Insights on Assessment of the Sustainability of Development Programmes and Projects in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Development programmes and projects have a significant impact on the environment as well as society and economy of a country. These impacts can have a spillover effect on other parts of the planet earth affecting the overall sustainability. Countries, including Sri Lanka, have a responsibility to assess their development impacts on themselves and other communities and nations. Sri Lanka had committed to achieving the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and many multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). However, in the absence of a comprehensive assessment framework or mechanism, there is no clarity on how the sustainability of development projects and programmes is assessed in Sri Lanka. The objective of the research was to find insights on the assessment of the sustainability of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka. Therefore, a survey was conducted on the main research question of how the sustainability of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka can be assessed. The findings of the survey show that the failure of development projects in Sri Lanka is due to multiple reasons including lack of proper planning for success, monitoring and evaluation, transparency, and negative impacts on the environment, society and economy. Lack of proper governance mechanisms, inability to prevent corruption, short-term nature of planning and political intervention have been obstacles to return on investment. A framework to assess the sustainability of projects must essentially ensure the long-term benefits that address major challenges including climate change, multi-dimensional poverty and help advance the social well-being and prosperity of the nation. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a general framework for sustainable development, but Sri Lanka needs a comprehensive framework to assess development projects and programmes with key components of environmental, social, economic and governance dimensions.

KEYWORDS: Sustainable development, International principles, International agreements, Transformation, Assessment framework

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Introduction

Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), which is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity, provides countries with a global framework for the assessment of its transformation (United Nations, 2015). However, the Global Sustainable Development Report 2023 of the United Nations has formally announced that the world has failed to achieve those goals and targets. Of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and 169 targets included in the 2030 Agenda, only 12% are on track, 50% moderately or severely off track, and 30% showing no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline (United Nations Department of Economic Affairs, 2023). As this assessment is not a system-wide impact assessment considering the interlinkages between the targets, the status of sustainable development in the world would be far less. Unfortunately, there is no impact investment conducted on the SDGs to see how the financing for sustainable development has impacted the world. What is measured is that the gap in financing the SDGs has grown from 2015 to now in developing countries.

Meanwhile, according to the Stockholm Resilience Centre, six of the nine planetary boundaries have been transgressed, suggesting that Earth is now well outside of the safe operating space for humanity (Richardson *et al*., 2023). Similarly, commitment to climate change by countries is seriously questioned by the 6th Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023). The report outlines that climate changes will increase in all regions of the globe over the coming decades and that even with an increment of 1.5°C of global warming, there will be increasing heat waves, longer warm seasons, and shorter cold seasons – which will become more intense at 2ºC of warming. The IPCC warns that the pace and scale of climate action are insufficient to tackle climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023).

Sachs (1993) claims that although the development syndrome has demonstrated failure throughout its history, it has persisted to the present day at the expense of growing senility. The effectiveness of "development" was relentless throughout, defying any contradicting evidence while exhibiting extraordinary resilience; the idea was continuously expanded until it encompassed both the therapeutic method and the strategy that caused the injury. The concept no longer shows any signs of responding to shifting historical circumstances. Development is a concept of disastrous emptiness.

Sri Lanka as a country committed to the 2030 agenda and many multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), the assessment of the sustainability of development projects and programmes needs to take a 'no development without sustainability' approach. Sustainability is how natural systems function, remain diverse and produce everything they need for the earth's systems to remain in balance while nurturing human lifestyles and livelihoods. Sustainable development, in this respect, is a paradigm for thinking about the future in which environmental, social and economic considerations are balanced in the pursuit of an improved quality of life.

As a nation, Sri Lanka is expected to adopt a framework that integrates environmental, social, economic and governance dimensions from planning through implementation to monitoring and evaluation stages.

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Large-scale industrial and infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka, such as harbours, hydropower plants, coal-fired power plants, highways, and international airports, have undergone massive development since the end of the war in 2009. The building industry contributed 8% of the GDP in the third quarter of 2017, highlighting the importance of infrastructure development to the nation's economic growth. On the other hand, Sri Lanka needs to demonstrate greater commitment to data-driven planning and decision-making to ensure sustainable development outcomes. Despite the fact that hydro-meteorological factors are often the cause of natural disasters, disaster risk management has not fully benefited from the availability of weather and climate data, sophisticated diagnostics, and seasonal predictions (Zubair *et al.*, 2005). According to Zubair (2005), the shortcomings of modern irrigation systems with respect to planning, policy and sustainability are prominent. For example, there is a strong tendency towards slope failures in the Kotmale Valley due to a rather unique combination of topographical, structural, and geological features. Human control over these features is non-existent. However, these are topped with an additional set of circumstances that are human-caused and have raised the likelihood of localized slope failures.

Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) have been applied to assess large development projects in Sri Lanka. But the country does not have a comprehensive framework or mechanism to assess the sustainability of development projects and programmes from environmental, social, and economic aspects in an integrated manner. This leaves a big gap in the monitoring and evaluation of project performance. Additionally, the lack of such a sustainability assessment framework prevents the integration of environmental, social, and economic dimensions of development projects at the planning and design stages. Another issue arising from the lack of an overarching framework is the inability to assess the impact of investment on development projects and programmes.

According to Kelegama (2000), once referred to as the "best bet in Asia', Sri Lanka could not live up to that promise. Singapore had expressed the view that Sri Lanka could overtake by 1990 the level of development achieved by Singapore up to 1979. The initial conditions in Sri Lanka made the policy-makers complacent. Sri Lanka's economic development after independence has been witness to a mixture of inability to get out of interlocking initial conditions due to political-economy factors rooted in the five-year electoral cycle, policy errors including the postponement of crucial policy changes until a crisis engulfs the economy and missed opportunities. According to Wanniarachchi (2022), the Sri Lankan government has borrowed and spent large amounts of money on infrastructure development projects and problems arise regarding the necessity of some of these projects. While the Colombo Katunayake Expressway has benefited the people in general, it was done during a period in which the current account deficit was increasing. The Mattala Airport is considered to be a commercially unsuccessful airport was budget for this project was 209 million dollars but had cost 243.7 million dollars. Such circumstances have led to the economic pressure that the people of Sri Lanka are presently undergoing.

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Meanwhile, on other development interventions, expansion of agricultural land uses for tea, tobacco, potato and vegetables has led to rapid degradation of land, and Sri Lanka has failed to address the problem due to poor implementation of existing legislations and the complicated nature of land management. (Ministry of Sustainable Development, Wildlife and Regional Development, 2018)

The development projects and programmes in Sri Lanka have not been able to derive the planned and expected outcomes of the investment and efforts made. The current economic crisis demonstrates poor development planning and management. Even prior to the economic crisis, Sri Lanka had remained a developing middle-income country according to international classifications and since independence not been able to rise beyond. The annual Performance Report of the Year 2022 of the Department of Project Management and Monitoring (DPMM) reports that only 29 projects, out of 109 projects that were scheduled to be completed by the end of the fourth quarter of 2022 were able to generate final project results. Further, it was reported that 29 mega-scale projects were suspended at the end of the year due to performance issues. In order to avoid the issues arising in the development projects, especially due to the crisis economic situation in the year 2022, a new mechanism, the "Committee on Re-strategising and Acceleration of Mega-Scale Projects" was established based on a proposal presented by this department to the Cabinet of Ministers. All mega-scale development projects (260) were reviewed through this mechanism with the participation of line Ministry officials. The criteria includes (a) the ability to further implement the project, if the overall physical progress of the project is more than 80% (b) Priority projects that would have a positive impact on the economy and achieve quick returns (c) The progress achieved by each activity of the project and their relationship with completion of the project (d) The space to stop partially completed activities/projects without completing them using safety measures and arrangements and ability to operate those at minimal cost without disrupting the public until the economy recovers (e) Current situation of providing funds for the projects and loan conditions (f) Investment value held so far, future imprest requirement and counterpart funds to be provided (g) Requirement of imported raw material for future activities including fuel (h) Contractual obligations requiring foreign exchange and local contract issues (i) Issues related to third-party agreements (Department of Project Management and Monitoring, 2023). However, there is no indication that the sustainability of these projects will be assessed, and no criteria have been provided.

Development projects with linear economic objectives provide evidence that the policy integration for sustainable development is yet to be established. In a highly fragmented institutional structure, policy coordination across sectors is weak in Sri Lanka. Evolved into a highly fragmented public institutional structure, planning and budgeting through siloed programmes by different ministries does not fit into a holistic impact model for sustainable development (de Zoysa *et al.*, 2020).

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As per the legislative provisions of the Sri Lanka Sustainable Development Act (No. 19 of 2017), the Sustainable Development Council of Sri Lanka (SDCSL) is the mandated Government Entity that is responsible for coordinating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Sri Lanka. However, the delegation of responsibilities of the SDGs to a separate new agency the SDCSL, without proper institutional integration across the public service and an accountability mechanism has led to a fragmentation of the planning and implementation of the 2030 agenda. The act specifically notes the importance of promoting the integration and maintaining the equipoise of environmental, economic and social factors in the making of all decisions by government. However, Sri Lanka has so far not been effective in the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development, environmental, and in mainstreaming the SDGs across national policy frameworks. In the absence of a cohesive national SDG policy and strategy, no comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework is available to measure the progress of the SDGs.

Methodology

The objective of the research was to find insights into the assessment of the sustainability of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka. In order to achieve the objectives of the study, a survey was conducted amongst multidisciplinary subject experts and those who have experience in broader subject areas covering sustainable development dimensions and their sub-aspects. The three main dimensions of sustainable development including environment, social and economic plus the enabling dimension of governance were presented for verification. The survey questionnaire was formulated to address the research question of which is "How can we assess the sustainability of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka?". The subject areas under environmental, social, economic and governance dimensions impacting sustainable development meant that opinions were to be raised by a diverse group of experts. A number of 200 potential respondents were identified using the main criteria and sub-criteria based on the following five categories: (i) Areas of expertise and experience (ii) Sector (iii) Years of experience (iv) Age (v) Gender. The sub-criteria were to ensure the survey sample was representative of the main criteria. While the findings of the survey provide the main results, desk research was carried out to enhance the context and discussion. The research context is established by the numerous international commitments to protect the environment and advance sustainable development by the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL).

Description of the survey sample

The survey received 86 responses out of a carefully selected database of 200 persons within 30 days between 1-30 October 2022. A majority of these respondents are well known for their expertise and their input provides valuable insight into the analysis. While most respondents had identified more than one area of expertise and experience, 40.5% also identified themselves with expertise and experience in the environment, 32% with economic, 29% with governance 27% with social.

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Further, 50% of the respondents distinguished their expertise and experience with their professional or academic areas of engagement as lawyers, engineers, doctors, bankers, scientists, public officials, entrepreneurs, students, etc. and wished to consider their expertise and experience more sector-specific than thematic. In relation to the employment sector, many had experience in multiple sectors; 53% were in the private sector, 42.9% were professionals, 25% were in the public sector, 21.4% were academics, 15.5% were Civil Society Organisations, and 6% were students. Over half of the respondents (52.4%) had over 25 years of experience in expertise they had mentioned. Another 17.9% had 15-25 years and 8.3% had 11-15 years of experience. A majority of respondents (40.5%) were in the age group between 51-60 years, 22.6% of very senior experts (60+ years), 10.7% between 31-40 years, and 9.5% between 41-50 years. That over 80% amongst the respondents provided a high level of expertise and experience. A majority of respondents (65.5%) were from the male gender and 34.5% were from the female gender.

Results and Discussion

The results of the survey are summarised below.

The success and failures of development programmes and projects during the past 05 decades in Sri Lanka

A majority of 75% of respondents felt that development projects during the past 05 decades in Sri Lanka were partially successful while 28.7% said they failed to achieve the objectives. This leads to an assumption that development projects have not been able to derive the planned and expected outcomes of the investment and efforts made.

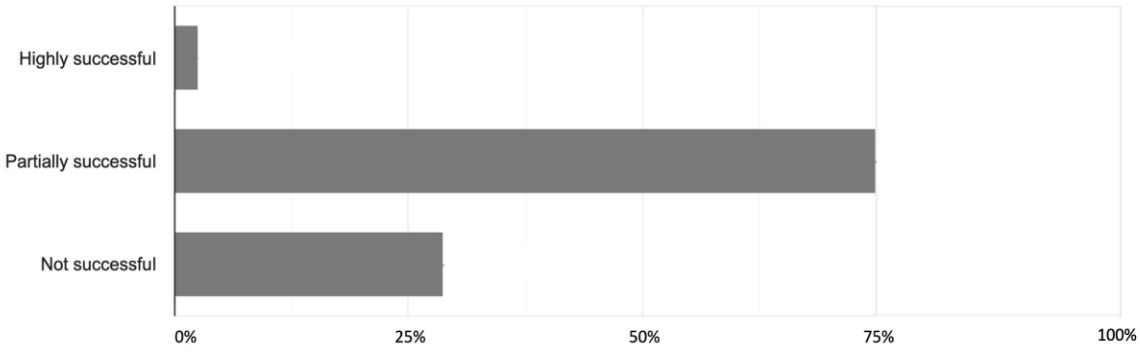

Figure 01: Success and failures of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka
Note: Due to multiple responses, the total exceeds 100%.

Respondents were asked to provide a few examples to justify their answers, and a host of medium to large-scale projects were identified.

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Some of them included the Mahaweli Development Programme, Baseline Road upgrade from Peliyagoda to Borella, Kelani Tissa Combined Cycle Power Plant, Hilton Tower Residential Development, Crescat Residential Development, Katunayake Industrial development zone/BOI, Norochcholai coal project, Hambantota Harbour, Nelum Kuluna, Mattala Airport, Kirinda Harbour, The Moragahakanda - Kalu Ganga Multi-Purpose Development Project (MKGMPDP), the Uma Oya Multi - Purpose Development Project (UOMPDP), the North-Western Province Canal Project (NWPCP). Inconsistent and changing policies have made implementation a challenge for most projects.

Many had identified infrastructure, road and highway development projects, irrigation poverty reduction, education, health, immunization, nutrition, etc. to have partially achieved success. These have provided measurable and tangible benefits although not to the optimal levels possible. On the other hand, some have stated that social development programmes, agricultural development programmes, and capacity-building programmes are at best partially successful or not successful. There are examples which had been argued as failed or partially successful; for example, the Mahaweli Development Programme. Some respondents think the programme has failed to increase the capabilities of the target communities. Farmers remain poor, vulnerable to climate shocks, and increasingly fall behind their urban counterparts. Similarly, the Uma Oya Hydropower and Irrigation project has not achieved expectations in addressing water scarcity while resulting in the loss of residences for communities.

It was identified that the majority of the development projects carried out in Sri Lanka were on infrastructure such as Highways, Airports and Seaports with financial assistance /loans obtained from foreign countries on commercial interests where the paybacks are very high. Such projects are not integrated with revenue-generating ventures but mere show-off projects to boost political interests and woe the vote bases. The labour, raw materials, machinery etc. for the projects are also provided by the funding country where a significant volume of the funds loaned to SL is drawn back to the originating country whereas for decades SL will be repaying the debts at a commercial rate. Some of the large-scale projects have not properly been appraised in terms of environmental, social and economic sustainability. Some of the Projects financed by bilateral agreements were not favorable for the country's economy. Development projects have compromised nearly all landscape and farmland sustainability over the past four-plus decades.

One justification for the failure of development projects was presented by a response as follows; "Many of these so-called "Mega Development Projects" are a complete disaster in terms of incorporating sustainability, across all components (environmental, economic, social and governance). Between rampant corruption within the State mechanism, no regard for the losses (physical and mental) to local communities, catastrophic ecological destruction and ridiculously high commissions that benefit only high-level Government Officers, Ministerial Officials, Non-Cabinet Ministers and Cabinet Ministers, these so-called Mega Development Projects have done nothing but

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follow antiquated development agendas and have ultimately plunged Sri Lanka into horrific debt, unsustainable financing and external dependency."

Availability of comprehensive frameworks or mechanisms to assess the sustainability of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka

In search of measuring success or failure, 48.8% of respondents thought that there were no comprehensive frameworks or mechanisms to assess the sustainability of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka, while 46.3% felt that partially available. With a clear majority of 95.1% stating that not or partially available, leads to an assumption that there are no comprehensive frameworks or mechanisms to assess the sustainability of development programmes and projects in the country.

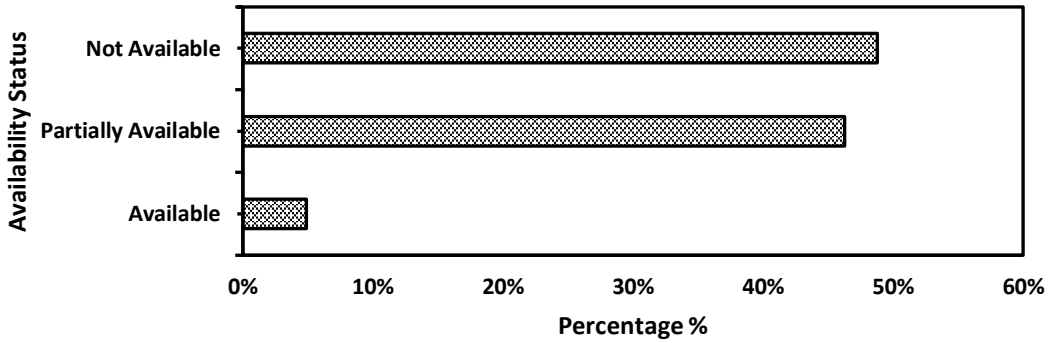

Figure 02: Availability of comprehensive frameworks or mechanisms to assess the sustainability of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka

Respondents were asked to provide a few examples and reasons for their answers, but they did not receive many examples of comprehensive frameworks or mechanisms to assess sustainable development in Sri Lanka. Only a few had identified sectoral or thematic frameworks or mechanisms that could partially assess the sustainability of programmes and projects. They included Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), Integrated Environmental Assessment (IEA), Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), sustainable livelihoods framework, vulnerability frameworks used for Climate change and well-being, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), frameworks based on SDGs, Theory of Change, and Impact Reporting and Investment Standards (IRIS+)

Many have stated that nothing substantial is available in Sri Lanka that sustainability is not factored into planning in a comprehensive way and that the existing assessment frameworks are not comprehensive enough and include too many biases. Political influences, corruption, and the inability of public institutions to work independently make it harder or impossible to have any such frameworks or mechanisms. Suitable mechanisms could not be introduced without continuous monitoring of natural ecosystems.

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For example, proper continuous monitoring of coastal water quality and biodiversity has not been carried out. Projects such as Mattala Airport, Norochcholai Coal Power Plant, Uma Oya Project, Hambanthota Exhibition Centre, etc. were provided as examples of failure in the absence of comprehensive sustainability frameworks and mechanisms.

It was stated that a country like Sri Lanka where there is a very high population density and stress on natural resources needs to select development objectives carefully so as not to alter the landscape that might impact negatively and lose project benefits. Therefore, it was noted that all development projects and programmes need to meet sustainability criteria.

Main results expected from a framework to assess the sustainability of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka

Towards ascertaining the main results expected from a framework to assess the sustainability of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka, key aspects were presented to the respondents that included a balanced development, comprehensive impact assessment, consideration of inter-generational and intra-generational equity, adherence to international conventions and agreements, and integrating principles of sustainability. While a majority between 60% - 85% had agreed or strongly agreed on all aspects, only a very small percentage had disagreed and strongly disagreed.

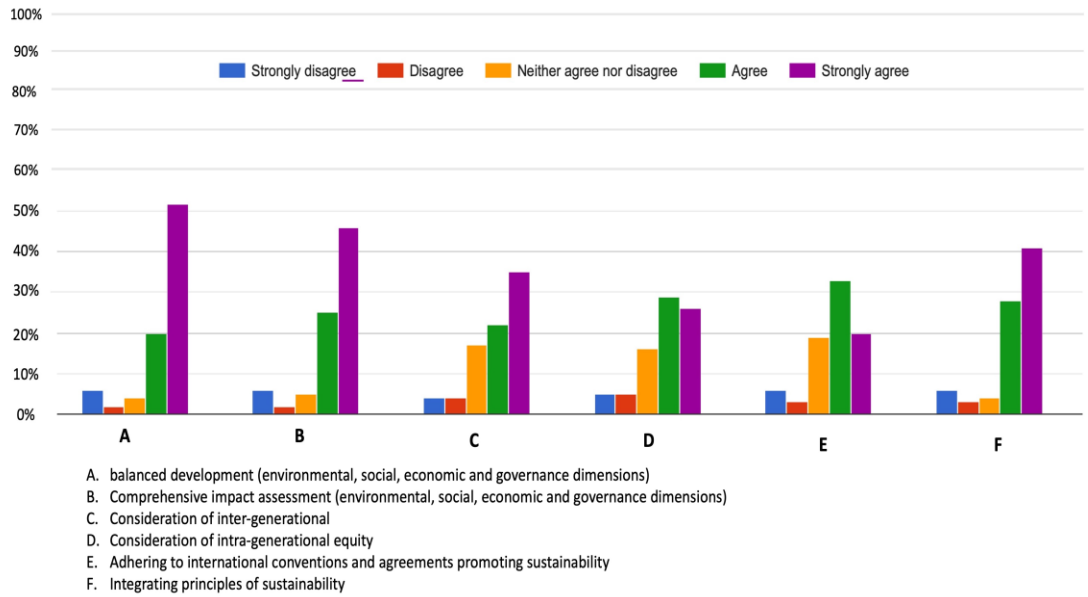

Figure 03: Availability of comprehensive frameworks or mechanisms to assess the sustainability of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka

Respondents were also asked to propose any other main results expected from a framework to assess the sustainability of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka.

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Respondents proposed Locally developed (must address local issues), Crowding-in of private capital/resources beyond funding commitment, Stakeholder Inclusivity, Inter-linkages based transformation, Climate Resilience, Return on investment, Environment, Social, Governance (ESG) for the private sector projects, Transparency at all levels, Return on Investment, Strong monitoring and evaluation, Preservation of common culture and heritage, Viability and suitability to local context, Flexibility to adjust parameters, Continuity of the projects, Benefits shared among stakeholders, Compute the living component of biomass as a baseline measure. Many of these recommendations were more relevant to the key aspects or sub-components of a framework raised in another question of the survey that was considered accordingly.

Key aspects to be included in a sustainability assessment framework

Respondents were provided examples of possible key aspects or sub-components of a dimension to be included in a framework to assess the sustainability of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka in order to clarify the question. The examples provided included enhancing equality, eradicating poverty, ensuring accountability, eliminating marginalization, fair trade, advancing well-being, respecting biophysical limitations, protecting biodiversity, reducing ecological footprints, demonstrating respect for environmental justice, management of waste, enhancing intergenerational and intragenerational equity, promoting spiritual advancement, preserve local knowledge systems. All these examples were verified by the respondents who also provided some other possible recommendations. These recommendations were made under environment, social, economic, and governance dimensions as follows.

a. *Environment:* climate change, water pollution, air quality, ensuring environmental responsibility, protect the living environment, pay attention to atmospheric composition (climate consideration), reduce pollution, improved waste collection, regeneration, restoration, net positive impact including on climate, biodiversity and pollution prevention, continuous monitoring of sensitive ecosystems, promote use of natural products, wise use of natural resources considering their ecosystem services, resource management, integrate local knowledge, consumption within ecological boundaries, resource efficiency, preserve the scenic locations while developing around them, limit carbon dioxide emissions by transitioning to renewable energy sources, getting away from importing hydrocarbons, holistic sustainomics view for conservation, reduce-reuse-recycle approach, promoting environmental education and awareness, limit carbon emissions, long term impact, climate finance, promotion of eco-friendly bio degradable products and services, green architecture, implementation of sustainable planning at all levels in replenishment of resources, minimum data set to track ecosystem changes/ impacts, accountability in decisions, protected area management, ecosystem and habitat restoration, landscape planning, sustainable production and consumption.

b. *Social:* social equity, ensure necessary social safeguards, broader cultural inclusion, access to resources, access to public goods and the increase in opportunities, alleviation of hunger, innovation, value the knowledge and experience of older generation, identity protection, problems of people at village level should be consulted and facilitated at those

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levels, education specifically on preserving natural resources, stop being used a weapon for political growth and strength, promote agriculture as a livelihood in villages, avoid discriminations and enhance equality and respect all community members, eliminate disparity between regions and incomes, avoiding social unrest by enacting programs where everyone feels like they are stakeholders, social cohesion, inclusivity, Environment-Social-Governance (ESG), pluralism, mechanisms to measure self-sustenance, social wellbeing and welfare, benefit sharing mechanisms, religious beliefs, reconciliation, mental health, population control and management, entertainment,

c. *Economic:* disparity of economic opportunities between societies, economic feasibility, economic development, promote circular economy, reduce free socialist values, internalizing of externalities including true cost/value accounting, popularise local products, control import of items that can be produced locally, reduce corruption, introduce development programmes with far-sighted economic gains, efficient consumption and production, inclusive economy, triple bottom line sensitivity, socially interactive responsibility to uplift marginalized communities financially, introduce new income sources, capacity building on proper income management, prosperity that respects social and ecological constraints, material flow cost accounting, use of alternative energy sources, re-cycling, organic farming to ensure a healthy nation, improve the living standards of the people of the country by improving economic conditions, return on investment, green collar jobs, ensure just payment for work to reduce exploitation and ensure income equality, use of chemical fertilizers only where necessary and the correct quantity, entrepreneurial development, financial capacity building, promote fairness, sustainability of economic returns, focusing on programs that makes the most sense from a local point of view so there is an organic support for them, increasing per capita income, proper income distribution, equal access to production and employment, direct subsidies to marginalized citizens, technology integration, sustainable finance, provide some measures of self-actualization, fact based economic policies, valorise the living photosynthetic component of biomass for positive externalities to the global commons, taxation, impact to the economic wellbeing of the end users, economic growth, distribute wealth, reduction of dependencies, eradication of economic wastage.

d. *Governance:* political participation of local governments, end corruption, transparency and meritocracy, diversity and inclusion, develop public private partnerships when planning development programmes, domestic balance of powers amongst the branches of government, public engagement, , access to information for all, responsibility, invisible parts of governance for whatever reasons should be assessed and should be brought within acceptable norms for public and private sectors, access to quality and adequate services, supportive and coherent policies, efficiency, reviewal based homegrown structure, reduce the centralize power decentralize power, put transparency and good governance to the forefront by allowing access to the decision making process, strong policy, policy lobbying, monitoring and evaluation, respecting human rights, qualified and experienced people are selected to parliament, social justice, ensure accountability of political decisions, eliminate marginalization laws governing political speech, adhere to

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democratic norms, anticorruption, , monitoring and feedback systems, educated decision makers with concern for impacts of climate change on humanity, oversights, trilingual language policy adherence, strong government, public service delivery and increased efficiency within the overall state mechanism, legal enforcement, maintaining law and order, establish unbiased independent monitoring mechanisms to evaluate the execution of the existing justice system, Independence of the justice system, evaluation and audit of the current justice system, justice system eliminating any possibility of foul play, performance measurement for justices.

Main international principles to be included in a sustainability assessment framework

Respondents were asked to recommend international principles that strengthen a framework to assess the sustainability of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka. Based on the literature survey conducted, a few examples were provided for a better understanding of the requirement. The examples included the Precautionary Principle, Polluter Pays Principle, Common but Differentiated Responsibilities Principle, Human Rights Principles, Principles of the UN Global Compact, and Principles for Managing a Commons.

Most of the respondents simply repeated the same examples and only a few could provide recommendations for additional international principles. Those included Eco-friendly building, Due diligence also referred to as the "no harm" principle, Value Driver Model, Integrated Capital/Value Creation Process, Endogenous Growth and Development principles, Equator Principles Principle, Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI), Principles for Sustainable Insurance (PSI), Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB), Recommendations Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), Worker Principle International Good Practice Principles for Sustainable Infrastructure, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and Right to Information.

Main international agreements/conventions/frameworks to be considered in a sustainability assessment framework

Respondents were asked to recommend international Agreements/ Conventions/ Frameworks that should be considered in a framework to assess the sustainability of development programmes and projects in Sri Lanka. Based on the literature survey conducted, a few examples were provided for a better understanding of the requirement.

The examples included the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), Agenda 21, Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Gross National Happiness (GNH), Green Economy Progress Measurement Framework (GEPMF), Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, and the United Nations Convention against Corruption.

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Most respondents chose to verify the examples provided, and few provided other such Agreements/ Conventions/ Frameworks.
These included the United Nations Convention against Corruption, Paris Agreement, SENDAI Framework, Basel Convention, International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) 1965, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) 1966, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) 1966, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 1979, Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) 1984, Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1989, International Convention on Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMRW) 1990, EU Taxonomy for Sustainable Activities, EU Green Deal, EU Circular Economy Action Plan, and UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Many of these are reflected in current national environmental legislation and EIA criteria

Conclusion

Sustainability and sustainable development remain concepts that still require more comprehension even among the environmental, social, economic and governance thematic experts, policymakers and stakeholders in Sri Lanka. Understanding of internationally evolved principles, frameworks, agreements and other instruments to advance sustainability and sustainable development remains moderate amongst the majority of thematic experts. Sri Lanka demonstrates a low policy coherence aptitude from design to implementation of development projects. Therefore, there are no comprehensive assessment frameworks or mechanisms to assess the sustainability of development projects and programmes.

Sri Lanka has a historical practice of conducting Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) in order to justify large development projects with significant impacts on the environment. The objective of conducting an EIA is to predict the possible impacts of development projects on the natural and social environment. Also, it acts as a planning and regulatory tool for authorities to suggest measures to prevent or minimize negative impacts and to enhance positive impacts (www.cea.lk, n.d.). However, EIAs have not been able to ensure the sustainability of development projects and programmes rather than provide some level of checks and balances. On the other hand, environmental accounting practices are rather low in development planning in the country. This keeps a gap in impact investment as well as prevents full cost accounting and accountability of these projects.

Sri Lanka is a signatory to many multilateral environmental agreements, human rights conventions and many international agreements that advance sustainable development and these must be adhered to in development planning, implementation and reporting. All these international instruments provide principles of sustainability that need to be integrated into a framework to assess the sustainability of development

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projects. For example, the 2030 Agenda is centred around the principle of 'leave no one behind' in the transformation towards sustainable development.
Then very commonly adopted international principles include the Precautionary Principle, Polluter Pays Principle, Common but Differentiated Responsibilities Principle, Human Rights Principles, Principles of the UN Global Compact, Principles for Managing a Commons, etc.

It is important that an assessment framework complies with the Paris Agreement on climate change to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Sri Lanka has committed to the Paris Agreement published its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and pledged carbon neutrality by the year 2050. The NDC recognizes that the country is highly vulnerable to the adverse impact of climate change and is also on an upward development trajectory with ambitions of achieving upper-middle-income status in five years and further improving its human development outcomes (Ministry of Environment, 2021). The demand for energy, clean water, efficient transportation, better connectivity, and waste management is growing among both rural and urban populations. Recognising high vulnerability to climate change, Sri Lanka NDC has committed to reducing its GHG emissions which include 4% unconditional and 10.5% conditional emission reduction commitments with respect to the Business-As-Usual (BAU) scenario. The NDC has also established 2030 targets to achieve 70% renewable energy in electricity generation and is committed to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 14.5% for the decade to 2030 (Ministry of Environment, 2021).

The 2030 Agenda through the SDGs provides an overarching framework for countries to assess sustainable development. An assessment framework for the sustainability of development projects and programmes in Sri Lanka can be inspired by it. The environmental, social, economic and governance dimensions must have a balance in order for a project to ensure sustainable development outcomes. The framework must be able to assess the impacts of all four dimensions of development projects. Development projects must be considerate that benefits, as well as safeguards for both current and future generations, are ensured and therefore ensure inter-generational and intra-generational equity.

Some reasons for the failure of development projects to effectively address sustainability are part of the systemic problems. Lack of policy coherence and institutional coherence hinders the proper integration of economic, social and environmental policies leaving conflicting and contradictory political and policy decisions for the progress of sustainable development. Many national policies can be seen to be crudely skewed towards economic growth rather than protecting the environment and ensuring social well-being. Lack of proper monitoring, evaluation, and reporting prevents honest stock-taking, transparency, and accountability of development projects (de Zoysa *et al.*, 2020).

Towards recalibrating the approach to strategic foresight and transformative action towards advancing sustainable development, countries will need to reimagine domestic resource mobilisation. This would entail reorganising the resource flows changing the

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approach to resource governance and redesigning the policy frameworks and institutional structures towards facilitating a circular economy (de Zoysa *et al.*, 2020).

A prosperity-based development planning to be sustainable will require the enhancement of ecosystem services. The sustainability of development projects and programmes will need to build resource regeneration strategies where resources are invested within the ecosystem for intra-generational equity and harvested for inter-generational equity.

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