

Speech by Mr. K. M. Mahinda Siriwardana, Secretary to the Treasury and Ministry of Finance, Economic Stabilisation and National Policies at the Workshop on “Revitalizing Sri Lanka's Statistical Legislation: Bridging Innovation, Reliance, and User Needs”, held at the Ministry of Finance on 18 March 2024

It gives me pleasure to discuss with you today a very important topic – that is the gathering of data and information in Sri Lanka. Our current Statistics Ordinance for this, enacted in 1935 and last amended in 1956, worked well in the past. But, as the world changes, these laws are no longer fit for purpose.

In the contemporary world, having access to accurate data, information, and statistics is extremely important for policy making and several other spheres. The necessity for data driven, evidence-based policy making was seen more than ever as Sri Lanka fell into its deepest and most complex economic crisis in post-independence history. The failure to be guided by technical evidence was one of the key factors behind the policy errors that triggered the crisis in 2022. It follows that navigating the economy out of this crisis also requires accurate, credible, and reliable data and statistics that would form the foundation for evidence-based policy making.

Data alone is not enough to foster good policy, it also requires sound analyses and for policy makers to be guided by such evidence based policy as opposed to ideological bias, which was again one of the causative factors behind the economic crisis. Therefore, credible and timely statistics is a necessary but not sufficient condition for sound national policy making.

Since the last time Sri Lanka amended its Statistics related legislation in 1956, a lot has changed in Sri Lanka and globally. The rise of digitalisation, big data analytics, artificial intelligence, among others, have changed the way the world uses and collects data. We therefore need new legislation that fits the modern world and follows international best practices. Such cutting edge practices can help improve the accuracy of statistics, and deploy the optimal methods of collection so as to ensure timely availability of data with the most efficient use of resources. Considering all of this, we have worked with the United Nations to create a new legislation that does establishes a modern legal framework to underpin the collection and usage of statistics in Sri Lanka drawing on global best practices.

An important development through the new legislation is the improved organisational process of collecting data. At present, different ministries, departments, and organisations collect similar information. This results in duplication of processes, wastage of resources, and often compromises the accuracy and utility of the resultant data and statistics. The new legislation puts in place the framework to streamline the collection of data and reduce duplication of processes. This will also help reduce the costs of data collection, thereby saving tax payer money in this process. Given Sri Lanka's very tight fiscal constraints at present, this kind of process efficiency that ensures value for money is a top priority and all other spending agencies must endeavour to follow similar practices.

Instead of relying largely on traditional survey methodologies, the new Act helps establish a system based data warehousing that leverages technology and keeps statistics ready whenever we need it. This not only makes it easier for those providing the information but also makes sure users can access data quickly and accurately. The positive outcomes of this would not just feed into better quality decision making at a national policy level, but robust data is also important to feed into decision making for businesses, civil society, academics, among others.

To sum up, new legislation for gathering data in Sri Lanka is extremely important and timely. However, the revamping of the process of statistics collection in Sri Lanka is not limited to just a change in legislation. It requires a change in the way our institutions related to data collection operate. It requires a change in culture in the way that statistics and data feed into evidence-based policy making and decision making. Collectively, this would be an important step towards preventing a repeat of the economic crisis Sri Lanka has endured through the recent past.

I congratulate the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) for the efforts taken thus far in this work. I also would like to thank the United Nations and others who provided assistance and expertise in preparing the proposed Act. I hope this work continues in a positive manner to bring the new legislation into reality and establish a new culture and institutional framework that results in highly accurate, credible, and reliable data availability in Sri Lanka.

Thank you for your time and consideration.