

# Webinar on Long-Term Social Consequences of the Covid Pandemic: Enduring Social Impacts, Challenges and Responses

Organized by: The National Academy of Sciences of Sri Lanka

22-24 February 2022

## Introduction

The Covid pandemic not only resulted in thousands of deaths, debilitations, and economic and other losses across the world, but also leaves a deep and indelible mark on human psyche, behaviour and society. There is evidence from USA that during the early stage of the pandemic, about 44% of the people felt that the pandemic has changed their lives in a significant way. Although such evidence is rare in most other countries, it is obvious that the impact of the pandemic is likely to linger on in the hearts and minds of people for decades and even centuries. The post-Covid world may not be the same again. Viewed from a holistic perspective, the pandemic had both negative as well as positive impacts, although the former may far outweigh the latter.

It was in this backdrop that the National Academy of Sciences of Sri Lanka organised this workshop with the support of the Association of Academies and Societies of Sciences in Asia (AASSA) and with financial support from the InterAcademy Partnership (IAP).

This report documents the proceedings of that workshop.

## The Workshop

The workshop was organised to learn, discuss and deliberate COVID-19 impacts in several areas, as follows:

**Science:** Although scientists have worked on global impacts such as climate change, they have not faced such immediacy as presented by the COVID pandemic. Scientists did deliver, within relatively short periods of time, e.g. developing COVID vaccinations. An important area was to explore whether the experience of facing the COVID challenge would lead to deeper reflections on what scientists can do, and become introspective about their limitations, recognizing also their dependence on others.

**Religion:** Religion has contributed towards personal comfort and social cohesion in the face of the pandemic; but controversies have been generated regarding adopting purely spiritual measures against the pandemic, the numbers allowed to gather for worship, and the burials of COVID victims. COVID has also demonstrated the impermanence of life, and the limitations of an acquisitive society, areas that religions focus on. Post-COVID, will religions move towards changes in their roles and practices?

**Culture and Human Behaviour:** Conventional cultures of living together in clusters have also been challenged. Cultural traits such as hugging, kissing and even shaking hands have become scarce. Even children have become distanced from their parents who travel for employment. Intimate relations between husbands and wives are also under stress, in some cases because

of losing personal space during lockdowns. In cultures where distance is traditionally kept between individuals, the incidence of COVID is claimed to have been less. Will such changes come to stay and leave an indelible mark in human society for long periods to come?

**Politics and Governance:** In some quarters, strong measures of Covid control are seen as eroding democratic space. Some emphasize the importance of preserving the economy, while others focus on safeguarding the health system. Decisions have mostly not been made to protect the most vulnerable (and numerically largest) sectors of society. Are modern tools of decision and social sciences capable of defining such goals more quantitatively and objectively?

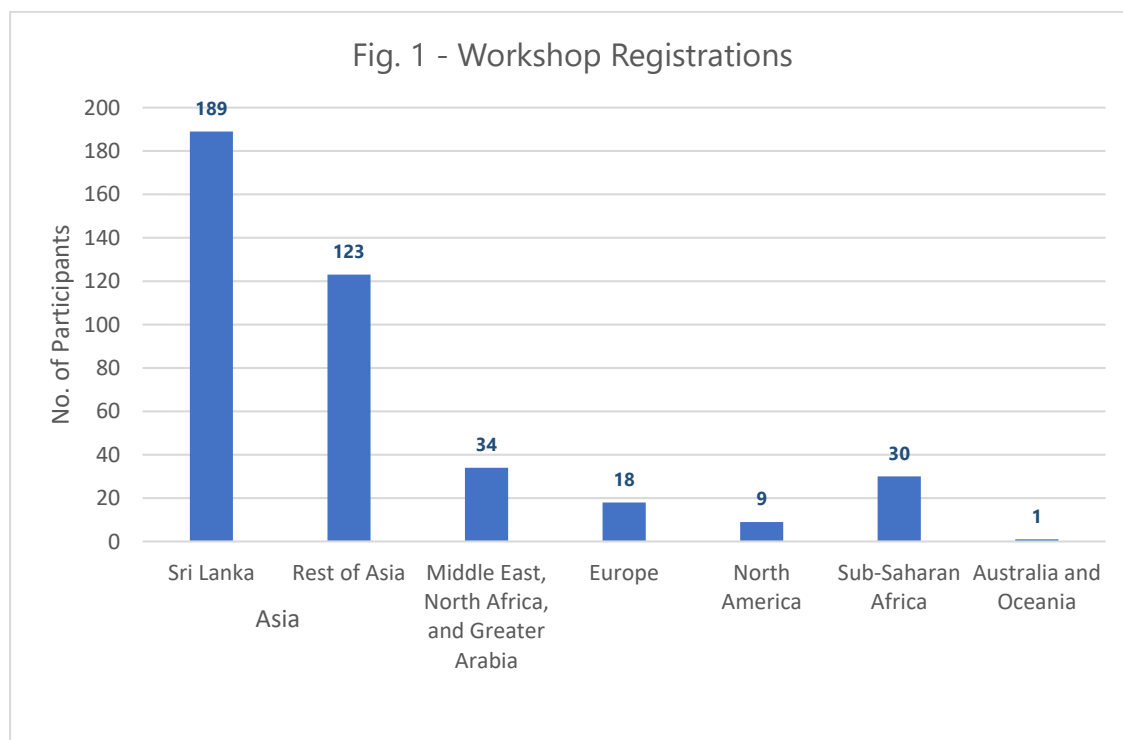
**Education:** Education was one of the worst affected activities. In many cases physical delivery was replaced by online modes, but generated debate about the very nature of education. Socio-economic inequalities were exacerbated by online modes, which however demonstrated great potential too. Will the nature of education change permanently after COVID?

**Economics:** Although the economy itself may recover post-COVID, will actors be forced to develop agility in the future in the face of uncertainties arising from pandemic type situations? There could also be concerns regarding self-sufficiency in the face of transport restrictions.

The Workshop was held as a virtual event from 14 00 hrs to 19 30 hrs (IST) daily on 22, 23 and 24 February, 2022 with the virtual hub in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

## Participants

The workshop attracted 404 registrations from 31 countries (Fig. 1).



The daily attendance was recorded as 137 (22 February), 95 (23 February) and 81 (24 February).

## Workshop structure

The workshop was organised into the themes mentioned earlier; day 1 was devoted to economic, politics and governance, day 2 for culture and human behaviour and religion, and day 3 for science and education. The day's proceeding began with a message from an international luminary, followed by keynote presentations and theme-based lead presentations.

A note on the webinar was circulated to the member Academies of AASSA with an invitation to submit abstracts as contributions to the webinar. This notification was also shared with other learned organisations within the network of NASSL. In response, NASSL received 128 abstracts for consideration. These abstracts were reviewed by a Panel appointed by NASSL, and 25 abstracts were provisionally accepted for further processing. Several contributors withdrew from presenting their papers due to a variety of reasons. The number of presentations is summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Number of Papers presented**

<b>Stream</b>	<b>Number of Papers</b>
Economic, politics and governance	5
Culture, human behaviour and religion	7
Education	4
Science	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>20</b>

The agenda of the meeting is at Annex 1.

## Opening

The webinar commenced with a welcome by **Professor Priyan Dias**, President of the National Academy of Sciences of Sri Lanka. He took the opportunity to explain the main objective of the webinar, which is to use evidence-based inquiry for examining the status and impacts of COVID-19 pandemic. Assessing impacts would be a particular challenge to scientists as they do not usually forecast by extrapolation.

In his message, **Professor Ahmet Nuri Yurdusev**, President *ad interim*, the Association of Academies and Societies of Sciences in Asia (AASSA), recalled his participation in a workshop organised by NASSL. He congratulated the NASSL for organising this timely webinar, as COVID-19 impacts need to be assessed from all scientific aspects. COVID-19 has been one of the most serious pandemics the humankind has faced; it has affected the lives of millions. The positive contribution from sciences is the development of the vaccine, which has shown positive results in containing the virus. However, international cooperation was somewhat less than desired in the distribution of the vaccine. There are socio-cultural issues relating to the inequity observed in the distribution; thus the Webinar is a timely activity to examine the issues. In conclusion, whilst congratulating the NASSL for a well-thought-out webinar, Professor Yurdusev expressed the commitment of AASSA to continue its support to NASSL.

The participants observed a minutes' silence in memory of **Professor Dato' Dr Khairul Anuar bin Abdullah**, President of the Association of Academies and Societies of Sciences in Asia (AASSA), who passed away after a brief illness on 16 January, 2022.

## Technical Sessions:

The following keynote addresses were presented:

**Keynote 1 - Societal Implications of COVID-19 – The UK and Beyond** - Professor Dominic Abrams, Professor of Social Psychology; Director, Centre for the Study of Group Processes, University of Kent

**Keynote 2 - Social Protection in India during the COVID 19 Pandemic** - Professor V.K. Malhotra, Professor of Economics; Member Secretary, Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi

**Keynote 3 - COVID-19: Lessons for Global Public Health** - Professor Malik Peiris, Chair of Virology, School of Public Health, University of Hong Kong

**Keynote 4 - Adaptable, Responsive and Equitable Health Systems** - Professor Dame Anne Mills, Deputy Director & Provost and Professor of Health Economics and Policy, London School of Health and Tropical Medicine, UK

**Keynote 5: Long Term Social Impacts of the Covid Pandemic on Education in South Asia** - Dr Jim Ackers, Regional Education Adviser, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, Nepal

In addition, the following theme-based lead papers were presented:

**Lead 1 - Covid vs. Democracy: India** - Professor Rahul Mukherji, Professor and Head, Department of Political Science and Executive Director, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University

**Lead 2 - Strategies for Post Pandemic Economic Recovery in Sri Lanka** - Professor H.M. Gunatilake, Former Director, Environment and Safeguards Division, Asian Development Bank, Philippines

**Lead 3 - Religions and the COVID Pandemic: Exploring the Long Term Impacts** - Professor Emma Tomalin, Professor of Religion and Public Life, University of Leeds

**Lead 4 - “Silya at Ayuda”: The Chair as a Symbolic Object in the Time of COVID-19 in the Philippines** - Dr Melvin Jabar, Director, Social Development Research Centre, De La Salle University, Philippines

**Lead 5 - Science, Health and Foresight Analysis: Foresight in the time of COVID-19** - Professor Vivian Kwang-wen Lin, Executive Associate Dean & Professor of Practice, LKS Faculty of Medicine, University of Hong Kong

**Lead 6 - Long Term Social Impacts of Covid-19 on Education** - Dr. Upali Sedere, Secretary, State Ministry of Education Reforms, Sri Lanka

The keynote and lead presentations were followed by an interactive online discussion.

**PART II** of this Report contains abstracts of these keynotes and lead presentations.

## Concluding Session

At the Concluding Session on 24 February 2022, Professor C M Madduma Bandara provided highlights of the 3-day Webinar along with an analysis of issues and the way forward. This analysis is being currently discussed to prepare a short consensus document to be circulated amongst the stakeholders. Professor Priyan Dias proposed a Vote of Thanks at the conclusion.



**The Association of Academies and Societies of Sciences in Asia (AASSA)** was established in 2012 through the merger of the Association of Sciences in Asia (AASA) and the Federation of Asian Scientific Academies and Societies (FASAS) to promote solidarity and cooperation among the scientific and technological academies in Asia and Oceania and to play a central role in cooperative efforts for further developing the region through science and technology. AASSA currently has 33 member academies representing 30 countries. AASSA Special Committee on SHARE Communication is an initiative of AASSA to promote communication in Science, Health, Agriculture, Risk, and Environment (SHARE) in member countries through academies which came into being in 2015.

Address:

c/o The Korean Academy of Science & Technology (KAST)  
KAST Building – 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, 42 Dolma-Ro  
Bundang-Gu, Seongnam-si  
Gyeonggi-Do 13630  
REPUBLIC OF KOREA  
Tel: +82 (0) 31 710 4611  
Email: aassa@kast.or.kr



**The National Academy of Sciences of Sri Lanka (NASSL)** is a non-governmental body of eminent scientists that provides independent advice on policy matters to the Government and the public in general on all scientific and technological matters of national importance. It was established in 1976 and incorporated by an Act of Parliament in 1988. NASSL is a member of the Inter Academy Panel (IAP, the global network of science academies), the Inter Academy Medical Panel (IAMP), the Association of Academies and Societies of Science in Asia (AASSA) and the Science Council of Asia (SCA).

Address:

120/10, Wijerama Mawatha  
Colombo 7  
SRI LANKA  
Tel: +94 11 267 8770  
Email: nassl@sltnet.lk