

## Civil Society Spotlight Report on SDG 4 for HLPF 2022



### I. COUNTRY CONTEXT

Sri Lanka is facing the most critical economic crisis since its independence in 1948. With more than USD 50 billion in external debt and a shortage of foreign exchange reserves, the country is currently struggling to pay for essential imports. Due to the shortage of fuel and gas supply, people have to remain in big queues for more than 24 hours. In this context, farmers and civil society organisations (CSOs) organised massive protests against the government during the last year. These protests forced the Prime Minister to resign on 10 May and a new cabinet was appointed by the President that comprised the representation of several political parties, including the main opposition. Although there are some changes in the government, they have been unable to address the main problems of the people.

COVID-19 made significant, long-term negative impacts on the Sri Lankan economy. The country has experienced low investment flows, disruptions in supply chains, setbacks in human capital accumulation, as well as a substantial increase in debt. According to the Ministry of Finance, Sri Lanka has incurred a total of LKR 117.5 billion (USD 322 million) in 2020 and LKR 53.0 billion (USD 145 million)<sup>1</sup> from January-June 2021 as expenses for the country's COVID-19 response. Special relief schemes were introduced to mitigate

the impact on the livelihood of the poor and marginalised communities.

The impact of the pandemic on vulnerable and marginalised groups remains critical even amidst the social protection programmes introduced by the government. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Policy tracker, Sri Lanka's expenditure on COVID-19 response is much lower than its South Asian peers where only 0.1% of the GDP was spent on the health sector and 0.7 % of the GDP on non-health sector expenditure.

The Central Bank of Sri Lanka on 12 April officially announced that Sri Lanka will default on its external debt pending a bailout package from the IMF. International rating agencies also downgraded Sri Lanka last year, effectively blocking the country from accessing foreign capital markets to raise new loans and meet the demand for food and fuel. Headline inflation increased drastically. Food inflation in Colombo set a record high of 80% and transport inflation is 120% in the month of June. Nearly 5 million people, or 22% of the Sri Lankan population, are food insecure and need assistance, with some limiting portion sizes, eating less nutritious food, or even skipping meals.

The education sector has been hard hit both by the pandemic and the economic crisis in the country. Schools and education institutions were partially or fully closed for 20 months during these two years. The Ministry of Education (MoE) decided to close the schools in the major town areas due to inadequate transport facilities owing to a lack of fuel.

The school closures have been extended and school days are reduced. This has resulted in a limited engagement of learners, an increase in the number of drop-outs, and worsening exclusion of disadvantaged communities from their right to education. In an attempt to continue learning, the Ministry has proposed to conduct online classes. In the 2022 budget, it was proposed to provide facilities for online learning for public schools, but these plans have not been implemented. All the government universities have been closed due to the lack of basic supplies. Students are encouraged to engage in online education, however, the lack of facilities and the frequent power cuts have become barriers to continuing their education.

### II. CHALLENGES IN AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

With the continuous support from the consecutive governments even prior to the independence up to now, Sri Lanka has been able to make significant achievements in the education sector. The country has made significant achievements with regard to SDG 4.1. The net enrolment for primary education is 99% and for junior secondary level is 84%. Free education policy has contributed to enabling the general public, including the poor and marginalised groups, to access education and develop their potential to secure a decent lifestyle.

<sup>1</sup> The currency converter used for the LKR figures in this document was XE Sri Lankan Rupee to US Dollar conversion, from <https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/convert/?Amount=5300000000&From=LKR&To=USD>

Although the enrolment ratio for primary and lower secondary education is high, there are issues in relation to upper secondary and tertiary levels of education. The school dropout population has increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the prevailing economic crisis. Gender parity has been achieved in Sri Lanka in Early Children's Education and junior secondary enrolment according to the Sri Lanka Education Assessment report published by the World Bank in 2017.

However, at the upper secondary and university level, the enrolment ratio of females has increased. The Sri Lankan education system has been highly criticised for its exam-centred curriculum that does not contribute to achieving the values of global citizenship. The language and religion-based school system further exaggerates existing demarcations of the community and has resulted in increased ethnic tension among the community.

In the latter part of 2021, schools reopened and started classes, but due to the high costs involved in transportation, parents are unable to send their children to school regularly. In June 2022, the authorities decided to close the schools for a two weeks period due to a lack of fuel to operate transport services. Again, this period was extended to another week. Now, the MoE decided to open schools only three days a week and they have emphasised home-based learning.

As the public schools remain closed or limit the number of days of operation, parents have given more attention to sending their children to private tuition classes which are expensive. However, the poor parents who are unable to afford these rates are avoiding private tuition classes and their children are excluded.

In addition, the decision made by the government to use online education as a remedial measure to classroom-based education highlighted the socio-economic inequalities in the educational framework and disparities in resource allocation. The attention to providing facilities and resources to improve the quality of online education has been diminished with the reopening of the schools in the latter 2021. However, the Ministry decided to continue online education to respond to the lack of transportation and other facilities due to the shortage of fuel and other essentials.

The digital divide deepened due to a lack of resources, infrastructure and inadequate awareness of using digital devices and online platforms. Teachers and students experienced high levels of stress when engaging in online teaching and learning with no former experience in using the platforms. According to statistics, less than 50% of students were able to engage in online learning, and 30% of students learned through TV which was a solution introduced by the government to deliver classes. In the 2022 budget speech, it was proposed to equip 200 schools with

cyber optic connections under the "Digitalise Sri Lanka" Programme. However, the financial constraints in the country pose challenges in implementing this project.

To address the issues with online education during the pandemic period, the government started a new television channel totally dedicated to education programmes that follow the school curriculum. In addition to that, at the request of the government and other actors, privately owned channels started education programmes that could be accessed free of charge. This could be considered a positive step that ensures inclusive education. Learners with disabilities, however, still encountered many difficulties in accessing education during the pandemic period due to the unavailability of assistive devices and disability-inclusive options to continue their education and the lack of transport facilities.

To implement alternative education strategies for children, parents should have the necessary competencies. In addition, developing and strengthening necessary skills among adults to cope with a crisis situation is also important. Financial literacy, Media Literacy, IT literacy, political literacy and stress management skills have become vital areas to deal with the crisis situation. Therefore, in the contemporary context, adult learning and education (ALE) has become more and more important to Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka has achieved high literacy rates within the South Asian region. In 2020, the adult literacy rate for Sri Lanka was 92.3%, and the youth literacy rate was at a staggering 98.8%. Sri Lanka's adult literacy rate fluctuated substantially in recent years, but it tended to increase through the 2006-2019 period ending at 92.3 % in 2020. 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.

In 2020, the MoE, in collaboration with the Provincial Education Authorities (PEAs) and national-level education institutions, developed a medium-term strategic plan for the period from 2020 to 2025. This sector development plan has been prepared based on the principles of 'learning for all' in the primary and secondary stages of education.

The Vision 2025 Policy Statement carries the commitment to transform Sri Lanka into a knowledge hub inspired by highly competitive, social market economic policies. In this futuristic effort, the document underscores the need to orient education for skill development; making 13 years of education available to all, increasing access to tertiary education, and expanding opportunities for vocational training, thus empowering youth to make a vibrant contribution to the economy. The government has recently introduced a number of measures to prepare the unemployed for

employment opportunities and to enhance the qualifications of existing workers by providing relevant training and skills. Introducing a technical stream in 2017 for upper secondary students could be considered a major step.

The Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC) introduced online education and ICT to achieve a sustainable system of distance learning for post-secondary education through the Distance Education Modernisation Project in 2003 (ADB, 2016).<sup>2</sup> However, the project focus was more on higher education institutions than TVET. Prior to COVID-19, only 36% of TVET institutions provided distance learning. The use of online platforms for delivering training accelerated during the pandemic. According to the COPE Budget Report (2019),<sup>3</sup> allocations to the TVET sector have reduced in real terms, contrary to the expectations set by government policy. The TVET budget was underspent by 25.6% with underspending of the relevant capital budget of as much as 44.5%.

There are questions raised in Sri Lanka about whether the education provided is relevant and leads to effective learning outcomes due to the stagnant pace of transformation of the education system in the country. Although Sri Lanka has formed policies for Preschool education and Higher education the authorities have not been able to finalise a National Education policy for general education that can realise National Education goals.

The education sector has received a lot of Official Development Assistance (ODA) for educational reform, but consecutive governments have not given adequate priority to ensure that learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development in Sri Lanka. Gender equality, human rights, inclusion, a culture of peace and nonviolence, and peer-to-peer learning are in policy documents but not in practice.

In 2021, the National Education Commission of Sri Lanka announced that they were in the process of forming a National Plan for the Non-Formal Education Sector in Sri Lanka for the period 2020 to 2030. However, similar to the previous policy formation, this policy was also formed internally and without public consultation. The draft framework has been prepared and submitted to the president for review.

A Presidential Task Force (PTF) on Sri Lanka's Educational Affairs was appointed in March 2020, with a mandate to undertake an extensive review of the existing education

2 ADB. (2016). Sri Lanka: Distance Education Modernization Project. Retrieved from <https://www.adb.org/documents/sri-lanka-distance-education-modernization-project-1>

3 Committee on Public Finance Report on the Budget 2019: Report on the 2019 Budget Estimates as Pertaining to Government Policy Priorities. Retrieved from <https://publicfinance.lk/public/uploads/reports/file/1620840724.pdf>

system, to understand its shortcomings and identify potential entry points to drive transformation. The task force prepared the report "Re-Imaging Education in Sri Lanka" in 2020,<sup>4</sup> which proposes to develop an equally accessible, holistic, integrated, and streamlined education system that will focus on harnessing the talents and abilities of different individuals and moulding them into intelligent, hard-working and principled citizens.

This report also identifies the major reforms in the education system that would lead to the creation of "a generation that is disciplined, healthy, stress-free, and possessing an inquisitive mind, instead of a generation that is stressed due to a competitive environment and possessing only book knowledge." It also envisages the reduction of the population of unskilled labour to 10% by 2025. The government expected to achieve an encompassing target that can make a difference not only in the learners' lives but importantly to society through transformative education. However, the extremely bureaucratic system and lack of monitoring and evaluation have posed challenges in achieving the desired goals.

### III. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 4'S ROLE IN THE SDGS FOR REVIEW

Sri Lanka has taken important steps to build a formal legal structure to coordinate the activities to achieve overall SDGs. Sustainable Development Act no. 19 in 2017 provides the necessary legal framework and the Sustainable Development Council was established under the same act to serve as the national focal point to coordinate, facilitate, monitor, and report on SDG implementation. Moreover, the GoSL and UN signed the UN Sustainable Development Framework (UNSDF) 2018-2022, which provides the overarching framework for the work of the UN in Sri Lanka. The country has drafted a National Policy and Strategy for the SDGs with the consultation of relevant stakeholders in 2020. However, this strategy is yet to be officially accepted.

In October 2019, a special circular was issued by the president and informed all the government ministries, and departments, including the provincial councils, to comply with the national policy and strategy and prepare a sustainable development strategy incorporating sustainable development targets as relevant to the scope of such institutions. These measures could be listed as a formal mechanism to establish partnerships,



interlink, and coordinate the different stakeholders in achieving the Goals. The MoE is the focal point for implementing SDG 4-related targets. In addition, the National Institute of Education, the National Education Commission and the Ministry of Vocational Training are responsible for mainstreaming education in achieving the SDGs.

**Goal 5.** Sri Lanka ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981, but some of its provisions are yet to be incorporated into national legislation.

While gender parity in education at the national level has been achieved, such as high literacy rates for both men and women, there remains an issue in the perpetuation of gender norms and stereotypes in textbooks and other learning materials. Due to some traditional values and social norms, girls are not encouraged to take on certain jobs/employments. To ensure gender equality in society, education systems could play a significant role in eradicating gender-based discrimination and respecting each sex equally from childhood. The existing education curriculum has overlooked the gender issues that remain in society and have not taken measures to eradicate gender inequality through formal education.

Despite the high literacy level among women, their representation in the political and decision-making processes is comparatively low. In the national parliament, out of the total number of 225 Members, there are only 12 women MPs. This is a huge gap. To address the lack of political representation for women, Sri Lanka introduced a quota at the local government level election, which states that 25% of the nomination should be given to women candidates. (The Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017).

A Women's Wellbeing Survey conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics in 2019 reveals that out of a population of 51.6% Sri Lankan females, at least 20.4% of them were reported to be subject to domestic violence. The report also revealed that women with higher education were less likely to agree with men being justified for hitting their wife (18.5%) than women with no education (44.1%) or primary education (42.4%).

showing the potential role education has in working towards the elimination of violence against women.

The Economic Empowerment of Widows and Women Headed Households, and Income Generation through the Education and Training Programme is vital to minimise the vulnerability of women. The Women's Bureau had allocated approximately LKR 60 million (USD 164,504) towards the NFE programmes, reaching over 2000 women beneficiaries by the end of 2017.<sup>5</sup> Most of the NGOs/CSOs directly or indirectly address gender discrimination and promote gender equality to ensure equal rights, while promoting, protecting, and upholding the rights of people living with disabilities, and ensuring all services and initiatives are disability sensitive.

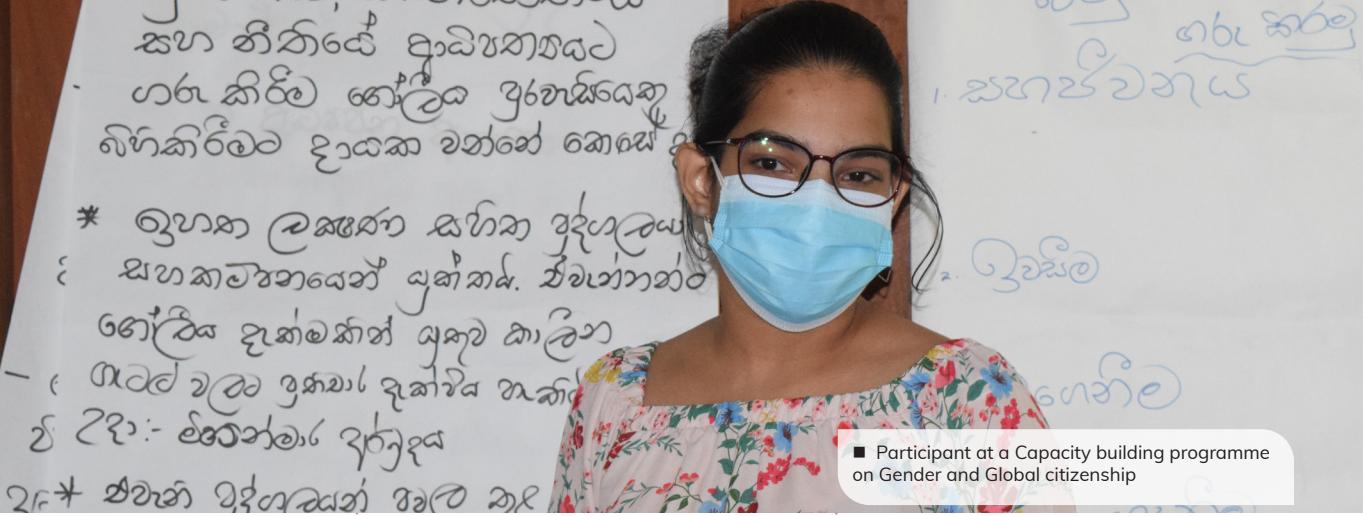
**Goals 14 and 15.** According to the Global Climate Risk Index 2020, Sri Lanka is in 6th place among the most affected countries list. Sri Lanka has been experiencing air pollution, vehicular pollution, deforestation, solid waste disposal problems, soil erosion, land degradation, loss of biodiversity and wildlife, industrial pollution, coastal erosion and problems associated with tourism. These can undermine poverty eradication and can lead to an abrupt, systemic, intergenerational and long-lasting increase in poverty.

In the national plan of action for disaster management, termed the 'Road Map,' the education sector was singled out as a vehicle of central importance for achieving the defined goals. Learners are to be taught in school how to protect themselves from hazards and how to conduct themselves and respond correctly in the event of a disaster. Following the 2004 Tsunami, the MoE paid attention to developing Disaster Risk Reduction plans for schools. However, 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 make a negative impact on education.

The Environment Education and Awareness Division of the Central Environmental Authority was established with the consideration of paving the way for the good practice in the decision-making process and self-formulation of a code of behaviour about

4 Presidential Task Force on Sri Lanka's EDUcation Affairs. (2020). Re-Imagining Education in Sri Lanka. Retrieved from <http://hec.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/6.Re-imagining-Education-Sri-Lanka-Summary-Report-by-Presidential-Task-Force.pdf>

5 See <http://www.childwomenmin.gov.lk>



■ Participant at a Capacity building programme on Gender and Global citizenship

issues concerning environmental quality in Sri Lanka. They are involved in conducting training programmes for provincial, zonal and divisional coordinators of the Education Department. In addition, they conduct training for School Principals, Teachers and implement eco-projects in Schools. The main objectives are to develop a wide array of knowledge with basic understanding and experience of the total environment and its associated problems and critically responsible presence of humanity and develop attitudes of concern for the environment and motivate to participate actively in environmental improvement and protection. They have been Conducting Education and Awareness Programmes on Contemporary Issues for school children.

#### IV. KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The prevailing economic crisis and civil unrest due to the shortage of essential goods and services have made a significant negative impact on the entire education system in Sri Lanka. The Secretary of the MoE stated that the learning losses are immense and the Ministry itself is unable to manage the existing situation. Short-term, ad-hoc remedial measures introduced by the authorities to address these issues are not adequate and inequalities in accessing education have dramatically increased. The poor and marginalised communities as well as the middle-income group are unable to bear the cost of education. It is therefore recommended to:

1. Reform the Sri Lankan economy whilst minimising adverse effects on vulnerable

groups. This is key to achieving macro-economic stability and overcoming the current economic crisis and 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.

2. Strengthen the coordination, cooperation, and synergy of relevant Ministries and Institutes in developing and implementing programmes to ensure inclusive and quality education. There is a need to strengthen the monitoring and accountability mechanisms as well, including disaggregated and baseline data collection, monitoring, and analysis.
3. Develop and implement policies to reverse trends of long-term inequities in access to education. Reducing gaps in equity is a priority to realise growth prospects. Climate Education, Sexual Education, Disaster Risk Reduction Training, and Legislation should also be adopted into the existing curriculum.
4. 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.
5. Align education in formal and nonformal

settings with the rapidly changing contexts and demands in both work and life. A conducive environment should also be available for youth to initiate new ventures. Investments, financing, soft skills development, physical and mental health awareness, media spaces, ICT, and technology transfer are some key areas that need to be improved to create such an environment.

6. Introduce non-formal education efforts and lifelong learning options 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. There is a need to:
  7. Educate them on financial literacy, conflict mitigation and media literacy.
  8. Promote Adult Learning and Education (ALE) opportunities to develop the capacity of parents and create a sense of shared responsibility.
  9. Provide psychosocial support for learners, parents, teachers, and communities.
  10. Design and implement targeted interventions and programmes to address the increased cases of gender-based violence. This includes the strict reinforcement of Sri Lanka's laws and systems to protect and safeguard women from violence. •



The Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) is a regional association of more than 200 organisations and individuals working towards promoting quality education for all and transformative and liberating, lifelong adult education and learning.

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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 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).