

**The Impact of COVID- 19 on
Education in Sri Lanka
and
Remedial and Response Mechanisms**



The Impact of COVID- 19 on Education in Sri Lanka and Remedial and Response Mechanisms



Coalition for Educational Development

Other publications by CED

Sustainable Development Goals and Education (2021)

Education in Sri Lanka (2021)

This study has been conducted by Coalition for Educational Development (CED) with the technical and financial support of Asia South Pacific association for Basic and Adult Education. CED would like to thank all the field investigators, key informants and other government institutes for their support extended in this research process.

The Impact of COVID- 19 on Education in Sri Lanka and Remedial and Response Mechanisms

© Coalition for Educational Development

December 2021

Compiled by: Shantha Kuathunge

Cover and Layout: Nalinda Seneviratne

Cover Image: Associated Press

Published by

Coalition for Educational Development

No. 51/1, Silva Lane, Rajagiriya

Phone 112 887642

e-mail: cedsrilanka@yahoo.com

Web: www.cedsrilanka.org



Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Executive Summary | 9 |
| 1. Introduction | 11 |
| 2. Country Context | 12 |
| 3. About the Study | 15 |
| • Objectives of the Study | |
| • Methodology | |
| • Sampling | |
| • Presentation of Results | |
| 4. Virtual and Blended Learning Modalities/Distance Learning/ICT in Education (challenges and good practices) | 18 |
| • Context | |
| • The education system in Sri Lanka | |
| • Basic Structure | |
| • Responsible Bodies | |
| 5. National Level Planning and Implementation of 'Blended Learning' Initiatives (Case Study on National Institute of Education) | 20 |
| 6. Inspiring National Level practices through provincial level best practices - A Case Study on the Blended Learning Experience of the Sabaragamuwa Provincial Council | 22 |
| • Basic Information | |
| • Designing the Project | |
| • Enhancing Blended Learning to Face the Pandemic | |
| • Improving Digital Literacy | |
| • Interactive Learning Environment | |
| • Home-Based Learning – Supplying Educational Resources | |
| • Child-Friendly Interface | |
| • Teacher Training | |
| • Resource Sharing | |



| | |
|--|-----------|
| 7. Finding Local Interventions to Address Challenges | |
| - Blended Learning Approaches by a Local Central School | 25 |
| • Basic Information | |
| • Planning and Developing Strategies to Face the New Challenges | |
| • Assessing the Context and Designing Suitable Approaches | |
| • Maximizing Local Knowledge and Utilizing Resources | |
| • Teacher Training on Online Teaching Techniques | |
| • Monitoring and Evaluation | |
| • Parent-Teacher Meetings | |
| • Extra-Curricular Activities - Relief on Mental Stress | |
| • Experience on Blended Learning of the Targeted Communities | |
| • Student Experience -Puttalam District | |
| • Polonnaruwa District | |
| • Kilinochchi District (war-affected area) | |
| | |
| 8. The Impact of COVID- 19 Pandemic on Mental Health | 30 |
| • Context | |
| • The Mental Health System in Sri Lanka | |
| • Responses for COVID19 Related Mental Health Issues | |
| • Promoting Mental Wellbeing of Children | |
| • Impact on the Community | |
| • Addiction to Mobile Phones and Online Games | |
| | |
| 9. Government Relief and Recovery Measures | 34 |
| • The COVID-19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund | |
| • Maintaining Income Conditions and Employment | |
| • Assisting SME and Self-employed Sector | |
| • Financial Compensation for Samurdhi Beneficiaries and Families that are Affected by the Loss of Income Sources | |
| • Distribution of Dry Rations to the Quarantined Families | |
| • Government Relief Programmes to Ensure the Nutrition Level of the School Children During the Pandemic | |
| • Promoting Health and Nutrition Level of the School Children while Increasing Food Security and Income of the Women Smallholder farmers | |
| • Community Response on Government Relief Programmes | |
| | |
| 10. Recommendations | 38 |
| Education sector | |
| • Developing a National Strategy for Blended Education | |
| • Teacher Training | |
| • Continue Blended Learning even after Schools Reopen | |
| • Updating the Learning Process | |
| • Promoting Digital Literacy | |



- Developing the Capacity and Emphasizing the Responsibility of Parents
- Re-open Schools in Low-risk Areas
- Avoided Replication
- Equity in Education
- Providing a Data Allowance for Students
- Re-imagining the Future

Mental Health

- Increase the Facility for Early Identification of Mental Health Issues
- Taking Action to Mitigate Gender-Based Violence
- Mental Health Programmes for Students and Youth
- Expanding the Services/ Introducing Distance Mode /Online Counselling

Government Relief and Recovery

- Registering Beneficiaries
- Introducing Social Insurance for Self-employed
- Promoting Institutionalized Response
- Mitigate Political Influence
- Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation

Sri Lanka – Basic information

- **Total Population** - 21.5 Million
- **Income group** - Lower Middle income
- **Poverty** - 4.1% below the national poverty line (2016)
- **Inflation** - 8.3 (2021 October)
- **Per capita income** - \$ 3682 (2020)
- **Unemployment rate** - 5.1 (2021)
- **Gini Index** - 3954 (2020)

Social indicators

- **Global peace index** - 95 (2021)
- **Human Development Index** - 0.780 (2018)
- **Gender index** - 86 (2018 UN data)

COVID-19 situation update (09/Dec 2021, Ministry of Health Sri Lanka)

- **Infected** - 569928
- **recovered** - 543467
- **Deaths** - 14533
- **Current trend** - 650 cases per day
- **Average deaths** - 12-15

Education

- **Total student population** - 4.0 million
- **Total number of teachers** - 2.4 million
- **Teacher student ratio** - 20 :1
- **Total number of public schools** - 10200
- **Secondary net involvement** - 91% (UNESCO 2018)
- **Literacy rate** - 91.75% (15 year and above)
- **Out of school** - 9286 (UNESCO 2018)
- **Expenditure on education** - 2.1% of GDP



Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic is the major catastrophe in the century and is a global threat to the entire humankind. The first COVID-19 patient in Sri Lanka was reported in January 2020 since then the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) has taken different measures to control its spreading. However, measures that were implemented in controlling the spread of the virus also had a number of negative consequences impacting the personal and the community space at a national level.

COVID-19 has wounded the Sri Lankan economy and its impacts would last well into recovery. The country has experienced low investment flows, disruptions in supply chains, and 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 (USD 0.6) billion in 2020 and LKR 53.0 billion during January-June of 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 marginalized communities. According to government sources, LKR 22,000 (USD 112.8) million was spent for the treatment as well as other remedial measures during the last year.

The impact of the pandemic on vulnerable and marginalized groups remains critical even amidst the social protection programmes introduced by the government. According to the 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 main psychological impact of the current crisis situation is stress and anxiety. Anxiety, fear and confusion is expected to rise among the public while battling a disease with no specific treatment as of yet. Regular activities and routines of the public have changed with the new work from home policies, working under quarantine centres or designated facilities that have altered the normal behaviour and livelihoods of people. Mental health condition is a

priority area that has been affected under the crisis circumstance and rising numbers have been recorded in cases of depression, self-harm, and the use of alcohol. In addition, an increase in domestic violence is also evident.

The education sector is one of the most impacted sectors in Sri Lanka where schools and education institutes were partially or fully closed during 20 months across the two years. This has resulted in limited engagement of learners, the number of drop-outs increasing and exclusion of disadvantaged communities from the academic process.

The education sector experienced the importance of digital platforms that became increasingly apparent with the travel restrictions and restrictions on physical engagement. Digital literacy has become an essential component in the contemporary context.

The shift to online learning in Sri Lanka received mixed reactions that highlighted the socio-economic inequalities in the educational framework and disparities in resource allocation. Certain segments of the community that were unable to access or use digital technology encountered difficulties in this context and a digital divide furthered by lack of resources, infrastructure and adequate awareness in 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 order to promote distance learning, the government needs to ensure the availability of basic infrastructure and resources for the public school system at a national standard.

A national strategy has to be developed on blended learning including smart tools to equip and train teachers adequately. The Covid-19 period introduced several innovative measures for education at the provincial level that could be adopted at the

national level. The meaningful intervention of parents and their role in the education process is critical.

Non-formal education is not necessarily limited to vocational training and there is room for promoting adult learning and education in the country. Establishing lifelong education and community learning centres is a must.

In order to monitor learning outcomes, accountability mechanisms must be strengthened with a robust monitoring system with the CSO participation. This would help achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 targets. The annual budgeting and funding allocation cycle have to be reviewed to make sure that appropriate funding is allocated for education is fully utilized.

Sufficient funding for the education sector has to be allocated in the country. At present, only 2.1% of the GDP has been allocated to education. The budget for 2022 proposes to invest in providing fibre optic connections to all schools in Sri Lanka. However, complementary investments in providing computers, and other human resources are also necessary if the schools are to make use of such facilities. In addition to mobilizing domestic resources, the Ministry of Education needs to raise additional funds to improve. The annual budgeting and funding allocation cycle need to be reviewed to make sure that the appropriate funding dedicated for education gets fully utilized.

The SDG focusing on education stresses the importance of ensuring “quality education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.” The pandemic has brought unprecedented disruptions to education and the learning loss will affect the country’s human capital gains. Identifying and implementing policies to reverse trends of long-term inequality and reduce gaps in equity are priorities to realize growth prospects. There is a need to strengthen accountability mechanisms to assess the learning outcomes.

As countries recover from the pandemic there is an opportunity to rethink national long-term development models. With the emergence of new digital technologies, Sri Lanka has an opportunity to shift gears from a traditional manufacturing-led growth model and capitalize on the potential of the services sector. Investing in research and conducting studies to identify the potential advantages to align education practices to cater to the demand created by the new normal would be ideal.

Introduction

Sri Lanka introduced various mechanisms to control the global catastrophe of the Pandemic that reached Sri Lanka in early 2020. Although these mechanisms mainly focused on controlling the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the negative impact on the socio-political and social-economic life of the public is immense.

The education sector in Sri Lanka suffered great losses during the pandemic and the education system met with a standstill with the lack of adequate resources and facilities that helped students and teachers meet the demands of the crisis.

This study is an effort to identify the difficulties encountered by different stakeholders from the public education sector, in order to assess the impact of remedial actions and approaches implemented by several actors during the last two years. The study provides recommendations to implement strategies that ensure the smooth functioning of the education sector in a similar crisis situation in the future.

Country Context

A significant proportion of the Government's income consists of remittance from Sri Lankans who work in the Middle East and other countries. Further, Sri Lanka receives a considerable amount of foreign exchange from the tourism industry. As a result of the closing airports with the Pandemic, the income generated through these avenues completely ceased.

The government expenditure for the Year 2021 was estimated at Rs. 2,678 (USD 13.73) billion and the Ministry of Education was allocated over Rs. 126 (USD 0.64) billion with over Rs. 102 billion (on recurrent expenditure and around Rs. 23 billion (on capital expenditure). For the year 2022, the Ministry of Education has been allocated LKR 128 (USD 0.65) Bn; with a marginal expansion of 1% compared to 2021. This expansion is a result of an increase in recurrent expenditure, which has risen by nearly LKR 3 Bn.

Sri Lanka's poverty is at 3.20 per day, and the poverty line is projected to drop to 10.9% in 2021, which is still significantly over the 2019 level of 9.2%. Further, with the pandemic striking the Sri Lankan economy, 0.359 of GDP (319.4 million USD) is expected to reduce, which will seriously affect the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. In this case, the GOSL will have to rethink how to ensure equity and inclusion under emergency situations.

Sri Lanka continued to face macroeconomic challenges, particularly the high debt burden, large refinancing needs, and weak external buffers that adversely affect growth and poverty reduction over the medium term. Despite policy rates and price controls imposed by the government, the inflationary pressure is expected to remain strong amid partial monetization of fiscal deficit, currency depreciation, and rising commodity prices. Food insecurity could worsen with slow rates in poverty reduction with the continuing rise of essential food prices and food shortages. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has estimated an 87% income reduction among informal workers following the

initial lockdown. Between January and June 2020, the World Bank's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth projections for Sri Lanka estimated a decrease substantially from 3.3% to -3.2% for 2020, and from 3.7% to 0% in 2021, despite taking the country's macroeconomic and epidemiological responses into consideration. As a result, in June 2020, the World Bank estimated that between 44,000 and 65,000 persons would fall below the extreme poverty line (USD1.90 at 2011 purchasing power parity) due to the crisis. In addition to the broad monetary and fiscal responses, including a substantial increase in public health expenditure, Sri Lanka implemented important social protection responses, using their existing social protection system.

To ensure the health and wellbeing of the people, the Government continuously implemented COVID tracing and undertook prevention and treatment measures. Covid testing including PCR and Rapid Antigen Tests are conducted from 2020. Special treatment centres have been established and the existing facilities were refurbished to facilitate the growing need.

Special relief schemes have been introduced to mitigate the impact on the livelihood of the poor and marginalized communities. According to Government sources, LKR 22000 (USD 112.8) million has been spent on treatment as well as other remedial measures in the year 2020. This in fact is intolerable to the Sri Lankan economy, which lacks foreign exchange and is already burdened with a high local and international debt. Sri Lanka had the highest pre-crisis coverage in South Asia (27 % of its population). Their main cash transfer programmes (Samurdhi; Senior Citizens Allowance—SCA; Disability Allowance—DA; and Kidney Disease Allowance—KDA) have escalated, enrolling those on waiting lists, and entitling them to access the LKR 5,000 emergency benefit under the SCA, the DA and the KDA and in the case of Samurdhi, an addition of 2 million self-employees were listed under the scheme. Samurdhi provided LKR 5,000

in addition to the regular benefit value, as well as in-kind food items. The SCA provided an additional LKR 3,000 as regular benefits. These vertical and horizontal expansions took place in April and May 2020, amounting to approximately 5.7 million worth of cash transfers.

Despite these social protection programmes, the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups remain critical. Existing socio-economic inequalities hinder the capacity of certain groups to cope with the COVID-19 crisis. Women, the elderly, those with chronic illnesses, disabled communities, daily wage earners, informal sector workers, and other population groups who are already vulnerable, fell into additional pressure. In the absence of adequate resources and safety nets to protect them against the COVID-19 impacts, these vulnerable groups faced a higher risk of contracting the virus and bearing the brunt. Job loss, abridged household income and less access to basic necessities were part and parcel of this condition. School closures have an added downstream effect on vulnerable families that cannot afford childcare who had to cut back working hours. Given a lack of cash and savings, these vulnerable groups were unable to stock up food at times of extended curfew.

Sri Lanka has made significant progress towards achieving gender equality, especially in areas of health and education. However, due to gender norms and structural barriers, women in Sri Lanka still lag behind on many fronts. Out of the 8.6 million economically active population, 64% are males and 35% are female. 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 2017 is 36.6% of the total population which has steadily declined over the past three decades. Moreover, the gap between the poorer and less educated and educated and wealthier women in terms of labour market outcomes is widening. In 2017 Women's unemployment rate was at its highest in rural areas constituting 7.5% against 2.9% in men. The female labour force participation rate is low as 22% in the Northern Province and 19% in the Eastern Province. Besides the low rate in labour force participation, women are more likely to work in low skill and low-income jobs.

Women and girls have faced disproportionate impacts during the pandemic response facing exacerbating human rights violations and abuses. Any COVID-19 response through policies and

programmes that lack inclusion of gender derail the little progress made so far in advancing the rights of women and girls. School closure due to the Pandemic increased the risk of children being exposed to domestic work, exploitation and the receiving end of domestic violence.

According to the women's wellbeing survey carried out by the Department of Census and Statistics in 2019, one in four (24.9%) women in Sri Lanka has experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner or a non-partner. Meanwhile, two in every five women (39.8%) have suffered physical, sexual, emotional, and/or economic violence and/or controlling behaviours by a partner. Instances of physical violence were highest in the estate sector. More than one-third (37.9%) of women living on estates have experienced physical violence during their lifetime.

Tragically, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation. In a social media post, the World Food Program (WFP) highlighted that, since the pandemic lockdown, the number of reported cases of violence against women increased four-fold in just one month from 123 to 460 cases. Once again, anecdotal evidence shows that the number of cases being reported is much less than the number of actual cases. This is commonly referred to as the 'shadow pandemic' and is one of the most serious side-effects of the pandemic.

According to the World Bank, "forced coexistence, job loss, escalating stress and anxiety, the tension in homes, contribute to partners being abusers". Victims are trapped with their abuser as they are unable to leave home, reach safe spaces and seek legal or medical help.

Sri Lanka was committed to improving access to quality essential health care services at the peak of the COVID-19 outbreak. The Directorate of Mental Health (DMH) within the Ministry of Health (MoH) of Sri Lanka prioritized the delivery of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) under the mandate of the Deputy Director-General for Non-communicable Diseases. Global resources developed by WHO headquarters and Inter-Agency Standing Committee reference group for MHPSS have been translated and adapted in local languages with the support of the WHO. These guidelines reinforced the standard response for continuity of mental health services and built the capacity of the frontline workers in providing care for patients. To ensure the continuity of medication for patients with

existing mental health conditions and psychiatric disorders, oral medications were sent through postal services to patients for two consecutive months and injectable medicines were administered either at the community level or in clinics. Medical Officers of Mental Health (MOMH) teams and the community of Psychiatry Nursing Officers conducted home visits to the most vulnerable patients for the administration of injectable medicines.

In the meantime, the 3rd wave of the pandemic swept through Sri Lanka and the lockdown period was further extended. This situation led to uncertainty about the future for investors and discouraged entrepreneurs, generating a worrying condition among the youth.

In this context, the education sector was seriously victimized where schools and both private and state educational institutions were closed for 20 months allowing only 3 months of proper functioning. As a result, approximately 4 million school children and youth who should have been in Universities and tertiary education channels remained confined to their homes.

In comparison to the 2021 budget acclamation for Education, the 2022 budget allocation has no significant increase in funds for the Education sector. However, the budget for 2022 proposes to invest in providing fiber optic connections to all schools in Sri Lanka and this is an important suggestion to promote a blended learning environment. The budget also proposes to reduce district level disparities in education facilities by giving required land and tax concessions for the establishment of International schools in every district. The proposal is based on an assumption that privately funded education will result in better facilities, which is not necessarily true. However, the budget proposes investments for improving rural schools with better facilities and a diverse subject stream. Additional funding of LKR 5,300 (USD 27.1) MN is allocated for expediting the establishment of 1,000 national schools. The latter two proposals are more likely to help reduce the disparities in access to quality education.

About the Study

The present study defines, “Blended learning” as an approach to education that combines online educational materials and opportunities for interaction online with traditional place-based classroom methods. The alternative “Distance mode and online education” system is widely used to substitute onsite education. These measures further exaggerate existing disparities in the education system and widen the gap of the digital divide. This has become another stress stimulating factor among students, youth and parents, especially in the rural and marginalized communities. Lack of facilities, devices, infrastructure, an unorganized education system and less interactive teaching methods has created inequality, injustice and immense stress among the majority of the students. People have demanded the authorities to address these issues and ensure equal access to education that is consistently provided. The government has taken several steps to address these situations and this research expects to measure the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on education financing. In addition, the study focuses on the mental health issues that emerged as a consequence of the pandemic alongside relief and recovery measures enacted for the benefit of affected people.

Objectives of the Study

- Identify the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education financing in Sri Lanka.
- Categorize key education components and/or sectors and vulnerable groups highly affected by the pandemic; analyze the financing implications and identify the programmes or services for response/mitigation intervention.
- Recognize the good practices to ensure adequate funding, especially for vulnerable learners most affected by the pandemic,

including women and girls that can be adopted by other schools, communities and local areas.

- Compile actionable recommendations.

Methodology

The study will encompass the following thematic areas that it takes as its focus, although COVID-19 has had its impact on socio-economic dimensions on multiple aspects;

- Virtual and blended learning modalities/ Distance learning/ICT in Education (challenges and good practices of schools/ communities/LGUs)
- Mental stress/psycho-social impact of COVID-19, coping and support for students, parents, and teachers
- Government aid such as food rations, cash transfers, etc

The main research questions are (for education and other thematic areas)

- Are the mechanisms introduced by the authorities reaching targeted communities?
- Do the target communities benefit from these schemes?
- Is there a monitoring mechanism to evaluate the progress and rectify issues identified?

The impact of COVID-19 on the above-mentioned thematic areas have been studied in two levels namely macro and micro level. At the macro level, the research reviewed the impact on education in Sri Lanka at the national level as an inclusive case study. Accordingly, national-level data, information, circulars and implementation progress reports and figures related to key ministries involved in education, health and psycho-social and social welfare including

government administration procedures have been collected.

At the micro-level, a deep analysis has been conducted to identify the personalized experience of the communities by gathering information from particular households/communities. These

communities have been identified through the CED member organizations and field investigators. Government officials who engage in the education, health and relief services at the community level at the selected locations are also interviewed to triangulate the findings.

Sampling

For the macro-level study, data and information are gathered from the following ministries/departments

| Information source | Department/institute | Type of information |
|--|--|--|
| Ministry of Education | Department of school affairs, Nutrition and Health Division, Statistical unit | Circulars/notices issues on education in the pandemic situation/during the closure of schools Data gathered on accessibility to online education |
| | National Institute of Education Coordination unit of Distance learning – on Television/ Educational channels | Programs developed for alternative/ distance mode education Teacher training on distance mode education |
| Ministry of Health | COVID-19 prevention taskforce Family health bureau Health promotion bureau Department of mental health Child protection bureau | Mental health-related issues Number of cases reported Problem areas Remedial actions implemented Preventive measure Reported cases of abuse |
| Ministry of social service and finance and other relevant ministries | Department of Samurdhi (department dedicated to provide relief to the families under the national poverty line) District and division secretariat of selected locations | Social security schemes New circulars targeting relief for COVID-19 Pandemic Progress report of the implementation Grievances report mechanism and action for addressing these issues |

For the micro-level study, information and data are gathered from the following categories. Five categories have been identified in Sri Lanka as marginalized communities. However, this study

is limited to a number of in-depth interviews that were carried out with the households/individuals to generate case studies. The following categories were selected accordingly:

| Location /District | Category | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|--|
| Polonnaruwa | Semi-urban community | Focus group discussion/interview with students and teachers Semi urban area |
| Puttalam | Rural community | Focus group discussion/interview with students and teachers of remote primary school |
| Trincomalee/ Kilinochchi | War affected area | Focus group discussion/interview with students and teachers and observation |

Presentation of Results

Data analysis and presentation of the results has been arranged under the main thematic areas of the research, namely blended learning, mental stress and government release schemes. Accordingly, the

following section presents data/information on the blended learning mechanisms implemented at the national, provincial and local levels as well as the experience of the target beneficiaries.



Virtual and Blended Learning Modalities/ Distance Learning/ICT in Education (challenges and good practices)

Context

Following the first cases of COVID-19 reported in the second week of March 2020, the government decided to close schools and all educational institutes on 12th March 2020. Initially, the government decided to close schools from 15th March for two weeks. However, this temporary action had to be extended up to July 2020. The authorities later decided to gradually open schools for the students who are to sit national level examinations. Examinations were held amidst the pandemic with some delays. However, during this entire period schools functioned in full capacity for only a period of 40 days. Schools were reopened in January 2021 for the advanced level students and gradually classes commenced for other students from February onwards. However, with the 3rd wave of the pandemic, the authorities decided to close all the educational institutes in April and all the schools remained closed for 07 months. As a result of this, approximately 4.2 million students lost continuous education.

There are approximately 243,000 teachers in the public sector schools who are attached to the Ministry of Education or provincial ministries of education. They have been recruited under various schemes and under different salary levels. Basically, their salary scales depend on educational qualifications and they are entitled to annual increments. Further, they have the opportunity to improve their knowledge by obtaining additional qualifications. It should be mentioned that all teachers have the required teaching skills and most of them have been trained by the teacher training colleges/national institute of education or universities.

When compared with the other professions the salary level of the teachers is comparatively low. According to the prevailing salary scheme teachers who possess a degree and at least 20 years of experience (grade 1.1 of the teaching service) will get a Rs 70000 LKR (USD 350) while a teacher

in Grade III who starts teaching will be paid LKR 25000 (USD 125). Teacher unions have demanded salary increments for the last 25 years. Consecutive governments have appointed committees to revise the salary schemes and provided temporary solutions. However, there is still no reasonable response from the government in this regard. In this context, in August 2021 all teachers' unions decided to refrain from teaching and boycotted voluntary online teaching. Although several discussions were held between the government and unions, they were unable to settle these issues. The government stated that they need an additional sum of Rs. 67.8 billion to resolve existing salary disparities in the teaching sector. The overall government income of this country in 2020 was Rs. 1216 billion and Rs. 1052 billion of that had to be spent on salaries and wages. The authorities informed the teachers' unions that they are not in a position to address the salary disparity owing to the financial crisis in the country due to the COVID 19 Pandemic. As a result of the teacher's struggle that demanded substantial government response, online teaching was on hold and students attending public schools missed online education opportunities for 100 days which could be considered a worst-case scenario in the education sector.

Interruptions to education have long-term implications beyond the mere loss in learning, increased dropout rates, loss of nutrition, and reductions in future earnings – the effects of which are disproportionately experienced by the more vulnerable groups. This deepens inequalities especially at a time when economies are embarking on the decade of action to meet the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the overall aim of leaving no one behind.

The Education System in Sri Lanka

In the primary and secondary education domain, the public sector schools play a significant role in Sri Lanka. Approximately 97% of the students are attached to public schools. The private sector could be mainly divided into two categories based on the school curriculum. One category follows the local curriculum and they are traditional private schools that are maintained by religious institutes/independent governing boards. The other category is international schools and they implement a different curriculum targeting international exams. These schools are registered under the Companies Act and they do not have a direct connection with or fall under the control of the Ministry of Education. The total number of public schools in Sri Lanka is 10,155 and the student population in public schools is 4,063,685 (School census report 2020). The total number of private schools is 90 and the student population is 136000. There are approximately 280 international schools and according to their information, the total student population is approximately 50000. The focus of this study is on blended learning that basically focuses on public school education.

Basic Structure

Education is a devolved subject in Sri Lanka on the administration front. Accordingly, provincial councils are responsible for some of the responsibilities related to education. Their responsibilities are developing and maintaining infrastructure, recruitment of teachers and administration of the schools of the provincial council etc. Meanwhile, some schools are directly controlled by the Ministry of Education and these schools are called national schools. The total number of National schools in the country is 373 and the total number of provincial schools is 9782. The national government provides funds for provincial education ministries through the national budget. All the public schools have a standard curriculum. The curriculum is developed by the NIE and the MOE provides textbooks free of charge. The NIE also provides teacher training/teachers' guides on every subject and other essential training and instructions for the teachers in provincial and national schools. Meanwhile, all students in the public schools sit the National level qualification exams – General Certificate of Ordinary Level and General Certificate

of Advanced level. These examinations are conducted by the Department of Examinations.

Responsible Bodies

The National Education Commission (NEC), Ministry of Education (MOE) and National Institute of Education (NIE) could be named as the key stakeholders in policy-making, planning and implementation of the public education sector in Sri Lanka. The Ministry of Education and provincial ministries of education are basically engaged in the administration of the education sector. The Ministry of Education has a well-established governing and management structure to deliver the expected services. At the provincial level, there are sub management levels in the district and zonal levels to enhance the administration of the school system. However, these education offices are mainly involved with the administration of human resources and infrastructure and they are not directly involved in teaching or curriculum development.

The National Institute of Education has the sole responsibility in curriculum development and teacher training. Therefore, the NIE could be considered the major duty bearer in assuring accessibility and quality of the education delivered in the public education sector. The study pays attention to NIE to find out the national-level strategies that are executed to ensure continued education in the 'new normal'.

National Level Planning and Implementation of 'Blended Learning' Initiatives

– Case Study on National Institute of Education (NIE)

As mentioned earlier, the NIE has the main responsibility in ensuring accessibility and quality of education. In order to achieve this, the NIE has a well-equipped infrastructure and other human resources. The NIE has been working in the field of face to face/traditional education systems since its inception. However, in the recent past, they have initiated “Blended learning methodologies”. These alternative distant mode education systems were introduced a long time ago in 1988. These distance mode education programs were mainly delivered through television channels. It should be noted that in addition to government TV channels, some privately owned channels have been used to telecast these programmes.

With the closure of schools due to the pandemic, in March 2020, the NIE planned to enhance and accelerate the alternative education programmes and these initiatives have been supported by the Ministry of Education and the reforms introduced by the Ministry of Education. They selected both television channels and online channels to deliver education programmes according to a fixed timetable during weekdays. Implementation of the said programme started on 11.04.2020, and education programmes were telecast on Channel Eye, which was renamed Gurugedara (Teaching home).

Amidst the challenges of COVID-19, especially due to the travel restrictions, the coordination with the provincial and zonal offices have been through online platforms which led to regular monitoring and updating of the progress made. In addition, the Ministry of Education issued special circulars with regard to online education. The circulars have been primarily issued in 2020. In addition, another circular was issued on 07 July 2021 with regards to conducting online education.

The main reason to select Television channels as the alternative mode of education is that, compared to online platforms, Television channels are more

accessible for targeted communities. According to the LIRNEasia's latest report, only 34% of Sri Lankan households with children (i.e. those aged 18 years and below) have some form of connection to an internet device to access e-learning, ranging from online classrooms to tutorials disseminated through social media platforms. However, amongst the lowest socio-economic groups, the number of households with access to internet connectivity has dropped significantly to 21%. It has been recorded that 73% of the households in Sri Lanka have a television. With the support of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Media, a special discussion was held with the managing directors of all the television channels where the education minister and the NIE requested these channels to allocate their air time to telecast educational programmes. Upon this request, the national television (Rupavahini) reserved one of their channels entirely for education programmes called “Gurugedara”. The other TV stations also agreed to telecast education programmes during selected time slots. For example, ITN dedicated their cartoon belt from 3.00 pm to 5.30 pm for primary education programmes. Concurrently some private channels also agreed to telecast programmes developed by the NIE. It should be noted that the majority of these programmes were developed by the NIE.

The NIE had produced some of these programmes before the pandemic, and these programmes were copied to CD drives and distributed to schools as supplementary education material. In addition, these materials are available in sales outlets for anybody to purchase.

All these educational programs have been developed according to the national curriculum and conducted by the trained teachers of respective subjects. The NIE trained the selected teachers for the process and the quality of the content of the programmes are reviewed by national-level committees of the NIE.



Programmes have been developed and produced under the observation of an expert panel consisting of six subject specialists, and content for each subject provided by the respective subject department. The entire process was supervised by subject directors and all programmes and program duration was monitored and coordinated by a study officer of the NIE ensuring the quality of the teaching output. Therefore, NIE was able to ensure the quality of the teaching.

The NIE has taken action to identify the resources for an emergency situation. As they have to produce a large number of programmes and recordings in a comparatively short period of time, the NIE obtained the support and utilized recording rooms of universities and other institutes to produce these programmes.

Universities and technical education institutes have been contacted to obtain the necessary equipment and human resources. Thereby, the NIE has been able to obtain assistance from various institutions that are not under the purview of the MOE. For instance, a group of students who are attached to the ICT faculty of the National University of technology had joined hands with the NIE to develop Channel NIE. This is a good initiative in sharing and utilizing resources and sharing experiences.

The programmes have been recorded by the science and technology faculty of the NIE. Developing these programmes to cover the entire syllabus/curriculum for all the subjects are in progress, and according to the NIE, this target could be achieved within this year. It should be noted that these accelerated procedures contributed to enhancing the blended learning spectrum.

In addition to the above-mentioned Television channels, all the programmes have been uploaded to the NIE YouTube channel and students who are unable to watch the programs on TV would be able to access the YouTube channel which was introduced as a COVID-19 response and includes all of the English medium programmes.

Priority has been given to programmes for grades 6 – 9 and students in the advanced level classes as they are supposed to sit the national level examinations. According to this information, it is noted that the NIE has a proper plan to implement the blended learning initiative ensuring the quality standards.

When it comes to the accessibility and responsiveness for the NIE initiatives it is clearly

observed that the majority of the audiences can access these resources as these TV channels can be viewed free of charge. Consequently, there is no additional cost for parents. However, with regard to channel NIE, there is a cost involved due to the fact that all programmes are uploaded on YouTube.

As these programs have been telecast according to the pre-informed timetable and students could prepare themselves to participate in these education programmes, the NIE has not conducted an evaluation on the effectiveness of these programmes yet, especially evaluating the number of students who participated and benefited through the entire process. Although plans have been made to conduct a survey to find out the benefit to the targeted community, this is not yet materialized and can be considered a major barrier in making necessary adjustments or redesigning the process.

The Ministry of Education has developed a special teacher guide on distance learning teaching methods in local languages both in Sinhala and Tamil. This manual has the technical information as well as ethics that they need to adhere to in conducting classes using online platforms.

Financing for these programmes has been provided through the Ministry of Education reform with the assistance of a World Bank grant.



Inspiring National Level practices through provincial level best practices - A Case Study on the Blended Learning Experience of the Sabaragamuwa Provincial Council

Sri Lanka has nine provincial councils and they have considerable authority in decision making given the nature of the administrative structure that prevails in the education sector. Compared to the other provinces, Sabaragamuwa province has performed outstandingly in the blended learning field.

Basic Information

An interview was conducted with the provincial education office in order to collect information regarding their blended learning initiatives for study purposes. According to the discussion, they have commenced blended learning initiatives in 2017 as a pilot project. The main objective of the project was to provide knowledge and skills to teachers and students to join new education reforms that would be in effect from 2025. In addition, they have focused on addressing inequalities in the education level due to the unequal distribution of human and other resources. They have also focused on minimizing the negative impact of the private tuition classes, which has created an additional burden to parents in the low-income groups.

With the guidance of the provincial director of education, a group of teachers and education officials have volunteered to design and implement this project 'e-nenapiyasa' <https://www.enenapiyasa.lk/>. In order to achieve the above-mentioned objectives, they have developed this project to provide multiple learning environments to both teachers and students. In contrast to other learning platforms, this provided an interactive learning experience with a child-friendly interface.

Designing the Project

In order to maximize the effectiveness and impact of the project, the project team has conducted a

baseline study/survey to identify the ground realities. In this survey, they have focused on the availability and accessibility to online education. They have found that 60% of parents in the province own a smartphone. However, this is not a guarantee that they have access to online education. The actual number of students who can access online education is comparatively low as the devices are owned by either the mother or the father. At the same time, results revealed that 40% of the students do not have these devices. Therefore, the project team had to find strategies to reach them as well.

Enhancing Blended Learning to Face the Pandemic

With the closure of schools in March 2020, new components have been introduced such as e-nenapiyasa. Although this has been initiated as a supplementary learning platform, the project team decided to incorporate more features and expand the areas covered under the project focusing on both student and teacher groups. In the new design, the project has focused on seven thematic areas that strengthen blended learning systems. The strategies adopted and the outcome is presented below.

Improving Digital Literacy

Digital literacy has become essential in the contemporary context. With restrictions imposed on physical movement, the importance of digital platforms is apparent. Some segments of the community that are unable to access or use digital technology encountered difficulties in this situation and this caused the digital divide to worsen.

Lack of devices, lack of infrastructure, insufficient knowledge and phobia associated with using online/



digital platforms are main factors for the digital divide. This situation is also seen in the education sector. This project planned to address the digital divide by creating working opportunities in the digital space through a learning environment. This involved providing opportunities to log in and register themselves in Learning Management Systems (LMS). This approach is useful not only to teach a particular subject but to increase their digital literacy. To prepare the students for the modern online learning system this project has conducted examinations using an LMS and students in grade five participated in these examinations. A total of 3,350,000 students were to sit this national level exam that was scheduled to be held in August 2021 and 1,112,000 students from the total number participated in this mock/pretest conducted under this project. In addition, they have conducted mock examinations for GCE O/L and GCE A/L with thousands of students. The project has provided the opportunity for the teachers to work and develop their skills to use this technology. Teachers in peripheral schools that do not have LMS are encouraged to utilize the space to develop their own LMS. These initiatives and opportunities have contributed to enhancing digital literacy by creating learning opportunities on digital platforms.

Interactive Learning Environment

In general, teachers are accustomed to conducting classes using online platforms and sharing the link to the group so they can join. However, in this system children do not get a chance to be involved in interactive learning. In contrast, the present project has familiarized the students to connect with a digital learning environment. All the lessons related to the curriculum have been prepared in the same-way. This system also provides an assessment of the learning outcome for the student which is also shared with the respective teacher so they can identify the learning gaps and adopt remedial measures.

Home-Based Learning – Supplying Educational Resources

Findings of data collection revealed that 40% of the students do not have access to online platforms. Taking this into account, a special program called ‘Sathipasala’ was introduced in the area. Under the programme printed copies of relevant educational

materials were sent by post to students who were unable to join online platforms. Students were to complete assignments and submit them within a given period of time. Assessment marks and feedback will be shared with each student with the next pack. According to information, 60% of the students have received the lessons disseminated under the “Sathipasala” programme. Students who joined online sessions have also shared these resources.

Child-Friendly Interface

The learning environment and presentation of education is really important to obtain the student’s attention for learning. Especially when there is nobody to guide or encourage the learning process, it is vital that strategies that encourage a child-friendly environment are developed. This project has adequately paid attention to this important factor and all the educational programmes have been developed accordingly. To improve the friendly user interface animations, images, icons and colourful themes have been introduced in lessons and learning materials. When compared to the other education websites/interfaces, e-nanapiyasa has its unique features to get the students involved as it suits different education levels.

Teacher Training

Online education is all about SMART content. Students need to be able to grasp the key concepts without being overwhelmed by the content. Just like excessive content is a major ‘turn off’ in any presentation deck, the same applies to online learning as well, irrespective of the type of platform used.

This project supports and enhances teacher training, which is a significant component in blended learning approaches. This project has identified that distance learning is effective when it is decentralized and personalized according to the desire of the teacher. Every teacher has their respective teaching methods. So, when they are equipped with the knowledge and skills to develop content for the digital learning platforms, it contributes to enhancing the learning outcome. At the moment, teachers are only trained in their respective subject areas. Therefore, when it comes to blended learning, especially using online or digital platforms, teachers find it difficult to cope with the technology. Although social media platforms

have unique tools to interact with students, teachers are generally not competent to use them efficiently. Traditional teaching methods that they are comfortable with do not have interactive components essential for online teaching. To address this issue, this project has paid attention to developing skills in content development using available software. Any teacher who would like to follow these courses can register themselves on the site and follow the online courses. These courses have been developed with interactive learning features and an inbuilt evaluation system to measure the learning outcome. As of yet, 400 teachers have followed these courses and developed their competencies. According to data obtained, most of the interactive learning sessions have been developed by the teachers who were trained under this project. It is interesting to note that one such music lesson was developed by a teacher who has never learned IT. A lesson on Buddhism has been developed by a monk who resides in a remote area and there are so many similar cases. Teachers followed these on their consent and this is a self-learning initiative with their own motivation. They are competent to use the underutilized facilities of the schools as a result of a lack of skill in computer technology. Further, this training programme which is open for anyone was used by people who are not in the education field who have obtained certificates completing the coursework. This could be considered a significant achievement that supports lifelong learning. The project team has proposed to implement this activity as a national-level programme under the NIE. The NIE board of directors approved the proposal and it will be implemented at the national level. This will enable saving of costs for teacher training. In addition Learning Management System E-nenapiyasa (www.enenapiyasa.lk) has won an award in the “UNV50 Awards” in the State Sector, the awarding ceremony was held in Galle face hotel on 7th of December in Colombo.

behind. However, by identifying and managing the existing resources, the project team has been able to reach 80% of the students in grade 5. Computer labs and equipment that has been provided under donor-funded projects which were underutilized were revitalized. Some of the equipment has not been used for years. Students who do not have the devices and infrastructure facilities for online education have been referred to these centres. Further, special mechanisms to share the limited resources on terms/shifts have been introduced. In addition, mobile services have been offered for the students in remote areas. By identifying alternative mechanisms and optimizing the usage of resources this project has been able to connect the majority of the students in blended learning systems through innovative thinking and dedication. This is a good example of resource management and sharing.

Resource Sharing

According to findings, at the beginning of this project, the majority of people have said that online education is not possible in the current context. This has especially been stated regarding online education that was said to be not practical at the primary education level. In addition, with the limited resources available, this facility was thought not to reach the wider community leaving most students



Finding Local Interventions to Address Challenges – Blended Learning Approaches by a Local Central School

In this study, one of the key research questions was to find out the impact of national-level blended strategies on students. At the same time, attention was paid to identifying and assessing the capacity of the local level programmes to address the challenges. For this purpose, an interview was conducted with a local level school management on the strategies that they followed to continue education during the school closure. The following case study is based on an interview with a principal of a local school.

Basic Information

This school is located in the Sabaragamuwa province and is a very popular school in the province. The school has developed a recognition and reputation among the parents as well as education authorities on outstanding results at the national level examinations that the students produce. In order to maintain good results and learning outcomes, this school has been using special project programmes. Some of them include extra evening classes, intensive learning seminars, assigning tasks to teachers to focus on individual students to increase competency levels etc. This school has approximately 3000 students and the staff consist of 400 teachers.

Planning and Developing Strategies to Face the New Challenges

Although this school has moderate facilities compared to the other schools in the area, prior to the pandemic, they have not adequately focused on the distance/online learning methods. However, with the closure of schools in March 2020, the school administration has paid rapid attention to continuing education in a challenging environment. The management had a discussion with the staff and identified the areas that need to be addressed. Once

the areas have been identified they have prepared a task list related to each area. In this process, they have formed teams and assigned tasks for each identified area. The academic team was given the task of making the relevant educational materials available while another team was assigned to obtain the details on the accessibility of online education.

Assessing the Context and Designing Suitable Approaches

A team of teachers was assigned to collect data on the availability of the devices to join online classes. Accordingly, they gathered information on the availability and accessibility of smartphones and computers. It was revealed that 60% of students have access to online education. However, it should be noted that the availability of a smartphone does not mean that this is adequate to fulfil the need. Most of the families have only one smartphone. Therefore, if the family has more than one child, then they have to share the device and in this situation, some children have to dedicate their time for the benefit of the other child. In most instances, smartphones belong to the parents and when they are not at home the child is unable to attend classes. As a remedial action, the team decided to record these lessons and upload them to a YouTube channel developed by the school. However, according to the assessment, it was observed that 40% of the students do not have the devices to attend online classes. Therefore, they decided to send the lessons via postal media.

Maximizing Local Knowledge and Utilizing Resources

To prepare the online lesson they have converted an abandoned small room that was used as a studio. This effort was supported by the school development



society and the past pupils' association. The school management was able to obtain the support of individuals who have a higher rank in society. All the lessons especially for those who were supposed to sit the national level examinations were produced in the studio. Popular and engaging teachers have been identified to teach the relevant subjects. This initiative has enhanced the student's participation in online learning.

Teacher Training on Online Teaching Techniques

Online learning requires a change in the mindset of not only the students and parents but most importantly the teachers. The traditional delivery of education is very different to online learning or blended learning. Therefore, teachers and educational facilitators need to go the extra mile in their delivery techniques. Some teachers have accepted change better than others. They have been willing to learn technology, adapt and engage their students more effectively.

The school management has organized training for the teachers providing them with the basic knowledge on social media platforms that they could use for online education. Teachers were trained how to create groups, schedule meetings, share education materials, evaluate the outcomes and utilize the inbuilt tools for effective learning. It should be noted that these techniques were new to most of the staff members. However, the teachers who were reluctant to use modern technology or who had negative attitudes on alternative modes of teaching gradually learned and adopted these techniques as well. This training was conducted in April 2020, while the school was able to identify the potential challenges of face-to-face education. According to the sources, they were able to cover the (entire) syllabus as scheduled. Using WhatsApp and other social media networks they have conducted term tests and mock tests for the national exams.

Monitoring and Evaluation

In the preliminary assessment, it was found that 20% of the students did not have devices or other infrastructure to obtain online education. Therefore, the school management made arrangements to send the printed educational materials by post to the

students who are unable to join online education methods. There were some periods that postal services did not function due to the pandemic. As an alternative, these materials were kept in a public location and the parents were asked to collect them and hand them over to the students at their convenience.

The monitoring team designed a plan to check whether the classes are being conducted as scheduled. They developed bottom to top approaches that students need to report to the focal person whether the classes were conducted properly by the teachers. At the same time, they were asked to track the number of students who attended the classes. Sectional heads had the responsibility to monitor the process. Students who continued education through distance mode education through postal media were also assessed and their learning outcomes were also evaluated regularly. However, it was found that 10% of the students did not participate in any of these alternative blended learning methodologies.

Ensuring participation and obtaining the opinion of the main stakeholder on the alternative education systems is important. The school management has taken action to involve all the main stakeholders in the process. Accordingly, they have conducted staff meetings and parent-teacher meetings regularly. It is interesting to note that according to the informants, these online staff meetings were more effective and successful than onsite meetings that were usually held after school. They have scheduled these meetings in the late evening, and they could ensure the participation and involvement of almost all the staff members. Progress related to the alternative education system and challenges encountered were presented in these meetings and remedial actions were also identified. For example, arranging visits to the students who do not participate in the online sessions. Rectifying the issues with the timetable allocated for each teacher. In addition, they have arranged recreational activities to relieve the common stressful situation due to the lockdown situation.

Parent-Teacher Meetings

It was revealed that the school had arranged meetings with parents in regular intervals. Most of the time these meetings were held in the late afternoon and therefore, parents were able to participate in these meetings more conveniently after their daily routine

work. Parents were asked to participate as groups according to the grades of their children. It was observed that the participation and involvement ratio is high. These meetings were very useful to track the progress of the students and make the necessary interventions. Student participation rates, assignment marks were presented to the parents.

Extra-Curricular Activities - Relief on Mental Stress

With the schools being closed for a long time period, all the people in society encountered some level of mental unrest. This is especially true for the students who are not permitted to go out and visit their friends because of the lockdown situation. To address this situation, the PCC has come up with some entertainment events. During this period, they conducted singing, stage drama, and painting competitions. All these programmes were held via online platforms. It should be noted that they have followed various strategies to host the competitions. For the drama –competition, all the characters of the drama had been recorded individually and edited as a single film. In this process, teachers and students worked as teams and they could learn new techniques through this process.

With the support of the staff and through participatory planning, they have been able to face the challenges. Most importantly, they were able to identify the resources available in their localities and maximize their utilization of them through teamwork. The cost involved in these initiatives were minimum and the additional cost has been covered by the school development society past pupils' association.

Experience on Blended Learning of the Targeted Communities

The majority of Sri Lankan public schools had continued education during the pandemic using online channels. Lessons were conducted via WhatsApp and Viber and teachers used to send large volumes of material as PDF documents to students. However, recent survey data indicate that in 2018, only 52% of Sri Lankan households with school-aged children owned a smartphone or computer – essential for online learning – and only 40% had an internet connection, which was primarily via

mobile phones. This means that less than half of all households in Sri Lanka can benefit from e-learning opportunities.

In order to obtain the experience of target communities, namely students and teachers, interviews were conducted in three communities. This includes a rural community (Puttalam District), semi-urban community (Polonnaruwa district) and war-affected area (Trincomalee district).

Student Experience -Puttalam District

This school is a primary school with classes from grade 1 to grade 11. The total number of students is 117 and the staff comprises 17 teachers. According to the principal, they have also conducted online education using social media platforms. This was initiated by the teachers voluntarily in their personal capacity and then they had started to make it more formal following a timetable. When a family has more than one child and then had to share the mobile phone students found it difficult to join the class. Sometimes more than one teacher conducted classes at the same time. However, they have rectified the issues by making the relevant changes in the timetable.

The study discovered that students most commonly use smartphones for online education and are connected to the internet through smartphones. Zoom has become a popular learning platform among them for conducting online lectures.

It should be noted that they have not paid adequate attention to the national level distance mode education systems like E-thaksalawa or Gurugedara television channels. They were not informed on other available platforms. In contrast, they are making an effort to maintain the same education system using different mechanisms. In this process teachers, parents, as well as students, encountered difficulties as they do not have the required devices, infrastructure and resources.

Most of the time these phones belong to the parents, and children are unable to use them when parents are away from home. Some parents had to purchase smartphones as they do not have them. Some of them had to purchase an extra one when they had more than one child. However, about 30% of the students were unable to join this distance mode education because of several factors. Some parents could not accommodate the cost involved in purchasing mobile phones.

In addition, they have to spend on connections and bear the data cost. This was a difficult task in the given scenario as unemployment and reduced income status were caused by the COVID-19 situation. Due to the lack of knowledge on the available options (data packages) sometimes they spend a considerable amount as data and communication charges. It was observed that the government concessions/reliefs have been used to purchase devices and data costs. Some parents have sold their belongings to bear the cost of online education.

According to the experience of the students, it was also discovered that students liked to use these types of online learning in the future. They stated that they feel more confident to ask questions in this online environment rather than in a typical classroom. That could be considered as a positive signal when approaching a new normal situation. However, it does not mean that they would like to have blended learning through mobile phones. Some of them stated that they find it difficult to read/see the content on the mobile phone screen. This is because most of the teachers used to send all the notes as images or pdf documents and students are loaded with text. However, online education is all about SMART content and teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to make the lesson that suits online platforms in order for students to be able to grasp the key concepts without being overwhelmed with content.

“We could not go to school for the last 18 months. I have been informed that the government planned to hold an Advanced Level examination soon. In this situation in order to cover the syllabus teachers send photocopies of lessons to us using WhatsApp and Viber. It’s hard for us to print these images, so we’ll have to write some of them on the papers. Sometimes these images are not clear at all. Looking at a phone for so many hours a day can be very stressful and frustrating. Don’t we have other option to change this system? we are very distressed”

- A student from Puttalam District

initially done using social media platforms by teachers voluntarily and then the school management made arrangements to make it more formal. However, the same media had been used for online education. According to their statistics, only 50% of the students are involved in online classes. Reasons for not participating are similar to the other communities and lack of devices/access to available devices and costs involved are the major obstacles. Students do not use alternative education systems sufficiently and instead, follow online tuition classes. Students complained that educational channels repeatedly telecast the same programme. In addition, when you have more than one child at home, it is difficult to watch the programme. Sometimes students used to walk to the neighboring houses to access these programmes. However, they prefer television education programmes over radio programmes. The inability to obtain more details, clarifications and lack of interaction could be identified as the main negative factors. Students’ engagement with the national level online education platforms are comparatively low in this community. The main reason for this situation is lack of knowledge about these facilities among the parents as well as teachers. At the same time, some teachers are reluctant to promote alternative education platforms as they are involved in conducting private tuition classes. It should be noted that lack of knowledge at the national level /provincial level programs has led to missing out on learning opportunities for children and incurred unbearable costs on education for parents.

I do not know about the educational programs that are being carried out at the national level. Only today I learned about something like that. Our school teachers teach us lessons at their convenience so we sometimes have to attend classes late at night. As there is no mobile coverage/ signal in our home area so we go to high places like mountains but this is somewhat risky. However, we don’t have other options

- A student in Polonnaruwa District

Polonnaruwa District

The information derived from the interview with teachers stated that they had also started distance mode education during the school closure. This was

Kilinochchi District (war-affected area)

The data collected in the Kilinochchi district revealed that children were gradually adapting to the distance education system. They said that learning difficulties,



especially due to the difficulty of receiving telephone signals, is a major obstacle to online classes.

In addition, the lack of money to purchase equipment data and parental ignorance have hampered children's access to alternative education methods. There have been reports of parents obtaining high-interest loans due to a lack of permanent employment. In addition, some of them have mortgaged their jewellery or sold their valuables to cover the cost of online education. However, it should be noted that similar incidents have been reported in the other communities as well.

My father is missing. He was lost during the last war period. There is no information about him till today. Our mother takes care of me and my brother and she work as a labourer. It is difficult to find work now because of the Corona epidemic. These days we are at home as school is being closed. The children in this area do not have internet facilities. The school teachers sometimes teach through WhatsApp. But we have no way to connect to them. We do not have smartphones.

- Grade 8 student from Kilinochchi District

The Provincial Ministry of Education has conducted several special programmes, especially targeting selected subjects.

Some of them mentioned that they were involved in educational programmes conducted by e-thaksalawa and television channels. It should be noted that although the percentage of participants who participated in national level alternative education was low this could be identified as a positive trend. However, most of the students' attention is focused on the classes conducted by the teachers in the area and the teachers who conduct tuition classes. This situation is seen everywhere at the community level. This is mainly due to the inability to access alternative education systems and failure to carry out follow-ups, which is conducive to children's learning.



The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health

Context

Due to the increased cases of COVID-19 infections, the government of Sri Lanka took different measures to prevent the spreading of the virus. Although these actions helped control the pandemic, some of these measures led to a number of negative consequences on mental health and psycho-social conditions. As the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly spreads in 2020/2021 in Sri Lanka it also involves a considerable degree of fear, stress, and anxiety among the public. Although the pandemic has caused overall challenges for the entire community, this concern is high among certain groups, such as older adults, caregivers, and people with underlying health conditions. In terms of public mental health, the main psychological impact of this crisis is underlying stress and anxiety. It is understandable that there is confusion, anxiety, and fear among the general public due to the seriousness of the disease, unavailability of a specific treatment and shortage of resources. In addition, when new measures such as quarantine at home or at various designated centres, self-isolation, and work from home policies are introduced, people's regular activities, behaviour or livelihood is affected, escalating feelings of loneliness, self-harm, depression, use of alcohol and even other substances.

Our family was infected with Covid 19. So we were sent to quarantine centres. Prior to this event our son has never been anywhere alone. As a result, he was very uncomfortable in the quarantine centre. When he returned home, I too had to go to Covid Quarantine. During that time my son became very depressed. Now he is very different. He says that he can't go to school. He is not interested in his studies. His friend also got away from him when they came to know that we infected Covid. He is always spending time in a state of fear. I feel the need to seek psychological

counselling. But the son does not want others to know that he is being treated for a mental illness and that others will make fun of him.

- A mother from Puttalam District

In addition, an increase in domestic violence is also evident. According to a survey of Women's Wellbeing conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics in 2019, out of a population of 51.6% Sri Lankan females at least 20.4% of them were reported to be subjected to domestic violence during this period.

One in five women in Sri Lanka has experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner. Yet, close to half (49.3%) of the women who experienced sexual violence by a partner did not seek formal aid anywhere. The survey also found that one-third (35.7%) of women who experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner had contemplated suicide; highlighting the serious repercussions violence has on the lives of women and girls.

Unfortunately, these numbers have increased during the lockdown due to a variety of reasons ranging from women being confined to home with their perpetrators, stress due to loss of jobs, addiction to alcohol, stress due to financial difficulties which are unacceptable yet persist nevertheless.

Additionally, the urban poor is disadvantaged in terms of isolating infected individuals and maintaining "social distance" in the very small dwellings, overcrowded spaces in urban settlements and boarding houses/hostels where they reside, often with poor sanitation. Additionally, access to clean water for cooking and maintaining hygiene, which is critical to preventing the spread of the virus, is often limited in low-income households. Falling sick is also extremely costly in terms of lost income, and out-of-pocket health expenses.



The Mental Health System in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, health services are provided free of charge. These services are administered and implemented with the guidance of the Ministry of Health along with other provincial Health Ministries. The Directorate of Mental Health (DMH) - Ministry of Health (MoH) of Sri Lanka prioritized the delivery of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) under the mandate of the Deputy Director-General for Non-communicable Diseases. National Institute of Mental Health and peripheral centres established in the district and divisional level provide these facilities to all the patients free of charge on a regular basis.

Responses for COVID19 Related Mental Health Issues

With the upsurge of the COVID 19 pandemic in late 2020, the Ministry of Health and special units have implemented special awareness programmes to reduce mental health-related issues. These programmes are implemented to raise awareness and are carried out through television channels. In addition, social media and traditional media was used in displaying posters/stickers and dissemination of leaflets. At the same time, the director of mental health also worked with telecommunication providers to decentralize the helpline service (1926) of the National Institute of Mental Health at the district level, as a means to accommodate the escalation of distress calls.

To ensure the continuation of medications for patients with existing mental health conditions and psychiatric disorders, oral medications were sent through postal services to patients for two consecutive months and injectable medicines were administered either at the community level or in clinics. Medical Officers of Mental Health (MOMH) teams and the community of Psychiatry Nursing Officers conducted home visits to the most vulnerable patients for the administration of injectable medicines.

Healthcare staff taking care of COVID-19 patients and public health personnel involved in contact tracing and quarantine processes were at the highest risk of stress and burnout. The DMH with the help of the National Technical Committee on Mental Health developed guidelines for health administrators of the curative and preventive health sectors to promote the mental wellbeing of frontline

health personnel and contain future mental health conditions. WHO helped MoH conduct a Mental Health Wellbeing Programme dedicated to frontline health workers and their families, assisting more than 2000 families as well. All hospitals have since taken initiatives to promote the wellbeing of their employees, according to these guidelines. In addition to this, musical shows and dramas, for entertainment purposes, were organized by the authorities and hospital staff to reduce the stress level of themselves as well as patients.

The Ministry of Women and child-development conducted a number of training sessions for the community level counselling officers attached to hospitals. District secretariats, Divisional secretariats, planned these training sessions as a response to the increased incidents of domestic and gender-based violence in the pandemic situation. These training sessions started in June 2020 and continued with follow-ups and updates according to the situation.

In addition, UN agencies including UNICEF, UNESCO and WHO implemented several programmes to reduce mental health issues related to the pandemic situation.

Promoting Mental Wellbeing of Children

Promoting writing skills while lessening mental stress

- Ratak Watina Pothak

During the school closure, the Ministry of Education introduced a writing completion for all the students. This programme was called “Ratak watina pothak” (storybook) and it gives an opportunity for the children to write a book. This programme expected to make students involved in creative writing and to keep them occupied in this difficult time period. The programme had in its plan to offer distinctions for hundred (100) best creative books from selected ten thousand (10,000) creations from island-wide and for those hundred books to be printed. The rest of the 9900 creations are expected to be published on electronic media by the Ministry of Education. A special circular for this project was issued by the Ministry of education with regard to ‘Ratak watina pothak’. It should be noted that the majority of students were able to participate in this programme as there was no need for a specific technological device to take part in this. Therefore, many students including those from remote schools participated in

this programme and it ended as a fruitful intervention to mitigate the negative impact on the mental health conditions.

In addition to this, debate/speech completions were organized at the provincial level by the provincial education authorities. These competitions were held on digital platforms and students were asked to record their speeches and share videos. Some television channels organized art competitions and were open for all and not limited to school children.

Impact on the Community

In the interviews, it was revealed that youth who were engaged in small scale businesses and those who were self-employed encountered immense difficulties in the prevailing situation. The majority of youth had started these small-scale businesses on credit facilities/or loans as their capital investment. Most of them had to pay loan instalments or rentals monthly and faced the need to operate their business to make the due payments to sustain their livelihood. According to the health measures except for a few essential services, all the other business institutes/shops were closed down. Further, the lockdown period was extended continuously. As a result, they were not able to generate income for a considerable time period. This situation led to an uncertainty of the future among the youth and they found themselves in a distressing situation.

I'm self-employed but I had to stop the business because I could not pay the rent due to the lack of business. I'm very sorry and I took a loan to start this. My friends who signed up as guarantees are also in trouble. I am embarrassed and I cannot face them. So I'm very upset and do not understand what to do. I'm not interested in anything now. At this time I do not know from whom we should seek advice or who will give us relief.

- A youth from Polonnaruwa District

In a recent study exploring the impact of the pandemic on small and medium scale enterprises in Sri Lanka, it was found that the mitigating strategies to combat COVID-19 have resulted in high economic and human costs. The employers

and employees of these enterprises were affected due to the shortage of materials, a decline in demand for their products, defaulting repaying loans, lack of savings and delay in salaries. The situation has become emotionally challenging to many, which could lead to widespread psychological distress and mental health consequences.

Due to the closure of the industrial sector, business ventures and construction sites too were halted. At the same time, a large number of workers who were in the mass scale manufacturing and production sector lost their jobs and started to return to their villages. Hence, there was an excess supply of labour in the rural sector and limited economic opportunities to employ them. As a result of the huge influx of labour to the rural sector, wage labourers also found it difficult to earn their livelihood within the community. According to the sources of the Family Health Bureau of the Ministry of Health, the number of Gender-based violence has increased. Loss of jobs and decreased reducing/cutting overtime/bonus has resulted in a decline in income of the youth/families. Due to the lack of income sources many families are unable to fulfil their day to day needs and are under tremendous stress.

Unfortunately, three students have committed suicide as they did not have the necessary facilities to follow online education programmes. Children were forced to study/attend in education by their parents and have complained that it has become a burden for them. This situation led to a restless situation between parents and children. It was reported that a 15-year-old boy died as his father assaulted him for not engaging in online classes.

In addition, the youth had to stay at home without interacting with their colleagues, friends and communities. This has also contributed to increased stress among the youth population. There are some instances that COVID infected families have been discriminated against by their own community indicating that they are responsible for spreading the virus. This situation has created a negative impact on the mental health status of the family members, especially on the youth.

When compared with rural communities the pandemic situation has made a big impact on the urban communities. The space of the targeted urban households in this study is extremely limited. According to the respondents, in some instances, several family members or families live in this small house and take turns fulfilling their basic necessities.



lack of adequate space in the house to sleep for all the family members causes them to take turns. They have to use common sanitary facilities. However, due to the restrictions of movement, all of the family members have to stay at home and their living space has become extremely limited. Active individuals in several families that reside in the same household have a limitation of access to common spaces which has made a significant downside on their mental condition.

Due to these stressful situations, some people even experimented with negative coping strategies. Meanwhile, those of them that are under stress but do not have the proper guidance or direction to overcome themselves encounter different types of mental health problems leading to issues that will hinder their potential.

Because of the impact of the pandemic on the socio-economic sector counselling services for mental stress anxiety has become a priority in the contemporary context. However, there are adequate remedial actions to address these needs.

Addiction to Mobile Phones and Online Games

The presence of school children at the mental health clinic has increased significantly. These days a large number of children are addicted to online games. Sometimes children play with people they do not know. Some of those children have been threatened and extorted. To investigate/check about these people, parents do not have a proper understanding of how to deal with their problems They are also suffering.

- A nurse in the Mental health unit

Before the pandemic, the usage of mobile phones by children was not encouraged by the parents. Using Mobile phones was prohibited on the school premises. However, due to the pandemic situation, at a time when online education has been introduced as the main mode of education, there was a significant change in these restrictions on using mobile phones. In this context children/students were provided with mobile phones with internet connection and most of the time they were not monitored by the parents and caregivers. The lack of knowledge on online

security among the children as well as parents has exposed them to online harassment, cyber-bullying as well as inappropriate content. Some children are extremely dependent on online games and they have encountered addictive symptoms. Parents who do not have adequate knowledge of social media and digital literacy are also in distress as they are not competent enough to handle their children's behavior. According to the information of the counselling services/mental health services incident of reporting victims of online violence and extreme users has been significantly increased.



Government Relief and Recovery Measures

Since the Easter Sunday attack in April 2019, the Sri Lankan economy has been experiencing a downturn and due to the current situation, many economic activities are severely affected. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit hard again and this has adversely affected the performance of public finance, foreign and financial sectors and will affect all stakeholders in society in various dimensions.

In the budget speech of 2020, the finance minister stated that Sri Lanka expected to sustain 6% of economic growth in 2021 while the inflation rate has been planned to be maintained at 5%, however, despite those predictions, year-on-year inflation (measured by the Colombo Consumer Price Index) increased to 6.0% in August 2021 due to high food inflation (at 11.5%) and a fuel price hike in June (the first in 21 months). The government invoked emergency regulations to curb speculative practices of traders amid high food prices and shortages of some essential commodities. The Sri Lankan Rupee depreciated by 7.4% against the US dollar in the first eight months according to the official exchange rate. However, the parallel market premia have been rising. Depleted net foreign assets in the banking system, at \$3.5 billion by July, suggests increasing challenges in meeting foreign exchange demand.

Real GDP grew by 8.0%, year-on-year, in the first half of 2021 from a low base with significant contributions from manufacturing, trade, financial services, and real estate activity. The subsequent increase of COVID-19 infections likely weakened the pace of recovery in the second half of 2021. The crisis precipitated widespread losses in livelihoods, which were expected to have increased the \$3.20 poverty rate from 9.2% in 2019 to 11.7% in 2020.

In order to prevent the spread of the virus and protect lives, the government implemented several measures. Even before the COVID-19 epidemic, income inequality in Sri Lanka was significant and did not present a positive picture. For example, in 2016, the lower 10 percentile of the population earned only 2.9% of the country's total income, while the highest 10 percentile enjoyed 32.9% of

the country's total income. This situation has further exaggerated with the current economic crisis.

Due to the lockdown of the country, there was a major impact on the tourism industry and Sri Lanka's leading export destinations. There was a huge impact on the apparel industry due to the shortage of supplies from China. In addition, the construction industry faced problems due to a shortage of labourers as a result of travel restrictions. Subsequently, financial institutes encountered difficulties because of the increasing non-performing loans and granting grace periods for loans. As a result of the adverse impact on such important economic sectors, the overall GDP growth in 2020 was -3.6%. Despite having all these negative economic conditions, Sri Lanka managed to keep the spread of the virus and the number of infected deaths low. The main reasons for this are the provision of free health care, early detection, isolation and prompt treatment. There is a network of public health inspectors throughout Sri Lanka who are dedicated to educating the public, identifying COVID-19 infections and implementing self-quarantine whenever necessary, along with an island-wide chain of hospitals to prevent the spread of the virus. Considering the health facilities available in Sri Lanka, the people of Sri Lanka have been fortunate to maintain a level where the virus can be controlled. If the provision of health care facilities were not a common commodity, income inequality would be a factor in determining the severity of this infection. In addition, providing high-quality health care, with the aim of bringing some relief to the less privileged groups of the population. Sri Lanka has taken a number of measures for the betterment of the people by mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 on the economy.

Some of the major initiatives implemented to provide relief for the affected communities in the pandemic season are presented below:



The COVID-19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund

This fund was established by the President to strengthen the mitigation activities aimed at controlling the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the country and related social welfare programmes. Donations were exempted from tax and foreign exchange regulations. Deposits could be made through cheques or telegraphic transfers. This Fund is managed by a 17-member committee headed by the Central Bank Governor. This fund was launched on March 23, 2020, with initial funding of Rs. 100 million. The balance of the COVID-19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund reached LKR. 1,668,379,121.74 (USD 8,555,790) as of 31.10.2020. This funding has been allocated for PCR testing, advocacy and quarantine facilities.

Some of the Major Objectives of the Fund are;

- To provide immediate funding requirement of Director General, Health Services to meet all expenditure connected with COVID-19 related healthcare facilities
- To meet expenses connected to healthcare and safety of health sector employees and all logistic providers working to provide essential public delivery services.
- To provide basic essentials to children, women, low income, elderly, differently-abled and vulnerable people.
- To mobilize required funding to strengthen public healthcare systems, including village and remote area dispensaries, testing and treatment centres, family healthcare system, to further consolidate Sri Lanka's public healthcare system to reduce country risks to communicable diseases.

Maintaining Income Conditions and Employment

One of the first steps taken by the Sri Lankan government was to close the country and declare 'work from home' to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Public Sector Services, Information and Professional and education services have been identified under this category and they were allowed to continue work from home. These areas could be

considered least affected by health regulation, such as government-imposed country closures and social alienation. However, this option is available for permanent job categories and high-income earners. Mostly for public sector employees benefiting under this concession.

Assisting SME and Self-employed Sector

Many policy measures were put in place to protect underprivileged people from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and to prevent job losses. The monetary board of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka by circular No 04 dated 24.03.2020 directed financial institutions (licensed commercial banks and licensed special banks and leading companies) in order to provide concessions for the public. Under this facility loan concession periods will be extended for the entrepreneurs in selected sectors. The Ministry of Labour has taken steps to fix a minimum monthly salary, especially for private-sector employees. It is important to provide these incentive packages first and foremost to small and informal businesses that are most affected by the pandemic. The relief package was extended to the tourism, hospitality and transport sectors. This is to minimize the increase in income distribution inequality through the impact of the epidemic.

Financial Compensation for Samurdhi Beneficiaries and Families that are Affected by the Loss of Income Sources

Samurdhi is a major poverty alleviation programme in Sri Lanka. Under this programme, families who live below the poverty line are provided with financial and other assistance for the improvement of their livelihood. The Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) allocated Rs. 400 Mn to distribute Rs. 5,000 each to those who have lost their incomes owing to curfews imposed due to the COVID-19 during the second wave in October 2020. This payment was made twice in 2020. In 2021 another compensation of Rs 2,000 was given to the same group. This payment was made primarily to persons registered as Samurdhi beneficiaries. Subsequently, steps were taken to include other workers who had lost their sources of income, those who were employed in the garment industry and households who had lost their daily income. The GoSL- issued an interest-free

advance of Rs. 10,000 (USD 51.2) to all low-income households (Samurdhi beneficiaries and Samurdhi cardholders) and vulnerable families, registered senior citizens, disabled persons etc. during the initial lockdown in March 2020.

The government announced ad hoc relief on lease installments for 1,500,000 self-employed people— such as owners of three-wheelers, school buses and vans—which corresponds to 16.8% of the labour force. Regarding non-contributory social assistance programmes.

The Farmers' and Fishermen's Pension and Social Security Benefit Scheme, a scheme for fishermen and farmers, provided an LKR5,000 (USD 25) emergency grant in response to COVID-19. The National Insurance Trust Fund, a government insurance fund, doubled the value of its benefits to health care, police and civil security professionals.

Distribution of Dry Rations to the Quarantined Families

Due to the higher number of COVID-19 infected cases, treatment was conducted in three levels. Under this plan, patients who have fewer complications were advised to stay home. In addition, the close contacts of the COVID infected persons were also advised to stay at home. These families had to register themselves with the local administration under the surveillance of the Medical Health Officer in the respective area. A dry rations pack worth Rs 10,000 was provided to each quarantined family for the quarantine period and this scheme was implemented by the local administration (GS officer) under the supervision of the Divisional Secretariat. Under this scheme, a total number of 43,376 families who were quarantined (by 31 of December 2020) received assistance for their food security. The total amount spent for this purpose is Rs. 438.76 million. The total number of families included in the government's programme of providing relief to families who lost their livelihoods during the quarantine curfew is 1409578. A number of INGO and NGOs made arrangements to provide dry rations to affected families in selected districts where they are actively engaged in community work. The majority of the beneficiaries were from marginalized communities. These programmes have been carried out with the support of the partner member organization of those organizations. For example, World Vision Lanka commenced its immediate response by providing dry rations to the

most vulnerable families who could not afford food due to loss of livelihoods. Under the initial response, they planned to support over 40,000 families in 35 locations in 15 districts at a cost of over LKR 70 million. In addition, some organizations supported marginalized individuals and families identified by their partner network and state officials nationwide. These programmes covered persons with disabilities (PWDs), female-headed households, orphanages, long-term care facilities as well as elders' homes.

Government Relief Programmes to Ensure the Nutrition Level of the School Children during the Pandemic

The government of Sri Lanka provides midday meals for the students at selected schools. This is called the National School Meal Programme and it is co-funded by the government and WFP. The objective of the National School Meal Programme is to uphold the health and safety of school children. This arrangement helped ensure that students have access to nutritious food. WFP has been supporting the National School Meal Programme since 2003 as part of its broader efforts to improve child nutrition.

The third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic started on 14th April in Sri Lanka. As an emergency preventive measure, the authorities decided to enforce closures of schools. While this played a critical role in minimizing the spread of the virus, it meant that children were unable to benefit from the nutritious meal they normally receive in school. In response to a request from the Government, WFP supported ensuring that school children of vulnerable families receive the much-needed food assistance amidst the pandemic.

It was revealed that for many children from low-income families, the food they receive in school is often the only substantial, nutritious meal they have in a day. Due to COVID-19 related job losses and reduced incomes making it harder for families to feed themselves, it was important to help ensure that children continue to receive healthy food during these challenging times.

With the WFP's assistance, the government altered the programme and started to provide "take-home rations distribution" to 1.2 million children enrolled in the National School Meal Programme. This initiative was funded by the government with a contribution of US\$ 6 million (approximately



LKR 1.2 Billion) and the WFP with a contribution of US\$ 200,000 (approximately LKR 40 million). The food ration handout is overseen by the State Ministry of Women and Child Development, Pre-school and Primary Education, School Infrastructure and Education Services.

The Government of Canada has redirected US\$ 200,000 (approximately LKR 40 million) from its planned projects to assist the WFP and the Government of Sri Lanka in procuring one month's worth of rations for 41,000 school children. The Government of Japan redirected 189 MN of canned fish which was initially donated for the in-school meals and will now be included in the ration packs for 220,000 families, providing children with vital protein in their diet.

Promoting Health and Nutrition Level of the School Children while Increasing Food Security and Income of the Women Smallholder farmers

The Home-Grown School Feeding project is an innovative approach and the first of its kind in Sri Lanka. This programme was designed to boost the local economy and improve the nutritional status of communities in regions with poor nutrition standards and high levels of poverty. By purchasing produce for the school meals from local smallholder farmers residing in the vicinity of the schools, the project has created a predictable outlet for farmers and a stable income while stimulating local production of nutrient-dense crops. Under this project, an estimated 170,000 primary grade school children received free meals.

Community Response on Government Relief Programmes

According to the responses, the relief provided for the Samurdhi beneficiaries was effective. A well-structured administration and coordination mechanism, human resources and maintaining a comprehensive database are listed as major contributing factors for the success. However, when the government decided to expand the relief for the other affected families, there had been misappropriations of resources. In some instances, the selection of affected families was through a committee composed of local politicians.

Some beneficiaries stated that there were political allegations in selecting eligible families. As a result of that, compensations have been allocated to comparatively higher income earners while neglecting the more marginalized families.

Our mother has gone to work in the Middle East. She had to come back as Covid was increasing in those countries too. We had a certain level of income. We had a three-wheeler. We were unable to pay the leasing for our vehicle and we lost that. We do not receive Samurdhi benefits. Now, we're helpless.

- A young girl from Puttalam district

It was observed that not only daily wage labourers but also self-employed and those working in the private sector, especially low-income earners, were in great distress due to the adverse economic effects of the epidemic. Accordingly, a considerable percentage of the people were at a certain level of risk. The government was not able to allocate adequate funding to provide compensation to the people in the face of the epidemic. It is important to develop and implement supporting social networks/social protection systems in order to build resilience against economic shock in the community.

“My job is transporting school children. We have a small van. However, now we do not have any income as schools have been closed for several months. We do not get government subsidies on the basis that we have vehicles. I do not like to be pressured into asking each other to get these reliefs or subsidiaries. So, we live very hard and this affects the education of the children as well. They participated in a lesson conducted by school teachers. I don't have money to pay for their tuition classes. They charge the same amount. If we do not pay them on time, so they do not send the link”

- A father from Polonnaruwa District

Recommendations

Recommendations are given according to the main thematic areas of the study. It should be noted that although these recommendations have been categorized separately there is strong interconnectivity of all the factors.

Education Sector

Although the pandemic situation has created an immense negative impact on the education sector, it has paved the way for alternative strategies that could be implemented to overcome the inherited limitations of the traditional education systems. Typically, in Sri Lanka, the education system emphasizes teacher-centred lecture-type education and physical presence is a vital factor. However, given the current scenario, this has been a challenge and new approaches have been evolved. Sri Lanka has paid attention to introducing digital technology to the public education system. Under projects identified by this study, some physical resources have been developed. In addition, education materials were proposed to be provided using digital media.

Further, tablet computers were planned to be provided for the students in the advanced level classes. However, these projects were not successfully implemented. In addition to the lack of financial resources, one of the main barriers in implementing these projects is the traditional attitudes of the officials including the teachers in the education sector. However, the unexpected pandemic situation has forced them to seek alternative measures breaking the self-imposed restriction. As a result, important innovations and new opportunities have emerged at various levels. The authorities should take action to study all the alternatives developed/invented by all the stakeholders in the education sector, and select the most suitable approaches and develop and maintain them to ensure inclusive quality education without interruption.

Developing a National Strategy for Blended Education

In the given context it is important to develop a national-level strategic plan for a blended learning system. In this procedure, attention should be paid to a mapping of the existing physical and human resources at the national provincial and community level. At the same time, this strategy should include validating and monitoring mechanisms to identify the gaps and rectify them at the initial stages.

Teacher Training

Online teaching requires specialized skills such as knowing how to conduct classes in a virtual environment, the training for which is currently lacking in Sri Lanka. Ensuring effective remote pedagogy is particularly challenging for TV broadcasts as opposed to online teaching. Given that TV is the most feasible way of reaching less-privileged students in Sri Lanka, it is crucial to address existing pedagogical and logistical issues. Distance teaching also necessitates equipping students with tools to learn independently, as opposed to problems with the bulk transfer of material and difficulties associated with reading and absorbing content from a phone screen, the current practice of sending large volumes of material via WhatsApp and Viber is problematic, as it reinforces teacher-centred education, where students merely absorb what is spoon-fed to them. In such a setting, achieving effective and relevant learning outcomes is difficult. Therefore, the government should invest in teacher training specially focused on SMART technologies.

It is important to understand that a teacher's salary increase is a long-term investment. As a nation, it is salient that we focus on our future and the long term even with the major short-term obstacles faced. High-quality teachers directly affect quality education, and this is one of the most important

determinants of economic performance in the modern world. Education and teacher pay is at the heart of human capital accumulation and economic growth.

Continue Blended Learning even after Schools Reopen

The periodic interruptions to school reopening attempts underscore the need for a well-developed hybrid system for education delivery – consisting of a mix of blended-person and remote options – so that teachers and students can shift smoothly to distance learning during an emergency. Even when schools are open, as we need to follow safety measures it will not permit all students to attend school daily in highly-populated schools. Therefore, it is important to invest in blended learning to ensure uninterrupted learning. The available underutilized resources could be revitalized as a short-term measure. However, the authorities need to identify the long-term measures to ensure indiscriminate accessibility and ensure the quality of education.

Updating the Learning Process

Due to the closure of schools, children remained in their homes thereby, strengthening the interaction between parents and children. Online learning has also resulted in parents having to play a larger role in the 'learning process, especially at a primary and secondary education level. As an example, parents who have three children (all below 16 years), now need to have three devices at their disposal and must assist all three children simultaneously in keeping to their timetable, which is a tedious task. At the Primary level of education, the responsibility is high and parents have to be intermediate teachers. Digital literacy and English language skills are other factors that need to be considered for this educational change in Sri Lanka. It is important to avoid dissimilarities among students. Should we plan to continue online education, economic growth, infrastructural development in the country also needs to be considered. It is noted that parents have to be educated on how to play this role effectively. Therefore, authorities should pay attention to informal education targeting parents.

Promoting Digital Literacy

The Computer Literacy Statistics (2019) released by the Census and Statistics Department showed that Computer literacy among males (32.9%) was higher than that of females (28.9%) in 2019. Although ICTs are a powerful tool for developing literacy skills and accessing education, progress on providing internet access and digital literacy training in public schools has been painfully slow. The Government should act urgently to prioritize delivering digital literacy training as a critical component of school literacy curriculum across all education levels, along with reading and writing. Youth (aged 15-19 years) show the highest computer literacy rate (64.9%) among all other age groups. Interestingly smartphone use was higher in rural areas than urban and internet access was largely used for education and work-related purposes.

Developing the Capacity and Emphasizing the Responsibility of Parents

Online learning has also resulted in parents having to play a larger role in the 'learning process' especially at a primary and secondary education level. As an example, parents who have three children (all below 16 years), now need to have three devices at their disposal and must monitor or help all three children simultaneously due to the timetable, which is an enormous task. If both parents are having a full-time job, then it is even more difficult to help their children in educational activities during these tough times. The responsibility of parents, especially in education, has been increasingly emphasized on the emergency caused by the Covid 19 epidemic. They have a special responsibility to oversee and provide the necessary support to their children's education. In this case, the child needs the support of both mother and father and the family members to provide an enabling environment for education. Therefore, it is important to develop the capacity of parents and create a sense of shared responsibility.

Re-open Schools in Low-risk Areas

It is beneficial to consider opening schools in peripheral COVID-19 low-risk areas where distance learning is neither accessible nor effective, which usually have smaller student populations, allowing



for better adherence to health guidelines such as physical distancing.

This can be done by allowing schools to make decisions in discussion with relevant school committees and regional education authorities, as opposed to blanket decisions made at the central level for all schools. Such plans should also involve strategies for more permanent ways of keeping schools open, supported by regular cost-effective testing of both teachers and students, and vaccinating teachers as a priority group.

Avoided Replication

It was observed that schools, as well as teachers, are making an effort to develop capacity in distance education systems. The efforts of schools administration on accruing resources and developing existing infrastructure that is required for blended learning systems need to be appreciated. This is more applicable in a context where they are interested in using underutilized resources. However, in some instances, this will lead to waste of human and other resources. In the case of a small school, should they decide to purchase equipment to establish a recording studio or develop an e-learning portal. It was observed that many teachers in the same locality have replicated several videos on the very same topic. Instead, it would be effective if the need to identify the resources and share it at a zonal level. This will ensure the quality of materials and avoid replication.

Eliminating replication will allow limited funds to be allocated for much-needed sectors like hygiene and health awareness promotions which have become a priority in a prevailing pandemic. Therefore, a resource management system needs to be developed to share the available resources among the schools. This will be useful to enhance the expertise and improve the quality of delivery.

Equity in Education

The disparities in resource allocation are evident in the education system of Sri Lanka. While some schools have the most sophisticated computer labs and modern facilities, other schools do not even have electricity. In order to promote online distance learning according to a national system, the government needs to ensure the availability of basic infrastructure and other resources in public schools. Developing these facilities would help the most

marginalized communities have access to online learning within their localities, and this is important where travel restrictions are imposed.

Providing a Data Allowance for Students

Although there are data-free that is dedicated to online learning, platforms such as, “e-thaksalawa”, “e-nanapiyasa” contain limitations. The user can only access limited content free of charge and most of the education material is uploaded in other domains which require data. For example, most of the educational material is on YouTube and this site cannot be accessed free of charge. On the other hand, it is not practical to maintain dedicated data free systems because of the huge cost involved. To maintain the blended learning system and in order to ensure accessibility to marginalized groups, it is recommended the Government should make arrangements to provide data cost/or concessionary rates for students.

Re-imagining the Future

The SDG focusing on education also stresses the importance of ensuring “quality education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.” The pandemic disrupted the flow of education and the learning loss will be a drag on the country’s human capital gains. It is important to identify and implement policies to reverse trends of long-term inequality, reducing gaps in equity is a priority to realize growth prospects. Climate Education, Sexual Education, Disaster Risk Reduction Training, and Legislation should be adopted in the existing curriculum.

As countries recover from the crisis, there is a chance to rethink their long-term development models. With the emergence of new digital technology, Sri Lanka has an opportunity to shift gears from a traditional manufacturing-led growth model and capitalize on the potential of its services sector. Therefore, the government should invest in research and studies to identify the potential advantages and align the education system to cater to the demands of the new normal.

Moreover, there is an urgent need for the education system to align with the employment types and demands that the economy can facilitate. 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. This comes with an urgent need to create awareness as well.

Mental Health

Increase the Facility for Early Identification of Mental Health Issues

In the context of Sri Lanka, early identification of mental health issues and appropriate interventions are pivotal to further limit the psychological catastrophe of COVID-19. Therefore screenings are mandatory for individuals at risk and those in need of special attention namely health care workers, affected females, the elderly and quarantined individuals. Knowledge of previous disaster management will assist in setting up support networks and assessment mechanisms

Taking Action to Mitigate Gender-Based Violence

The pandemic situation resulted in increased negative effects on women where they frequently fall victim and become distressed with gender-based violence. The authorities need to design and implement special intervention/ programmes to address these rising issues.

Sri Lanka's laws and systems have so far failed to protect and safeguard women from violence. In the pandemic, situation evidence shows that this issue is getting worse. Therefore, it is high time that authorities took decisive steps to bring perpetrators to justice and empower women to recognize their right to a life free of violence – thereby eliminating violence against women.

Mental Health Programmes for Students and Youth

The Prolonged lockdown situation has had a negative impact on youth and students. Some of them are addicted to online games and inappropriate content that would impair their learning abilities. Therefore, the existing school-based counselling

programmes need to be strengthened in order to face the increasing number of issues as well as address the diversity of the problems.

Expanding the Services / Introducing Distance Mode / Online counselling

Due to the stigma and discrimination related to mental health issues most people who are suffering from these problems are reluctant to go for counselling or treatments. At the same time due to the restrictions on movements, these people were unable to see counsellors. In this situation especially girls and women encountered more difficulties when compared to males who have more freedom of movement. On the other hand, some of the victims do not like to obtain these services from nearby clinics and prefer to go out of their localities. This is because they believe that would make a negative impact on their image. However, they were not able to do this because of the travel restrictions. Therefore, it is important to introduce/ accessibility of alternative options – online services to address these issues.

Government Relief and Recovery

Due to the unexpected pandemic situation, the private sector employees and those attached to the non-formal sector encounter tremendous difficulties. In addition, people who engaged in small and medium level business industries including self-employed were also faced with financial challenges. In this situation, a new segment of the community adds up to an economically vulnerable situation. Accordingly, the number of people who need basic support for their living/livelihood assistance has significantly increased. The government implemented several programmes to address these issues. However, in implementing the relief programmes at the ground level there were incidents where these facilities/aids have not been disseminated in a reasonable manner or successfully reached the targeted communities.

As a consequence of the regular structure of Sri Lanka's social protection system, those belonging to the 'missing middle' are not targeted by noncontributory social assistance or contributory social insurance systems. Around 31% of the households in the middle quintile are estimated to be excluded. Important challenges remain to expand Sri

Lanka's social protection floor and include informal and self-employed workers.

Accordingly, to address these issues the following strategies could be considered;

Registering Beneficiaries

Registering beneficiaries of emergency responses into a comprehensive information system that could support a dynamic shock-responsive system in the near future;

Introducing Social Insurance for Self-employed

Adding COVID-19-responsive features to the social insurance scheme for self-employed people— and overall expanding social insurance benefits to the recipients' families; and

Promoting Institutionalized Response

Shifting social assistance responses from an ad hoc arrangement towards an institutionalized response better equipped to transition from mitigation to a recovery strategy, which could include rolling out universal benefits for children, elderly people and persons with disabilities

Mitigate Political Influence

Taking necessary actions to mitigate political influences by strengthening more accurate and advanced methodologies to identify the targeted community

Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation

Implementing monitoring and evaluation system/ strategies including the participation of impacted communities to ensure that benefits have been reached to the intended recipients

References

1. <https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2020/07/13/distance-education-during-and-after-covid-19-long-road-ahead-for-sri-lanka/>
2. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:450266/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
3. Edirisinghe, P.S., 2018. Structural Changes of Higher Education in Sri Lanka: A Study on Privatised Universities and Emerging Burdens in Free Educational System. Available at [SSRN 3607473](https://ssrn.com/abstract=3607473).
4. Lim, C.P., Ra, S., Chin, B. and Wang, T., 2019. Information and communication technologies (ICT) for access to quality education in the global south: A case study of Sri Lanka. *Education and Information Technologies*, pp.1-16.
5. Sri Lanka COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health Systems Preparedness Project (P173867) -Ministry of health and indigenous medical service 2020
6. Liyanage, I.K., 2014. Education system of Sri Lanka: strengths and weaknesses. Accessed online on Jul, 18, p.2019.
7. Budget speech 2022- Ministry of finance
8. Satahana,2021 July Central Bank of Sri Lanka
9. Central Bank report 2019, 2020 Central Bank of Sri Lanka
10. Statistical report 2020 – Department of Census and Statistics
11. COVID-19 and social protection in South Asia: Sri Lanka1 September 2020,Inclusive policy centre for inclusive growth
12. Rameez, A., Fowsar, M.A.M. and Lumna, N. (2020). Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education Sectors in Sri Lanka: A Study based on South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, [online] 10(6), p.341. Available at: <https://www.richtmann.org/journal/index.php/jesr/article/view/12279>
13. ReliefWeb. (2020). It is time to change the narrative - Measuring the devastating impact of COVID-19 on the education of children in tea plantation communities in Sri Lanka - [online] Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/it-time-change-narrative-measuring-devastating-impact-covid-19-education-children>
14. Sachs, J., Schmidt-Traub, G., Kroll, C., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. and Woelm, F., 2020. The sustainable development goals and COVID-19. Sustainable development report, 2020.
15. UGC. 2016. Admission to Under graduate Courses of the Universities in Sri Lanka.

