


Sri Lanka



■ Youth and Social Media Training on how to use social media to lobby authorities to address educational issues

Executive Summary

Civil Society Spotlight Report on the SDG 4 Implementation Status in Sri Lanka

| COUNTRY FACTS AND FIGURES | |
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| TOTAL POPULATION: | 20.877 million (UNESCO, 2017) |
| POPULATION AGED 14 YEARS AND YOUNGER: | 5.013 million (24%) (UNESCO, 2017) |
| GNI PER CAPITA: | US\$ 3,850 (World Bank, 2017) |
| INCOME GROUP: | Lower Middle Income Status (World Bank, 2018) |
| HDI VALUE AND RANK: | 0.770, 76 out of 189 (UNDP, 2017) |
| POVERTY HEADCOUNT RATIO AT NATIONAL POVERTY LINES (% OF POPULATION): | 4.1% (World Bank, 2016) |
| OUT OF SCHOOL RATE: | 6.35% (UNESCO, 2019) |
| OUT OF SCHOOL: | 12,056 children (UNESCO, 2017) 22,296 adolescents- 12,772 female and 9,524 male (UNESCO, 2017) |
| LITERACY RATE (15-24 YEARS): | 98.86%: Female 99.15%: Male 98.55% (UNESCO, 2017) |
| LITERACY RATE (15 YEARS AND OLDER): | 91.9%: Female 90.97%: Male 92.98% (UNESCO, 2017) |
| EDUCATION EXPENDITURE: | 2.81% of the GDP and 14.5% of the total government expenditure (UNESCO, 2017) |

The Implementation of the SDGs

Since signing on to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015, the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) has taken numerous initiatives towards facilitating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including the introduction of a cabinet ministry on sustainable development, the establishment of a parliamentary select committee on the SDGs, and the enactment of the Sustainable Development Act in the parliament. Unfortunately, by the end of December 2018, the same government has abandoned the ministry and its plans, raising questions over who is now responsible for coordinating the implementation of the SDGs.

While the Sustainable Development Act was passed in parliament in 2017 and the Sustainable Development Council was appointed, no effective action has been taken to formulate a National Sustainable Development Policy and Strategy and implement national programmes and projects in alignment with the SDGs. The Sri Lankan government has so far failed to formulate a comprehensive national SDG policy framework and develop a strategic plan for its implementation. Therefore, no financing plan has been drawn, and no monitoring, evaluation, and reporting mechanism for the SDGs has been established. The policy and institutional incoherence are an impediment towards progress on the implementation of the SDGs while the lack of a plan to localise the SDGs hinders long-term aspirations for an inclusive transformation.

Reviewing the Progress on SDG 4

SDG 4 has not been effectively and adequately addressed by the concerned authorities. Three Ministries with the primary responsibility of implementing SDG 4 targets - the Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Skills Development and Vocational Training - have not been able to establish coordination and formulate a policy framework or adopt the SDGs into the existing education policy frameworks. There is no central focal point or focal mechanism for SDG 4 in the country, while fragmented approaches continue to be employed to address the related issues.

It is imperative that the education system in the country address the key issues that undermine any serious efforts to achieve SDG 4. While Sri Lanka demonstrates many positive indicators on education, these programmes and policies have not been aligned with the SDGs. Consecutive governments have not given adequate priority

to education for sustainable development; gender, human rights, inclusion, peer-to-peer learning equality are in policy documents but not in practice. The quality of education in the country is highly questioned as it heavily focuses on exam-based curricula. This means that the education system fails to create value-based holistic citizens and provide adequate supply to market needs at the same time. It is also worth mentioning that payment for private tutoring and the shortage of skilled teachers in rural schools are critical factors in education and examination outcomes, and create unequal opportunities between the rich and poor.

CSO Spaces and Engagement with the Government in the Implementation of the SDGs and SDG 4

Stakeholders who are contributing to support the fulfilment of SDG 4 have had few or no engagement opportunities to form a plan of implementation or towards collective action with government authorities. The lack of dialogue between stakeholders and public authorities relevant to SDG 4 has created uncertainties on taking forward the targets and establishing a monitoring process.

In early 2016, the Ministry of Sustainable Development and Wildlife (MSDW) introduced the 'National Sustainable Development Engagement Platform' to take forward their flagship initiative with the theme, 'A Sustainable Nation – An Inclusive Transformation.' However, after a successful year of engaging stakeholders in planning the 'National SDG Action Plan (2017-2020)' and the dialogues around 'Provincial Sustainability Plans', MSDW officials eventually abandoned the platform. The absence of an official stakeholder engagement platform was badly felt during the VNR process which saw a bureaucratic decision-making approach applied against the 2016 practice of planning with the full engagement of multi-stakeholders.

The Role of CSOs in the SDG Implementation and Review Process

The Sri Lanka Stakeholder SDG Platform (SLS SDG Platform) was established in March 2018 by a collective of civil society

organisations (CSOs), private sector, academia, professional associations, and trade unions to facilitate an inclusive transformation towards sustainable development. The objectives of the 'SLS SDG Platform' are to facilitate an inclusive transformation, and to independently monitor and report on the implementation of the SDGs in Sri Lanka. Towards ensuring accountability of SDG implementation, representatives from civil society, business, academia, media, as well as the local and national governments should be able to congregate periodically to assess the status on sustainability and devise collective strategies for prosperity.

The lack of honest spaces for engagement in the official VNR process and the limited scope of the investigation into truthful stocktaking compelled stakeholders to seek an alternative reporting pathway. The Sri Lanka Stakeholder SDG Platform, therefore, decided to formulate the Sri Lanka Voluntary People's Review (VPR) alternately. The VPR is an initiative to monitor and report on the status of implementing the SDGs, keeping with the objectives of an inclusive transformation towards sustainable development. It also kicks off the 'Independent Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Mechanism' on the SDGs in Sri Lanka.

The VPR offers a macro analysis on the key aspects of mainstreaming the SDGs, integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development – environmental, social and economic, policy and institutional coherence, financing the sustainable development agenda, and data readiness for monitoring and evaluation.

Issues in the Education Sector

The right to free education, including university education, is enshrined in Sri Lanka's Constitution. It mandates compulsory schooling between the ages of 5 and 14. Admission at the undergraduate level to public universities is based solely on the results of the General Certificate of Education- Advanced Level (G.C.E- A/L) Examination and the Z-score, which considers the difficulty level of the subjects. In this context, only 6 per cent of the students who sit the examination are admitted to the universities.

Although the right to free education is enshrined in Sri Lanka's Constitution, the gap in infrastructure for school education



■ Consultation meeting on Lifelong education with youth representatives

Overview of Policies and Government Agencies for the Youth

The National Youth Services Council of Sri Lanka defines youth as people from 13 to 29 years of age.

The Ministry of Youth Affairs & Skill Development is responsible for youth affairs and is the “main institution” responsible for implementing the national youth policy (2014). The Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour and Labour Relations, the Ministry of Sports, Culture and the Arts, and the Ministry of Child Development and Women’s Affairs are other government agencies that provide special attention to the youth through their projects and programmes.

The National Youth Services Council (NYSC), also known as Sri Lanka Youth, acts as the focal point for youth clubs and organisations. It delivers extensive programmes, such as youth awards on education, sports, media, international youth affairs, skills and training. It has close links to government ministries and receives government funding.

Policy and Legislation

The National Youth Policy (2014) aims to “develop the full potential of young people to enable their active participation in national development for a just and equitable society.” The policy focuses on nine areas for policy intervention, namely education; skills development and vocational training; youth employment; civics and citizenship; youth work; health and well-being; social exclusion and discrimination; peace and reconciliation; and arts, recreation, sports, and leisure. As a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, Sri Lanka is a signatory of the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (PAYE) 2006-2015.

Youth Consultations on the SDGs and SDG 4

The Coalition for Educational Development (CED- Sri Lanka) conducted a youth consultation on March 16, 2019 in Colombo City. Eighteen youth representing 16 districts were gathered and asked to present their current engagement in youth work in their respective organisations or communities. It was found that although a majority of the participants are aware of the SDGs, none had clear and adequate knowledge of the goals and targets. This indicates that the government mechanisms and approaches to raise the public’s awareness on the country’s development plan has not yet reached the general public, particularly the youth. Opportunities for the youth to participate in the preparation of development plans are limited. CED has also remarked that the government only had a few engagements with youth constituencies in government-led VNR processes.

Issues of inclusion, equality, financing, and governance in the education system were continually raised by youth participants. A majority of their responses pointed out governance issues as detrimental to education. For example, the government would rather obtain political advantages than address the ground realities and respond to the needs of the education sector. Other challenges under governance include the inappropriate

continues to create and exacerbate inequalities in the education system and sector.

Sri Lanka is an outlier among middle-income countries in terms of government expenditure on education and health. Expenditure on education is only 2.8 per cent of GDP in 2012-13, far below the 4.8 per cent average for all middle-income countries. Such a level of spending makes it difficult to overcome disparities, improve learning achievements, and attain the country’s goal of becoming a knowledge-based economy.

The fragmented bureaucratic culture in Sri Lanka has prevented an interagency planning process for SDG 4. It has therefore been difficult for civil society and stakeholder groups to work on a collective programme for SDG 4. There is also no independent mechanism to conduct the independent monitoring, evaluation, and reporting of the SDGs in Sri Lanka.

The education system has not been able to effectively address the changing financial and market trends. Shortages of technically skilled personnel for the marketplace are a key issue due to the lack of equitable treatment and investment

allocation of resources, uninformed priority setting, and frequent changes in policies. While Sri Lanka provides free education from primary to tertiary level, the country allocates only 2.8 per cent of the GDP to education. Resources have also been allocated without public consultation and proper coordination. Some schools have been provided with more facilities than others, entrenching existing inequalities within the education system. This impelled the students’ union to demand the allocation of 6 per cent of the GDP to education.

Other key concerns of the youth are as follows:

- The shortage of teachers with expertise on the subject matter is a major obstacle to obtaining a quality education.
- Young people from wealthy families have more academic advantages than those from marginalised communities because they have the means to enrol in tutoring and other education services, find better schools, learn the English language, and participate in social and recreational activities.
- Unplanned urbanisation also proves to be an obstacle. Most of the youth, especially males, migrate to urban or metropolitan areas to seek jobs. As a result, the percentage of males enrolled in higher education is significantly lower than for females.
- Another cause for serious concern is the poor infrastructure that impedes persons with disabilities (PWDs) from accessing education. A majority of the youth participants noted that school in remote areas suffer from the lack of basic facilities, while schools in urban areas enjoy sophisticated equipment.

The participants then proposed that the government take the appropriate actions to provide subsidiaries and loans to advance education opportunities for disadvantaged groups. The urgent need to improve facilities, public spaces, and school infrastructures to provide disability-friendly environments for PWDs has also been underscored during the youth consultation.

Youth Recommendations for Education

To overcome the issues in the education system of Sri Lanka, the youth recommends to:

Increase opportunities for young people to enter universities by providing scholarships or subsidy for students from marginalised communities;

- Introduce new curriculum or training courses to vocational training centres, including life skills development to meet the demands of the job market in Sri Lanka and in the world. Education is integral for the preparation of the youth for work and life;
- Implement the policy recommendations of the youth commission;
- Equally distribute human and financial resources to urban and rural areas in order to narrow disparities across regions;
- Establish youth counseling or guiding programmes in every sector, including education and career development for the youth; and
- Ensure institutionalised mechanisms for youth participation in education governance both at the national and local levels.

in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector. Unequal attention and recognition are given to vocational education and is treated with lower quality of education standards in social ranking. Whilst infrastructure for delivering vocational education is in place, it is doubtful whether its delivery and the selection of trades are satisfactory.

In the absence of a coordinating ministry for the SDGs, education sector stakeholders will need to effectively coordinate themselves and lobby the related ministries and agencies to ensure that SDG 4 targets are implemented and the progress is regularly monitored. A stakeholder mapping for the SDG 4 is necessary for the process of convening and coordinating stakeholder engagement and ensuring the effective planning of a national implementation strategy.

The highest value of the key indicators in relation to the education sector in Sri Lanka masks the significant provincial level disparities. While some of the large national schools are provided with the best infrastructures, equipment, and facilities, many rural schools continue to suffer from the lack of the minimum basic requirements. Access to early

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■ Youth participants sharing their perspectives on education reforms during a youth consultation on SDG 4

childhood education is still low in Sri Lanka compared to most middle- and high-income countries. Disparities in income and geographic location persist, and a large share of early education centres lack adequate resources for teaching and learning, especially for children with special needs.

Children with disabilities are admitted to formal schools under the inclusive education programme that targets 850 special education units in government schools and 25 assisted special schools. However, the reality is far from ideal. Some barriers to children with disabilities' access to education include the inadequate physical infrastructure and the lack of properly trained teachers who can detect and assist children with learning disabilities, as well as workers who can ensure that these children are able to effectively integrate into education services. Equally important to address is the lack of access to early screening that can help detect a disability. Delays in the identification of disabilities deprive the child of systematic help and, in many cases, create a lifelong struggle.

Recommendations

■ The lack of a national policy and an action plan for education could be identified as a key obstacle to the achievement of SDG 4 in Sri Lanka. The government needs to pay adequate attention to accelerating the policy formulation process and enacting the recommendations.

- To achieve the country's goal of becoming a knowledge-based economy, the government must take measures to increase its expenditure allocated to education to at least 6 per cent of the GDP.
- In the context of abolishing the Ministry of Sustainable Development, it should be noted that a mechanism needs to be established by the government to carry out a formal monitoring, evaluation, and reporting system.
- The provincial education policies need to be aligned to the national education policies, especially those relevant to the Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) sector.
- Awareness-raising programmes are necessary to increase the participation of the general public and to motivate the dedication of the government officials in the process of achieving the SDGs more efficiently.
- To ensure that no one is left behind, Sri Lanka must focus its efforts on providing more opportunities for adult education and lifelong learning that have been neglected during the past decades. Opportunities for non-formal and informal learning should be improved as well.
- Providing more spaces for the active engagement of civil society organisations in the planning and implementation processes is another significant requirement for the fulfilment of SDG x 4 in the country. •



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Coalition for Education Development (CED) is a consortium of organisations involved in the education sector at national provincial and local levels in Sri Lanka. Since its inception in 2004, CED has been involved in promoting civil society participation in formulating and implementing policies related to education in Sri Lanka. It is committed to steer the civil society participation as a vital part in the achievement of goals and targets of EFA, MDG and SDG declarations. Since SDG 4 goals provide the guideline for a new vision for education by 2030, CED has already addressed the issues of promoting civil society involvement in education development tasks of Sri Lanka. CED is a member organisation of ASPBAE.



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