presidential Commission on Youth (1990), established after violent youth uprisings, concluded that exclusion breeds alienation. *[4]* It called for youth participation in governance, recommending school management committees with youth and parent representation, so schools could be "returned to the community."

More recently, the **Youth Declaration on Transforming Education (2022)**—developed through consultations with nearly half a million youth from over 170 countries, including Sri Lanka delivered a powerful message:

"For too long, we have been excluded or only tokenistically included in the policy and decision-making processes affecting our lives, livelihoods, and futures. In transforming education, we demand that our voices be heard, our lived experiences valued, our demands addressed, and our efforts, leadership, and agency acknowledged." *[5]*

Evidence from UNICEF's (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) **Asia U-Report poll (2022)** reinforces this argument: 80 percent of young respondents indicated that their aspirations are not adequately reflected in policies designed for them. *[6]*

What Children Must Be Asked
A genuine commitment to participation requires that children be consulted not merely for representational purposes, but as meaningful contributors to the design and implementation of reform. This means asking them directly:
- **What do you want to learn?**
- **How do you want to be assessed?**
- **How do you want your schools to be designed?**
- **How do you want your schools to be governed?**
- **In what ways do you want to participate?**

Children should be included in these discussions on an equal footing with other stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, policymakers, industry, and civil society. Excluding them undermines legitimacy.

Why Participation Matters
The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by Sri Lanka, provides both a legal and normative foundation for children's participation. *[7]* Article 12 affirms that children capable of forming their own views have the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them, and that their views must be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

Claims that children cannot be meaningfully engaged are no longer tenable. A substantial body of international guidance, well-established participatory models, and specialized agencies exist to support governments in creating safe and effective mechanisms for dialogue with children. Comparative experiences—from student councils in Finland, to youth parliaments in Scotland, to participatory budgeting initiatives in Latin America—demonstrate that meaningful child participation is both feasible and practicable.

From Tokenism to Transformation
In the Sri Lankan context, children are seldom involved in education reform processes, and such involvement is frequently confined to symbolic consultation. Against this backdrop, **Human-Centered Design (HCD)** offers a practical and scalable approach to participation. Its core principles—empathy, co-creation, and iteration—enable policymakers to design structured yet flexible spaces that foster dialogue, accommodate dissent, and support collaborative problem-solving with children and other stakeholders.

In the context of education reform, this entails:
• Systematically engaging with lived experiences of children, perspectives, and aspirations.

• Co-designing curricular content and school environments in partnership with children.

• Implementing iterative reform processes that incorporate feedback loops, ensuring that children can observe and understand how their contributions inform outcomes.

A Call to Action
Sri Lanka possesses the historical foundation, international commitments, and domestic legal obligations necessary to embed child participation at the core of education reform. The pathway forward is evident: a comprehensive national consultation with children and young people, structured around the principles of the UNCRC, aligned with the Youth Declaration, and operationalized through Human-Centered Design.

Education reform must extend beyond preparing children for democratic citizenship; it must embody democratic principles in its processes, demonstrating participatory practice as a model in itself.

Conclusion

The future of education belongs to children and young people. Designing reforms without their active involvement risk repeating past mistakes, reinforcing inequality, and foregoing the opportunity to create an education system that is genuinely transformative.

Engaging children and youth in meaningful dialogue is not a discretionary measure; it constitutes a democratic imperative, a rights-based obligation, and a practical strategy for effective reform. Moreover, the process of participation is inherently educational, cultivating skills in dialogue, collaboration, and democratic citizenship through lived experience.

As the Youth Declaration emphasizes, children and young people are not waiting for permission, they are already leading change. Sri Lanka's education reform must align with this reality, embracing the voices of its youngest stakeholders as central to shaping the future of learning.

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Strengthening Sri Lanka's Epidemic Preparedness Through an Immuno-Epidemiological and Artificial Intelligence Lens: Policy Gaps, Evidence, and Strategic Recommendations

Dr. Visula Abeysuriya

Executive Summary

Sri Lanka's repeated encounters with infectious disease outbreaks, including dengue, COVID-19, and other emerging and re-emerging infections, highlight the importance of sustained epidemic preparedness. These experiences also demonstrate the strengths of Sri Lanka's public health system, including a strong preventive health tradition, effective epidemiological surveillance, a skilled workforce, and the ability to coordinate national responses during health emergencies. Together, these foundations place Sri Lanka in a relatively strong position within the region. At the same time, recent outbreaks have revealed specific limitations in anticipating outbreak dynamics, precisely targeting interventions, and adapting strategies as population risk profiles change. The key challenge is not a lack of surveillance, but the limited integration of population-level immunological evidence into public health decision-making, alongside the underuse of advanced analytical tools that can support complex, data-driven policy choices.

This paper examines Sri Lanka's epidemic preparedness through an immuno-epidemiological and artificial intelligence lens, focusing on how insights into population immunity, exposure patterns, and immune heterogeneity can strengthen existing epidemiological approaches. Immuno-epidemiology helps explain why disease transmission and severity vary across populations and over time, while artificial intelligence (AI), when used responsibly, can integrate epidemiological, immunological, climatic, and demographic data to support early warning and strategic planning. AI is framed as a decision-support tool that complements public health expertise rather than replacing it. The analysis identifies several policy and institutional gaps, including the absence of routine population-level immune surveillance, fragmented health data systems, limited analytical capacity, and the lack of clear ethical and governance frameworks for AI use in health. Addressing these gaps is essential not only for managing future epidemics, but also for strengthening overall health system resilience amid climate change, urbanization, and evolving disease threats. The paper concludes with practical policy recommendations for policymakers and health system leaders. These include establishing sentinel immuno-epidemiological surveillance, improving cross-sectoral data integration, strengthening public health analytics capacity, and developing ethical and regulatory frameworks for AI in health. By translating scientific evidence into policy-relevant insights, this paper aims to support informed public dialogue and contribute to a more resilient, evidence-driven approach to epidemic preparedness in Sri Lanka.

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Why an Immuno-Epidemiological and Artificial Intelligence Lens Matters for Epidemic Preparedness

Effective epidemic preparedness depends not only on detecting cases and monitoring disease spread, but also on understanding how population-level immunity shapes transmission dynamics, disease severity, and the effectiveness of interventions[1]. Traditional epidemiological surveillance, which focuses on case counts, incidence, and mortality, has been central to Sri Lanka's public health success. However, these indicators often provide a retrospective view of outbreaks, limiting the ability to anticipate changes in risk before case numbers rise.

An immuno-epidemiological lens complements conventional surveillance by incorporating information on who is susceptible, who is protected, and how immunity is distributed across populations. Factors such as prior infection, vaccination history, waning immunity, immune heterogeneity across age groups and regions, and pathogen variation all influence outbreak trajectories. In diseases such as dengue, where immune responses to different serotypes influence disease severity, and in respiratory infections like COVID-19, where hybrid immunity and waning protection shape transmission dynamics, understanding population-level immunity is essential for effective preparedness and response planning [1-4].

Artificial intelligence (AI) offers an additional layer of analytical capability by enabling the integration and interpretation of complex, multidimensional data. When applied responsibly, AI can support the analysis of epidemiological trends alongside immunological, environmental, climatic, and demographic information, helping public health authorities move from reactive response toward anticipatory and adaptive preparedness. Importantly, the value of AI in this context lies not in replacing public health decision-makers but in enhancing situational awareness, scenario planning, and early warning systems[2].

For Sri Lanka, adopting an immuno-epidemiological and AI-informed perspective does not imply a departure from existing public health strengths. Rather, it represents an opportunity to build on a strong preventive health foundation by integrating additional layers of evidence that can improve targeting, timing, and effectiveness of interventions. Such an approach is particularly relevant in the context of increasing climate variability, rapid urbanization, demographic mobility, and the continued risk of emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases. By framing epidemic preparedness through this combined lens, policymakers can better anticipate shifts in population risk, allocate resources more strategically, and design interventions that are responsive to both biological and social realities. This perspective provides a coherent foundation for identifying current gaps in Sri Lanka's preparedness framework and for developing policy recommendations that are forward-looking, evidence-informed, and ethically grounded[3].

Sri Lanka's Recent Epidemic Experience: Key Lessons from Dengue, COVID-19, and Emerging Infections

Sri Lanka's recent epidemic history provides important insights into both the strengths and limitations of existing preparedness frameworks. The country has long been recognized for its robust preventive health system, strong surveillance infrastructure, and effective public health workforce. These strengths have enabled Sri Lanka to detect outbreaks early, mobilize response mechanisms rapidly, and maintain relatively low mortality compared to many comparable settings. However, experiences with dengue, COVID-19, and other emerging infections also reveal areas where preparedness can be further strengthened through more anticipatory and integrative approaches[4].

Dengue remains as one of Sri Lanka's most persistent public health challenges, with cyclical outbreaks influenced by climatic variability, rapid urbanization, vector ecology, and population immunity. While routine surveillance has been effective in tracking case numbers and geographic spread, limited incorporation of immunological information—such as population-level exposure histories, serotype circulation, and immune susceptibility—has constrained the ability to anticipate shifts in outbreak severity and risk. The immuno-epidemiological characteristics of dengue, including immune-mediated disease enhancement and serotype-specific immunity, highlight the importance of understanding immunity patterns alongside traditional epidemiological indicators[5].

The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the value of Sri Lanka's public health capacity, particularly in early containment efforts, coordinated response measures, and vaccine rollout. At the same time, it exposed challenges related to rapidly evolving immunity landscapes shaped by infection, vaccination, waning protection, and emerging variants. Decisions regarding booster timing, risk stratification, and protection of vulnerable populations were often made under conditions of uncertainty due to limited real-time data on population immunity. This experience illustrates how immuno-epidemiological insights could have strengthened strategic planning and adaptive response[5].

Beyond these high-profile epidemics, Sri Lanka continues to face risks from other emerging and re-emerging infections, including zoonotic and climate-sensitive diseases. Increasing population mobility, environmental change, and regional disease dynamics further complicate preparedness. In this context, reliance on reactive indicators alone may be insufficient to address future threats that evolve rapidly and exhibit complex transmission patterns.

Together, these experiences suggest that while Sri Lanka's epidemic response capacity is strong, preparedness can be enhanced by moving beyond case-based surveillance toward a more anticipatory model that integrates immunological evidence and advanced analytics. Lessons from recent epidemics point to the need for preparedness strategies that can adapt to changing immunity profiles, detect emerging risks earlier, and support targeted, proportionate interventions. These lessons form the basis for identifying current policy gaps and opportunities for strengthening Sri Lanka's epidemic preparedness framework through an immuno-epidemiological and artificial intelligence lens.

Policy and Institutional Gaps in Sri Lanka's Epidemic Preparedness Framework

Sri Lanka's epidemic preparedness framework is underpinned by a strong preventive health system, well-established surveillance mechanisms, and experienced public health institutions. However, recent epidemic experiences reveal that preparedness challenges arise less from structural weakness and more from gaps in integration, anticipatory capacity, and analytical support[3]. Addressing these gaps is essential to ensure that existing strengths are fully leveraged in an increasingly complex disease landscape.

Limited Integration of Population-Level Immunological Evidence

A central gap in Sri Lanka's preparedness framework is the absence of routine, systematic population-level immune surveillance. While epidemiological data on cases, hospitalizations, and mortality are routinely collected, information on population immunity such as prior exposure, vaccination-induced protection, immune waning, and heterogeneity across age groups and regions, is not consistently integrated into preparedness planning [1,2]. This limits the ability to anticipate shifts in susceptibility, forecast outbreak severity, and tailor interventions proactively. As a result, public health responses may remain reactive, relying on rising case numbers rather than early indicators of changing risk [1].

Fragmented and Poorly Integrated Health Data Systems

Although Sri Lanka generates substantial health-related data across multiple institutions, these data systems often operate in institutional and sectoral silos. Epidemiological, laboratory, immunological, environmental, and demographic data are rarely integrated in real time, constraining comprehensive risk assessment and scenario planning [7]. This fragmentation limits the effective use of advanced analytical approaches, including artificial intelligence, which depend on high-quality, interoperable data. Strengthening data integration is therefore a critical prerequisite for more anticipatory preparedness [6,7].

Limited Analytical Capacity for Advanced Decision Support

Another key gap lies in the limited institutional capacity for advanced public health analytics. While technical expertise exists within universities and research institutions, this capacity is not always embedded within routine public health decision-making processes. The application of immuno-epidemiological analysis and AI-supported tools requires interdisciplinary skills spanning public health, immunology, data science, and policy analysis. Without sustained investment in capacity building and institutional support, the potential benefits of these approaches remain underutilized [7].

Absence of Clear Governance and Ethical Frameworks for AI in Health

The use of artificial intelligence in public health raises important ethical, legal, and governance considerations, including data privacy, transparency, accountability, and equity. At present, Sri Lanka lacks clear, context-specific governance frameworks to guide the responsible use of AI in health preparedness and response. This creates uncertainty among policymakers and practitioners and may hinder adoption, even where AI could provide clear decision-support benefits. Establishing governance mechanisms is therefore essential to ensure that AI applications align with public values and public health priorities[6].

Insufficient Cross-Sectoral Coordination

Epidemic preparedness increasingly depends on factors beyond the health sector alone, including climate, urban planning, mobility, and environmental change. While Sri Lanka has experience in intersectoral collaboration, existing coordination mechanisms are not always optimized for integrating immunological and analytical insights into broader preparedness planning. Strengthening cross-sectoral coordination is necessary to support holistic, forward-looking responses to emerging and re-emerging disease threats[7].

Taken together, these gaps do not diminish Sri Lanka's public health achievements, but rather highlight opportunities for strategic enhancement. Addressing them would enable the country to move toward a more anticipatory, data-informed, and resilient preparedness framework—one that builds on existing strengths while adapting to evolving epidemiological and immunological realities.

Strategic Policy Recommendations for Strengthening Epidemic Preparedness

Building on Sri Lanka's strong public health foundations and the gaps identified above, this section outlines a set of strategic, feasible, and context-appropriate policy recommendations to strengthen epidemic preparedness through an immuno-epidemiological and artificial intelligence lens. These recommendations are designed to complement existing systems, enhance anticipatory capacity, and support evidence-informed decision-making while remaining sensitive to ethical, institutional, and resource considerations.

Establish Sentinel Immuno-Epidemiological Surveillance Mechanisms

Sri Lanka should consider the gradual introduction of sentinel immuno-epidemiological surveillance, integrated within existing surveillance structures. Periodic, targeted assessment of population-level immunity—through serological surveys and other immunological indicators—can provide early insights into susceptibility patterns, immune waning, and geographic or demographic disparities in protection. Such mechanisms would be particularly valuable for diseases with complex immune dynamics, including dengue and emerging respiratory infections, and would enable preparedness planning to move beyond reactive, case-based indicators [1,4].

Integrate Immunological, Epidemiological, and Contextual Data Systems

Strengthening preparedness requires improved data integration across sectors and institutions. Policy efforts should focus on enhancing interoperability between epidemiological surveillance, laboratory data, immunological studies, and relevant non-health data sources such as climate and mobility indicators. Establishing standardized data-sharing protocols and interoperable platforms would enable more comprehensive risk assessment and provide a foundation for advanced analytical tools, including AI-supported decision systems[7,10].

Responsible Deployment of Artificial Intelligence as a Decision-Support Tool

Artificial intelligence should be introduced in epidemic preparedness as a decision-support mechanism, not as a substitute for public health expertise [6].

Pilot applications could focus on early warning systems, scenario modelling, and resource allocation planning that integrate immuno-epidemiological data with existing surveillance inputs [11,12]. Emphasis should be placed on transparency, interpretability, and alignment with public health priorities to ensure that AI tools enhance trust and usability among decision-makers [12].

Strengthening Institutional and Human Capacity in Public Health Analytics
Sustained investment in capacity building is essential for the effective use of immuno-epidemiological and AI-informed approaches. This includes training public health professionals in basic immunological interpretation, data analytics, and interdisciplinary collaboration, as well as creating institutional pathways that link academic expertise with routine policy processes. Strengthening analytical capacity within public health institutions will ensure that advanced tools are meaningfully embedded in decision-making rather than remaining isolated within research settings [6,7].

Developing Ethical and Governance Frameworks for AI Use in Health
To support responsible innovation, Sri Lanka should develop clear ethical, legal, and governance frameworks for the use of AI in public health preparedness. These frameworks should address data protection, accountability, equity, and transparency, while ensuring alignment with national health priorities and public values. Establishing governance structures early will reduce uncertainty, build confidence among stakeholders, and facilitate appropriate adoption of AI-supported approaches [8].

Enhancing Cross-Sectoral Coordination for Preparedness Planning
Given the influence of climate change, urbanization, and environmental factors on disease emergence, epidemic preparedness must extend beyond the health sector. Strengthening cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms can support the integration of immuno-epidemiological insights into broader preparedness strategies involving environmental, urban, and social policy domains. Such coordination will be critical for addressing future epidemic risks that are shaped by complex social and ecological drivers [9,14,15]. Together, these recommendations provide a roadmap for strengthening Sri Lanka's epidemic preparedness in a manner that is forward-looking, evidence-informed, and ethically grounded. By integrating immuno-epidemiological insights and responsibly leveraging artificial intelligence, Sri Lanka can enhance its capacity to anticipate risks, target interventions more effectively, and build a more resilient public health system for the future.

Conclusion
Sri Lanka's public health system has demonstrated strong capacity in responding to infectious disease outbreaks, supported by a well-established preventive health tradition and robust epidemiological surveillance. As future epidemic risks become increasingly complex, there is an opportunity to further strengthen preparedness by building on these existing strengths. This paper highlights the value of applying an immuno-epidemiological and artificial intelligence lens to epidemic preparedness.

Integrating population-level immunological evidence with conventional surveillance can improve anticipatory capacity, while responsibly deployed AI can enhance decision support by synthesizing diverse data sources. Importantly, these approaches are intended to complement, not replace, public health expertise and institutional judgment. Addressing key gaps related to immune surveillance, data integration, analytical capacity, and governance can support a more anticipatory and resilient preparedness framework. By translating scientific insights into actionable policy recommendations, this paper contributes to informed public dialogue and supports Sri Lanka's transition toward a more evidence-driven and adaptive approach to epidemic preparedness [13-15].

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Sri Lanka's National AI Strategy: Leadership, Governance, and Public Policy Implications

Shayani Jayasinghe/ Senior Researcher of the BALPP in Conversation with Mr. Asela Waidyalankara, Expert in AI and Cyber Security and Visiting Lecturer - BALPP

This interview seeks to understand the leadership, governance, and policy dimensions of the National AI strategy, including its formulation, implementation, and societal impact.

1. What role has political and administrative leadership played in shaping and implementing Sri Lanka's National AI Strategy?

Political leadership has played a crucial agenda-setting role in legitimizing AI as a national development priority rather than a purely technical or sectoral concern. This signaling function is important in small states such as Sri Lanka, where bureaucratic risk-aversion and fiscal constraints can otherwise delay adoption of frontier technologies.

Administrative leadership, particularly during the strategy's formulation phase, has been instrumental in convening expertise across government, academia, and industry. However, from a governance perspective, leadership has so far been strongest at the vision-setting stage and comparatively weaker at the institution-building stage.

From a policy standpoint, the principal leadership challenge now lies in sustaining political attention beyond strategy launch cycles and translating high-level intent into durable governance mechanisms. AI governance requires continuity, legitimacy, and institutional memory, qualities that cannot rely solely on individual champions but must be embedded within the public administration.

2. In your opinion, do public sector institutions have the capacity and authority to implement the AI strategy effectively in Sri Lanka?

At present, public-sector capacity is fragmented and asymmetrical. While pockets of technical competence and policy awareness exist, they are unevenly distributed across institutions. This is a common challenge observed in emerging AI governance contexts globally and is not unique to Sri Lanka.

The more fundamental issue, however, is not technical capacity alone but institutional authority. Many public bodies lack clear mandates to deploy or govern AI systems, leading to cautious experimentation rather than systemic adoption. Without clearly designated ownership, both for innovation and for risk, AI initiatives risk remaining at the pilot level.

From an AI governance perspective, effective implementation requires:
- a clearly empowered central coordinating entity,
- delegated authority for sector-specific experimentation,
- and defined accountability for downstream impacts.

Capacity building without corresponding authority will not be sufficient to operationalize the strategy at scale.

3. How does the strategy safeguard citizens' rights and build public trust in AI-enabled services?

The strategy correctly recognizes that public trust is a prerequisite for successful AI adoption, particularly in the public sector. Its emphasis on ethical AI, transparency, and human-centric design aligns well with international norms.

However, trust in AI systems is not generated through principles alone; it emerges through institutional behaviour. From a governance standpoint, citizens are more likely to trust AI-enabled services when:
- Decision-making processes are explainable,
- Redress mechanisms are accessible,
- Accountability is visibly enforced when harm occurs.

The strategy's real contribution lies in opening space for rights-based governance, but its effectiveness will ultimately depend on how these safeguards are operationalized through procurement rules, system audits, data governance practices, and oversight mechanisms. Trust is cumulative and earned over time through consistent institutional conduct, not one-off policy declarations.

4. What specific policy instruments within the strategy support leadership capacity and AI skill development in Sri Lanka's public sector?

The strategy adopts a commendably broad view of skills development, extending beyond technical training to include leadership awareness and institutional learning. This reflects a mature understanding that AI in government is as much a management and governance challenge as a technological one.

From a global policy lens, the most significant contribution is the strategy's recognition of AI-literate leadership as a policy objective. Public sector leaders do not need to become data scientists, but they must be capable of asking the right questions about risk, bias, procurement, accountability, and societal impact.

Embedding AI literacy into senior leadership programmes, policy training institutions, and public sector career pathways will be critical. Without this, technical capacity risks becoming siloed, leaving strategic decision-making disconnected from technological realities.

5. What mechanisms are in place to evaluate outcomes and ensure accountability for the National AI Strategy?

The strategy's emphasis on monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement reflects good policy design practice. Importantly, it acknowledges that AI strategies must be adaptive rather than static.

That said, accountability in AI governance requires more than performance indicators. It requires clarity on who is accountable for what when systems fail, discriminate, or produce unintended consequences. From a governance perspective, outcome evaluation must therefore extend beyond efficiency gains to include social, ethical, and rights-based impacts.

Independent review mechanisms, transparent reporting, and the ability to pause or recalibrate deployments are essential complements to internal monitoring. Accountability is not punitive; it is corrective and confidence-building, particularly in high-impact public sector use cases.

6. What structures or mechanisms within the strategy facilitate effective responses to emerging social and technological challenges?

One of the strategy's strongest features is its recognition that AI governance must be anticipatory rather than reactive. The emphasis on agility, pilot-based learning, and multi-stakeholder engagement reflects contemporary best practice.

From an AI governance standpoint, the strategy implicitly supports adaptive governance: policies that evolve alongside technological capability and societal expectations. This is particularly important in addressing emergent issues such as algorithmic bias, labour displacement, and automated decision-making in public services.

Effective response mechanisms will depend on sustained dialogue between policymakers, technologists, civil society, and affected communities. Governance structures must therefore be designed not just to regulate technology, but to listen, learn, and adjust as real-world impacts become visible.

Sri Lanka's National AI Policy can be accessed through this link:
https://mot.gov.lk/assets/files/National_AI_strategy_for_Sri_Lanka08a88c78d541a0746aeb8c71ed312231.pdf

Humanitarian Responses and the Politics of Responsibility: How Political Agendas Shape Aid and Accountability

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

Abstract

This article examines the complex relationship between humanitarian responses and the political agendas that shape them, with particular attention to the politics of responsibility. It argues that aid delivery and accountability mechanisms are not neutral or purely technical processes, but are deeply embedded in geopolitical calculations, donor interests, and the strategic objectives of both state and non-state actors. Drawing on a qualitative secondary analysis of five case studies—the Israel–Palestine conflict, the Syrian civil war, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Venezuelan economic crisis—the article illustrates how political interests can lead to the manipulation, diversion, and weaponization of humanitarian assistance. It further analyzes how practices of delegation, evasion, and instrumentalization of responsibility by states and other powerful actors serve to advance their own interests, often at the expense of the very populations humanitarian aid is intended to support. Across these cases, the study identifies a recurring pattern in which the principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence are undermined, resulting in fragmented, inequitable, and frequently ineffective humanitarian responses. The findings underscore the need for systemic reforms to improve transparency, strengthen accountability mechanisms, and empower local actors to foster a more principled and effective humanitarian system.

Keywords: Humanitarian Responses, Accountability, Geopolitical, Impartiality, Inequitable

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1 Introduction

The Politics of Responsibility in Humanitarian Action

The politics of responsibility in humanitarian action refers to the contested processes through which states, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local actors define, allocate, delegate, and at times evade responsibility for the protection and well-being of populations affected by conflict and disaster. Rather than constituting a deviation from humanitarian ideals, this political dimension is widely recognized as intrinsic to humanitarianism itself, as assistance is never delivered in a political vacuum (Schubert & Smith, 2007). Humanitarian action is instead embedded within existing power relations, geopolitical rivalries, and national interests. The delegation of responsibility in humanitarian governance is therefore not a neutral administrative practice but a political act that shapes patterns of access, determines the forms assistance takes, and structures accountability when interventions fail (Ayoob, 2001). As scholarship on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict demonstrates, humanitarian intervention in such contexts becomes inseparable from broader political struggles, where decisions to intervene or to refrain from intervention are conditioned by donor states' strategic calculations and the sovereign prerogatives of affected states (MacFarlane & Minear, 1997).

This politicization manifests in multiple ways, including the selective allocation of humanitarian funding in accordance with donor priorities and the imposition of sanctions that generate severe humanitarian consequences. As a result, the core humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence are frequently compromised or reinterpreted through political considerations, contributing to uneven and contested humanitarian outcomes (Subotic, 2009).

The politics of responsibility also entails contestation over crisis narratives. The causes of humanitarian emergencies and the appropriate forms of response are framed by different actors in ways that advance their respective interests. For instance, governments confronting insurgencies may frame internal conflicts as part of a broader "war on terrorism," thereby legitimizing the use of military force that results in civilian harm and restricting humanitarian access on the grounds of national security (Moses et al., 2011; Medina, 2023). The Russian government's response to the conflict in Chechnya illustrates this dynamic, as it drew on international sensitivities surrounding terrorism to justify extensive military operations while limiting the delivery of humanitarian assistance. (Bindig, 2000).

Similarly, donor states may portray humanitarian assistance as an expression of altruistic solidarity while simultaneously instrumentalizing aid to advance geopolitical objectives, such as bolstering allies or constraining rivals. In such cases, humanitarian action can function as a humanitarian alibi, whereby the provision of aid serves to legitimize political inaction or obscure the humanitarian consequences of other policies.

A significant development in international law and humanitarian governance has been the emergence of the principle of sovereignty as responsibility, which holds that states bear the primary obligation to protect and provide for their populations (Crisis Group, 2023). In practice, however, the application of this principle has been highly politicized, with powerful states shielding allies from international scrutiny while invoking the norm to justify intervention against adversaries. This selective application of international standards exacerbates the politics of responsibility, contributes to the emergence of dual standards, and ultimately undermines the credibility and legitimacy of the international humanitarian system.

2.The Politicization of Humanitarianism: A Global Overview

At the global level, humanitarian aid is commonly portrayed as a neutral and impartial activity; however, it is closely embedded in the political environment in which it operates. The provision of humanitarian assistance is not merely a technical exercise in logistics and resource distribution, but a deep political process that both shapes and is shaped by power relations, foreign policy objectives, and domestic considerations of donor states and international organizations (Curtis, 2001). The core humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence seek to establish a humanitarian space in which assistance is provided according to need and shielded from political, military, or economic interests. In practice, this space is frequently constrained and renegotiated within complex political environments.

The allocation and distribution of humanitarian aid are frequently uneven, with marked disparities in funding levels, political attention, and operational access across crises of comparable scale and severity. These disparities are often driven less by levels of human suffering than by the geopolitical priorities of powerful states. Politicization thus takes multiple forms, ranging from the direct use of aid as an instrument of foreign policy to more indirect mechanisms through which political agendas shape humanitarian priorities, access negotiations, and accountability frameworks (Plan International, n.d.). The increasing integration of humanitarian action into broader political and security strategies —often described as the "new humanitarianism"—has further blurred the distinction between relief and politics, raising fundamental questions about the integrity of humanitarian principles and the nature of responsibility to protect vulnerable populations.

Within this context, the concept of the humanitarian alibi offers a critical lens for understanding the relationship between humanitarian action and political interests (Yamashita, 2015). The humanitarian alibi refers to situations in which the provision of aid substitutes for more robust political engagement aimed at addressing the root causes of crises. This substitution allows states and international actors to signal concern for human suffering while avoiding the more demanding, costly, and politically contentious responsibilities associated with conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and the protection of civilian populations. As scholars such as William Shawcross have argued, the concept captures the instrumentalization of humanitarianism by governments that seek to limit their engagement in strategically or economically marginal contexts (Sriram, 2001).

This dynamic was encapsulated by former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata's assertion that "there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems." Despite this recognition, the humanitarian alibi persists because it aligns with the interests of powerful states, enabling them to adopt a moral posture of concern without incurring the political costs of decisive action (Heins, Koddenbrock, & Unrau, 2016). A frequently cited example is the Bosnian War, where the international community's emphasis on humanitarian assistance delivered through UNPROFOR effectively substituted for meaningful protection of civilians against ethnic cleansing. While aid operations undoubtedly saved lives, they also functioned as a mechanism for managing the political consequences of Western non-intervention, thereby constituting a paradigmatic case of humanitarian action serving as a humanitarian alibi (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.).

At the global level, humanitarian aid is commonly presented as a neutral and impartial activity; however, it is closely embedded in the political environments in which it is conducted. The provision of aid is not merely a technical exercise in logistics and resource distribution, but a profound political process that both influences and is influenced by power relations, foreign policy objectives, and domestic considerations of donor states and international organizations (Curtis, 2001). The core humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence are intended to establish a humanitarian space in which relief is delivered on the basis of need, insulated from political, military, and economic considerations. In practice, however, this humanitarian space is persistently contested.

The distribution of humanitarian assistance is frequently uneven, with marked disparities in funding levels and political attention afforded to crises of comparable scale and severity. Such disparities are often shaped less by the extent of human suffering than by the geopolitical interests of powerful states. This politicization manifests in multiple forms, ranging from the direct use of humanitarian aid as an instrument of foreign policy to more indirect mechanisms through which political agendas shape priorities, access negotiations, and accountability structures within humanitarian responses (Plan International, n.d.). The growing incorporation of humanitarian action into broader political and security agendas—often referred to as the "new humanitarianism"—has further blurred the distinction between relief and politics, raising fundamental questions about the integrity of humanitarian principles and the nature of responsibility toward vulnerable populations.

Within this context, the concept of the humanitarian alibi provides a critical lens through which to interpret the complex relationship between humanitarian action and political interests (Yamashita, 2015). The humanitarian alibi refers to situations in which the provision of humanitarian assistance substitutes for more substantive political engagement aimed at addressing the underlying causes of crises. This substitution enables governments and international actors to signal responsiveness to human suffering while avoiding the more demanding and politically contentious responsibilities associated with conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and the protection of civilian populations.

As scholars such as William Shawcross have argued, the term captures the instrumentalization of humanitarianism by states seeking to limit their engagement in strategically or economically marginal contexts (Sriram, 2001).

This dynamic is reflected in the observation by former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata that "there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems." Nevertheless, the humanitarian alibi persists because it serves the interests of powerful states, allowing them to adopt a moral posture of concern without incurring the political costs of decisive action (Heins, Koddenbrock, & Unrau, 2016). The Bosnian War offers a salient illustration of this phenomenon: the international community's emphasis on humanitarian assistance delivered through UNPROFOR [United Nations Protection Force] effectively substituted for the protection of civilians against ethnic cleansing. While these aid operations were lifesaving, they also functioned as a means of managing the political consequences of Western non-intervention, thereby constituting a paradigmatic example of humanitarian action operating as a humanitarian alibi (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.).

2.1. The "New Humanitarianism" and the Blurring of Agendas
The concept of new humanitarianism represents a significant shift in the practice of international aid, whereby humanitarian action is increasingly integrated into broader political and military strategies aimed at conflict resolution, state-building, and the promotion of liberal democratic norms. This paradigm, which gained prominence in the post-Cold War period, marks a departure from the classical Dunantist model, which emphasized the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, providing aid solely on the basis of need. In contrast, new humanitarianism is characterized by a coordinated agenda that links humanitarian assistance with diplomatic, political, and military initiatives to address the root causes of conflict and create conditions for long-term peace and development (Hoffman, 2014; Barnett, 2011). Proponents argue that in complex emergencies, where conflict and underdevelopment are deeply intertwined, humanitarian aid alone is insufficient; rather, aid must be leveraged to reward peace, legitimize governance, and support human rights. In practice, this approach has led to a closer alignment between humanitarian objectives and political goals, including the conditional provision of aid, the forced repatriation of refugees, and the use of assistance to influence state behavior or gain support in counter-insurgency operations.

Within this context, international law and the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) have emerged as central concerns in debates about humanitarian response and the politics of responsibility. Endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 2005, R2P seeks to codify the international community's obligation to protect populations from mass atrocities, including genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. Under this doctrine, states hold the primary responsibility to prevent such crimes within their own borders; when they fail or refuse to act, the international community is expected to respond collectively, decisively, and swiftly. R2P is structured around three pillars: the responsibility to prevent, the responsibility to react, and the responsibility to rebuild.

Despite its normative appeal, the operationalization of R2P has been hampered by political constraints and controversies. States have often invoked sovereignty to resist intervention, and the conditions under which military action may be justified remain hotly contested (Salleh & Duguri, 2019). The Syrian conflict exemplifies these limitations, as the international community has largely failed to halt atrocities committed by the Assad regime, highlighting the gap between R2P rhetoric and political willingness to act. Similarly, the NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011, authorized under R2P, generated significant debate, with some states contending that the operation exceeded the doctrine's mandate and was used as a pretext for regime change. Consequently, while R2P represents an important evolution in international law, its credibility and effectiveness as a mechanism for civilian protection remain contingent on the international community's ability to transcend political differences and power dynamics that have historically constrained its implementation (Perišić, 2017; Akbarzadeh & Saba, 2019).

3.Case Study Preview:A Global Preview of Political Influence

This article examines the complex relationship between political agendas and humanitarian responses through five detailed case studies. These cases illuminate different dimensions of the politics of responsibility, demonstrating how geopolitical interests, domestic political considerations, and the strategic calculations of diverse actors' shape both the provision of humanitarian assistance and the mechanisms of accountability.

The Israel–Palestine case illustrates how accountability can be diffused and responsibility shifted through reliance on international organizations such as UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), while political actors on multiple sides exploit civilian vulnerability for strategic advantage (Oxfam, 2025). Humanitarian organizations have highlighted the increasing politicization and militarization of aid delivery in Gaza, where access to essential supplies has been tightly controlled and humanitarian assistance has at times been treated as a conditional instrument rather than a neutral relief mechanism.

The Syrian civil war provides a stark example of the weaponization of humanitarian assistance within a complex geopolitical environment. The Syrian government, international donors, and armed groups have all used humanitarian aid as a strategic resource to advance political and military objectives (Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity, 2021). This case demonstrates how humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence can be severely undermined in prolonged conflicts.

The Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh highlights the international community's limited capacity to hold states accountable for mass atrocities when geopolitical considerations and regional interests shield those responsible (Zhu, 2021). Despite widespread recognition of the humanitarian emergency, political constraints have restricted meaningful enforcement of international accountability mechanisms.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) provides insight into the challenges of delivering humanitarian assistance in contexts marked by state fragmentation and protracted conflict. In such environments, donor competition, institutional weakness, and the politicization of aid often undermine the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions and limit long-term impact (Reardon et al., 2012). Structural weaknesses within the humanitarian system have frequently resulted in limited localization, insufficient consultation with affected communities, and persistent inefficiencies in aid delivery.

Finally, the economic crisis in Venezuela illustrates how a government's refusal to acknowledge a humanitarian emergency, combined with the politicization of aid by external actors, can deepen human suffering. Venezuelan citizens have been caught in a broader political struggle involving sovereignty, sanctions, and competing interpretations of what constitutes a humanitarian crisis (Patel, 2019). Taken together, these diverse case studies provide a comprehensive basis for analyzing how political agendas shape humanitarian responses, weaken accountability mechanisms, and ultimately affect the lives of millions of people experiencing crises worldwide.

4.Methodology

This study employs qualitative secondary data analysis to examine the complex relationship between political interests, humanitarian action, and the politics of responsibility. This methodological approach was selected for its capacity to provide a detailed and multidimensional interpretation of complex social and political phenomena through the synthesis and critical evaluation of existing data drawn from a wide range of secondary sources including web reports, scholarly articles and opinion pieces.

5.Analysis

5.1. The Israel-Palestine Conflict– Delegating Responsibility, Evading Accountability

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict provides a powerful and multifaceted case study of the politics of responsibility, particularly in the context of prolonged military occupation. The case of UNRWA represents a distinctive and highly politicized example of delegated responsibility within the humanitarian sphere.Established in 1949 to provide assistance to Palestinian refugees displaced by the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, UNRWA's mandate has been repeatedly renewed by the United Nations General Assembly pending a just and lasting resolution of the refugee question. This arrangement has produced a situation in which the international community, acting through the United Nations, has assumed a long-term and quasi-governmental role in supporting the welfare of millions of Palestinian refugees across the Middle East (Husseini & J., 2012). The agency provides essential services—including education, healthcare, and social support—to more than 5.7 million registered refugees in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

At the same time, this system of shared and delegated responsibility has become the subject of significant political debate. Critics argue that the institutionalization of humanitarian assistance has contributed to the protracted nature of the refugee question, while simultaneously allowing key political actors to defer their responsibility to pursue a durable political settlement (Citaristi, 2022).

The operations of UNRWA have also been subject to significant politicization, with the agency facing repeated criticism and allegations—particularly from the Israeli government and its supporters. These criticisms have frequently claimed that UNRWA is politically biased, hostile toward Israel, or that its educational materials encourage extremism. UNRWA has consistently rejected such allegations, maintaining that it adheres strictly to the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence. The agency's Commissioner-General has repeatedly emphasized that UNRWA functions solely as a humanitarian organization and does not engage in political activity.

Nevertheless, sustained political pressure on the agency has had tangible consequences for the daily lives of the refugees it serves, particularly through funding reductions and operational constraints. The case of UNRWA thus illustrates a central tension within the politics of responsibility: humanitarian functions delegated to international organizations may simultaneously sustain vulnerable populations and become entangled in unresolved political conflicts. As a result, humanitarian institutions risk becoming instruments of political contestation even while fulfilling essential life-saving roles (United Nations, 2024).

5.2 Political Obstruction and the Weaponization of Vulnerability

Humanitarian assistance in the Israel–Palestine conflict has been widely described as politicized and subject to interference, with aid sometimes used as a strategic tool by conflict parties. The long-standing blockade of the Gaza Strip imposed by Israel has severely restricted the movement of people and goods, including humanitarian supplies, contributing to a major humanitarian crisis. This blockade—enforced by land, sea, and air—has been criticized internationally as a form of collective punishment and a potential violation of international humanitarian law. As a result, Gaza's civilian population has become heavily dependent on external humanitarian assistance (Al Jazeera, 2025; United Nations, 2023). Aid delivery is further complicated by internal Palestinian political divisions, particularly between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza, which affect coordination with international agencies and the distribution of assistance. In addition to access restrictions, the weaponization of humanitarian aid includes attacks on humanitarian infrastructure and personnel and the use of administrative and bureaucratic barriers that obstruct humanitarian operations (Al Jazeera, 2025; OCHA, 2024).

A key dimension of this dynamic is the weaponization of civilian vulnerability, where humanitarian suffering becomes a political instrument. Parties to the conflict may exploit humanitarian crises to gain international leverage, turning aid provision into a tool for political pressure, reward, or punishment. This situation places humanitarian organizations in a difficult position, as they must deliver life-saving assistance while avoiding complicity in systems that may perpetuate suffering. Overall, the Israel–Palestine conflict highlights the urgent need for a stronger international response to the weaponization of humanitarian aid, including improved protection of humanitarian space and more effective accountability mechanisms for violations.

5.3 The Response of the International Community

The international community's response to the humanitarian crisis arising from the Israel–Palestine conflict is often characterized by selective concern and limited concrete action, reflecting deep political divisions and competing strategic interests. Although the humanitarian situation in Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories is widely criticized, there has been relatively little progress toward ensuring accountability for violations or addressing the underlying causes of the conflict. Responses by states are frequently shaped by political alignments and geopolitical priorities, with some governments offering strong support for Israel while others adopt a more critical stance. This political polarization has weakened collective action, particularly within the United Nations system, limiting effective international responses to the humanitarian crisis (Assouline & Trager, 2021).

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which holds primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, has faced significant constraints in addressing the Israel–Palestine conflict. Much of this institutional paralysis is linked to the veto power of the Council's five permanent members, particularly the repeated use of vetoes by the United States to block resolutions perceived as critical of Israel. As a result, proposed measures—including calls for ceasefires, demands to ease the Gaza blockade, and proposals for investigations into alleged violations of international humanitarian law—have often failed to gain approval. Critics argue that this pattern has contributed to a perception of limited accountability and has hindered the Security Council's ability to protect civilians and uphold international law. The use of the veto in this context has been widely debated, with some scholars suggesting that it enables powerful states to shield allies from international scrutiny and constrains timely responses to humanitarian crises (Ahmed & Ali, 2025; The Cradle, 2024).

6.The Syrian Civil War – Geopolitics and the Weaponization of Aid

The Syrian Civil War, ongoing since 2011, exemplifies how political interests can distort humanitarian action, turning aid into a tool of warfare and political leverage, and undermining the principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality (Attar, 2014; Seven, 2025).

The Assad regime has systematically weaponized aid to consolidate control, restrict opposition access, and manipulate resources, with convoys subject to arbitrary inspections and border crossings reduced despite UN Security Council Resolution 2165 (United Nations, 2014; Hall, Shaar, & Agha, 2021; Betare & Ghosh-Siminoff, 2022). Simultaneously, international donors have politicized assistance, linking aid to strategic objectives rather than need, while sanctions intended to pressure the Syrian government have constrained humanitarian operations, limiting aid delivery to vulnerable populations (Tateyama, 2018). Geopolitical rivalries further complicate the response: Russia and China have repeatedly used their UN Security Council vetoes to protect the Syrian government, blocking cross-border aid mechanisms and frustrating efforts to enforce the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), while the US and other actors push for access to opposition-held areas, leaving aid caught in a broader strategic contest (Borgen Project, 2023; Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2011). The Syrian case thus highlights a fundamental tension between state sovereignty and humanitarian imperatives, revealing the challenges the international community faces in delivering impartial assistance and upholding civilian protection in a politically polarized and militarized environment.

7.The Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh

The Rohingya crisis, marked by the systematic persecution and displacement of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar, exposes the failure of both the Myanmar government and the international community to protect vulnerable populations. The Myanmar government has consistently refused to acknowledge its role, blocked humanitarian aid, and rendered the Rohingya stateless through the 1982 Citizenship Law, while military operations in Rakhine State since 2017 have involved mass killings and sexual violence, widely recognized as potential genocide (Baena, 2025; Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2014). International mechanisms such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) have been undermined by geopolitical considerations, with China and Russia shielding Myanmar in the UN Security Council, preventing decisive action and enabling the government to act with impunity (Thörnqvist, 2022). China's strategic interests, including the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and access to the Bay of Bengal, have motivated its political and diplomatic support for Myanmar while limiting engagement with international organizations, thereby weakening coordinated humanitarian efforts (United States Institute of Peace, 2018; Joy, 2018). Bangladesh, hosting nearly a million Rohingya refugees in overcrowded camps, bears the heaviest burden, yet restrictive policies, including movement limitations and relocation to flood-prone Bhasan Char, have complicated aid delivery and refugee welfare (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2025; Khan & Kontinen, 2022). Overall, the crisis highlights systemic flaws in the international humanitarian system, as geopolitical interests, weak enforcement of R2P, and insufficient aid have left the Rohingya in prolonged displacement and vulnerability, emphasizing the urgent need for targeted sanctions, increased humanitarian support, and international coordination to protect this population (Dhaka Tribune, 2018; Tattevin, 2022).

8. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The humanitarian crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) illustrates how fragmented state authority, political agendas, and institutional weaknesses hinder effective aid delivery. With millions internally displaced, the DRC government has repeatedly evaded its primary responsibility to protect and provide for its citizens, a failure rooted in a long history of corruption, weak institutions, and a political culture prioritizing regime survival over public welfare (Trefon et al., 2002; Carayannis, 2013; Kindornay et al., 2009). In the Eastern provinces, where state authority is minimal, the government often deflects blame onto historical legacies, foreign interference, and regional actors such as Rwanda, thereby rationalizing its own governance failures while reinforcing narratives of victimhood and regional stability (Lischer, 2013; Borgen Project, 2023). Rampant corruption and predatory security forces exacerbate insecurity, undermining both governance and humanitarian access. The involvement of international actors adds further complexity: while NGOs provide resources, their agendas may overlook local priorities, and local organizations, though attuned to community needs, often lack funding, resulting in gaps in aid and coordination challenges (Zachariae, 2025). MONUSCO (United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo), the UN peacekeeping mission, faces criticism for its inability to fully protect civilians under its dual mandate, and its potential withdrawal threatens to create a security vacuum that could further compromise humanitarian response and stability (CIVICUS, 2022). The EU's inconsistent funding and reliance on NGOs further highlights the disconnect between political considerations and the root causes of conflict, demonstrating how the interplay of domestic failures, regional dynamics, and international interventions shapes the complex humanitarian landscape in the DRC.

9. The Venezuelan Economic Crisis

The humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, driven by economic collapse, hyperinflation, and political instability, illustrates the entanglement of aid and political agendas. Millions have fled the country amid shortages of food, medicine, and essential services, while the regime of Nicholas Maduro has denied the severity of the crisis, restricted international assistance, and used state-controlled programs like CLAP [Local Committees for Supply and Production (Spanish: Comités Locales de Abastecimiento y Producción)] to consolidate political loyalty (Da Silva, 2023; Lancet, n.d.; Dupraz-Dobias, 2023). At the same time, international actors, particularly the United States, have provided humanitarian aid through opposition-aligned channels and imposed sanctions to pressurize the regime, raising concerns about the politicization of assistance and its impact on neutrality and impartiality (Bahar, Piccone, & Trinkunas, 2018; Jones-Quiadoo, 2019; InterAction, 2019). Regional and global powers further complicate the response: the EU has taken a cautious, humanitarian-focused approach, the Lima Group applied political and economic pressure on Maduro, and Russia and China support the government, insisting on sovereign solutions (Minkova, 2020; Ayuso, 2023).

While sanctions and politically directed aid are intended to hold the government accountable, they also risk exacerbating humanitarian suffering, highlighting the difficulty of providing effective, impartial assistance in a deeply polarized and politically charged context (Review, 2023; Rossi, 2023; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2025). The Venezuelan case underscores how both domestic and international political agendas shape humanitarian action, influencing who receives aid, how it is delivered, and how responsibility is assigned.

10. **The Emerging Multipolar World and Its Impact on Humanitarian Crises**

The rise of regional powers such as China, India, Russia, Germany, and Brazil has contributed to a more multipolar global order, reshaping international cooperation and the political environment that influences both humanitarian responses and accountability in conflicts such as those in Israel–Palestine, Syria, the Rohingya crisis, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Venezuela, with implications for conflict prevention and humanitarian outcomes (Dean, 2023; Kapoor, 2024; Minkova, 2020). In a multipolar system, these emerging and established powers bring significant economic resources and strategic capacities that can support reconstruction, refugee assistance, and peacebuilding —for example, China's growing role in financing infrastructure and engagement across Asia, potentially including initiatives like the Belt and Road to support recovery efforts and influence regional stability (Dean, 2023); India's non-aligned stance and economic ascent, which may facilitate mediation in protracted conflicts where major powers are at odds (Kapoor, 2024); Germany's economic role within the EU in supporting refugee aid systems in neighboring countries to crises such as that of the Rohingya (Mueller, 2024); and Brazil's regional leadership in Latin America in coordinating relief efforts for displaced Venezuelans (Silva, 2025). Nevertheless, multipolar dynamics can also impede humanitarian action when conflicting priorities prevail: interventions in Myanmar and Syria have been blocked in part by Russia and China's veto power in the UN Security Council, prioritizing sovereignty over civilian protection and undermining norms such as the Responsibility to Protect (Ivanov, 2023; Rahman, 2025). Similarly, Chinese and Russian support for the Venezuelan government and opposition to U.S. sanctions have contributed to the politicization of aid and prolonged economic hardship (Fernandez, 2024), and competition over mineral resources in the DRC involving multiple global actors has exacerbated instability (Nkosi, 2025).

These dynamics demonstrate that while multipolarity offers the potential for more diverse contributions to humanitarian relief and peace, it also introduces obstacles when geopolitical interests override cooperative responses. Addressing these challenges will require cooperative approaches such as transparent, needs-based support programs that resist the weaponization of aid (Hassan, 2024), joint economic initiatives in conflict-affected areas to tackle systemic issues (Diallo, 2023), and reforms to global governance mechanisms—including reconsideration of the UN Security Council veto—to enable more consistent humanitarian responses (Schmidt, 2025).

11. Conclusion

The analysis of the five case studies—Israel-Palestine, the Syrian Civil War, the Rohingya crisis, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the Venezuelan economic crisis—reveals a recurring pattern in which political agendas shape humanitarian responses and undermine the principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence. Humanitarian aid is rarely neutral; it is deeply embedded in geopolitical maneuvering, state sovereignty concerns, and the strategic interests of both state and non-state actors. The politics of responsibility highlights how powerful actors transfer, evade, or weaponize responsibility, often at the expense of vulnerable populations. This politicization results in fragmented, inequitable, and frequently inefficient humanitarian responses, raising critical questions about the integrity and credibility of the international humanitarian system. Across these cases, common dynamics emerge: selective enforcement of international norms such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), the use of aid as a geopolitical tool, marginalization of local actors, and the humanitarian alibi, whereby aid substitutes for addressing the root causes of crises. Together, these patterns underscore the systemic challenges faced by the humanitarian sector and the urgent need for structural reforms.

12. Policy Recommendations

To address these challenges, the following measures are essential:

1. **Increase Transparency**: Establish independent monitoring systems to track the distribution and delivery of aid, ensuring assistance reaches intended recipients without interference from political actors. Global monitoring institutions could oversee compliance with humanitarian principles and report violations.

2. **Enhance Accountability**: Develop binding mechanisms to hold states and non-state actors accountable for obstructing aid or committing human rights violations. This may include sanctions or legal measures via international tribunals, applied uniformly regardless of geopolitical alliances.

3. **Empower Local Actors:** Strengthen the capacity of local NGOs and communities by providing resources and decision-making authority. Collaborative approaches can align humanitarian responses with local needs, minimizing the gap between international agendas and ground realities, as seen in the DRC and Bangladesh.

4. **Reaffirm Core Humanitarian Principles:** Depoliticize aid by ensuring interventions are guided solely by need, not political or strategic interests. Reforming global governance structures, particularly the UN Security Council veto, could reduce political paralysis and enable more decisive action in crises such as Syria and Myanmar.

By prioritizing transparency, accountability, local empowerment, and adherence to humanitarian principles, the international community can move toward a more equitable and effective humanitarian system that centers on the needs of the most vulnerable.

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Beginning of Another Euro Centric World Order?

By Dr. Sasanka Perera

[1]

By Sasanka Perera[2]

US President Donald Trump's complete lack of intelligence, empathy and common sense towards his own people, the rest of the world, nature and the world's natural resources have become more apparent during the present term of his presidency.Ordinarily, a country's wish to self-destruct as the United States seemingly does at present, and as the violence against US citizens and immigrants alike at the hands of federal authorities have shown in Minnesota, can callously be considered the business of that country. But the world is not so simple or linear in the way it works.

If the ongoing action of President Trump was unfolding in Sri Lanka, anywhere else in South Asia or some other country in the purported 'Third World' instead of the United States, the so-called 'world order' led by the United States would be preaching to us the values of democracy and human rights. They might have, as has often happened in the past, sent us tutors to talk about the life of Martin Luther King and the virtues of that country's Civil Rights Movement. But what happens when the actions of a powerful country such as the United States engulfs in the ensuing flames the rest of us? President Trump and his freely expressed madness then necessarily become our business too. This is because combined with the military and economic power of the United States and its government's proven lack of empathy for its own people and the rest of the world quite literally becomes a matter of global survival. Besides, one of the 'positive' outcomes of what might be called 'the Trumpian madness', as a friend observed recently, is that the US President "has single-handedly exposed and destroyed the fiction of 'Western Civilization', including the pretenses of Europe."[3]

It is in this context that the speech delivered by the Canadian Prime Minister, Mr Mark Carney, at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 20 January 2026, deserves attention. It was an elegant speech, an unexpected slap in the face of President Trump and his policies by someone who is supposed to be an ally, the articulation of the need for global directional change, all in one. But pertinently, it was also a speech that did not clearly accept responsibility for the current world (dis)order which Mr Carney says needs to change. The reality of that need was overly reemphasized by President Trump himself during his meandering, arrogant and incohesive speech delivered a day later, spanning over one hour.

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[1]. An earlier version of this essay was published in the Island on 4 February 2026 as 'Beginning of Another 'White Supremacist' World Order?':
https://island.lk/beginning-of-another-white-supremacist-world-order/

[2]. The author formerly taught at University of Colombo and South Asian University,New Delhi

[3]. Personal communication sent via WhatsApp on 21 January 2026.

My interest is in what Mr. Carney did not specifically say in his speech: who would constitute the new world order, who would be its leaders and why should we believe it would be any different from the present one?

Speaking in French, Mr. Carney observed that he was talking about "a rupture in the world order, the end of a pleasant fiction and the beginning of a harsh reality, where geopolitics, where the large, main power, [geopolitics], is submitted to no limits, no constraints."[4] He was of course responding to the extremely unpleasant script for global domination put in place by the Trumpian United States, given President President Trump's declared interest in seeing Canada as part of the United States,[5] his avarice for Greenland, not to mention his already concluded grab for Venezuelan petroleum. But within this scenario, bound by 'no limits' and 'no constraints,' he was also talking of Russia and China, albeit in a coded language. We know well that whatever excuses the new world order makes for the United States, would also have to be made for others, such as Russia and China, whose track record fit the bill. With the US's protection and the silence of the more powerful, errant countries like Israel fit that description too.

He reiterated, "that the other countries, especially intermediate powers like Canada, are not powerless. They have the capacity to build a new order that encompasses our values, such as respect for human rights, sustainable development, solidarity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the various states. The power of the less power starts with honesty."[6]

Who could disagree with Mr. Carney? His words are a refreshing whiff of fresh air in the context of the intellectual wasteland that is the Trumpian Oval Office and the current world order it prevails over. But where has been the 'honesty' of the less powerful in the specific situation where he equates Canada itself within this spectrum? He tells us that "the rules-based order is fading, that the strong can do what they can, and the weak must suffer what they must."[7]

[4]. See, Forum in Focus: 'Davos 2026: Special address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada'; World Economic Forum: https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[5]. See for instance, the altered image of a map President Trump shared on his social media handle, Truth Social on 20 January 2026 of the United States that included Canada, Greenland, Venezuela and Cuba as part of US territory: https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/9.7052751 (last accessed on 4 February 2026) and https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/donald-trump-shares-altered-image-of-map-showing-greenland-canada-venezuela-as-us-territories/article70528720.ece (last accessed on 4 February 2026). When a sitting US president does this, it goes beyond problematic humor and becomes a political statement one needs to reckon with.

[6]. See, Forum in Focus: 'Davos 2026: Special address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada'; World Economic Forum: https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[7]. See ibid, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

That is stating the obvious. Many of us who live in the real world have known this for decades by experience. Long before Canada's relative silence with regard to President Trump's and US' facilitation of the assault on Gaza and the massacre of its people, and the US President's economic grab in Venezuela and the kidnapping of that country's President and his wife[8], Canada's own chorus in the world order that Mr. Carney now critiques has been embellished by silence or – even worse – by chords written by the global dominance orchestra of the United States.

He says the fading of the rules-based order has occurred because of the "strong tendency for countries to go along, to get along, to accommodate, to avoid trouble, to hope that compliance will buy safety."[9] Canada fits this description better than most other nations I can think of. But would Canada, along with other nations among the silent majority within the 'intermediate powers' take the responsibility for the chaotic situation the world finds itself in today which that silence has directly led to creating? Who will pay for the pain many nations have endured in the prevailing world order? Will Canada lead the new world order with reflection and responsibility? That was a palpable zone of silence in Mr. Carney's seemingly idealist speech.

Mr. Carney further articulates that "for decades, countries like Canada prospered under what we called the rules-based international order. We joined its institutions, we praised its principles, we benefited from its predictability. And because of that, we could pursue values-based foreign policies under its protection."[10]

But this is not entirely true, is it? Countries like Canada prospered not merely because of the stability offered by the rules of the world order, but because they opted for silence when they should not have. The rupture and the chaos in the world order Mr. Carney now critiques and is insanely led by President Trump today is not merely the latter's lone creation. It has been co-authored for decades by countries such as Canada, France, the United Kingdom to mention just a few who also regularly chant the twin-mantras of human rights and democracy. President Trump is merely the latest and the most vocal proponent of the nastiness of that world order.

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[8]. For an analysis of the US action in Venezuela and the silence and inaction of the prevailing order, read my essay, 'The Venezuela Model: The New Ugly and Dangerous World Order'; The Island, 9 January 2026: https://island.lk/the-venezuela-modelthe-new-ugly-and-dangerous-world-order/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[9]. See, Forum in Focus: 'Davos 2026: Special address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada'; World Economic Forum: https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[10]. See ibid, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

It is not that Mr. Carney is unaware of this unpleasant reality. He accepts that "the story of the international rules-based order was partially false, that the strongest would exempt themselves when convenient, that trade rules were enforced asymmetrically. And we knew that international law applied with varying rigour depending on the identity of the accused or the victim."[11]

While Canada seems to be coming to terms with this reality only now, countries like Sri Lanka and others in similarly disempowered and precarious positions in this world order have experienced this for decades, because, as I have outlined earlier, Canada et al have been complicit sustainers of the now demonized and demonic world order. It is in this context one can understand the way in which Sri Lanka has been subjected to the scrutiny and institutionalized and ritualized harassment of the UNHCR for over a decade for its role in the country's civil war. Canada was at the forefront in this endeavour. The issue is not that countries – including Sri Lanka – should not be held accountable for any violence or any other misdeeds they have unleashed upon their own people or others. However, that sense of accountability should be practiced based on the principle of equality irrespective of the identity of the countries involved and their proximate relations with powerful nations.[12]

I explained this in my 2024 essay, 'The Geneva Circus' in some detail. For clarity and context, let me reproduce the most relevant sections here:

The issue here is not that those at the helm of the Sri Lankan government and its agencies should not be held responsible for human rights violations. But it should not be a matter for an international kangaroo court subjecting the entire country and its people to a slow-moving global show trial simply because the culprits could not be touched. This is collective punishment on the global stage at its most vulgar. More importantly, the self-appointed UN adjudicator, the UNHCR is not an unbiased body. Let us look at just a few of the plain facts. Right now, it is unlikely Israel would ever be dragged before the Council in the way Sri Lanka, Cuba, several African states and other less powerful countries have been, despite the ongoing large-scale violence that country is committing in Gaza and Lebanon.*[13]*

As I had further noted, the human rights records of many countries claiming the moral high ground in the Security Council and the UNHCR, including the P5 (Permanent Five of the Security Council) are far worse historically and also when taking into account the colonial excesses, than what Sri Lanka is accused of committing.

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[11]. See ibid, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[12]. For more information and analysis on this specific matter, read my essay, 'The Geneva Circus'; Sunday Observer, 13 October 2024: https://www.sundayobserver.lk/2024/10/13/news-features/35113/the-geneva-circus/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[13]. See ibid, 'The Geneva Circus': https://www.sundayobserver.lk/2024/10/13/news-features/35113/the-geneva-circus/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

Lay aside the colonial excesses for a moment. Consider this: have countries like the US, France, UK and Russia ever been punished for their excesses in the context of the Syrian and Iraqi wars or for that matter the mess that was created in Afghanistan? However, since military and political power and money speak a particular language that defies decency, common sense, justice and fair play, these countries have always escaped the choregraphed wrath and the orchestrated performances of 'justice' authored by the UN and the so-called international community.*[14]*

What this means is, if Sri Lanka's track record in war is unacceptable, then so is that of Israel in Palestine, US in every war it has unilaterally taken part in since the end of World War II, Russia particularly under President Vladimir Putin, China since the 1950s and the list goes on. There cannot be any credibility in the world order if its members are treated blatantly unequally as has been the case.

It is not that I disagree with the basic description Mr. Carney has painted of the status of the world. But from personal experience and from the perspective of a citizen from a powerless country, I simply do not trust those who preach 'the gospel of the good' not as a matter of principle, but only when the going gets tough for them.

At this rather late stage, Mr. Carney says, Canada is "amongst the first to hear the wake-up call, leading us to fundamentally shift our strategic posture."[15] Unfortunately, we, the people of countries who had to dance to the tunes of the world order led by the First World, have heard it for years, with no one listening to us when our discomforts were articulated. Now, Mr. Carney wants 'middle powers' or 'intermediate powers' within which he also locates Canada, "to live the truth?"[16] For him, the truth means "naming reality"[17] as it exists; "acting consistently"[18] towards all in the world; "applying the same standards to allies and rivals"[19] and "building what we claim to believe in, rather than waiting for the old order to be restored."[20] This appears to be the operational mantra for the new world order he is envisioning in which he sees Canada as a legitimate leader merely due to its late wakeup call and his ability to articulate it in Davos.

[14]. See ibid, 'The Geneva Circus': https://www.sundayobserver.lk/2024/10/13/news-features/35113/the-geneva-circus/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[15]. See, Forum in Focus: 'Davos 2026: Special address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada'; World Economic Forum: https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[16]. See ibid, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[17]. See ibid, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[18]. See ibid, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[19]. See ibid, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[20]. See ibid, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

He goes on to give a list of things Canada has done locally and globally and concludes by saying, "we have a recognition of what's happening and a determination to act accordingly. We understand that this rupture calls for more than adaptation. It calls for honesty about the world as it is."[21] He goes on to say Canada also has "the capacity to stop pretending, to name reality, to build our strength at home and to act together."[22] He notes this is "Canada's path. We choose it openly and confidently, and it is a path wide open to any country willing to take it with us."[23] Quite simply, this a leadership pitch for a new world order with Canada at its helm.

Without being overly cynical, this sounds very familiar, not too dissimilar to what USAID and the Voice of America preached to the world for decades; not too dissimilar to what the propaganda arms of the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party used to preach in our own languages when we were growing up. It is difficult to buy this argument and accept Canadian and middle power leadership for the new world order when they have been consistently part of the problem of the old one and its excuses for institutionalised double standards practiced by international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other hegemonic entities that have catered to the whims of that world order.

As far as Canada is concerned, it is evident that it has suddenly woken up only due to an existential threat at home projected from across its southern border and President Trump's threats against the Danish territory of Greenland. When Gaza was battered and its citizens subjected to mass murder by Israel, and Venezuela was clinically invaded only for its petroleum resources in a brand-new colonial enterprise bringing to mind what the British and Dutch East India Companies stood for centuries in the now almost forgotten colonial past, there was no audible clarion call. Therefore, one cannot hear in Mr. Carney's words and those who parrot them without reflection, any real desire for democracy or human rights in their true form. Instead, what is present is a convenient and strategic interest in creating a new Euro-centric or more bluntly, 'white supremacist' world order in the same persona as before. But this time it is supposed to be led by a new white warrior instead of the old ones. The rest of us would be mere followers, nodding our heads in choreographed agreement – as expected and as was the case before.

As the 20th century American standup comedian Lenny Bruce once said, "never trust a preacher with more than two suits."[24] Mr. Carney, Canada along with the so-called middle powers and the lapsed colonialists have way more than two suits, and we have seen them all.

[21]. See ibid, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[22]. See ibid, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[23]. See ibid, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

[24]. See Goodreads, https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/12628921-never-trust-a-preacher-with-more-than-two-suits (last accessed on 4 February 2026).

Securing Citizens' Data: A Policy Roadmap for Sri Lanka's Digital Future

By M.D. Naduni Dinethra

Paving the way towards a more comprehensive Digital Landscape Protection framework in Sri Lanka.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sri Lanka's digital landscape is rapidly expanding: with the increasing risk of digital exposure along with e-governance initiatives and fintech growth, the risk of exposure of personal data is greater than ever.

Lack of robust data protection laws leaves individuals highly vulnerable. Where there is an absence of a comprehensive legal framework which would allow for unsupervised data collection, sharing and breaches, public trust would be severely undermined.

Cybersecurity depends on data protection: Without clear regulations governing the storage, use, and protection of personal data, even the most robust cybersecurity measures remain insufficient

Accordingly, it's important to understand:

What is the problem? In an increasingly digitized society, the absence of a unified legal framework for privacy renders citizens' data vulnerable, highlighting the urgent need for legally enforceable protections

Why does it matter? With the escalating prevalence of cyber threats and cybercrimes, personal data is increasingly susceptible to unauthorized access, making it more valuable and sensitive than ever

What needs to be done? A comprehensive data protection law, aligned with international best practices and underpinned by clear enforcement mechanisms and public transparency, is essential

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Data Privacy & Cybersecurity in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's digital ecosystem has grown rapidly over the past decade, with over 12.34 million internet users (a 56.3% internet penetration) as of early 2024[1]. This widespread access has led to an exponential increase in the public's reliance on mobile apps, online banking, e-government portals, social media platforms, and Artificial Intelligence (AI). However, internet penetration alone does not equate to user readiness or understanding, digital literacy levels must also be considered. Many citizens have internet access but still lack the necessary digital skills and awareness to use these services responsibly and effectively, indicating that digital literacy, not just connectivity, is crucial for informed and secure engagement. While personal data is routinely collected by government agencies, telecommunication providers, financial institutions, and private companies etc., an all-inclusive legal framework is essential to protect such data.

The enactment of the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) in 2022 marked a monumental step in this arena, positioning Sri Lanka as the first South Asian nation to adopt comprehensive legislation considering international standards such as EU GDPR [EU General Data Protection Regulation] and OECD guidelines[2].It aimed at initiating the establishment of a Data Protection Authority, along with imposition of obligations for data controllers to ensure lawful, transparent, and purpose-limited processing, and rights for individuals to access, rectify, and erase personal data[3]. The Data Protection Authority, established in August 2023[4], has authority to regulate processing personal data and safeguard individual privacy. However, it must be noted that though these guidelines were enacted in 2022, primary provisions are still being phased in. Although full enforcement of the Act was initially scheduled for March 2025, implementation has been postponed by at least six months, with the new enforcement date set for September 2025[5], to allow sufficient time for the public sector to prepare for compliance.[6].

The gaps in implementation exposes millions of Sri Lankans to cybersecurity risks, including data breaches, unauthorized surveillance, and misuse of sensitive information. The Data Protection Authority has emphasized that legal frameworks alone will not suffice, they must be supported by comprehensive policy frameworks, regulations and technological safeguards.[7]

[1] DataReporter, 'Digital 2024: Sri Lanka' (2024); https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-sri-lanka

[2] Home | Data Protection Authority. https://www.dpa.gov.lk/; Sri Lanka Government official electronic information and services (eServices) delivery portal (n.d). https://www.gov.lk/

[3]Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (2021) Personal Data Protection Act, L.D.O-19/2019. https://www.icta.lk/icta-assets/uploads/2021/09/DP-Bill-2021-30th-July-21-Latest-Draft.pdf ; Madushani, T.P. and Transparency International Sri Lanka (2021) Legislative Brief Personal Data Protection Bill 2021. https://www.tisrilanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TISL-Legislative Brief_Personal-Data-Protection-Bill_13.07.2021.pdf.

[4] Data Protection Authority of Sri Lanka, official announcement (August 2023); https://www.dpa.gov.lk

[5] Gazette Notification (Sri Lanka), 'Personal Data Protection (Amendment) Act, No. 22 of 2025'; Cabinet Decision (19 February 2025); Ministry of Digital Economy Press Release (25 February 2025).

[6] Daily Mirror, 'Personal Data Protection Act enforcement pushed back by six months' (25 February 2025) https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking-news/Personal-Data-Protection-Act-enforcement-pushed-back-by-six-months/108-303177

[7] Data Protection Authority of Sri Lanka, Public Statement on Data Protection Framework (2023-2024).

Hence, without urgent action, public trust in digital services may erode, which would undermine Sri Lanka's ambitions for a secure digital economy.

Despite the progress in enacting of the PDPA, Sri Lanka still operates under a fragmented regulatory framework, particularly with sector-specific rules in banking and telecommunications. Legislation such as the Telecommunications Act imposes data handling standards but lack interoperability[8]. Such loopholes create compliance challenges and limits cross-sectorial data governance. The lack of unified law exposes regulatory inefficiency in Sri Lanka.

Assessment through Comparison
The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is one of the most prominent frameworks of data protection and cyber security law adopted to provide uniform regulation of data protection laws across Europe. It was adopted on 14 April 2016[9] and entered into force on 25 May 2018[10]. This inspired India to enact the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA) of 2023 which addresses a number of primary areas in relation to strengthening data privacy and thereby cybersecurity.[11]

The Act applies to digital personal information and expressly excludes publicly available data, as opposed to the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) which aims to cover both offline and online data including special categories such as health and biometrics. The GDPR's extraterritorial scope along with its stringent enforcement mechanisms seems to have made it an ideal, thereby influencing both the Sri Lanka's and India's legislative drafts.[12]

Hence, it is important to analyze the Sri Lankan legislation in relation to the GDPR and the DPDPA to decipher the extent of efficiency and any possible loopholes that might have been left out.

The diagram below illustrates the key provisions across GDPR, DPDPA of India and PDPA of Sri Lanka.

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[8] Sri Lanka Telecommunications Act No. 25 of 1991.
[9] European Parliament and Council, Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (14 April 2016).
[10] General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), effective date 25 May 2018, Official Journal of the European Union.
[11] Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023 (India), Act No. 49 of 2023, assented to 11 August 2023.
[12]'COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GDPR AND DIGITAL PERSONAL DATA PROTECTION ACT, 2023' (2023) International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT), 11(12), pp. a735–a736. https://www.ijcrt.org;(2023); India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023 vs. the GDPR: A Comparison https://lw.com/admin/upload/SiteAttachments/Indias-Digital-Personal-Data-Protection-2023-vs-the-GDPR-A-Comparison.pdf; GDPR V INDIA'S DPDPA: KEY DIFFERENCES AND COMPLIANCE IMPLICATIONS – Legal Developments, https://www.legal500.com/developments/thought-leadership/gdpr-v-indias-dpdpa-key-differences-and-compliance-implications/.

DP Laws Comp: GDPR, India, SL
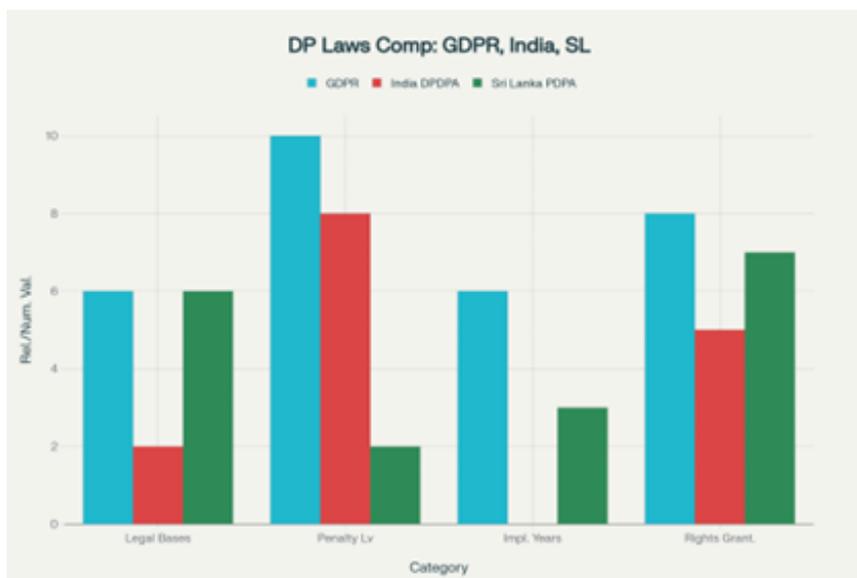
A comparative analysis of the PDPA and the GDPR demonstrates that the Sri Lankan legislation substantially mirrors the structural and substantive architecture of the GDPR. Notably, Sri Lanka's PDPA incorporates the six legal bases for processing personal data recognized under the GDPR, including contractual necessity and legitimate interests, the latter subject to an appropriate balancing test. [13]

This provides more operational flexibility for businesses while upholding individual protection. India's DPDPA, however, adopts a two-tier approach, i.e., consent or legitimate uses. This would force businesses to adopt a consent heavy compliance model and given that contractual processing is eliminated, organizations relying on contractual necessity would face significant compliance gaps when operating in India.

The rights addressed by each are illustrated in the table below:

	EU's GDPR	India's DPDPA	Sri Lanka's PDPA
Access Rights	Included & Comprehensive	Summary based	Included & Comprehensive
Data Portability	Mandatory	Absent	Excluded
Automated Decision Making	Comprehensive protection	No protection	Enhanced Protection for 'irreversible impacts'
Grievance Redress	Basic complaint rights provided	Mandatory internal mechanism	Right to appeal directly to authority; controllers are not required to provide an internal mechanism
Nomination Rights	Absent	Present	Absent

[13] Personal Data Protection Act No. 9 of 2022.

While the Sri Lankan PDPA is heavily modeled on the GDPR and brings modern data protection standards to the country, its penalty structure is significantly lower, which may reduce its deterrent effect on large, multinational, or well-capitalized firms. *[14]*

The most concerning aspect upon such comparison is the difference in penalty structures between the Sri Lankan PDPA when compared with the GDPR and the DPDPA.

Framework	Maximum Penalty	Level of Deterrence
GDPR	€20 million or 4% global turnover of preceding fiscal year (whichever is higher)[15]	Medium (likely to have a reasonable deterrent effect due to the possibility of an extensive fine)
DPDPA	₱250 crore (~€28 million)[16]	Medium (untested but likely to have reasonable deterrent effect)
PDPA	LKR 10 million (~€27,000) [Repeat offences: LKR 10 million with additional penalty of twice the amount imposed for the second and each subsequent non-compliance][17]	Low (unlikely to provide sufficient deterrent effect)

It is clear that Sri Lanka's penalty structure is significantly lower than that prescribed by the GDPR which could undermine the efficacy of the deterrence effect even if there was a comprehensive procedural framework in place.

Why do these Dynamics Matter in the Sri Lankan Context?
These dynamics in legislation have important effects on Sri Lanka's digital governance system. The GDPR's wide reach offers more protection across various data categories. In contrast, Sri Lanka's PDPA focuses on immediate needs, targeting cyber threats in online transactions and digital services. India takes a similar approach, prioritizing digital personal data. Similar to Sri Lanka, India recognizes that effective cybersecurity enforcement requires targeting the digital domains most vulnerable to breaches, focusing resources on areas with the highest risk of data compromise and cyberattacks. For Sri Lanka, this implies that while the PDPA may appear narrower in scope compared to the GDPR, it is strategically structured to address the nation's primary vulnerabilities in e-commerce, financial services, and government digitalization. However, Sri Lanka would benefit from gradually including non-digital personal data as its digital governance landscape expands.

[14] Abeysekara, T.B. and Dabarera,S.I. (2025) Legal challenges in Achieving a Business-Oriented Data Protection Ecosystem in Sri Lanka, Journal of Business Research and Business Research ,11:01, 01-09, DOI: https://doi.org/10.31357/jbri.v11i01.8466
[15] GDPR-Info, 'GDPR Fines / Penalties' (GDPR-Info.eu) https://gdpr-info.eu/issues/fines-penalties/
[16] Press Information Bureau, 'DPDP Rules, 2025 Notified: A Citizen-Centric Framework for Privacy Protection and Responsible Data Use' (PIB Delhi, 17 Nov 2025) https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2190655&reg=3&lang=2
[17] Personal Data Protection Act, No. 9 of 2022.

Persisting Challenges

Despite the passage of the Personal Data Protection Act No. 09 of 2022 (PDPA) and other digital regulations, Sri Lanka's digital legal landscape faces significant gaps that leave user data vulnerable and reflect a persistent digital literacy challenge. Despite broad internet access, only about one-third of Sri Lankans (around 36% in 2024) are considered computer literate *[18]*. As a result, many individuals are not aware of managing their data or providing truly informed consent through digital platforms. Although the Data Protection Authority stipulates that consent must be freely given, specific, informed, and unambiguous, the risk of unauthorized data collection remains significant due to weak enforcement mechanisms, particularly among smaller service providers and mobile application operators. *[19]*

Another notable gap is the lack of an independent regulatory authority. Although the Data Protection Authority was established formally in August 2023, its operational independence and enforcement capacity remains limited[20] especially given the delayed implementation and concerns over the DPA's budget to attract and retain qualified personnel. In 2020, the New York Times reported that the budget to run a data protection authority is a minimum of £25 million annually, which would be over LKR 5 billion in operational costs. The probability that the Sri Lankan Data Protection Authority would be given at least one fifth of that by the Treasury is quite slim[21]. It is important to note that without autonomy and adequate resources, the DPA risks becoming a symbolic body rather than a functional watchdog.

These risks are far from theoretical. In March 2025[22], Cargills Bank PLC suffered one of the largest data breaches in Sri Lankan history, **exposing over 1.9 terabytes of sensitive customer and employee data**, which included CRIB reports, internal audits and NIC scans[23]. This prompted a court order to block websites distributing the leaked data, but by that time, the breach had already caused significant harm. This incident serves as a testimony to the absence of real time breach response protocols and inadequate strength of current data protection standards.

[18] Arzath Areeff, 'The Hidden Crisis: Sri Lanka's Computer Literacy Decline and the Path Forward' Medium (28 September 2025) https://techxnomad.medium.com/the-hidden-crisis-sri-lankas-computer-literacy-decline-and-the-path-forward-07be31b433d8.

[19] Wijesinha, R. T. (2025) 'Sri Lanka online safety and personal data protection: Thoughts for our legislators towards bipartisan consensus', Daily FT, 9 June. Available at: https://www.ft.lk/opinion/Sri-Lanka-online-safety-and-personal-data-protection-Thoughts-for-our-legislators-towards-bipartisan-consensus/14-777483 (Accessed: 26 January 2026).

[20] Data Protection Authority, https://www.dpa.gov.lk/Background.php

[21] Is the Data Protection Bill Right for Sri Lanka? (n.d.), https://www.themorning.lk/articles/178743

[22] Sunday Times, 'Cargills Bank's massive data breach sparks cybersecurity overhaul' (5 April 2025); BreachSense, 'Cargills Bank Data Breach in 2025' (March 2025 incident discovery date 21 March 2025).

[23] Readme.lk, 'Cargills data breach: Bank warned of security lapses in 2024' (6 April 2025) https://readme.lk/cargills-data-breach-bank-warned-of-security-lapses-in-2024/

Experts warn that incidents like these could result in **identity theft, financial fraud and reputational harm**, especially when data is stored without access controls or encryption[24].

It is important to note that cybersecurity without data governance is a false sense of security. Although systems can technically be secure, if the data usage is unregulated, breaches can still occur through misuse, unauthorized sharing, or even over collection of data. As Kaspersky's 2024 report notes, Sri Lanka has been identified among the top countries for phishing attacks targeting financial institutions, with over 9,218 incidents detected in 2024[25]. This emphasizes the need for integrated and comprehensive data governance, where cybersecurity tools are complemented by legal safeguards and ethical data practices.

Policy Recommendations

1. Enact a Unified Data Protection Act with Strong Enforcement Mechanisms
Sri Lanka must accelerate the full implementation of the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA), ensuring robust enforcement, clear penalties, and judicial recourse. Under the Act, the Data Protection Authority can impose fines of up to LKR 10 million per violation, with the possibility of appeals to the Court of Appeal.[26]To be effective, these powers must be supported by operational independence and adequate resources. Strengthening institutional capacity and clear compliance oversight will be essential to protect data across e-commerce, financial services, and government digital platforms.

2. Establish and Empower the Data Protection Authority (DPA)
Although the Data Protection Authority (DPA) was established in 2023, its effectiveness could be enhanced by incorporating technical expertise, investigative powers, and public accountability mechanisms. Drawing on the EU GDPR model, the DPA could gain authority to conduct audits, issue binding directives, and collaborate internationally on cross-border data matters. To strengthen operational capacity, the Authority could seek financial support from the Asian Development Bank under the "digital economy" or "institutional development" programs. Additionally, establishing a specialized Cybersecurity Incident Response Unit within the first six months of full enforcement would help address emerging threats and ensure timely incident management.

[24] Readme.lk, 'Cargills data breach: Bank warned of security lapses in 2024' (6 April 2025) https://readme.lk/cargills-data-breach-bank-warned-of-security-lapses-in-2024/
[25] Daily Mirror, 'Sri Lanka's financial phishing cases spike in 2024: Kaspersky' (14 March 2025) https://www.dailymirror.lk/latest-news/Sri-Lankas-financial-phishing-cases-spike-in-2024-Kaspersky/342-304444
[26] Personal Data Protection Act No. 9 of 2022, Section 52-53 (Penalties).

3. Mandate Privacy Impact Assessments (PIAs) for Public Sector Data Projects

A Privacy Impact Assessment (PIA) is a systematic process used to identify, evaluate, and mitigate potential privacy risks associated with a project or system that handles personal information—particularly sensitive data such as biometric, financial, or health information. Conducting PIAs helps identify privacy risks early and ensures compliance with ethical and legal standards. The OECD's PIA tool[27] provides a step-by-step framework for public agencies[28], while SecurePrivacy's guide is more focused on risk mitigation guidance[29]. Consequently, it would be beneficial for government ministries and state institutions to carry out PIAs for all new data-processing projects prior to implementation, under the oversight of the Data Protection Authority (DPA).

4. Introduce Minimum Cybersecurity Standards for Public and Private Sectors

Sri Lanka should adopt and enforce the Minimum Information Security Standards (MISS) developed by CERT[National Centre for Cyber Security in Sri Lanka][30]. These standards encompass vital aspects of data security such as asset identification, encryption requirements and incident response protocols.This approach would help ensure that all organizations, across sectors are adequately prepared to prevent privacy breaches. It would also be advantageous to require that public and private entities handling sensitive data undergo regular Vulnerability Assessments and Penetration Tests (VAPT) and report any breaches within 72 hours. The responsibility for implementation would rest with CERT, which should conduct annual compliance audits, with enforcement authority vested in the Data Protection Authority (DPA).

5. Launch Public Awareness Campaigns on Data Literacy

If the vision is to build a privacy-conscious society, Sri Lanka should be willing to invest in nationwide data literacy campaigns especially targeting youth, citizens in marginalized communities and civil servants. The EU's DALI Project[31] recommends integrating data literacy into curricula and using gamified learning tools[32]. The Ministry of Education and the DPA should co-develop a national data literacy curriculum for primary and secondary schools, with implementation beginning within 18 months.

[27] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Data Protection Impact Assessment Tools and Guidance, https://www.oecd.org

[28] PIA tool - Observatory of Public Sector Innovation Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (2019), https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/pia-tool/

[29] Team, S.P. (2025) How to conduct a Privacy Impact Assessment (PIA): A Step-by-Step guide for government agencies. https://secureprivacy.ai/blog/how-to-conduct-a-privacy-impact-assessment-pia-step-by-guide-for-government-agencies.

[30] Sri Lanka Computer Emergency Readiness Team (CERT), Minimum Information Security Standards Version 1 (July 2021) https://www.onlinesafety.lk

[31] Data Literacy for Citizenship (DALI) Project, DALI Data Literacy Framework (2023), funded by Erasmus+ https://dalicitizens.eu

[32] How can we promote Data Literacy? | EPALE Salomao,A.(2023) 'How can we promote Data Literacy?,'EPALE – European Commission, 30 November, https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/blog/how-can-we-promote-data-literacy.

6. Require Algorithmic Transparency for AI Systems

Given that AI tools are becoming increasingly embedded in public services, it would be prudent if Sri Lanka could mandate algorithmic audits and explain-ability standards. This would mean that AI decisions would be transparent, fair and even challenging, which would be especially useful in the contexts of surveillance, welfare and law enforcement. Countries such as Singapore and Canada have already integrated AI ethics into national strategies[33]. Sri Lanka should establish an AI Ethics Board within the DPA to review government AI deployments during the initial years of enforcement.

7. Create a National Data Ethics Council

Establishing an independent body to guide ethical data use—by issuing guidelines, reviewing high-risk projects, and fostering public dialogue on digital rights—would concentrate expertise and provide direction across emerging areas such as biometrics, cross-border data flows, and predictive analytics. While the enactment of Sri Lanka's Personal Data Protection Act represents a milestone in regional digital governance, recent breaches and phishing attacks demonstrate that legislation alone is insufficient. Effective data protection requires an integrated system combining legal safeguards, technology, public awareness, and ethical governance. By implementing policy recommendations with clear responsibilities, realistic timelines, and adequate resources, Sri Lanka can transform data protection from a compliance obligation into a competitive advantage, building public trust and enabling a secure, inclusive, and prosperous digital future through coordinated efforts across government, the private sector, and civil society.

[33] Singapore National AI Strategy 2.0 (2023); Canada's National AI Strategy (2017)

School Counseling in Sri Lanka: Policies, Awareness, and Implementation

By Sasini Wasana Wijesiri Gunawardhana

Contemporary Issues, Psychosocial Support and School Counselling

Contemporary societies are increasingly exposed to disruptions arising from natural disasters, socio-economic pressures, and human-induced challenges associated with rapid scientific and technological change. School-age children are particularly vulnerable to these pressures, highlighting the need for structured psychosocial support within the education system. Schools therefore play a critical role in promoting student resilience and well-being while minimizing the potential adverse effects of such disruptions. Comprehensive school counselling programmes, delivered by trained counsellors, represent an important institutional mechanism for addressing these needs and contributing to broader social stability.

The effectiveness of school counselling programmes is closely linked to the level of awareness among members of the school community. In Sri Lanka, government policy has emphasized the institutionalization of school counselling services in schools with more than 300 students through the appointment of vocational guidance teachers. However, the utilization and impact of these services depend significantly on the extent to which students, teachers, principals, and parents are aware of their availability and functions. This article therefore examines the level of awareness of school counselling services among key stakeholders within the school community.

Over time, school counselling programmes have evolved from a primary focus on vocational guidance to a broader approach addressing students' academic, career, and social–emotional development needs. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) identifies these three domains as the core components of school counselling, with counsellors providing guidance, support, and resources to help students achieve academic success, explore career opportunities, and develop social and emotional competencies (ASCA, 2023). According to ASCA, an effective school counselling programme is designed as an integral part of the school's academic mission and can have a significant positive impact on student achievement.

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In the implementation of school counselling services, the school counsellor plays a pivotal role. Dimmitt, Carey and Hatch (2007) highlight the importance of school counsellors in promoting students' career development and decision-making skills. Similarly, Whiston, Tai and Rahardja (2011) emphasize their contribution to fostering a positive school climate, enhancing students' social skills, and providing mental health support.

Their findings indicate that well-implemented school counselling programmes improve attendance, academic performance, and graduation rates while creating a supportive environment that enriches students' overall educational experience. School counselling is inherently collaborative, with counsellors working alongside students, parents, teachers, and administrators to address students' academic, social–emotional, and career needs (Karunanayake, Chandrapala and Vimukthi, 2020; Sabella, Poynton and Isaacs, 2010). Awareness within the school community strongly influences cooperation and the effective achievement of counselling goals, making it essential to assess the extent to which these services are understood.

Awareness—defined as knowledge and understanding of the available services—is a crucial factor in achieving the objectives of school counselling. When members of the school community are well informed about the purpose and availability of counselling services, they are better able to support students' academic success and emotional well-being through the creation of a positive learning environment. Increased awareness also helps reduce stigma and normalizes the use of mental health services, thereby encouraging students to seek assistance when needed. Therefore, evaluating awareness levels within the school community is essential for the effective delivery and utilization of school counselling services (Corrigan, 2004; World Health Organization, 2022; Karunanayake, Chandrapala and Vimukthi, 2020).
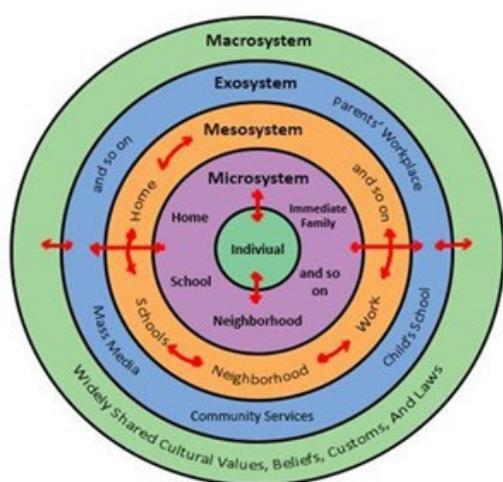
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory suggests that raising awareness about school counselling can have positive effects in both the microsystem and mesosystem. At the microsystem level, providing additional support and resources can enhance the child's educational and emotional development. Within the mesosystem, promoting communication and collaboration between the school and the family regarding counselling can strengthen the child's overall well-being through coordinated supportive efforts. Ultimately, this awareness contributes to creating a more cohesive and supportive environment for the child's development, benefiting both school and family perspectives (Guy-Evans, 2024).

Policies and Regulatory Framework for the Implementation of School Counselling in Sri Lanka

The implementation of school counselling in Sri Lanka has evolved through several key policy directives and circulars. Circular No. 10 of 1957 introduced counselling and vocational guidance services in schools (National Education Commission, 2014). The 1981 White Paper reinforced the need for counselling, leading to the 1983 establishment of a formal service under the Yovun Mithuro (Youth Friends) Counselling Programme. A major milestone was Circular No. 2001/16, which empowered the national School Counselling and Guidance Programme (Gomila Gunalankara and Wijithatissa, 2020). More recently, Circulars No. 16/2006 and No. 6/2013 established the national School Guidance and Counselling Programme (National Education Commission, 2014). These policies underscore the government's commitment to enhancing students' physical, psychological, and social well-being through structured counselling services.

However, the effectiveness of these policies depends largely on the awareness, perceptions, and attitudes of the school community toward counselling. Karunanayake, Chandrapala and Vimukthi (2020) reported that students' attitudes toward school counselling were generally negative, primarily due to misconceptions, limited understanding, and stigma surrounding counselling services rather than complete unawareness. Similarly, Wijegunawardhana (2015) found that although 66% of students were aware of the existence of counselling services, only 29% had sought assistance for personal problems, indicating that awareness alone does not translate into utilization. These findings highlight the need for structured awareness programmes that address misconceptions and reduce stigma in order to improve student engagement with counselling services. Furthermore, Priyadarshani (2018) observes that the role of school counsellors is poorly understood within the wider school community in the Kalutara District, thereby undermining the effective utilization of counselling services and weakening the intended outcomes of related policy initiatives.

Given the evidence that lack of awareness is a primary factor influencing social stigma toward school counselling in Sri Lanka (Karunanayake, Chandrapala and Vimukthi, 2020; Wijegunawardhana, 2015; Priyadarshani, 2018), it is essential to formulate and implement targeted policies aimed at enhancing the school community's understanding of counselling services. Such policies should ensure that students, teachers, and parents are well-informed about the objectives, processes, and benefits of counselling. Practical measures could include:
· Mandatory annual orientation sessions for all stakeholders.
· A national "Know Your Counsellor" awareness campaign.
· Integration of mental health and counselling modules into the school curriculum.
· Regular parent-teacher-counsellor meetings.
· Establishment of peer counselling ambassador programmes to foster a supportive environment.

Embedding these initiatives within a formal policy framework can ensure consistent awareness, reduce stigma, and strengthen the effectiveness of school counselling services nationwide. However, awareness initiatives should be complemented by other supportive measures – such as assuring confidentiality and providing incentives – to further encourage students to utilize these services.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to the Sri Lankan context, it is clear that policy interventions must address multiple interconnected layers—from national directives (macrosystem) and institutional structures (exosystem) to student–counsellor interactions (microsystem), stakeholder relationships (mesosystem), and historical policy evolution (chronosystem)—through structured awareness programmes, integration of mental health education, and collaboration among schools, families, and communities, ensuring that school counselling policies achieve meaningful and sustainable outcomes aligned with Sri Lanka's broader development goals.

Conclusion

School counselling in Sri Lanka is supported by a well-established policy framework aimed at promoting students' academic achievement, psychological well-being, and social development. However, the effectiveness of these policies is limited by low functional awareness, persistent misconceptions, and the stigma associated with counselling services, while inadequate understanding of counsellors' roles and limited stakeholder engagement further constrain utilization. From a public policy and leadership perspective, strengthening school counselling should be considered not merely an educational priority but a strategic investment in national human capital development, as effective services foster emotionally resilient, socially responsible, and career-ready individuals who contribute to social stability and economic growth.

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'Is Populism a Threat to Democracy?'

By Insaaf Bakeer Markar

It can be argued that progressive populism is feasible for democracy. The answer of a 'yes' or 'no' to the question in the title may not be feasible given the varying contextual perspectives of populism and their respective consequences on democracy. Hence, a form of populism that mobilizes citizens toward the genuine realization of democratic principles—such as good governance, equity, and the rule of law may be regarded as strengthening democracy rather than threatening it. Hence, in essence this article will discuss populism in relation to democracy both in light of a threat and also an integral part of democracy.

It can be argued that both populism and democracy establish and uphold the same principle of people's power. As Lincoln argued, the rule of the people by the people and for the people - vox populi vox dei - is central to both these notions. Over 2,500 years ago, in one of the most celebrated speeches on democracy, Pericles stated in a public square in Athens: "Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority, but of the whole people." Thus, both notions should ideally stand in harmony, on the assumption that the more extensively people's voices are heard and meaningfully reflected in governance, the stronger and more vibrant democracy becomes. However, the issue with populism and democracy discussed in the context of Sri Lanka is that that the very structures that are supposed to uphold democratic functions does not seem to deliver what they ought to. The branches of power – the legislative, executive and judiciary seem to have been hijacked under the façade of democratic validation into serving successive rulers and governments.

The populism witnessed in western nations is different from that of Latin America, Southeast Asia or South Asia. The populism in the United States or the Nordic nations carry a trademark of racial attacks against immigrants and minorities which argues that the traditional ways of life for the whites are under attack. The plight of immigrants and minorities are often used by politicians as scapegoats for real systematic socio-economic issues that needs to be addressed.

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The populism observed in Southeast Asia—particularly in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand—has largely taken the form of left-wing populism, in which overt racial exclusion has not been a central feature. By contrast, majority support in the United States for Donald Trump's perceived racial politics cannot, in itself, be taken as democratic validation under the principle of "majority rule," as this risks constituting a tyranny of the majority—where electoral dominance is used to legitimize ethnic or racial discrimination. However, the populism witnessed in the streets of Manilla or Bangkok may be seen as a cry against systematic socio-economic injustice and corruption by the few against the many. Rodrigo Duterte in 2016, Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001 and Joko Widodo in 2015 appealed to the masses by promising to 'politically correct' the system in favor of a fair and equitable society against the 'enemies of the common people'. This, in itself, need not be interpreted as a threat to democracy, since such movements are frequently driven by efforts to restore or reshape what participants understand as "their democracy." However, populism becomes a threat to democracy when populist leaders drift toward authoritarianism and invoke their prior democratic mandate to justify policies and practices that undermine democratic norms.

The notion of stereotyping 'populism' may render incorrect. Both Adolf Hitler and Franklin Delano Roosevelt were considered populist leaders. The distinction to be drawn here may appear self-evident. While Hitler advocated racial hegemony through exclusionary nationalist rhetoric, Roosevelt, in his 1941 Four Freedoms speech, made a sweeping appeal for freedom for "everyone in the world."

Similar to what was witnessed in Sri Lanka, politics in the Philippines was shaped more by the "parliaments of the streets" than by the formal and deliberative institutions of authority. Duterte's rise to power can in no mean be less populist. He came into power from Philippine's most impoverished region appealing to populist sentiments which were anti-establishment, nationalistic, strict law enforcement and many promises of economic revival. However, two years into the rule, Duterte resembled previous regimes with cronyism, oligarchy and a bunch of broken promises which led some people in Philippines to question or rethink the correctness of Duterte's rule. However, supporters of the then Duterte's administration have defended the policies suggesting Duterte is democratically validated to carry out his policies. Now this is exactly the baggage of concerns which arises out of the term 'threat' suggested in the heading – is populism a threat to democracy?

This in turn validates the question whether it is democracy that have failed the Filipinos or whether it is the Filipinos who have failed democracy.

A reflection on the Philippines indicates that the appeal of populism in Sri Lanka is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a manifestation of deeper systemic challenges that require contextualized analysis. Populism should be seen as a sign to remedy the deficiencies democracy faces in Sri Lanka – amending the current constitution, reforms in the electoral & existing party system and appropriate policy changes in the system.

Therefore, the author suggests that populism should be seen in a constructive lens with regards to its rise in the island. Sri Lankans have turned to populist politicians who promise to address their grievances when the governments and authorities/systems have failed. The only way to amice both populism and democracy is a virtuous cycle of reform and renewal where there are consistent progressions of a vibrant civic tradition of responsible citizens and politicians. Of course this must be complemented by an equitable socio-economic development. Hence, these long-term developments demand the aforementioned consistency.

One good example would be the 'populist movement' in Australia called - CommunityRun. It is an independent social movement aiming to remedy the perceived wrongs of society through progressive democratic action. "Save Our Hospitals" is an initiative of CommunityRun that enables ordinary Australians to mobilize against cuts to healthcare funding. Citizens can participate by signing online petitions, organizing peaceful protests, and pressuring local councilors to oppose the cuts where there is sufficient support within the community.

Sri Lanka has long struggled with the absence of consistently responsible governments capable of being progressive, proactive, and effective in steering the country's development and growth. The weaknesses in the judiciary have not attracted investments as it should have as well as political corruption undermining economic development. Young people on the island have been radicalized socially due to the lack of economic opportunities pushing them towards desperateness and the structural injustices embedded within society. The weakness of the democratic institutions in Sri Lanka to check-and-balance the power and address corruption has resulted in a vicious cycle of damage. It is precisely in this context that discussions for a populist leader in 2020 emerged in the minds of Sri Lankan voters. Certain candidates who contested in 2020 have been capable of addressing both - peoples' continued frustration and vulnerability – echoing the message of power back to the masses.

It is contentious to engage in debates over whether populism is inherently democratic. After all populist leaders such as Trump and Duterte have claimed that they appeal and speak on behalf of the grass-root everyday people. This brings in parallels with what may be referred as direct democracy – the grassroots of democratic concepts itself. Political science offers no definitive model of democracy that fits all contexts; there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Many contemporary political scientists are cautious about endorsing direct democracy as the optimal form of governance. This reflects the central contention illustrated throughout this article – that a 'yes' or 'no' answer to the question will not suffice. There are different forms of populism. However, it can be argued that when a particular strand of populism promotes good governance, equitable socio-economic development, and the protection of democratic ideals, it may function less as a threat and more as a gain for democracy. At the very least, such populism can stimulate democratic engagement by mobilizing citizens through appeals to "people power."

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The article has been updated by the author to underscore key contemporary challenges in global politics.

Reforming STEM/STEAM Education in Sri Lanka

By Vidujith Vithanage

Executive Summary

Sri Lanka's STEM/STEAM education system[1] remains structurally constrained by disciplinary silos, rote-based pedagogies, and weak interdisciplinary integration, limiting its contribution to national development and global competitiveness. These systemic weaknesses are compounded by persistent equity gaps: female enrollment in upper-secondary science streams remains at approximately 27%, while rural, post-conflict, and estate-sector communities continue to experience disproportionate access and quality deficits (Chai et al., 2024; Withanage & Chandrakumara, 2021). As a result, the system inadequately cultivates critical 21st-century competencies—innovation, critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability—essential for participation in an AI-driven economy. Although the National Education Policy Framework (2020–2030) and the 2025–2029 Education Reform Agenda set ambitious goals to modernize curricula and increase STEM participation, their implementation has remained fragmented. Key barriers include chronic resource constraints, shortages of adequately trained teachers, and the growing yet weakly regulated role of private-sector providers, which risks exacerbating inequality rather than addressing it (National Education Commission, Sri Lanka, 2020; Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka, 2024).

Drawing on comparative analysis of STEM/STEAM policies in the USA, Canada, UK, India, Singapore, and Malaysia, this policy brief advocates for hybrid pedagogies integrating project- and problem-based learning with culturally resonant elements. It proposes mandatory STEAM modules, a national teacher accreditation program, regional STEM hubs, portfolio-based assessments, and a robust accreditation framework for private providers to ensure equity and alignment with Ministry of Education priorities. Supported by World Bank financing and British Council partnerships, these evidence-based reforms aim to bridge access gaps, regulate private robotics and coding programs, and foster epistemic equity, positioning Sri Lanka for economic resilience and workforce readiness by 2030 (World Bank, 2025; UNESCO, 2022).

[1]STEM and STEAM education integrate science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and the arts to foster interdisciplinary, problem-based learning. Through hands-on inquiry and collaborative design, students apply knowledge to real-world challenges rather than rote memorization.

About the Author Vidujith Vithanage is an emerging visiting lecturer at multiple leading private universities in Sri Lanka. His research focuses on STEM and STEAM pedagogy, curriculum development, and strategies to enhance equity and inclusion in science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics learning, leading curriculum reforms and providing policy advisory in the private school sector.

This Policy Brief synthesizes data from policy documents, statistical analyses (e.g., National Human Resources Development Council, 2023), stakeholder surveys (e.g., National Institute of Education, 2018), and the 2022 GEM (Global Education Monitoring) South Asia Report on non-state actors, ensuring context-specific, actionable recommendations to transform Sri Lanka's education landscape into a regional model of inclusive innovation (UNESCO, 2022).

Problem Statement

Sri Lanka's STEM/STEAM education faces systemic challenges that undermine national development goals. Despite high literacy rates (over 92%), science education is characterized by disciplinary silos, rote learning, minimal hands-on activities, and limited interdisciplinary integration, resulting in low critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and innovation skills (Chai et al, 2024). Female enrolment in upper-secondary science streams stands at roughly 27%, while structural rural–urban disparities and unresolved post-conflict legacies in the Northern and Eastern regions continue to deepen inequities in access (Sakalasooriya, 2021). Despite policy commitments under the 2017 STEM Education Subjects Development Act and the National Education Policy Framework (2020–2030), curricular integration remains limited in practice, constrained by enduring resource shortages and insufficient teacher capacity (Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka, 2024; Chai et al., 2024).

Critically, the failure to effectively operationalize globally endorsed interdisciplinary approaches has contributed to persistent labour-market mismatches, with many STEM graduates experiencing unemployment and resorting to post-qualification upskilling, particularly in the aftermath of recent economic crises. While the 2025–2029 education reforms propose improvements in curriculum quality and expanded enrolment in science and technology streams, critics caution that these reforms insufficiently address equity concerns and may risk eroding cultural relevance.

Meanwhile, private-sector participation , though substantial, remains largely unregulated. Degree-awarding institutions and specialised academies (e.g., Meu Lab, STEM.edu.lk) increasingly offer fee-based programmes in robotics, coding, and artificial intelligence, partially compensating for gaps in public provision but simultaneously reinforcing access inequalities for low-income students. In the absence of systemic integration, such initiatives further fragment the education ecosystem, a concern echoed in World Bank analyses. This regulatory vacuum, compounded by fiscal constraints following the 2022 economic crisis, underscores the urgency of policy intervention to channel private-sector dynamism toward inclusive reform and to prevent the widening of skills gaps across urban–rural and socioeconomic divides.

Background and Evidence

Global STEM/STEAM education models offer instructive insights for Sri Lanka. The United States' Next Generation Science Standards (2013) emphasize experiential learning and critical thinking; however, persistent resource disparities in rural districts mirror challenges evident within Sri Lanka's education system (AAU, 2014).

Canada's Pan-Canadian Framework prioritizes equitable access for rural and Indigenous learners, yet uneven provincial implementation underscores potential risks for Sri Lanka's decentralized governance structure (Wang & Degol, 2020). In the United Kingdom, the STEM Learning programme leverages industry partnerships to integrate arts and sciences and strengthen teacher professional development, though it has attracted criticism for an increasingly market-oriented orientation (Relocate Magazine, 2018).

Within Asia, India's National Education Policy (2020) has expanded access by enabling private institutions to deliver approximately 80% of engineering places; however, this growth has not substantially reduced gender disparities—a challenge mirrored in Sri Lanka, where female participation in STEM stood at roughly 30% in 2023 (NHRDC, 2023). Singapore's Applied Learning Programme demonstrates strong outcomes through project-based pedagogy and tightly regulated private-sector involvement, though its highly structured assessment regime may constrain creativity (Rose, 2025). Malaysia's STEM policies leverage tax incentives to strengthen university–industry linkages, presenting a potentially transferable model for addressing Sri Lanka's persistent skills mismatches and gender gaps (Chai et al., 2024).

Private-sector provision plays a growing role in Sri Lanka's STEM education landscape. In 2022, non-state higher education institutions enrolled 42,594 students, including 15,096 at SLIIT and 5,896 at NSBM Green University in technology-related disciplines (UNESCO, 2022). Private training institutes recorded a further 32,494 enrolments, with ICT participation increasing by 22.5% from 2021; however, course fees ranging from LKR 50,000 to 100,000 restrict access for rural and low-income learners (UNESCO, 2022). A National Institute of Education survey found strong stakeholder support for vocational pathways, with 80% endorsing their expansion to address post–G.C.E. O/L dropout, yet only 30% of schools currently offer hands-on STEM instruction, indicating persistent pedagogical limitations (NIE, 2018). Enrolment in the G.C.E. A/L Technology stream reached 22,808 students in 2022, while women represented just 37.6% of vocational graduates, underscoring enduring gender disparities (NHRDC, 2023). Although donor- and corporate-supported initiatives, including a USD 50 million World Bank programme targeting 500,000 learners by 2025, have expanded provision, weak regulatory oversight risks reinforcing existing urban–rural inequities (World Bank, 2025).

The United Kingdom's STEM Learning programme, supported through industry partnerships, trained approximately 30,000 teachers by 2023 and increased student engagement by an estimated 20% in pilot schools; however, its market-oriented delivery model has raised concerns regarding equity and differential access (Relocate Magazine, 2018). In contrast, Sri Lanka's post-conflict Northern and Eastern regions continue to face compounded structural constraints, with only around 25% of schools equipped with advanced STEM facilities due to infrastructure losses sustained during the 1983–2009 conflict (UNICEF, 2023). Access is further shaped by intersecting socioeconomic, gender, and linguistic barriers: only 20% of low-income rural female students and 15% of low-income Tamil female students participate in private ICT or STEM programmes (NIE, 2018; UNICEF, 2023).

Provision for neurodivergent learners remains particularly limited, with fewer than 10% of schools offering tailored STEM accommodation despite strong stakeholder support for inclusive education (NIE, 2018). While Sinhala and Muslim students also encounter barriers to STEM participation in rural contexts, these constraints are less severe than those experienced by Tamil communities in post-conflict areas.

Policy Options

Four policy options, informed by global STEM/STEAM best practices and Sri Lanka's national context, are assessed for feasibility in supporting post-2022 economic recovery.

1. **Mandatory STEAM Modules**: This option proposes the introduction of one compulsory STEAM-based project per semester for students in Grades 6–13, integrating locally relevant themes (e.g., biodiversity-related innovation) and private-sector expertise to enhance student engagement and enrollment. Evidence from urban pilot initiatives indicates **85% teacher-reported student engagement**, based on a 2024 Ministry of Education survey of 200 teachers across 50 urban schools, utilizing a 5-point Likert scale to measure perceived effectiveness. Cost efficiencies are achieved through corporate partnerships. **Feasibility is hig**h, given alignment with the National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) 2020–2030; however, successful implementation requires expanded teacher training in rural areas (NIE, 2018).

2. **National STEAM Teacher Accreditation**: This policy recommends the certification of 5,000 STEAM teachers by 2028, with targeted support for female and rural educators through Ministry of Education–funded partnerships with tertiary institutions such as NSBM. The initiative directly addresses the estimated **15% national STEM teacher deficit** (NHRDC, 2023). **Feasibility is assessed as medium to high**, supported by **90% stakeholder endorsement** (NIE, 2018), although logistical and capacity constraints in rural regions remain a significant consideration.

3. **Regional STEM Hubs**: This option involves establishing 10 regional STEM hubs by 2029, supported through public–private partnerships that leverage private-sector technological expertise (e.g., ANKA Tech) alongside Ministry of Education and corporate funding. Existing ICT enrollment data (6,464 students in 2022) suggest latent demand and scalability (NHRDC, 2023). **Feasibility is moderate**, with implementation dependent on clearer regulatory and governance mechanisms.

4. **Status Quo**: Continuation of existing NEPF pilot initiatives is likely to perpetuate structural inequities within the education system. This is evidenced by Technology stream enrollment figures in 2022 (22,808 students, of whom only 37.6% were female) (NHRDC, 2023). **Feasibility is low**, as maintaining current practices risks limited systemic progress and reduced responsiveness to evolving labor market demands (Chai et al., 2024).

In summary, **Options 1–3** demonstrate greater potential to advance inclusive, scalable, and financially diversified STEM/STEAM education reforms compared to the status quo.

Recommendations

To implement STEM/STEAM reforms effectively, the Ministry of Education (MoE) should adopt a phased strategy from 2026 to 2030 that emphasizes curriculum integration, strengthened regulation, and fiscal sustainability, while gradually reducing reliance on external financing during Sri Lanka's economic recovery.

1. **Implement Mandatory STEAM Modules:** Require students in Grades 6–13 to complete one STEAM project per semester, grounded in local contexts such as biodiversity-related innovation and supported by low-cost, open-source tools (e.g., online coding platforms). Partnerships with private education providers (e.g., STEM.edu.lk) and corporate sponsors (e.g., Commercial Bank) can subsidize participation costs and ensure equitable access, particularly for rural schools.

2. **Launch a National STEAM Teacher Accreditation Programme:** Introduce a national certification scheme targeting 5,000 teachers by 2028, with priority given to female and rural educators. Financing should draw on existing MoE allocations, cost-sharing arrangements with private institutions (e.g., NSBM Green University), and technical assistance from UNESCO. Community-based peer training networks can serve as a contingency mechanism in periods of fiscal constraint.

3. **Establish Regional STEM Hubs:** Develop 10 regional STEM/STEAM hubs by 2029, integrating private-sector technologies (e.g., ANKA Tech robotics) and financed through a blended model combining MoE funding, corporate sponsorships, and provincial government contributions. The hubs should prioritize neurodivergent and low-income learners and adopt scalable, modular designs to remain viable under fiscal pressure.

4. **Transition to Portfolio-Based Assessments:** Gradually replace rote-based examinations with portfolio-style assessments that emphasize creativity, problem-solving, and applied learning. Initial pilots should be conducted in urban schools, with subsequent expansion through teacher networks and digital platforms to ensure cost efficiency and equitable access.

5. **Strengthen Regulation of Private Providers:** Establish a national accreditation framework for private STEM providers to ensure affordability, quality, and alignment with MoE objectives. Regulatory oversight can be co-financed by local universities and industry partners. To enhance political and institutional feasibility, implementation should begin with voluntary accreditation pilots in 2026, supported by stakeholder consultations with institutions such as SLIIT and NSBM to co-develop affordability benchmarks.

Given post-2022 fiscal constraints, these reforms should be supported through a blended financing approach that reallocates **approximately 20% of existing MoE programme budgets (around LKR 300 million annually)** and leverages corporate tax incentives, drawing on lessons from successful STEM policy frameworks in Malaysia to reduce pressure on public finances.

Feasibility and Implementation Summary

A SWOT [Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats] analysis indicates that the proposed STEM/STEAM reforms are feasible, driven by diversified financing, local resource mobilization, and the integration of culturally relevant projects to enhance student engagement. Equity objectives are embedded through targeted measures for female, rural, and neurodivergent learners, supported by a combination of public funding and corporate partnerships. However, risks to scalability and equity remain, including limited evidence on private-sector program effectiveness, rural infrastructure gaps, teacher shortages, and weak regulatory enforcement.

Opportunities lie in expanding public–private partnerships, leveraging open-source learning tools, and establishing regional STEM hubs to improve access and build AI-relevant skills. Key threats—post-2022 fiscal volatility, resistance to interdisciplinary models, and weak monitoring—can be mitigated through phased implementation, sustained government advocacy, and strengthened oversight mechanisms.

To ensure operational feasibility, reforms should follow a phased rollout: pilot mandatory STEAM modules in 50 urban schools by 2026 (LKR 200M); scale national teacher accreditation to 1,000 educators annually from 2026 (LKR 800M by 2028); and establish 10 regional STEM hubs incrementally (3 by 2026; 7 by 2029) at an estimated cost of LKR 500M, financed through blended Ministry of Education and corporate funding. Cost estimates are benchmarked against World Bank–supported South Asian initiatives and should be reviewed annually.

Overall, phased implementation and blended financing make these reforms achievable and fiscally prudent within Sri Lanka's current economic context.

Table: Feasibility, Risks, and Implementation Plan for STEM/STEAM Reforms

Category	Key Elements	Policy Implications
Strengths	• Diversified funding (public + corporate) • Local resource mobilization • Culturally relevant, project-based STEAM learning • Equity measures for female, rural, and neurodivergent learners	Enhances fiscal resilience, student engagement, and inclusive participation
Weaknesses	• Limited evidence on long-term impact of private-sector programs • Rural infrastructure gaps • STEM teacher shortages • Weak regulatory enforcement	Risks uneven quality, inequitable access, and limited scalability
Opportunities	• Public–private partnerships • Open-source STEM tools • Regional STEM hubs • Growing demand for AI-ready skills	Expands access, reduces costs, and aligns education with future labor markets
Threats	• Post-2022 fiscal volatility • Resistance to interdisciplinary education • Cultural pushback against STEAM models • Weak monitoring and evaluation	Requires phased rollout, advocacy, and strong oversight

Conclusion

Sri Lanka has a narrow but strategic window to leverage STEM/STEAM education reform as a driver of economic recovery, skills development, and social equity. By aligning national reforms with the best global practices and establishing clear regulatory frameworks for private-sector participation, the Ministry of Education can overcome institutional fragmentation, expand access for underserved populations, and stimulate innovation. The 2025–2029 reform agenda, supported by World Bank financing and expert consultations, will require strong implementation discipline, inter-agency coordination, and sustained political oversight to succeed. Progress should be measured through outcome-focused indicators, including a 35% increase in female and rural STEM enrollment by 2030 and tailored learning accommodations for at least 20% of neurodivergent learners, with annual Ministry reporting and independent audits ensuring accountability. With decisive leadership and evidence-based execution, Sri Lanka can position itself as a regional model for inclusive, future-ready science education by 2030.

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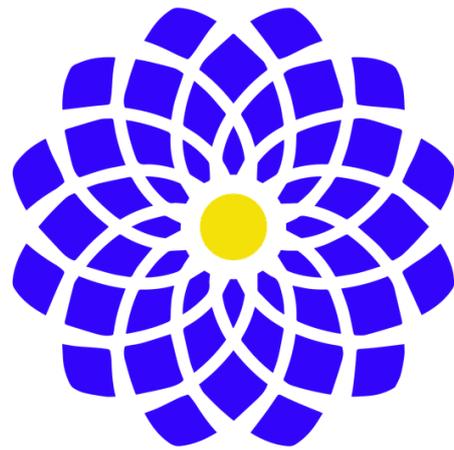UNESCO, 2022. Non-state actors in education: Who chooses? Who loses? Global Education Monitoring Report 2022, South Asia. Paris: UNESCO. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383550 (Accessed: 16 September 2025)

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