



# 2020 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

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For Sri Lanka  
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# LOCAL PARTNER

## VERITÉ RESEARCH

Sierra Amarasiri  
Shamana Amjah  
Joelle Besch

# PROJECT MANAGERS

## FHI 360

Michael Kott  
Eka Imerlishvili  
Alex Nejadian

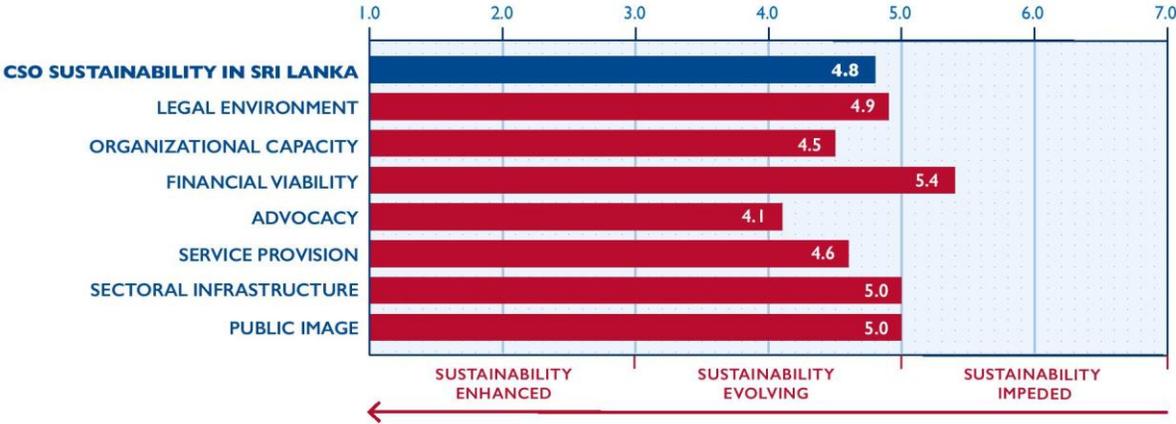
## INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW (ICNL)

Catherine Shea  
Jennifer Stuart  
Marilyn Wyatt

# EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

Luc Chounet-Cambas, Bishnu Sapkota, Hans Antlov, Natasha Dandavati, Kate Musgrave, Julie Hunter, Linnea Beatty, Mariam Afrasiabi, Gary Bland, and Kourtney Pompei

## OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 4.8



On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic. While the first case of COVID-19 was detected in Sri Lanka in late January, the first wave of the virus became evident in early March 2020. The Sri Lankan government took several actions to curb the spread of the virus. In its first and widest response, on March 20, the government imposed a national curfew, inevitably creating obstacles for the public and impeding access to essential goods and services. This curfew was completely lifted on June 28, after which the government imposed curfews only in high-risk areas. Also in March, the government established the National Operation Center for Prevention of the COVID-19 Outbreak (NOCPCO), headed by Army Commander Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva, as part of its pandemic response.

In April 2020, the Ministry of Health issued an extraordinary gazette ordering the cremation of those who had died or were suspected to have died of COVID-19. The regulation was contradictory to WHO guidelines, which allowed for both cremation and burial options, and denied religious rights, particularly impacting Sri Lanka’s Christian and Muslim minorities. This forced cremation policy was challenged through several fundamental rights (FR) petitions before the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka in December 2020. However, the Court dismissed the petitions. In response, several CSOs, including the Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA), the Women’s Action Network, and the Muslim Women’s Development Trust, issued a joint statement against the policy. Regardless of continued complaints from civil society, the policy remained in place through the end of the year.

Political uncertainty added to the challenges of COVID-19 in 2020. On March 2, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa issued a proclamation dissolving parliament six months prior to the end of its term. At the same time, he set April 25 as the date for the next parliamentary elections. The Election Commission of Sri Lanka then postponed this election to June 20, citing the health risks of holding an election during the pandemic. Several CSOs publicly raised concerns over the resulting lack of a functioning parliament. In May 2020, seven FR petitions were filed before the Supreme Court challenging the dissolution of parliament and the postponement of the general elections. In June 2020, the five-judge bench unanimously dismissed the petitions after ten days of hearings, and elections were postponed once more to August 2020. Ultimately, there was no sitting parliament in Sri Lanka for five months. This raised several concerns relating to government expenditure, as the constitution provides the parliament with full control over public finances.

Parliamentary elections were finally held on August 5, in line with health guidelines to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Voter turnout was 71 percent, a notable decline from previous elections, which saw voter turnout of over 90 percent. CSOs such as People’s Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) requested the adoption of a method to allow individuals in quarantine or in hospitals the opportunity to vote. However, due to a lack of legislation to facilitate mobile voting, the Election Commission of Sri Lanka stated that it was unable to allow those in quarantine centers the opportunity to vote. The election resulted in the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP),

headed by President Rajapaksa's brother, securing 145 seats in the 225-seat parliament, just five seats short of the 150 needed for a supermajority. The vote was therefore seen as a resounding victory for President Rajapaksa.

On August 19, shortly after the election, the cabinet granted approval to repeal the 19th Amendment (19A) to the Constitution and draft the 20th Amendment (20A). 19A, introduced in 2015, attempted to reduce the powers of the presidency and restore the independence of commissions, including the Election Commission, the Public Service Commission, and the National Audit Commission. In its place, the draft 20A Bill proposed reversing several democratic safeguards that had been entrenched by 19A by vesting broad powers in the president and weakening the powers of the parliament. For instance, the 20A Bill sought to replace the Constitutional Council (CC) with a Parliamentary Council. Under 19A, the CC had functioned as a check on executive powers by approving appointments and removals made by the president, thereby safeguarding the independence of the government and democratic institutions. The Parliamentary Council, however, can only make observations on the appointments, and the president is not bound to them. Thirty-nine petitions challenging the bill were filed at the Supreme Court; some of these were supported by CSOs like Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) and CPA. By a four-to-one majority, the Supreme Court held that the bill, minus four clauses, could be passed by a two-thirds majority vote in parliament. On October 22, 20A was passed, with 156 votes in favor and 65 votes against.

The government's progress on achieving transitional justice, accountability, and reconciliation suffered further setbacks in 2020. In February, the Sri Lankan government publicly declared its withdrawal from co-sponsorship of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Resolution 30/1 and the commitments made therein relating to post-war transitional justice and accountability. CSOs, including the Mannar Women's Development Federation (MWDF), condemned the decision and raised concerns over human rights abuses. In March 2020, Sunil Ratnayake, a former lance corporal who was sentenced to death for the murder of eight civilians in Mirusuvil in 2000, was granted a presidential pardon by President Rajapaksa. The president's election manifesto published in 2019 had promised to release "war heroes" who were imprisoned by the previous regime. He made similar assurances to protect the Sri Lankan armed forces from allegations of war crimes and even stated that he will "not hesitate to withdraw Sri Lanka" from "international bodies and organizations" that continue to make such accusations.

The pandemic amplified the hardships CSOs were already facing, and the constitutional changes together with several other policies posed unprecedented challenges for CSOs in Sri Lanka. Overall CSO sustainability underwent moderate deterioration in 2020, with all dimensions experiencing some level of backsliding. The legal environment for CSOs recorded one of the most drastic deteriorations, largely due to heightened state harassment and scrutiny of registration procedures. CSO advocacy also experienced a sharp decline due to reduced CSO representation within government mechanisms and an increasingly hostile environment for CSO advocacy efforts. Organizational capacity experienced a moderate decline due to pandemic-related constraints on capacity and overall functionality. The slight decline of financial viability was fueled by continued reliance on foreign donor funding and the dwindling availability of domestic funds. Limited opportunities for cooperation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, along with decreased government recognition of CSOs and limited resources to sustain services, were leading factors in the moderate decline of service provision. Similarly, sectoral infrastructure experienced a significant decline due to movement restrictions and the lack of CSO support organizations. The moderate decline in public image was due to increased hostility and distrust towards CSOs by the government and limited public outreach as a result of the pandemic.

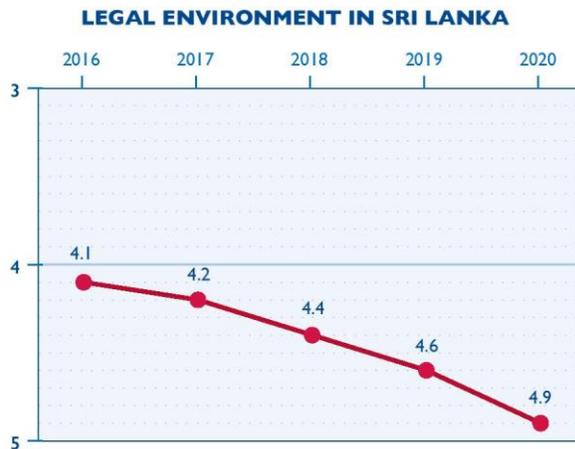
The Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Secretariat maintains a directory of NGOs registered under the Voluntary Social Service Organizations (Registration and Supervision) Act, No. 31 of 1980 (VSSO Act). As of December 2020, the directory listed 1,639 NGOs.

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## LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 4.9

The legal environment for CSOs experienced significant levels of deterioration in 2020 due to ad hoc regulations around CSO registration and increased harassment and intimidation of CSOs by the state. Heightened state scrutiny associated with registration further resulted in difficulties for new CSOs in securing banking services.

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.

The NGO Secretariat oversees CSOs in Sri Lanka. Since December 2019, following the election of President Rajapaksa, the Secretariat has operated under the Ministry of Defense, and in 2020 its office was physically moved to the Ministry of Defense.

In 2020, CSOs reported an informal requirement to register with the NGO Secretariat. Registration with the NGO Secretariat—in addition to CSOs' preferred methods of registration under the Companies Act, VSSO Act, or other legal instruments outlined above—enables increased scrutiny from the Ministry of Defense. The

process of registering with the NGO Secretariat remains complex and subject to delays. Once a CSO submits the relevant applications, the NGO Secretariat forwards all registration documentation to the Ministry of External Resources and the Ministry of Defense for approval. This approval process takes approximately four to five months. In 2020, CSOs that were not registered with the NGO Secretariat faced difficulties opening bank accounts. CSOs not registered with the NGO Secretariat, particularly those engaged in social justice and human rights advocacy, also reported visits from government officials who insisted on registration with the NGO Secretariat. These CSOs were asked to hand over detailed documentation of their activities, financial statements, and lists of beneficiaries. CSOs registered with the NGO Secretariat were reportedly instructed to refrain from working with unregistered organizations.

Sri Lanka continues to have no regulations on the internal governance or reporting requirements for CSOs. However, government authorities increasingly scrutinized CSOs on an ad hoc basis in 2020. For instance, in June 2020, the Ministry of Defense announced that the NGO Secretariat had initiated investigations into CSOs with "questionable funding sources and projects." This policy most impacted CSOs engaged in human rights with funding from foreign donors.

CSOs in a variety of sectors faced heightened surveillance and harassment from state authorities in 2020, including the Criminal Investigations Department (CID), Terrorism Investigation Division (TID), Military Intelligence, NGO Secretariat, and the Divisional Secretaries. For instance, TID officials repeatedly made unannounced visits to a Jaffna-based think tank to inquire about its activities, funding, and staff details. In the north and east, government officials reportedly asked CSOs involved in transitional justice and human rights to focus instead on infrastructural development in the area. As a result of these requests, CSO activities on transitional justice and human rights were seriously curtailed in 2020.

There were no significant changes to tax policies applicable to CSOs in 2020. 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.

CSOs may compete for government contracts and procurements but continue to experience bureaucratic delays in the procurement process and payments. CSOs are legally allowed to earn income from the provision of goods and services by charging fees and establishing social enterprises. They can also accept funds from foreign donors.

Lawyers and organizations such as iProbono continued to provide limited legal assistance to CSOs in 2020. However, most grassroots CSOs still lack funds to seek legal expertise and administrative support.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 4.5

The organizational capacity of CSOs moderately deteriorated in 2020 due to pandemic-related constraints on CSO capacity and activities. Many CSOs, including women's groups, youth groups, community-based organizations (CBOs), and informal networks, were forced to temporarily cancel activities during the first wave of COVID-19 and the resulting curfew beginning in March.

Travel restrictions due to the pandemic also resulted in an accelerated shift to online spaces, and as a result many CSOs increased their use of internet-based technologies in 2020. However, some rural CSOs continued to lack sufficient information communication technology (ICT) resources and support, and the shift took time even for those with greater ICT resources and capacities. Nonetheless, urban CSOs showed a significant increase in the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, along with virtual meeting platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams for constituency building. For instance, youth CSOs like Hashtag Generation utilized these platforms to organize webinars and raise awareness about issues relating to gender, ethnicity, and religion. Chrysalis engaged with women entrepreneurs negatively affected by the pandemic to support and promote investment. The Center for Equality and Justice (CEJ) also hosted a series of virtual roundtable discussions, addressing the urgent need for reparations for women survivors of the civil war. Discussion participants included affected individuals, members of the Office of Reparations, and other CSOs.

CSOs also built constituencies with government officials on thematic areas such as the need to increase female representation in parliament. For instance, the Yeheliya Foundation engaged with youth, academia, female members of parliament, and other stakeholders through the launch of its Crossing Diyawannawa trilingual video series and online discussions to promote female representation in politics.

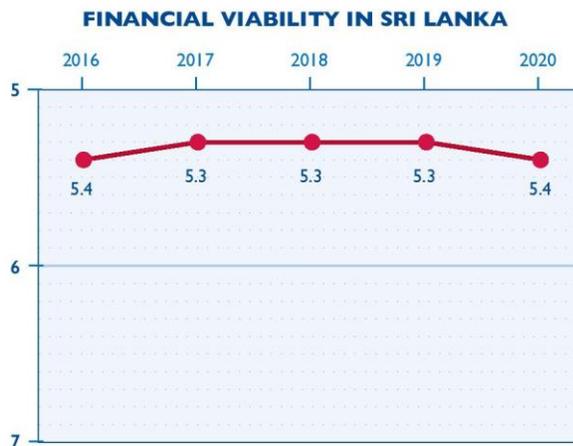
Most organizations have strategic plans and visions. However, smaller CSOs are predominately reliant upon project-based donor funding and therefore do not invest too much effort in creating strategic plans, as their focus is primarily on their financial sustainability. Most CSOs deviated from their set strategic plans in 2020, placing higher priority on COVID-19 relief efforts.

Smaller CSOs continued to lack formal structures and internal governance systems in 2020. Larger, urban-based CSOs such as Women in Need (WIN) and CPA have boards of directors and dedicated departments or personnel for human resources and finance. CSOs' ability to retain permanent staff, provide staff training, and mobilize staff in 2020 deteriorated due to the pandemic constraints. However, a few CSOs with a strong online presence, such as Hashtag Generation, made efforts to improve their organizational structures, including through the appointment of permanent staff and the creation of a board of directors.

Internet facilities are generally accessible throughout the country through state-owned and private service providers. Many CSOs increased their use of internet-based technologies in 2020, often out of necessity, as described above. However, some rural CSOs lacked sufficient ICT resources and therefore struggled with the shift to virtual platforms.



## FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 5.4



CSO financial viability deteriorated slightly in 2020. CSOs continued to rely primarily on foreign donor funding, as domestic funding remained limited. In 2020, authorities reportedly informed a majority of CSOs based in the north and east, and a few CSOs based in the west and south, that utilizing foreign funding could affect the legality of their work. These CSOs were working primarily on specific issues, such as transitional justice, human rights, and other fundamental rights. Given these instructions, CSOs in the north and the east faced significant uncertainty in terms of using foreign funds, and many of these CSOs either operated with minimal staff or ceased operations entirely.

Bilateral donors continued to be the primary source of funding for CSOs in 2020. USAID provided \$28 million

to Sri Lanka in 2020, out of which \$8.9 million was allocated to democratic participation and civil society; this was an increase from \$27 million and \$8 million, respectively, in 2019. According to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Australian government provided \$25 million in overseas development assistance to Sri Lanka in 2020–2021, a slight reduction from \$27.1 million in 2019–2020. The Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) provided \$44,600 to the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka specifically for COVID-19 relief targeting vulnerable communities.

Although there was a slight increase in foreign funding in 2020, especially for programmatic areas such as hate speech and disinformation, funders often preferred projects with immediate results. For instance, Chrysalis re-granted funds in the form of interest-free loans to support entrepreneurs in the north who were adversely affected by the pandemic.

Access to domestic sources of funding remained limited in 2020. Most companies continued to implement their corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives through separate entities within their corporate structures, rather than partnering with CSOs. The Dilmah Ceylon Tea Company, for instance, established the MJF Charitable Foundation to run its CSR initiatives. In 2020, the MJF Charitable Foundation and MillenniumIT ESP, in partnership with Microsoft, Sarva Integrated, and WorldVision Lanka, launched the disABILITY application. This platform connects children with disabilities and their families to expert guidance. Similarly, John Keells Holdings established the John Keells Foundation to run its CSR initiatives.

Raising funds from local communities and constituencies remained a challenge for CSOs in 2020. Fundraising from local communities is estimated at just 5 to 10 percent of the amount CSOs receive from foreign donors. Nonetheless, CSOs made appeals for donations in 2020 particularly in relation to COVID-19 relief. For instance, the Sarvodaya District Centers called for donations to various funding initiatives that worked to provide relief packages to vulnerable communities such as daily wage workers.

CSOs may compete for government contracts and procurements. Only a few CSOs earn income through service provision.

The lack of adequate financial management systems continued to be a challenge for CSOs in 2020. Large, urban-based CSOs generally release financial statements and annual reports, while smaller CSOs continue to maintain financial records predominantly to comply with donor requirements. Strict government scrutiny in 2020 prompted CSOs to maintain orderly financial records.

## ADVOCACY: 4.1

A combination of pandemic restrictions, reduced CSO representation within government mechanisms, and state unwillingness to engage with CSOs contributed to the significant deterioration of CSO advocacy in 2020. While CSOs continued to engage in sustained advocacy efforts, due to the above reasons they had limited ability to influence government policies in 2020.

As described above, 19A provided for CSO representation in the CC. However, this changed in 2020 with the repeal of 19A. In its place, 20A was passed in parliament in October 2020. Among other clauses, 20A replaced the CC with a new Parliamentary Council (PC) composed entirely of members of parliament. As a result, CSO access to and involvement in central government decision-making processes immediately declined.



The distribution of COVID-19 public relief funds and restrictions tied to the pandemic spurred several CSO advocacy efforts in 2020. For instance, the government promised a COVID-19 relief allowance of LKR 5,000 (approximately \$25) to low-income persons, but some were initially excluded without cause. Following the advocacy efforts of TISL's regional Advocacy and Legal Advice Center, a divisional secretariat in the north promptly delivered the promised relief allowance. In response to the policy mandating cremation of COVID-19 victims, many CSOs collaborated to issue a joint statement requesting health authorities to reformulate the guidelines, which threatened to persecute or marginalize the Muslim community. CSOs leading the effort included the Sisterhood Initiative, National Peace Council, Women's Action Network, and CPA. Though several FR petitions on the matter were taken to the Supreme Court, the policy remained in place through the end of 2020.

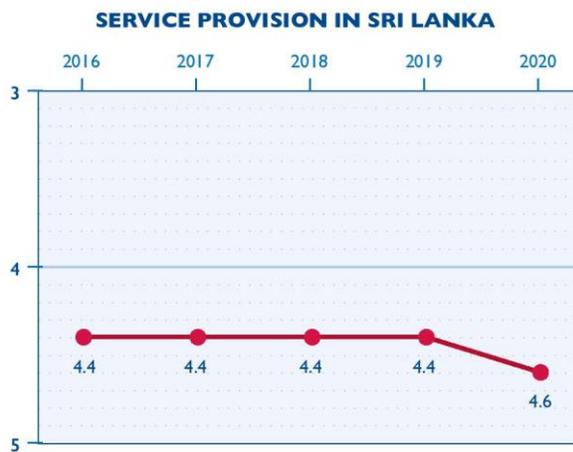
Also in 2020, CSOs such as WIN, Child Protection Force, iProbono, and the Family Planning Association met with the Minister of Justice and Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs to discuss inadequacies in the penal code and other laws. The discussions included suggestions to introduce new provisions to curtail harassment, bullying, disinformation, and hate speech, and protect the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+) community. Youth CSOs also increased their advocacy efforts in relation to governance and the preservation of democracy. For instance, newly established youth CSOs such as the Democracy and Governance Initiative of Sri Lanka (DGISL) advocated for good governance and democracy during the parliamentary elections in 2020.

CSO advocacy in relation to the amendments of the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, No. 13 of 1951 (MMDA) shifted in 2020 as policymakers deliberated repealing the MMDA as opposed to amending it. In response, CSOs and activists who had advocated for law reform in 2019 instead took steps to prevent the MMDA from being repealed in 2020. CSOs continued to call for the minimum age of marriage to be set at eighteen years without exception, mandatory signatures or thumbprints of both bride and groom, and for women to be eligible to be appointed as Quazis (judges in Quazi courts, which have jurisdiction over matrimonial disputes involving persons professing Islam).

CSOs involved in environmental protection engaged in successful advocacy efforts in 2020. For instance, after five years of advocacy, the Center of Environmental Justice was successful in a 2015 action filed before the Court of Appeal against the Conservator General of Forest, a former minister, and five others regarding the destruction of forests in the north of Wilpattu National Park.

As movement was restricted due to the pandemic, CSOs largely continued their advocacy through online platforms in 2020. For instance, CEJ conducted campaigns to spread awareness about sexual bribery through illustrated stories, posts, and videos on its Facebook page. The Sisterhood Initiative also held online discussions and raised concerns tied to its advocacy efforts, including those focused on 20A and the MMDA reforms. However, CSOs' ability to conduct broad-based advocacy campaigns was limited due to the lack of ICT resources in some rural areas.

## SERVICE PROVISION: 4.6



CSO service provision deteriorated slightly in 2020 due to a necessary refocusing of CSO efforts, limited opportunities for cooperation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and lack of government recognition and support for CSOs.

The public health crisis spurred by COVID-19 contributed to a notable decline in the variety of goods and services provided by CSOs in 2020. Organizations that were previously focused on topics such as conflict resolution and peacebuilding realigned their services to respond to pandemic-related needs of the public. For example, Sarvodaya began distributing public health information in local languages and allowed its training and residential facilities across the island to be converted into quarantine centers. Organizations such as Viluthu

partnered with UN Women to provide emergency relief packs to more than 1,300 female-headed households. The Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust, which ordinarily focuses on social justice and reconciliation initiatives, offered grants to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. Informal social movements also raised awareness about the pandemic. For instance, Sarvodaya and Hashtag Generation created a series of online, trilingual public service announcements to promote COVID-19 safety precautions. With the increase of disinformation during the pandemic, CSOs such as the National Christian Evangelical Alliance, Minor Matters, and Hashtag Generation raised public awareness about the spread of disinformation. While the variety of goods and services provided by CSOs declined in 2020, this trend does not reflect a decline in responsiveness to the community as CSOs prioritized meeting demonstrated needs during the pandemic.

CSOs' ability to collaborate with the health sector and other government bodies in providing pandemic relief was stymied by two factors: the prominent role played by the military in the pandemic response, and the lack of government recognition of CSO capacity to provide support services. All decisions relating to the pandemic response were centralized through the military-led NOCPCO, which did not invite participation or feedback from CSOs. Regardless, CSOs continued to provide basic goods and services for disaster relief. The Family Planning Association (FPA) of Sri Lanka, for instance, assembled and distributed 3,420 hygiene kits for vulnerable groups.

CSOs continued to provide goods and services to beneficiaries beyond their own memberships in 2020, though travel restrictions and beneficiaries' lack of access to online services limited CSOs' ability to reach all of their traditional constituents. However, some CSOs were able to increase their digital capacity and move their services online, conducting online training and workshops. For instance, the Arka Initiative established an online platform for the public to raise concerns about sexual and reproductive health, then provided expert opinions and facilitated online access to gynecologists across the country.

CSOs remain dependent on donor funding and are largely unable to recover the costs of service provision, as most services are provided free of charge.

In 2020, government recognition of CSO service provision varied widely depending on their areas of focus. Rights-based CSOs received no recognition and instead faced heightened surveillance by authorities and pressure to register with the NGO Secretariat. However, CSOs that provide services in the fields of development and ICT received positive recognition from government-affiliated educational institutions. For instance, Sarvodaya-Fusion partnered with the Open University of Sri Lanka and the National Institute of Business Management to provide ICT learning opportunities to rural youth countrywide.

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## SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 5.0

The infrastructure supporting the CSO sector deteriorated significantly in 2020 due to pandemic restrictions and the continued lack of local grant-making and CSO support organizations in Sri Lanka.

Resource centers and CSO support organizations remained limited in 2020. Some local grant-making organizations were able to raise funds, but these were not sufficient to sustain CSO activities. For instance, the Neelan Thiruchelvam Trust provided funds to organizations that had lost funding due to the pandemic. Several CSOs also re-granted foreign funds to smaller organizations in 2020.

The number of issue-based coalitions declined in 2020 due to pandemic-related restrictions on movement, including a curfew imposed during the first wave of

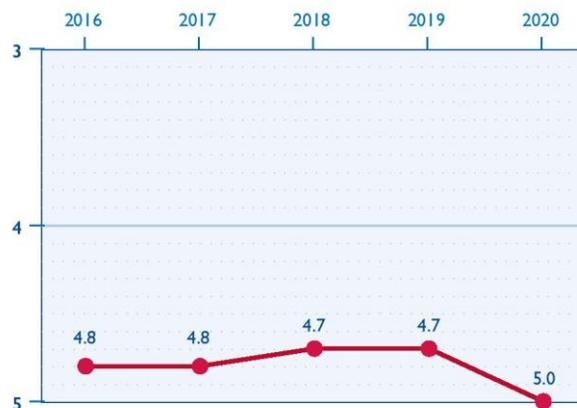
COVID-19. In previous years, collaboration between urban and rural-based CSOs was predominantly carried out through in-person interactions. However, the three-month long curfew imposed at the beginning of the pandemic included severe travel restrictions. Most rural-based CSOs lacked access to ICT resources and struggled to shift to online spaces, thereby limiting collaboration. Ad hoc procedures requiring CSOs to register with the NGO Secretariat also created complications and further weakened CSO collaboration. For instance, some CSOs were informally told by government officials that they could not work with “unregistered” CSOs.

Still, several CSO coalitions were active in 2020. Sarvodaya facilitated the Civil Society Collective for COVID-19 Response, comprised of seven CSOs. The coalition called for contributions to provide food, hygiene, and medical supplies to children, women, and elders living in homes and institutional care facilities around the country. A few coalitions were also active in relation to the general election. For instance, domestic election observation groups comprising CSOs like PAFFREL, the Asia Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), and the Center for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) released a COVID-19 code of conduct for election observers ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections.

The training opportunities available for CSOs in 2020 remained largely unchanged. Donors continued to focus their investments on capacity building, and many urban-based CSOs were able to continue that capacity building and training online. For example, CEJ conducted virtual sessions on thematic issues like gender equality and war reparations. Women representing CSOs from Anuradhapura, Trincomalee, Ampara, Puttalam, Hambantota, and Kilinochchi participated in these sessions. However, grassroots level CSOs, predominantly based in rural areas, often lacked access to the internet and other facilities, and therefore were not able to participate in these types of online activities.

CSO intersectoral partnerships also remained unchanged in 2020. CSOs, predominantly urban-based organizations, formed several partnerships with the private sector, particularly aimed at raising awareness of sexual and reproductive health and digital literacy. For instance, the Arka Initiative collaborated with the online lifestyle website Pulse.lk to create a series of videos on sexual and reproductive health. Sarvodaya-Fusion, in partnership with Facebook and with the support of the Ministry of Education, launched the We Think Digital program to conduct training and increase digital literacy in the country.

SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN SRI LANKA

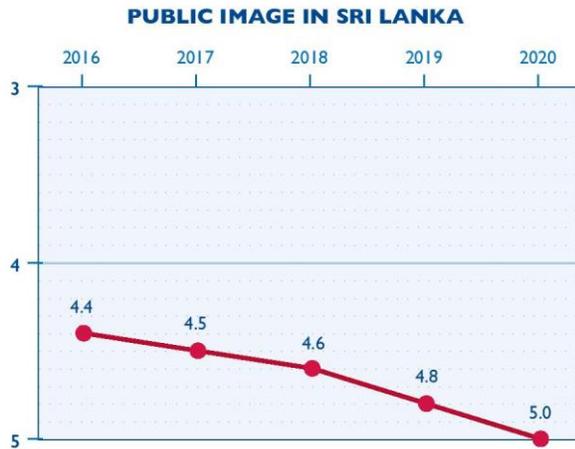


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## PUBLIC IMAGE: 5.0

The CSO sector’s public image moderately deteriorated in 2020. The ongoing decline in this dimension was attributed to increased hostility and distrust toward CSOs by the government, in addition to constrained public outreach due to pandemic-related restrictions.

Media coverage—especially of the work of environmental CSOs—remained largely positive in 2020. The environmental conservation activities of the Center of Environmental Justice, for instance, were positively covered



by online and print media. While CSO activities in response to the pandemic crisis were positively acknowledged, public perceptions of CSOs remained largely negative and unchanged in 2020. For instance, the public continued to negatively view the FR petitions filed by CSOs at the Supreme Court that challenged the president’s dissolution of parliament and the date selected to hold the 2020 general election. Some media coverage had categorized these petitioners as acting on the request of “NGOs” and “powerful nations,” adding to the public’s negative perception by suggesting ties to Western organizations and foreign funding.

The government perception of CSOs substantially deteriorated in 2020, with increased hostility, distrust, and intimidation toward CSOs. On July 6, Prime Minister

Mahinda Rajapaksa stated that special attention would be paid to NGO funding practices, particularly regarding foreign funding sources. Co-Cabinet Spokesman and Minister of Energy Udaya Gammanpila further alleged that the involvement of “NGOs” and foreign embassies in previous constitutional drafting had resulted in the need for a new constitution. Additionally, state actors like Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva, Commander of the Sri Lankan Army, reportedly identified CSOs as a contemporary security challenge in Sri Lanka.

The government did, however, welcome CSO work in the fields of development and ICT advancement. For instance, Chrysalis, together with British Council and CARE Germany, supported the Ministry of Small and Medium Businesses and Enterprise Development in conceptualizing and developing a Business Service Center model to facilitate regulatory functions and business development services across the country. Private sector perceptions of CSOs did not improve in 2020.

CSOs continued to expand their use of social media for public outreach in 2020. However, public outreach in rural areas was heavily constrained due to lack of resources and online access, combined with restrictions on movement due to the pandemic. Some CSOs began to increase their outreach activities in May 2020, when restrictions in the country were relaxed. For instance, the Arka Initiative continued public outreach for its Sustainable Sanitation projects in Batticaloa and Mullaitivu during this time.

Most CSOs do not have a formal code of ethics and only larger CSOs continue to publish annual reports. 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.*

**U.S. Agency for International Development**

1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20523

Tel: (202) 712-0000

Fax: (202) 216-3524

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