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Enable Climate Resilient and Healthy Human Settlements

As the newly resurgent Sri Lanka moves along a path of rapid economic growth, impacts of climate change can undermine or reverse its development targets and goals. This is especially so with human settlements and related infrastructure.

Seven out of 10 Sri Lankans still live in areas classified as rural, but this is changing fast. The latest projections indicate that over half of the total population would be living in cities and towns within the next decade. This will have major implications for infrastructure, economy and society. While urbanisation can help reduce unemployment and poverty, it can also increase pressures on public utilities and services.

To keep up with these demands, major new investments are planned. The investments in human settlements and related infrastructure, totalling more than LKR one trillion (approx. USD 8.9 billion) during this period, will address city planning, housing, drinking water supply and healthcare. Targets include the development of new metro cities, construction of over 600,000 new housing units, and working towards making Sri Lanka the “Wonder of Asia.”

Strengthening Capacity for Climate Change Adaptation in Sri Lanka
National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy:
Strategic Thrust Area #2

Climate Change Impacts

Climate change impacts, which will build up and get worse over the next few decades, can threaten both our human settlements and future development programmes. We are already beginning to see how such impacts are cutting across multiple sectors. Often, they exacerbate problems that the country is already grappling with.

These climate impacts include the following:

- Floods and landslides can become more common and more severe, displacing more people and causing greater property damage (the poor will be the hardest hit).
- Droughts can also get more common and more severe, exerting greater pressures on our freshwater resources, and creating frequent and serious shortages in drinking water, particularly in the Dry and Intermediate Zones.
- Temperature increases can lead to a bigger demand for electricity for cooling purposes.
- Disease-carrying animals -- such as mosquitoes and rats -- can breed faster and spread to more areas, leading to public health crises like Dengue Fever and Leptospirosis.
- In the longer term, rising sea levels can damage coastal settlements and infrastructure and affect the livelihoods of people living or working in these areas.

No single sector or institution can cope with these far-reaching impacts on its own. This requires an integrated approach: only through a concerted effort to develop climate resilient and healthy human settlements can Sri Lanka ensure that its national interests are not jeopardised by current and future climate change-induced risks.

Timely interventions are needed across sectors and issues covering planning, housing, water supply and drainage, health, roads and several others.



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Thematic Areas



Stakeholders have identified the key issues and adaptation measures during consultations to prepare the National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy. These can be grouped into the following thematic areas.

Mobilise stakeholders for climate change adaptation of settlements

Sri Lanka has institutional mechanisms – such as District Coordinating Committees and local government bodies – for engaging local communities. There are also many civil society groups and NGOs with extensive grassroots networks. But these have yet to be tapped effectively for mobilising stakeholders for climate change adaptation in human settlements.

Improve planning to include climate change considerations

At the moment, human settlement planning in Sri Lanka does not take into account climate change related impacts. Also, development plans for the major urban areas only cover those areas coming under the Urban Development Authority (UDA). And while we have climate-resilient building construction methods and expertise, these are not being used widely. On the whole, long-term climate resilience and adaptation need much more concerted attention.

Ensure adequate quality and quantity of water for settlements

All human settlements need water -- and cities a lot more so. Climate change will add new pressures on the already stressed water supplies. To cope, we need to improve the management of watersheds and water sources, and practise integrated water resource management (IWRM). Biological and chemical pollution of water is another problem: although several agencies monitor water quality, these efforts are scattered and uncoordinated, and agencies don't share data regularly. Water conservation methods and rainwater harvesting also need to be pursued more vigorously.

Combat climate change-related health concerns in settlements

In recent decades, human settlements have expanded fast and without proper zoning or planning. This has degraded the environment and helped the spread of vector-borne diseases, but there is no clear understanding of these links. To bridge this gap, it is necessary for health professionals to be more involved in local level physical planning. Sharing standardised data sharing across sectors, it is ideal if the health sector's geographical units (called MOH areas) tally with the administrative units known as Divisional Secretariats.

Increase awareness on vulnerabilities and adaptation of settlements

Climate change impacts on human settlements and health are only beginning to be felt in scattered and seemingly unrelated ways. This makes it hard for state agencies, service providers and the public to grasp and understand the underlying processes. Timely gathering, analysing and disseminating of information would help people 'connect the dots' more easily. Authentic sources of knowledge need to be better linked to effective dissemination mechanisms such as the mass media.



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In the end, creating climate resilient and healthy cities and villages across Sri Lanka will require collective action that blends the approaches of disaster risk reduction together with the principles of environmentally and socially sustainable development.

Living and coping with uncertain impacts of climate change is no longer a choice; it is an imperative. Sri Lanka needs to address climate change adaptation to ensure that its economic development can continue without disruption or setbacks, and investments in poverty reduction, food and water security and public health will not be undone.

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ADB is working with the Ministry of Environment, Sri Lanka, in formulating a national strategy for climate change adaptation to increase Sri Lanka's resilience to climate change impacts whilst pursuing sustainable economic development. When adopted, the strategy would stimulate improved effectiveness of environmental management and better organization of stakeholders to address climate change adaptation.

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