

Hon. Mahinda Rajapaksa  
Prime Minister  
Prime Minister's Office  
58, Sir Ernest De Silva Mawatha  
Colombo 07

22 May 2020

Hon. Prime Minister,

**Opportunity for Sri Lanka to Take Global Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

I write to you to draw your attention to the opportunity for Sri Lanka to take both regional and global leadership in the COVID-19 response through the proactive disclosure of information on financial and material grants and donations received.

TISL recommends the following three steps be implemented by the Finance Ministry:

1. Establish an online platform providing all information on grants/donations received with timely updates on spending
2. Maintain an e-procurement platform to publish all government tender notices and related documents, technical evaluations, decisions etc.; providing timely updates during the procurement process and implementation.
3. Issue a circular reinforcing the need for strict record management practices in all public institutions in compliance with provisions of the RTI Act and regulations promulgated by the RTI Commission.

Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) understands that thus far, amongst others, the World Bank has pledged USD 128 million, the European Union has pledged EUR 22 million, the Chinese government has provided a concessionary loan of USD 500 million and the USA has pledged USD 6 million towards Sri Lanka's efforts to combat COVID-19. TISL also recognises that Sri Lanka too has pledged USD 5 million to the SAARC Coronavirus Emergency Fund. Furthermore, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has announced that the COVID-19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund has received more than Rs. 1 billion in donations.

Whilst welcoming the President's pledge to utilise the Social Security Fund with complete transparency and share audited accounts with the public, we also kindly call upon you in your capacity as the Minister of Finance, to follow international best practices on disclosing information to ensure transparency and accountability in the utilisation of funds/grants from overseas.

In its paper on Fiscal Affairs as part of a series on "Fiscal Policies to Respond to COVID-19", the International Monetary Fund (IMF) highlights the importance of ensuring fiscal transparency, safeguarding public accountability and maintaining institutional legitimacy as being key to the success of the COVID-19 fiscal policy response.

The need to document decisions and transactions is also a primary call to action in the joint statement signed by UNESCO and the International Conference of Information Commissioners which notes that sound record management is more important than ever with governments taking unprecedented steps to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The statement also notes that it is essential that the basis of decisions made, the decisions themselves and the senior decision-makers involved are thoroughly documented in order for governments to remain accountable both during and after the emergency.

Furthermore, in its latest briefing paper on "Ensuring the Public's Right to Know in the COVID-19 Pandemic", Article-19, a global watchdog on the right to information, acknowledges that billions of dollars are now being committed by governments worldwide to purchase goods and services and to support businesses and communities. They emphasise that transparency about the justification for, allocation of, and the results of this extraordinary expenditure is essential to provide oversight, ensure that funds are used fairly and wisely, and to avoid corruption.

Whilst appreciating the difficulties and challenges in administration brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and recognising the efforts of the government of Sri Lanka to mitigate the COVID-19 risk domestically, TISL believes that the higher stakes mean that accountability is more important than ever.

Sharing as much information as possible with the public enables each individual citizen to make informed decisions, will serve to build public trust in the efforts of the government and will minimise the risk of corruption by adding a layer of external accountability through public scrutiny. Availability of this information ensures that the spending is justified by the need of the hour.

Over the past two months' public concerns about transparency and accountability linked to the COVID-19 response have been raised with TISL, including in the administration and allocation of relief such as the Rs. 5,000 allowance program for low-income earners. The overarching concern in all aspects of the COVID-19 response should be the recognition that the public are the victims of the pandemic and that the response to the crisis should not inadvertently provide an opportunity for a pandemic of corruption and mismanagement.

As the Minister of Finance, TISL requests that you initiate steps to implement the three recommendations provided. Swift action at this time will enable Sri Lanka to provide global leadership on information sharing and public engagement in the response to COVID-19. We will be happy to provide support in this public interest endeavour.

Thank you,  
Yours sincerely,



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Asoka Obeyesekere  
*Executive Director*  
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