

October highlights:

- Release of our annual flagship publication 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2021' with a three-part webinar series to mark the release.
- Sachini Niwarthana of the Sabaragamuwa University wins IPS' inaugural 'Policy Pitch Contest – 2021' for her pitch focusing on the difficulties faced by farmers transitioning from conventional to organic farming.
- 'Inside IPS' segment features IPS Research Economist Ashani Abayasekara, who flags the need for a holistic approach to education in Sri Lanka to develop well-rounded individuals with competencies in both hard and soft skills.
- Articles on agriculture, health, labour, and trade published during the month.
- Latest videos from IPS.

We hope you find this issue informative and welcome your feedback, as always.

Forthcoming Event

Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2021 Report Launch

Session led by IPS (Sri Lanka)
Transforming food systems through evidence-informed policy responses
 11 November 2021
 7:00 NYC / 13:00 Lagos / 17:30 Delhi
 via zoom

Shaping an equitable post-COVID world: the role of Global South think tanks | 3rd Southern Voice Research Conference

Catch Dr Manoj Thibbotuwawa speaking on 'Transforming food systems through evidence-informed policy responses' at the 3rd Southern Voice Research Conference.

Date: 11 November 2021
Time: 5.30pm-7.00pm

The aim of the 3rd Southern Voice Research Conference is to find joint solutions for an equitable recovery from the pandemic, and will pay particular attention to the role of think tanks from the Global South to foster transformative policies and rebalance power at multiple levels.

[See more >>>](#)



IPS released its flagship publication 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2021' on the theme of 'Pandemics and Policy: Protecting Health and Promoting Economic Recovery' on 11 October 2021 with a three-part webinar series on the following topics:

Webinar 1: COVID-19 and the Sri Lankan Economy: Policy Choices and Trade-offs

Sri Lanka's macro-economic outlook amidst the COVID-19 pandemic came under the spotlight at a webinar panel discussion held on October 11, to mark the release of IPS' flagship report, 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2021'. The event featured presentations by Dr Dushni Weerakoon and Dr Asanka Wijesinghe from IPS with expert insights from Dr Missaka Warusawitharana, Financial Economist, Johns Hopkins University, USA. Tharindu Udayanga from IPS moderated the discussion.



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Webinar 2: Pandemics and Disruptions: Safeguarding Lives and Livelihoods of Sri Lankans

The impact of COVID-19 on Sri Lanka's labour market, education, migration, and health sectors were discussed at the second webinar panel discussion held on October 13, to mark the release of the 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2021' report, the flagship report of the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS). The event saw presentations by Dr Nisha Arunatilake and Dr Bilesha Weeraratne from IPS, with expert insights from Ms Madhavi Gunawardena, Director of TRCSL and Former Commissioner of Labour, and Dr Kolitha Wickramage, Global Migration Health Research and Epidemiology Coordinator, Migration Health Division, International Organization for Migration (IOM). Ashani Abayasekera from IPS moderated the discussion. Key highlights of the discussion are presented in this blog.



[See more >>>](#)

Webinar 3: Equity in Recovery: Addressing Sri Lanka's Social Protection and Food Security Need

Sri Lanka's social protection and food insecurity amidst the COVID-19 pandemic came into focus at the third and final session in a webinar series held to mark the release of the 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2021' report, the annual flagship publication of the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS). This year's report focuses on the theme of 'Pandemics and Policy: Protecting Health and Promoting Economic Recovery'. The final webinar featured presentations by Dr Ganga Tilakaratna and Dr Manoj Thibbotuwawa from IPS, along with insights from Prof Udith Jayasinghe, Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, and Prof Dilini Gunewardena, Professor of Economics, University of Peradeniya. IPS' Lakshila Wanigasinghe moderated the discussion.



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The 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2021' report can be purchased from the Publications Unit of IPS located at 100/20, Independence Avenue, Colombo 07 and leading bookshops island wide. For more information, contact 011-2143107 / 077-3737717 or email: publications@ips.lk.

IPS Policy Pitch Contest - 2021

Sachini Niwarthana of Sabaragamuwa University won IPS' Policy Pitch Contest 2021 for her essay on organic farming. In her essay entitled, 'From Conventional to Organic Farming: Towards a Slow and Steady Transition', Niwarthana highlights the difficulties faced by the farming community due to the sudden shift from conventional to organic farming and calls for a clear national policy to facilitate a smoother transition. Sachini will be awarded a cash prize of LKR 25,000 for her essay.

Essays written by Jayana Vimalasinghe of the University of Peradeniya, Samali Jinadasa of the University of Peradeniya, and Sandali Senarathne of the University of Kelaniya were commended. The contest, aimed at encouraging youth to present practical solutions to contemporary problems in Sri Lanka, was open to all undergraduates enrolled at a local or foreign university. Participants were asked to critically analyse an existing policy, explain why the status quo is not working and present a solution to address the issue.

[See more >>>](#)

Policy Brief

A detailed policy brief titled 'Reforming Fertilizer Import Policies for Sustainable Intensification of Agricultural Systems in Sri Lanka: Is there a Policy Failure?' explains that sustainable intensification of agricultural systems in Sri Lanka can be achieved through the prudent application of a combination of instruments in place of the import ban on chemicals. The policy brief is the collaborative effort of the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS), the University of Peradeniya, and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI).



[See more >>>](#)

Inside IPS

Special interview featuring: Ashani Abayasekara

Tell us about yourself and your role at IPS:

I am an economist by training and developed a keen interest in economics during my A-Levels, thanks to a brilliant teacher! I am currently engaged in policy research on education, health, and labour markets at IPS. I am a graduate of the University of Peradeniya and the Australian National University, and recently started my PhD at Monash University, Australia.

What are the key concerns in the Sri Lankan education system?

A commonly cited concern is the sole emphasis on academics, or hard skills development. Sri Lanka's education system has often been criticised for its overloaded school curriculums and the undue stress placed on students as a result. This has, in turn, led to limited opportunities for children to engage in extra-curricular activities such as sports, music, and the arts, which are key to developing many soft skills. Moreover, academic skills tend to be measured based on old-school rote learning and memorising methods as opposed to critical thinking and problem-solving approaches. These concerns are now gaining renewed attention with the gradual reopening of schools after over 1.5 years, where the danger of diving straight into covering syllabi and preparing for exams without due focus on recognising and addressing the multiple social, economic, and emotional impacts undergone by children to significantly varying degrees, is a very real concern.

What are you currently researching?

At the moment, I am involved in two research projects. One is looking at students' distance learning experience during the pandemic, the various challenges faced by students of different socioeconomic backgrounds, and how the tuition industry's role and importance have increased in response to school closures. The other project focuses on assessing the healthiness of retail food environments in Sri Lanka's urban slum settings and examining how food environments affect household diets, in the context of unhealthy consumption-driven non-communicable diseases in the country.

How can these concerns be addressed?

Sri Lanka must move beyond the obsession with test scores and the notion that academic achievement is all that matters. To do so, several changes need to be made in our education system, including:

- What exams measure – if exams focus on measuring rote learning of academic content, acquiring these competencies would remain the focus of students, parents, and teachers. Countries like Singapore are changing the focus of primary school exams from academics towards expanding opportunities for children to discover their interests and talents and develop life skills.

What are the defining features of a good education system?

In my opinion, a good education system is one that adopts a holistic approach to education. This means that it focuses on developing a well-rounded individual with competencies in both hard and soft skills. The former is the sole focus in many education systems around the world; but the importance of developing soft skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, teamwork, leadership skills, and empathy, is becoming increasingly evident in today's world. Such an approach calls for addressing multiple needs of students, including the academic, emotional, social, and ethical.

What do you enjoy most in your work?

I enjoy researching in general and appreciate the freedom it provides to work on issues of interest. Also, while recognising the difficulties in influencing real policy change as mentioned above, the knowledge that the ultimate aim of our research is to improve the lives and livelihoods of people is encouraging; and when it does happen and leads to positive change, even in a very small way, it is immensely rewarding.

What are some of the challenging aspects of working as a researcher?

Two aspects that I have found challenging are the availability of data and the ability to influence policy change. In many developing countries like Sri Lanka, there is a lack of high-quality data that can be used to do rigorous research on areas of interest. Moreover, even when data is collected, obtaining access can be a very challenging and time-consuming process that requires a lot of patience! It is also difficult to influence actual policy change based on research findings due to multiple political economy factors that come into play.

Apart from your current field of research, what are your other pursuits?

My current PhD studies along with my research work at IPS are currently taking up most, if not all of my time. I love singing, baking, and spending quality time with my dog, and engage in these whenever time permits.

Sri Lanka's Gender-based Employment Segregation: Does it Increase Women's Vulnerability Amidst COVID-19? By Sunimalee Madurawala



The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic started as a public health concern but swiftly progressed into a major social, economic, and humanitarian crisis. With the emergence of new variants, COVID-19 will continue to stress health systems around the world. Policymakers face the dilemma of whether to maintain stringent containment measures or relax them to lower the socioeconomic losses. Proper government policies and strong institutions are needed to manage costs and trade-offs effectively and enhance pandemic preparedness and response.

COVID-19 has created a crisis that has disproportionately affected women across the globe. Estimates show that women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable than men's jobs, and while women make up 39% of global employment, they account for 54% of overall job losses. While many factors affect the vulnerability of women's employment during the pandemic, existing gender gaps in the labour market, women's employment share in highly affected sectors, the ability to telecommute and the amount of unpaid care work carried out by women have been identified as the main determinants. Against this backdrop, this blog examines women's vulnerability in the Sri Lankan labour market due to the sector they are employed in. It also looks at gender-based employment segregation – a key factor behind women's overrepresentation in certain industries and underrepresentation in others – and proposes policy representations to address this imbalance.



[See more >>>](#)

GSP+ Withdrawal: How Would it Impact Sri Lanka's Economy? By Dr Asanka Wijesinghe and Eleesha Munasinghe

Sri Lanka's preferential access to the vital European Union (EU) market faces fresh challenges after the European Parliament's special resolution was adopted in June 2021. The GSP+ is a non-reciprocal trading arrangement whereby Sri Lanka does not have to lower tariffs in return but is required to implement certain non-trade related conventions to benefit from preferential access. The GSP+ arrangement slashes import duties to zero for vulnerable low and lower-middle-income countries that implement 27 international conventions related to human rights, labour rights, environment protection, and good governance. This article assesses the impact of a hypothetical withdrawal of GSP+ on Sri Lanka's exports to the EU: the largest single trading block, with the United Kingdom (UK), accounting for 30% of Sri Lanka's exports.



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World Bank's 8th South Asia Economic Policy Network Virtual Conference | Harini Weerasekera



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Dr Dushni Weerakoon on Sri Lanka's Debt Sustainability | The Current Challenges



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GSP+ and Sri Lanka, What Next? | Face the Nation | Dr Asanka Wijesinghe



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