



## COUNTRY FACTS AND FIGURES



## Civil Society Spotlight Report on SDG 4 for HLPF 2021

### 1. COUNTRY CONTEXT

The education sector has been severely impacted due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka as the government's focus was centred mainly on health and economic recovery efforts. With the closure of educational institutions from primary to tertiary levels and the shift to online and distance learning, the stark digital divide in the country has been revealed and exacerbated. In contrast to the students in urban areas in Sri Lanka, most rural students do not have access to the internet and the required digital devices for learning. In 2020, it was found that only 22.2 per cent of households in the country had at least one available computer<sup>1</sup> - of which 38.3 per cent in the urban sector have at least one computer, 19.9 per cent in the rural areas, and only 3.8 per cent in the estate sectors.<sup>2</sup> Sri Lanka's digital literacy in 2019 was 46 per cent and computer literacy at 30.8 per cent with Rural and Estate sectors having only 28.6 per cent and 13.7 per cent (DCS).

The government has taken steps to improve the outreach, however, while it has introduced initiatives to advance e-learning through programmes like "e-thaksalawa", the national e-learning portal specifically designed to deliver syllabuses of the students from Grades 1 to 13, the shift to online learning received mixed reactions, highlighting the socio-economic inequalities and the widening digital divide. With no previously established platforms or experience in digital education, both teachers and students have experienced high levels of stress when engaging online. Less than 50 per cent of the students were reached online and 30 per cent through television. However, the high youth literacy (98.7%) rate as reported in 2018 remains an advantage for Sri Lanka in the recovery process where hybrid education seems to be possible.

The President Task Force on Sri Lanka's Education Affairs was assigned to identify the current issues concerning all aspects of pre-school and general education, critically review its effectiveness in the context of 21st century needs, and develop reform proposals to improve its quality and effectiveness and increase its contribution for socio-economic development. This is despite several National Policies, Strategies, and Action Plans being approved and released in the draft stage and awaiting release, namely the National Policy on General Education in Sri Lanka (2016) (Draft), the National Policy on Preschool Education (2019), the National Policy Framework on Higher Education and Tertiary and Vocational Education (2009), the National Policy on Tertiary and Vocational Education (2018), and the National Policy on Higher Education (2019) (Draft). The quality of education has been highly criticised as it is based on an exam-based curriculum and has not improved and changed for some time. The education systems are not able to mould citizens with holistic life skills and fail to respond to evolving market needs required for

#### REFERENCES:

Human Development Report Office (HDRO), (2020). Latest Human Development Index Ranking. Retrieved July 1, 2021, from <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking>  
Sachs et al. (2021): The Decade of Action for the Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainable Development Report 2021. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
Statista. (2020). GINI index worldwide 2020, by country. Retrieved July 1, 2021, from <https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1171540/gini-index-by-country>  
Sustainable Development Report: Rankings. (2021). Retrieved July 1, 2021, from <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/rankings>  
UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) database. (2018). Retrieved July 1, 2021, from <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/lk>  
World Bank Country and Lending Groups. (2020). Retrieved July 1, 2021, from <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519>  
Worldometers. (2021). Sri Lanka Population. Retrieved July 3, 2021, from <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/sri-lanka-population/>

1 See <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PressReleases/ComputerLiteracyStatistics-2020-FirstSixMonths>, p. 2

2 The poor and near-poor groups in the Estate sector include "young, Hindu Tamils, working in tea estates in the agriculture sector." See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2017/03/02/partii-understanding-poverty-in-sri-lanka>

economic development. The Presidential Task Force is expected to come up with transformative reforms and programmes to ensure a quality education system while addressing the targets of SDG 4. Also, a results-based compressive strategic framework that covers levels and dimensions to ensure that an inclusive distance learning programme will be included in the reforms.

## **2. EQUITY AND FINANCING CONCERNS IN SDG 4 AMIDST COVID-19**

Sri Lanka, historically, has invested in free public education, from primary to tertiary, towards leaving no one behind. However, the country cannot claim that it has been able to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Even though the right to free education is enshrined in Sri Lanka's Constitution, the gap in infrastructure for school education continues to create inequalities in the education system. While some of the large national schools are overwhelmed with the best building, equipment, and facilities, many rural schools continue to suffer from a lack of the minimum essentials. Regional disparities in facilities are also pronounced and the number of qualified teachers has also shown shortages. The most developed Western province has 0.4 per cent of schools classified as 'very difficult', while the Northern Province has 30 per cent, followed by the Eastern and Central Provinces with 24 per cent. Also, only 6 per cent of the students who sit the examination are admitted to the universities.

Historically, successive Central Governments of Sri Lanka have devoted only moderate percentages of the overall National Budget towards the unstructured, fragmented implementation of the targets now stated in SDG 4. Although Government Entities associated with SDG 4 have been decentralised, the implementation of the existing Parliamentary Legislation, National Policies, and Strategies remains extremely weak. This is equally apparent as you travel further down the devolution chain in both the Subnational (Provincial) and Local Governance Mechanisms. There are monitoring mechanisms in place, but the outcomes are delayed. The main reason for this might be the lack of a database and regular updates.

Sri Lanka's economy contracted by 3.6 per cent in 2020, which is considered to be its worst performance record, according to the World Bank.<sup>3</sup> With the economic growth impacted by COVID-19, heavy external debt, and multiple socio-economic challenges, Sri Lanka is mainly focused on trying to overcome the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic than on investing in the SDGs and long-term sustainability. After five years, Sri Lanka still does not have a clear roadmap, policy, strategy, action plan, monitoring mechanism, and financing plan for the SDGs at national and sub-national levels. Similarly, there is no overall plan for financing SDG 4 to achieve its targets. UNESCAP states that Sri Lanka needs "an annual additional investment of 4.4 per cent of the 2018 GDP through 2030 to provide a social protection floor (1.7%), poverty gap transfers (0.2%), quality education (1.6%), and climate-resilient infrastructure (0.8%)."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, with the pandemic affecting the Sri Lankan economy, it is expected to reduce 0.359 per cent of the GDP (USD 319.4 million), which will seriously affect the implementation of

SDG4. The government will need to rethink its education system and strategically define an education sector plan that ensures equity and inclusion in education under the pandemic and future emergencies.

Although the education sector has received a lot of Official Development Assistance (ODA) for educational reform, consecutive governments have not given adequate priority to ensuring that learners are acquiring knowledge and skills needed to 'promote' sustainable development (Target 4.7). The quality of education in Sri Lanka is highly questionable due to its heavy focus on exam-based curriculum. The curriculum outcomes are weak on the formation of values and critical thinking, promotion of citizens' engagement and acquisition of knowledge and skills towards decent job and productivity. Further, private tuition plays a critical factor in education and examination outcomes and creates unequal opportunities between the rich and poor. While rural schools have a shortage of skilled teachers, students also have limited opportunities due to the need to pay private tuition as well. Access to early childhood education is still low in Sri Lanka compared to most middle and high-income countries (Target 4.2). There are existing disparities by income and location and the majority share of early education centres, primary education, and secondary education institutions lack adequate resources for teaching and learning, especially for children with special needs. For instance, some schools only have one building for all grades with subjects.

The education system has also not been able to effectively address the changing financial and market trends. The lack of technically skilled personnel for the marketplace is a key issue due to poor equitable treatment and investment in the TVET sector (SDG 4.3). Unequal attention and recognition are given to vocational education. It is treated as lower quality education in terms of social ranking. According to the COPE Budget Report 2019, allocations to the TVET sector have reduced in real terms, contrary to the expectations set by government policy. Government allocation to TVET in 2019 is Rs. 11.268 million (USD 56,625).<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the TVET budget was underspent by 25.6 per cent - with underspending of the relevant capital budget as much as 44.5 per cent. While the SDG Report 2021 shows a positive trend and performance on SDG 4, the Goal in its entirety has not been effectively and adequately addressed by the concerned authorities. All indicators, except 4.7, show moderate progress. Data on Target 4.6 is not available and is yet to be monitored by Sri Lanka. The rest of the indicators and targets have an average performance until 2020.

The Constitution of Sri Lanka commits the state to promote the interest of children and youth by ensuring their full development, protecting them from exploitation and discrimination, and ensuring universal access to education. Although Sri Lanka ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on 12 July 1991, to date, it has not been directly incorporated into national law. Sri Lanka has, however, expressed its view that many of the provisions of the CRC are in line with many of the current rights espoused by the 1978 Sri Lankan Constitution. The national child protection policy was cabinet-approved in October 2019 and needs to be launched and operationalised. Youth are largely excluded from the national decision-making processes, including in parliamentary representation. In 2014, Sri Lanka launched the National

<sup>3</sup> World Bank. (2021). As Sri Lankan Economy Recovers, Focus on Competitiveness and Debt Sustainability Will Ensure a Resilient Rebound. From <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/04/09/sri-lankan-economy-recovers>

<sup>4</sup> UNESCAP. (2019). SDG implementation and budgeting: Sri Lanka's efforts and challenges. From <https://www.unescap.org/blog/sdg-implementation-and-budgeting-sri-lanka>

<sup>5</sup> XE Sri Lankan Rupee to US Dollar conversion, Retrieved Jul 5, 2021, 13:58 UTC, from <https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/convert/?Amount=1&From=LKR&To=USD>





Youth Policy (NYP) that recognised nine key strategic areas for the policy interventions in education, skills development, and vocational training. The NYP has identified young women as a ‘priority target group’. The lack of streamlining of all youth-related policies and frameworks may result in ad-hoc approaches, strategies, and national programmes that are not relating to and corresponding to issues and areas previously identified as priority actions.

Gender, human rights, inclusion, a culture of peace and non-violence, peer-to-peer learning, and equality are in the policy documents but are not practised due to the lack of comprehension of policymakers. 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. The key concerns in the concluding observations of CEDAW state the need to strengthen the implementation mechanisms, including human resources and skills, and to strengthen the laws, policies, and action plans concerning women, ensuring that women are able to participate effectively. There is also a need to improve the efficiency of judicial procedures to address gender-based violence (GBV), combat discriminatory gender stereotypes in education, and mainstream gender into national education policies, including the Education Sector Development Framework and Programmes. Gender equality is a cross-cutting issue identified in the SDG framework and intersects with many of the SDG targets and indicators.

### **3. EMBEDDING SDG 4 IN OTHER SDGS**

While Sri Lanka demonstrates many positive indicators on education, these programmes and policies are yet to be aligned with the SDGs. In 2017, Sri Lanka formulated the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy. In 2019, a policy draft was compiled as a school-based career policy by the National Education Commission and British Council. This is a framework to capacitate career guidance teachers and develop a school curriculum on career guidance for the development of the education sector. This framework is a toolkit to guide and motivate students from Grade 6 onwards on their career path planning, which is also useful in helping student dropouts. Four Ministries have the primary responsibility of implementing the SDG 4 targets consisting of the Ministry of Higher Education (MHE), the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Ministry of Skills Development and Vocational Training (MSDVT), and the

Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS). These Ministries 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 coordination mechanism for SDG 4 in the country.

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. There are sound policies in the education system but there is a huge gap in the understanding and implementation of these.

Failure to achieve Target 4.7 and the indicators will result in poor performance on environmental education, affecting SDGs 2, 12, 13, 14, and 15. Improving progress in Target 4.2 will assist in alleviating poverty or SDG 1, Early childhood development (ECD) interventions will assist in improving the nutritional intake and positively impact SDG 2, will affect good lifelong health (SDG 3), promote decent work (SDG 8), reduce inequality (SDG 10), Ensure sustainable consumption (SDG 12), and promote peaceful societies (SDG 16). Target 4.3 on improving “access to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education” will increase women’s participation (SDG 5) aside from ensuring decent work (SDG 8), reducing inequality (SDG 10), and promoting peaceful societies (SDG 16). Not achieving SDG 4.1 will directly impact Target 5.5 as women will not be educated for leadership and decision-making opportunities. Achieving Target 4.4 will help improve employment (SDG 9).

### **4. ROLE OF EDUCATION IN SUSTAINABLE AND RESILIENT RECOVERY**

The government has introduced the e-learning platform and learning portals through the government institutions’ Learning Management System (LMS), and television telecasting of classes are some of the measures that the government introduced in an attempt to continue learning. Additionally, the school textbooks, tutorials are uploaded in government portals. There have been reports that the government has not been able to bear the cost of the Internet data of the educators. This situation has put

thousands of students at risk of missing out on education. The pandemic should be taken as an opportunity to transform the education system for the better, ensuring quality, inclusion, and equity.

Formal and non-formal education is key to providing the skills necessary to secure decent and secure employment opportunities. However, the skills requirements may be significantly changed during this time and the necessary reforms must take place now. One main concern in Sri Lanka was the education and skill mismatches in the labour market, which lead to a lack of suitable employment opportunities. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the education system to provide the necessary skills that are aligned with employment opportunities and are needed to thrive in the present and future. A conducive environment should also be available for youth to be able to initiate new ventures. Investments, financing, soft skills development, physical and mental health awareness, media spaces, information and communications technology (ICT), and technology transfer are some key areas that need to be improved to create such an environment. This comes with an urgent need to create awareness as well.

The government has included education in the recovery plans to a certain extent but missed out on key components. The recognition of the importance of the natural environment and natural resources is a vital component that needs to be integrated into education. Furthermore, knowledge on disaster risk reduction and climate change, comprehensive sexuality education, global citizenship, sustainable development, peace and justice, equality and inclusion, are extremely important and must also be integrated into the education system to ensure that it is geared towards developing holistic, versatile, compassionate, and resilient citizens who are able to weather and adapt to the challenges and realities presented during and beyond the pandemic. So far, these aspects are not adequately covered through the government's COVID-19 response.

By transforming education into one that is of good quality, inclusive, equitable, and gender-transformative, citizens would become more socially and economically empowered, with an increased awareness of the environment that will ensure the protection of nature and wildlife, and an understanding of the community and awareness of the law that will safeguard communities and reduce vulnerabilities. The focus on non-formal and lifelong learning can transform the job market and expand the opportunities for all citizens. The decision-makers at all levels should be capacitated enough to understand the

development challenges in the country and provide context-responsive solutions, including strengthening the education system. Education plays a key role in the capacity development of these decision-makers.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are CSO recommendations for strengthening the SDG 4 implementation towards a sustainable and resilient recovery:

- Provide quality training, both online and offline, for teachers, educators, and other personnel to improve their capacities to carry out the hybrid delivery of education. Establish more training institutions for teachers and educators.
- The MoE should review and improve curricula and pedagogies covering all areas of education making them more adaptable to various modalities of learning delivery, both online and offline.
- The MoE and National Institute of Education (NIE) should lead the process of formulating and carrying out strategies to support all students and learners, especially the marginalised, and collaborate with provinces that have good practices in ensuring learning continuity.
- Introduce and institutionalise informal and non-formal education and lifelong learning at the district level and establish related facilities.
- The MoE is recommended to mobilise resources and raise additional funds instead of depending on the local annual budget and mega-loan funded projects.
- Strengthen the monitoring and accountability mechanisms and put in place baselines and mid-line evaluations of locally funded or mega loan funded projects.
- Implement and enforce review mechanisms to monitor and assess the annual budgeting and funding allocation cycle to make sure that the funding dedicated for education is fully and effectively utilised
- Increase the financial and technical assistance of development and donor agencies.
- 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.
- Review the roles and responsibilities of the Sustainable Development Council and MOE as the focal point for SDG 4 towards ensuring greater policy-institutional coherence, monitoring and evaluation, and follow-up and review. •



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.

Unit 106 Sterten Place Condominium, 116 Maginhawa Street,  
Teachers Village East, Diliman, Quezon City, Philippines  
Tel/Fax: 63 2 8441 4594  
Email: [aspbae@gmail.com](mailto:aspbae@gmail.com) | Website: [www.aspbae.org](http://www.aspbae.org)

ISBN: 978-621-95859-0-3



Coalition for Educational Development (CED)  
51/1, Silva Lane, Rajagiriya, Sri Lanka  
Phone: +94 112 887642  
Website: [www.cedsrilanka.org](http://www.cedsrilanka.org)

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).