

CSO Review Report on SDG 4 Progress

Sri Lanka 2025



Coalition for Educational Development Sri Lanka

This Interim Report on the implementation of SDG4 in Sri Lanka, developed by the Coalition for Education Development (CED) Sri Lanka, provides an independent civil society assessment of the country's progress in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, over the past decade.

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2025 12 .12

EDUCATION OUTLOUD
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Funded by: Education Out Loud



Published by:

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About the Report

This Interim Report on the implementation of SDG4 in Sri Lanka, developed by the **Coalition for Education Development (CED) Sri Lanka**, provides an independent civil society assessment of the country's progress in achieving **Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all**, over the past decade. The report seeks to complement official government reporting by offering evidence-based verification and civil society perspectives on policy commitments, implementation outcomes, and ongoing systemic challenges within the education sector.

The review examines progress toward key targets, including access, equity, quality of learning, teacher development, education financing, and governance, throughout the implementation period. It places particular emphasis on the extent to which national education reforms, sector plans, and budgetary allocations have resulted in inclusive and equitable outcomes for children and young people, especially those from disadvantaged and marginalized communities.

The analysis is primarily qualitative and is based on policy and legislative reviews, stakeholder consultations, key informant interviews, and focused group discussions with civil society organizations, education practitioners, and community-level actors across selected provinces. The report highlights discrepancies between policy intent and actual outcomes, identifies challenges in achieving SDG 4, and offers recommendations to address existing gaps in SDG4 implementation and to strengthen the process moving forward.

Coalition for Educational Development

Acronyms and Abbreviations

A/L	– General Certificate of Education Advanced Level
CED	– Coalition for Education Development
CLCs	– Community Learning Centres
CPD	– Continuous Professional Development
CSO	– Civil Society Organisation
DVV	– Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband (DVV International)
ECD	– Early Childhood Development
ECCD	– Early Childhood Care and Development
EFA	– Education for All
EMIS	– Education Management Information System
FGD	– Focus Group Discussion
GDP	– Gross Domestic Product
GCE	– General Certificate of Education
GESDP	– General Education Sector Development Plan
ICT	– Information and Communication Technology
KII	– Key Informant Interview
MDGs	– Millennium Development Goals
MoE	– Ministry of Education
NEC	– National Education Commission
NEPF	– National Education Policy Framework
NIE	– National Institute of Education
NQF	– National Qualifications Framework
NSDA	– National Skills Development Authority
NVQ	– National Vocational Qualification
O/L	– General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level
PPP	– Public–Private Partnership
RPL	– Recognition of Prior Learning
SDC	– Sustainable Development Council (Sri Lanka)
SDGs	– Sustainable Development Goals
SDG 4	– Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education)
SESIP	– Secondary Education Sector Improvement Programme
SLQF	– Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework
STEM	– Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TVEC	– Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission
TVET	– Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UGC	– University Grants Commission
UN	– United Nations
UNGA	– United Nations General Assembly
UNESCO	– United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VNR	– Voluntary National Review
WASH	– Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

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Executive Summary

Sri Lanka has demonstrated its commitment to SDG 4, especially in policy, through the National Education Policy Framework (2020–2030) and the General Education Sector Development Plan (2020–2025). These have become key initiatives transforming Sri Lanka's education. The country's long-standing free education policy has largely led to high enrolment rates and gender parity at primary and lower secondary levels. However, national SDG monitoring data show **Sri Lanka lags on most SDG 4 indicators**. The **technical, vocational, and tertiary education sectors** show comparatively better progress. Upper secondary completion rates, early childhood education participation, adult literacy, and equitable learning outcomes remain below targets. This reveals persistent gaps between policy intentions and actual implementation.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** and the subsequent **economic downturn** have significantly delayed both expected reforms and progress due to prolonged school closures and other educational institutions, the lack of digital infrastructure in education, and limited education financing. These challenges have disproportionately impacted rural, estate-sector, and low-income learners, resulting in increased dropout risks and learning losses. Stakeholder consultations further indicate that **limited awareness and ownership of SDG 4 targets among political leaders and the general public** have undermined prioritisation, sustained advocacy, and accountability for education outcomes.

Although Sri Lanka's policy framework is generally consistent with the principles of SDG 4, progress remains uneven across thematic areas, especially in learning quality, equitable teacher deployment, early childhood education, and adult learning. **Civil society organisations play a vital bridging role** by supporting outreach to marginalised communities, generating independent evidence, monitoring equity gaps, and enhancing public awareness of SDG commitments. Nevertheless, civil society engagement in SDG 4 planning and monitoring is largely ad hoc and not yet institutionalised.

In summary, accelerated implementation of proposed actions, increased capacity of national and sub-national education actors and institutions, predictable and equity-focused financing, and **formalised multi-stakeholder mechanisms that meaningfully incorporate civil society contributions** alongside those of government and development partners are critical to achieving SDG 4 targets by 2030. Simultaneously, strengthening public understanding of SDG 4, improving data systems, and reinforcing accountability at all levels of the education system are essential to translate Sri Lanka's policy commitments into inclusive and sustainable education outcomes for all.

Key recommendations to accelerate progress.

❖ Institutionalise multi-stakeholder governance for SDG 4

- Establish or strengthen a formal SDG 4 coordination platform with regular quarterly meetings, clear terms of reference, and published minutes. This platform should include the Ministry of Education, the National Education Commission, the National Institute of Education, Provincial education heads, key statutory bodies (TVEC, UGC, NSDA), teacher unions, civil society organisations, representatives of parents and students, private sector representatives, and development partners.
- Create thematic working groups focused on learning recovery and quality; teacher workforce; equity and disability inclusion; skills and TVET pathways; and early childhood education.

❖ Shift monitoring focus from enrolment and examination outcomes to participation, learning, and well-being.

- Introduce a wider Education Management Information System (EMIS) in addition to the annual school census data to track attendance, dropout risk indicators, disability accommodations, language barriers, psychosocial referrals, and progress in learning recovery. Data should be disaggregated by province, sector (urban, rural, estate), sex, disability, and income proxy.
- Publish an annual SDG 4 Equity and Learning Scorecard to enhance transparency and guide targeted investment.

❖ Safeguard pro-equity education spending during periods of fiscal stress.

- Ensure adequate budgets are allocated for school nutrition, transport support, essential learning materials, inclusive education services, and priority school maintenance.
- Prioritise low-cost, high-impact learning recovery and teacher support interventions before initiating new large-scale pilot programs.

❖ Integrate crisis resilience into education planning.

- Maintain a national preparedness plan for blended learning and school continuity. This plan should include minimum standards for connectivity, offline learning materials, and teacher digital pedagogy, incorporating lessons from COVID-19 and the economic downturn.

❖ **Strengthen accountability mechanisms for inclusion.**

- Adopt enforceable standards for inclusive education, including reasonable accommodation, accessible infrastructure, and referral mechanisms. Establish complaint-handling pathways and clarify responsibilities for schools, zones, and provinces.

Background of the SDG04 and Sri Lankan Implementation

Education is a central pillar of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, emphasizing quality, inclusivity, and equity while promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Goal 04 of the agenda is included both formal education, from early childhood through secondary levels, and ongoing education, including vocational and technical training, higher education, skills development for employment and entrepreneurship, and the cultivation of values for global citizenship. Agreed-upon targets and a global framework for aligning national education policies and practices are essential for achieving universal education goals.

UN General Assembly Resolution 70/1, adopted on September 25, 2015, formally established the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with specific targets and indicators, creating a politically binding commitment for implementation. The Incheon Declaration and Education 2030 Framework for Action, adopted by 184 member countries at the World Education Forum on May 21, 2015, further solidified this commitment.¹ The Declaration positions education within the 2030 Agenda, building on earlier initiatives such as Education for All (EFA) and goals 2 and 3 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Education 2030 Framework for Action calls on countries to establish intermediate benchmarks for Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), thereby fostering collective responsibility and accountability.²

Member countries are accountable for ensuring inclusive and equitable education by reducing disparities and guaranteeing access to quality learning opportunities for all children, including those living in poverty, rural areas, with disabilities, from indigenous backgrounds, or as refugees. Lifelong learning, encompassing vocational and technical training, higher education, and skills development for employment and entrepreneurship, is also prioritized. These objectives are structured around several specific targets, including:

- Free, Equitable, and Quality Primary and Secondary Education: Ensure all girls and boys complete these levels with effective learning outcomes by 2030.
- Early Childhood Development and Pre-primary Education: Guarantee access to quality early learning so children are ready for primary school.
- Affordable Technical, Vocational, and Higher Education: Expand access to tertiary education and relevant skills training for youth and adults.

¹ (2015). *Incheon Declaration and Education 2030 Framework for Action*. UNESCO. <https://iite.unesco.org/publications/incheon-declaration-education-2030-towards-inclusive-and-equitable-quality-education-and-lifelong-learning-for-all/>

² *SDG4 Benchmarks*. UNESCO. <https://www.unesco.org/sdg4education2030/en/regional-coordination/asia-pacific/about/monitoring/sdg-4-benchmarks>

- Relevant Skills for Employment: Increase the number of people with skills for decent jobs and entrepreneurship.
- Eliminate Discrimination in Education: Remove gender and other disparities at all educational levels, focusing on marginalized and vulnerable groups.
- Universal Literacy and Numeracy: Achieve literacy and numeracy for all youth and a substantial proportion of adults.
- Education for Sustainable Development: Integrate sustainable development and global citizenship into education.
- Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments: Build and upgrade educational facilities to be safe, non-violent, inclusive, and effective for all learners.

Following the commitment of member States to achieve measurable progress on SDG 4, numerous countries have revised or introduced education sector plans that explicitly integrate SDG 4 objectives. Several countries have undertaken gap analyses, restructured ministries, and shifted from activity-based to results-based planning.³ Benchmark indicators for 2025 and 2030 include; early childhood education attendance, out-of-school rates, completion rates, gender disparities, proficiency in reading and mathematics, teacher training, and public education expenditure.

Sri Lanka has demonstrated a strong commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) within the 2030 Agenda framework. This is evident in the alignment of national policies, as well as institutional and legislative measures. The country also has a longstanding history of prioritizing access to education and promoting equity.

National Policies: Sri Lanka maintains a longstanding policy of providing free education from Grade 1 through university at state institutions. This policy has resulted in high literacy rates, strong enrollment in primary and secondary education, and gender parity at the primary level.⁴ However, limited capacity in government-funded universities, the high cost of private universities, and the lack of effective compliance mechanisms to ensure the quality of private universities remain significant challenges to achieving free, equitable, and quality education.

In alignment with the commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), Sri Lanka has updated midterm education sector development objectives for the period of 2020 - 2025:⁵

- ensure equal educational opportunities and compulsory free-education for all children by expanding quality primary and secondary education facilities with adequate human and physical resources;
- ensure equity in access and participation of students in meaningful learning;

³ (2019) UNESCO, BEYOND COMMITMENTS, The Global Education Monitoring Report.

<https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/publication/beyond-commitments-2019-how-countries-implement-sdg-4>

⁴ (2024) Gender Statistics, Department of Census and Statistics.

<https://www.statistics.gov.lk/GenderStatistics/StaticInformation/Education>

⁵ (2020) Sri Lanka General Education Sector Development Plan (2020 – 2025), Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka.

- improve the overall quality, effectiveness, and relevance of the education system for improving learning outcomes of students;
- improve the efficiency, accountability, and stewardship of general education;
- facilitate to improve 21st century transversal skills of students: transversal, social, socio-emotional, inter-personal, critical thinking, creative, problem solving, learning acquisition and communication skills;
- reach higher levels of standards pertaining to quality of education;
- delegate autonomy to the implementation levels, including schools;
- strengthen good governance, timely service delivery, and accountability within the education system;
- improve teacher quality and teacher management systems;
- improve assessment and evaluation (both formative and summative) systems;
- ensure efficiency, equity, and adequacy of resource allocation; and
- promote the national/Sri Lankan identity, ethics, cultural values.

The National Education Policy Framework 2020–2030 provides comprehensive policy direction for all levels of education, with objectives related to Access, equity, relevance, and digital transformation together with policy principles in teaching, learning and credentialling, governance, investments and resources aligning with national development priorities.⁶ The updated National Education Policy Framework 2023–2033, along with related Cabinet processes, has furthered this progress by laying the groundwork for a consolidated Education Act to replace and modernize the longstanding Education Ordinance.

Institutional and Legislative Actions: The enactment of the Sustainable Development Act No. 19 of 2017 established a legal framework for integrating United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into national policy and government operations.⁷ This legislation resulted in the creation of the Sustainable Development Council in Sri Lanka, which coordinates the implementation of national policies aligned with the SDGs. The Council is also tasked with enhancing public and private sector engagement, increasing awareness, and promoting the adoption of sustainable practices across society.

Regarding SDG 4, the Compulsory Attendance of Children at Schools Regulations No. 1 of 2015 was introduced as the initial legislative reform. This regulation reinforced parental responsibility for ensuring school attendance and established local committees and procedures to identify and support children who were not attending school.⁸ Despite ongoing proposals and draft legislation

⁶ (2023) National Education Policy Framework, Ministry of Education https://moe.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/NEPF_English_final.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁷ *The objects of this Act shall be to— (a) ensure that the National Policy and Strategy on Sustainable Development is prepared in accordance with section 11 of this Act and provide the legal framework for developing and implementing such National Policy and Strategy on Sustainable Development; (b) ensure an ecologically efficient use of natural, social and economic resources; (c) to promote the integration and maintain the equipoise of environmental, economic and social factors in the making of all decisions by government; and (d) formulate strategies in accordance with paragraphs (a), (b) and (c) of this section. S.2 of the Sustainable Development Act No. 19 of 2017.*

⁸ *Every parent of a child of not less than five years and more than sixteen years of age (hereinafter referred to as the “age of compulsory education”) shall cause such child to receive an education by regular attendance at a school unless he has otherwise made adequate and suitable provisions for the education of such child. S.2, the Compulsory Attendance of Children at Schools Regulations No. 1 of 2015, Extraordinary Gazette No. No. 1963/30, April 20,*

since at least 2017 under several governments, efforts to introduce a new consolidated Education Act to replace the Education Ordinance (Chapter 185) and its regulations have not yet succeeded.

The reactivation of the students (Higher Education) Loans Act, No. 50 of 1983, with updates implemented via ministerial circular, marks a significant milestone in expanding higher education opportunities. Since 2017, the scheme has operated under annual budget proposals to increase access for Sri Lankan students who have completed the G.C.E. (Advanced Level) examination but are unable to secure admission to state universities.⁹ Furthermore, the 2020 budgetary proposal to provide bursaries to economically disadvantaged students in government technical and vocational training institutes have further strengthened the tertiary education sector.

Political will: The current government's political commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is reflected in the 2020 national policy framework, '**A Thriving Nation – A Beautiful Life**'. **This framework aligns with SDG targets and directly contributes** to 108 of the 169 targets, including those under SDG 4.¹⁰ Education reforms scheduled for implementation in 2026 are a central component of this initiative. However, the lack of consultation and financial limitations remain challenges in achieving those targets at expected levels.

This report examines the implementation of SDG 4 targets within the 2030 Agenda from a civil society perspective, with particular attention to equity, inclusion, and systemic barriers. As key stakeholders and beneficiaries, civil society actors have a legitimate right to provide feedback that can strengthen government efforts to achieve education targets aligned with SDG 4.

2016. https://employers.lk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/1_Compulsory-Attendance-of-Children-at-Schools-Regulations-No.1-of-2015.pdf

⁹ Interest Free Student Loan Scheme, Ministry of Education, Higher Education, and Vocational Education, https://www.mohe.gov.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=348:interest-free-student-loan-scheme&catid=48&lang=en&Itemid=331

¹⁰ (2024), Sri Lanka's Progress in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (2024), Sustainable Development Council of Sri Lanka. https://www.sdc.gov.lk/sites/default/files/2025-02/SDG%20Progress%20Report%202024_25%20Feb.pdf

2. Methodology

The Civil Society Review of SDG 4 employed a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder, and participatory methodology, utilizing a mixed-methods approach for data collection and analysis. Understanding that effective implementation of SDG 4 is a process of multi-stakeholder engagement, the methodology was built on to capture the perspectives and experiences of a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including education administrators, teacher unions, parents, students, development partners, and civil society organisations (CSOs). This approach systematically incorporated diverse viewpoints into the assessment of progress, gaps, and challenges associated with SDG 4.

Qualitative analysis was conducted with data obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were received through key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with educationists, field-level education officers, teachers, parents, and CSO representatives. These consultations spanned Sabaragamuwa, Western, North Western, and Uva Provinces, ensuring geographical and institutional diversity. Secondary qualitative sources comprised a structured review of relevant policy documents, legislation, regulations, and national and international publications related to SDG 4, which informed the analytical framework.

Quantitative data were primarily sourced from existing reports and datasets produced by government agencies, particularly the Sustainable Development Council and the Ministry of Education, as well as from international development partners and civil society organisations. The analysis focused on evaluating policy alignment with SDG 4, the integration of equity and inclusion in implementation processes, the role of civil society, and systemic gaps and governance challenges influencing progress.

The study encountered several limitations. Financial constraints limited field-level data collection across all districts and restricted engagement with a broader range of CSO partners nationwide. Time constraints also reduced stakeholder engagement with the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET/TEVET) sector, resulting in limited KIIs and FGDs with TVET institutions, trainers, and learners. Furthermore, the assessment did not comprehensively examine the impact of certain government-level implementation mechanisms, such as education-related interventions coordinated through Divisional Secretariats, on SDG 4 outcomes. These limitations are acknowledged to ensure transparency and to guide the scope of future, more comprehensive assessments.

3. Evaluation of SDG 4 Implementation and Progress in Sri Lanka

Framework for Assessing the Implementation of SDG 4

Sri Lanka's progress on Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) is evaluated using a framework aligned with the global SDG 4 monitoring system. This analysis systematically examines five thematic priorities through four cross-cutting dimensions: policy integration, institutional strengthening, equity and inclusion, and financing. The results demonstrate that, although national policies and reforms have led to advancements in certain areas, significant gaps remain in equity, quality, and overall system effectiveness. These findings underscore both the strengths and the areas requiring critical attention.

The analysis addresses the following five thematic areas:

1. Access, Participation, and Completion
2. Early Childhood Development and Pre-Primary Education
3. Technical, Vocational, and Tertiary Education
4. Youth and Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning
5. Learning Quality, Teacher Workforce, and Infrastructure

Each thematic priority is evaluated using the four cross-cutting dimensions to assess progress, identify systemic barriers, and address equity concerns.

Integration of SDG 4 into National Education Frameworks

Sri Lanka has incorporated SDG 4 targets into national education policies and sector reforms, operationalizing these through key planning instruments such as the General Education Sector Development Plan (2020–2025) and the National Education Policy Framework (2020–2030). This integration demonstrates the prioritization of SDG 4 within national policy frameworks.

The General Education Sector Development Plan (2020–2025) in Sri Lanka establishes a strategic framework to enhance educational quality, promote equitable access, and align educational outcomes with national objectives. The plan emphasizes the integration of 21st-century skills, including digital literacy, STEAM, and entrepreneurship, within a reformed curriculum. Major initiatives encompass modernization projects with support from international partners such as the World Bank, strengthened governance structures, expanded use of technology, promotion of vocational education, and provision of resources for inclusive education. These efforts collectively aim to cultivate globally competitive and responsible citizens.

The National Education Policy Framework (2023–2033), developed by the National Education Commission, outlines long-term policy principles and statements aligned with the national development goals and the SDG 4 targets. With the expectation of transforming the country's education sector to address existing challenges, it prioritizes 13 years of compulsory education, structured professional development, continuous assessment, and modernization of content. The framework focuses on quality, inclusiveness, equitable access, and expanded lifelong learning, recognizing these areas as essential for closing gaps in educational delivery, participation, and opportunity currently facing the sector.

3.1. Access, Participation and Completion

In line with **SDG 4.1**, which aims to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education, Sri Lanka continues to demonstrate strong performance in terms of access, participation, and completion, particularly at the primary and lower secondary levels. These achievements are rooted in the long-standing policy of free education introduced in 1947, which has established a strong foundation for universal access and gender parity.

Progress towards **SDG 4.5**, which calls for the elimination of gender disparities and the reduction of inequalities in education, is evident through sustained gender parity across primary and secondary education levels. Near-universal primary enrolment and high secondary participation reflect effective policy implementation and broad social acceptance of formal schooling.

Recent national data indicate the following trends:¹¹

- Primary net enrolment rates remain consistently high, ranging from **95 to 99 percent**, and demonstrate gender parity between girls and boys.
- Enrolment rates in junior secondary education (Grades 6 to 9) range from approximately **84 to 98 percent**.
- Senior secondary enrolment (Grades 10 to 13) is estimated at approximately 90 percent.
- Completion rates at early stages remain robust, with **96.18 percent** at the primary level and **93.45 percent** at the lower secondary level (2022).
- In contrast, **upper secondary completion** is substantially lower at **65.44 percent**, indicating increased attrition during the later stages of schooling.

¹¹ (2023) Statistical Bulletin, National Human Resources Development Council of Sri Lanka. https://nhrdc.gov.lk/nhrdc/media/attachments/2024/07/23/statistical-bulletin---2023_edition4.1_compressed.pdf

Stakeholder consultations consistently suggest that Sri Lanka has largely achieved the SDG 4 objective of universal access to basic education. However, maintaining learner participation and increasing completion rates at the **upper secondary level**, especially regarding transitions associated with public examinations and post-school pathways, remains a significant challenge for fully realising SDG 4.1 and ensuring equitable learning outcomes for all.

Policy Integration

Access, participation, and completion are firmly embedded within Sri Lanka's national education policy architecture and are closely aligned with **SDG 4.1** and **SDG 4.5**, which emphasise universal completion of free and equitable primary and secondary education and the reduction of disparities in educational outcomes. The **General Education Sector Development Plan (GESDP) 2020–2025** and the **National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) 2023–2033** serve as the principal instruments through which these SDG 4 targets are operationalised.

The GESDP prioritizes strengthening system-wide retention and completion by extending compulsory education to **13 years**, addressing bottlenecks at key transition points, and improving survival rates at Grades 5, 11 (GCE Ordinary Level), and 13 (GCE Advanced Level). It also includes policy measures for equitable school admissions, rationalization of school networks, and targeted support for underperforming schools and vulnerable learners, thereby reinforcing access and continuity throughout the education cycle.¹²

Complementing this, the NEPF provides a long-term strategic vision that integrates access and completion objectives across all levels of education. It articulates policy commitments to universal access regardless of socio-economic background, disability, or geographic location, and promotes flexible learning pathways that allow students to progress through general, technical, vocational, or tertiary streams. By embedding access and completion targets within a broader framework of quality improvement and system modernisation, the NEPF strengthens coherence between SDG 4 outcomes and national development priorities.

Recent policy reforms illustrate a transition from an examination-driven model to a more inclusive, learner-centered approach. **Automatic progression between secondary grades** aims to minimize early dropouts associated with examination failure, while awarding **completion certificates at Grades 11 and 12+**, regardless of examination outcomes, provides formal recognition of learning and encourages continued participation.¹³ Collectively, these reforms

¹² (2023) National Education Policy Framework, Ministry of Education https://moe.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/NEPF_English_final.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹³ (2024) Present Status Assessment of the 13 Years Guaranteed Education Programme in the Western Province of Sri Lanka, National Education Commission. <https://nec.gov.lk/wp->

represent a strategic shift toward retention-oriented policies that support diverse learner pathways and promote more equitable completion outcomes within the secondary education system.

Strengthening Institutional Framework

Over the past decade, institutional changes in Sri Lanka's education system have been closely associated with improvements in **access, participation, and completion**, particularly at critical transition points within the general education cycle. Regional education officers confirmed that reforms in school administration, zonal and divisional education management, and student admission procedures have been implemented to reduce bottlenecks, enhance system efficiency, and support sustained participation from primary through upper secondary education.

Institutional strengthening has also prioritized human resource management to improve retention and completion outcomes. Revisions to teacher recruitment, deployment, and transfer mechanisms, along with expanded in-service training and professional development, have sought to address teacher shortages in underserved areas and enhance continuity of learning.¹⁴ The roles of key institutions, including the Ministry of Education, the National Institute of Education, and the National Education Commission, have been reinforced to improve curriculum delivery, assessment coherence, and system oversight, all of which affect student progression and completion.

Within this long-term trajectory, the current education reform agenda consolidates previous institutional adjustments into a more structured program focused on learner progression and system responsiveness. The initial phase of implementation, scheduled for **2026**, emphasizes curriculum and assessment reforms at selected grades, accompanied by changes to teacher training and school management aimed at reducing exam-related dropouts and strengthening completion pathways. Although government authorities consider this phased approach essential for improving participation and completion, some teacher unions and civil society groups have criticized it for issues related to preparedness, sequencing, and consultation.

Despite these efforts, implementation capacity varies across provinces and school types. Ongoing coordination challenges among central, provincial, and school-level institutions hinder consistent policy application, particularly in disadvantaged areas, thereby limiting the overall impact of institutional reforms on participation and completion outcomes.

[content/uploads/2025/05/RP_GE_2024_01_Present-Status-Assessment-of-the-13-Years-Guaranteed-Education-Programme-in-the-Western-Province-of-Sri-Lanka.pdf](#)

¹⁴ (2023) Teachers in Sri Lanka: Situational Analysis of Teacher Establishment and Development, National Education Commission. https://nec.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/RP_GE_2023_01_Teachers-in-Sri-Lanka-Situational-Analysis-of-Teacher-Establishment-and-Deployment.pdf

Stakeholder perspectives reveal a complex landscape. Government officials generally endorsed the direction of institutional reforms as essential for strengthening access and completion. In contrast, teacher unions, civil society organizations, and private sector education experts raised concerns about limited engagement and potential unintended consequences for equity and school-level practices. These perspectives highlight the necessity for more inclusive and sustained stakeholder consultation to ensure that institutional strengthening effectively supports access, participation, and completion throughout the education system.

Equity and Inclusion

The education reform agenda, grounded in the **National Education Policy Framework (NEPF)**, places equity and inclusion at the center of efforts to improve access, participation, and completion. It aims to ensure equitable access to quality education for all learners, particularly those from rural, disadvantaged, and marginalized communities, through expanded and rationalized school infrastructure, enhanced digital connectivity, and targeted interventions such as school nutrition, transport assistance, and dedicated support for children with disabilities and special educational needs. The framework also seeks to reduce financial and social barriers to school entry, especially at the primary level, thereby reinforcing the principle of free and universal education.

To enhance meaningful participation, reforms prioritize inclusive education within mainstream schools, early identification of learners at risk of exclusion, and the provision of flexible learning pathways. These measures include expanded technical and vocational options, alternative learning programs, and improved counseling and psychosocial support services. School-level planning and the use of administrative data are intended to identify participation gaps, address absenteeism, and respond to local barriers, thereby supporting sustained engagement throughout the education cycle.

Completion-focused measures aim to reduce dropouts at critical transition points by implementing **13 years of compulsory education**, issuing **completion certificates at Grades 11 and 12+ regardless of examination outcomes**, and enabling automatic progression from Grade 11 to 12+. Clearer transition pathways to tertiary, technical, and vocational education are intended to support diverse learner trajectories and promote successful completion in alignment with SDG 4 equity commitments.

Despite these policy commitments, stakeholder consultations and reported incidents revealed persistent gaps in inclusion at the practical level. Instances have been documented where schools had failed to provide adequate accommodation¹⁵ or learning support for students with

¹⁵ A leading girl's school in Colombo refuses to assist a Grade 8 student, with special needs, The Asian Human Rights Commission. <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAC-042-2015/>

disabilities, leading to reduced participation or exclusion from specific learning activities.¹⁶ These cases highlight the need for stronger enforcement of inclusive education standards, enhanced teacher capacity, and clearer accountability mechanisms to ensure that equity and inclusion policies result in effective support for learners with disabilities at the school level.

Financing

Public financing for education in Sri Lanka has been instrumental in maintaining high levels of **access, participation, and completion**, particularly at the primary and lower secondary levels. Government expenditure has consistently prioritized recurrent spending to support the free education policy, including teacher salaries, school maintenance, textbooks, uniforms, and examination administration. Targeted programs such as the school nutrition program, textbook and uniform subsidies, and transport assistance have helped reduce household costs and mitigate financial barriers to school attendance, especially for children from low-income and rural households.

Capital and program-based financing during this period have targeted participation and completion gaps at critical transition points. Investments in school infrastructure development, classroom rehabilitation, sanitation facilities, and digital learning infrastructure, often supported by development partners, have sought to improve learning environments and reduce regional disparities. Increased allocations for teacher recruitment, deployment incentives for challenging areas, and expanded in-service training have supported continuity of learning, while scholarships, bursaries, and examination fee waivers have contributed to student retention through secondary education. Nevertheless, overall public education expenditure as a share of GDP has remained relatively low, limiting the scale and equity impact of financing and constraining progress in improving upper secondary completion rates.¹⁷

Gaps and Challenges

Despite strong performance at the primary and lower secondary levels, dropout rates and low completion at the upper secondary level remain persistent challenges. National data show that while enrolment at the senior secondary level is approximately 90 percent, upper secondary completion is only about 65 percent, indicating significant attrition between Grades 11 and 13. Contributing factors include high-stakes public examinations, limited post-school pathways,

¹⁶ A young student from Bandarawela has turned to the Supreme Court, alleging that his constitutional rights had been violated after the University Grants Commission (UGC) denied him admission to pursue a degree in technology on the basis of his disability. (2025) Daily Mirror online. <https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking-news/Differently-abled-student-petitions-SC-over-denial-of-university-admission/108-319777>

¹⁷ (2019) BUDGET BRIEF: EDUCATION SECTOR, Verité Research. https://www.unicef.org/srilanka/media/1701/file/Temp_edu.pdf

economic pressures on households, and early entry into the labor market, particularly among boys and students from low-income families.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic collapse have further intensified challenges related to access and retention. Prolonged school closures disrupted learning for millions of students, with remote learning remaining unevenly accessible due to digital divides, limited internet connectivity, and insufficient devices in rural and estate areas. The economic crisis heightened financial pressures on households, compelling some children to drop out to support family income, while school-related costs such as transportation and uniforms became increasingly prohibitive, especially for vulnerable populations.¹⁸

Implementation of institutional reforms has been inconsistent across provinces and school types, reflecting variations in administrative capacity, resource allocation, and local leadership. CSO stakeholders pointed that national and urban schools have generally adapted more efficiently to policy and curriculum changes, while rural and estate schools continue to face delays in applying revised administrative procedures, teacher deployment policies, and support mechanisms. Weak coordination among central, provincial, and school-level authorities has further hindered consistent implementation.

Disparities in access, participation, and retention remain significant among rural, estate-sector, and marginalized learners. Schools in remote or under-resourced areas continue to experience teacher shortages, limited subject offerings at the upper secondary level, and inadequate infrastructure, all of which contribute to higher dropout rates. Learners with disabilities and those from economically disadvantaged households are disproportionately affected, especially where inclusive education support and social protection measures are inconsistently implemented.

Current monitoring systems primarily focus on enrolment and examination outcomes, with limited attention to non-academic factors influencing participation and completion. Variables such as poverty, household responsibilities, child labor, psychosocial well-being, school climate, and accessibility barriers are not consistently recorded in administrative data. This limitation restricts the capacity to implement timely, evidence-based interventions, particularly during crises such as the pandemic and economic downturn, which have heightened the risk of dropout at critical transition points.

¹⁸ (2021) Civil Society Spotlight Report on SDG 4 for HLPF 2021, Coalition for Educational Development (CED). <https://cedsrilanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/4-Civil-Society-Spotlight-Report-Final-06-July.pdf>

3.2. Early Childhood Development and Pre-Primary Education

Early Childhood Development (ECD) and pre-primary education play a critical role in fostering holistic child development and ensuring readiness for formal schooling. This section examines the availability, quality, and utilization of services, as well as policy frameworks, regulatory standards, and institutional coordination across education, health, and social sectors. It further considers targeted interventions for vulnerable children. The analysis of financing focuses on the adequacy, stability, and equity of budget allocations, including the roles of public–private partnerships and support mechanisms for low-income families.

Policy Integration

Sri Lanka has made significant progress in developing policies for ECD and pre-primary education. The **National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD, 2004; updated 2018)** covers children from conception to school entry, prioritizing holistic development across physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and intellectual domains, with particular attention to vulnerable children. The policy mandates a comprehensive and integrated service system involving health, education, social services, and child protection, coordinated at both national and provincial levels.¹⁹

The **National Policy on Preschool Education (2019)** outlines a long-term vision to achieve primary education readiness by 2030. It emphasizes universal access, establishes quality standards, and introduces a national curriculum framework to ensure consistency among providers. The policy further encourages public–private partnerships to expand coverage and improve service quality.

Strengthening Institutional Framework

Preschool education is primarily a devolved responsibility managed by Provincial Councils, which oversee registration, licensing, monitoring, and general oversight of preschools. Local authorities support these functions by issuing licenses, conducting inspections, and facilitating the establishment of preschools in underserved areas. Over the past decade, national initiatives have strengthened institutional capacity through several key measures:

- Clear guidelines and mandatory minimum standards for all preschools and child development centers covering staffing, safety, infrastructure, and child protection.
- Establishment of the State Ministry for Women and Child Development, Pre-School & Primary Education to integrate ECCD and preschool oversight.

¹⁹ (2019) The National Policy on Preschool Education, National Education Commission – Sri Lanka.
https://nec.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/National-Policy-on-Preschool-Education-2019_E.pdf

- Implementation of teacher training and capacity-building programs by the National Institute of Education, including a nationwide initiative in 2025 to train 19,000 preschool teachers in preparation for a unified national curriculum scheduled for 2027.²⁰
- Execution of projects such as the **World Bank-supported Early Childhood Development Project**, which improved quality standards in more than 4,000 centers by 2020.²¹

Equity and Inclusion

Equity and inclusion are central to policy implementation. The National Policy on Preschool Education explicitly mandates access for all children, including those from marginalized, rural, and low-income backgrounds, as well as children with disabilities. Key initiatives include:

- Expansion of public preschools and daycare centers, with subsidies or fee waivers to reduce financial barriers.
- Implementation of Inclusive Early Childhood Development (Include) programs for early identification and support of children with developmental delays and disabilities, although coverage and effectiveness remain inconsistent.
- Teacher training in inclusive education practices, supported by development partners.
- Upgrading infrastructure to ensure child-friendly, accessible, and safe learning environments.
- Conducting community awareness campaigns to promote participation among minority and marginalized communities.

Financing

Despite increased investment in early childhood and pre-primary education over the past decade, funding remains inadequate to address current needs. Public spending is primarily directed toward teacher salaries, infrastructure development, and programmatic support for vulnerable children. Provincial budgets cover most operational costs, while the national government provides additional funding for targeted initiatives such as teacher training, curriculum development, and quality assurance projects, including the World Bank-supported Early

²⁰ (2025) A Unified Curriculum Framework for All Preschools from the Year 2027, Ministry of Education and Higher Education. <https://moe.gov.lk/en/a-unified-curriculum-framework-for-all-preschools-from-the-year-2027/>

²¹ (2024) Strengthening early childhood development in Sri Lanka through public-private partnerships, World Bank blogs. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/endpovertyinsouthasia/strengthening-early-childhood-development-sri-lanka-through-public-private#:~:text=This%20initiative%20also%20introduced%20a,future%20for%20its%20next%20generation.>

Childhood Development Project. Public–private partnerships have expanded access, but high fees in private preschools continue to exclude low-income families. Uneven budget allocations across provinces have resulted in disparities in access and quality, highlighting the need for more predictable, equitable, and needs-based financing to achieve universal, inclusive pre-primary education in accordance with SDG 4.

Gaps and Challenges

Preschool education in Sri Lanka remains inaccessible to many, with affordability posing a significant barrier. According to the World Bank, approximately 70 percent of preschools and 78 percent of daycare centers are privately operated, charging fees that exclude numerous low-income families. Public provision accounts for only about 19.8 percent of preschools, resulting in limited free or subsidized options, particularly in rural and estate sectors. As a result, preschool enrollment for children aged 3–5 is substantially lower than at the primary level, estimated at 56.6 percent, underscoring persistent structural inequities in early access.²²

Implementation of inclusive early childhood education remains inconsistent. Many preschools lack accessible infrastructure, assistive materials, and adequately trained personnel to support children with disabilities. While the Inclusive Early Childhood Development (IncluDe) program promotes early identification and intervention, its coverage and implementation vary across provinces. Existing screening and referral mechanisms, supported by the education and health sectors, continue to face gaps in early detection, follow-up services, and coordination, limiting effective inclusion at the preschool level.²³

Stakeholders note that, although gender parity has largely been achieved in preschool participation, children from minority ethnic groups, low-income households, and rural or estate communities remain at greater risk of exclusion. Language-based disparities are particularly pronounced, with uneven quality and availability across Sinhala-, Tamil-, and English-medium preschools. Children entering primary education from under-resourced Tamil- and Sinhala-medium preschools, especially in estate and remote areas, are often less prepared for school than peers from well-resourced urban and English-medium preschools.

Preschool education is not included in the free education system, and regulatory responsibilities

²² (2020) Integrating Early Childhood Care and Education in Sri Lanka, World Bank Group. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/626491603440496920/pdf/Integrating-Early-Childhood-Care-and-Education-in-Sri-Lanka-From-Global-Evidence-to-National-Action.pdf>

²³ (2023) Quality and Standards of Care and Education Provided by Early Childhood Development Centres in Sri Lanka: Current Status and Way Forward, National Education Commission. https://nec.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/RP_ECE_2023_02_Quality-and-Standards-of-Care-and-Education-ECE.pdf

are divided between provincial and local authorities. Although minimum standards exist, monitoring and enforcement are inconsistent, leading to significant quality variations among urban and rural preschools, estate-sector centers, and between established and informal providers. Limited public financing, insufficient oversight capacity, and reliance on household expenditure have perpetuated disparities in quality, infrastructure, and learning environments, impeding progress toward equitable and inclusive early childhood education in line with SDG 4.

3.3. Technical, Vocational and Tertiary Education

In alignment with **SDG 4.3** (equal access to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education) and **SDG 4.4** (relevant skills for employment, decent work, and entrepreneurship), this section examines the accessibility and relevance of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and higher education in Sri Lanka. The analysis addresses pathways from general education to TVET and tertiary education, alignment with labour market requirements, recognition of prior learning, governance and quality assurance mechanisms, equity of access for marginalised groups, and the adequacy and sustainability of financing.

Policy Integration

Sri Lanka has developed a comprehensive and coherent policy framework to support skills development and higher education, demonstrating a sustained commitment to human capital development and alignment with **SDG 4.3 and 4.4**. The **National Policy on Technical and Vocational Education and Training** offers strategic direction for the TVET sector, prioritising expanded access, improved quality, and enhanced labour-market relevance. The policy promotes employability, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning, and encourages stronger industry engagement and flexible training delivery, including short-term and modular programmes that respond to emerging skills demands.²⁴

In the TVET sector, the **TVET Authority Act** amended in 1995 and 1999 provides the legal basis for regulating technical and vocational education and training and establishes national

²⁴ (2018) National Policy on Technical and Vocational Education was developed by the National Education Commission under its mandate, in the years 2017 and 2018, towards achieving a skilled workforce for socio-economic development of Sri Lanka. National Education Commission worked closely with the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission, Ministry of Skills Development and Vocational Training, Ministry of Labour, National Institute of Education, Public and Private TVET institutions, Industry Sector Skills Councils and Industry Representatives including Employers' Organizations in identifying issues on different aspects of Technical and Vocational Education and formulating policies and key strategies with wider consensus. <https://tvec.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Policy-Book-English-web.pdf>

mechanisms for accreditation, quality assurance, and standardisation across public and private providers. Policy directions emphasise the use of nationally recognised qualification frameworks to ensure consistency, transparency, and relevance of training programmes, while supporting diverse delivery models and pathways for learners. Accordingly, Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission has updated the National Vocational Qualification Framework by the new manual published in 2021.²⁵

In tertiary education, the **University Grants Commission (UGC) Act**²⁶ defines the policy framework governing public universities, including admissions, quality standards, and system oversight. These provisions are complemented by the **National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) 2020–2030**, which sets long-term policy priorities to expand equitable access to higher education, enhance academic quality, and strengthen linkages between tertiary education and national development and employment needs.

The **TVEC's Strategic Plan 2024-2028**²⁷ and the **National Qualifications Framework (NQF)** further reinforce policy coherence across skills development and higher education. Together, they promote alignment of education and training with national economic priorities, recognition of prior learning, learner mobility across vocational and academic pathways, and progression between different levels of education, supporting lifelong learning and inclusive skills development in line with SDG 4.

Strengthening Institutional Framework

Efforts to strengthen institutions in technical, vocational, and tertiary education have concentrated on improving **governance, regulation, coordination, and accountability** within a complex, multi-provider system. In the past decade, reforms have emphasised operational capacity, quality assurance, and system coherence, rather than introducing new policy directions.

In the TVET sector, institutional strengthening has centred on reinforcing national regulatory and quality assurance mechanisms. Administrative systems for the **registration and accreditation of**

²⁵ (2021) National Vocational Qualifications Framework Operational Manual, Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission. https://tvec.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/NVQ_Operation_Manual_2021_new.pdf

²⁶ S.2, Universities Act, No.16 of 1978.

https://www.ugc.ac.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=49&Itemid=195&lang=en

²⁷ TVEC's Strategic Plan 2024-2028 has been prepared in line with the Government's Education policy. Being the quality assurance and regulatory body for TVET in Sri Lanka, the TVEC is geared to fulfill its mandate through seven (07) main goals; Formulate, review, update and implement robust TVET policies & Strategies, Develop and maintain information systems in order to facilitate TVET activities, Liaise with industry for obtaining industry inputs for TVET development, Expand and maintain National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) system, Establish and maintain credible systems for quality assurance of delivery of TVET In Sri Lanka, Establish and maintain credible systems for quality assurance of assessment of candidates for award of NVQs (in all modes), Effective management of human and financial resources and develop institutional capacity of the TVEC as the apex body. https://tvec.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Strategic_plan_2024_2028.pdf

training institutions and courses, supervision of assessments, and certification of competencies have been expanded to cover a growing number of public, private, and non-state providers. The establishment of new TVET centres and the upgrading of existing facilities—particularly in underserved areas—have been accompanied by improvements in monitoring, reporting, and compliance mechanisms to support equitable access and quality control.

In tertiary education, institutional reforms have focused on improving university governance and oversight of the system. Measures to enhance accountability, transparency, and performance monitoring have been implemented across public universities, alongside strengthened quality assurance processes to ensure consistency and comparability of qualifications. Administrative arrangements have also been introduced to support diversification of programmes and collaboration with external partners, including the private sector.²⁸

The **Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission** has documented substantial progress in coordinating skills development initiatives across ministries, training institutions, and labour market stakeholders. The TVEC has spearheaded system modernisation, including the expansion of **National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) levels from 7 to 10**, curriculum updates to include ICT, languages, and entrepreneurship, and the digitalisation of registration, assessment, and career guidance systems.²⁹ Flagship initiatives such as “**Tec Udana**” and “**Skill Vista**” have enhanced outreach, district-level skills planning, and school-to-work transitions. By the end of 2025, the system registered and accredited 3016 training institutions for conducting 3209 accredited courses and issued 970,443 NVQ certificates, demonstrating increased administrative capacity and scale.³⁰ However, coordination challenges and uneven institutional capacity at sub-national and provider levels persist as significant constraints.

Equity and Inclusion

Equity and inclusion in technical, vocational, and tertiary education in Sri Lanka are advanced through a combination of targeted financial support, inclusive programme design, flexible learning pathways, and quality assurance mechanisms, broadly aligned with SDG 4.3 and SDG 4.4.

²⁸ A Manual for Institutional Review has been developed to provide guidance to Sri Lankan universities and HEIs dedicated to the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode who wish to submit themselves for Institutional Review under the Quality Assurance Framework of the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). It is expected to serve as a guide for universities and other HEIs to adopt and internalize good practices and standards in respect of quality assurance. <https://eugc.ugc.ac.lk/qac/downloads/OUISL-IR-MANUAL-Final.pdf>

²⁹ The Progress 2024 and The Way Forward 2025, Vocational Education Division, Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Vocational Education. <https://skillsmin.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/English-2024.pdf>

³⁰ (2025) Dashboard, Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission. <https://tvec.gov.lk/dashboard/>

Access and affordability are supported through various public mechanisms. The government offers **scholarships, bursaries, fee waivers, and allowances** to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds in accessing tertiary and vocational education, including established programmes such as the Mahapola Scholarship for university students. In the TVET sector, public and subsidised training programmes are prioritised to lower economic barriers, particularly for rural youth and first-generation learners.³¹ Nevertheless, overall participation remains modest: Sri Lanka's tertiary gross enrolment ratio is estimated at approximately 20–23 percent in recent years, reflecting limited system capacity relative to demand and persistent inequities in access, especially where private provision is prevalent and fees are high.

Inclusive policies and programmes have increasingly focused on persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. The **Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC)** have introduced measures to improve accessibility of curricula, assessments, and certification processes.³² These include adapted training modules, reasonable adjustments in NVQ assessments, and targeted career guidance and upskilling programmes. Initiatives such as “**Tec Udana**” explicitly include district-level skills planning and training components for youth with disabilities, including those with Down syndrome and other developmental challenges. However, stakeholder feedback suggested that the availability and quality of inclusive support services vary significantly across training providers and locations.

Capacity building, monitoring, and the implementation of flexible pathways have been widely acknowledged as key mechanisms for promoting equity. Training-of-trainers (TOT) programmes aim to equip instructors with the skills to teach diverse learners and to apply inclusive pedagogies, while institutions have been encouraged to improve physical accessibility and to provide assistive technologies. The **National Vocational Qualification (NVQ)** system and the **Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework (SLQF)** incorporate provisions for **recognition of prior learning (RPL)** and flexible progression, enabling learners—particularly those in informal employment or who did not complete formal schooling—to gain nationally recognised qualifications and transition

³¹ In the government budget 2025, the government increased the monthly scholarship amount from Rs 750 to Rs 1,500 to students who qualified from the Grade 5 scholarship examination in low-income families. The government proposes to allocate Rs 1,000 million for this purpose. The monthly nutritious food allowance for students in sports schools from Rs 5,000 to Rs 10,000 per student, while the government also increased the stipend from Rs 4,000 to Rs 5,000 per month for students in vocational education. In universities, the government increased the monthly Mahapola scholarship from Rs 5,000 to Rs 7,500 and monthly bursary from 4,000 to Rs 6,500. A provision of Rs 4,600 million had been made in the budget. Budget Speech 2025, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development. <https://www.treasury.gov.lk/api/file/96100697-0492-4c66-b2a2-71aeafa23404>

³² NVQ 9/2023, Implementing Reasonable Adjustments in Technical and Vocational Education and Training Delivery for Persons with Disabilities, Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission. <https://tvec.gov.lk/circular-and-guideline/>

across vocational and academic pathways.³³ Quality assurance mechanisms monitor institutional compliance with inclusivity standards, although stakeholders note that data on equity outcomes remain limited and enforcement uneven.

Financing

Public financing remains the backbone of Sri Lanka's technical, vocational, and tertiary education system, particularly for state universities and public TVET institutions. Government funding primarily supports **recurrent expenditures**, including staff salaries, institutional operations, student welfare, and scholarship schemes such as Mahapola and bursaries for disadvantaged students. Capital investments over the past decade have focused on infrastructure development, upgrading training centres, laboratories, and workshops, and supporting quality assurance and curriculum reforms, often supplemented by financing from development partners. However, overall public expenditure on post-school education remains constrained relative to demand, limiting system capacity and contributing to intense competition for public university places and uneven quality across TVET institutions.³⁴

Private investment plays an increasingly significant role, especially in TVET and non-state tertiary education. A growing number of **private training institutes and degree-awarding institutions** operate on a fee-based model, expanding enrolment capacity and programme diversity in areas such as ICT, business, and professional qualifications.³⁵ Stakeholders pointed out that while private provision has helped absorb unmet demand and introduce market-responsive programmes, high tuition fees have raised equity concerns, particularly for students from low-income and rural backgrounds. Public-private partnerships in training delivery, apprenticeships, and curriculum development remain limited in scale, despite their potential to improve labour-market alignment and share financing burdens.³⁶

Overall, financing patterns indicate a **mixed funding model** where public resources provide basic access and system stability, while private investment supports expansion and diversification. Stakeholders consistently highlight the need for more predictable and targeted public financing, enhanced incentives for employer participation, and financing mechanisms that explicitly promote inclusion, quality improvement, and digital innovation. Strengthening the alignment

³³ Sri Lanka Qualification Framework, The Ministry of Education and Higher Education. https://www.ugc.ac.lk/attachments/1156_SLQF_2016_en.pdf

³⁴ Sri Lanka: Fostering Workforce Skills Through Education, Employment Diagnostic Study, Asian Development Bank and the International Labour Organization. <file:///C:/Users/DELL/Downloads/995036891602676.pdf>

³⁵ (2024) Growth of Sri Lanka's private higher education sector, British Council. <https://opportunities-insight.britishcouncil.org/analysis/growth-of-sri-lankas-private-higher-education-sector>

³⁶ (2018) Education Inequalities in Sri Lanka; National Data and Local Perspectives Access, Quality and Learning Outcomes, The Centre for Poverty Analysis. <https://www.cepa.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2019-Sarma-et-al-Educational-Inequalities-English.pdf>

between public funding priorities and labour-market outcomes is essential to ensure that investments in technical, vocational, and tertiary education contribute effectively to inclusive growth and workforce development.

Gap and challenges

Despite ongoing policy attention and institutional reforms, Sri Lanka's technical, vocational, and tertiary education sectors continue to experience structural gaps that constrain their effectiveness, equity, and responsiveness. Both system-level and civil society perspectives indicate that access remains uneven, particularly for rural populations, estate-sector communities, low-income households, women, and persons with disabilities. Although public provision, scholarships, and subsidised programmes are available, limited system capacity and the increasing prevalence of fee-charging private institutions have created affordability barriers that disproportionately impact disadvantaged and first-generation learners. These access challenges were exacerbated **during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic downturn**, as household incomes declined and education-related expenses became a lower priority.

Concerns regarding quality and labour-market relevance are prevalent among government, employers, and civil society organisations. Persistent mismatches between training outputs and labour market requirements contribute to graduate underemployment and skills underutilisation. Numerous institutions continue to operate with outdated equipment, limited practical training opportunities, and shortages of qualified instructors, especially outside urban centres. Civil society representatives emphasise that inadequate engagement of employers, workers' organisations, and community stakeholders in curriculum development diminishes programme relevance and employability outcomes.

Inclusion and learner support systems remain inadequately institutionalised. Although inclusive policies and standards exist, implementation is inconsistent, and support services for students with disabilities, language barriers, or psychosocial needs are uneven across institutions. Limited availability of accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, and trained staff continues to constrain participation. The lack of comprehensive, disaggregated data on access, progression, and outcomes further limits policymakers' and stakeholders' ability to identify and address equity gaps effectively.

Institutional capacity and coordination challenges remain significant. Quality assurance and accreditation systems are still developing, with inconsistent enforcement and limited public transparency. Civil society organisations note fragmented coordination among ministries, regulatory bodies, training providers, and employers, as well as limited opportunities for non-state actors to participate meaningfully in planning and oversight. Underdeveloped public–

private partnerships and uneven digital infrastructure, particularly in remote areas, further restrict innovation, access, and system resilience. Addressing these challenges will require sustained investment, improved coordination, and more inclusive governance mechanisms that integrate civil society and community perspectives with those of government and private sector actors.

3.4. Youth and Adult Literacy & Lifelong Learning

Youth and adult literacy, as well as lifelong learning, are addressed under **SDG 4 target 4.6**, which seeks to ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults achieve functional literacy and numeracy by 2030. Sri Lanka maintains high literacy rates by regional standards, with national literacy is exceeding 92 per cent and youth literacy is 99 per cent, reflecting sustained investments in free education.³⁷ Nevertheless, these aggregate statistics conceal areas of **low functional literacy**, particularly among older adults, women outside the formal labour force, estate-sector populations, persons with disabilities, and adults who left the education system early. Consequently, this thematic area encompasses not only basic literacy but also second-chance education, non-formal learning, skills upgrading, and opportunities for continued learning beyond initial schooling.

Policy integration

Sri Lanka lacks a standalone national policy dedicated exclusively to adult education. Instead, youth and adult literacy, along with lifelong learning, are incorporated into the National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) 2020–2030, which explicitly recognises lifelong learning as a national priority. The NEPF emphasises the expansion of non-formal education, second-chance pathways for early school leavers, and increased recognition of learning acquired outside formal schooling. Although this integration confers policy legitimacy, stakeholders report that the absence of a dedicated adult education policy limits visibility, prioritisation, and budgetary protection for lifelong learning programmes.

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) serves a critical enabling function by recognising prior learning and facilitating progression from non-formal and informal learning into formal education and training. The framework enables adult learners to convert work experience and community-based learning into recognised qualifications, thereby enhancing social inclusion and

³⁷ (2023) World Bank Group, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.1524.LT.ZS?locations=LK>

employability.³⁸ Civil society organisations working with adult learners view the NQF as a positive development, although its implementation remains inconsistent across sectors and institutions.

Strengthening Institutional Framework

The Department of Adult Education under the Ministry of Education holds primary institutional responsibility for adult education. It coordinates literacy and non-formal education programmes nationwide through a network of **Community Learning Centres (CLCs)**. These centres offer localised platforms for basic and functional literacy, life skills, vocational skills, and livelihood-oriented learning, particularly targeting adults who have not completed formal schooling.³⁹ Additionally, CLCs support community development initiatives that align with local economic and social needs.

Stakeholders recognised the value of CLCs as accessible community-based institutions, particularly in rural and underserved areas. However, implementation capacity differs considerably across districts due to variations in staffing, infrastructure, and local partnerships. Civil society organisations and community-based groups frequently complement government provision through outreach, mobilisation, and learner support, yet coordination between state and non-state actors remains largely informal.

Equity and Inclusion

Equity and inclusion constitute central objectives of adult education and lifelong learning initiatives in Sri Lanka. Programmes are structured to reach **women, rural and estate-sector populations, low-income groups, persons with disabilities, and other marginalised communities**. The geographic distribution of CLCs improves physical access, while flexible schedules and non-formal delivery modes address the needs of working adults and caregivers. Recognition of prior learning under the NQF further promotes inclusion by valuing experiential learning and enabling progression regardless of previous educational attainment.⁴⁰

Despite these efforts, stakeholder consultations reveal that participation remains uneven. Women's organisations identify persistent time poverty and unpaid care responsibilities as barriers to participation, while disability rights groups cite limited accessible infrastructure and

³⁸ Sri Lanka Qualification Framework (SLQF), Quality Assurance Council, University Grant Commission. [https://eugc.ugc.ac.lk/qac/slqf.html#:~:text=Sri%20Lanka%20Qualification%20Framework%20\(SLQF\),qualifications%20offered%20by%20different%20institutions.](https://eugc.ugc.ac.lk/qac/slqf.html#:~:text=Sri%20Lanka%20Qualification%20Framework%20(SLQF),qualifications%20offered%20by%20different%20institutions.)

³⁹ Non-Formal Education Programmes, Census Report – 2017, Ministry of Education. https://www.statistics.gov.lk/Resource/en/Education/Other_Reports/NonFormalEduStat-2017.pdf

⁴⁰ Spotlight Report on Adult Learning and Education in Sri Lanka, Coalition for Educational Development Sri Lanka. <https://cedsrilanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/10-Spotlight-Report- ALE-in-Sri-Lanka-Final -April-2021.pdf>

learning materials. Estate-sector representatives report language barriers and shortages of trained facilitators fluent in Tamil as ongoing constraints.

Financing

Financing for youth and adult literacy and lifelong learning in Sri Lanka is predominantly public but remains **limited in both scale and predictability**, reflecting the absence of a dedicated national adult education policy. Government funding is primarily channelled through the Ministry of Education to support the Department of Adult Education and the operation of Community Learning Centres (CLCs), covering basic literacy programmes, facilitator allowances, learning materials, and limited operational costs.⁴¹ However, adult education receives a **small proportion of overall education expenditure**, with budget allocations often treated as residual and susceptible to fiscal tightening. Stakeholders observe that funding is largely recurrent, with minimal investment in curriculum renewal, facilitator professional development, digital learning infrastructure, or monitoring systems. During the COVID-19 period and the subsequent economic crisis, fiscal constraints further reduced allocations, disrupting programme continuity and limiting outreach to vulnerable adult learners.

Alongside government funding, **development partners and civil society organisations** provide complementary financing for targeted literacy, skills, and community learning initiatives, particularly benefiting women, estate-sector workers, and persons with disabilities. These interventions have facilitated the piloting of innovative approaches and improved access for hard-to-reach populations, yet they are frequently **project-based and time-limited, which restricts** sustainability and scalability. Household contributions and informal cost-sharing also support some non-formal programmes, creating affordability barriers for low-income adults. Stakeholders consistently emphasise the need for **more stable and protected public financing**, stronger integration of adult learning within national skills and employment budgets, and targeted investment in digital and community-based delivery models to ensure that youth and adult literacy and lifelong learning are sufficiently resourced to meet SDG 4.6 commitments.

Gap and challenges

Both system and civil society perspectives identify several challenges that constrain progress towards SDG 4.6. **Access remains limited for marginalised groups**, particularly in remote and estate areas, due to transport costs, opportunity costs of participation, and limited outreach. **Affordability** is also a significant concern, as many adult education programmes depend on partial cost recovery or project-based funding, making sustained participation challenging for low-income learners.

⁴¹ The Progress 2024 and The Way Forward 2025, Vocational Education Division, Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Vocational Education. <https://skillsmin.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/English-2024.pdf>

The quality and relevance of programmes vary considerably. Civil society organisations report that curricula and learning materials are not consistently aligned with adult learners’ practical needs or local labour market opportunities. Shortages of trained adult educators and facilitators, along with inadequate infrastructure and outdated materials at some CLCs, further undermine learning quality.

Additional gaps exist in data, monitoring, and digital inclusion. There is no comprehensive, disaggregated national data system to track adult learner participation, completion, or outcomes, which limits evidence-based planning. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated the **digital divide**, as most adult learning programmes were unable to transition effectively to online or blended modalities, thereby excluding learners without devices, connectivity, or digital skills. Stakeholders also highlight **social stigma and low awareness** of adult education as persistent barriers, particularly among older adults, underscoring the need for stronger advocacy and community engagement.

In summary, although Sri Lanka possesses a strong foundation for youth and adult literacy, achieving the objectives of SDG 4.6 will require stronger policy prioritisation, more predictable financing, improved institutional capacity, enhanced data systems, and deeper collaboration with civil society and community-based organisations.

3.5. Quality of Learning, Teachers and Infrastructure

This thematic area aligns with **SDG 4.1** (quality learning outcomes), **SDG 4.a** (safe, inclusive, and effective learning environments), and **SDG 4.c** (qualified and motivated teachers). It integrates learning outcomes, teacher quality, and school infrastructure adequacy, emphasizing that increased access must be accompanied by improvements in learning quality and equity. Evidence from national assessments, sector reviews, and international learning studies demonstrates that, despite high enrolment and completion rates in Sri Lanka, disparities in **learning outcomes and school quality persist, especially among** disadvantaged learners.

Policy Integration

Sri Lanka’s policy framework prioritizes the enhancement of learning quality, teacher professionalism, and school infrastructure, with reforms explicitly aligned to **SDG 4.1, 4.a, and 4.c**. The **National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) 2020–2030** places quality improvement at the core of system transformation, focusing on curriculum reform, competency-based learning,

and assessment for learning.⁴² These reforms are designed to shift the education system from rote memorization and examination-centric approaches toward the cultivation of transferable skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, creativity, and digital literacy. The proposed curriculum reforms under the **Education Reform Agenda**, scheduled for phased implementation beginning in 2026, aim to rationalize subject content, integrate cross-cutting competencies, and reinforce formative assessment practices. These measures respond to national and international assessments that highlight persistent gaps in functional literacy, numeracy, and higher-order skills, particularly at the secondary level.⁴³

Teacher recruitment, training, and professional development constitute key components of policy integration. Recent policy initiatives emphasize higher **entry standards for teacher recruitment**, including the requirement of a **recognized degree or equivalent professional qualification** for new teachers, particularly at the secondary level. The NEPF and **General Education Sector Development Plan (GESDP)** advocate for strengthening **pre-service teacher education** through curriculum reform in National Colleges of Education and teacher training institutions, with increased emphasis on pedagogy, subject mastery, inclusive education, and classroom-based practice. Policies also prioritize the expansion of **in-service professional development**, including structured induction, mentoring for early-career teachers, continuous professional development (CPD), and alignment of training with curriculum and assessment reforms.⁴⁴

To address persistent capacity constraints, recent reforms focus on **expanding opportunities for teachers' higher education and career advancement**. Policy proposals include increasing access to postgraduate diplomas, bachelor's and master's degree programs for in-service teachers, strengthening partnerships with universities and teacher education institutions, and recognizing higher qualifications within promotion and salary structures. These measures aim to enhance teacher quality, motivation, and retention, thereby fostering a more professionalized teaching workforce. Complementary policies regarding regulated teacher transfers, improved deployment mechanisms, and incentive schemes for service in rural, estate, and challenging areas are designed to promote a more equitable distribution of qualified teachers throughout the system.

Infrastructure policy is addressed through the **Education Sector Development Plan (2021–2025)** and associated investment programs, which commit to upgrading classrooms, laboratories, libraries, **WASH facilities**, and **ICT infrastructure** to support safe, inclusive, and effective learning

⁴² (2023) National Education Policy Framework, Ministry of Education https://moe.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/NEPF_English_final.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁴³ The Progress 2024 and The Way Forward 2025, Vocational Education Division, Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Vocational Education. <https://skillsmin.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/English-2024.pdf>

⁴⁴ (2020) Sri Lanka General Education Sector Development Plan (2020 – 2025), Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka.

environments. Policy directives mandate child-, gender-, and disability-sensitive design standards, with increased focus on physical accessibility and school safety. Targeted investments have prioritized rural, estate, and conflict-affected areas, while recent policy decisions underscore the importance of strengthening maintenance planning and enhancing digital connectivity in schools.⁴⁵ Collectively, these integrated policy measures seek to ensure that expanded access is accompanied by sustained improvements in learning quality, teacher professionalism, and equitable learning conditions throughout Sri Lanka's education system.

Strengthening Institutional Framework

Institutional responsibility for quality improvement in Sri Lanka is distributed across national, provincial, and school levels. The **National Institute of Education (NIE)** serves as the technical lead for curriculum development, teacher education guidance, and leadership training for principals and senior education administrators. In collaboration with the **Ministry of Education (MoE)**, the NIE conducts periodic reviews of the **National Curriculum Framework** and related syllabi, with the next major phase of curriculum reform scheduled for phased implementation beginning in **2026** under the Education Reform Agenda. According to the education officials attended KILs, Provincial Education Departments, Zonal and Divisional structures, and School Management Committees are tasked with translating these reforms into classroom practice through implementation oversight, school improvement planning, and monitoring of teaching and learning processes, although the quality of implementation varies by province and school capacity.

Over the past decade, teacher education and quality improvement practices have expanded and diversified, with greater emphasis on **reform-oriented pedagogy, subject upgrading, and system-wide cascading training models**. In preparation for the 2026 curriculum changes, the MoE has reported the training of approximately **10,000 master trainers** to facilitate teacher upgrading and classroom-level adoption of new pedagogical approaches.⁴⁶ In-service training has increasingly incorporated classroom-focused methodologies, such as activity-based learning, formative assessment practices, and competency development, alongside leadership development for principals to enhance instructional supervision. Performance monitoring mechanisms, including teacher appraisal processes and classroom observation, have been strengthened; however, stakeholders report ongoing inconsistency in application and feedback quality across provinces, partly due to staffing constraints and uneven supervisory capacity.

⁴⁵ Budget Speech 2025, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development.
<https://www.treasury.gov.lk/api/file/96100697-0492-4c66-b2a2-71aeafa23404>

⁴⁶ Nalaka Kaluwewa, Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, held on November 6, 2025.
[https://lankanewsweb.net/archives/141487/sri-lanka-to-introduce-learning-centered-education-model-under-2026-reforms/#:~:text=The%20Training%20of%20Trainers%20\(ToT,will%20apply%20to%20all%20grades:](https://lankanewsweb.net/archives/141487/sri-lanka-to-introduce-learning-centered-education-model-under-2026-reforms/#:~:text=The%20Training%20of%20Trainers%20(ToT,will%20apply%20to%20all%20grades:)

Quality improvement efforts have also been supported through targeted investments in infrastructure and learning environments. Programs such as the **Secondary Education Sector Improvement Programme (SESIP)** have financed science laboratories, practical learning spaces, equipment, and school-level improvements to strengthen hands-on learning, particularly in STEM subjects where learning gaps are most pronounced.⁴⁷ However, the continuity and equitable impact of these initiatives have been constrained by resource limitations, maintenance challenges, and disparities in school-level capacity to effectively utilize upgraded facilities.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** and subsequent **economic downturn** placed considerable strain on institutional quality assurance and teacher development systems. Prolonged school closures disrupted instructional time, limited opportunities for practicum-based teacher training and mentoring, and necessitated a shift to remote teaching modalities for which many teachers and schools were inadequately prepared. The pandemic revealed significant digital divides in connectivity, device access, and teachers' digital competencies, resulting in uneven learning continuity. The economic crisis further restricted fiscal resources for training, supervision, school maintenance, and infrastructure upgrades, while increasing household hardship and elevating absenteeism and dropout risks in disadvantaged areas. In response, institutions accelerated efforts to enhance teacher digital literacy, expand blended learning resources, and prioritize targeted remediation and learning recovery. However, stakeholder consultations indicate that system-wide recovery remains inconsistent and requires sustained investment and strengthened provincial implementation capacity.

Equity and inclusion

Practices to promote **equity and inclusion** have become increasingly integrated into Sri Lanka's efforts to enhance learning quality, teacher systems, and school infrastructure, though implementation remains inconsistent. At the **curriculum and learning level**, the transition to competency-based education and formative assessment represents a key inclusion-oriented strategy. By reducing reliance on high-stakes examinations and promoting continuous assessment, differentiated instruction, and inclusive learning materials, recent reforms seek to better support first-generation learners, students with learning difficulties, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Remedial and catch-up programs, expanded during and after COVID-19, have further targeted learning recovery for students most affected by school closures, while flexible and accelerated learning pathways have supported out-of-school children and learners with interrupted schooling.

With respect to teachers, equity-focused practices have concentrated on enhancing both capacity and distribution. Teacher education curricula have been revised to incorporate inclusive

⁴⁷ Secondary Education Sector Improvement Program, Program Implementation Document. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/52203-001-pid.pdf>

pedagogy, diversity-responsive teaching, and strategies for supporting learners with disabilities and varied learning needs. Large-scale in-service training, including the preparation of approximately 10,000 master trainers, has facilitated the system-wide dissemination of inclusive teaching approaches. Policies and administrative measures regulating teacher transfers, incentivizing service in rural and estate areas, and expanding access to higher education and postgraduate qualifications for teachers are designed to reduce disparities in teacher quality across schools, although shortages in key subjects persist in challenging locations.

Infrastructure development has increasingly incorporated an inclusion perspective. Investment programmes such as the Secondary Education Sector Improvement Programme have prioritised upgrading classrooms, science laboratories, WASH facilities, and ICT infrastructure in rural, estate, and underserved areas.⁴⁸ New and rehabilitated school facilities are required to meet child-, gender-, and disability-sensitive standards, including physical accessibility features such as ramps and adapted sanitation. Efforts to expand digital connectivity and learning technologies, accelerated during the pandemic, are intended to narrow the digital divide, although access to devices and reliable connectivity remains inconsistent.

Institutional practices have increasingly aimed to identify and address exclusion in a systematic manner. Early identification mechanisms for learners at risk of dropout, school-level improvement planning, and greater use of assessment data to target support reflect a more equity-oriented approach to quality assurance. Collaboration with civil society and development partners has enhanced inclusive teacher training, disability-responsive practices, and community-based support for vulnerable learners. Collectively, these practices indicate a stronger orientation toward equity and inclusion within the quality, teacher, and infrastructure agenda, while underscoring the need for sustained investment, enhanced provincial implementation capacity, and consistent monitoring to ensure that inclusive intent results in equitable outcomes across all schools.

Gaps and Challenges

Across these domains, civil society organizations, teacher associations, and development partners consistently identify a range of implementation gaps that hinder the translation of inclusive policy commitments into equitable outcomes.

Inclusion in practice versus policy intent remains a central concern. While Sri Lanka's policy frameworks strongly endorse inclusive education, stakeholders note that implementation capacity at school and district levels is uneven. Many schools lack trained personnel, specialised

⁴⁸ Half a Million Students, 150,000 Teachers to Benefit from New World Bank Support for Education in Sri Lanka, World Bank Group. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/06/27/half-a-million-students-150-000-teachers-to-benefit-from-new-world-bank-support-for-education-in-sri-lanka>

support services, and consistent supervision to operationalise inclusive practices. Education sector reviews and partner assessments have shown that inclusive education guidelines are often applied selectively, with limited follow-up and weak accountability mechanisms. As a result, learners with disabilities, learning difficulties, or socio-economic disadvantages are frequently included in principle but not adequately supported in practice.

Teacher deployment and professional support continue to present equity challenges. Although policy instruments promote equitable deployment and incentives for service in rural and estate-sector schools, teacher unions and provincial authorities report ongoing shortages of subject specialists (science, mathematics, ICT, English) and special education teachers in hard-to-serve areas. Provincial staffing data reveal that urban schools continue to attract a surplus of qualified teachers, while rural and plantation schools rely more heavily on temporary or out-of-field appointments. Both financial and non-financial incentive schemes are widely regarded as insufficient to offset challenging living conditions, heavy workloads, and limited career progression opportunities in remote locations.

The sustainability of digital inclusion has become a critical challenge in the post-COVID context. School closures during the pandemic exposed significant digital divides, as national surveys and sector studies revealed that a substantial proportion of students, particularly in rural, estate, and low-income urban communities, lacked reliable internet access, devices, or affordable data. Although subsequent investments have improved teachers' digital competencies and expanded online learning resources, stakeholders report that connectivity gaps, device shortages, and high data costs continue to limit effective participation by disadvantaged learners. Without sustained public investment in connectivity and subsidized access, digital learning may reinforce existing inequalities.

Finally, infrastructure resource imbalances remain pronounced despite targeted programmes. Monitoring reports from education authorities and development partners indicate that estate-sector, conflict-affected, and small peripheral schools continue to lag behind national and urban schools in classroom quality, laboratories, libraries, and WASH facilities. Stakeholders argue that capital allocation mechanisms often favour larger or more visible schools, while maintenance funding and technical support for smaller schools are inadequate. These disparities undermine efforts to ensure comparable learning environments across the system and highlight the need for more needs-based planning, transparent allocation criteria, and sustained maintenance financing to achieve equitable infrastructure development.

4. Civil Society Contributions

Civil Society Engagement in SDG 4 Implementation in Sri Lanka

The SDG 4 “Education 2030” agenda positions implementation as a whole-of-society effort, requiring participation beyond government, particularly from civil society organisations (CSOs), communities, learners, and non-state education actors. UNESCO’s SDG 4 platform acknowledges structured mechanisms for NGO engagement, such as the Collective Consultation of NGOs on Education 2030, which facilitates dialogue, accountability, and partnership between governments and civil society in advancing SDG 4.

In Sri Lanka, CSO engagement has expanded over the past decade through policy dialogue, evidence generation, advocacy on education financing and equity, and monitoring of SDG 4 progress. The Coalition for Education Development (CED), established in 2004, serves as a platform to strengthen civil society participation in education governance and SDG commitments. CED has produced SDG 4 “spotlight” reports and policy analysis outputs, including policy briefs and civil society observations on reforms, providing an independent perspective on equity, inclusion, and accountability in SDG 4 implementation. CED’s reporting indicates that civil society participation in national SDG processes, such as VNR consultations, has occurred but remains limited and episodic, with few opportunities for sustained co-planning or joint monitoring with government actors.⁴⁹

Examples of CSO and partner-supported engagement

Civil society engagement is further strengthened through targeted initiatives that build CSO capacity to participate in policy processes. For instance, the Education Out Loud programme supports a Sri Lanka project aimed at enhancing CSO advocacy for public education reform, including policy gap analysis, education financing briefs, inclusive and gender-sensitive programming, and the creation of collaborative mechanisms at the provincial level.⁵⁰ In the area of lifelong learning and adult education, aligned with SDG 4.6, DVV International has facilitated dialogue platforms and multi-stakeholder consensus-building processes, convening national and provincial actors to advance adult learning and the development of the lifelong learning system.⁵¹ In this context, CSOs frequently serve as outreach and delivery partners in non-formal education.

How development partners interact with and reinforce civil society roles

⁴⁹ Research and Publication, CED Sri Lanka. <https://cedsrilanka.org/research-papers/>

⁵⁰ Education Out Loud, Strengthening CSO advocacy for public education reforms in Sri Lanka. [Strengthening CSO advocacy for public education reforms in Sri Lanka - Education Out Loud](#)

⁵¹ (2025) Building Consensus for Lifelong Learning in Sri Lanka, DVV International. <https://www.dvv-international-central-asia.org/tajikistan/news/2024/building-consensus-for-lifelong-learning-in-sri-lanka>

Development partners shape the SDG 4 ecosystem by funding reforms, supporting equity-focused programmes, and facilitating stakeholder consultation, often involving CSO participation. The World Bank's General Education Modernisation Project, including recent support announced in 2025, prioritises investments to improve teaching and learning, school management, and social equity.⁵² In these areas, CSOs contribute through community engagement, monitoring, and advocacy for equitable implementation. International NGOs, such as Save the Children, support inclusive education approaches, learning support, and the development of tools to enhance inclusion in teaching and learning, including guidance for inclusive education and remote learning contexts.

Common themes raised by civil society stakeholders

Sri Lankan CSOs consistently highlight several priorities: the need for institutionalised participation in education reform and SDG 4 monitoring rather than ad hoc consultation; improved transparency and public access to education performance and equity data; greater focus on marginalised learners, including those from the estate sector, rural poor, and children with disabilities; and sustained attention to education financing and distributional equity. CED spotlight reporting specifically underscores the risks associated with weak SDG 4 coordination and limited structured engagement opportunities for stakeholders, reinforcing the need for stronger, formalised multi-stakeholder mechanisms.⁵³

⁵² General Education Modernization Project, World Bank Group. [Development Projects: General Education Modernization Project - P163714](#)

⁵³ 2024 Civil Society Spotlight Report on SDG4, CED Sri Lanka, <https://cedsrilanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/CED-Sri-Lanka-Spotlight-Report-2024.pdf>

5. Recommendations

Recommendations by thematic area

1) Access, Participation and Completion (SDG 4.1, 4.5)

Retention and upper secondary completion

- Expand targeted retention measures for Grades 10 to 13, including school-based counselling, career guidance, remedial support, and flexible pathways that connect general education to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) or tertiary options.
- Strengthen transition management at the Ordinary Level (O/L) and Advanced Level (A/L) by expanding bridging programmes and establishing recognized alternative progression routes, such as modular learning and formal school-to-TVET transition agreements.

Equity-focused participation supports

- Increase provision of transport assistance, school nutrition, and fee-related relief, such as uniforms and learning materials, for low-income and crisis-affected households, ensuring transparent eligibility criteria.
- Implement a structured protocol for identifying and supporting at-risk learners at the school level, including attendance thresholds, referral processes, and follow-up, with support from zonal teams.

Financing

- Reallocate capital spending to address retention bottlenecks, such as subject access for Grades 10 to 13, laboratories, information and communication technology (ICT), and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities, particularly in rural and estate areas and schools with persistent dropout patterns.

2) Early Childhood Development and Pre-Primary Education (SDG 4.2)

Expand equitable access

- Gradually expand public or subsidized preschool provision in rural, estate, and low-income urban areas through a mixed model that includes community-based preschools, provincial expansion, and targeted subsidies or vouchers for low-income households.

Quality assurance and regulation

- Standardize minimum quality standards across provinces or introduce nationally coordinated benchmarks, and enhance inspection capacity through risk-based monitoring, with priority given to low-quality or high-risk centres.
- Implement the national curriculum framework using phased support packages, including teacher guides, learning materials, and mentoring.

Inclusion and language equity

- Expand inclusive early childhood development (ECD) screening and referral pathways in collaboration with health and social services. Ensure preschool teacher training addresses disability inclusion and language-responsive pedagogy in Sinhala and Tamil, with careful management of English-medium disparities.

Financing

- Establish a predictable financing mechanism for early childhood development (ECD) with transparent provincial allocations based on equity criteria such as poverty, estate concentration, and remoteness, while safeguarding subsidies for low-income families.

3) Technical, Vocational and Tertiary Education (SDG 4.3, 4.4)

Strengthen pathways and recognition.

- Formalize pathways from school to technical and vocational education and training (TVET), including career guidance, credit transfer, and recognition of prior learning, and improve alignment between Ordinary Level (O/L) and Advanced Level (A/L) outcomes and post-school options.
- Increase uptake of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) by simplifying assessment processes and promoting employer-supported certification.

Improve labour-market relevance

- Institutionalize participation of employers and worker organizations in curriculum design, workplace training, and assessment panels, particularly in high-growth sectors such as information and communication technology (ICT), logistics, construction, hospitality, and green skills.

Equity and inclusion

- Expand targeted support for rural and estate youth, women, and persons with disabilities through stipends, accessible facilities, assistive technologies, adapted assessments, and disability-responsive training of trainers.
- Require accredited providers (public and private) to meet basic inclusion standards as part of quality assurance.

Financing

- Increase performance-linked financing for public technical and vocational education and training (TVET) providers based on inclusion and employment outcomes, and incentivize employers to co-finance apprenticeships and work-based learning.
- Enhance regulation and transparency regarding private provider fees and quality to reduce barriers to affordability.

4) Youth and Adult Literacy & Lifelong Learning (SDG 4.6)

Policy focus and system visibility

- Develop a dedicated adult learning strategy, or an operational plan under the National Education Policy Framework (NEPF), with clear targets for functional literacy and numeracy, second-chance education, and community skills upgrading.

Strengthen Community Learning Centres (CLCs)

- Enhance Community Learning Centre (CLC) staffing, learning materials, and monitoring. Introduce flexible schedules and livelihood-linked modules to increase participation among women and low-income adults.
- Increase the availability of Tamil-language facilitators in estate areas and strengthen outreach through civil society organizations (CSOs) and community-based groups.

Digital and crisis-resilient delivery

- Implement blended adult learning models, including mobile learning, radio and television modules, offline content, and community digital access points, accompanied by facilitator training.

Financing

- Secure a stable allocation for adult learning, covering materials, facilitators, monitoring, and digital tools, and align this funding with skills and employment budgets. Leverage partner funding while planning for sustainability beyond project cycles.

5) Quality of Learning, Teachers and Infrastructure (SDG 4.1, 4.a, 4.c)

Learning quality and assessment reform

- Implement competency-based curriculum reforms alongside assessment reforms, including formative assessment tools, sample-based national learning assessments, and benchmarks for learning recovery.
- Systematically expand remedial and catch-up programmes following the COVID-19 pandemic, with clear learning standards and targeted support for low-performing schools.

Teacher workforce: recruitment, deployment, and continuous development

- Strengthen teacher deployment mechanisms through transparent vacancy mapping and ensure equitable distribution of subject teachers and special education support to rural and estate schools.
- Expand higher education opportunities for teachers, including degree and postgraduate pathways linked to career progression, while maintaining the quality of pre-service practicum and mentoring.

Inclusive education in practice

- Ensure enforceable reasonable accommodation at the school level, including resource teachers, assistive materials, accessible infrastructure, and referral pathways. Establish school accountability for inclusion incidents, with required corrective actions.
- Expand teacher training to include differentiated instruction, disability inclusion, language-responsive teaching, and psychosocial support.

Infrastructure equity and sustainability

- Prioritize water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), electricity, laboratories, and safe classrooms in estate, conflict-affected, and peripheral schools using needs-based criteria. Establish minimum service standards for all schools.
- Establish dedicated maintenance funding and technical support mechanisms at the school and provincial levels to prevent rapid deterioration of facilities.

Financing

- Reallocate education spending to promote equity by protecting teacher development, inclusive education supports, water, sanitation, and hygiene (**WASH**) maintenance, and connectivity. Reduce repeated upgrades to already well-resourced schools through transparent capital allocation rules.

Recommendations on civil society engagement and accountability

1. Formalize CSO participation in policy cycles

Include civil society organizations (CSOs), such as the Centre for Education Development (CED) and others, in reform design, piloting, monitoring, and evaluation, not limited to consultation, through clearly defined roles and a timetable for inputs.

2. Strengthen community monitoring and feedback.

Establish community and school feedback channels regarding inclusion, infrastructure, and teacher availability, and publicly report responses and actions taken.

3. Evidence partnerships

Support collaboration among civil society organizations (CSOs), universities, and government agencies on policy briefs, equity audits, and learning recovery evaluations, ensuring public dissemination of findings.