

Four Years in Review: 2020-2024

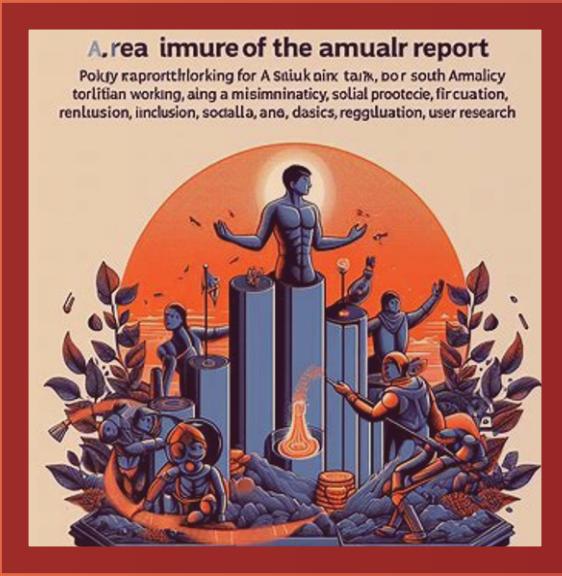


Balancing AI and human touch in design

Over the last four years, capabilities of generative AI have grown by leaps and bounds. Until recently, changes in jobs and work, driven by technological advances such as automation and AI, were primarily expected to impact routine jobs, as those on factory assembly lines.

It was widely believed that 'creative' occupations would be somewhat insulated from these changes, as the human element was thought to be non-automatable. However, recent advances have enabled generative AI to perform tasks like design, artwork, and creative writing, among others. While it is unlikely that these occupations will be completely displaced, they are more likely to be augmented, allowing professionals in these fields to gain efficiencies and enhance their capabilities.

Our experience speaks to this. We decided to embrace the generative potential of AI and put it to the test of coming up with a cover design that would capture the essence of what LIRNEasia does and is, in the style that we wanted. Numerous prompts with key terms and language were fed into Microsoft's Copilot designer tool, resulting in over 17 cover designs.



One of the initial AI-generated designs.

The prompt was 'cover page design for an annual report of a digital policy think tank operating in India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines, and Nepal. The organisation focuses on critical areas such as misinformation, social safety nets, pandemic recovery, data protection policies, data analytics, qualitative research, gender research, and inclusion. The design should incorporate symbolism of emerging from a challenging period and gradually recovering.'

Our mission

Catalysing policy change and solutions through research to improve the lives of people in the Asia and Pacific using knowledge, information and technology.

Contents

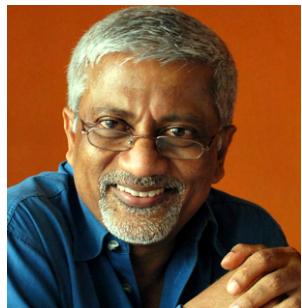
List of abbreviations	8
Message from the Chair	10
Message from the CEO	12
1 About us	14
About LIRNEasia	15
People and culture	18
Advancing gender equity and inclusivity	24
Learning organisation	26
Board of Directors	31
Advisory councils and committees	32
Who we have worked with for the past four years	36
2 From crises to resilience	38
The impact of COVID-19 on LIRNEasia's research	39
LIRNEasia's journey through Sri Lanka's economic crisis	42
3 Review of activities	45
Inclusion	48
Data for inclusive sustainable development	68
Governance	74
4 Events, speaking engagements and media presence	88
Events	89
Speaking engagements	92
Media presence	103

List of abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AI	Artificial Intelligence
APAC	Asia Pacific Region
APC	Association for Progressive Communications
API	Application Programming Interface
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BBINS	Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka
BBNMAPS	Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka
BCS	British Computer Society
BOP	Bottom of the Pyramid
CDRs	Call Detail Records
CIFAR	Canadian Institute for Advanced Research
CMP	Common Minimum Programme
e-Commerce	Electronic Commerce
e-Governance	Electronic Governance
ESDA	Economic and Social Development Affiliates
ESG	Environmental, Social and Governance
EU	European Union
G20	The G20 or Group of 20 is an intergovernmental forum comprising 19 sovereign countries, the European Union, and the African Union.
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GIS	Geographic Information System
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
ICTA	Information and Communication Technology Agency
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
IIT	Indian Institute of Technology
INEE	Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies
T (CMI)	Information Technology (Communication, Media and Information Technology)
IWMI	International Water Management Institute

KAS	Konrad Adenauer Stiftung
LDA	Latent Dirichlet Allocation
MCC	Myanmar Communication Commission
MIL	Media and Information Literacy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NLP	Natural Language Processing
OCR	Optical Character Recognition
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OJP	Online Job Portal
Pvt	Private
PWD	Persons With Disability
SAGP	South Asia Grants Programme
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SLIDA	Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
STEG	Structural Transformation and Economic Growth
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNICEF	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
LECO	Lanka Electricity Company (Pvt) Ltd
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
ICRIER	Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations
Cepei	The Centro de Pensamiento Estratégico Internacional
USA	United States of America
WHO	World Health Organisation
EY	Ernst & Young

Message from the Chair



Those of us present at the launch of LIRNEasia in September 2004 will recall the accompanying wind and rain. The Mount Lavinia Hotel warned us of inclement weather and offered a boring backup location. But we insisted on the original beach hut. When gusting wind compelled us to shield the oil lamp that was being lit with our bodies, I said that it foretells how we will face and overcome adversity. Little did I realise that it would take until 2020 for true adversity to hit us.

We did not let the lamp be snuffed out. In the same way that we worked together to protect the nascent flames twenty years ago, we collectively shielded LIRNEasia from the gusts of adversity in the past few years. The stormy weather has abated. The financial indicators are no longer keeping us up at night.

Not only did we survive; we delivered. Our project deadlines were met. We were effective in taking research to policy. Sri Lanka's Personal Data Protection Act passed in 2022 is significantly improved from the GDPR clone it started out as. We at LIRNEasia can take some of the credit for limiting the damage caused by a law that is not appropriate for local conditions (though more needs to be done). Pivoting from COVID-19 research to social safety nets quickly, we helped shape the Aswesuma programme that was critical to looking after those most harmed by the crisis.

Not all the external threats have subsided. The unprecedented crisis that enveloped the country in 2021-22 is not over yet. The impact of high inflation, the harsh medicine that is being administered to root out the causes of our economic dysfunction, and the loss of hope is causing a significant exodus of talent. We are affected; recruitment is harder. Politicians pandering to middle-class grievance may take us back to default and shortages.

The pandemic and the associated changes including lockdowns should have been easy for us. Meetings and colloquia with remote participation were routine from the start at LIRNEasia. The performance evaluations at LIRNEasia were always based on output and outcomes, rather than time spent at the office. We never had sign-in and sign-out procedures. We spent days and weeks on the road. I had been writing about the transition from physical space to virtual space from the 1990s. But it was rough.

It took some time for people to shift focus from the physiological effects of the virus to the psychological effects of isolation and loss of human touch. But it took us even longer to grasp the damage being done to the invisible strands that converted a bunch of individuals into a well-functioning organisation. Again, it's not that we lacked the experience, starting in a single room in the back of the SLIDA premises (that building no longer exists) and taking phone calls and meetings at a picnic table under a great mara tree, and then moving to a multi-floor building that separated the team in all kinds of ways. Now, we are in a repurposed apartment. We felt the effects and are working to compensate.

As we move ahead with the new grants that have been obtained, we need to ensure that we operationalise the learnings gained in the bad years. How do we ensure that the space for serendipitous sparking of creativity is preserved in a workday that is dominated by scheduled remote meetings? How do we ensure that mentoring does not fall by the wayside? How do we ensure that the opportunities for tacit learning are fostered?

The pandemic and the multifaceted crisis that enveloped Sri Lanka subsequently mark a discontinuity. LIRNEasia, and the country where it is located, cannot go back to 2019.

We, and Sri Lanka, can sink into a degraded trajectory. Or we can do better. We will do better.

Rohan Samarajiva
Chair

Message from the CEO



It's been four years since we published an annual review. The years of COVID-19 made us contract our office space because we all worked from home, not just some of our staff who were already doing so part time. The economic crisis in Sri Lanka meant we continued to work from home even longer because getting to work was too costly or impossible. The exchange rate controls imposed on everyone by the Government of Sri Lanka also meant we had to cut our expenses to the bare bone-- even moving to a smaller office. Younger staff who couldn't see a future for themselves and their children in Sri Lanka decided to migrate overseas.

Today, it feels good to look back on those times and see that we survived petrol queues, power outages, times when we couldn't pay our international fellows, salary deferments, and even moments where we seriously considered winding down the organization.

We did better than survive – we made meaningful contributions to policy. Our research directly contributed to ensuring the new social welfare scheme that was being rolled out didn't leave out the neediest in Sri Lanka who didn't know they had to re-register for their benefits. Subsequently we were able to work on the new welfare policy (and develop a new area of expertise in-house). We helped shape several important pieces of law related to online safety and privacy in Sri Lanka, and shaped policy debates globally on misinformation. Our work on responsible artificial intelligence saw the concept taken seriously in the region. We found ourselves pivoting fast, using new research methods, and communicating effectively to policy makers.

We also used the time to think about the kind of organization we are, and the kind we wanted to

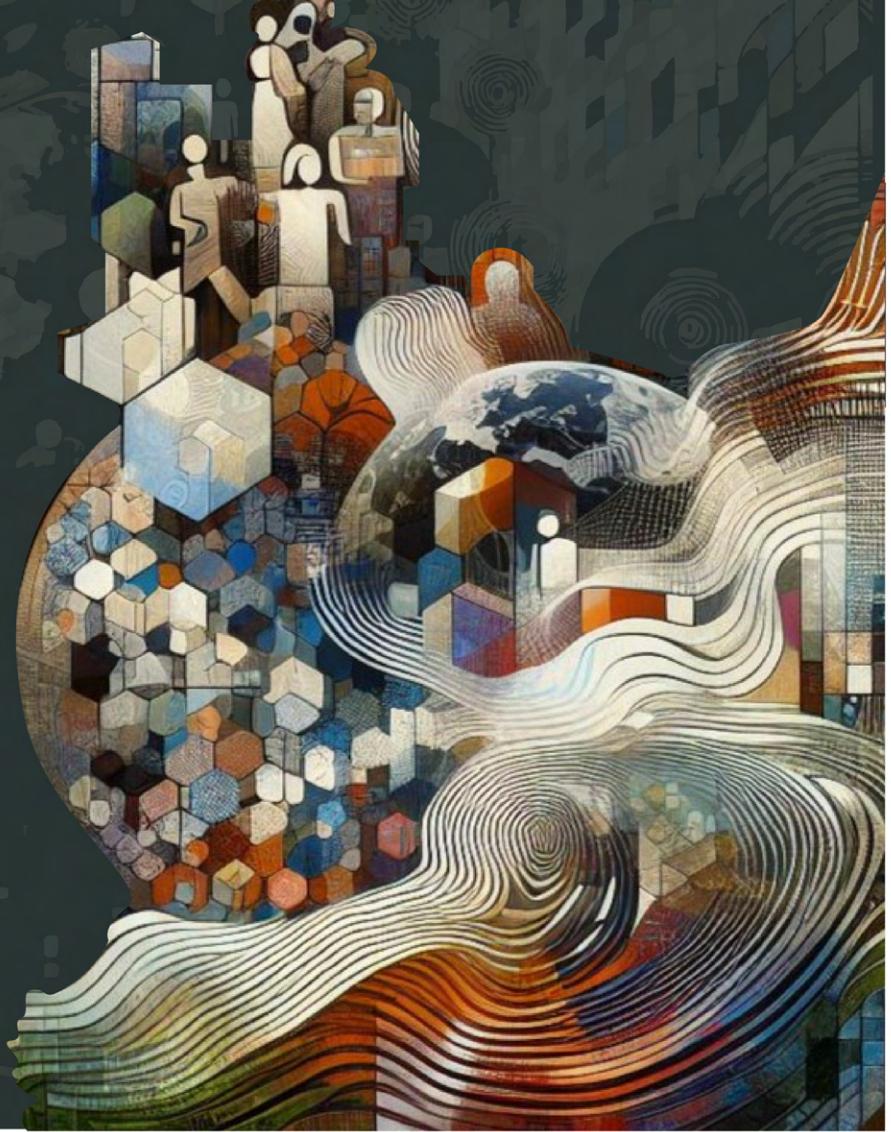
be – something that has been helpful as we face a world that has vastly changed over the past four years. We have managed to stay ahead of the curve in terms of producing policy-relevant research. Now, we must do it again: find workable policy solutions in a world that is more polarized, and where funding is more uncertain.

We are ready.

Helani Galpaya
Chief Executive Officer

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About us



About LIRNEasia

Despite our evolving focus, the core theme underpinning all our work has remained intact from the beginning: promoting inclusive economic development in the Asia Pacific.

We began our journey in 2004 with a team of five staff members as a telecom policy think tank, primarily focused on the economics of regulation within the sector. Over time, we organically expanded to explore how information and knowledge, transmitted through digital technology, can improve the lives of people in Asia. For example, we studied how access to market information can benefit farmers; or how mobile phone channels could be used for disaster early warning. Our work then extended to leveraging digital data and tools, such as algorithms and large datasets, to understand human behaviour and various economic sectors. We used telecom network big data to analyse people movement and to inform transport planning. While we continue to engage in these areas, our attention has increasingly turned to global governance issues. We are exploring how algorithms, data, and platforms should be governed in an age where users, producers, host platforms, and the physical networks transmitting data are spread across countries.

From time to time we have revisited and refined our mission statement to reflect the evolving direction of our organisation, the priorities of those we serve – those who are marginalised in various ways across Asia – and the policy priorities needed to achieve inclusive development. Most recently as part of our strategic planning activities in 2022, with funding from The Asia Foundation, we had the opportunity to collectively review our mission, and articulate our vision.

As such, our current mission is:

'Catalysing policy change and solutions through research to improve the lives of people in Asia Pacific using knowledge, information, and technology.'

At this same juncture, we took the opportunity to collectively reflect on and articulate the values that influence our organisational culture. Based on this collective articulation, we identified seven core values which are, and have been integral to our way of working over the years:

- **Continuous learning**
- **Integrity**
- **Quality**
- **Innovation**
- **Agility**
- **Resilience**
- **Commitment to the mission**



VISION

Promote inclusive economic development

MISSION

Catalysing policy change and solutions through research to improve the lives of people in the Asia and Pacific, using knowledge, information and technology

THEMATIC FOCUS AREAS



INCLUSION

- ◆ Education
- ◆ Social Safety Nets
- ◆ Disabilities
- ◆ Future of Work
- ◆ Access and Use
- ◆ Small and Medium Enterprises

DATA FOR SDGs

- ◆ Transaction Generated Data
- ◆ Natural Language Processing
- ◆ Satellite Remote Sensing
- ◆ Data Set Building

GOVERNANCE

- ◆ Platform Governance
- ◆ Data, Algorithms, AI Governance
- ◆ Information Disorder
- ◆ Participatory Democracy
- ◆ Infrastructure Regulation

INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Capacitator . Advocator . Data Wrangler

ORGANISATIONAL VALUES

CONTINUOUS LEARNING	INTEGRITY	QUALITY	INNOVATION	AGILITY	RESILIENCE	COMMITMENT TO THE MISSION
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People & culture

LIRNEasia's team is driven by curiosity and bold ideas. We work in teams with individuals as diverse as they are talented. We don't just learn; we explore, we critique, and we collaborate. Our teams work flexibly, across borders, and across cultures.

During our strategic planning process, we also asked everyone to write down on post-it notes the characteristics that make them feel part of the team and what they value most about working at LIRNEasia. This is what various people wrote (anonymously).

What helps us feel part of LIRNEasia?



What do we value most about the culture?



Not just names: The people who shaped our work in the past 4 years



Core Staff
during the 4
years in review

⋮	Rohan Samarajiva	<i>Chair</i>
⋮	Helani Galpaya	<i>Chief Executive Officer</i>
⋮	Nilusha Kapugama	<i>Chief Operating Officer</i>
⋮	Anha Adhlee	<i>Junior Researcher</i>
⋮	Ayesha Zainudeen	<i>Senior Research Manager</i>
⋮	Chanuka Algama	<i>Researcher</i>
⋮	Chiranthi Rajapakshe	<i>Research Manager</i>
⋮	Dayan Surendranathan	<i>Senior Researcher</i>
⋮	Dimuthu Attanayake	<i>Junior Researcher</i>
⋮	Gayani Hurulle	<i>Senior Research Manager</i>
⋮	Gayashi Jayasinghe	<i>Researcher</i>
⋮	Isuru Samaratunga	<i>Research Manager</i>
⋮	Isuru Udakara Yakandawala	<i>Junior Researcher</i>

	Isurini Fernando	<i>Research Manager and Statistician</i>
	Iyanthi Kulathilaka	<i>Junior Researcher</i>
	Jagath Perera	<i>Office Assistant</i>
	M. Parvati	<i>Office Assistant</i>
	Merl Chandana	<i>Research Manager and Team Lead: Data, Algorithms, and Policy</i>
	Milindu Tissera	<i>Communications Specialist</i>
	Namali Premawardhana	<i>Communications Coordinator</i>
	Nipuni Habaragamuwa	<i>Researcher</i>
	Piyumi Fonseka	<i>Communications Manager</i>
	Prashanthi Weragoda	<i>Senior Finance Manager</i>
	Priyadharshini Liyanage	<i>Accountant</i>
	Ramathi Bandaranayake	<i>Researcher</i>
	Ruwanka De Silva	<i>Junior Researcher</i>
	Sachini Ranasinghe	<i>Junior Researcher</i>
	Shenali Bamaramannage	<i>Researcher</i>
	Srimantha Katukurunda	<i>Office Manager</i>
	Sukitha Bandaranayake	<i>Researcher</i>
	Tharaka Amarasinghe	<i>Project Manager and Statistician</i>
	Vihanga Jayawickrama	<i>Junior Researcher</i>
	Viren Beruwalage	<i>Junior Researcher</i>
	Viren Dias	<i>Researcher</i>
	Yaseer Arashath	<i>Project Manager</i>
	Yudhanjaya Wijeratne	<i>Senior Researcher</i>

Policy Fellows

•	Abu Saeed Khan	<i>Senior Policy Fellow</i>
•	Harsha De Silva	<i>Senior Policy Fellow</i>
•	Muhammad Aslam Hayat	<i>Senior Policy Fellow</i>
•	Nirmita Narasimhan	<i>Senior Policy Fellow</i>
•	Babu Ram Aryal	<i>Policy Fellow</i>
•	Htaike Htaike Aung	<i>Policy Fellow</i>
•	Sriganesh Lokanathan	<i>Policy Fellow</i>
•	Tahani Iqbal	<i>Policy Fellow</i>
•	Wangey Dorji	<i>Policy Fellow</i>
•	Yatanar Htun	<i>Policy Fellow</i>

Research Fellows

•	Christoph Stork	<i>Senior Research Fellow</i>
•	Erwin Alampay	<i>Senior Research Fellow</i>
•	Nuwan Waidyanatha	<i>Senior Research Fellow</i>
•	Payal Malik	<i>Senior Research Fellow</i>
•	Pirongrong Ramasoota	<i>Senior Research Fellow</i>
•	Rajat Kathuria	<i>Senior Research Fellow</i>
•	Sabina Fernando	<i>Senior Research Fellow</i>
•	Sujata Gamage	<i>Senior Research Fellow</i>
•	Vigneswara Ilavarasan	<i>Senior Research Fellow</i>
•	Arthit Suriyawongkul	<i>Research Fellow</i>
•	Ashwini Natesan	<i>Research Fellow</i>
•	Ayumi Arai	<i>Research Fellow</i>
•	Danaja Maldeniya	<i>Research Fellow</i>

●	Dilshan Fernando	<i>Research Fellow</i>
●	Grace Mirandilla-Santos	<i>Research Fellow</i>
●	Kasun Amarasinghe	<i>Research Fellow</i>
●	Lasantha Fernando	<i>Research Fellow</i>
●	Moinul Zaber	<i>Research Fellow</i>
●	Nisansa de Silva	<i>Research Fellow</i>
●	Pradeepa Jayaratne	<i>Research Fellow</i>
●	Shazna Zuhyle	<i>Research Fellow</i>
●	Suthaharan Perampalam	<i>Research Fellow</i>
●	Yuhei Miyauchi	<i>Research Fellow</i>

Interns

●	Ali Hakim	<i>Research Intern</i>
●	Anah Cassim	<i>Research Intern</i>
●	David Gunawardana	<i>Research Intern</i>
●	Imaad Muwahid	<i>Research Intern</i>
●	Kavisha Batawala	<i>Research Intern</i>
●	Lainitha Krishnakumar	<i>Research Intern</i>
●	Neema Jayasinghe	<i>Research Intern</i>
●	Priyadarshan Logeswaran	<i>Research Intern</i>
●	Suhela Ranawana	<i>Research Intern</i>
●	Supun Dassanayake	<i>Research Intern</i>
●	Thilakna Kumaratunga	<i>Research Intern</i>
●	Zewei (Whiskey) Liao	<i>Research Intern</i>
●	Krithiga Thachanamoorthy	<i>Communications Intern</i>
●	Safa Haroon	<i>Communications Intern</i>

1.3

Advancing gender equity and inclusion

At LIRNEasia, gender and inclusion are fundamental lenses through which we approach all our work. The review of activities looks at how we incorporate gender and inclusion in our work, and the kinds of contributions that our work has made in various domains. But in the substance of our work, gender and inclusion are also key considerations in how we work as an organisation.

Gender and inclusion in how we work

Women constitute approximately 60% of our organisation. Almost all our senior managers are women. Two out of the five members on our Board of Directors are women.

Women constitute approximately 60% of our organisation.

Our core values, derived from our collective experiences and our mission statement, emphasise respect, equity, and inclusivity. We strive to respect human beings and do not discriminate based on class, age, gender, race, ethnicity, or religion. We do not tolerate harassment of any kind, ensuring that our workplace is comfortable and productive for everyone. Our anti-harassment policy extends beyond staff to include those that we deal with, regardless of their level of seniority, length of employment, or cultural background.

We strive to respect human beings and do not discriminate based on class, age, gender, race, ethnicity, or religion.

At LIRNEasia, we recognise the importance of supporting our employees during significant life events, such as the birth of a child. Offering both maternity and paternity leave is crucial in helping parents adjust to the new chapter in their lives. Research from the World Economic Forum in 2023 found that fathers who take paternity leave are more likely to be actively involved in their children's lives long-term, which benefits the child's development and the mother's well-being. This study also highlighted that equitable parental leave policies contribute to greater gender equality by allowing both parents to share childcare responsibilities from the start. At LIRNEasia, we provide paternity leave to new fathers, acknowledging the essential role they play in the early stages of their child's life. This policy supports our commitment to creating a balanced and supportive work environment where both men and women can thrive professionally and personally. Gender inclusivity benefits everyone, not just women.

In addition to parental leave, we also offer flexible work arrangements, including the option to work from home when needed; in fact, this is something that has been in place from pre-COVID times.

The flexibility, output-oriented culture, and culture of inclusion are also highly valued by staff.

This flexibility has been invaluable for women and men alike, enabling them to manage caregiving responsibilities for children and elders during special requirements or emergencies. By providing the option to work from home, we help to alleviate the care burden traditionally placed on women and promote a more equitable distribution of household duties. Men who have taken advantage of this option have expressed gratitude as it allows them to take on more household responsibilities, particularly when their partners are unable to work from home due to their job requirements.

Organisational growth through feminist learning

As a part of one of our recent large grants from IDRC (the Cyber Policy Centre grant), we received support to build capacity within the organisation on feminist approaches to research and operations. LIRNEasia researchers learned how to apply a feminist lens to our work and internal processes. Through Gender Action Learning workshops led by Gender at Work, we realised that while we often apply feminist principles unconsciously in our research design and organisational processes, having these principles explicitly framed has helped us apply them more consciously. Over the past four years, we have seen small but visible changes in the way we frame questions and issues, such as when wording a survey questionnaire, questioning our assumptions, or considering our positionality.

One of the most valuable outcomes of the Gender Action Learning activities was an organisational review using feminist tools to strengthen and support the organisation. The collaborative review of LIRNEasia's culture by staff offered candid insights into their core Values, areas for improvement, and other key aspects. The process helped us to understand that one of the features staff most value is the learning environment that LIRNEasia provides. The flexibility, output-oriented culture, and culture of inclusion are also highly valued by staff. This activity has been immensely valuable in helping LIRNEasia understand its key strengths from the staff perspective and identify areas for improvement.

Learning organisation

We embrace a culture of questioning, curiosity, and continuous improvement.

At LIRNEasia, learning isn't just something we do; it's who we are. We embrace a culture of questioning, curiosity, and continuous improvement. It is the part of our culture which our people –our greatest asset—value greatly, if not the most. We recognise that the pursuit of knowledge is not confined to formal education or training programmes.

In our organisation, “knowledge building activities” includes a range of training initiatives. While many researchers engage in formal structured training by attending training programs, conducting and attending colloquia, or taking a series of online courses, a substantial amount of training takes place on the job, where team members continuously develop their skills through hands-on experience and daily tasks.

Journal Clubs

‘Being a part of these journal clubs has been like stepping into a knowledge blender, but in the best way possible. Imagine a room filled with people bringing all sorts of experiences and various fields of expertise to the table: a potluck of ideas.’

Shenali
Bamaramannage,
Researcher

As a learning organisation, we must stay current with the latest research beyond our own walls. Therefore, we also host journal clubs, where our staff examine original knowledge from outside our organisation, broadening our perspectives and deepening our understanding of relevant topics. A researcher is assigned a book, a peer reviewed journal article, or a report – something that is directly or indirectly relevant to our multi-disciplinary work – and asked to present it, critically assess it and find relevance or connections between our work and the assigned reading.

The journal clubs can range in topic from high-level big-picture reports on the state of play in an area (e.g., Data for Better Lives: World Development Report 2021), to highly technical examination of a topic relevant to our work (Educative Interventions to Combat Misinformation: Evidence from a Field Experiment in India), to an explainer or review of a specific law or policy (e.g., The EU Artificial Intelligence Act).

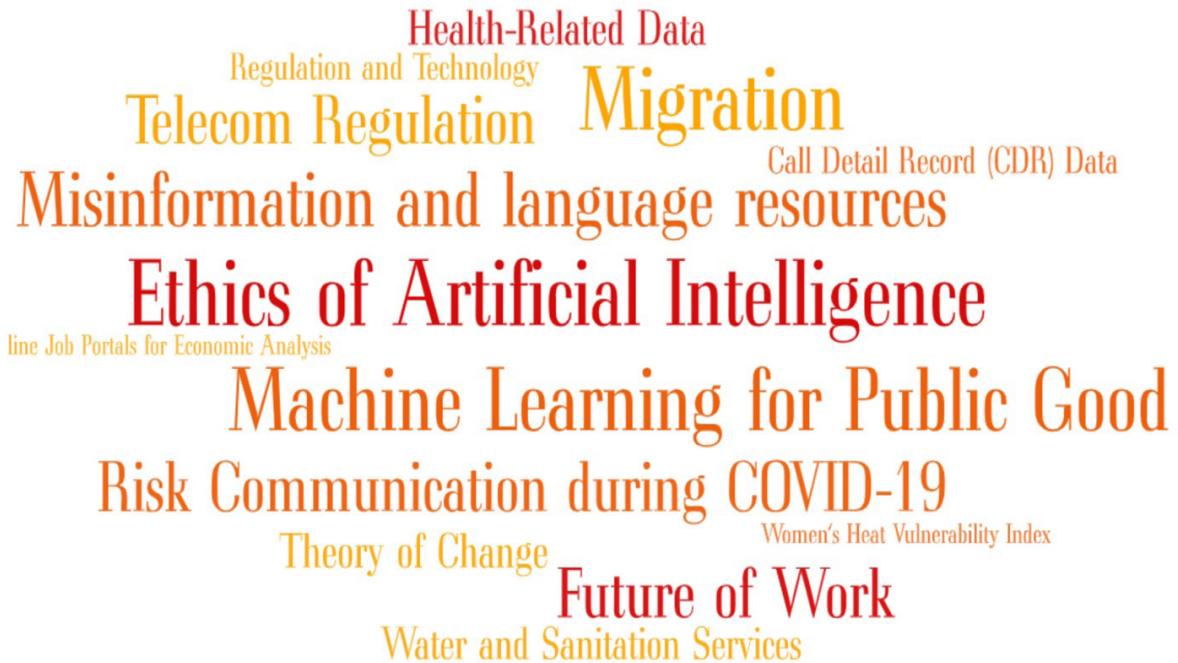
At other times, the researcher is synthesising multiple articles and books and presenting a broad sweeping picture of the topic (e.g. State of AI).

In the last four years, we have held 24 journal clubs, diving into various research areas.

- Research methods in a pandemic
- Analysis of knowledge domains and skill sets using LDA-based topic modelling
- Perspectives on issues in AI governance
- Analysing existing research on COVID-19 in India
- Cybersecurity and data protection law of China
- Data for better lives: World Development Report 2021
- The usefulness of the consumer survey method in defining relevant markets
- Gender inequalities during COVID-19
- Big data for the labour market: Sources, uses and opportunities
- Negotiating history: Contingency, canonicity, and case studies
- Disinformation reshaped the relationship between journalism and Media and Information Literacy (MIL): Old and new perspectives revisited
- Revisiting targeting in social assistance: A new look at old dilemmas
- Datasheets for datasets
- The future of digital democracy in the Global South
- The EU Artificial Intelligence Act
- Educative interventions to combat misinformation: Evidence from a field experiment in India
- E-Commerce: A driver of inclusive growth in Sri Lanka?
- State of AI policy
- Machine learning and phone data can improve the targeting of humanitarian aid

Colloquia

One of the main pillars of our learning culture is our colloquia. These gatherings provide a platform for our researchers to share their work – completed or in-progress. They are a primary way of peer review for our work; a ‘safe space’ for our younger researchers to dry-run their presentations before presenting at public events; a space for finding synergies between projects; a place where ideas for new research questions emerge. They foster a culture of collaboration, knowledge-sharing and constructive critique. Over the past four years, we have had a total of 25 colloquia covering a wide range of topics, as seen in Figure 1.



Wordle of our colloquia topics from April 2020 - March 2024

These curated primers –often multi-part—were a way to bring everyone up to speed on knowledge and tools we need to carry out our work.

Primers

The stillness of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the timing of the IDRC-supported Gender Action Learning initiative gave us opportunity to self-reflect as an organisation. When we asked staff what they valued most about the culture at LIRNEasia, learning opportunities featured heavily at the top of the list.

With the reduced travel demands of staff due to the mobility restrictions, we asked them to distil and present to the organisation their knowledge and expertise across various domains – ranging from the philosophy of science and technology to big data analytics using remote sensing data, to sample and survey design methods. These curated primers –often multi-part—were a way to bring everyone up to speed on knowledge and tools we need to carry out our work.

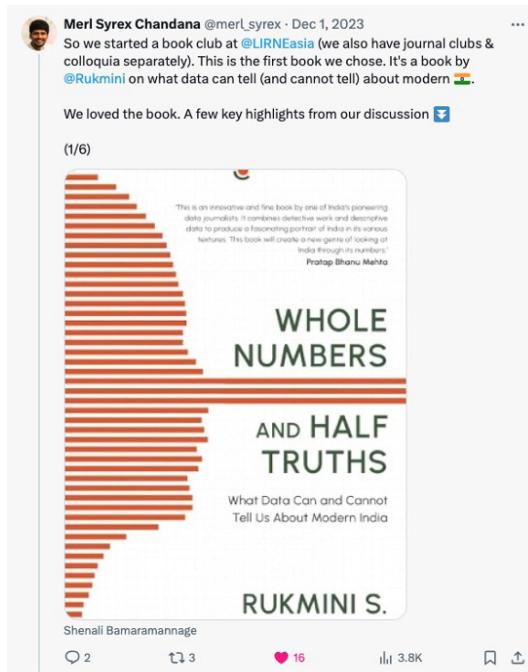
The sessions are a valuable opportunity for mentorship and professional development. In the last four years, we organised 11 multi-part primers covering a diverse set of topics, such as the philosophy of science and technology, qualitative and quantitative research methods, big data analytics, AI governance, cybersecurity and data protection law, digital policy in Sri Lanka, gender action learning, organisational capacity assessment, and strategic planning.

Book Clubs

In late 2023, a new staff-led initiative came to fruition: the Book Club. Here, interested staff gather monthly to explore a wide range of literature, from works directly relevant to our field to those that ignite our curiosity.

Our first pick Whole Numbers and Half Truths -- by Rukmini S., a pioneering data journalist from India—demonstrated that the realm of impact of this informal convening is far wider than we had initially thought. To our delight, the author responded to a social media post reflecting on the first meeting of the book club, sparking a follow-up conversation. Taking our virtual interactions into the real world, upon her visit to Colombo, an event was organised where she joined Merl Chandana, our Data, Algorithms, and Policy Team Lead, at the Barefoot Gallery. Together, they explored the impact of data in shaping narratives.

Other than Rukmini's Whole Numbers and Half Truths, the books collectively dissected and examined at our book clubs included Moneyball by Michael Lewis, Power and Prediction by Ajay Agrawal, Avi Goldfarb, and Joshua Gans and Recoding America by Jennifer Pahlka. This diverse collection provided a wealth of insights on data-driven innovation, governance, and decision-making in various fields.



Rukmini S @Rukmini

This is incredible – thank you for engaging with the book!

10:07 PM · Dec 1, 2023 · 284 Views

1 3 5 3.8K

Post your reply

Yudhanjaya Wijeratne @yudhanjaya · Dec 5, 2023

It's a fantastic book with plenty of lessons for Sri Lanka. Thanks for writing it!

1 1 1 194

Rukmini S @Rukmini · Dec 6, 2023

Thanks very much! I'll be in Colombo in Feb – hoping very much to engage with the data/ policy community.

1 3 3 82



To our delight, the author responded to a social media post reflecting on the first meeting of the book club, sparking a follow-up conversation. Taking our virtual interactions into the real world, upon her visit to Colombo, an event was organised where she joined Merl Chandana, our Data, Algorithms, and Policy Team Lead, at the Barefoot Gallery.

Board of Directors



Rohan Samarajiva

Chair



Jeeva Perumalpillai-Essex

Development Economist



Lakshman Bandaranayake

Chairman, Sarvodaya SEEDS



Mervyn de Silva

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Vishaka Nanayakkara

Senior Lecturer, University of Moratuwa

**Term ended in Dec 2022*

**Term ended in Dec 2022*

Advisory councils and committees

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The members of our Scientific Advisory Council are as follows:

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Alison Gillwald, PhD

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Robin Mansell, PhD

Professor Emerita, London School of Economics; Scientific Director, Observatory on Information and Democracy, Forum on Information & Democracy, Paris

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Tim Kelly

Lead ICT Policy Specialist, World Bank Group, USA

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Professor at University of
Maryland, USA*



Nuwan Senaratna

*Director of CBC Tech Solutions
Ltd; Founder and CEO of
ColomboLabs Inc., Sri Lanka*



**Pirongrong
Ramasoota, PhD**

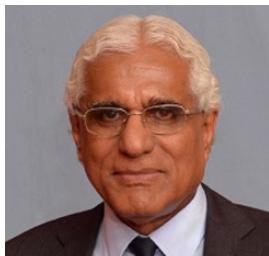
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*Co-founder - Centre for Law
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Kasturi Sridhar

*Independent Consultant
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**Anja Kovacs, PhD**

Consultant: Research & Advice on Feminism, Technology, & the Digital Society, India; Senior Fellow, Centre for International Governance Innovation, Ottawa

Who we have worked with over the past four years

Over the last four years, LIRNEasia has partnered with a wide range of organisations, including repeat funders and first-time collaborators. These partnerships have played a crucial role in supporting our research, dissemination efforts, capacity building initiatives, and technical advancements. Whether through sharing data, co-developing research, or collaborating on technical solutions, each partnership has been instrumental in driving our mission forward.

Funders

- Ford Foundation
- Facebook (Meta)
- International Development Research Centre
- Millenium Challenge Corporation
- Institute de Estudios Peruanos (Institute of Peruvian Studies)
- Public Utilities Commission of Sri Lanka
- Vriens & Partners
- The Asia Foundation
- GSMA Mobile for Development Foundation
- Research ICT Africa
- JustJobs Network
- University of Cape Town (South Africa)
- Association for Progressive Communication
- German Development Cooperation (GIZ)
- Konrad Adenauer Stiftung
- Asian Development Bank
- Progressus Corporation
- Meridian Institute
- East West Management Institute
- Stellenbosch University
- The World Bank
- United Nations Development Programme
- Lanka Jathika Sarvodaya Sharamadana Sangamaya
- Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
- Department for International Development (UKAID)

Partners

- Centre for Policy Research (India)
- TopJobs.lk
- World Resources Institute (India)
- Indian Institute for Human Settlements
- Research ICT Africa
- Centro Latam Digital
- Advocata Institute (Sri Lanka)
- Ceylon Chamber of Commerce Chamber Academy (Sri Lanka)
- Centre for Law and Technology (Nepal)
- Gender at Work
- Appendix Pvt Ltd (Watchdog, Sri Lanka)
- Ernst & Young (Sri Lanka)
- Federation of Information Technology Industry Sri Lanka
- Sarvodaya Fusion (Sri Lanka)
- Citra Social Innovation Lab (Sri Lanka)
- South Centre (Switzerland)
- Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations
- Cepei (Colombia)
- Lanka Electricity Company (Pvt) Ltd/ LECO (Sri Lanka)
- World Health Organisation
- Digitally Right (Bangladesh)
- Prime Institute (Pakistan)
- National Law University Delhi
- BRAC University (Bangladesh)
- Centre for Handicapped Kundasale (Sri Lanka)
- Wellassa Organisation of Persons with Disabilities (Sri Lanka)
- Siharam Disability People's Organisation Koralaipattu West, Oddamavadi (Sri Lanka)
- Global Centre on AI governance (South Africa)



2

From crises to resilience

GENDER
DATA FOR SDGS
SOCIAL SAFETY NETS
DIGITAL POLICY AND REGULATION
MISINFORMATION
FUTURE OF WORK
CLIMATE CHANGE
HUMAN RIGHTS
INCLUSIVE AGRICULTURE
DISABILITIES
DIGITAL TAX

The impact of COVID-19 on LIRNEasia's research

Besides rethinking what to research, we also had to reconsider how to do it.

The pandemic forced us to reconsider our research methodologies, given the limitations imposed by lockdowns, social distancing measures, and health and safety concerns. Starting from May 2020, we explored existing resources and drew from our own experience and insights to address the implications of the rapidly changing context for our research processes. One major shift was recognising new research questions that emerged during the pandemic, such as: How do digital technologies impact access to essential goods and services? What new inequalities are arising due to uneven digital access across the Asian Global South?

Besides rethinking what to research, we also had to reconsider how to do it. With the global health crisis, we examined both qualitative and quantitative methods, discussing necessary changes and the challenges and opportunities ahead. Inspired by the UNDP Innovation 'Speak Up via WhatsApp' project, we experimented with a novel e-diary tool. This approach captured real-time, self-reported insights into daily life during Sri Lanka's second wave of COVID-19. While it seemed like a workaround for fieldwork restrictions, the e-diaries provided valuable first-hand information alongside traditional interviews. Participants sent daily photos of their meals, exercise routines, and home-schooling activities, while brief phone interviews each evening added further context. The enthusiastic response to this format raised important questions about how data collection tools shape the quality and depth of the information gathered. It made us reflect on the influence of methodology on research outcomes.

Engaging with people in the field is central to our work, but the pandemic made this significantly harder. Mobility restrictions, health protocols, and public hesitancy created major challenges. Pilot survey tests revealed that even when we could reach people, many were reluctant to participate.

The pandemic forced us to reconsider our research methodologies, given the limitations imposed by lockdowns, social distancing measures, and health and safety concerns.



These challenges echoed a similar crisis in Sri Lanka after COVID. Adapting and innovating research methods became essential, requiring flexibility in contracts and funding. Despite limited resources, we continued to find creative solutions.

Switching to remote or phone surveys brought its own challenges, especially since many in our target group—such as persons with disabilities (PWDs) and those from low-income backgrounds—lacked access to personal devices.

For example, interviewing someone with hearing impairments over the phone was extremely difficult. With time constraints and funding deadlines, we faced a tough choice: either sacrifice some level of representation or risk incomplete fieldwork before the next wave of the pandemic. Even among non-PWDs, response biases emerged, as many were hesitant to participate in face to-face surveys despite strict social distancing measures. This added another layer of complexity to our decision-making.

These challenges echoed a similar crisis in Sri Lanka after COVID. Adapting and innovating research methods became essential, requiring flexibility in contracts and funding. Despite limited resources, we continued to find creative solutions. Training external individuals was logistically difficult, but our team's resilience ensured success. Budgeting for dissemination also required innovation as we worked to reach our audience effectively.

LIRNEasia's journey through Sri Lanka's economic crisis

During Sri Lanka's economic crisis, which peaked in 2022, LIRNEasia, like every organisation and person in the country, faced unprecedented challenges. With soaring inflation, dwindling foreign reserves, and shortages of essential goods, continuing policy-relevant research, especially in digital infrastructure and agriculture became increasingly difficult.

As the crisis unfolded, LIRNEasia adapted to the changing situation, staying focused on our pro-poor goals. We prioritised projects that would help the most vulnerable groups. Government imposed foreign exchange controls created financial challenges, leading us to renegotiate contracts and cut costs while maintaining research quality. Rising living costs required salary increases, which were made possible by voluntary salary deferments from senior staff. To ensure financial stability during uncertain times, we also worked to diversify our funding sources, forming partnerships with international organisations and foundations that supported our pro-poor policies.

As the crisis deepened, the government introduced energy conservation measures, leading to widespread power cuts and fuel shortages, worsened by soaring global oil prices.

During these challenging times, LIRNEasia's staff faced unique obstacles.



Protests erupted across the country, resulting in significant political changes. During these challenging times, LIRNEasia's staff faced unique obstacles. Some worked while waiting in fuel queues. But it wasn't just the queues that tested our resilience. With daily power cuts becoming the norm, we had to be inventive to keep the lights on – quite literally. We gathered around makeshift Wi-Fi hotspots using our phones, and power banks became our lifeline, keeping our devices charged through the blackouts.

The mental toll was undeniable. The constant uncertainty weighed heavily on us all. Yet, somehow, we found strength in each other, in our shared commitment to making a difference, no matter the obstacles. As the days turned into weeks and the crisis showed no signs of easing, we knew we had to do more than just survive – we had to thrive. So, we channelled our energies into new areas of work, exploring ways to use our expertise to address the pressing needs of our communities.

The economic, social, and political challenges didn't stop us from our mission. Even as the crisis worsened, we kept focusing on digital infrastructure, recognising its importance during the pandemic and economic struggles. Virtual conferences, webinars, and publications became key tools for sharing our knowledge. We worked with policymakers, regulators, service providers, and the media to ensure our research continued to guide decision-making, especially in tough times. Looking back over the past four years, we're proud of how we managed to survive and thrive, continuing our important work to help those who need it most.

3

Review of activities



Starting in May 2021, LIRNEasia began strategically realigning itself with funding from The Asia Foundation's (TAF) South Asia Grants Programme (SAGP). This led to the development of a new strategic plan for 2023-2025. As part of this process, we created a strategic framework to categorise all our work into three key focus areas, or pillars: Inclusion, Data for SDGs, and Governance. This section reviews the work carried out from April 2020 to March 2024, organised by these three pillars. It's important to note that many areas of our work are interconnected and may touch on more than one pillar.

The first pillar or focus area is inclusion. Our work centres around ensuring that national policy frameworks are inclusive and designed to uplift the lives of the poor, vulnerable, and marginalised groups. This can include contributing toward creating more equitable, efficient and transparent social safety nets to protect the vulnerable, to ensuring socio-economically empowering, rights preserving, meaningful internet access for all, to a future of work and labour that increasing decent work opportunities for vulnerable groups through inclusive national labour policy frameworks and laws.

The second focus area, Data for SDGs, uses data to drive positive change. This includes analysing mobility patterns, using satellite data to track climate change and heat stress—especially for female workers—and creating high-quality datasets to support research and policymaking.

The third focus area, Governance, aims to strengthen platform governance and telecom regulation to ensure users are better protected. This can include work focused on various laws, regulations and institutions that govern digital platforms (e.g., social media regulation, digital taxation policy), as well as work focusing on the governance of data, algorithms and AI (e.g., data protection legislation, cross border data policy), to policy issues that have a bearing on digital rights and risks to the user (e.g., how misinformation spreads and methods of countering it). Our traditional areas of work which relate to telecom (and broader infrastructure) regulation – to ensure access and affordability to all—are also included under this focus pillar.

THEMATIC FOCUS AREAS



INCLUSION

- ◆ Education
- ◆ Social Safety Nets
- ◆ Disabilities
- ◆ Future of Work
- ◆ Access and Use
- ◆ Small and Medium Enterprises



DATA FOR SDGs

- ◆ Transaction Generated Data
- ◆ Natural Language Processing
- ◆ Satellite Remote Sensing
- ◆ Data Set Building



GOVERNANCE

- ◆ Platform Governance
- ◆ Data, Algorithms, AI Governance
- ◆ Information Disorder
- ◆ Participatory Democracy
- ◆ Infrastructure Regulation



Inclusion

LIRNEasia's work within this area is geared towards ensuring that national policy frameworks are inclusive and designed to uplift the lives of those living at the intersections of various forms of marginalisation such as income, gender, physical ability.

Digital technology as a path to inclusion

At LIRNEasia, our entry point to inclusion has been primarily through digital technology. Recognising the role of meaningful digital access in shaping societal progress—along with the necessary analogue complements—our work is directed toward providing evidence for policy change that can positively impact the lives of vulnerable and marginalised segments of society. This focus on digital technology as a tool for inclusion has remained central to our approach in addressing social inequalities.

Building on a foundation of years of rigorous research, our CEO Helani Galpaya, was invited in 2020 and 2022 to deliver guest lectures to master's degree students at the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) at Columbia University. These lectures explored critical aspects of digital inclusion and the challenges faced by underserved populations in accessing digital technologies. Helani emphasised the importance of inclusive and adaptive policy frameworks to bridge digital divides, and drive development and equity.

In her capacity as a member of the Centre's Advisory Group for 2022-2023, Helani also conducted an assessment for the Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development (APCICT). The purpose of the assessment was to identify the courses that APCICT should offer, as the leading digital policy training institution for the Asia-Pacific region within the UN system, thus enabling LIRNEasia to shape effective policy and training mechanisms for digital inclusion across the region.

Our dedication to promoting digital inclusion on a global scale continued at the OECD Digital Economy Ministerial Meeting in Spain in December 2022. There, Helani participated in a panel discussion titled High-Quality Connectivity Across the World, where the session focused on strategies for developing high-quality connectivity and facilitating dialogue on regional approaches to bridging digital divides. Building on her previous engagements, she shared her insights on policy frameworks designed to promote digital inclusion in Asia, highlighting the interconnectedness of quality connectivity and inclusive development. This discussion further reinforced our ongoing efforts to shape global conversations on the role of digital technology in fostering social inclusion and economic development.

The AfterAccess surveys: Understanding digital exclusion

Our award-winning AfterAccess surveys across six countries in Asia, conducted between 2016-2019, and disseminated into 2020, shed light on the dynamics of digital inclusion—where countries have been doing well and where they have fallen short. Little did we know then that the findings from this study would serve as a crucial reference point in understanding the unfolding impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on digital access and its implications across other sectors.

As the world grappled with the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic, our research became even more relevant. The pandemic pushed numerous aspects of daily life into the digital world, from remote work to education, essential shopping, and even social interactions. This forced transition to the digital space exposed the gaps in access and raised pressing questions about the sustainability and inclusivity of digital policies in the face of such a global crisis.

Digital tools became essential in fighting the virus, helping with communication, contact tracing, and vaccine distribution. While these innovations brought new opportunities, they also exposed existing inequalities in technology access. Gender and economic gaps worsened the pandemic's impact on vulnerable groups, highlighting the need for inclusive policies.

Building on this momentum, LIRNEasia also took its findings to key global platforms. In November 2021, we presented our AfterAccess research findings at the India Internet Governance Forum (India IGF). The forum provided a platform for policymakers, industry leaders, and digital rights advocates to discuss pressing issues surrounding internet governance and digital inclusion. Our presentation highlighted key data insights on digital access and usage, including disparities in internet connectivity, device ownership, and digital skills, and also called for a multi-stakeholder approach to addressing digital divides, making the case for evidence-based policy interventions in both local and regional contexts.

Impact of COVID-19 on digital access and inequality

Drawing on our diverse work in many areas, including disaster response, education, the future of work, and gender, we started to understand the multifaceted impact of COVID-19. Leveraging insights from our AfterAccess surveys, we unpacked the challenges faced by digitally-disconnected individuals in accessing education during pandemic-related lockdowns.

Moreover, recognising the important role of digital payments and online presence for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), we engaged in policy dialogues to raise awareness of the importance of digital payments amidst the “new normal.”

A screenshot from a short LIRNEasia video highlighting the need for SMEs to be digitally connected especially during a lockdown and crises.



However, conducting research amid pandemic restrictions posed unique challenges, compelling us to innovate with methods like the e-Diary to ensure continuity in our studies.

The challenges identified through our research became even more urgent as the pandemic revealed the need for immediate action to ensure no one is left behind in the digital transition. In this context, LIRNEasia's continued engagement in discussions around digital inclusion became even more critical. Our CEO, Helani Galpaya, spoke at a panel discussion organised by the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce in late 2020 on the use of digital platforms for Small and Medium-sized Businesses (SMBs).

Presenting findings from LIRNEasia's national SME survey, she highlighted how digital connectivity became crucial for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) during COVID-19 lockdowns, particularly for accepting digital payments. Helani underlined how higher ICT adoption is strongly linked to enterprise size and growth, with digitally connected businesses more likely to achieve higher revenues, integrate into global value chains, and expand customer each.

Limited device access left many students struggling to keep up with online classes. With parents often taking phones to work, some teachers in government schools adapted by offering lessons at early and late hours, ensuring no child was left behind. Photos shared by relevant families with their consent for the research study.



Expanded demand-side research in India and Sri Lanka: the “COVID+” surveys

Building on our previous work, we expanded our efforts to comprehend the demand-side dynamics on a broader scale. Through two surveys conducted in India and Sri Lanka, we sought to examine people’s behaviours in relation to various aspects of life before, during, and after the pandemic in depth.

These surveys, completed in May 2021 captured insights into work patterns, access to essential resources like education, food and healthcare. These surveys were instrumental in painting a comprehensive picture of societal dynamics amidst unprecedented challenges.

However, navigating the complexities of sampling which ensured national representation of the population aged 15 and conducting a face to face survey amid pandemic surges presented unique challenges. A phone survey would have been ideal, but no one had a robust sample that would not exclude the unconnected, and we couldn’t verify some information if we relied on a phone conversation. In India, safety considerations compelled us to exclude the state of Kerala from the sample. In Sri Lanka, the face to ace survey took place with stops and starts, with the field research team trying to stay one step ahead of the disease while respondents at times mistook them for health inspectors.

The survey findings were launched in both countries in 2021 through online launch events. Abhishek Singh, President and CEO, National e-Governance Division, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) of India, who participated in the research launch event, stated that the survey findings provided a comprehensive view of the status quo in the country, and were consistent with anecdotal feedback government was receiving.

Similarly, the (then) Director General of Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka, Oshada Senanayake, participating at the parallel event in Sri Lanka, commended LIRNEasia for producing an opportune report, and reflected on the research findings on changes in internet use. Findings were used to highlight policy challenges in training activities (e.g., at an UNESCAP organised session on building capacity on universal service funds, attended by government agencies of 19 countries). Findings were used to frame discussion on policy options at key international forums (e.g., at the G20 Digital Economy Working Group meetings and OECD Ministerial Meetings).

Second Digital Economy Working Group meeting of the G20, held in Hyderabad, India from 17-19 of April 2023. CEO Helani Galpaya took part in the opening panel titled 'Digital Inclusion: Connecting the Unconnected'.



Platform usage in emerging Asia



LIRNEasia
Pro-poor. Pro-market.

Working paper
Digital platforms in Asia: Access and Use

Helani Galpaya, Gayani Hurulu, Tharaka Amarasinghe and Shenui Bamaramanage
April 2023

LIRNEasia was commissioned by the World Bank to produce a report examining the use and access to digital platforms in Asia. Using data from the AfterAccess initiative and nationally representative surveys conducted during the COVID-19 lockdowns, we explored how individuals and businesses in six countries—Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and Cambodia—engaged with digital platforms.

The report focused on the use of digital platforms for buying and selling goods and services, while also examining factors such as digital skills, payment mechanisms, and barriers to adoption. We highlighted the transformative impacts of the pandemic, particularly on education and food delivery services. Our findings emphasised key policy recommendations to foster inclusive digital growth and ensure broader access across diverse demographic groups. This work was made possible by grants from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Ford Foundation, and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

Digital access in education

The findings from the COVID+ surveys highlight significant disparities in digital access and its role in enabling the delivery of education during lockdowns. Among households with at least one child in full-time education at the onset of the pandemic, 76% in Sri Lanka and 64% in India had internet access.

The survey investigated whether children received some form of educational instruction, such as through WhatsApp messages, online video-based learning, group calls, or other channels. It did not measure actual learning outcomes, which is more complex to assess.

In both countries, digital connectivity played a crucial role, with connected households being far more likely to provide educational access to their children. For example, in India, 31% of children in connected households received some form of education, compared to just 8% in unconnected households. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, 90% of children in households with internet access received educational instruction remotely. These results underscore the crucial role of internet connectivity in continuing education during crises.

Connectivity gaps were often linked to economic class, household education levels, and urban versus rural settings. Connected households were typically wealthier, more urban, and had more educated parents than their unconnected counterparts, demonstrating how offline disparities translated into online educational gaps.

The survey also highlighted the importance of maintaining diverse forms of educational delivery during shutdowns. Sri Lanka surpassed India by using diverse delivery methods, including TV broadcasts, online content, and SMS, rather than relying on a single digital channel.

These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers seeking to build inclusive and resilient educational systems in both countries, emphasising the need for a robust, multi channel approach to educational delivery during crises.

The survey findings were cited by Sri Lanka's Leader of the Opposition to emphasise the importance of advocating for a multi-faceted approach to remote education, using various channels such as television, radio, and the postal service. Education Forum Sri Lanka organised several policy dialogues centred around these research findings, with participation from school heads and district-level education officials. Overall, the findings received extensive media coverage in both Sri Lanka and India, with around 200 articles published, including national level coverage in both countries and significant state-level coverage in India.

From research to reform: Catalysing change in Sri Lanka's social protection systems

Before fully recovering from the COVID pandemic, Sri Lankans found themselves struggling with a major economic crisis, adding another layer of hardship to their struggles. Even before the government declared its inability to service bilateral and commercial debt in April 2022, awareness was building among the President's advisors that the country was heading into a massive crisis. This resulted in a call asking about what knowledge LIRNEasia could contribute to the internal discussion on ensuring that the poorest and most vulnerable will be protected from the impending crisis.

Realising the urgency of supporting an equitable economic recovery, we started to gather and disseminate knowledge concerning cash transfers, essential for establishing robust social safety nets to support those who were hardest hit by the crisis. Leveraging the results of our IDRC funded nationally representative survey conducted in 2021, originally aimed at measuring the pandemic's impact across various domains, including digital access, livelihood, food security, education, and digital platforms, we responded to the need of the hour. While our survey did not initially focus on this aspect, it revealed useful and up-to-date insights into the landscape of welfare benefits for the poor - such as significant problem of accurately targeting those most in need for social assistance. We saw that those who needed the support the most were not getting support while others who didn't need support were receiving it.

For example, 55% of households most in need (those in socioeconomic category E, which refers to the poorest segment of society) did not receive any assistance; meanwhile, 7% of those least in need (those in socioeconomic category A, the richest) did receive assistance (Figure 1).

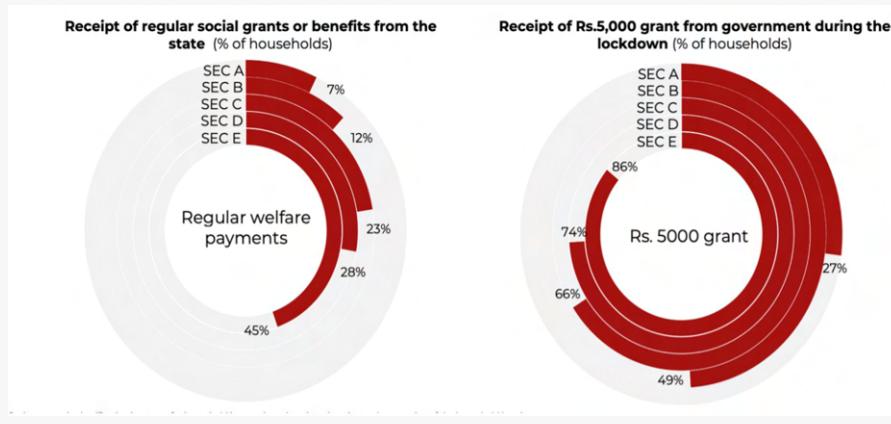


Figure 1: Insights on targeting of existing welfare schemes,
Source: LIRNEasia (2022)

Note: Base = 10,062 households

We were able to highlight how wider use bank accounts to include state and private banks, and mobile phones (including the mobile phone cash out network) could help to streamline the welfare payment system, for example by making the distance travelled to collect payments shorter, and making overall delivery more efficient. In doing so, we drew upon the learnings from our earlier research in ‘big data analytics,’ which examined how near-real-time data streams from mobile network operators could be combined with other large datasets to map socioeconomic levels in cities with greater accuracy. Within just a few weeks of actively engaging in the domains of poverty and social protection, we began sharing our work publicly.

Support for the poor in the form of cash transfers was one of the few areas that parties and organisations across the political spectrum could agree on as part of a Common Minimum Programme (CMP) that the government could adopt to bring the country out of the crisis. This data was featured in an op-ed article by Helani Galpaya in the Financial Times and was presented to the IMF team at a convening they organised for civil society organisations.

As we delved deeper into social protection, it became evident that there were several glaring gaps in the existing data. This included outdated poverty data –with the government’s latest figures from 2019 failing to capture the profound impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic crises. Furthermore, there was a concerning lack of data on the implementation of specific schemes, such as Samurdhi —the flagship social protection programme—including whether the poorest were receiving funds, how long beneficiaries remained on these schemes, and the exit rates from these initiatives. We wanted to fill these important data gaps to help improve social protection for the most poor and vulnerable.

Adding to the complexity of the situation was the government’s announcement of a new scheme called Aswesuma, designed to replace the Samurdhi cash transfers, among others. Beneficiaries for this new scheme were to be selected through a multi-step process, including the use of a 22-indicator formula called the deprivation score. This development presented us at LIRNEasia with a unique opportunity to test the effectiveness of this formula in accurately identifying the poor.

We made the strategic decision to redirect some funds from an existing grant towards conducting a 10,000-sample nationally representative survey and qualitative research involving approximately 400 individuals across 13 districts. The design of our survey was greatly aided by the technical input from development agencies such as the World Food Programme, which helped us identify questions that would enable the precise measurement of food poverty in the country.

This research too proved insightful. For example, the survey highlighted that 4 million Sri Lankans had fallen into poverty between 2019 and 2023 – consequently, 7 million Sri Lankans, or 31% of the population were living in poverty. Further poverty had increased across provinces, with nearly half the population in some provinces living in poverty (Figure 2).

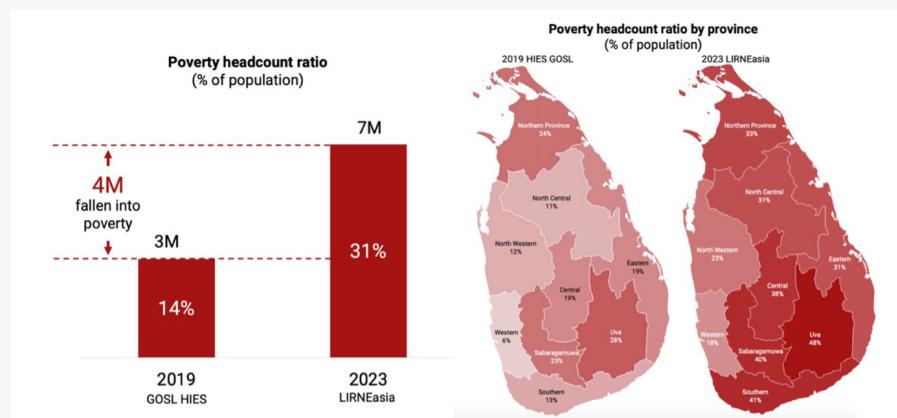


Figure 2: Poverty in Sri Lanka (2019 vs 2023),
Source: LIRNEasia (2023)

The survey also showed that only 31% of those in the poorest decile received Samurdhi cash transfers, while 4% of those in the richest decile did. Each beneficiary, on average, spent 4 hours collecting benefits each month, with some spending up to 12 hours a month.

In June 2023, we launched the findings from our extensive research at an event attended by key government officials, including the State Minister of Finance and the (then) Chairperson of the Welfare Benefits Board, representatives from development agencies, think tanks, civil society organisations, and members of the media. This launch event served as an important moment in our journey, as we shared the findings from our in-depth studies with stakeholders who could drive meaningful change.

Photos from the report launch in June, 2023





Following the launch, we facilitated follow-up meetings with key government officials, including the State Minister of Finance, the Minister of Labour, and the Committee on Comprehensive Social Protection for Workers. During these meetings, we shared our research findings and explored potential policy options to address the challenges identified. Moreover, we actively participated in five stakeholder meetings with the delegates from the IMF, providing insights on the state of the economic reform process and emphasising the impacts on the poor and vulnerable communities.



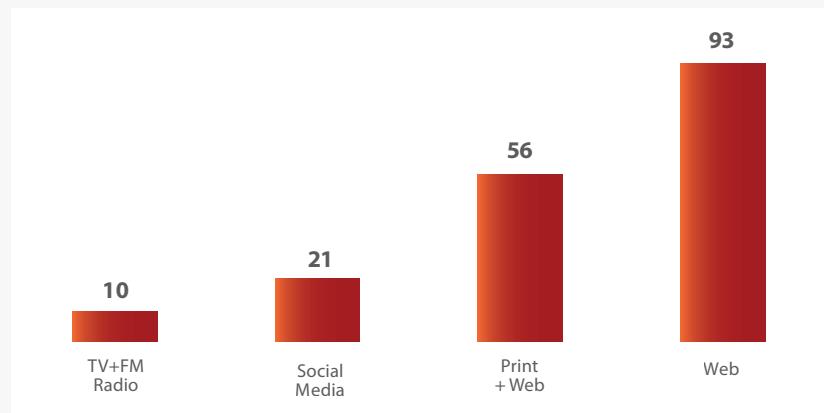
In January 2024, where we met the Committee on Comprehensive Social Protection for Workers, led by Labour Minister Manusha Nanayakkara. During our presentation, we shared findings from LIRNEasia's survey, stressing the need for an inclusive social protection system, noting gaps in contributory savings schemes like EPF and ETF. We also highlighted the growing number of platform workers and suggested policy measures to protect them.

Our engagement extended to other development agencies as well, such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the United Nations Development Programme, all of whom provide technical assistance to the government. We continued to engage with other think tanks and civil society actors, sharing our research findings and contributing to discussions on building a comprehensive social protection system. In late 2023, one of our Senior Research Managers Gayani Hurulle served as a discussant on a panel dedicated to this topic, alongside the Director General of the National Planning Department, representatives from the World Bank, UNICEF, and other key stakeholders and decision makers.

Our research findings gained attention, making notable appearances even in Parliament, with the Opposition Leader citing it multiple times to underscore the prevalence of poverty and advocate for system improvements. In one instance, he highlighted LIRNEasia's research, which indicated that 7 million Sri Lankans, constituting 31% of the population, were living in poverty, emphasising the significance of their findings compared to official statistics. Development agencies such as the World Bank and UNDP have also referenced our research in their publications.

The World Bank used the research to shed light on the politicisation within the existing system and advocate for reform, while the UNDP collaborated with us on a joint blog post, emphasising the importance of integrating digital and data elements into the reform process. The research has received substantial media coverage too, being cited approximately 180 times across various media platforms since early 2021 (Figure 3). It has been featured in a diverse range of local and global mainstream media channels, websites, and social media platforms, including notable outlets like BBC Radio, Nikkei Asia, and Channel News Asia.

Figure 3: Media coverage of our social safety nets research report by platform
Source: LIRNEasia



This IDRC-funded research has not only gained attention but has also opened new avenues for LIRNEasia. We were recently contracted by the UNDP to conduct a Digital Readiness Assessment for the Social Protection landscape, leveraging our expertise in both digital technology and social protection. Additionally, the World Bank is working with our team to conduct a survey to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the Awesome programme, using LIRNEasia's datasets as a base.

Addressing disability data gaps and capacity building on assistive technologies

The lack of accurate and high-quality data on disability prevalence in Sri Lanka exacerbates the exclusion of Persons With Disabilities (PWDs) from essential services like education, employment, healthcare, and social support. To address this gap, LIRNEasia, with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and World Health Organisation (WHO), launched a significant initiative aimed at filling these data gaps, which have long hindered inclusive policymaking.

In the first phase, an extensive landscape mapping exercise was conducted to evaluate existing disability datasets across government bodies, NGOs, and disabled persons organisations in Sri Lanka. Qualitative data was collected through focus group discussions and key informant interviews across six districts: Colombo, Kandy, Monaragala, Rathnapura, Kilinochchi, and Batticaloa to understand disability data gap from the data provider perspective. Additionally, capacity building workshops on Assistive Technologies for persons with disabilities and for their caregivers was conducted in the same districts.

In the second phase, LIRNEasia carried out a survey in Colombo and Kandy, ensuring representation across urban, rural, and estate sectors. Over 40 enumerators, including PWDs themselves, were deployed for this exercise after undergoing intensive training on survey data collection. This initiative, which aligns with Sri Lanka's progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities, aims to pave the way for more inclusive policymaking and effective interventions.

The two-day National Consultation Workshop on 'Disability Data and Assistive Technologies' held in March, 2024 in collaboration with WHO and UNDP Sri Lanka.



Gender and inclusion in our work

We acknowledge the importance of measuring, understanding, and addressing marginalisation, especially in relation to gender, across our work areas like digital access, algorithmic and AI governance, platform-based jobs, and the design of social safety nets. Instead of treating women as a uniform group, we consider the intersections of other forms of marginalisation, such as economic status, rural location, and ethnic identity.

Our surveys, such as Teleuse@BOP and the award-winning AfterAccess surveys, were among the first to quantify gender gaps in access and use in the developing Asian region, filling a lacuna of reliable gender-disaggregated data for policymaking. The nationally representative, face-to-face survey samples are designed to enable gender disaggregation of data at the national level and often at other sub-sample levels (e.g., urban/rural), allowing for intersectional analyses of quantitative data. These kinds of rigorously collected survey data are often complemented with qualitative data to provide deeper insights and understand the nuances of the specific barriers women face in accessing and utilising digital technologies. This includes limited access to infrastructure, cultural norms, and socioeconomic constraints.

Years of rigorous research and analysis have positioned us as a leading voice in global policy debates on gender, digital access, and the digital economy. Our CEO Helani Galpaya's contributions on international platforms reflect our continued commitment to fostering inclusive digital spaces.

In March 2024, Helani was appointed to the inaugural Advisory Council of the Women in the Digital Economy Fund (WiDEF), a \$60 million initiative by USAID and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to close the gender digital divide by advancing digital access, literacy, safety, and women-led solutions. She also served on the initial advisory committee of the Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN), a global project supporting feminist research to challenge gendered power structures online and inform inclusive internet policies.

Further, LIRNEasia contributed valuable insights at the United Nations Responsible Business and Human Rights Forum held virtually in June, 2021. Marking the 10th anniversary of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the event explored transformative approaches to advancing responsible business practices in the Asia-Pacific region. CEO Helani who was invited to speak at this global event, shared key findings from the AfterAccess surveys and research on online harassment in Myanmar, highlighting the intersection of digital rights and business responsibility.



Helani was also invited to speak at the 67th UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67) in March 2023, where the focus was on digital technology and gender equality. The hybrid panel, titled Innovation for Women and Equality, was convened by Amina Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary General. Drawing from multiple LIRNEasia research projects, Helani highlighted the persistent challenges in achieving meaningful digital connectivity for women across Asia.

Helani's contributions to CSW67 were informed by earlier work as part of the CSW67 Expert Group in September 2022, where she and our Senior Research Manager Ayesha Zainudeen co-authored a paper titled *Gender and Digital Access Gaps and Barriers in Asia: But What About After Access?*. These efforts reflect LIRNEasia's ongoing commitment to gender inclusive digital policy advocacy on global platforms.

A recent project involved a qualitative exploration of the women's empowerment through digital platform-enabled work in Sri Lanka and India, conducted in partnership with the Centre for Policy Research (CPR, India). During the height of pandemic, the research explored how such flexible work and earning opportunities come at a cost to women, and may not lead to the desired outcome of lasting women's labour force participation. Though the project was conceived prior to the pandemic, its timing was fortuitous as the crisis underscored the very challenges and trade-offs that the study sought to examine.

The project was a part of a larger consortium of similar IDRC-funded projects across the Global South, convened by the JustJobs Network (JJN). In its role of convenor, JJN organised a 10 day, two-continent roadshow to take the findings of the various research projects to global policymakers, at the ILO (Geneva), the European Commission (Brussels), the OECD (Paris), and the US Department of Labour (Washington DC), in May 2023. The findings from LIRNEasia and CPR's study were also published in a joint volume, Empowerment or Exploitation: Global Perspectives on Women's Work in the Platform Economy, published by JJN.

Senoir Research Manager, Ayesha Zainudeen in Brussels, participating in a 10-day roadshow organised by the JustJobs Network, in May 2023, taking research findings to global policymakers at the ILO, European Commission, OECD and UN.



The findings of this qualitative exploration together with key gender data points on remote work from the COVID+ survey were presented and made use of in several panels and talks, to highlight the uneven gender impacts and opportunities of remote and flexible work, now becoming the 'norm' as the pandemic ensued. At a panel co-organised by LIRNEasia at the inaugural Sri Lanka Internet Day in April, 2021, Ayesha used the findings to set the stage for panellists Bani Chandrasena (Head of Inclusive Diversity at the London Stock Exchange Group Sri Lanka), and Dr. Gayathri Lokuge (Team Leader for Livelihood and Employment at the Centre for Poverty Analysis) to discuss the challenges of women's work during the pandemic. Ayesha also presented the findings at CPRDialogues2022, organised by CPR in New Delhi in 2022, highlighting the gender norms and inequalities that are in fact reinforced by remote and flexible work 'opportunities.'

An inclusive and sustainable future of work

LIRNEasia continues to expand its future of work portfolio with a focus on inclusion and sustainability, through a five-year grant from the IDRC to establish and nurture an Asian research network, FutureWORKS Asia.

From technological innovations to shifting demographics and the climate transition, the world of work is undergoing profound transformation. Not enough is known about how these changes are manifesting in labour markets across the globe, especially the Global South. New opportunities as well as challenges and forms of inequality are constantly unfolding due to these shifts taking place at a global scale. Furthermore, beyond pandemic recovery, to facilitate inclusive growth in the Global South, there is a need to strengthen labour market institutions and empower workers' and employers' groups, especially in key sectors. As our previous work has highlighted, Asia in particular is held back by a lack of decent work, gender disparities, high levels of informality and weak labour institutions. Strengthening labour market institutions can have wide-reaching impacts on living standards for the region.

Recognising the urgency of understanding and addressing the challenges from a Global South perspective, the IDRC of Canada launched the FutureWORKS initiative. FutureWORKS aims at building and nurturing a South-centric research network which focuses on ensuring an inclusive and sustainable future of work. LIRNEasia was competitively selected lead the Asian hub in the FutureWORKS network. Similar regional hubs are being established across Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East to conduct research, foster collaboration, and inform public policy for promoting decent work and advancing skills.

Over the next five years, LIRNEasia will build a network of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners dedicated to advancing the future of work in the region. Through the issue of a number of research grants in the region, capacity-building activities, and knowledge sharing, FutureWORKS Asia aims to empower communities and institutions to navigate the complexities of the changing labour landscape, and help the region better respond to the changes through improved policy in the domains of skills and education, social protection, care economy, *inter alia*.



Launch of the FutureWORKS Collective at inception workshop in Negombo in March, 2024. The workshop, organised by the JustJobs Network, was the first in-person convening of the five regional hubs that will form the Global South research network.



Data for inclusive sustainable development

At LIRNEasia, our quest to leverage data for sustainable development began in 2012, driven by the potential of open-source software and affordable hardware to process vast datasets. Researchers with data science skills are always hard to find when we are competing for them against some of the largest private sector companies.

Despite this, our commitment to continuous learning and interdisciplinary collaboration has enabled us to overcome obstacles effectively.

In 2022, we made a strategic decision to focus on: (i) working with data partners to leverage transaction generated data; (ii) expanding the Natural Language Processing (NLP) work we started into new directions; and (iii) building high quality datasets for machine learning which is the key in unlocking the power of artificial intelligence.

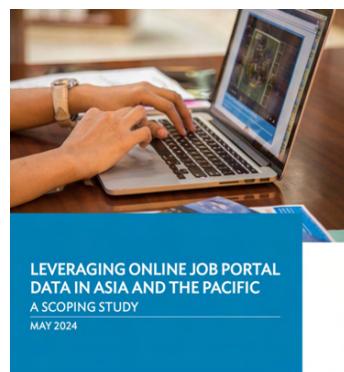
These choices, informed by our organisational vision, operational context, and the state of data science as a discipline, guide us in addressing challenges and finding innovative solutions, reinforcing our commitment to data-driven, sustainable development.

Natural language processing for labour market intelligence

Natural Language Processing (NLP) is crucial for our work, as policy and social-good-related issues generate large amounts of text data. One application of NLP is providing timely labour market intelligence to support evidence-based decision-making. Noticing the absence of a timely mechanism to communicate the skills demand of employers, we set out to develop a mechanism to gather data from Sri Lankan job boards and analyse the real-time demand for skills in different sectors. The initial exploratory work was funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada.

Expanding on our success, we secured funding from the Asian Development Bank in 2022 to extend this research across 12 Asia Pacific countries. The resultant research on Online Job Portals (OJPs) in Asia and the Pacific, shed light on the potential and challenges of utilising OJP data for labour market insights. Through a comprehensive scoping study of 34 major OJPs across 12 economies, and interviews with key stakeholders, LIRNEasia has uncovered valuable information on job vacancies, skills demand, salary trends, and jobseeker behaviour. While acknowledging challenges such as data representativeness, quality issues, and ethical concerns, our research team proposed practical strategies to enhance the utility reliability and inclusivity of OJP data of labour market intelligence. These include adjusting for biases, standardising data formats, and expanding coverage to blue-collar and gig-work platforms. By addressing these challenges and advocating for responsible data use, LIRNEasia is paving the way for more effective, evidence-based policymaking in labour markets across the Asia Pacific region, ultimately contributing to inclusive economic growth and a better understanding of the evolving employment landscape.

The ADB report cover and the main acknowledgement page



Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by Merl Chandana, Ayesha Zainudeen, and Imaad Muwahid of LIRNEasia; and Madhavi Pundit of the Macroeconomics Research Division under the Economic Research and Development Impact Department.

Using natural language processing to understand the propagation of misinformation on traditional and social media

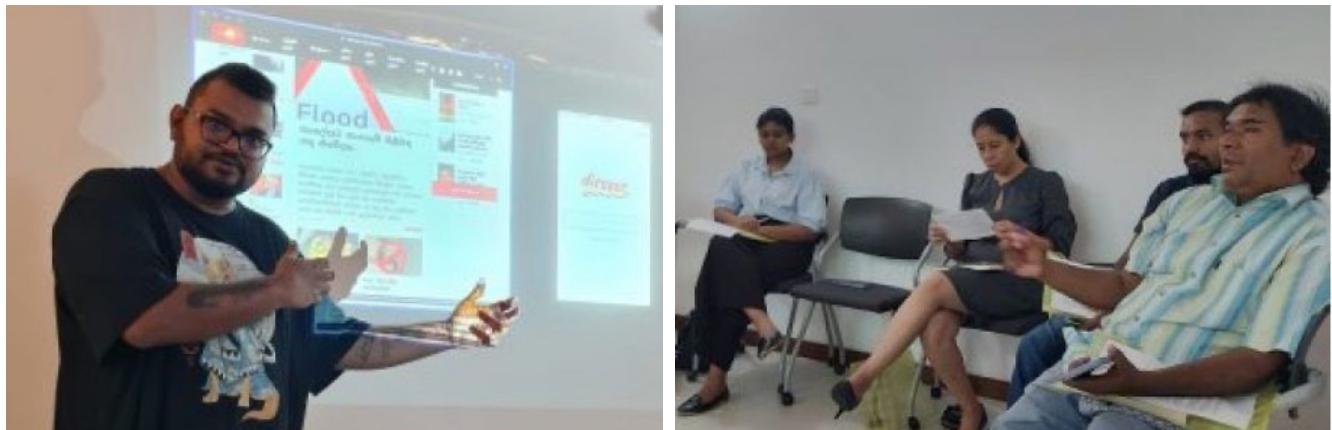
Building on past and ongoing work around misinformation, we are also currently in the process of using NLP techniques to understand how misinformation spreads across traditional and social media. In Sri Lanka, media concentration and political ties have fostered biased narratives, stifled diverse perspectives, and suppressed independent journalism. By analysing 15 years of media content through web scraping, OCR [optical character recognition], and NLP techniques such as topic modelling, sentiment analysis, and Named Entity Recognition, we are tracking narrative evolution, biases, and media pluralism. Simultaneously, we will investigate viral misinformation on Twitter by accessing Twitter's API data to measure the speed and scope of false information dissemination, identify patterns and mechanisms driving virality, and assess the effectiveness of interventions using metrics like retweets, engagement indicators, and network analysis. This comprehensive approach will reveal the dynamics of misinformation propagation and inform strategies to counter its impact on public discourse.

AI tools and fact-checking: Enhancing information accuracy in the Global South

In an era where misinformation spreads rapidly and at scale, leveraging AI tools for fact checking is crucial to maintaining the integrity of information. LIRNEasia studied information disorder in Asia through a scoping study on the challenges of information disorder in the Global South in 2022. We conducted over 80 key informant interviews, including fact checkers and journalists, to gather data for the study. These professionals discussed their use of digital tools, including AI tools, in their daily work. Some of the digital tools mentioned were the Social-People Index, Facebook Ad Library, Crowd Tangle, Senticone, Google fact-check tools, Claim Buster, and TinEye.

In another project funded by The Asia Foundation, we explored fact-checkers' willingness to use AI tools in their fact-checking processes. Fact checkers explained how AI can be integrated into their work, what they expect from an AI tool, and the challenges of using AI. We explored this because the quantity and speed of information creation and spread can be difficult for humans to keep up with. Often, a viral (and untrue) story is noticed by fact checkers only after it has already gone viral. As such, the use of tools might help not only to identify content that is false but also to identify false content before it causes harm.

This year, in collaboration with Appendix Pvt Ltd (Watchdog Sri Lanka) and The Asia Foundation, we focused on enhancing the use of AI for journalism. Through this project, we rigorously tested an AI-empowered tool designed for journalists and fact-checkers. Six journalists and fact-checkers actively tested the tool over five months, providing essential feedback that led to several improvements, enhancing both user-friendliness and technical performance. The testers highlighted the tool's rapid analysis capabilities and accuracy, although challenges were noted in processing long Sinhala and Tamil articles. We will move towards a broader public launch, ongoing collaboration with end-users, and iterative refinements based on user feedback in the next year.



These photographs are from a recently held workshop in Colombo where LIRNEasia unveiled 'Dissect' the fact-checking tool developed by Appendix Private Limited (Watchdog) to a group of journalists and fact-checkers.



Remote sensing data for development

Remotely sensed satellite imagery is an important data source for our work, offering valuable insights for policy, development, and social-good applications. These data help monitor changes on the earth's surface and atmosphere over time and space, which is helpful in informing planning and resource allocation. By providing up-to-date information, remote sensing facilitates applications ranging from urban planning and disaster response to wealth mapping and climate change monitoring.

Building on our previous work on estimating paddy cultivated extent using neural networks and remote sensing data, we decided to see if we could use the same approach to better estimate urban extent in Sri Lanka. Drawing from the work of the UN Habitat and other scholars who have argued that the existing administrative definition of a 'city' does not mirror reality, we decided to leverage high-resolution satellite data and advanced machine learning techniques to create a comprehensive urban map of the country. Our early results on this have been encouraging our final outputs will be released over the coming months.

We also conducted a study on using mobile Call Detail Records (CDRs) and remote sensing data for spatial mapping of poverty in Sri Lanka. By applying machine learning techniques and integrating diverse data sources such as CDRs and Geographic Information System (GIS) data, we aimed to improve the accuracy and timeliness of poverty distribution mapping. Our research shows promising results in creating higher-resolution poverty maps, which can support evidence-based decision-making for targeted interventions and effective poverty alleviation efforts. Additionally, we are in the early stages of developing a simulation of Colombo using a popular city simulation engine, incorporating high-resolution population maps derived from remote sensing and developed by Meta's AI research team.

We have recently started using remote sensing to study extreme heat and its disproportionate impact on vulnerable communities, particularly women and girls. Our research revealed systemic inequalities in how females experience and cope with heat, including economic disparities and differences in labour force participation. By utilising satellite sensors, we can track atmospheric and earth surface temperatures. In addition, GIS and remote sensing data on tree cover, water bodies, and built-up areas offer valuable context to this temperature data. We are also working on mapping these land cover categories more systematically, exploring how changes in them are linked to development and social cohesion.

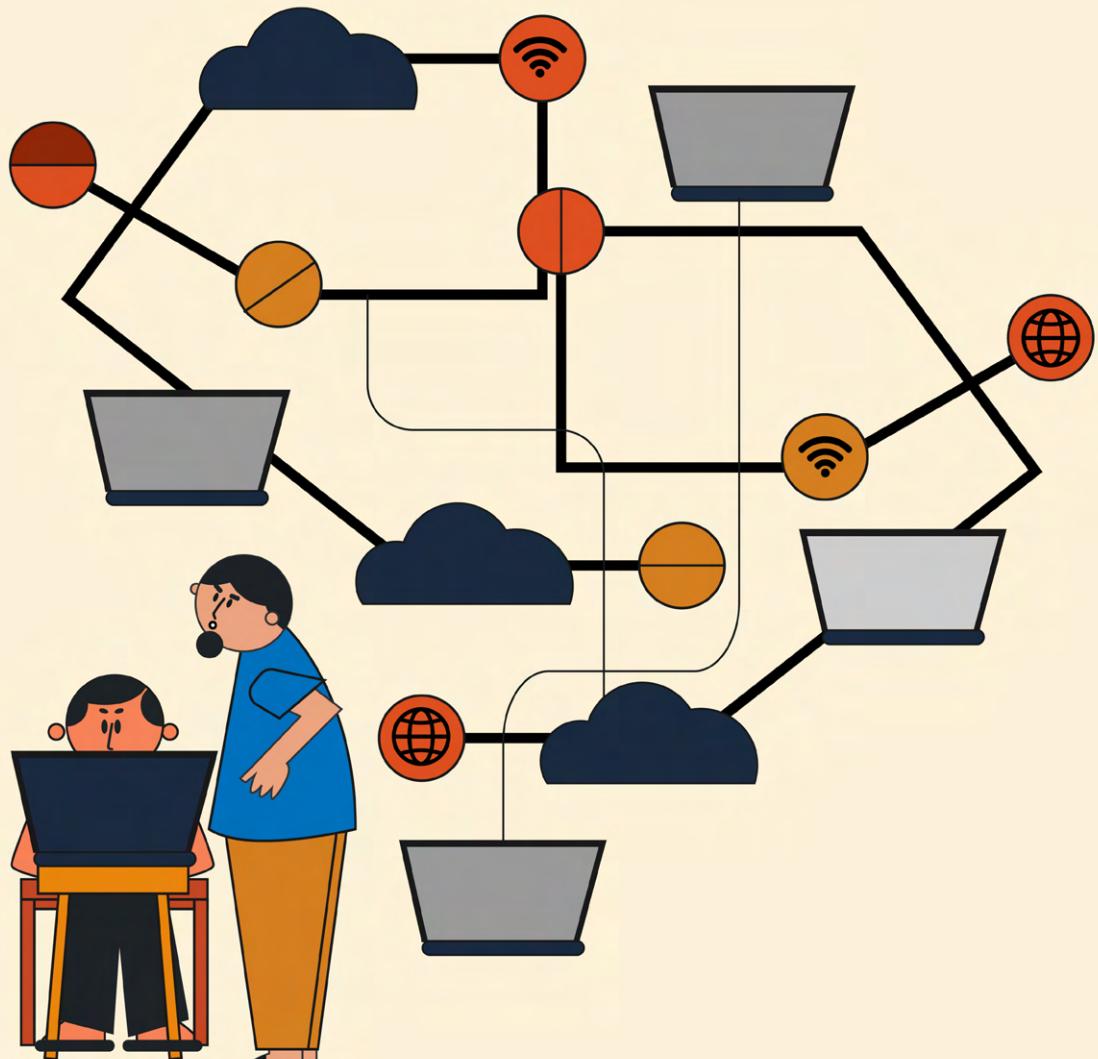
Building datasets at the intersection of climate change and energy

Sri Lanka is only just emerging from an economic crisis that affected the energy sector, causing unreliable supply, blackouts, and increased petroleum use, a known atmospheric pollutant. A proven solution to help addresses this complex problem is better demand management. Effective demand management requires access to a diverse and integrated set of data containing information on electricity consumption and its underlying drivers. Accessibility to such datasets is crucial in developing methods that will lead to reliable insights, better products, and policy changes. Currently it is difficult to find datasets that have adequate coverage, quality, and documentation.

With a grant from the LACUNA Fund, LIRNEasia is currently developing a two-part dataset that combines electricity consumption data (from smart meters and regular meters) with results from a three-round longitudinal survey. This dataset, covering over 4,000 households, aims to capture the drivers, attitudes, and knowledge related to electricity consumption. It will be valuable for various machine learning applications, including load shape analysis, non-intrusive monitoring, energy forecasting, and energy benchmarking.

*Snapshot from our fieldwork:
A qualitative study exploring
behaviours and attitudes toward
electricity consumption.*





Governance

Governance and regulation have been central to our work across various areas since the very beginning. In recent years, much of our efforts in this domain have focused on platform, data, and AI governance, which form the backbone of the modern digital world. Effective governance in these areas is crucial for crafting inclusive policies and practices that maximise the benefits of digital connectivity, enabling innovation and minimising harms to users. In keeping with our ethos, we have always attempted to ensure that the governance policies are implementable and suitable to the development context of the emerging Asian Pacific countries we work in.

Harnessing data for democratic development in South and Southeast Asia

Data governance systems are made up of policies, laws, practices, and technologies that govern data. Ideally, a data governance system protects rights, enables innovation, improves transparency, and ultimately brings about democratic, inclusive governance.

There are many existing and new policies, laws and practices related to data governance. Tensions can arise when balancing conflicting needs – for example between the right to privacy vs the need for transparency or the right to information. In advanced economies, these conflicts may be adjudicated in efficient court systems. But how do they work in less resourced situations?

What are the core building blocks for a data governance policy ecosystem that enables the creation, use, re-use, transfer and storage of data in a manner that enables innovation, protects human rights and leads to efficient service delivery? What are the policies that exist and what is missing? These are the questions we attempt to answer. Research under this project is being carried out in India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Philippines. The research explores laws and policies related to areas such as personal data protection, competition law, open data, cybersecurity, archives, to name but a few. It also aims to develop a network of mid-career policy intellectuals who can effectively influence policymaking related to data in their countries and in the region.

Improving cross-border data flows in the BBINS region

Given the global nature of the digital economy, data generated in a country is frequently stored and processed outside its borders; cross border data flows are crucial for enabling trade, innovation, and economic development. Some countries have introduced or are considering, data localisation policies -- requirements to store and process data within the borders of a specific country within which the data was generated. Data protection and security, and data sovereignty are some reasons cited for introducing such requirements.

LIRNEasia is a part of a network of think tanks convened by the World Bank, looking to contribute towards improving the policy landscape on cross border data flows in the BBINS region (Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka). As a part of this initiative, we have analysed legal and policy documents, conducted interviews with key stakeholders, and participated in policy discussions both at a national and regional level. Critically, at a national level, we considered the feasibility of data localisation requirements for public authorities in Sri Lanka given infrastructure constraints. Regionally, conversation focus on identifying opportunities to foster greater regional integration.

The photo is from a meeting held in Colombo in February 2024 with the think tank network to align the efforts of various stakeholders, assess the progress made thus far, and chart a comprehensive timeline moving forward.



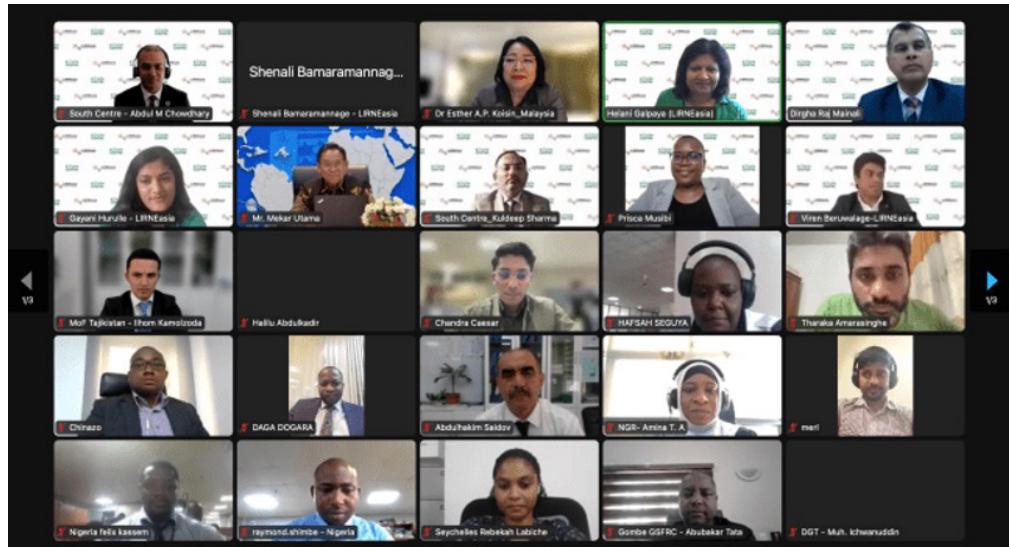
Digital taxation for multinational tech firms

The widespread growth of cross-border data flows in the digital economy has also impacted taxation systems. Many current tax laws are designed to tax companies with a physical presence in a country. However, many businesses now operate and generate profits in countries where they have no physical presence. International solutions, like the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework, have been discussed for years but have yet to be implemented. In the meantime, many countries have developed their own domestic solutions, such as digital services taxes.

LIRNEasia has been at the forefront of examining various taxation approaches, including domestic measures implemented by countries such as India, Pakistan, and Malaysia, as well as international treaty-based solutions like the UN Model Tax Convention and the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework.

We conducted research and convened several policy dialogues on this topic, along with the South Centre. A key event was an online expert forum in September 2023, that saw the participation of over 40 countries. This was followed by a session on digital taxation at the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Kyoto, marking one of the discussions on this topic at IGF.

A screenshot from the online expert forum held in September 2023, that saw the participation of over 40 countries.



A photo from the session on digital taxation at the Internet Governance Forum in Kyoto, Japan.



Therefore, LIRNEasia has begun conducting research, and policy dialogues in this space. In response to these challenges, LIRNEasia has been at the forefront of examining various taxation approaches, including domestic measures implemented by countries such as India, Pakistan, and Malaysia, as well as international treaty-based solutions like the UN Model Tax Convention and the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework.

Our work aims to facilitate informed decision-making on digital taxation policies, focusing on crucial aspects such as revenue generation, implementation strategies, and the need to balance government income with a competitive business environment. By organising events like the Digital Tax Forum, LIRNEasia continues to foster critical discussions on designing effective digital tax systems that can increase government revenue while ensuring a level playing field for both local and multinational businesses in the digital age.

Understanding the spread and counteraction of misinformation

Various forms of misinformation, disinformation, mal-information, hate speech, fake news has emerged as a significant challenge in today's digital world, shaping opinions, influencing decisions, and sometimes causing widespread harm. While disinformation is not a new phenomenon, the speed and scale of its spread is higher and large than ever before thanks to various online digital platforms. We have in the past studied this phenomenon across Asia, and documented the ways in which the problem manifests itself, and the various attempts taken to

counter it. These include policies and laws that attempt to outlaw the creation and spread of false information, countering falsehoods with fact checks, improving the ability of recipients of information to identify falsehoods, and actions by governments (including the algorithmic de-prioritisation of false information). This is a topic that probably has the highest attention among policy makers, private platform providers and researchers globally. But much of the research is based in the Global North, often the countries where the platforms are located. How these so-called ‘solutions’ work in emerging economies in Asia is an under-researched subject. Why do people believe misinformation? What counter-measures are effective and how can these programs be scaled up?

Researching the human factors of misinformation

Building on previous research into information disorder in the Asian region, we have launched a comprehensive study, funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), to explore how human factors contribute to the spread and belief in misinformation. This research, which began in 2023, focuses on the sociocultural and economic elements that affect people’s ability to identify false information, particularly on social media. The study is structured in three phases.

In the first phase, we will conduct a nationwide survey involving 3,000 Sri Lankan participants to assess factors that influence people’s vulnerability to or skepticism about misinformation. In the second phase, we will carry out experimental studies to test various media literacy interventions—such as training videos, video games, and social media group interactions—to identify the most effective methods for empowering people to recognise and resist misinformation. Finally, in the third phase, we will carry out qualitative research through interviews and focus group discussions with diverse participants, including journalists, academics, and regular social media users.

In addition to our adult-focused research, we acknowledge the important role younger generations, especially children, play in combating misinformation. To address this, we are partnering with Sarvodaya Fusion, the ICT branch of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, to assess the effectiveness of existing digital literacy programmes aimed at young learners. These programmes seek to equip early adolescents with the essential skills to navigate the vast amounts of information they encounter online. Funded by the IDRC, this research explores the link between digital literacy and vulnerability to misinformation among young people. Through methods like in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, we aim to provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and technology developers on how to best foster critical thinking skills in youth.

A glimpse of the data collection which took place in the Monaragala district to address key questions concerning early adolescents' internet behaviour and their ability to identify misinformation. Photo Courtesy: Sarvodaya Fusion



Together, these efforts provide a comprehensive look at how different segments of the population—adults and children—interact with misinformation, helping us design more effective interventions to counter its spread in both the present and future.

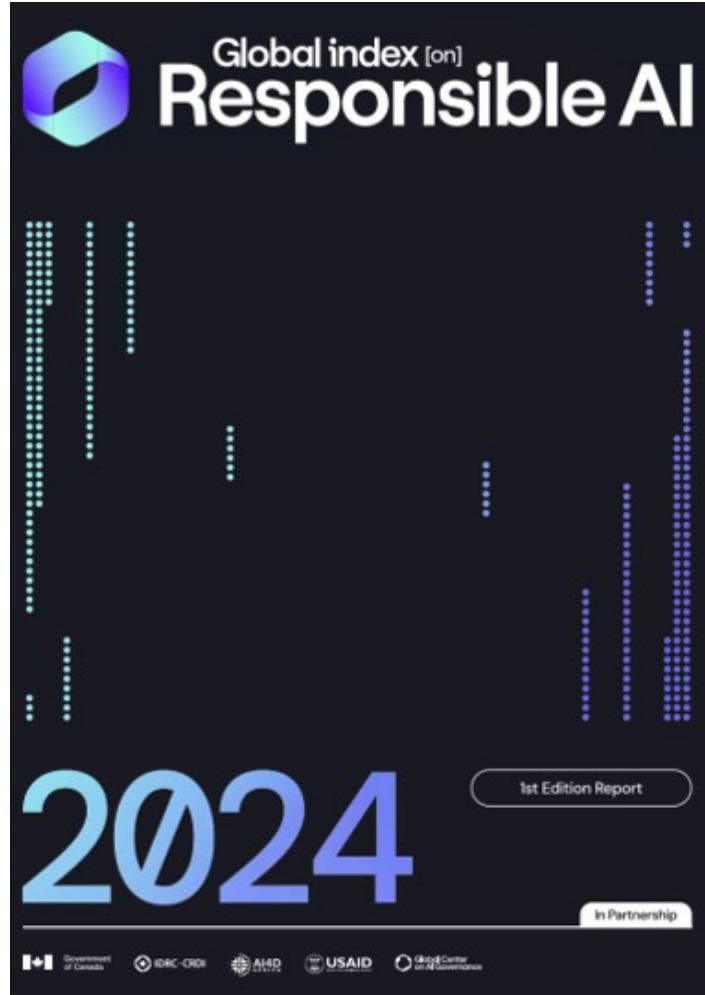
Responsible AI

As AI rapidly advances, “Responsible AI” focuses on making sure these technologies are ethical, fair, and benefit the public. In Asia and the Global South, where diverse contexts and limited regulations increase risks, Responsible AI helps prevent harm and ensures inclusivity. Achieving this requires technical and policy research, practical projects to apply principles, and strong frameworks to track progress.

In partnership with the East West Management Institute (EWMI) and the Global Centre for AI Governance (GCG), with funding support from the International Development Research Centre, Canada (IDRC), LIRNEasia served as a regional research hub for 16 countries in the Asia-Pacific region in conducting and managing research for the inaugural edition of the Global Index on Responsible AI. By collecting primary data from 138 countries, the Global Index on Responsible AI (GIRAI) represents the first large-scale global effort to uncover critical contextual data and assess the responsible development and use of AI worldwide.

LIRNEasia also influenced policy on Responsible AI in Sri Lanka by shaping its inclusion in the draft National AI Strategy. Merl Chandana, LIRNEasia's DAP team lead, played a key role in ensuring Responsible AI became a prominent feature of the strategy, serving as the sub-pillar lead for Responsible AI and contributing to the sections on safe and trustworthy AI.

Front page of the GIRAI global report



Mapping public-private data partnerships in Asia

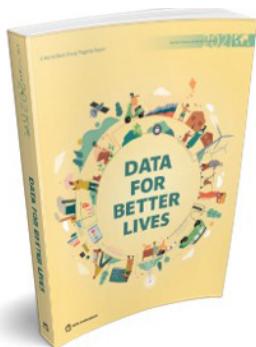
In recent years, the rise of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) considerations has resonated with a more socially and environmentally conscious consumer base. This shift offers a unique opportunity for alignment between businesses and government, particularly around shared goals like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One key area of alignment is data and digital transformation, where companies support public sector institutions by providing actionable data and tools to enhance evidence-based decision-making and improve data utilisation capabilities.

To gain insight into how these trends are playing out in Asia, LIRNEasia conducted a mapping study in 2021 to understand private sector collaborations related to data to achieve the SDGs across the continent. Working alongside our partners Cepei in Colombia and others across the Global South, our team has been busy mapping public-private data partnerships in the Asian region. The project's two-stage approach, involving structured mapping and in depth case studies, has yielded valuable insights into how private sector data support can enhance government decision-making and SDG monitoring, focusing on key areas such as quality education, gender equality, health, economic growth, and climate action. The findings have contributed to a deeper understanding of how private sector data can be leveraged to accelerate progress towards the SDGs, particularly in the Global South.

Building on these findings and continuing the conversation at the global level, our CEO Helani Galpaya joined a virtual panel at the UN World Data Forum 2023 titled Demonstrating the Power of Private Sector Data for Sustainable Development, co-organised by LIRNEasia. Moderated by Tom Orrell (DataReady), the discussion featured experts from Cepei, the Local Development Research Institute, and the University of the West Indies.

Screenshots from the virtual discussion held in June, 2021





The panel highlighted how private sector data partnerships across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean are helping to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while strengthening evidence-based decision-making.

As early as 2021, our work in this area was also featured in the World Development Report: Data for Better Lives, published by the World Bank, where Galpaya served as a contributing advisor. During a virtual discussion organised by the IDRC, which brought together stakeholders to explore the report's recommendations, she highlighted the need for inclusive, data-driven strategies to improve the lives of vulnerable populations while addressing related challenges.



Helani at the IDRC-hosted virtual discussion on the World Bank's World Development Report 2021: Data for Better Lives, emphasising inclusive, data-driven strategies to uplift vulnerable communities.



Helani Galpaya

CEO, LIRNEasia

Our commitment to data-driven policymaking was further demonstrated at the Open Data Institute (ODI) Summit 2020, where Galpaya joined a panel on Policy Data Futures: How do we source the data that policymakers need. There, she reinforced the call for opening up both public and private data to support better policymaking.

At the Open Data Institute (ODI) Summit 2020, Galpaya joined a panel on Policy Data Futures



By emphasising the importance of data accessibility, LIRNEasia underlined that harnessing actionable data can play a transformative role in tackling global challenges and shaping inclusive, effective policies. Together, these engagements reflect our continued advocacy for building data ecosystems that empower decision-makers and uplift vulnerable communities.

While the ODI Summit reinforced LIRNEasia's commitment to open data for better policymaking, CEO Galpaya's contribution at the UNESCO conference took this further by emphasising the importance of adapting data governance policies to specific regional contexts. In February 2023, she participated as a panelist at UNESCO's Internet for Trust global conference held at its headquarters in Paris, France.



The event brought together over 4,000 participants from 134 countries to consult on draft global guidelines for digital platform governance, focusing on safeguarding freedom of expression and access to information.

Speaking during Session 1, moderated by renowned journalist Patrícia Campos Mello, Galpaya emphasised that while UNESCO's guidelines are a promising start, policies effective in Europe may not translate seamlessly to emerging Asian contexts. She highlighted that in the region, governments themselves often contribute to misinformation, alongside so-called "bad actors."

In 2023, LIRNEasia actively participated in key discussions surrounding platform and digital ecosystem governance, contributing insights on crucial issues shaping the future of digital spaces. Helani Galpaya took part in two significant events: the European Stakeholder event on the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) and Global Affairs Canada's (GAC) 'Democracy in the Digital Age' panel. At the European event, hosted by the European Commission on June 27, Galpaya spoke on the evolving landscape of digital services regulation and the critical need for balanced governance in Europe's digital sphere.

At the GAC event, the discussion focused on Canada's efforts to promote internet freedom globally. Galpaya, alongside other experts, reflected on Canada's role in advancing digital inclusion and freedom, especially in the context of the Ottawa Agenda developed under Canada's Chairmanship of the Freedom Online Coalition. Through these discussions, LIRNEasia reaffirmed its commitment to shaping digital policies that support inclusive, democratic governance in the digital age.

Content moderation and models of platform regulation

In 2022, we hosted an expert roundtable on "Online Harms: Content Moderation and Models of Regulation" as part of the third installment of the Frontiers of Digital Economy series, funded by Meta. This series facilitated discussions among government representatives, the private sector, academics, and civil society on emerging digital economy issues through virtual forums. Our goal was to foster diverse perspectives, bringing together participants from BBNMAPS countries—Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

We organised an engaging forum to promote cross-country and cross-sector learning, aiming to help participants avoid redundant efforts. This event was conducted in partnership with Digitally Right in Bangladesh and the Prime Institute in Pakistan. Speakers included representatives from Netsafe in New Zealand—developers of the Aotearoa New Zealand Code of Practice for Online Safety and Harms—Meta, and experts from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The forum delved into the complexities of content moderation, a topic of growing interest due to the widespread use of social media.

The dialogue emphasised that there is no 'one size fits all' solution. It explored alternatives to criminalisation, such as industry codes and regulatory sandboxes, while stressing the importance of building capacity for those handling 'illegal' content. The dialogue also underscored the need for collaboration between the government, platform companies, and other key stakeholders.

Social media regulation and the rule of law in South Asia

We worked on a comprehensive report which examines the nexus between regulating social media platforms and upholding the rule of law within three South Asian countries: Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh. The report was a joint effort of LIRNEasia, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's Rule of Law Programme Asia, National Law University Delhi and BRAC University, Bangladesh. The report looks at the legislative frameworks, enforcement mechanisms and challenges and opportunities faced by each of the countries.

The study identifies four main ways governments regulate social media: internet shutdowns, content blocking, law enforcement access to data, and criminalising online speech, often citing national security. It highlights the diverse and complex approaches to regulation, stressing the need for balanced, context-specific solutions.



The launch of social media regulation and the rule of law in South Asia report. The event included a panel discussion featuring experts such as Saliya Pieris – Former President, Bar Association of Sri Lanka, Bhavani Fonseka – Senior Researcher & Attorney-at-Law, Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), Saritha Irgulbandara – Head of Advocacy, Hashtag Generation, Helani Galpaya – CEO, LIRNEasia, Tavishi Ahluwalia – Programme Manager, Center for Communication Governance, National Law University Delhi, and Saimum Reza Talukder – Senior Lecturer, School of Law, BRAC University. The discussion was moderated by Nalaka Gunawardene – Science Writer and Media Analyst.



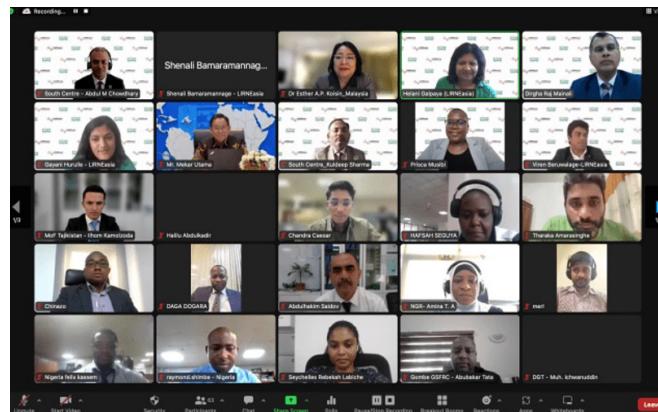
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Events, speaking engagements and media presence

Events

Over the past four years, LIRNEasia has organised dozens of impactful events that brought together thought leaders, policymakers, and innovators to discuss critical issues such as digital governance, artificial intelligence, social protection, and internet policy. These events have encouraged idea exchange and collaborations, driving progress. Notable events include discussions on social safety nets in Sri Lanka, highlighting the country's socio-economic challenge which revealed gaps in internet usage despite widespread mobile phone ownership.

Expert forum on Policy Options for Digital Taxation in South and Southeast Asia



LIRNEasia together with the South Centre hosted an expert forum on Policy Options for Digital Taxation in South and Southeast Asia in September 2023. The event was a closed door event, attended by over 110 tax officials, with participants registered from Global South 40 countries. The event, based on research conducted jointly by LIRNEasia and the South Centre, looked to provide a forum for the organisers and participants to share their experiences and weigh relative merits of different policy options for providing new taxing rights to capture revenues of large technology multinationals in local tax nets.

Internet Governance Forum (IGF) 2023

At the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) 2023 in Kyoto, Japan in October, 2023 LIRNEasia hosted two sessions featuring experts from the Global South, along with our CEO Helani Galpaya, Senior Research Manager Gayani Hurulle and Senior Researcher Isuru Samaratunga.

The debate on digital taxation, organised in collaboration with the South Centre, focused on taxing technology multinationals in the Global South. Gayani Hurulle framed the discussion, drawing from LIRNEasia and the South Centre's joint research, while Helani Galpaya moderated the session.



The roundtable discussion organised by LIRNEasia together with Cepei where Isuru Samaratunga shared findings from our research on how governments and data partnership facilitators have utilised private sector data to address various challenges and achieve SDGs while Helani Galpaya moderated the session.

Public workshop on 'Artificial Intelligence for Social Good'



The first public workshop organised by LIRNEasia in March 2023 on 'Artificial Intelligence for Social Good'; intended to raise interest and awareness on the potential of AI to benefit society at large. The event featured a keynote speech by Dr. Romesh Ranawana, Chairperson of the National AI Strategy Committee (Sri Lanka, 2024-28).

Speaking engagements

LIRNEasia researchers have been active in various speaking engagements, contributing to important global discussions on digital governance, economic development, and technology's role in shaping society. These engagements have strengthened LIRNEasia's reputation as a thought leader and helped influence policy discussions both locally and globally.

IPCIDE Annual Conference on State of India's Digital Economy

Helani (on the far right) is joined by Aruna Sundararajan, former Secretary to the Government of India in the Ministries of Steel, IT, and Telecom; Michael Ginguld, Chief Strategy Officer at AirJaldi, and moderator Rohit Prasad, Professor of Economics and Public Policy at the Management Development Institute, Gurgaon.



LIRNEasia CEO Helani Galpaya participated in the inaugural panel discussion, "Investing in Meaningful Connectivity," at the ICRIER Prosus Centre for Internet and Digital Economy's annual conference in New Delhi on February 16, 2024.

The event, organised by ICRIER and Prosus, focused on the launch of the "State of India's Digital Economy (SIDE) 2024" report, exploring India's digital transformation and the need for policies to bridge connectivity and access gaps.

ICA Regional Hub 2023 Inaugural Session

LIRNEasia Chair, Professor Rohan Samarajiva, delivered the keynote address on Day 1 of the ICA Manipal Regional Hub 2023, held on May 26, 2023. His address was titled "Inauthenticity of Content in Internet Regulation: Who Decides and How?" The event was organised by the Manipal Institute of Communication.



The Advocata Economic Freedom Summit 2024

The Summit opened with a forum titled "Economic Freedom & its Pathway to Prosperity." The session was moderated by our Chair, Professor Rohan Samarajiva, who steered the discussion toward actionable insights aimed at advancing economic reform.

On January, 2024, the Advocata Institute organised the Advocata Economic Freedom Summit 2024, bringing together leading thinkers and practitioners to assess the current state of economic freedom in Sri Lanka.





Press briefing: IMF and the urgency of state-owned enterprise reforms

The Advocata Institute hosted a press briefing to raise awareness and foster public debate on the urgency of implementing reforms to State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). LIRNEasia Chair, Professor Rohan Samarajiva, participated as one of the main speakers at the briefing, which took place at BMICH, Tulip Hall, on October 10, 2023.





International Conference on ICT for Rural Development

LIRNEasia Chair, Professor Rohan Samarajiva, participated in the 2nd International Conference on ICT for Rural Development (IC-ICT RuDev), organised by the ICT Research and Human Resource Development Agency, Ministry of Communications and Informatics (Kemkominfo) of the Republic of Indonesia. The conference was held in Jakarta from October 27–28, 2021. Prof. Samarajiva's presentation was based on a systematic review of research on the economic benefits of mobile-phone-based interventions in rural areas.



Panel discussion on effective and impactful utilisation of RTDF

On May 8, 2021, TechPana organised a webinar on “Effective and Impactful Utilisation of the Radio Transmission Development Fund (RTDF)” as part of their policy debate series. Our Chair, Professor Rohan Samarajiva, participated as the sole external speaker. His remarks were based on work he co-authored in 2019 with Senior Research Manager Gayani Hurulle, titled “Metrics to Improve Universal-Service Fund Disbursements.



Discussion on post-COVID-19 policy directions

In May 2020, our Chair, Professor Rohan Samarajiva, participated in a Zoom discussion organised by the Nightwatchman Society, attended by around 200 participants. The session focused on the question “Inward or outward-looking policies post COVID-19?”, during which Prof. Samarajiva highlighted how the pandemic underscored the importance of building resilient food supply chains capable of functioning during future crises.



Panel discussion organised by the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA)



A panel discussion organised by the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) in January, 2024, where our Senior Research Manager Gayani Hurulle emphasised the need for an effective social protection system tailored for Sri Lanka, addressing the controversies in targeting within existing schemes and advocating for more objective criteria to ensure accurate assistance distribution.

Making sense of Sri Lanka's efforts to criminalise internet content



On October 19, 2023, our Chair Prof. Rohan Samarajiva participated in a discussion in Kathmandu focused on Sri Lanka's proposed "Online Safety" bill. The presentation covered key aspects such as complaint mechanisms for prohibited online content, the Commission's investigative authority, and penalties for non-compliance, emphasising its implications for regulating digital content.



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RESEARCH DAY

Please join the webinar on
03rd May 2023
05.00 pm to 06.00 pm

RESEARCH FOR A BETTER WORLD

Gayani Hurulle
Senior Research Manager - Policy
LIRNEasia

Rosanna Flamer-Caldera
Executive Director -
EQUAL GROUND

Dr. Nirmal De Silva
Co-founder - Capazity

Market Research Society of Sri Lanka
<https://mrssl.org>

MRSSL
Market Research Society of Sri Lanka

On May 3, 2023, LIRNEasia Senior Research Manager Gayani Hurulle spoke at an online event organised by the Market Research Society of Sri Lanka. She highlighted LIRNEasia's nearly two decades of experience in leveraging quantitative and qualitative research to drive evidence-based policymaking across the Asia Pacific, underscoring its critical role in achieving meaningful policy impact.

UN Global Digital Compact Deep Dive on Internet Governance



Together with Vint Cerf (the 'father of the internet') and Tripti Sinha (Chair of ICANN, and with the University of Maryland), LIRNEasia CEO Helani Galpaya set the stage at the UN Global Digital Compact Deep Dive on Internet Governance held in April, 2023. In her remarks, she highlighted the challenges faced by emerging economies in the domain of internet governance, focusing on geopolitical influences on private sector participation, gaps in governmental capacity, and the importance of inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement in global decision-making processes.

'Addressing Sri Lanka's twin deficits' organised by the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects



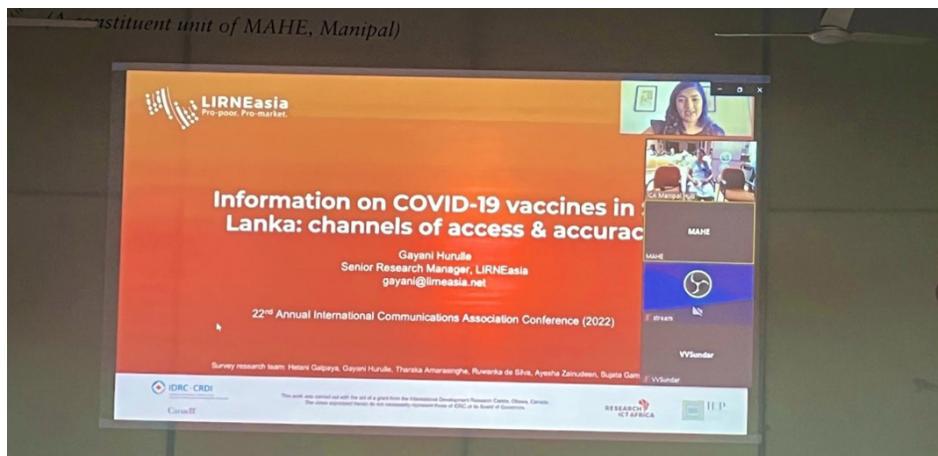
A forum organised by the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects in March, 2023 where LIRNEasia Chair Professor Rohan Samarajiva laid out examples of ways to address Sri Lanka's twin deficits in the path to collectively rise out of the economic crisis.

Social safety nets research at the ReformNow Conference



Senior Research Manager Gayani Hurulle presented at the ReformNow Conference organised by Advocata Institute in August, 2022, where she emphasised the urgent need for social safety net reform in Sri Lanka. Her presentation highlighted the importance of addressing immediate gaps in cash transfers and coverage, as well as long-term reforms in targeting and programme efficacy to strengthen support for those affected by the economic crisis.

LIRNEasia research on vaccine communications at the 22nd ICA Conference



At the ICA Conference (South Asia Regional Hub), Senior Research Manager Gayani Hurulle on behalf of LIRNEasia presented insights from a 2021 survey showing two-thirds of Sri Lankans relied on TV for Covid-19 vaccination info. The session included panellists from UNESCO and communications experts.

Asia regional consultation on the UN Global Digital Compact (GDC)



In 2023, CEO Helani Galpaya participated in the Asia regional consultation on the UN Global Digital Compact (GDC). As outlined in the UN Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda report, the GDC seeks to promote an open, inclusive, and secure internet. Led by the UN Envoy on Technology, Amandeep Singh, alongside Sweden and Rwanda, the consultation covered key topics such as digital public goods, meaningful connectivity, governance of emerging technologies, capacity building, and digital trust and security.

Second Digital Economy Working Group Meeting of the G20



Second Digital Economy Working Group meeting of the G20, held in Hyderabad, India from 17-19 of April 2023. CEO Helani Galpaya took part in the opening panel titled 'Digital Inclusion: Connecting the Unconnected'.

“Internet for Trust” Conference organised by UNESCO



At UNESCO’s “Internet for Trust” global conference held in February 2023 at its headquarters in Paris, France—and attended by over 4,000 participants from 134 countries—LIRNEasia CEO Helani Galpaya underscored the need for regionally tailored approaches to digital platform governance.

Presence

As of March, 2024, here's where we stand:

X 2,000
Followers

f 2,100
Followers

in 1,400
Followers

150
Followers

Social media: Our digital step forward

For the first time, we're placing a spotlight on our social media presence in LIRNEasia annual report. In an increasingly digital world, social media has proven to be a powerful tool in driving public policy discourse and expanding our impact beyond traditional media outlets. As a regional policy think tank based in Colombo, Sri Lanka, we have always been committed to fostering policy change through research and advocacy. Now, we recognise the vital role social media can play in amplifying our voice and reaching a broader audience.

Why it matters

Social media is not just a communication platform—it is a powerful catalyst for influence. Global public policy organisations such as the Brookings Institution and the World Economic Forum have leveraged platforms like LinkedIn and Twitter to engage policymakers, stakeholders, and the public in meaningful conversations. For instance, Brookings boasts over 600,000 Twitter followers, allowing them to disseminate research findings widely and facilitate real-time engagement.

For us at LIRNEasia, this marks the beginning of a similar journey. Social media allows us to connect with diverse audiences—students, policymakers, journalists, and regional peers—making policy discussions more inclusive and dynamic. It bridges the gap between complex research and actionable insights by presenting key findings in accessible formats.

Our current footprint

These numbers reflect our initial steps into the digital space. While modest compared to global benchmarks, they represent a strong foundation upon which we can build going forward. In addition to the platforms mentioned above, we are also present on YouTube and Instagram Threads, where we plan to allocate more resources and dedicate time in the future.

Looking ahead, we aim to:

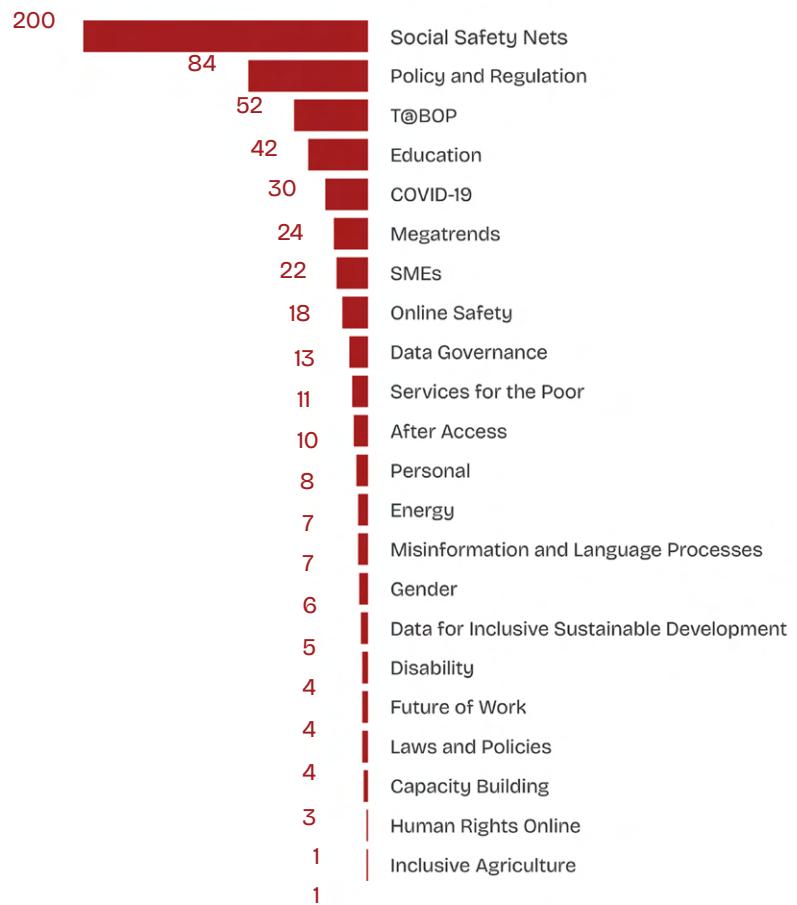
- 1 Engage and collaborate:** Use trending hashtags, partner with regional influencers, and collaborate with renowned experts for co-tweets, discussions, and cross-promotion on all platforms to increase visibility and drive policy conversations.
- 2 Visual storytelling:** Create short, visually engaging explainers, a "Research in Brief" series, and infographics inspired by our work. Utilise Instagram Stories, Reels, and Facebook Ads to deliver digestible updates and promote key campaigns to targeted audiences.
- 3 Localised and inclusive content:** Introduce more posts in Sinhala and Tamil to connect with local audiences and ensure inclusivity in policy discourse.
- 4 Platform-specific engagement:** Develop a dedicated newsletter to share updates and events.

Our vision is to transform our social media platforms into dynamic hubs for policy dialogue, reaching not only Sri Lanka but the broader South Asian region and beyond. By doing so, we hope to enhance our influence, foster collaborations, and continue our mission of driving impactful policy change.

Media coverage of our work

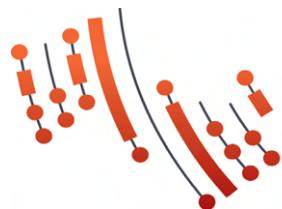
556
Mentions
covering
22
Themes
reported in
07
Languages

Key themes and frequency over the past 4 years



Top media-covered
themes





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