

Coping with the  
New Normal:  
Changing Role of  
Local Authorities in  
the Covid-19  
Pandemic  
Symposium  
Synopsis Report  
August 2021



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## Overview

COVID-19 has posed an unprecedented challenge to governments as they struggle to operate within a context of extreme uncertainty with frequent health and economic shocks and disruption to social structures. The pandemic has intensified social and economic inequalities, widened the digital divide and worsened gender disparities. National and sub-national governments are at the frontlines of responding to the pandemic and are required to manage an escalating health crisis within a rapidly deteriorating socio-economic environment.

COVID-19 has reaffirmed the role of a strong local government in responding to challenges like the current public health crisis as well as helped local authorities (LAs) to reflect on how to best serve citizens through digital tools. The pandemic has also helped instigate a long-overdue digital transformation of public institutions while underscoring the need for accountability, inclusivity and equal access to information. Coping with the new normal will require local governments to take a leading role in rebuilding more equitable, sustainable and resilient communities embedding principles of civic participation, gender equality and digital inclusivity. An online symposium organised by the UNDP's flagship programme on local governance (supported by the European Union), Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities and the Citra Social Innovation Lab, UNDP brought together approximately 150 participants across local authorities in the South Asian Region and subject-area experts to share good practices and lessons learnt in managing the Covid 19 pandemic whilst ensuring continued service delivery.

## Local governance in Sri Lanka

Local governments are becoming increasingly important in bridging the gap between national policies and ever-changing ground realities. The local government level consists of 24 Municipal Councils, 41 Urban Councils and 276 Pradeshiya Sabas totalling 341 Local Authorities. LAs have been resilient despite increasingly difficult challenges, including lack of financial and human resources at the sub-national level and vertical and horizontal coordination gaps. Sub-national government finances have become more constrained with growing expenditure and reduced revenues resulting in deficits and increased debts. At the same time, LAs have an expanded role during the pandemic in making basic health care more responsive to local needs as well as trying to mitigate the future impacts of the crisis.

### **Roles and responsibilities of local authorities**

The 2009 National Policy on Local Government recognises LAs both the planning and implementing authority responsible for several areas including primary healthcare, poverty reduction, women's empowerment and social inclusion. Business continuity during crises is critical to ensure the provision of essential services to keep communities functioning. Digital technologies have helped local governments continue to deliver essential services during the pandemic and additional measures will need to be taken to ensure all communities are able to benefit from digitalization.

## Services provided by local authorities



### GOVERNANCE

Grassroots political representation



### REGULATORY

Creation of by-laws on local issues



### ADMIN

Revenue collection, staff training.



### HEALTH

Promotion of public health and sanitation



### INFRASTRUCTURE

Physical Planning, Thoroughfares, Land and Buildings.



### PUBLIC UTILITIES

Water and Public Utility Services.



### WELFARE

Including libraries, community centres, and pre-schools

## Key challenges to local government's service delivery during the pandemic:

1. **Governance functions have been re-centralized** as the national government has appropriated mandates of LAs to support a swift government emergency response.
2. **The contraction of the economy due to Covid-19 has severely impacted public service spending** as many local governments and councils are facing severe budget shortfalls and bankruptcy. Unemployment, business closures and unstable revenue collection have resulted in declining tax revenues and reduced access to resources at the local level at a time of increased need.
3. **Poor coordination with Provincial and National government partners as well as between LAs and civil society.** LAs have to facilitate coordination between diverse stakeholders across the levels of Government, civil society institutions and development partners, to work together to respond cohesively to the crisis.
4. **Poor digital skills of government officials and inadequate data sharing systems between government institutions.** Inadequate network connection capacities, poor digital literacy among civil servants and a multitude of parallel Government data systems which have not been standardised hinders information sharing and timely decision making
5. **Waste management:** gaps in legislation, systems and public awareness on management of healthcare waste coupled with unsafe disposal methods and inadequate incinerators pose multiple health and environmental risks.

## Good practices of LAs during the pandemic

Local authorities, working closely with the Government, development partners and civil society, have strengthened their responses in efforts to contain COVID-19 transmission and support affected communities. The establishment of virtual platforms, online payment systems and a call centre has enabled unimpeded public access to government services. Emergency response measures were facilitated by LAs including garbage collection, notification of COVID-19 cases and community transmission, distribution of assistance to COVID patients, disinfection of public areas and facilitation of safe and open market places. LAs have also efficiently leveraged digital technologies to support the COVID-19 response through the utilization of a pre-existing online registration system for vaccination; introduction of QR codes for location-based tracking and contact tracing; and use of social media platforms to raise public awareness on COVID-19.

## Gender Dimensions of the Covid-19 pandemic and LA response

Women are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic across every sphere - from the health sector to the economy to safety and social protection. COVID-19 has revealed the deep structural inequalities faced by women and girls which governments and local authorities will need to unpack and address in order to build back better. Women are economically more vulnerable to pandemics as they earn less, save less, hold insecure jobs or live close to poverty. The pandemic has also reduced women's access to life-saving sexual and reproductive health services due to overstretched health systems. Stress, loss of income and isolation due to the pandemic and government lockdowns have all exacerbated the risk of women facing domestic violence.

Targeted policies need to be developed addressing systemic gender inequalities, pay inequalities, the care economy and the gendered socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. Women's full participation in decision making needs to be facilitated across all levels of government to ensure recovery planning is gender inclusive. Additionally, gender mainstreaming and the use of gender-segregated data will help policy-makers assess and address the gendered impacts of the pandemic on women and girls.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations will help enhance local governments' COVID-19 response

### 01

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#### Strengthen responsibilities, infrastructure and capacities of local governments



Local governments need to be empowered with the mandate, responsibilities and resources to enhance preparedness at the ground level for public health emergencies. Decentralized systems, funds and responsibilities will help to make service delivery more responsive to local needs. National guidelines and establishment of monitoring and legal systems within LAs to enforce public health guidelines are instrumental to bring about behavioural change within the population. Rapid upskilling of staff is required to support the seamless execution of digital service delivery initiatives and enhance the effectiveness of local governments

### 03

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#### Ensure uninterrupted implementation of other public health activities



Equal emphasis should be placed on upholding public health through the uninterrupted delivery of other public health services, such as elimination of mosquito breeding sites; food safety measures and pest control etc. Special emphasis should be placed on developing an accountable, sustainable and effective health care waste management system addressing the specific responsibilities, resource allocation and monitoring aspects.

### 02

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#### Enhance multi-stakeholder and civil engagement



COVID-19 necessitates a strong, coordinated response across sectors, enterprises and stakeholders to ensure decisive actions are taken to mitigate the fallout from the pandemic. As such, concrete mechanisms for multi-stakeholder engagement should be established and scaled up with the Ministry of Health at the centre as the technical authority for health emergencies. Additionally, network connection infrastructure and capacities of LAs should be strengthened. Engagement with multiple stakeholders for the design, implementation and monitoring of interventions will help systems respond cohesively. Partnerships with technology firms built during the pandemic should be expanded to instill digital innovation within LAs.

### 04

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#### Facilitate citizen engagement in public health



Education, empowerment and engagement of communities in health decision-making processes are vital towards making basic health care more responsive to local needs and will ultimately determine the success of public health measures. Local authorities as the institution closest to the communities play a critical role in facilitating civic participation. An online platform should be developed for citizen engagement and monitoring of citizen-led relief efforts to promote greater transparency, informed decision making and improved coordination.

## Recommendations

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### 05

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#### Embrace innovative approaches to governance



Local governments need to shift from a compliance-heavy mindset to a more innovative approach to effectively operate within the new normal post Covid 19. Capacity building of local governments will need to focus on digital literacy, innovative thinking, teamwork and communications to engineer innovative and long-lasting solutions to systemic challenges and rising issues. Innovative solutions to bridge the digital divide should also be explored such as the creation of Wi-Fi or connectivity hubs in public libraries and community centres.

### 06

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#### Improve data on digital exclusion



LAs need to move beyond national averages and statistics to understand the demographic, social and economic factors that contribute to digital exclusion and map out where digital exclusion exists. Following improved and finer-level data on digital exclusion, LAs need to develop and implement training programmes and provide infrastructure support to ensure digitally inclusive development.



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