

# Sri Lanka

## Civil Society Spotlight Report on SDG 4 for HLPF 2023



■ Youth from marginalised communities came together to discuss the impacts of COVID-19 on the education of persons with disabilities.

### I. Country Context

Sri Lanka is emerging from a political, social, and economic crisis. In the face of numerous challenges such as inflation, high levels of public debt, virtual bankruptcy, and misgovernance, among others, the Government and the Central Bank implemented policy initiatives to prevent further escalation of the situation and to ensure the normalcy of the day to day life.

According to the government, although the corrective measures affected the vast citizenry in the near term, they were necessary to safeguard the economy and economic agents from the potentially devastating consequences of unrestrained economic instability, such as hyperinflation, the collapse of economic activity to a much deeper level, and a complete disconnect of the country from the rest of the world. When compared to the previous year Sri Lanka has been able to restore socio-economic stability.

Much is to be learned from the crisis that gripped the country during the first six-month period of 2022. Longstanding macroeconomic weaknesses, characterised by deeply entrenched twin deficits, due to persistent budget deficits and external current account deficits, reflected the impact of policy delays in

addressing these imbalances over the years, particularly in recent years, amidst ill-timed and ill-equipped reforms in taxation and agricultural policies, among others.

The ongoing economic crisis has adversely affected poor households. The rapid increase in inflation, particularly food inflation, has disproportionately affected poorer households with a larger share of their budgets spent on food. Approximately 6.3 million people, or over 30% of Sri Lanka's population, are "food insecure" and require humanitarian assistance. The poverty rate is estimated to have doubled and inequalities have widened over the past two years. While government spending on Social Safety Net (SSN) programmes has increased in recent years, in part due to COVID-19 relief in 2020-21 and emergency cash transfers in 2022, these programmes remain fragmented, which has led to a lack of ownership and widespread inefficiencies in delivery.

According to the National Nutrition and Micronutrient survey, 93.3% of households reduced their essential non-food expenditures such as education and health due to a lack of money to buy food (Medical Research Institute Sri Lanka, 2023). The situation has further worsened as the Government has scaled down its nutrition programmes, such as

school meals and fortified food for mothers and malnourished children, due to severe financial constraints.

Despite the resumption of in-person academic activities at the beginning of 2022, following the closures of schools, universities, and other education centres since 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, educational activities were once again hampered in the early part of the second quarter of 2022, owing to transportation difficulties arising from severe shortages in domestic fuel supplies.

Amidst the transportation issues, academic activities were shifted to online platforms to some extent in mid-June 2022, but these were also affected by regular power outages. With some resolution of the issues pertaining to the fuel supply, educational activities gradually recovered towards the second half of 2022, allowing the commencement of in-person academic activities on a full-time basis since August 2022. It is troubling to note that learning losses may have increased due to the intermittent disruptions to academic activities since 2020.

Learners from low-income households faced difficulties due to shortages of stationery and school supplies, and soaring prices of such items caused by the high inflation. In addition, the latest available data for 2020 revealed that school

dropouts in the primary sector increased to 9,269 from 8,834 in 2019. In this context, school dropouts are likely to have further increased in 2022, as vulnerable households opted to cut education expenses as a coping strategy.

## II. Progress towards the Achievement of SDG 4

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 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, 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.

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. In 2020, the adult literacy rate for Sri Lanka was 92.3%, and the youth literacy rate was at a staggering 98.8%.

With the direction of the former president, the National Education Commission (NEC) commenced the formulation of the National Education Policy Framework 2020-2030 in October 2020 (NEPF 2020-2030). In this process, the National Education Commission made

arrangements to take into consideration of the government policy on education that is outlined in the Government Manifesto and give due consideration to proposals made in other policy documents prepared by the NEC, Presidential Task Force, the Ministry of Education, and reports published recently by international donor and development agencies.

In this report, the NEC has formulated six aims that the NEPF (2020-2030) envisions to achieve and these aims are as follows: Assures Universal Access to Education; Ensures Equity and Inclusiveness; Delivers Quality Education Matching International Benchmarks; All-Round Personality Development; Nurtures National Identity and Unity in Diversity; and Education System with Adequate Funding, Quality Physical and Human Resources and Greater Accountability and Efficiency.

In June 2022, the National Education Commission of Sri Lanka completed the National Educational Policy Framework and submitted it to the president for his approval. However, the president has decided to further review the framework and appointed a cabinet subcommittee comprising ten (10) members to prepare a New National Education policy framework.

The Medium-Term Strategic Development Plan (MSDP 2020-2025) finalised in May 2020 further ensure Sri Lanka's commitment to developing a shared vision of education's future and strengthening political and public commitment to the general education sector. This plan also proposed many other educational reforms proposed in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Tertiary education sectors. The MSDP is prepared to address prevailing issues relating to gaps and challenges in equity, equality, quality, efficiency, effectiveness, and adequacy and embrace the general education sector with sustained advancements.

The National Institute for Education (NIE) is working towards making major reforms in the general education sector. The NIE believes that once the proposed education reform is in place, it will help identify the total expected attributes of 21st-century graduates by the job market, and pave the way to fill those gaps through modern curricula, improved teaching and learning techniques, simplified evaluation, and continuous improvements to the education system. The content, workload, num-

ber of subject areas, teaching methods and especially the evaluation system is expected to be changed under these reforms. The module-based learning will be first implemented for students of Grades 1, 6, and 10. These grades will continue their learning process in line with the reforms over successive years. Once the module-based learning programme is implemented, it would ease the burden of national exams. Even grading of examinations would reduce, as 70% of the marks would be based on activity completion and assignment submissions while only 30% of marks would be based on aptitude tests. It was planned to implement these reforms in 2023 March, however, this plan has to be altered as expected to start in July 2023.

At the Transforming Education Summit (TES) that was held in September 2022, Sri Lanka made a declaration on the actions that they have planned to implement in the education sector. Accordingly, the government will ensure to implement a free education policy while taking the necessary actions to improve quality relevancy and accessibility. Accordingly, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has introduced the 13 Years Guaranteed Education Programme, which facilitates the retention of thousands of students in the education system after the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) of those who have not qualified for Higher Secondary level studies.

In addition to equipping the students with the necessary skills to enter the world of work, the MoE Sri Lanka has taken steps to introduce STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) education which is considered a multidisciplinary stream of experience relevant to economic value creation and living in harmony with nature for making learners equipped with Rising Skills (Internet of Things- IoT), Big Data, Data Sciences and Analytics leading to Artificial Intelligence.

Teacher Development, Teacher Education, and Teacher Management are important in transforming education to meet knowledge and skill requirements for the 21st century. In this regard, the reinforcement of competencies and skills of the present and future teacher is required. The National Colleges of Education (NCOE) are the main arm of providing pre-service teacher training in the Sri Lankan Education system

The MoE has planned to bring the management of the National College Of Education under the National Institute of Education (NIE) which is the main institute for curriculum development and teacher development. The MoE has initiated a proposal to upgrade NCOEs as degree-awarding institutions under the NIE-affiliated universities.



Among countries in the region as well as countries with similar economic conditions, Sri Lanka invests considerably a lesser amount of public finance in education. The highest education expenditure percentage was reported in 2017, which was 2.7% of GDP. In the recent two years, there has been a 2.3% decrease in the central government budget allocation for education. The subsequent drop in government revenue due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was the main reason for that decrease. The main investment for Sri Lanka's education has been domestic funding between 2015 and 2021. Approximately 97% is funded through domestic resources, while only 3% is funded by foreign resources.<sup>1</sup>

In 2021, Sri Lanka allocated LKR 158.4 billion<sup>2</sup> to the education sector at the central level. It was a 2.3% decline in allocation in nominal terms compared to the revised estimated cost of 2020 and an increase of 4.3% in comparison to the actual expenditure in 2019. In real terms, the 2021 budget estimate for the education sector decreased by 6% relative to the 2020 revised budget estimate and decreased by 5% in real terms compared to the 2019 actual education sector expenditure.

In 2022, the government allocated LKR 199.5 billion (USD 515 million) to the education sector. Again, in the interim budget of 2022, the government increased the allocation of up to LKR 200 billion (USD 650.5 million) for education expenses in the remaining period of the financial year. In the interim budget speech, the government insisted on its commitment to expanding higher education opportunities, facilitating the establishment of branch campuses in Sri Lanka, particularly focusing on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, as well as finance, information technology, and medicine, and enabling the state to ensure preserving free education and expanding beyond present levels through encouraging private investment in the higher education sector. The government also highlighted their priority in skills development as per the requirement of the labour market and improvements in TVET education. In 2021, Sri Lanka allocated LKR 158.4 billion (USD 515 million) to the education sector at the central level.

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.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of significant changes have occurred in the education sector. Although the shift to online education presented several challenges to students, teachers and parents at the initial stages all of them managed to use these platforms productively. This situation challenges the traditional teaching and learning mythologies, and structures and paved the way to enter the new actors and introduce innovative actions and systems to the education field.

Several universities and schools developed and introduced a Learning Management System (LMS), and dedicated TV channels to continue education in a crisis environment. A number of new private actors entered the general education sector with alternative learning systems, including online and offline methods. It is therefore crucial for the government to take the necessary steps to ensure that these do not infringe on the right to education for all, the quality of these mechanisms, and strictly regulate their involvement to eliminate barriers to education that are faced by the students of poor and marginalised communities.

### III. III. Civil Society Engagement in the SDG 4 Implementation

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. It also aims to 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, but it should be noted that this circular does not mention civil society and private sector actors. In addition, existing policy frameworks and implementation mechanisms (such as public-private sector partnerships) do not adequately reflect the role of civil society.

In the process of preparing the second VNR, the Sustainable Development Council of Sri Lanka invited civil society to the consultations. CED Sri Lanka actively participated, representing the education sector in the consultations that were held in Colombo in March 2022. However, stakeholders related to SDG 4 have had minimum or no engagement opportunities in forming a plan of implementation or collective action with government authorities. The lack of a dialogue between stakeholders and public authorities relevant to SDG 4 has created uncertainties in making progress toward the targets and establishing a monitoring process.

To implement a quality educational framework, a monitoring mechanism for the education system should take place in future. While there are very sound policies in the education system, there is a huge gap in the understanding and implementation of the existing policies. As the focal point of the SDG 4 implementation and monitoring in Sri Lanka, the MoE has not taken adequate measures to invite and ensure the active engagement of the civil society sector in the implementation of SDG 4. CED Sri Lanka has made efforts to cooperate and coordinate some activities related to SDG 4 during the past two-year period.

In November 2022, representatives of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) had a series of discussions with different actors, including the MoE, the Ministry of Finance, international NGOs, UN agencies and development partners, with the aim of proposing the GPE membership and multiplier grant to Sri Lanka. In this forum, CED was invited as the civil society representative. Finally, in April 2023, the MoE appointed CED as a member of the Local Education Group (LEG). The establishment of a LEG is a significant step toward ensuring the engagement of civil society in education-related policy dialogue.

### IV. SDG 4 Interlinkages with Other SDGs

#### 6- Clean water and Sanitation

Accessibility to water and sanitation became more important with the impact of COVID-19. The Health and Education Authorities made arrangements to increase the water and sanitation facilities at the schools with domestic finance and support from donor agencies.

According to the Sri Lanka Demographic Health Survey (DHS) 2016, 90% of households have access to safe drinking water and sanitation coverage. However, there are strong spatial differences with only 36% of people having access to piped water and 2% to piped sewerage. Public funding for water projects has increased

1 Central Bank Report CBSL (2019; 2021; 2022)

2 The currency converter used for the LKR figures in this document was XE Sri Lankan Rupee to US Dollar conversion, Retrieved Jul 5, 2023, 12:17 UTC, from <https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/convert/?Amount=158400000000&From=LKR&To=USD>

in recent years; at around 1% of GDP. Around 93.2 % of the population has access to safe drinking water of which 53.1% is through piped water supply systems throughout the country. Only 2.05% of the population is provided with piped sewerage facilities, according to the annual report (NWSD, 2020).

## 17- Partnership for goals

According to the Ministry of Education, grants and funds from various organisations have been received during this period, including a concessionary loan of USD 400 million from ADB Secondary Education Sector Improvement Project (SESIP), USD 100 Million for World Bank's General Education Modernisation Project, USD 14.95 Million for the Construction of the National College of Education for Technology from the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), among others.

The report titled “Multi-Stakeholder Dimension of National Development Planning and SDG Mainstreaming” released by the UNRCO in Sri Lanka indicates that, although the engagement rate between the Sustainable Development Council of Sri Lanka (SDCSL), government agencies, and the UN is high, the SDCSL’s direct engagement with wider stakeholder groups is limited. As per the report, this has been attributed to the limitations in SDCSL’s mandate, the absence of mechanisms to deal with multi-level stakeholders and limited resources for stakeholder engagement.

The SDCSL and UNDP Sri Lanka have initiated a process to introduce the "SDG Budget Coding and Tagging System to the National Budgetary Process" in 2022. This is aimed at supporting the Department of National Budget (NBD) and the NPD to improve the rationale of budgetary allocation and transparency and accuracy in analysis, thereby strengthening budgeting and policymaking processes. Through this initiative, the Government of Sri Lanka hopes to enhance domestic resource mobilisation and foster a stronger connection between development financing and revenue generation by designing a sustainable progressive tax system for the realisation of the SDGs. Notably, this initiative will explore the better alignment of fiscal policies and frameworks with the SDGs, develop capacities to improve tax administration



- Youth sharing the educational issues related to racism and identity-based discrimination in Sri Lanka

and help incorporate Sri Lanka's perspective and needs in global and regional discussions on reforms.

## IV. V. Key Messages and Recommendations

Although efforts have been made to develop a National Policy Plan for education, these efforts have not materialised. This could be identified as a key obstacle to the achievement of SDG 4 in Sri Lanka. The National Education Policy framework that was presented to the President has been not accepted and a new parliament subcommittee was appointed to revisit the framework. The government needs to pay adequate attention to accelerating the policy formulation process and enacting the recommendations. CED Sri Lanka, therefore, puts forward the following recommendations:

Increasing the budget allocation for education to 6% of the GDP to improve the infrastructure for the hybrid education system and adhere to the principles of inclusion, quality, accessibility, and equity in education. The annual budgeting and funding allocation cycle need to be reviewed to make sure that the funding dedicated to education gets fully utilised. In the context of an economic crisis, rather than depending on the local annual budget and mega loan-funded projects, the Ministry of Education should raise resources.

Developing the knowledge and skills of teachers to adapt to new education reforms and improve the assessment of

students' learning. New education reforms are proposed to be implemented starting in 2023 to reduce the barriers to improving the inborn talents of the children within the exam-centric curriculum and improve the evaluation method.

Ensuring equity and inclusion in the promotion of a quality hybrid learning modality through the review of existing curricula/ pedagogy. This is one way by which learners can continue learning during crises or natural disasters. Both the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the National Institute of Education (NIE) should lead this process in collaboration with the Provincial Ministries of Education. Solutions should immediately be taken to address the disparities in access to education.

To ensure that no one is left behind, the government must also 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.

Strengthening the monitoring and accountability mechanisms aligned with the country's context and international standards, including disaggregated and baseline data collection, monitoring, and analysis.

Providing more spaces for the active engagement of civil society organisations in the planning and implementation processes.

Initiating and strengthening partnerships with relevant different stakeholders, including the public, private and I/NGO sectors to realise the full SDGs, including SDG 4. There should be better mechanisms and platforms to enable communication and coordination to promote synergy. •



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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).

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