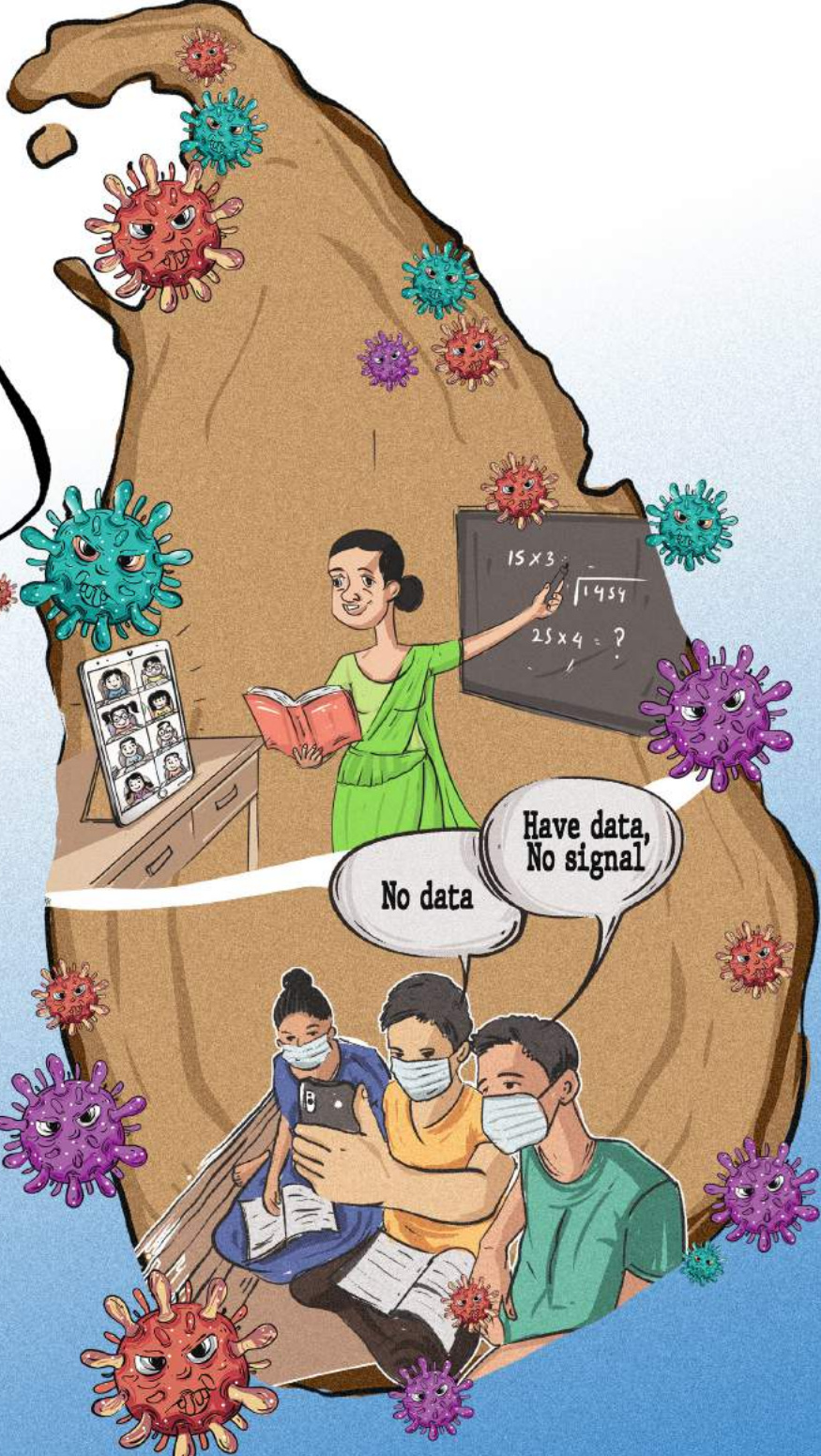


Online education? I have 3 children in school and only 1 phone. How will my children learn?

My children are always on the phone playing games - Is this online learning?

I have no income, I am stressed and lose my temper with my children

No school, No school lunch



Let's talk about children's education in Sri Lanka during the pandemic

Democratic dialogue, active listening and inclusive citizen participation: creating spaces for inclusive civic participation in times of pandemic and social crisis

The objective of the project is to create spaces for inclusive civic participation during the pandemic and the socio-economic crisis that Sri Lanka is facing and to strengthen democratic institutions, the rule of law, and public accountability. As engaged citizens, we aim to ensure that government responses to the crisis are aligned to principles of constitutionalism and that government by exception will be restricted; misinformation and hate mongering prevented and that social solidarity will be strengthened through the positive engagement of change makers and influencers.

To achieve these objectives, the project has established an informal “civic watch” that analyses the government's rapid responses to health and economic challenges; promotes a public discussion on policy issues, documents fundamental rights violations; provides timely, fact-based information to citizens on emerging issues that impact on democratic values, constitutional principles and fundamental rights. The project also aims to conduct advocacy campaigns to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, as well as to conduct a needs assessment that enable citizens to articulate their needs, anxieties, and aspirations in the post-pandemic context.

This report was written by Inoma Karunatilake as a contribution towards the project. The Law and Society Trust (LST) appreciates her engagement in this project. The views expressed in the article do not necessarily reflect the views of the Board or the Management of LST.

Cover art by Sangeeth Madurawala

Let's talk about education in Sri Lanka during Covid 19

“Education is a fundamental human right”-UNDHR

The COVID-19 pandemic had a global impact on all aspects of human activities, especially so on health, livelihoods and education. The pandemic resulted in the near-total closures of schools and this has greatly disadvantaged children. Schools are not only the arena for learning. It is the place where children interact with other children and develop their social skills.¹ The temporary and long-term closures of schools have impacted students and teachers and families. It has inflicted high social and economic costs for people across communities.

On 12th March 2020, the Sri Lankan government responded to the pandemic by closing all the educational institutions including schools and suspended all academic activities in the country.² After the 1st wave, in July 2020 the schools were re-opened for selected grades with health guide lines but were closed again after a few days following a fresh outbreak of the novel corona-virus. Unfortunately, high numbers of Covid patients were reported in the western province, which is the most densely populated area in the country. Hence, the government decided to reopen all schools and educational institutions on 10th August 2020,³ except for the schools in the Western Province. However, all academic institutions across Sri Lanka were closed again on 5th October 2020 until further notice amid a sudden spike of the third wave of Covid-19.⁴

Testimony from a regional journalist (Male, age 25, Nawalapitiya)

“The education sector has an enormous impact. A child who went to nursery school in 2019 is now in grade 1 or 2. Children who are in grade 5 now were not able to gather knowledge from grade 4. Also, students who took the Ordinary Level exam have not received their results as yet. There is a delay in the process because of the pandemic. The students who did Advanced Levels in 2020 did not face that much difficulty because the pandemic hit only in the last few months. But students who are going to sit for Advanced Levels in 2021 face many issues. They don't have a proper foundation. The on-line effort is not that practical and effective. The on-line system itself is difficult to integrate into the process. Children have psychological barriers to on-line learning. Some are not participating in classes properly. One and a half years have created a huge gap in the educational sector. The knowledge update is very weak. Also, children are not involved in extracurricular activities, such as sports. The cost of on-line education is also high. Some areas don't have proper connectivity and families don't have the equipment and facilities. Some people completed the LLB in 2019 but still could not complete the Attorney at Law exams an apprenticeship due to the situation. There is a delay in many areas. There is also no proper plan for overcoming these issues in the education sector.”

Sri Lanka's education sector faced various and unprecedented challenges. The closure of national universities⁵ and other higher education institutions and 10,266 government and private schools affected the teaching and learning activities of students.⁶ Admissions, examinations, the ceremonial awarding of degrees and extra-curricular activities were temporarily postponed due to the situation.⁷ Many employees in the education sector faced severe challenges in receiving their salaries and other allowances on time due to lockdowns and travel restrictions. Employees within educational institutions receiving daily wages were also impacted.

COVID-19 forced teachers and students to deliver education and training on-line. The concept of on-line education is a huge change for the education sector in Sri Lanka as it was a new teaching / learning approach, and one that many teachers and students were not fully equipped to undertake. They were not familiar with the new technology; they lacked the required equipment and internet connections and the skills in using modern tools and technologies.⁸ Both teachers and students faced several challenges.

Lack of knowledge on Information Technology (IT)

***Testimony from a Community Worker/Cultivator
(Female, age 46, Kakirawa, Anuradhapura)***

“This is one of the big issues facing the families in my village too. After schools closed due to the pandemic, most of the education initiatives shifted to the on-line mode. For on-line education we need many facilities including android phones, data as well as proper coverage. Most of the families in the village don’t have these phones or the financial status for those. Even for on-line education, the cost of data is quite high and in the majority of cases, it won’t be affordable. Another main issue is the connectivity coverages and the signal issues. Even to get this call I had to come to a particular place that has coverage. My daughter is in Grade 5 and She is preparing for the scholarship examination. She wants the support of private classes too. For that she also has to attend on-line classes. As I hear from her, online-based virtual education is quite difficult. There are facilitation difficulties and there are difficulties in directing the focus on learning. Also, some families have two to three schooling age children. They all have to engage with on-line education. It is very difficult to facilitate this with one phone for each child. In some areas I have noticed a few students trying to join classes through one phone.”

Face-to-face teaching, rote learning and interactive learning processes are entrenched in Sri Lankan educational institutions. On-line education is a new concept for Sri Lankan students as well as for teachers. Thus, it is difficult to break this tradition and to educate children in an innovative on-line environment. Sri Lanka was slow, even in the pre-pandemic environment, to introduce and advance the concept of on-line education. The authorities did not have a comprehensive policy or approach towards on-line learning and the use of IT as a teaching platform. They did not provide proper training in information technology for the teachers and make equipment and the required infrastructure available to all schools and regions.⁹ Periodically, and more as an election promise, students are assured free tablets without an appreciation as to whether they will have the support systems (such as internet connections and regular supplies of electricity) to be able to use them effectively.

Many teachers were challenged because of the extra burden placed on them and they struggled to design and deliver on-line sessions. Likewise, school children also suffered due to their lack of knowledge of the modern technology, and their lack of access to the required devices as well as internet services. Many families do not have the resources to pay for the internet connections and where there are several children in the family, they do not have devices for all of the children. Students with a little knowledge of the IT, managed to continue their studies, but most of them were disadvantaged by this system. Furthermore, many parents do not have the knowledge of the modern technology and were unable to support their children.¹⁰ Those who have children in lower

grades were facing difficulties with these processes as it is difficult to secure the attention of young and restless children.

Lack of proper devices

Many students, especially those from low-income families, could not afford the right equipment for on-line education.¹¹ At the most, families have a smart phone and one device and this is not sufficient for families with several children as many of the teaching sessions are held at the same time. This causes many problems between siblings and places an additional burden on the parents as the environment within the family is fractured. Some elite schools, that draw children from a higher socio-income level and where families have better infrastructure facilities, have been able to ‘weather the storm.’ But the less-privileged schools with limited infrastructure and attended by children from poorer families are greatly disadvantaged.¹²

Data issues

Children put extra pressure on parents by asking for money for data. Charges for data are very high and most parents cannot afford full packages due to the whole or partial loss of their incomes due to the pandemic. Also, many students were unable to continue their education due to poor internet coverage despite having devices and data.¹³ Media reported that the teachers and schoolchildren in some rural areas climb a rock to access the only internet signal available. For example, the teachers and about 45 schoolchildren in Bohitiwaya climbed to the top of a rock, walking for more than 2 miles, to find an internet signal.¹⁴ These challenges will create gaps between children due to their unequal access to education.

Testimony from a community worker, cultivator (Female, age 61, Kakirawa, Anuradhapura)

“The education sector has collapsed. My daughter’s elder son is in Grade 7 in school. Nowadays, most of their educational activities are conducted on-line. They don’t have phones and other types of equipment. They need an android phone to do on-line classes. Most of the time, I give my phone to him. But I do a lot of community activities and we also have some on-line meetings. At those times, it’s very problematic when we both need the phone. Also, there are connectivity and signal issues. Sometimes I have to travel a long distance to maintain signal connectivity. There is no proper plan or solution for these difficulties in the education sector. Even teachers face many problems with this method of teaching. Last year, there were some efforts by teachers to send printed notes to students. Also, some teachers sent the work lists to their phones through WhatsApp and followed up. but that also could not continue properly. Since March 2020 there is a huge gap in all the grades. This can impact very negatively on the next generation. Also, ordinary-level and advanced-level students face many difficulties. Some have given up their studies and are trying to do some kind of job. But some are going to universities. They don’t have issues. They are continuing their work properly.”

Learning limitations

Education is a broad concept that includes cognitive and analytical skills, extra-curricular activities and skill trainings. It also provides the basis for social interactions. As a result of COVID children are blocked from outdoor activities, social interactions and interpersonal communications and practical training sessions as well.¹⁵ The pandemic has greatly affected professional institutions such as technical and vocational training centers where instructors and students do not always have access to the internet and hardware devices and software platforms to conduct effective on-line training.¹⁶ Also, it is very difficult, if not impossible to provide practical training on-line.

***Testimony from a Human Resource Manager
in a Private Hospital in Colombo (Male, 30,
Palmadulla)***

“The dynamics of education are reshaping social stratification. Students are becoming more backward when it comes to virtual education, than in classroom-based education. When a teacher is teaching in a classroom, there are different methods of getting students to interact. On-line platforms are limiting that interaction. The space to communicate freely and learn has shrunk with this change in the education sector. Education has multiple chapters. Each chapter helps students to learn and to improve understanding. But now, they only have the first chapter of the lesson on-line.”

The on-line platform does not provide a student - centered approach as instructors including school teachers are constrained to give lectures and assignments through social media platforms such as WhatsApp. Sometimes, school teachers and instructors have to repeat lectures once face-to face trainings resume, because all students could not access digital learning during the lockdown. Considering all these factors, it is expected that the quality of learning will be impaired and student capacities will drop significantly during the pandemic, despite the best efforts of teachers and lecturers to keep students engaged in learning through special activities at home during the pandemic.

Critical Exams – GCE Ordinary and Advanced levels

***Testimony from a Logistic Manager in a Private
Company in Colombo (Male, age 34,
Bandarawela)***

“Most of the students sitting for Advanced Level exams face immense pressure. Everything has been delayed due to the situation. They are struggling to remain focussed. It is the same with the university students who have just been admitted and those who are waiting to get admission. I think it is very important to roll out vaccinations for school children to resume classes in schools in the near future. At least it will create some foundation from which they can overcome the issues.”

Conducting exams is one of the major challenges that the government faces due to the long-term lockdown. Sanath Pujitha, the Chief of Exams in Sri Lanka, stated that he will make a reasonable decision in light of the Advance Level Exam on May 3rd, 2020. Based on that, the education ministry introduced an on-line application system for the Advanced Level exams to be held in May. Both the A/L and grade 5 scholarship exams were postponed to

September due to the situation in June 2020. However again, the Ministry of Education said that they will have a final discussion on the dates of the above-mentioned exams after school starts again on July

6th.¹⁷ The uncertainty of the decision negatively affected students. Eventually both exams were postponed to October 2020 and they were conducted during the lockdown period.

The admission card was the travel pass for the students and the government arranged a special transport service for the students.¹⁸ Exam results were delayed and were released on May 4th, 2021. The application process was changed due to the pandemic, and the government introduced an on-line system and accepted applications only on-line.¹⁹ Similarly, the GCE Ordinary Level examination has been postponed. The GCE Ordinary Level examination results were delayed, and in the end, only 8 subjects' results were issued. The results of aesthetic subjects could not be released because of the delay in practical examinations.

University Grants Commission (UGC) Chairman Senior Prof. Sampath Amarathunga stated that focus of the approach has shifted to conduct university exams on-line in the near future.²⁰ The University Grants Commission (UGC) conducted an alternative assessment with various forums and issued a special circular on guidelines in order to continue with the academic activities in the state universities without much delay.²¹ As a result, the state universities managed to implement the relevant educational activities, including exams, smoothly without much delay.

Testimony from a Management Assistant of a public university (Male, age 38, Valachchenai, Batticaloa)

“At the university level, there are different initiatives for continuing the process. As an example, I work at the Trincomalee campus of Eastern University and they signed an agreement with Zoom to provide a free platform for the students and the university teachers and also provide free internet facilities. But at the school level, teachers and students do not have enough facilities and knowledge about technology. Also, they had to spend their own money on the facilities like Android phones and data charges. Some teachers created and printed study kits and papers. Printing and distribution costs have to be borne by themselves without the support of anyone. I sometimes struggle to find photocopy centres because most of them have been closed due to the lockdown. I think the government can initiate a trilingual web platform to share all the lessons for students. The school curriculum is the same, so it's easy to conduct online classes. The cost will be less and it will create some relief for the students and teachers. Also, television, radio, and YouTube can be used as platforms for sharing the same content with students. I was told that the education system was conducted in this way during the pandemic in Portugal.”

Misuse of the internet

It was reported that many school children misuse the internet. Based on reports from school counsellors, the COVID-19 pandemic granted some students, especially teenage girls and boys unfettered access to the internet.²² It is understood that many Sri Lankan parents control their children's access and do not give them unrestricted access to electronic devices such as phones, tablets and laptops. Online education created opportunities for students who were waiting to get electronic tools.²³ Many teenagers apparently became addicted to adult web sites and gaming sites during the pandemic.²⁴ Some of the students developed undesirable relationships via social media without the knowledge of their parents. Due to their lack of awareness of such dangers, children have fallen victim to fraud and enticements and this has compromised their lives.²⁵

Physical and psychological and teaching challenges

The Sri Lankan government advised the public on physical distancing, locked down high risk areas, imposed curfew and implemented quarantining as safety measures to control the spread of COVID 19. Generally, school children maintain high levels of social and physical connection at educational institutions. The sudden imposition of isolation and social distancing has apparently led to students, parents and teachers to develop numerous symptoms indicating psychological distress. Physical distancing in particular is an essential measure to control the spread of covid, but evidence shows that physical distancing has long-term adverse psychological consequences.²⁶ Especially affected are vulnerable children and adults, who could experience manifestations of psychological stress during post - COVID recovery periods and they may find it difficult to interact and make new connections.²⁷When schools close unexpectedly and for extended and open-ended periods of time, teachers are faced with the challenge of maintaining relationships with students to help them learn while they have to perform their own administrative and curriculum planning duties. In the early days of school closures, the situation was very confusing for teachers and they experienced severe stress.

Testimony from a Management Assistant of a public university (Male, age 38, Valachchenai, Batticola)

“The biggest challenge was with the freedom of movement. Even though there is no lockdown, many people fear going outside. In particular, children and youth face many issues. They don’t have the space to get involved in extracurricular activities. Also, young people are addicted to their phones. Their sleeping patterns have changed. Some of them are addicted to games. Their thinking patterns have changed.”

“Regarding this aspect, there was less concern and no one focussed on it. The health sector doesn’t have enough capacity to handle the mental health aspect. People who can help with the guidance are also facing many difficulties.”

Teachers and tutors often start their teaching sessions early in the morning and continue late into the night. As a result of these schedules, many advanced level students faced difficulties due to the changes in their biological clock. Parents complained that students are awake the whole night and sleeping all day time without having proper meals. Some of the students mark their presence on-line in the class but watch videos pretending that he/she is engaged in the on-line class. As there is no proper guidance and supervision, these kinds of practices can lead them to mental stress due to various issues including when the students’ skills are tested. The normal patterns of teaching and learning have been tremendously

impacted due to COVID-19 resulting in psychological issues for both students and parents alike. Many children developed different kinds of anxieties along with symptoms of depression, irritability, insomnia, emotional disturbance, changed eating habits and behaviour patterns due to the sudden change in their learning environment.²⁸

Parenting challenges

Counsellors have reported that some students who started serious relationships through social media during the first wave of the pandemic developed severe anxiety disorders when they learned that

they had been scammed or misled. There have been several media reports that school children have committed suicide due to their inability to get the right equipment for on-line education.²⁹

Parents do not know how to deal with their children's internet addictions. Internet gaming addiction causes a variety of cognitive problems such as sadness, anger, anxiety ect. Many parents think their children are upset because of the lock down and on-line classes. Those children feel that their life is stuck at one place. The government is not focused on these issues and has no plans to resolve these issues.

Some students behave aggressively towards their parents because their parents are unable to provide them with the required devices for the on-line learning sessions due to their financial difficulties. Parents too, feel helpless and suffer. This impacts the peace and harmony within the family and increases stress levels even leading to domestic violence.³⁰ When the family environment is disturbed, it can affect the mental health of family members, including children. Fear and anxiety among the younger population, results in a higher prevalence of depression and anxiety. In this context, we cannot expect the future generation to be healthy and well educated.

Poor nutrition

Many children and their parents count on the free or discounted meals and healthy, nutritious meals provided at schools. This is especially so in the rural areas and in the plantations where many of the students come to school for the meal. But unfortunately, the outbreak of the COVID 19 and the closure of schools, has dramatically affected not only children's access to education, but also to nutrition. People have been facing severe financial difficulties since March 2020 and are even making trade-offs between educating children and putting food on their tables.

Although the government eventually introduced educational television and radio channels,³¹ not everyone has the same access or access to the same services.³² Some scholars have highlighted issues related to both on-line education and educational television. There was no serious debate on on-line education and distance education. The third wave of the pandemic has caused further disruptions and the anxiety of both parents and children has increased as they are fearful of ever achieving their future goals.

The strikes by the teachers have shut-down even the minimal on-line teaching that was conducted. The teachers have genuine grievances and they too have a fundamental right to protect their livelihoods, but these rights are now pitted against the fundamental rights of children to education. Therefore, the authorities must pay equal attention to these two issues.

Education is a basic human right

Education is a basic human right and is essential for the implementation of all other human rights. It promotes individual freedom and empowerment and provides significant development benefits.

The universal declaration of human rights has recognized the right to education as the fundamental human right.³³ Sub clause (2) of Art 26 provides that “*Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms...*”

The right to education is recognised as a human right in several international conventions. The first international instrument to recognize the right to education was the UNESCO Convention against Changes in Education (CADE) 1960, which addresses discrimination in education, and also addresses opportunities for equality in education, access to free primary education, average access to secondary education, higher education based on individual capacity, and the rights of minority groups to education.

Education is endorsed as a fundamental right in:

- a. The International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR): upholds the right to education via Art 13 and Art 14. Art 14 provides that *“Each State Party to the present Covenant which, at the time of becoming a Party, has not been able to secure in its metropolitan territory or other territories under its jurisdiction compulsory primary education, free of charge, undertakes, within two years, to work out and adopt a detailed plan of action for the progressive implementation, within a reasonable number of years, to be fixed in the plan, of the principle of compulsory education free of charge for all.”*³⁴
- b. the Convention on Child Rights 1989: *Article 28(1)*. States Parties recognize *“the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular”*
- c. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights³⁵, 1966 contains a provision ensuring the liberty of the parents in providing moral and religious education to the children as specified in Art 18(4) - *“The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parent and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions”*³⁶.
- d. The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families-(1990) contains in Article 12(4) that States Parties undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents, at least one of whom is a migrant worker, and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions. Article 30 and Article 45 (1) are the other related provisions for ensuring that the children of the migrants are able to access the education.
- e. The Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women 1979 are one among them: *providesthe basis for realizing equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life -- including the right to vote and to stand for election -- as well as education*³⁷.
- f. The Convention on Right of Persons with Disabilities, (2006), recognizes the rights of the persons with disabilities to education. *“States shall realize their right to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity by assuring that they are not denied access to the general system of education and providing them inclusive, quality and free primary education”*.

The Sri Lankan government has signed and ratified all the above-mentioned conventions at the United Nations. Hence, the Sri Lankan government has an obligation to protect, promote and safeguard these human rights including the right to education without any discrimination under any circumstance. The Constitution of Sri Lanka includes the right to universal education within the Directive Principles of State Policy. Sri Lanka has provided universal free education since 1945 and it is an essential part of the social contract even though it is not incorporated as a fundamental right.³⁸

For over one and a half years, many children struggled without the full realization of their right to education and this will affect their life chances. It will also have an impact on the country's growth prospects since they are dependent on a well-developed disease with no apparent solution to its problem.. Therefore, the relevant authorities should pay serious attention to this.

We urge the government to develop a strategic plan to respond to the educational challenges that have emerged with COVID 19 and to make appropriate short, medium and long-term investments required to improve all peoples access to quality education.

We note the aspirations the government has for higher education and rapid economic development. This is reflected in the Kotelawala, Defense University Act (KDU Act), and the Port City Act which prioritizes a highly skilled student population, trained to work in construction and in finance and the service sectors.

A greater investment must be made, to capacitate the parents and students to adjust to this reality. In the meantime, the educational structures that have been established, must be strengthened as well.

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