

Localization of Sustainable Development Goals in Sri Lanka: The Way Forward

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Introduction

Sri Lanka's worst political and economic crisis has impacted each and every aspect of life and livelihood. The government is struggling at its highest level to fulfill the basic needs of the citizen in terms of providing free education, medical services and even the public services. Food insecurity and malnutrition are highly prevailing as the breadwinners are unable to feed their families and children due to the high inflation as it recorded 60% solely in the month of June 2022 (CBSL, 2022). The destruction created by the State itself by its political authoritarianism and unimaginable level of corruption deviated itself from focusing on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Far before the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis, the process for an inclusive transformation was derailed since the last Voluntary National Review (VNR) by the government in 2018 (VNR, 2018).

It is unfortunate to reiterate that, to date Sri Lanka has failed to create and implement national road map, policy strategy, action plan, financing, plan, monitoring mechanism and a reporting process for the SDG's. The lack of planning and implementation strategies put by relevant authorities led the political hierarchy far away from adopting the 2030 agenda (NPF, 2018). If Sri Lanka had adopted a transformative process as planned in 2016, the current multiple crises could have been averted. At some point, the State has centralized the planning and implementation of SDGs rather concentrating on an inclusive national process by devolving the process into the sub national levels (IPS, 2020). This has resulted in extremely low stakeholder interest and action at both national and sub national levels. The present tragic scenario of the State directed it to move away from adopting the transformative agenda and now it is far distant from reality. By understanding the ground reality, one could agree that, neither Sri Lanka will achieve the targets sets out by the 2030 agenda nor reclaim the country back from corrupt and authoritarian political group until and unless there is a system change.

Legal and Institutional Framework

Sri Lanka has passed the Sustainable Development Act No. 19 of 2017 (the Act) to increase institutional coherence in achieving the SDGs. The Sustainable Development Council (Council) was created by the Act to serve as the national coordination body for the implementation of the

SDGs. The Council is responsible with developing the country's sustainable development policy and strategy. This plan establishes a sanctioned legal framework for the SDGs' implementation. It offers direction on all issues pertaining to the SDGs in Sri Lanka. Sustainable Development Strategies (SDS) must be developed by all government agencies in accordance with the overall plan. The Council sets recommendations on sustainable development for new development projects as a supplementary measure and oversees the national strategy's execution.

All governmental agencies are required by the Act to conduct environmental and social audits for new development projects. These organizations must also update the Council on the status of the implementation of each of their respective growth strategies. A strong policy framework for a common national perspective on sustainable development has therefore been established by the Act. It offers the legal basis for bringing the SDGs into practice, using the national institutions and institutional architecture already in place.

A key part of achieving the SDGs is played by the Council established by the Act. But a lot relies on how well the Act is put into practice. It's not at all easy to exercise the kind of power that has been granted to the Council. For instance, disagreements can arise from the Council's control over formerly mainly independent governmental entities like Provincial Councils. As a new entity, the Council's capacity will need to be rapidly developed. This comprises skills for formulating policies, for overseeing them, and for effectively involving stakeholders. Building all government organizations' abilities to create and carry out institutional sustainable development policies is equally crucial. The reclusive, solitary tendencies of government bodies need to be overcome to ensure institutional coherence. This is in the interest of creating an environment where everyone works together and in synergy. Only then can the government's institutional mechanism effectively and efficiently implement the SDGs in Sri Lanka. To establish institutional coherence, government organizations must overcome their solitary, reclusive inclinations. This is in the interest of creating an environment where everyone works together and in synergy. Only then can Sri Lanka's institutional system for the government execute the SDGs effectively and efficiently.

Focus Areas

Domestic Resource Mobilization

All countries committed to implementing the SDGs are accountable for mobilizing domestic resources. To fulfill the SDGs internationally between 2015 and 2030, according to the United Nations (UN), \$5 trillion to \$7 trillion per year and \$3.3 trillion to \$4.5 trillion in poor nations would be required. In spite of the 2030 Agenda's eight-year existence, Sri Lanka has not yet determined how much money it would spend on achieving the SDGs or determined the returns on that investment (ICAAP, 2021). The nation still needs to link its financial institutions, investment plans, and national economic policies with the 2030 Agenda. In this context, Sri Lanka has not been able to mobilize additional external or internal resources required for transformative action towards achieving the SDGs.

It is necessary to adapt the domestic resource mobilization framework (framework) for the various tiers of government, including national, provincial, local, and community. The constitutionally mandated multilevel structure of government has not resulted in a change in the subsidiarity of the national government's service delivery obligations relative to the province and local governments. Additionally, no institutional or technological procedures have been created or implemented to provide policy-program coherence between the national and subnational levels. Because of the numerous obstacles that fragmentation has made for localizing the SDGs, public service delivery has to be reevaluated in order to guarantee that domestic resource mobilization

and investment are effective, inclusive, and transformational. The community was also included in the proposed structure, primarily as a self-organized level that is also susceptible to regulation, facilitation, and effect by the multilevel government system. Microbusinesses and community-based organizations (CBOs) run formal and informal partnerships and transactions that have an impact on the SDGs at the local level. In order to achieve the level of change envisioned by the 2030 Agenda, domestic resource mobilization must be taken into account at all levels of government, in all sectors, and in all communities.

Communities can be involved in local development initiatives through discourse, active involvement, or even demonstration, which can assist rebalance the policy setting and have a positive snowball effect. The implementation of the Framework may reveal the intricate relationships between the pieces. If not picking from the 16 parts, thoughtful decisions will need to be taken when contextualizing the Framework, particularly at the subnational levels. Although it is intended for the 16 components to interact as a networked system, the type and extent of these dependencies will rely on the requirements of integration at each tier. For instance, at the local level, subsidiarity and decentralization would be reliant on the interactions and business dealings between informal and official groups. The formal interactions and transactions between provincial and local government levels would still require the use of subsidiary and decentralization, even when the majority of policy choices are made for subnational governments at the national level. Therefore, each element's use necessitates a planned and thoughtful investigation of its use in order to recalibrate situations.

To put it simply, governments must mobilize more revenue in order to address the numerous issues that affect their citizens and economy. Instead of relying on foreign finance, which results in unmanageable debt loads, this revenue must increasingly originate from internal sources. In particular, the situation in Sri Lanka has entirely crumbled, and domestic revenue is not even enough to meet the population's basic necessities. Covid-19 has exposed significant flaws, and the current economic and political crisis has worsened due to improper use of public funds and erroneous policy choices, which have driven the nation to its doom (Farhan Z., 2021). Unfortunately, the progress made in reducing poverty is now being undone, inequality is rising, public services are under pressure, and economic development is declining.

Policies and Proposals on National Planning and Budgeting

Investments needed to accomplish the SDGs is enormous, but not insurmountable. According to preliminary ESCAP projections, Sri Lanka will need to invest an additional 4.4% of its GDP year until 2030 in order to provide a social safety floor (1.7%), transfers to close the poverty gap (0.2%), high-quality education (1.6%), and climate-resilient infrastructure (0.8 per cent). Some of these investment requirements ought to be included in the budgets of the Sri Lankan government (UNESCAP, 2019). The budget should prioritize investments in high-quality education by changing curricula to enable the integration of STEM and the arts, improving ongoing professional development for teachers, and introducing more technology into the delivery of education; healthcare services and facilities by increasing investments in healthcare delivery, quality, and infrastructure; agriculture by connecting smallholder farmers to the value chains of larger businesses, investing in climate-proof storage, and enhancing natural disaster insurance for farmers; climate resilience by enhancing the quality of irrigation infrastructure, strengthening ecosystem conservation, and expanding the natural disaster insurance program; gender equality by splitting the cost of maternity benefits, facilitating childcare services by businesses and schools, and encouraging participation of women (ILO, 2020). The problem is that the local level

government is unable to provide effective development programs to CSOs and direct their engagement. Additionally, because NGOs are mostly excluded from decision-making processes, they do not feel a part of it and are not co-owners of progress.

Whenever proposing a suggestion for national planning and budgeting, it is important to take into account the potential and problems of financing the SDGs. The yearly investment gap in the primary SDG sectors in poor countries is expected to be approximately US\$2.5 trillion annually, while the anticipated annual worldwide demand for financing the SDGs is in the range of US\$ 5-7 trillion. Nevertheless, considering the size, scope, and sophistication of the global financial system, with estimates of the gross world output and worldwide gross financial assets at over US\$ 80 trillion and US\$ 200 trillion, respectively, it is thought that finance for sustainable development is still possible.

Sri Lanka has not presented a convincing argument to draw any of the available funds for the SDGs since it has not developed a clear financial estimate and investment strategy. While SDGs are at the center of nearly every UN program and that of other international and multilateral development organizations active in Sri Lanka, the government has not yet obtained a sizable amount of funds for the 2030 agenda through foreign finance. Additionally, Sri Lanka has not made any notable efforts to secure domestic funding for the SDGs. There hasn't been much initiative on the part of business and industry sectors to incorporate the SDGs into their business operations, even though the government hasn't provided enough room and avenues for private finance sectors to contribute to the SDGs (ITC, 2020). Despite being referred to as the country's economic engine, there is little proof that Sri Lanka's private sector is guiding the country's economy toward sustainable development.

Sri Lanka has not been consistent in its belief in change, confidence in charting new routes, or commitment to operate outside of the established system since publicly committing to the 2030 Agenda in 2015. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are still seen as just another international initiative by the elite policy circles, with little apparent impact on the public or stakeholders at the national and subnational levels. In actuality, political participation in the formulation of public policy has been minimal even at the national level, while provincial and local government levels are severely underrepresented and the civic space for participation has been dwindling.

Sri Lanka is still carrying out its development projects and programs, which leads to conflicts between the laws and rules governing the environment, society, and the economy. Environmental, social, and economic sustainability have been poorly integrated into current national policy frameworks due to a lack of policy coherence planning, whereas subject ministry walled techniques have been used to mainstream SDGs. The stark absence of institutional coherence and policy in Sri Lanka illustrates the country's unwillingness and incapacity to undergo a genuine change toward sustainable development.

The political commitment of Sri Lanka to achieving the 17 SDGs is limited and lacks clarity. While there are general policy frameworks for the majority of the SDGs, they may not always apply to all 17. SDG 10 serves as an illustration of this, since it does not include any physical government material that mimics national policy papers and instead prefers to conceptualize macroeconomic and physical policy theoretically. Separately, there is a bare-bones policy framework for SDG 13 that is filled by a single, stale national policy paper. Having said that, specific and more recent national policy document drafts in SDG 02 are attempting to formulate policy coherency, through the development of the relevant interlinkages between SDG 02 and SDG 13. On a different note, SDG 15 is an example of a goal that does have a moderate number of national policy documents

available, that cover multiple aspects within the broad thematic areas of biodiversity conservation, protected area administration and sustainable forestry management.

There is no formal method to integrate and synchronize seldom localized national level policies, action plans, and strategies at the subnational and local level, which has resulted in significant divergence. For some theme areas, there exist subnational and local level action plans and strategies, but they are implemented in a haphazard and dishonest way without the necessary supervision from a policy framework. Subnational/Provincial development and adaptation plans are currently said to be in the development phase and until such time these plans are finalised and published, Sri Lanka is not on track to achieve sustainable development. When looking at Sri Lanka from a holistic perspective, planetary boundaries are yet to be surpassed.

Participation of Public, Private, Civil Society and All Stakeholders at National, Subnational and Community Levels

The collective demand resonated by all groups of the 2022 civic struggle of Sri Lanka, system change, proves not only the desire of the common man to contribute to Sri Lanka's sustainable development transformation. It must be noted from the onset that, though the people who are represented by the civil society of Sri Lanka, are both the actors and recipients of national sustainable development, the state structures have monopolized the intended transformation without the commitment, capacity and vision to achieve it. This has led to disintegrated initiatives in the name of sustainable development which do not link the existing silos of the national development sector; the state, the non-state and the civil society. Needless to say, such a disconnect which was worsened by the mismanagement of Sri Lanka's transformation since the global adoption of the 2030 agenda, has brought about the current national crisis, the effects of which will be felt long after the year 2030.

Unquestionably, a vital player in Sri Lanka's change toward sustainable development is the civil society, which represents the main groupings, various stakeholders, and the general populace. Civil society should be given genuine opportunities for involvement and effective contribution rather than just appreciation. If Sri Lanka is to undergo the anticipated shift toward sustainable development, there are four primary truths that demonstrate why this problem has to be handled right away.

The first reality is that significant groups in Sri Lanka, such as women, children and youth, and people with disabilities, are not seen as key stakeholders who must actively participate in all phases of Sri Lanka's transformation toward sustainable development, but rather as mere inclusion exercises. Such groups now depend on the "benefits" offered by both state and non-state enterprises, which has not only bred a poisonous culture of reliance but also disappointment that Sri Lanka's transformation is essentially an impractical ideal that is frequently spoken but never realized. The academic community, including the research community, is another significant underrepresented component in the move toward sustainable development. It was noted that the academic community at the national state institutions was excluded from the national SDG implementation process (Surfshark, 2020).

The second reality is that, despite the civil society's ability to work with local government mechanisms to provide fundamental services for promoting equality and eradicating poverty on multiple fronts, they are not included in the processes for planning, evaluating, and managing Sri Lanka's transformation. Such exclusion has caused a mismatch between organized development initiatives and Sri Lanka's actual development requirements, a missing link that is essential to the

change toward sustainable development. Moreover, Sri Lanka has systemically excluded the indigenous communities in the transformation planning as well as in implementation.

The third reality is that the governance structure's registration and administration procedures for civil society have flaws. The main legislative law governing NGOs, CSOs and VSSOs is the Voluntary Social Service Organizations (Registration and Supervision) Act (No. 31 of 1980), (amongst others). The National Secretariat for Non-Governmental Organizations (NSNGO), which reports directly to the internal affairs division of the cabinet minister of defense, serves as the focal point for this piece of law on a national level. The current administration has essentially militarized the control applied to the NGO administration under the guise of "National Security" as a result of hyper nationalist views toward NGOs, CSOs and VSSOs. The relationship between the Non-State Development Sector and the State has deteriorated since the Civil Society has evolved into a national security concern, leading to such arbitrary transparency of the CSO management procedures to the Ministry of Defense.

The fourth reality is that Sri Lanka's civil society and public spaces are getting smaller as a result of ongoing shifts in the central government's stance on the "leaving no one behind" policy. The spaces available for CSOs to actively participate in the SDG planning process have been constrained by the government structures' lack of ongoing commitment to including civil society in the transformation toward sustainable development. With every cycle of administration and cabinet shift since the establishment of the 2030 Agenda, changes in the methods in central government have been made via this transition. CSO involvement in the planning, maintenance, integration, and development processes for sustainable development has been minimal.

The monopoly of data and information by state data collecting stations has weakened Sri Lanka's data democracy, which is having a detrimental influence on civil society action and people-led development. This is the fifth reality. The macro data reporting systems of Sri Lanka, which are necessary for the country's sustainable policy processes, do not include the data gathered by civil society actors. Together, these facts show that the civil society in Sri Lanka only has a nominal role in the country's transformation and makes little real effort to support the country's sustainable development from the perspectives of policy coherence, systemic mainstreaming, and cross-sectional integration. The civil society must act as a check and balance on a state structure lacking accountability frameworks, starting with the contentious role of the executive presidency which violates the fundamental norm of necessary power, in order for Sri Lanka to achieve its transformation under any agenda by any given deadline.

Urban Rural Disparities in Project Planning and Implementation

“Intensifying relations between cities and the rural territories surrounding them call for deepening the connections and cooperation between urban and rural territories.... Urban-rural interdependence should be tackled through multi-level governance including integrated planning” (Territorial Agenda 2020). Three points in common could be identified in relation to urban rural disparities such as increasing importance of functional linkages in delivering on objectives; issues of governance, partnership and organisation and processes of exchange, mediation or aggregation between places also other forms of territorial interaction.

The VPR report 2022 provides many key takeaways about how present constraints and instabilities at the subnational levels for integrated action on economic, environmental, social, and governance undermine the overall development system and the advancement of all 17 SDGs. The provincial council, local government officials, and other interested parties emphasize that the

lack of national and subnational targets, inadequate funding for implementation, poor coordination between national and provincial agencies, and a lack of a framework for implementing the SDGs are the primary reasons for the lack of progress (VPR, 2022).

The difference between the local and international poverty lines is quite wide in the Eastern Province. 6.5% of people live in complete poverty, and the government provides Samurdhi payments to 40% of the population. Due to a lack of agricultural funding, a lack of prior preparation, and a failure of the organic farming execution methods, it was unable to complete even 20% of the planned operations. This had a significant impact on agricultural production, cutting back on output by more than 50%. In the Central Province, access to public transportation, road infrastructure and transportation facilities and budget allocation for SDG implementation must be improved to meet the particular standards which is already implemented in the capital city (Sooriyaarachchi, 2018).

Additionally, there is a sizable wage difference since workers in the Central Province's garment industries and plantation industry are not covered by the Employment Provident Fund or Employee Trust Fund. Communities have become very dependent on microloans as a consequence, and excessive debt levels have caused many individuals to uproot and move to other cities as well as contributing to a rise in the suicide rate.

Due to government action, illicit sand mining and deforestation have increased in the North Central Province since 2019. Local government entities currently use subpar garbage collection techniques, particularly in the Northern and North Western Provinces. The discharge of hazardous compounds into the environment by bigger corporations is not addressed by provincial statutes, regulations, or local standard bylaws. Wilderness encroachment in particular areas (Peak Wilderness, Knuckles and Piduruthalagala) is a major issue in the Central Province. In addition, the Central Province faces a number of serious problems, including inadequate recycling and waste management practices, landslides and other natural catastrophes, and more. As a result, rubbish has spilled into the residences of employees on plantations, resulting in unhygienic conditions.

The Eastern Province needs to update its facilities and infrastructure. Additionally, even though the provincial administration of education provides primary and secondary education to 1,115 schools in the Eastern Province, it is impossible to meet all of the requirements of the educational system due to a lack of personnel in some fields and inadequate budgetary allocations (SDG 4). Due to multifaceted poverty, Southern Province residents in rural areas have noted that they lack appropriate access to food, furnished housing, official and informal elementary and secondary education, as well as a dependable water supply and sanitary facilities, notably in schools.

Despite the fact that the Uva Province has 800 schools, a high rate of high school dropouts has been attributed to a shortage of textbooks, computers for teaching IT, Tamil teachers to teach science and mathematics, among other factors. On the other hand, the Western Province is advancing into a high-quality digital era through the execution of several P3 initiatives to improve the social and economic conditions of the community. Other challenges include poor female participation in decision-making, and malnutrition due to the shortages of food and nutrition. Furthermore, despite the fact that Grama Niladhari officers and plantation enterprises are isolated, there are language barriers in fulfilling their basic necessities in North Western and Northern Provinces.

The Central Province is dealing with problems including child marriages, high rates of childhood malnutrition, especially in the estate sector, and communication obstacles between patients and

medical professionals. Additionally, situations like 500+ people standing in line to see two physicians in a general hospital, incompetent practitioners administering first aid and treatments at general dispensaries, and others show a scarcity of medical professionals. In the Southern Province, there is a lack of liability and accountability has been observed, thus adequate governance systems must be developed to solve these issues.

In addition, while the Northern Province's governance development is constrained by low public participation and the postponement of the provincial and local government elections, trade unions and complicated legislative, statutory, and regulatory processes have also made SMEs wary of doing business with large-scale corporations. The most pressing issues in North Western province, however, are thought to be the militarization of provincial council operations, a decline in total government personnel services, a dearth of successful social development, and out-of-date laws.

Recommendations

Sri Lanka needs to construct a comprehensive policy framework that might direct sustainable development and strengthen the convergence of environmental, social, and economic policies. There are many policies that address the SDGs; the majority of these policies are comprehensive on their own, but some of the more recent policies have also sought to map sectoral interlinkages. Overall, policy coherence is low, even within specific aims. Sectoral policies developed using siloed methods and institutional frameworks that are fragmented and unstable continue to be the major causes of the lack of coherence (UNDESA, 2020).

A defined national SDG monitoring, evaluation, follow-up and review (MEFR) structure has not yet been established in Sri Lanka. While a few proxy indicators have been established during the previous two years, Sri Lanka has not yet properly and thoroughly localized the indicators. The lack of disaggregated data, both in terms of availability and frequency of compilation, is the biggest obstacle to evaluating Sri Lanka's progress toward reaching the SDGs. Monitoring, assessment, and follow-up are essential parts of ensuring Sri Lanka makes the progress required to achieve the SDGs. To do this, Independent National Coordination Mechanisms (NCMs) need to be formulated and established at each of the designated National Focal Points assigned to each of the SDGs.

Due to the centralization of government, Sri Lankan institutions lack subsidiarity. Stakeholder participation would automatically rise significantly if Sri Lanka were to make real progress in realizing the principle of subsidiarity and guaranteeing the localization of the SDGs. In the end, a lack of central control will enable all tiers of government, CSOs, NGOs, the private sector, and other relevant players to actively contribute to the transformation necessary to accomplish the SDGs.

Sri Lanka has not properly evaluated the financial and domestic resource mobilization for the SDGs' implementation; this demonstrates the political and administrative hierarchy's low degree of commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The nation lacks a well-defined sustainable development finance architecture despite the Central Bank of Sri Lanka releasing a study on Sri Lanka Green Finance Taxonomy this year. The government's lack of foresight, which prohibits the nation from requesting outside financial help for the SDGs implementation, is made clear by the present economic crisis. It is impossible to take advantage of the promise of financial innovations, new technologies, and digitalization to provide fair access to finance without sustainable funding plans and investments at the national and subnational levels.

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