



# 2021 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

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# 2021 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

For Sri Lanka

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## OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 4.7



The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions continued to impact daily life in Sri Lanka throughout 2021, even as the country gradually lifted lockdowns. By late January, the Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) officially reopened for tourists, several villages were released from lockdown, and the government commenced COVID-19 vaccinations. Beginning in mid-April, however, the country experienced a third wave of COVID-19, and after a spike in cases in July, a nationwide lockdown was imposed from August to October. Over the course of the year, lockdowns and related restrictions were put in place for specific districts and towns in response to rising COVID-19 cases. According to official data, Sri Lanka had vaccinated more than 62 percent of its population by December 2021.

In late February, Sri Lanka lifted its policy ordering the cremation of those who had died of COVID-19. The policy had been in place since April 2020 and was heavily criticized by CSOs, religious leaders, and international rights activists as a violation of religious rights, particularly impacting Sri Lanka’s Muslim and Christian minorities.

Political unrest and problematic government regulations continued to cause concern in 2021. In February, CSOs from the northern and eastern provinces organized a five-day peaceful march from Pottuvil to Jaffna, timed to align with the country’s Independence Day celebrations on February 4. The peaceful protest called for the attention of the United Nations and the international community in pressing for justice in Sri Lanka’s ongoing reconciliation process. In particular, the protest aimed to bring attention to minority rights, and it emphasized topics such as enforced disappearances, militarization, the continued use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), and the imprisonment of political prisoners without trial. Sri Lankan officials issued several court orders against the march, the Jaffna magistrate court banned all protests for four days beginning on February 3, and seven march participants were summoned by the Kalmunai Magistrate Court.

On March 23, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted Resolution 46/1 on promoting reconciliation, accountability, and human rights in Sri Lanka. As in previous resolutions, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) will evaluate the country’s progress or lack thereof in implementing UNHRC recommendations. The new resolution further empowers OHCHR “to collect, consolidate, analyze, and preserve information and evidence” of gross human rights violations committed in Sri Lanka.

The use of presidential pardons continued to highlight concerns around reconciliation and accountability following Sri Lanka’s civil war and ongoing political divides. In June, to mark the Buddhist festival *Poson Poya*, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa pardoned and released ninety-four prisoners, including sixteen political prisoners. Among the prisoners released was former parliamentarian Duminda Silva, who had been sentenced to death, along with four others, for the murder of a political rival in 2016. While many rights activists welcomed the release of prisoners who were detained under the PTA, the pardon of the former member of parliament, whose conviction had been upheld by the Supreme Court in 2018, sparked criticism for undermining the rule of law. In July, Rajapaksa appointed Silva as the chairman of the Housing Development Authority. Transparency International Sri Lanka

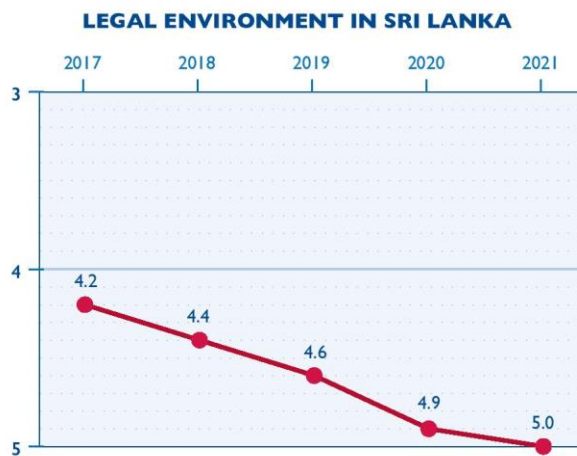
(TISL) filed a right to information request to ensure that the proper process was followed in granting the presidential pardon.

The Sri Lankan government pledged to reform the PTA in 2021. In December, seven UN human rights experts published five benchmarks that were “necessary prerequisites” for making the law compliant with Sri Lanka’s international human rights obligations and joined Sri Lankan activists in calling for a moratorium on the use of the PTA.

Even as the pandemic continued to exacerbate the existing difficulties faced by CSOs, the overall sustainability of the sector improved slightly in 2021. The legal environment for CSOs recorded a slight deterioration due to increased state harassment and scrutiny of registration procedures. CSO organizational capacity moderately improved with improved strategic planning and use of technology, while the infrastructure supporting the sector also moderately improved with increased training opportunities and CSO coalitions. Financial viability and service provision both recorded slight improvements in 2021, while CSOs’ public image and advocacy work remained largely unchanged.

The Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Secretariat maintains a directory of NGOs registered under the Voluntary Social Service Organizations (Registration and Supervision) Act, No. 31 of 1980 (VSSO Act). The official website of the NGO Secretariat directory listed 1,639 NGOs as of April 2022. Although this official number has not changed since 2020, and while other data is not publicly available, in a September 2021 interview, the director general of the National NGO Secretariat, Raja Gunaratne, estimated that over 30,000 local and foreign CSOs were operating in the country.

## LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 5.0



The legal environment for CSOs deteriorated slightly in 2021 due to irregular regulations and ad hoc requirements attached to CSO registration. Harassment, state intimidation, and official scrutiny during registration and in banking also continued to create a difficult climate for new CSOs.

CSOs in Sri Lanka may legally register through any of six legal instruments: the Societies Ordinance of 1892; Companies Act, No. 07 of 2007; Trusts Ordinance of 1917; Co-operative Societies Act, No. 05 of 1972; the VSSO Act; and an Act of Parliament sponsored by a member of parliament through a private member’s bill. Most CSOs prefer to register under the Companies Act or VSSO Act.

In 2021, CSOs faced extreme pressure to register with the NGO Secretariat, an informal requirement that began in 2020 after this body was moved under the Ministry of Defense, in addition to registering under the Companies Act, VSSO Act, or other legal instruments outlined above. In addition, for CSOs engaged in community development programs, registration with the NGO Secretariat became a prerequisite to bid on some projects. While CSOs are legally able to continue operations without this registration, government authorities were typically hesitant to provide assistance to CSOs not registered with the NGO Secretariat (for instance, if the CSO required permission from health inspectors to hold an in-person meeting or event). Registration with the NGO Secretariat is a complex process and enables increased government scrutiny. CSOs that receive funding from international organizations or that focus on reconciliation and human rights efforts also came under increased state surveillance in 2021.

All CSOs registered under the VSSO Act were also required to submit their annual and quarterly reports for projects, along with proposed plans for the upcoming year, for approval by the Divisional Secretary or NGO Secretariat. Without the required approvals, projects gradually came to a halt. While this reporting requirement has always been in place, it was more strictly implemented in 2021. Colombo-based CSOs without district-level branches generally collaborated with regional CSOs to execute programs at the district level; these regional CSOs

were also asked to provide reports to the Divisional Secretaries in order to continue the projects. This stricter implementation of the requirement in 2021 was logistically difficult for regional CSOs that lacked staff capacity to prepare the required reports.

CSOs that are already registered with the NGO Secretariat were also asked to provide quarterly reports. The NGO Secretariat also required quarterly reports from the primary funders of all projects. The reports would then be compared and if there were inconsistencies, the CSO would be called in for further questioning. CSOs that have recently been registered with the NGO Secretariat are also required to submit five-year fund utilization reports, including funding sources and project details.

Some CSOs working in the north and east reported that some government agencies began to require them to contribute 5 percent of their budgets to the national COVID-19 relief fund.

Unregistered CSOs continued to face difficulties opening bank accounts and with banking transactions in 2021. In addition, regulations enacted in March required individual foreign currency transactions above \$15,000 to be backed by supporting documents<sup>1</sup>. This regulation particularly hampered unregistered organizations that received funding directly from foreign donors, while organizations that functioned as sub-granting agencies were less scrutinized and maintained some flexibility.

Heightened surveillance continued in 2021, and many CSOs based in Colombo reported frequent, ad hoc visits from the NGO Secretariat and state intelligence agencies like the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and Terrorism Investigation Department (TID). These agencies requested information on staffing, the management board, financial and administrative records, donor funding details, and bank accounts. CSOs based in the eastern province were also asked to report to the CID and TID for investigations that have been ongoing since 2020.

Increasing government scrutiny also impacted some CSOs' access to resources in 2021. Muslims who meet the necessary criteria are expected to provide *zakat*, a donation of a certain portion of their wealth to charitable causes each year; CSOs based on Islamic faith previously collected these donations and used them to distribute relief packages to marginalized Muslim communities. However, over the course of the year, the government's increasing scrutiny of funding sources created difficulties for these CSOs, particularly in the north and east, which struggled to comply with information.

CSOs may compete for government contracts and procurements but continued to experience bureaucratic delays in the procurement process and payments. CSOs are legally allowed to earn income from the provision of goods and services, and they can accept funds from foreign donors.

There were no significant changes to the tax policies applicable to CSOs in 2021. According to the Inland Revenue Act, No. 24 of 2017, 3 percent of funds received by CSOs from grants, donations, or contributions are subject to a 28 percent tax. Tax reductions and exemptions are available for CSOs engaged in rehabilitation, infrastructure facilities for disabled persons, and humanitarian relief, with no exemptions on earned income. However, in general, foreign donors are unwilling to pay the tax, and CSOs have to cover the tax from their own budgets.

Groups such as iProbono continued to provide limited legal assistance to CSOs working in the human rights sector, but most grassroots CSOs lack funds to seek legal expertise and support.

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## ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 4.3

The organizational capacity of CSOs moderately improved in 2021 with the improvement of strategic planning and use of technology and virtual platforms among CSOs.

In some regions of the country, CSOs, community-based organizations (CBOs), and informal networks struggled to carry out fieldwork in 2021 due to the reimposition of COVID-19 restrictions. Because the government's pandemic response was entirely managed by the military-led National Operation Centre for the Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak (NOCPCO), CSO operations were often interrupted by the military. CSOs in the north and

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<sup>1</sup> CBSL official website at Microsoft Word - Directions No. 4 - Personal Foreign Currency Accounts at [https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/sites/default/files/cbslweb\\_documents/laws/cdg/Foreign\\_Exchange\\_Act\\_Direction\\_No\\_4\\_of\\_2021\\_e.pdf](https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/sites/default/files/cbslweb_documents/laws/cdg/Foreign_Exchange_Act_Direction_No_4_of_2021_e.pdf) [Last accessed on 10 June 2022]

east were particularly isolated due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, which were imposed there beginning in January 2021.

CSOs' online presence became a requirement for constituency building in 2021, given the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions. CSOs such as Hashtag Generation were better able to operate online and organized many virtual events over platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Facebook in the second year of the pandemic. Hashtag Generation provided technical support and training for grassroots-level organizations on the use of social media platforms to engage with constituents and promote their daily activities.

Most CSOs continued to have strategic plans and visions and were able to successfully re-strategize in accordance with COVID-19 regulations. To remain responsive to urgent needs and crises, however, CSOs sometimes rapidly shifted their focus, regardless of their strategic plan. For instance, when the X-Press Pearl cargo ship caught fire off the coast of Sri Lanka in May 2021, many CSOs working in the environmental sector diverted their attention toward the incident to evaluate the harm and respond immediately to the environmental disaster.

Smaller CSOs and unregistered organizations continue to lack formal structures and internal governance systems. Larger, urban-based CSOs such as Sarvodaya and Women in Need (WIN) have strong internal administration units and dedicated staff for each department.

Some CSOs continued to face challenges retaining permanent staff, and employees that were specialists in their field shifted their focus to COVID-19 related issues. Though many CSOs were successful in utilizing online platforms for internal communication, those that maintained a larger staff faced difficulties in shifting to online operations. For instance, CSOs with hundreds of employees spread across several regions required a shared network to connect; each staff member had to be provided with a user account, which took time. Additionally, overall productivity was dependent not only on staff performance, but also on their technical knowledge, working environment, and network connection. Most staff members had to use their personal resources to meet work requirements.

CSOs were better able to recruit and engage volunteers in 2021. According to the Charities Aid Foundation World Giving Index 2022, which reports on developments in 2021, 37 percent of respondents in Sri Lanka reported volunteering, placing it in the top ten in the world on this metric. Many CSOs utilized social media and virtual meeting platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams, in addition to limited in-person meetings, to provide training for both staff and volunteers.

Internet facilities are generally accessible throughout the country, and many CSOs continued to increase their use of information communication technology (ICT) in 2021, often out of necessity, as described above. Many CSOs received funding from donors to improve their ICT and technical capacity, thereby improving their ability to engage with stakeholders despite COVID-19 restrictions. Larger, Colombo-based CSOs continued to make swift transitions to virtual platforms, while some rural CSOs still lacked sufficient ICT resources and therefore struggled with the shift to virtual platforms.

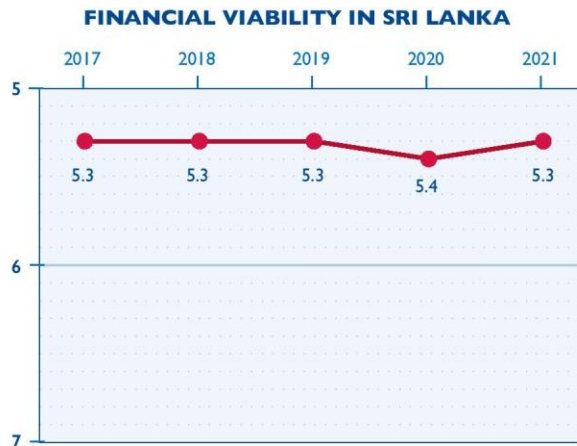
**ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY IN SRI LANKA**



## FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 5.3

The overall financial viability of CSOs improved slightly in 2021 with the benefit of increased foreign funding, particularly for COVID-19 relief efforts and to improve CSOs' technological capabilities.

CSOs continue to depend on foreign funding, and diversification of funding sources remains limited. This is particularly true of grassroots organizations, which often struggle with proposal development and grant administration or are unfamiliar with alternative funding opportunities.



Bilateral donors like Canada and the United States increased their financial support in 2021. Multilateral donors like the European Union (EU) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) also provided support. For instance, in 2021, the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) increased its average minimum funding for a project from CA\$15,000 to CA\$30,000. Funding was frequently targeted to address urgent needs; for instance, UNDP supported a CSO to open short-term relief shelters for victims of gender-based violence, which increased during the pandemic. As a result of the emergency funding, the CSO was able to continue operating the shelter well into 2021.

USAID provided \$39 million to Sri Lanka in 2021, out of which \$9 million was allocated to democratic

participation and civil society; this was an increase from \$28 million and \$8.9 million, respectively, in 2020. The USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA) also provided more than \$850,000 to support early recovery, risk reduction, and resilience initiatives in Sri Lanka to strengthen the capacity of community organizers, the government, and NGOs to prepare for and respond to humanitarian emergencies. USAID's Civil Society Impact project provided grants to CSOs to help them expand their technical and organizational capacity and continue work in the areas of economic governance, gender equality, youth empowerment, and environmental protection. The project will distribute a total of \$13.5 million between June 2021 and June 2026. USAID's Increased Demand and Engagement for Accountability (IDEA) project was also a key source of funding and support for CSOs in 2021. The project has a total budget of \$13.9 million, \$11 million of which is targeted at government and civil society management. In 2021, CSO grants awarded under the IDEA project ranged in size from \$25,000 to \$90,000.

Access to domestic sources of funding remained limited in 2021. As a result of the government's increasing scrutiny of sources of zakat funding, as noted above, the collection and distribution of these funds was largely halted in 2021. Some companies continued to implement their corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives by partnering with CSOs. For instance, the John Keells Company partnered with the NGO Ruk Rakaganno to reforest twenty hectares of Suduwalipotha Forest. Hemas also initiated a reforestation project, partnering with Rainforest Protectors Sri Lanka in 2021.

CSOs may compete for government contracts and procurements, but this is only possible when the government initiates open, transparent procurement processes. Some CSOs reported difficulties in navigating these processes. Raising funds from local communities and constituencies remained a challenge.

The maintenance of adequate financial management systems also continued to be a challenge for CSOs in 2021. Large, urban-based CSOs generally release financial statements and annual reports, while smaller and grassroots-level CSOs continue to maintain financial records predominantly to comply with donor requirements. As noted earlier, some donor agencies that provide funding only to CSOs registered under the NGO Secretariat also require thorough reporting.

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## ADVOCACY: 4.1

CSO advocacy remained unchanged in 2021.

Government engagement with CSOs improved slightly in 2021, largely in response to international pressure and in certain areas like COVID-19 relief. Despite this positive CSO engagement with government in certain areas, government authorities continued to lack the political will to cooperate with CSOs or incorporate their input in decision making in a systematic manner.

Despite this challenge, CSOs engaged in numerous policy advocacy initiatives in 2021. For instance, in April 2021, the ruling party tabled the Colombo Port City Economic Commission Bill in parliament, which nineteen petitioners then challenged before the Supreme Court. CSOs, including TISL and the Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA),



raised concerns that the bill was in violation of the constitution and would create pathways for corruption by facilitating and enabling illicit financial flows and money laundering. The Supreme Court held that the bill contained twenty-six clauses that were incompatible with the constitution, but also suggested several amendments to the bill to bring it in line. With those amendments, the bill was passed in May 2021.

In November, the ministerial subcommittee on amending the PTA met with members of the Sri Lankan Collective for Consensus (SLCC) to discuss their proposals to amend the Act. The SLCC includes representatives from multiple sectors of society, religion, academia, and civil society. Then, in December 2021, CSOs and human rights activists called for the repeal of the PTA and an immediate moratorium on the use of the law. Mannar Women’s Development Federation, Rural Development Foundation, Tamil Civil Society Forum, Viluthu, and Women’s Action Network, among others, were signatories of this joint statement.

CSOs also issued a joint statement in 2021 in response to the appointment of Supreme Court Justice Upali Abeyratne as the Chairperson of the Right to Information Commission, stating that the appointment was against the rule of law as Justice Upali Abeyratne was already chairperson of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry on Political Victimization. Signatories of the statement included TISL, Law & Society Trust (LST), People’s Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), CPA, and Viluthu.

As pandemic restrictions continued to limit movement, CSOs conducted advocacy primarily through online platforms. For instance, in July 2021, the Center for Equality and Justice (CEJ) facilitated a virtual meeting of the Core Lobby Group—which consists of CSOs, academia, and legal and health experts—to develop strategic interventions to influence law and policy reform addressing sexual bribery. Hashtag Generation also used online platforms to campaign for the protection of marine life and hold discussions on the collective social responsibility to prevent child abuse. CPA also published a number of materials to educate the public on COVID-19 regulations. However, CSOs’ ability to conduct broad-based advocacy campaigns continued to be limited due to the lack of ICT resources in some rural areas.

In 2021, the National Peace Council (NPC) raised concerns over the planned drafting of new NGO legislation that would implement unified oversight of NGOs. NPC noted that legislation would potentially further restrict CSOs working on human rights and corruption and emphasized that it is vital to guarantee that legislation pertaining to the sector is drafted with the broad participation of the sector, rather than just those organizations loyal to the government.

**ADVOCACY IN SRI LANKA**

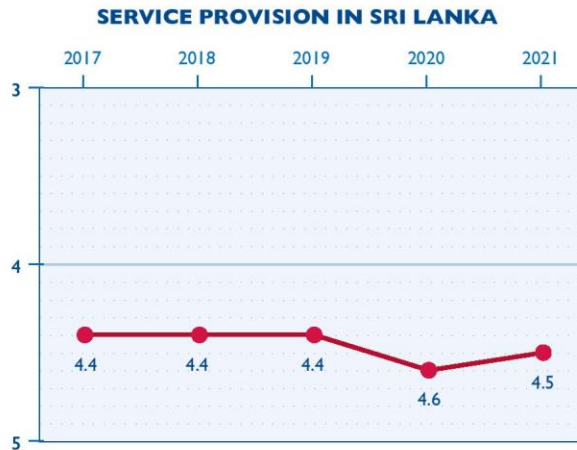


## SERVICE PROVISION: 4.5

CSO service provision slightly improved in 2021 as CSOs reprioritized their services in response to the changing needs of their constituencies. CSOs also somewhat benefitted from government acknowledgement of their contributions to development, job creation, and pandemic relief. Still, CSOs were subjected to COVID-19 restrictions and state surveillance, particularly impeding their ability to reach populations in the north and east.

Traditionally, CSOs in Sri Lanka have provided a wide range of goods and services, including health care, peacebuilding and reconciliation, and environmental protection. In 2021, CSOs were responsive to the most urgent needs of their communities, with an immediate focus on the ongoing health crisis.

CSOs across the country continued supporting COVID-19 relief initiatives in 2021. For instance, with support from the German embassy, in September, NPC distributed LKR 75,000 (approximately \$200) to each of seventeen districts in the form of dry rations and sanitary items, reaching fifty-four orphanages, homes for the elderly, and medical centers. NPC also worked with twelve divisional secretariats and three mediation boards in the Colombo



district to provide COVID-19 relief assistance, including 730 personal protective equipment (PPE) kits for government institutions and dry ration packs for low-income families.

Many CSOs increasingly used online platforms to facilitate workshops and training sessions for their constituents in 2021. The Family Planning Association (FPA) conducted an online program for fifty youths in the Hambantota District to discuss challenges around sexual and reproductive health. Hashtag Generation made use of online platforms to disseminate its research, including an extensive report on social media, the law, and electoral integrity.

Ongoing restrictions on physical contact in 2021 further marginalized those communities that were already

disadvantaged by non-inclusive infrastructure, and the organizations that traditionally served them struggled to adequately meet their needs. For example, the safety guidelines issued by the government to control the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the operations of CSOs for people with disabilities, whose constituents rely on in-person assistance.

Continuing state surveillance and harassment blocked many CSOs in the northern and eastern provinces from engaging in their traditional peace, reconciliation, and transitional justice activities in 2021. The state encouraged CSOs in those areas to turn instead to livelihood or economic development activities such as developing infrastructure facilities, poultry house projects, sanitation infrastructure, and providing COVID-19 relief. Many of them shifted their attention to COVID-19 relief efforts and held discussions on topics such as disinformation and hate speech in relation to the pandemic. However, those CSOs often had limited internal resources and lacked the training or capacity to rapidly make this shift in focus.

Increasing state surveillance in the north and east, together with ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, meant that communities and CSOs in those regions had limited interaction with CSOs from other districts in 2021. Overall, however, CSOs continued to supply products and services to beneficiaries outside of their own members.

CSOs remain dependent on donor funding and most services are provided free of charge.

Government recognition of CSO service provision varied widely depending on their areas of focus. For instance, the government responded positively to CSOs working on gender equality and gender-based violence, which increased during the pandemic lockdown. The government collaborated with CSOs to build the capacities of frontline staff of the Sri Lanka Police's women and children's desks to ensure continuous service in responding to complaints. Government authorities also recognized CSO contributions to COVID-19 relief, such as the NPC programs noted above.

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## SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 4.8

After significant deterioration in 2020, the infrastructure supporting the CSO sector recorded a moderate improvement in 2021 with an increase in CSO coalitions and training opportunities.

CSOs have access to a limited number of resource centers and intermediary support organizations (ISOs). The USAID-funded IDEA project, for instance, promotes a dynamic civil society in Sri Lanka to advance democratic values and government accountability on a variety of governance and reform topics. IDEA works with CSOs to help them build organizational capacity, safeguard and improve their operating environment, and lobby for good governance changes.

Several local grantmaking organizations provided funds for CSOs in 2021. The Neelan Thiruchelvam Trust provided grants through a COVID-19 emergency fund that focused on vulnerable communities. Also in 2021, with support from Global Affairs Canada, The Asia Foundation provided funding for district-level CSOs to strengthen social cohesion in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka Unites launched the Small & Mighty Grants Program with US Embassy

support to provide funding to smaller organizations and individuals with the capacity to lead and develop programs but without the infrastructure to compete for funding.

Issue-based CSO coalitions and cooperation within the sector notably increased in 2021. For instance, CSOs held a series of meetings to discuss the possible impact of a proposed draft bill to replace the VSSO Act. In February, a coalition of twenty-two organizations issued an open letter calling for a new UNHRC resolution to protect human rights, justice, and accountability in Sri Lanka. In June, the National Forum Against Gender-Based Violence (NFAGBV) publicly called for action regarding the challenges faced by victims of domestic violence during the pandemic. Formed in 2005, NFAGBV is a multi-stakeholder collective, including CSOs, state entities, and international organizations.

CSOs had access to a growing number of capacity-building initiatives in 2021. NPC conducted a workshop for forty-two CSOs on preventing violent extremism, incorporating both virtual and in-person training. Also in 2021, the Sri Lanka Preparedness Partnership organized a training program for CSOs in the Kalutara district to develop their capacity in disaster risk reduction and management. However, grassroots CSOs, predominantly based in rural areas, often lacked access to the internet and other ICT and therefore faced challenges in participating in online activities.

CSOs continued to partner with both state entities and the private sector in 2021. In February, CEJ partnered with Power of Play (Pvt) Ltd to sensitize the staff of the Office for Reparations regarding issues of gender, women, and reparations. Twenty mid-level employees attended the workshop, which was conducted simultaneously in Sinhala and Tamil. In March and June, CEJ worked with government officials in Polonnaruwa and Hambantota districts to organize two forums, with the support of the Sunila Women and Children Development Centre (SWCDC) in Polonnaruwa and Women Development Federation (WDF) in Hambantota. The forums enabled meaningful dialogue between government officials and women and youth regarding memorialization and collective remembrance, using movie screenings and art workshops to help participants communicate their ideas.

### SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN SRI LANKA



## PUBLIC IMAGE: 5.0

### PUBLIC IMAGE IN SRI LANKA



with Western organizations and foreign donors.

The government also developed a somewhat more positive relationship with select CSOs that provided training sessions to government employees. For instance, NPC conducted several training sessions with government

The CSO sector's public image remained unchanged in 2021.

Media coverage remained largely positive in 2021, especially of CSOs providing COVID-19 relief or working on environmental issues and anti-corruption. For instance, various online media platforms provided coverage of TISL's new website ApeSalli.lk and its efforts to ensure accountability following revelations from the Pandora Papers disclosure.

The public perception of CSOs, particularly those engaged in work related to the COVID-19 pandemic, slightly improved in 2021. For instance, NPC's provision of dry rations and PPE was highly visible and well received among the public. However, as in previous years, the public remained skeptical of CSO engagement

officials on non-discriminatory customer service and organized three webinars to increase awareness of the Community Policing Service and strengthen collaboration between civil society and police to resolve community-level issues. CSOs used these opportunities to expand their scope and networking with government officials. However, at the same time, CSOs in the north and east experienced ongoing and increased government surveillance, disapproval, and intimidation.

Many CSOs continued to expand their use of social media for public outreach in 2021 and had a strong online presence. CPA, TISL, and Hashtag Generation have particularly led the way in developing a strong online presence in recent years. Public outreach in rural areas remained limited due to the lack of resources and online access.

Most CSOs do not have formal codes of ethics. In October 2021, the Sri Lanka Center for Development Facilitation held a training program for CSOs in eighteen districts with the goal of popularizing the Code of Conduct for CSOs. This code was developed in 1995 by the NGO National Action Front (NNAF), a national-level organization with the membership of eighteen district consortia, encompassing over 250 NGOs and more than 3,000 CBOs in eighteen districts. The initiative included thirty-five awareness sessions for over 370 NGOs, reaching all eighteen districts and 625 participants. CSOs have also reported an interest in developing a formal certification mechanism or system to prove the credibility of an organization. CSOs hope that such an initiative may also increase funding opportunities. Typically, only larger, well-established CSOs publish their annual reports, and CSO self-regulation and reporting mechanisms are implemented predominantly at the request of donors and larger CSOs.

**Disclaimer:** *The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.*

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