



Diaspora engagement mapping

SRI LANKA

Facts & figures

During the civil war (1983-2009), the term “diaspora” was used to label a segment of the Sri Lankan community overseas that was perceived as a threat towards the Government of Sri Lanka. The government labelled this group as “enemies of the country” which played a crucial role in changing public perceptions about the diaspora. In 2009, the “Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission” (LLRC) identified the importance of constructively engaging with the diaspora. As a result, the term “Overseas Sri Lankans” is used to officially refer to the Sri Lankan diaspora.

Political rights



Dual citizenship¹



Right to vote in national elections for citizens residing abroad



Remittances



Remittances as a share of GDP: **7.14%**
Remittances inflow (USD million): **6,023**

Data disclaimer

As diaspora definitions vary widely, we have chosen to use comparable data on emigration as a proxy. This does not include all who consider themselves diaspora and is not necessarily aligned with national definitions of diaspora. Emigration data comes from UNDESA (2024) and remittances from the World Bank (2023).

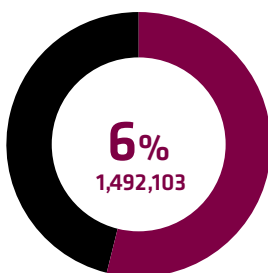
Emigration



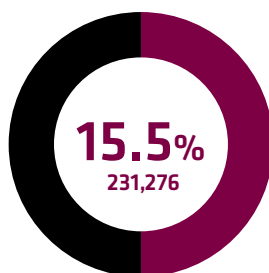
% of emigrants in total population



% of which in the EU



♂ 54%
♀ 46%



♂ 50%
♀ 50%

Top countries of destination



| | |
|----------------|---------|
| India | 253,869 |
| Qatar | 161,747 |
| United Kingdom | 160,178 |
| Australia | 156,876 |
| Canada | 140,870 |

¹ http://www.immigration.gov.lk/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=299&Itemid=59&lang=en. Dual citizenship is applicable to: A person whose citizenship of Sri Lanka has ceased under section 19, 20 or 21 of the Citizenship Act, No 18 of 1948 or a person whose Citizenship of Sri Lanka is likely to cease.

- Resumption – Section 19(2) of the said Act makes provisions in respect of a person whose citizenship of Sri Lanka has ceased due to obtaining of citizenship in another country and who there after desires to resume the status of a citizen of Sri Lanka. Or
- Retention – Section 19(3) of the said act makes provisions in respect of person who is having a desire to obtain citizenship in another country, while intends to retain the citizenship of Sri Lanka.

Overview of the policy and legislative framework



- 2008** ● **Sri Lanka National Labour Migration Policy**, ensures that labour migration is integrated and mainstreamed in national development. The policy has three main components: governance of the migration process, protection and empowerment of migrant workers and their families, and linking migration and the development process. The policy recommends a coordinated effort between national and international agencies and departments to ensure that labour migration is incorporated into all relevant policy frameworks.
- 2012** ● **National Human Resources and Employment Policy**, includes measures to help create an environment that promotes the participation of diaspora in activities where local expertise and skills are in short supply. For example, a national science, technology and innovation research cadre was established to employ expatriate Sri Lankans or foreigners for highly skilled jobs for which suitably qualified resident Sri Lankans were not available. For the construction sector, plans were made to encourage private sector contractors to attract qualified diaspora individuals back to the country to take on higher-skilled jobs. The policy also mentions establishment of bilateral agreements with labour receiving countries to promote respect for, and safeguard, the labour rights of migrant workers.
- 2015** ● **Sub-policy and National Action Plan on Return and Reintegration of Migrant Workers**, aims to support return and reintegration of migrant workers. It covers social reintegration, economic reintegration, physical and psychological wellbeing of returnees and their family members, mobilisation and empowerment of migrant returnees and the effective management of the return and reintegration process. In line with this, a Reintegration Coordination Unit was also set up at the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE).
- 2018** ▼
2022 ● **Decent Work Country Programme**, seeks to improve services offered by the reintegration unit of the SLBFE and public employment services to ensure better employment or self-employment options within the country for returned migrants.

» Trends

The government of Sri Lanka is increasingly viewing the dividends of successful engagement with Sri Lanka's diaspora as useful for the country for improved relations between communities, increased national unity and stability, and a more positive international image. As a result, Sri Lanka is now exploring ways to engage its overseas community for future growth, as well as reconciliation. Key sectors of diaspora engagement include housing, restoring livelihoods, psychosocial wellbeing, economic diversification and the tourism sector.

In 2022 there have been reports of several forthcoming government coordination initiatives for diaspora engagement, the first being an Overseas Sri Lankan Coordination Secretariat² proposed by the Foreign Ministry with backing from the Justice Ministry. The Coordination Secretariat is proposed to work with the Tamil Diaspora on specific issues such as prisoners and land; it will also work with the Office of Missing Persons and have a role in encouraging investment. The same reports talk of visa fast-tracking in the Immigration Department, a special police unit for expatriates and assistance for prospective Sri Lankan students without dual citizenship. In November 2022, the government announced a forthcoming Cabinet paper on setting up an Office for Overseas Sri Lankans under the Foreign Affairs Ministry.³ The Office for Overseas Sri Lankan Affairs (OOSLA) was opened in January 2023, undertaking consultations and outreach in 2023 and launching its website at the end of 2023. OOSLA

² Sunday Times (4 September 2022) Overseas Sri Lankan Coordination Secretariat to help expatriates, talks with diaspora groups. <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/220904/news/overseas-sri-lankan-coordination-secretariat-to-help-expatriates-talks-with-diaspora-groups-494280.html>

³ Sunday Observer (20 November 2022) Office for overseas Sri Lankans to be set up next month. <https://www.sundayobserver.lk/2022/11/20/news/office-overseas-sri-lankans-be-set-next-month>

provides consular services as well as covering education, research and development, trade and investment, tourism, philanthropy and reconciliation. It will expand its programmes iteratively, but has already started work on tourism projects, diaspora mapping and consultation with diaspora in academia, amongst others.⁴

Additionally, several Sri Lankan public service institutions have announced plans to implement tech-based solutions in 2025 to better serve overseas Sri Lankan communities. For instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has launched a pilot project enabling overseas Sri Lankans to access online authentication services for birth, marriage, and death certificates, with certified copies available through Sri Lankan missions abroad.⁵ Furthermore, an online passport application system is set to be introduced in 20 embassies worldwide by the end of 2025, as part of an IOM project funded by Japan.⁶



Achievements

Sri Lanka's Labour Migration Policy and its Sub Policy on Reintegration of Returning Migrant Workers is recognised as a model by several other countries. Given the highly dynamic nature of labour migration, the policy - adopted nearly a decade ago - is now undergoing revisions to better reflect changes in labour market supply and demand within the country, region and destination countries. An ILO study in 2015⁷ examined the workforce skills gap across the four industrial sectors projected to grow: ICT, tourism and hospitality, construction and light engineering. This revealed the prevailing challenge of a skills mismatch. To address this, the ILO, in collaboration with the Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC), offers job placement services for returned migrant workers with the appropriate skill levels to fill labour shortages in key sectors.

The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) operates an Overseas Workers Welfare Fund (OWWF) as a form of social protection for workers abroad; it is compulsory for all overseas workers to register. It covers expenses for providing assistance to Sri Lankan migrant workers and their families as well as regulating recruitment agencies, managing complaints from migrant workers and offering training and orientation programmes. The OWWF includes a compulsory insurance scheme, the costs of migrant workers' repatriation, scholarships for children, and loan schemes with partner banks to cover pre-departure costs and self-employment start-up costs. OWWF also supports returnees who have been rendered disabled while being employed overseas.⁸



Obstacles

- **Trust:** Given the history of the civil war in Sri Lanka and the circumstances in which many Sri Lankans left the country, there is a lack of trust between the diaspora and the national authorities. Consequently, diaspora engagement is mostly informal, short term and ad-hoc, targeting the local rather than national level.
- **Data:** There is no comprehensive mapping of Overseas Sri Lankans. Data is mainly based on information collected by embassies and high commissions.

4 <https://www.ft.lk/opinion/Many-bottlenecks-cleared-for-overseas-Sri-Lankans-to-invest-in-the-country/14-756417>

5 <https://www.torontoslcg.org/>

6 <https://economynext.com/overseas-sri-lankans-to-apply-for-passports-online-through-20-missions-202422/>

7 Decent Work Country Programme 2018-22, International Labour Organisation, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-colombo/documents/genericdocument/wcms_632743.pdf

8 ILO good practices database (accessed November 2022) https://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/migmmain.showPractice?p_lang=en&p_practice_id=151

- **Lack of policy framework to support diaspora investment:** Much private investment, both local and foreign, has gone into real estate and related sectors. The lack of direction in promoting specific sectors and limited regulatory framework in other sectors prevent Overseas Sri Lankans from investing in Sri Lanka. For instance, the government relaxed foreign investment restrictions for deep sea fishing in order to attract investment to the sector. However, the lack of publicity or a designated ministry to bring in investments from the diaspora prevents them from knowing about the policy and investing in the requisite sector. The establishment of the OOSLA (see annex) in 2023 is foreseen to address these concerns, but will take time for changes to take effect.

SPOTLIGHT: effective practices

Explore 400+ practices by country, SDG or sector of engagement in the [interactive database!](#)



Conference on Diaspora Engagement in Sri Lanka's Post-war Development, Reconciliation and Sustainable Peace, 2018

IDENTITY

Organised by the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), the themes of the conference included the politics of diaspora identity and definitions, the complexities of diaspora post-war development initiatives, the flow of skills, ideas and capital of the diaspora beyond the political and diaspora activism in justice, reconciliation and social cohesion. The conference outcome report brings a refreshing focus on diaspora literature – which is usually dominated by research on Tamil diaspora communities – by bringing in case studies of the Sinhala and Muslim diaspora communities. It also points to gaps that need to be addressed, such as the negotiation of aid between the diaspora and local communities and the role of women in diaspora engagement. The report concludes that the diaspora does not carry one identity, but multiple identities, and that can be used as a platform for finding commonalities leading to a more impactful engagement.

Condominiums in Wellawatte, 2018

INVESTMENT

Wellawatte has been a historically multi-ethnic place, which was known as 'Little Jaffna'. In recent years, it has seen small-scale investments by returning diaspora Tamils in condominiums in Wellawatte. Diaspora Tamils now view the place as connecting them to a larger community. Despite these investments being very small in scale, the fact that diaspora Tamils were investing in this part of Colombo was encouraging.

Science & Technology Expatriates Network

EDUCATION & TRAINING

The National Science Foundation (NSF) established a database of qualified Overseas Sri Lankans in science and technology fields in an attempt to address the limited in-country availability of such skills and qualifications. NSF is aware of the need to enhance Sri Lanka's knowledge economy and seeks to do so with "knowledge remittances". The S&T Network seeks to: 1) Provide greater access to opportunities for higher education and short-term training; 2) Promote international scientific cooperation and research collaboration; 3) Promote joint scholarly publications; 4) Shared experience through webinars & seminars and taking science to the community; 5) Enable Sri Lankan entrepreneurs to make links with expatriate Sri Lankan scientists; 6) Offer training and capacity building R & D workforce of Sri Lanka and create an overarching research culture.

Youth Dialogue 2024: Clicks to Progress: Youth for a Smarter Sri Lanka

YOUTH

On 21 August 2024, the Office for Overseas Sri Lankans Affairs (OOSLA), in partnership with the National Youth Services Council (NYSC) and the Ministry of Youth and Sports, hosted a youth dialogue focused on using digital solutions to address Sri Lanka's development challenges. Over 200 young Sri Lankans from home and abroad participated via a hybrid platform, highlighting the untapped potential of Sri Lankan youth, particularly those in the overseas community, in driving tech-based change. The dialogue process was youth-driven, with participants drafting the concept, guiding the roundtable discussions and proposing actionable recommendations. The event also concluded with the launch of the OOSLA Youth Ambassador Programme to strengthen ties between Sri Lankan overseas communities and their peers in Sri Lanka.

Annex:

List of Actors

Explore the institutionalisation of diaspora engagement worldwide via the [typology of 430+ institutions](#)

Diaspora related institutions

- **At regional level**

Colombo Process

The Colombo Process is a regional consultative process on the management of overseas employment and contractual labour for countries of origins in Asia. It is a member state-driven, non-binding and informal forum to facilitate dialogue and cooperation on issues of common interest and concern relating to labour mobility.

International Alert

It has been working in Sri Lanka since 1989 and opened its country office in 2003. It engages with civil society, local businesses, donors and the government to build inclusive peace. The organisation helps young politicians play a positive role in supporting peace, ensures that development organizations are sensitive to the impact that their funding has on the complex context of Sri Lanka and promotes the positive role that the diaspora can play in reconciliation, both in their own communities and in Sri Lanka as a whole.

International Organisation for Migration

Sri Lanka became a member state of IOM in 1990 and IOM established its presence in the country in 2002. IOM's focus of work is towards addressing long-term sustainable development goals across the country. They work in close partnership with national and local government institutions, NGOs, community organisations and the donor community, to address emerging issues, needs and priorities of the Sri Lankan government, migrants, partners and member states.

International Labour Organisation

Sri Lanka became a member of the ILO in 1948. Its areas of work in Sri Lanka includes child labour, employment promotion, equality and discrimination, green jobs, informal economy, international labour standards, labour market governance and working conditions, labour migration, safety and health at work, skills and employability, social security and workers and employer organisations. It is also instrumental in the implementation of the Decent Work Country Programme in Sri Lanka, where it works with the government on outlining policy direction, and prioritising areas of work that will contribute to decent work for all.

- **National Institutions**

- At ministerial level

Ministry of Labour and Foreign Employment

The main function of the ministry is to promote foreign employment, provide welfare to migrant workers and expatriate Sri Lankans, regulate and supervise employment agencies, provide career guidance on foreign employment, and supervise the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) and Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Agency (SLFEA).

Office for Overseas Sri Lankan Affairs 2023

OOSLA was established in January 2023 under the Office of the President to intensify the engagement with all Overseas Sri Lankans. OOSLA's aim is to assist Sri Lankans living abroad with issues like dual citizenship, passport renewals and obtaining information about their relations, as well as having the broader goal of bringing together all Sri Lankans to contribute to the country's development. As well as consular services, OOSLA services cover education, research and development, trade and investment, tourism, philanthropy and reconciliation. OOSLA is working with 23 public and private sector counterparts, as well as 62 overseas missions to improve service delivery, and supporting diasporans to launch small projects in Sri Lanka.

- At sub-ministerial level

Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE)

The bureau's key functions are in training and registration of migrant workers, licensing of recruitment agencies, complaint management mechanisms and the publishing of annual statistics.

Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Agency (SLFEA)

The agency is a subsidiary of the SLBFE. It recruits skilled and semi-skilled workers for various clients in East Asian, West Asian and European countries.

Department of Immigration and Emigration Sri Lanka

The department regulates the entry and exit of persons and provides citizenship services. It also keeps and maintains a register of persons who are non-citizens of Sri Lanka at entry and departure points.

- At Local Level

The Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC) 1929

It was established as an organisation of employers dealing with labour and social issues in Sri Lanka, today it is the principal organisation of employers, promoting employer interests at the national level, especially focusing on industrial relations and labour law.

Diaspora organisations in Europe

Association of Sri Lanka Lawyers in the UK (ASSLUK) 2003 UK

It brings together lawyers of Sri Lankan origin (both Sri Lankan and British born) and aims to provide a common forum in the UK, where barristers, solicitors, academics and students in the legal field, as well as others who are associated within the legal field can interact and exchange ideas with a view to assisting each other, including providing continuing education and interaction with professional bodies.

Read more about diaspora organisations
in "[Starting guide: What is a diaspora
organisation](#)"



British Tamil Forum (BTF) 2006 U**✓ Development activities**

It aims to be the bridge between the British Tamil Community and the Tamil people in Sri Lanka, campaign for the Tamil people's collective right to self-determination in Sri Lanka, alleviate the sufferings of the Tamils in Sri Lanka and help Tamil people rebuild their lives after the war.

Comdu.it 2004 Global Germany**✓ Development activities**

Comdu.it is a global Tamil diaspora organisation based in Canada and Germany committed to “helping shift diaspora engagement from charity to sustainability, from aid to economic development, and from sending remittance to building a knowledge economy.” It supports local development projects in North and East Sri Lanka and places great emphasis on empowering local partners to be equal partners in collaborations which range from the NEOrganics Food Innovation Lab, to urban waste governance in Jaffna city, to a Google e-Classroom training which has led to 16 teachers delivering digital content on their own – and more besides.

Global Tamil Forum (GTF) 2009 Global

It is the largest Tamil diaspora organisation with members drawn from across five continents, including Europe. It seeks to rebuild the lives of Tamils post-conflict, ensure justice for innocent victims of the conflict and facilitate international engagement for the Tamil political representatives from Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka Association Berlin e.V. 1978 Germany**✓ Development activities**

It is a non-profit association to give Sri Lankans the opportunity to get to know each other better, to create a platform for everyday problems and solutions, and to make the cultural heritage of Sri Lanka better known to the citizens of the host country as well as promote and deepen the cultural and social relations between Sri Lanka and Germany. Supporting the homeland, especially in emergency situations, as well as promoting education, training and the integration of young people remain priority tasks of the SLA.

Sri Lankan Association of Norway 1984 Norway

The association's primary purpose is to provide a common ground for the diaspora to gather, share, use, cultivate and promote Sri Lankan culture, language, sports, etc. In addition, the association has undertaken humanitarian work, such as disaster relief, in Sri Lanka, initiated arrangements to strengthen the cooperation between Norwegians and Sri Lankans as well as support diversity and integration work in Norway. At present, the association has approximately 200 members from across Norway.

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