



Wednesday 3rd of November 2021

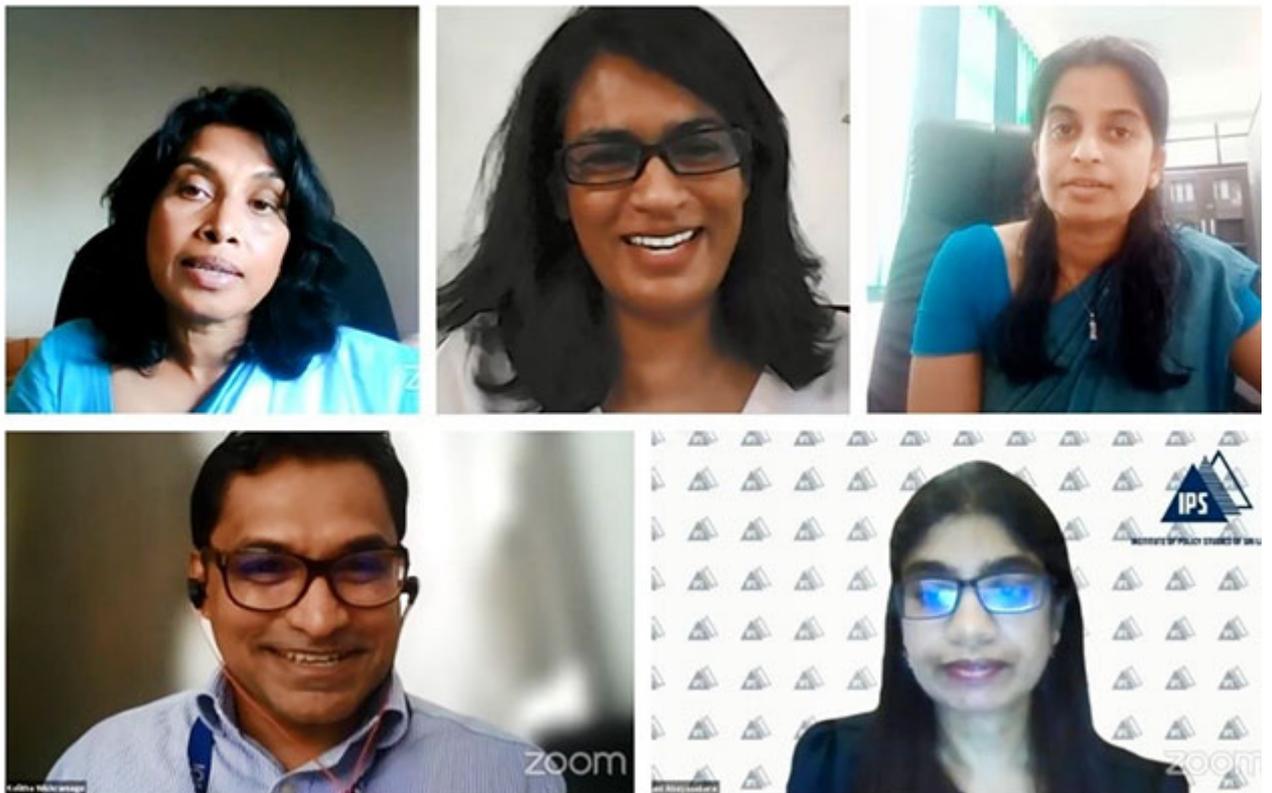


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Published 2 weeks ago on 2021/10/19



Pandemics and Disruptions:



by Suresh Ranasinghe



The impact of COVID-19 on Sri Lanka's labour market, education, migration, and sectors were discussed at the second webinar panel discussion held on October 13 release of the 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2021' report, the flagship report of Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS).

The event saw presentations by Dr Nisha Arunatilake and Dr Bilesha Weeraratne f with expert insights from Ms Madhavi Gunawardena, Director of TRCSL and Forr Commissioner of Labour and Dr Kolitha Wickramage, Global Migration Health Res Epidemiology Coordinator, Migration Health Division, International Organization Migration (IOM). Ashani Abayasekera from IPS moderated the discussion.

Key highlights of the discussion are presented in this blog.

Presentation: Labour Markets and Education

Dr Nisha Arunatilake

An estimated 225 million people lost their jobs globally in 2020 due to COVID-19, the International Labour Organization (ILO). Sri Lanka's labour market was also s affected, with 150,000 people losing jobs and the quality of available jobs deterior many workers taking on more vulnerable forms of employment (eg. agriculture, se employment) that have low social security. The unemployment rate rose by 0.7% i most affected were youth, low and medium-skilled individuals, and males, while s women left the labour market altogether.

The pandemic affected different types of workers differently. Frontline workers we vulnerable, and a large share of frontline workers are females. The ILO has classifi according to their COVID-19-related economic output risk. This calculation was u how COVID-19 has affected different types of workers, and it shows that 39% of w high-risk industries in Sri Lanka. Further, medium-skilled workers and women are to be in high-risk industries.

The government took various measures to provide relief to workers, but the relief were given is not as sizeable as the types of relief provided in other countries. IPS shows that the perception of employees, employers, and trade union leaders is the government could have done better by providing financial support through the EP as done in other countries like India.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of providing pre-retirement social] such as unemployment benefits and wage support during illnesses in addition to c

retirement social protection measures. Therefore, it is necessary to create a separate fund to provide pre-retirement social protection as practised in Nepal, Malaysia, and Singapore.

A recent IPS study finds that, Sri Lanka's ETF funds are sufficient to cover sickness and unemployment benefits to workers and provide wage support to retain jobs. In summary, the government must improve and expand access to social security for employees and firms, support firms to offer flexible work arrangements for higher labour participation and develop better labour market institutions that have the capacity to collect timely data and are prepared to address risks.

Since March 2020, schools across Sri Lanka were closed other than for few brief periods of operation and the total number of school days missed are significantly higher in Sri Lanka compared to other countries. Even though the Ministry of Education and associated organisations provided lessons online and via TV, less than 50% of the students were reached online and in smaller schools, only 30% were reached by both online and TV. There should be an assessment done about the learning losses, and adjust the curricular, so that the focus is on the most needed competencies to streamline and speed up the recovery.

Migration and Health

Dr Bilesha Weeraratne

A large number of migrant workers were forced to return much earlier than they planned to the pandemic, and it affected earnings and their capacity to return. Notably, many returnees were either self-financed or their employer paid for their return air tickets. Limitations in Sri Lanka's return and repatriation efforts were not able to bring a large section of returnees back to Sri Lanka from the onset itself. On average, there was a significant delay between the decision to return and the actual date of return. This was also due to the lack of proper information. Sri Lanka has a return and reintegration sub-policy, but the issue was that it was not implemented.

Returning migrant workers require economic, social and psychosocial reintegration support but reintegration support was largely limited to immediate health support (testing, quarantine, treatment). Also, issues associated with the vaccination process in Sri Lanka, such as irregular and inconsistent supply, delays in NMRA approvals, disorganised deployment, caused the delays in vaccinating potential migrant workers as well. However, the v

process for migrant workers was much better organised than the overall vaccination process in the country.

Sri Lanka sends 225,000 workers abroad while foreign annual exchange earnings is \$1.5 billion. Although in 2020 there were just 53,713 registered departures, remittance grew by 5.8%. They began declining since the beginning of 2021. There were many reasons for the growth last year like informal remittance channels being closed due to the local workers increasing their remittances through formal channels. Further, workers who were terminated would have got lump sums as terminal benefits which were remitted, and another reason would have been the reluctance of returnees to carry cash as they had to be quarantined on arrival.

Commentary: Labour Markets and Education

Ms Madhavi Gunawardena

The COVID-19 pandemic has flagged the need for Sri Lanka to revisit its labour law regulations. Since the labour market was forced to accept work from home (WFH), accommodating flexibility in labour legislation and other legislation governing the sector is essential. Accommodating flexible working practices is important, especially for women as this allows them to balance their family and work responsibilities, thus retaining the female labour force. With prolonged school closures, there is currently no way of improving students' soft skills as extra-curricular and co-curricular activities were halted. This will affect their employability in the future.

Commentary: Migration and Health

Dr Kolitha Wickramage

In the migration sector, future policy decisions should take into consideration factors like the gender dimension of returnees and skills requirements of migrant workers as well as their psychosocial health and mental health are extremely important for the reintegration of returnees since this is still an unmet agenda. Even though the overall vaccination process in Sri Lanka is appreciable, the number of deaths among migrants can be averted if a more systematic strategy such as those provided by WHO recommendations were followed. The IPS State of the Economy report must be comprehensive in recognising the need to address psychosocial issues of migrants, in addition to the economic issues.
