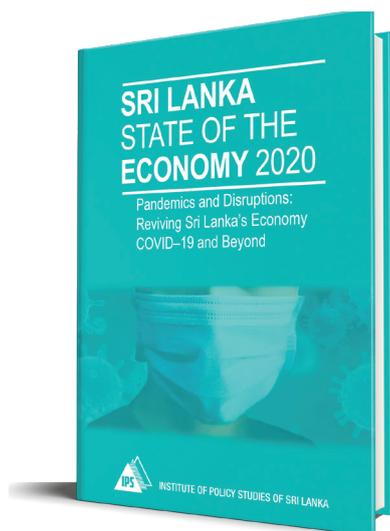




TECHNOLOGY, INNOVATION AND IPRs IN REVIVING SRI LANKA'S ECONOMY, COVID-19 AND BEYOND

From the IPS flagship publication 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2020'



The COVID-19 has already proved that technology and innovations are essential to manage the epidemic much effectively. Several innovations have introduced new technological methods, techniques and equipment to combat the virus. In every corner of the world, people are exploring new ways to fight the COVID-19, especially trying to develop drugs, to identify an effective vaccine, trying to mitigate health impact using traditional knowledge and traditional medicine etc.

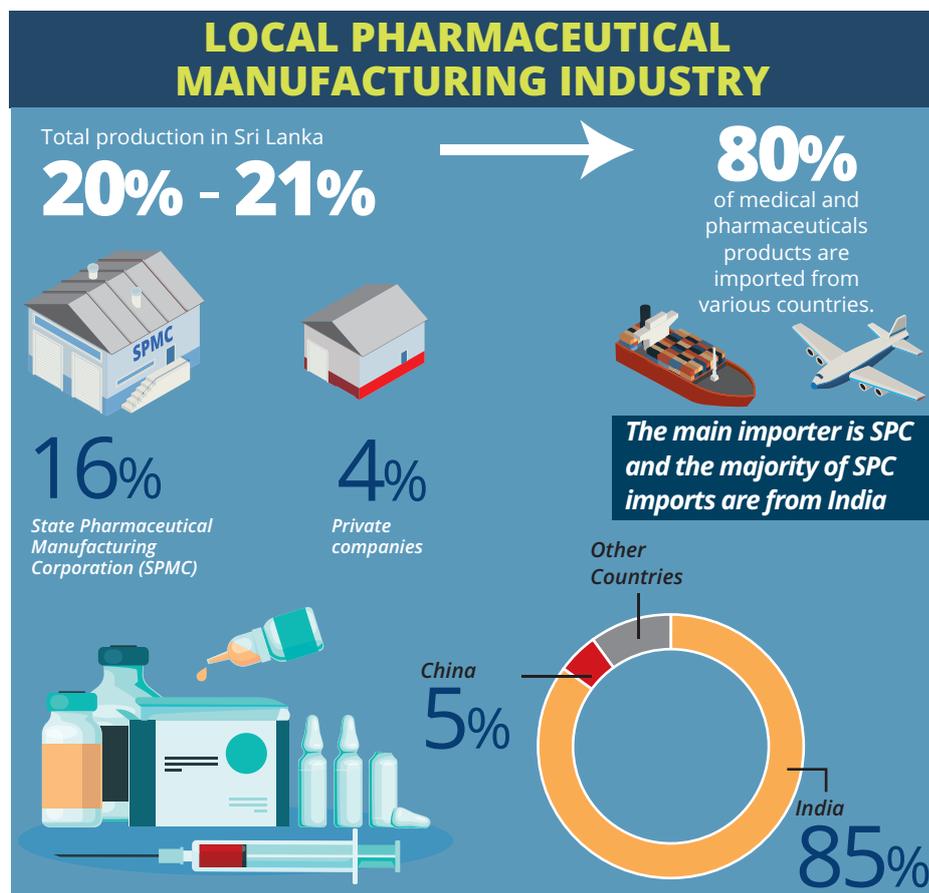
TRIPs Agreement and Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

In Sri Lanka, the traditional medicine system, and Ayurveda treatments were largely discussed as a cure for the virus. But, to date, the use of Sri Lankan Ayurveda treatments was not highlighted as effective in eradicating COVID-19. Moreover, Sri Lankan traditional medicines are not yet protected under the TRIPs agreement. Anecdotal evidence suggests that due to lack of a proper protection system, a large amount of traditional knowledge which relates to medicinal use are exploited.

Regardless of what the TRIPs agreement has stated on technology and innovations, most important is the national law and its enforcement in individual countries. The TRIPs agreement is flexible, where it provides the freedom to each member to implement their respective national laws according to their settings considering country's economy, financial ability etc. Several countries are taking steps to ensure that flexibilities are available in the TRIPs agreement, but many developing countries including Sri Lanka are unable to take advantage of these owing to lack of capacity in science and technology fields. Moreover, developing countries may face legal, technical and institutional challenges in using TRIPs flexibilities, especially those who have never utilised flexibilities

such as compulsory licenses before. Sri Lanka uses some of the latest technologies such as robotics in supplying medicines to COVID-19 patients in few hospitals. Primarily, Sri Lanka used nanotechnology in combating the virus. Remarkably, some of these technologies were not available before the COVID-19 outbreak. Automated guided vehicle (AGV) robots, isolation pods, sterilised umbrella, sterilised beds, testing methods- swab testing, peddling wash basin etc., were innovated during the past two months.

These focused on various practical and medical issues arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, during this period, online purchasing, online teaching, virtual meetings, use of social media platforms

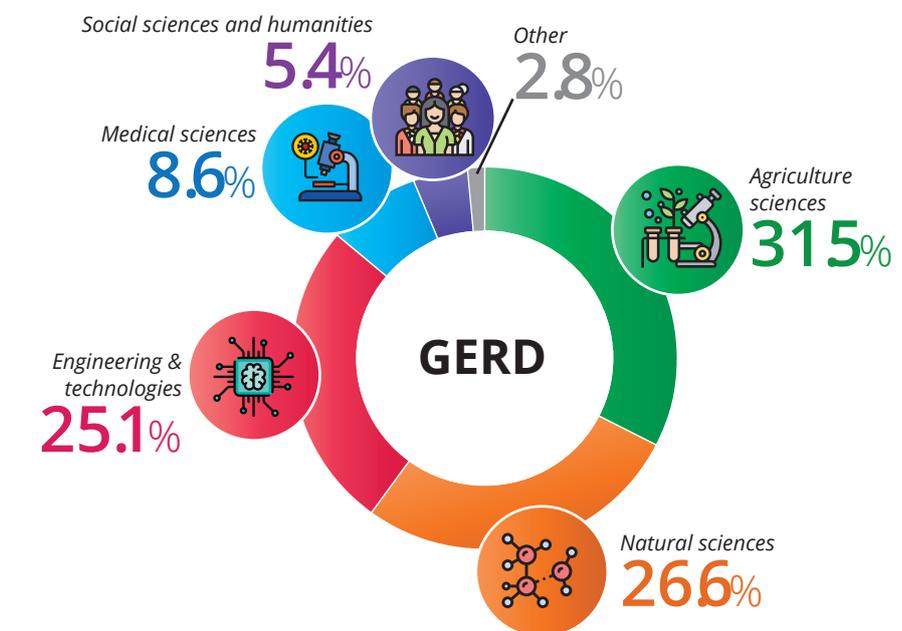


for shopping, purchasing and selling etc., were widely utilised in Sri Lanka. Regardless of physical distancing, people used to interconnect with the rest of the world to maintain their day-to-day lives using several ways. In Sri Lanka, people are using these technologies commonly via a mobile or fixed broadband, smartphones and the internet. Nevertheless, the paramount problem is that how many Sri Lankans have access to these facilities or how many of them are privy to access the benefits of technology and innovations without any disturbances/barriers. This factor will depend on the availability of ICT infrastructure in the country. Moreover, the internet penetration, speed of internet services (broadband, 3G and 4G), the number of smart mobiles are some other indicators which measure the usage of the technologies.

Policy Recommendations

Attract Private Investments in R&D. It is pivotal move to increase the investments on R&D, at least to meet the benchmark level of the developing countries. In attracting R&D, sustaining confidence among investors and investees that the investment is secure can achieve mutual benefits in the long run. Therefore, the importance of attracting private investments in R&D by assuring security of such investments has also been emphasised repeatedly. Most of the developed and upper middle-income countries have overcome the issue of ensuring private investments secure, by introducing strong IP protections. Thus, Sri Lanka too can use its IPRs to provide necessary protection for investments. Especially, by providing protections in technology transferring, commercialisation, sui generis protection for traditional medicine, traditional knowledge, plant varieties, protection for new start-ups etc. Furthermore, to utilise the flexibilities provided by the TRIPs agreement on compulsory licensing it is important to promote innovations in health and medicine through institutional development. This process should be focused on minimising technical and legal challenges.

Expand Commercialisation, Technology Transfer and Business Linkages. It is crucial to understand the importance of the practical and commercial viability of innovations. Presently, several govern-



ment institutes have adopted several strategies to encourage inventors in obtaining patents and commercialising of products; however, in the long run it is important to have a solid linkage between private sector and the research institutes. Sri Lanka has taken several initiatives to encourage innovations and commercialisation. Nevertheless, what is more important is to accelerate the practical implementation of these strategies. Moreover, it is essential to strengthen the activities in technology and innovation support centres established in few universities with the support of University Grant commission and World Bank's Accelerating Higher Education Expansion and Development project (AHEAD).

Encourage Innovations and Patenting. Sri Lanka can adapt several strategies to encourage innovations and speed up the process of patenting and commercialisation, especially during COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. As a first step, it is vital to create public awareness on IPR services, especially patenting. In doing so, awareness to be spread on its importance, how patents support and encourage inventors by providing recognition, rewarding and how to make inventors knowledge into tradable assets. Sri Lanka could also introduce an online search facility for PATENTSCOPE database to support COVID-19 innovations. It is an online dashboard to monitor operations in line with WIPO. Fees relating patents, renewals are costly. According to the 'WIPO COVID-19 IP Policy Tracker', some countries have reduced patent fees, extend deadlines etc. Sri Lanka too can consider waving off patent fees and renewal fees. Improve Availability and

Accessibility of ICT Infrastructure. Post-COVID-19 has already accelerated online teaching and learning, online healthcare, online selling and purchasing. Additionally, new technologies, techniques and digital methods will be innovated, to make human lives hassle free. Thus, it is most vital to have a developed ICT infrastructure facilities. It is also important to improve mobile subscriptions by providing facilities to mobile operators; this is more practical than improving fixed subscriptions. Sri Lanka provides free wifi since 2015 and a very few are making use of it. Hence, it is more prudent to conduct awareness programme for target groups. It needs to accelerate the process of implementing new laws and regulations to protect data privacy, internet privacy, curtail spreading misinformation, false profiles in social media and also introduce relevant amendments to the existing Computer Crime Act of No: 24 of 2007.

This Policy Insight is based on the comprehensive chapter on "Technology, Innovation and IPRs In Reviving Sri Lanka's Economy, Covid-19 and Beyond" in the 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2020 Report' - the flagship publication of the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS). The complete report can be purchased from the Publications Unit of the IPS.



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