



2024 CIVIL SOCIETY SPOTLIGHT REPORT ON SDG 4

I. COUNTRY CONTEXT

Following the completion of the First Review under the 48-month Extended Fund Facility (EFF) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Government of Sri Lanka received the second tranche under the EFF on 14 December 2023. While the economy grew by 1.6% in the third quarter of 2023, inflation, which was at 56% in December 2022, has decreased to 4.2% a year later.

The government increased electricity tariffs and phased out fuel subsidies, contributing to an upsurge in the price of all the essential items. In addition, since 1 January 2024, the Value Added Tax (VAT) has been increased up to 18% on a large number of goods and services as per the conditions set by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Due to the economic crisis that prevailed from 2021 to 2022, the country's poverty rate doubled to 25%. The overall unemployment rate reported for females is 6.7% and 3.7% for males. The government's new social protection program "Aswesuma" was criticised by several parties claiming that this has led to the exclusion of many people who do not have an adequate standard of living. Amid widespread protests, the government agreed to review the procedures.

Sri Lanka's expenditure on Education is relatively low and is only 1.2% of its GDP in 2022. Sri Lanka's public investment ratio in the three pillars of sustainability: economic, social and environment is 80:19:1. Of which, physical infrastructure development attracts the largest investment share. These discrepancies are even visible in the Budget 2024. A single Ministry, the Ministry of Finance, Economic Stabilisation and National Policies, receives 62% of total capital expenditures while only the balance 39% is shared among 29 other line ministries, including health, education and environment.

Both presidential and parliamentary elections are slated to take place in 2024. Both the government and the opposition are busy preparing themselves for polls.

In September 2023, the government published an Online

Safety Bill to prevent the publication of false, threatening, alarming, or distressing statements on the internet, but activists said that it would further restrict speech.

II. PROGRESS TOWARDS THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SDG 4

The president appointed a cabinet subcommittee to develop a National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) and this new framework was compiled by an expert committee approved by the cabinet in December 2023. The government announced that this will be considered as the fundamental document for developing all future policies. This framework has been presented under three domains namely 1. Teaching, learning and credentialing 2. Governance and 3 Resources and Investments. It should be noted that there is a separate section for digital learning. Similar to the previous policy/policy frameworks, the present NEPF is also developed without adequate consultation with the relevant stakeholders.

Several segments of the community have criticised the proposed reforms claiming that some of the proposed reforms have a negative impact on the equity and inclusiveness of education in Sri Lanka. In addition, it was also revealed that the NEPF has not paid adequate attention to the previous policies and framework and this has led to leaving out the valuable findings/recommendations and making unrealistic assumptions which could have negative consequences in the sector. Sri Lanka intends to become a developed country by 2048 and most of the targets in the framework have been set up to achieve in 2048 that is far beyond the 2030 post-development agenda.

With continuous support from consecutive governments even before the independence up to now, Sri Lanka has been able to make significant achievements in the education sector. Sri Lanka reports an impressive literacy rate for males and females 94.3% and 92.3%, respectively (Census 2021).

COUNTRY FACTS AND FIGURES	
Population:	21,832,143 (2022)
GNI per Capita (PPP\$)	13,990 (2023)
Income Group	Lower-Middle Income
HDI: Value/Rank	0.780/ 78th out of 193 (2022)
Gini Index	37.7 (2019)
Education Expenditure (% GDP)	1.20% (2022)
Upper Secondary Completion Rate Female / Male	84.8% Female / 78% Male (MOE, 2020)
Literacy Rate (15-64 Yrs.) Female / Male	92.5 (2022) 91.8 / 93.3
2024 SDG Score/ Rank	67.43 / 93th out of 166
SDG 4 Trend	■ Significant challenges remain SDG 4 Dashboard ↑ On track
Climate-related disasters:	
Total No. of disasters* Regional Mean/ Median	13 (2020-22) 9.3 / 4
Risk Management Index:	
Climate-driven Hazard & Exposure	4.6 (2022) Regional Mean: 4.6
Lack of coping capacity	4 (2022) Regional Mean: 4.3
Vulnerability	2.7 (2022) Regional Mean: 3.4
*Drought, Extreme temperature, Flood, Landslide, Storm, Wildfire	

Even though it encountered the worst economic hardships during the past two-year period, Sri Lanka has been able to maintain a high school enrolment ratio (98%) for the primary education sector. However, during the past two-year period, the completion rate of primary education has been reduced from 93% in 2019 to 90% in 2020 (MOE 2015-2020).

The Ministry of Education of Sri Lanka reports that many children with disabilities are mainstreamed in regular classrooms and special education units in schools. However, UNICEF's country profile on Disability-Inclusive Education Practices in Sri Lanka reveals that children with disabilities continue to face barriers to access, participation, and achievement in education.

The average student-teacher ratio in primary schools is approximately 23:1 and Sri Lanka has achieved near gender parity in primary and secondary education (World Bank Data). Access to higher education remains competitive, with a limited number of university places available.

Sri Lanka is a climate-vulnerable tropical island nation. The UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index' (CCRI) ranks Sri Lanka at 61st place. Every year, heavy rain, floods and landslides have a considerable impact on the education of the students in certain districts.

The Disaster Management Centre (DMC) of Sri Lanka has been established under the Sri Lanka Disaster Management Act No. 13 OF 2005. DMC has the authority and executive powers to take the necessary action during disasters. The National Policy for Disaster Management was approved in 2010 and under the collective response section, it has mentioned that the private sector, NGOs, and community-based organisations (CBOS) should plan and implement disaster management programmes in close coordination with the relevant government agencies at the national and provincial levels.

Sri Lanka's general education curricula do not adequately cover topics including the fundamentals of climate science and the human causes of climate change. Sri Lanka also has not allocated funds for Climate Change Education. The President of Sri Lanka, at the Conference of the Parties (COP) 27 Summit proposed the idea of establishing a climate change university in Sri Lanka in 2024. This will provide room for scientists, environmentalists, researchers, policymakers, and development practitioners worldwide" (CFC Sri Lanka, 2023). In 2007, the Ministry of Education commenced to set up the School Disaster Management Committees in the public schools, however, these committees are nominal and not functioning effectively.



The State University System in Sri Lanka offers various graduate, and post-graduate degrees focused on Environmental Sciences, including Climate Change, but only a handful of the youth get the opportunity to study the subject deeply, which should be included in the knowledge base of all citizens.

Government spending on higher education in the last decade has been under 2% of its GDP, except for a brief rise to 3% in 2016. The year 2022 recorded the lowest GDP allocation of 1.2% to education in its history of 50 years. It is observed that the household private spending on education is significantly higher in Sri Lanka. According to the 2019 expenditure survey carried out by the Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, it shows that on average a family spends Rs.2,401 (USD 7.95) on education which is 5.9% of total spending in a month. The majority of spending goes towards private tuition (48%), stationery (14%) and higher educational activities (9%). This was severely impacted by the country's economic crisis in 2022.

There is high competition to enter public universities as a result only 4% of the students receive the opportunity to have free higher education. To address this issue, the government initiated an interest-free loan scheme for private sector students, called the Interest-Free Students Loan Scheme (IFSLS). This is offered to Sri Lankan Students who have passed their G.C.E (Advanced Level) Examinations.

It is vital to give opportunities for students not only at state universities but also at private universities. The President emphasised the need to improve the private share of Sri Lankan higher education in the budget speech made in November 2023 (Budget Speech, 2023). Meanwhile, the student movement and social activists identified this as a move to privatise the public education system. The government also proposed to set up a Quality Assurance and Accreditation Commission to ensure quality and accreditation of degree-level courses delivered by the private higher education campuses.

With the reopening of the schools, the attention paid to hybrid learning has been significantly decreased, yet the Ministry has arranged to continue its digital platforms. The private sector actors in the education sector continue their hybrid learning strategies and several online education facilities/options have evolved in the post-pandemic era. It was reported that the proportion of youth and adults with information and communication technology (ICT) skills has increased from 32.3% in 2020 to 36.5% in 2022 (Labour force study DCSs 2015-2022).

The scope of non-formal education was narrowed down to encompass literacy and vocational aspects only. Sri Lanka is facing a problem in providing workers with the necessary knowledge and skills for the current job market demands. The NEPF 2023 does not mention adult learning and education (ALE) and lifelong learning (LLL). The absence of a national policy for ALE, along with the necessary political commitment and financing, is the main challenge in advancing ALE and LLL in Sri Lanka (CED, 2022).

Sri Lanka's secondary education enrolment rate was around 90% in 2018. However, the enrolment rate for tertiary education is around 23%. The remaining student cohort, which is the larger portion, chooses various career options and mainly contributes to the informal labour market, which accounts for nearly 70% of employed persons. The Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC) is the quality assurance and regulatory body for TVET in Sri Lanka. TVEC's Strategic Plan 2024-2028 has been prepared in line with the Government's Education policy. This Strategic Plan 2024- 2028 envisages uplifting the TVET system of Sri Lanka to provide training as required by the industry, which would ultimately enhance the economic and social development of the country.

It is reported that 17% of the population is facing moderate acute food insecurity 31% of children aged under 5 are malnourished 20% of children aged under 5 suffer from wasting (WFP, 2024). The School Meal Program 2024 seeks to address nutritional deficiencies among students, enhance daily attendance rates, instil healthy eating and lifestyle habits, elevate academic performance, and promote local culinary traditions. This year's school feeding program benefits 1.6 million students, encompassing primary grade pupils from 9,134 government schools, as well as schools with fewer than 100 students.

Sri Lanka presents a mixed picture, with positive achievements in education and health indicators, as well as negative developments such as gender inequality in employment and political participation, and issues of gender-based violence. Out of the 8.5 million economically active population, 72% are males and only 35% are females. Women constitute 52% of Sri Lanka's population, but female representation in parliament is only 5.3%. The labour force participation of women as of 2021 is 33.6% of the total population. According to the findings of the study conducted in 2019 by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 90% of Sri Lankan women and girls have faced sexual harassment in public buses and trains at least once in their lifetime.



According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report 2021, Sri Lanka ranked (HDI) for 2021 0.782 — which puts the country in the high human development category—positioning it at 73 out of 191 countries and territories. The same UNDP report ranked Sri Lanka 75th in the gender inequality index (GII) with a GII of 0.383. A GII of 0.383 indicates that gender inequality along these three dimensions is low in Sri Lanka, but it is ranked 75th suggesting that gender inequality in Sri Lanka is higher compared to 74 other countries.

III. CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT IN THE SDG 4 IMPLEMENTATION, FOLLOW-UP, AND MONITORING

The National Education Policy Framework 2023 was prepared by an expert committee appointed by a cabinet subcommittee. However, the procedures followed in preparing this framework are unclear. Academia, civil society, unions, and student movements highly criticised this framework on different aspects and one of the major points is the inadequate consultation of the stakeholders in this process.

The National Policy for Disaster Management was approved in 2010 and under the collective response section, it mentioned that private sector NGOs and CBOS should plan and implement disaster management programmes in close coordination with the relevant government agencies at the national and provincial levels. In 2007, the Ministry of Education commenced to set up School Disaster Management Committees (DMC) in public



schools. In addition, the DMC should establish and consult the district disaster management committees. However, it should be noted that these committees are nominal and not functioning effectively. The authorities have not paid adequate attention to the implementation of these policies/plans and therefore even after two decades natural disasters, especially flooding and landslides, regularly have negative impacts on education.

Despite the civil society's ability to work with local government mechanisms to provide fundamental services for promoting equality and eradicating poverty on multiple fronts, they are not included in the processes for planning, evaluating, and managing Sri Lanka's transformation. Such exclusion has caused a disparity between organised development initiatives and Sri Lanka's actual development requirements.

The dominance of state data collection entities in controlling data and information has undermined Sri Lanka's data democracy, negatively impacting civil society initiatives and grassroots development efforts. Sri Lanka's macro data reporting mechanisms crucial for sustainable policy-making do not incorporate data collected by civil society organisations.

Stakeholders related to SDG 4 have had minimum or no engagement opportunities in forming a plan of implementation nor engaging in collective action with government authorities. The lack of a dialogue between stakeholders and public authorities relevant to SDG 4 has created uncertainties around making progress in the targets and establishing a monitoring process. To implement a quality education framework, a monitoring mechanism in all sectors of education should take place with equipped facilities physically and psychologically.

“The government needs to take several measures to promote good governance and accountability in Sri Lanka. A key transformation required to achieve the SDGs is political will, accountability, transparency, responsive and collaborative institutions, and efficient service delivery. It requires an ethical obligation to improve performance and be accountable for one's actions.”

— CED Sri Lanka Response to the ASPBAE Survey
for the Mid-Term Review on SDG 4 (2024)

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Although Sri Lanka has been able to overcome the economic crisis with the support of the international community and IMF, the remedial measures implemented to resolve the issue have negatively affected the general public. While inflation has been decreasing the prices of essential items have not been reduced. This whole situation has made a significant impact on the entire education system in Sri Lanka. The National Education Policy Framework need to be reviewed with wider consultation and necessary revisions need to be taken to ensure inclusive quality education. It is therefore recommended to:

- 1. Reforms of the education sector and the need to appreciate the timely initiatives taken by the government.** Since education is a very important policy area of a country and it has a bearing on the nation's destination and its future generation, reforms in education are required to be done very carefully consulting all stakeholders and considering expert views as well.
- 2. Equity and inclusion in education** will only be a distant dream if existing inequalities in the distribution of physical, financial, and human resources are not addressed by the National Education Policy Framework as a priority. It is advisable and also imperative that the policy framework pays attention to this and explore options to bring these underprivileged and underserved schools to a national standard to make the policy goals and objectives a reality.
- 3. Ensure the necessary action to increase the knowledge on climate change education** and disaster risk reduction techniques by including these areas in the school curriculum and tertiary and vocational education sector.
- 4. Reform the Sri Lankan economy whilst minimising adverse effects on vulnerable groups.** This will require stronger multilateral and bilateral partnerships and cooperation with development partners. The government must also integrate the concepts of equity and inclusion in government policies at national and sub-national levels, especially in education.
- 5. Provide and institutionalise more meaningful spaces and opportunities for civil society** to engage in planning and decision-making processes as well as in implementation and monitoring.
- 6. Review the roles and responsibilities of the Sustainable Development Council and Ministry of Education (MOE)** as the focal point for SDG 4 towards ensuring greater policy-institutional coherence, monitoring and evaluation, and follow-up and review.
- 7. Ensure the quality of alternative online education by reviewing existing curricula/ pedagogy to prioritise the most suitable sections/units** that can be easily adapted for online education. Both the MOE and the National Institute of Education (NIE) should lead the aforementioned process in collaboration with the Provincial Ministries of Education.
- 8. Introduce non-formal education, including adult learning and education (ALE) and lifelong learning programs at the district level, while establishing related facilities.** The responsibility of parents and family members in supporting their child's education and providing an enabling environment has been increasingly emphasised during the crises. In addition, due to the existing economic crisis, parents and adults are facing numerous difficulties and suffering mental stress.



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The **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 steering 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 is working with multiple stakeholders including the government sector to address the important issues related to education and achieve the desired goals in Sri Lanka. CED Sri Lanka is a member organisation of the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE).

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