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From Adversity to Serendipity

*Perspectives of global relevance based on  
research, experience and successes in  
combating COVID-19 in Sri Lanka*

Volume 01

## ***Editors:***

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(edited by)

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ISBN 978-624-5896-00-4

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### **Suggested citation:**

**Senaratne, R., Amaratunga, D., Mendis, S. & Athukorala, P (eds) (2021), COVID 19: Impact, Mitigation, Opportunities and Building Resilience “From Adversity to Serendipity”, Perspectives of global relevance based on research, experience and successes in combating COVID-19 in Sri Lanka, Vol. 1, National science Foundation, Sri Lanka: ISBN 978-624-5896-00-4**

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## Building Resilience: Introduction

Dilanthi Amaratunga, Naduni Jayasinghe and Nishara Fernando

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has been perceived and experienced by most governments and societies across the globe as an unprecedented shock. However, facts reveal that pandemics have been far from alien. Before the advent of the Coronavirus, a number of outbreaks have repeatedly triggered the world ranging from those as early as the Spanish flu of 1918, the Asian flu of 1957 to more recent outbreaks such as HIV/AIDS in 1981, SARS in 2003 and MERS in 2012. Most countries have demonstrated a low level of preparedness for COVID-19, have failed to incorporate pandemics in their Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) strategies, and to act on the basis of science and warnings about the threat of a pandemic. COVID-19 has given rise to complex risk scenarios and compound vulnerabilities which most countries have hardly anticipated. Most countries have barely recognized multi-hazard scenarios although now they are faced with the challenge of responding to extreme climatic events such as floods, earthquakes and landslides in the midst of their boundless efforts to curtail the spread of COVID-19. The pandemic has called into question the viability of existing response mechanisms to climatic events and urged relevant stakeholders to rethink their approaches, at all levels. The effects of the pandemic have not failed to transcend the health sector, cascading into other sectors such as the economy, society, legal systems and politics. This way, the pandemic has not just dismantled one part of a system but failed the entire system thereby showcasing the systemic nature of risks.

The effects of COVID-19 have been disastrous and complex, and it is nowhere near its end. Given how various epidemics and pandemics have been emerging and re-emerging in the recorded history, it is almost impossible to imagine a future devoid of similar outbreaks. COVID-19 has created a significant shift in people's lifestyle, behaviour and aspirations paving way to the 'new normal'. It is the 'new normal' that sets the context for interaction, communication, trade and development. These point towards the need to recover better from the COVID-19 pandemic with emphasis placed on taking transformational actions to strengthen resilience at all levels. National and local authorities can seize this as an opportunity to create the policy and structural changes that are capable of navigating the journey of resilience building. Such changes may range from strengthening health systems and health infrastructure; improving social protection to pursuing climate friendly policies.

Within this context, 'Resilience Theme' of "COVID 19: Impact, Mitigation, Opportunities and Building Resilience : From Adversity to Serendipity", Perspectives of global relevance based on research, experience and successes in combating COVID-19 in Sri Lanka, is aimed at facilitating a discourse on how the 'new normal' should be visualized and preparedness for and recovery from COVID-19 can be geared towards strengthening the resilience of the society and community. This track is intended at providing an avenue for knowledge sharing and scrutiny of key topics namely, best practises of responding, re-opening and recovery with respect to COVID-19; combatting dual challenges of COVID-19 and natural hazards; systematic integration of public health and disaster risk management; business reactivation from systemic risk management; urban preparedness for effective response to COVID-19; effective and integrated risk communication and multi-hazard disaster preparedness incorporating pandemics. There are seven chapters which address these key components:

1. Analysing the effectiveness of varied stakeholder segments in preparedness planning for epidemics and pandemics in Sri Lanka: Application of Social Network Analysis (SNA);

2. Settling the ripples: An examination of Sri Lanka's approach to addressing cascading impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic
3. A more decentralized governance framework for pandemic response: A multi-stakeholder approach for COVID-19 preparedness and planning in Sri Lanka
4. Preparing, responding and re-opening: Lessons from the UK to emerge during the COVID-19 pandemic
5. COVID-19 nexus with food security and sustainable growth: Impacts, implications and road to resilience in Sri Lanka
6. Integrating pandemic and epidemic into disaster management/disaster risk reduction mechanisms in Sri Lanka: From the perspective of local government authorities
7. Health resilient cities in a post covid world

These chapters reflect on some of the core areas that demand attention on the path towards 'whole of society resilience' including the establishment of accountability for pandemic preparedness and response; addressing the cascading socio-economic effects of COVID-19; governance for pandemics; learning from success stories and adopting best practises; food security and sustainable growth in the context of COVID-19, the role of local governance in pandemic preparedness and response and integration of pandemic preparedness into urban planning.

The first chapter delves into who is accountable for pandemic preparedness and response in Sri Lanka while attempting to visualize the linkages between these stakeholders via the Social Network Analysis Approach. In doing so, the authors emphasize on the importance of widening the scope of stakeholders involved in preparedness planning for pandemics and other biological hazards in the country. The authors also advocate the enhanced participation of non-health sector stakeholders including the private sector and community based organizations in preparing for and responding to biological hazards such as COVID-19 thus, reflecting on the importance of cross sectoral collaboration. It also draws attention to the need for a unified legal framework and a streamlined system of governance to facilitate such cross-sectoral collaboration and to establish collective accountability for risk management pertaining to biological hazards.

The second chapter observes how the effects of COVID-19 have transgressed the health sector to give rise to unfavourable and long lasting economic and social effects. The chapter examines Sri Lanka's approach to addressing these cascading socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and outlines its major strengths and gaps. The authors demonstrate how such cascading effects can cause sustained vulnerabilities that call for solutions with a long-term focus as opposed to exercising immediate responses measures such as the provision of emergency relief. Accordingly, the authors recommend that increased attention be paid to building the resilience of both the society and the economy while outlining certain policy initiatives (E.g.: the establishment of a systematic and inclusive social protection system; enhancing state-citizen interactivity at the local/village level).

The third chapter draws lessons from other countries that have responded to COVID-19 and similar pandemics such as SARS and Ebola to demonstrate the importance of a multi-sectoral and decentralised governance mechanism for pandemic response in Sri Lanka. The authors argue that pandemic response should be contextualised/localised to suit the psychological, social, demographic and economic characteristics and needs of local communities while harping on the ineffectiveness of a national level blanket approach. The authors move on to discuss how the deconcentrated approach to DRR in the country can be leveraged and optimised to allow for decentralised

governance of pandemic response. The chapter also showcases the potential for involving a broader range of sectors such as education, higher education and mental health in pandemic response at the sub-national level to enhance effectiveness of response measures.

The fourth chapter highlights the best practises and shortcomings of UK's pandemic risk governance system with reference to actions taken by the UK Government across three stages of the COVID-19 pandemic: preparedness, responding and re-opening. Some of the best practises identified by the authors include increased capacities to carry out risk assessments; the prevalence of a sound legal and policy framework; undisrupted access to Early Warning systems; financial stability to invest in infrastructure during emergencies; use of scientific data and advice to inform policy making; and provision of adequate financial support by the government. The chapter recommends several measures to improve UK's pandemic risk governance system including (but are not limited to): ensuring clear, timely and accurate Early Warning communication; promoting research on pandemic impact; activating speedy responses as opposed to delayed responses and rebuilding lost public trust on government through sharing science based information on one hand and ensuring inclusivity in policy and decision making on the other hand.

The fifth chapter discusses how COVID-19 has impeded nations' progress towards Sustainable Development Goals mainly paying attention to its impacts on food security in Sri Lanka. The authors reflect on how food security in the country has been threatened due to numerous challenges posed by COVID-19: the loss of livelihoods, and income generating opportunities and disruptions to national and global food supply chains. The chapter also puts forward key interventions to improve food and nutrition security in Sri Lanka with a focus on protecting development gains and building resilience of communities. Some of the proposed interventions include re-engineering market access to food; situating Sustainable Development Goals at the heart of policy making across all sectors; promoting regenerative agriculture and scaling up climate-informed agriculture planning and climate-smart agriculture practices.

In the sixth chapter, authors identify the crucial role played by the Local government authorities (LGAs) during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka in areas such as the coordination of provision of subsidized essential grocery packages, disinfecting public areas, providing basic facilities at quarantine centres, and acting as a nexus point between the government and the general public. The chapter also reveals some of the key challenges faced by LGAs in performing their duties during the COVID-19 pandemic, some of which are politicization of pandemic relief and provisions, conflict on their role in DRR planning, absence of inter-agency accountability, lack of appreciation of their services, limited technical capacities, lack of access to equipment and insufficient representation of LGAs in local Disaster Management committees. Further, the chapter suggests various steps that can be taken to overcome these challenges. Suggested measures include [but are not limited to] adoption of a provincial council disaster response framework, introducing representatives from LGAs to disaster management committees and providing specialized training for LGA officers on handling biological hazards and managing waste during pandemic situations. Authors also have re-emphasised the on-going concern that Local government authorities (LGAs) have not been adequately incorporated into the national disaster risk management framework of Sri Lanka.

The seventh and the final chapter draws attention to the increased exposure of condominium residents in Sri Lanka to COVID-19, while establishing the need to consider the potential effects of pandemics and similar biological hazards in urban planning. The chapter stimulates a discussion on how cities should be re-imagined in the context of the 'new normal' and how urban planning should be geared towards building health resilient cities. This may call for initiatives such as accelerating digitized and remote working; establishment of '15 minute cities' characterised by more sidewalks and less compact, greener buildings; strengthening the health resilience of transportation by incentivizing sustainable mass transit and promoting health driven urban renovation and infrastructure improvement.

As summarised above, the ‘resilience’ theme has aimed to pave way for knowledge production and exchange on the basis that a resilience building approach is critical to recover better from COVID-19 and mitigate the adverse human, psychological, social and economic effects of future pandemics and similar hazards. Scholarly work produced under this track has affirmed that it’s necessary to build resilience of societies to protect development gains and steer uninterrupted progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs]. Scholars have also demonstrated that resilience building should be holistic with attention being paid to issues within and links among different sectors. For this reason, a resilience building approach requires legal, policy and action frameworks that support synergy among multiple sectors and levels in the society. While contributors have addressed the theme of ‘resilience’ from many angles, their work provides impetus for further research in this area, particularly capturing 1) preparedness for multi-hazard scenarios and integration of biological hazards into such preparedness; 2) current status, gaps and directions for building private sector resilience against pandemics and similar hazards; 3) policy directions and ground level actions for strengthening the resilience of vulnerable groups; 4) role of resilience in post-COVID-19 sustainable development agenda; 5) role of data and science in pandemic governance for resilience building and 6) current status, gaps and directions for strengthening the resilience of health infrastructure.