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## Public Sector Accountability to Implement Sustainable Development Goals in Sri Lanka: Influence of Traditional and Non-Traditional Donors

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### Keywords

Accountability, Environmental Sustainability, SDGs, non-Traditional Donors, Public Sector, Infrastructure Funding, Sri Lanka



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### Abstract

Implementation of Sustainable development Goals (SDGs) for better environmental sustainability in developing countries in Asia has taken centre stage in response to the major environmental and social degradation created through rapid economic development in the region. Further, lack of clarity in environmental accountability of traditional economic developmental activities and internationally funded infrastructure development projects has resulted in reduced water and air quality and imperilled biodiversity. SDG related research in developing country context is limited and the impact of the funding bodies on public sector governance and accountability is scarce. This paper aims to fill this gap by addressing environmental accountability of public sector entities in internationally funded development projects in Sri Lanka, as a fast-developing country in Asia. The results indicate that environmental degradation is a continuing issue in Sri Lanka despite the efforts of traditional donor agencies monitoring and implementing environmental sustainability guidelines and SDG principles in infrastructure projects. The drastic change in the donor landscape experienced in the country with the rise of non-traditional donors and the deficiencies in public sector governance and accountability structures pose a significant threat to attainment of SDGs, including environmental sustainability in Sri Lanka.

**JEL classification:** G30, M40, Q01

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Given the intensity of the public sector involvement and its size in national economies, the public sector has a significant role to play in attaining environmental sustainability (Adams, Muir & Hoque 2014; Ball et al 2014) including SDGs (Abhayawansa et. al. 2021). Despite the awareness of the importance of the environmental sustainability, due to economic constraints developing countries (DCs) focus more on economic development (Wignaraja et al. 2020). OECD (2018) explains that public sector accountability is about setting clear goals and targets and taking responsibility to deliver them as planned or accepting potential sanctions for lack of compliance and commitment. This accountability concept needs to be applied to ensure public sector accountability for sustainable development (SD) in DCs. According to Briffett, Obbard & MacKee (2003), although the public sector has established policies and procedures for environmental sustainability including SDGs, countries in Asia such as Sri Lanka are facing challenges in implementing them due to limitations in public sector accountability mechanisms. In addition, accountability relationships have become increasingly complex in the Sri Lankan public sector with the involvement of multiple international stakeholders such as United Nations (UN) and international donor and funding agencies such as Asian Development (ADB), World Bank (WB) as traditional donors and China as an emerging donor (Wignaraja et al. 2020; De Silva 2021).

The UN SDGs Agenda 2030 outlines goals for a future sustainable world (Abhayawansa et. al. 2021) and the cooperation required, particularly in the low-income and middle-income regions (Rudolph 2017). Donors and funding agencies play a significant role in implementing SDGs (Huang & Pascual 2018). Responsible management and cooperation in development matters between donors and funding agencies (Rudolph 2017) is important if SDGs are to be meaningfully implemented (Huang & Pascual 2018; De Silva 2021; De Silva Lokuwaduge et al 2020). In line with Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth), infrastructure development needs in DCs can be supported while addressing environmental and social challenges through key requirements of Goal 11- Sustainable cities and communities, Goal 13 - Climate action, Goal 14 - Life below water and Goal 15 - Life on land (UN n.d.)

The SDGs built on earlier initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (OECD 2015; Rudolph 2017). From the lessons learned from the earlier ineffective implementation of MDGs, there is increasing pressure to ensure SDGs are achieved as DCs emerge through economic growth (Rudolph 2017; Bowen et al. 2017; Asadullah, Savoia & Sen 2020; Ocampo, Gómez-Arteaga 2016, De Silva 2021). SD is an essential component of DC aid initiatives (Lenssen & Van Wassenhove 2012) associated with traditional donors such as World Bank and Asian Development Bank, that puts pressure on the recipient country's government to ensure policies achieve SDG-related reforms in those countries (Rudolph 2017). Non-traditional donors such as China Export and Import Bank whose governments are not signatories to Development Assistance Committee (DAC) are not bound by best practices in SD (Besharati 2019; Hurley et al. 2019; Mulakala 2016). With a significant rise in non-traditional donor funded infrastructure development projects in DCs, environmental deterioration continues to be a major issue (Besharati 2019; Hurley et al. 2019; Clausen et al. 2011; Alshuwaikhat 2005). Abhayawansa et al (2021 pp 925) warns that, "failure to achieve the SDGs will destroy the fabric of society, carry grave risks for the Earth and its inhabitants and make enhancing economic value both meaningless and challenging"

The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of the traditional and non-traditional donors on public sector accountability for environmental sustainability giving special reference to SDGs in international development projects in Sri Lanka during the last decade from 2009 to 2019. To explore the issue, the study predominantly focuses on political, legal and professional accountability typologies proposed in prominent public accountability frameworks (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Dubnick, 2005; Boven, 2010), that are useful in investigating achievement of SDGs. The major public sector projects selected for this case study are: First Highway project in Sri Lanka – Southern Transport Development Project (STDP); Colombo Port City Project (CPCP).

## **2.0 PUBLIC SECTOR ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SDGS IN THE DCS**

### **2.1. Environmental condition of DCs and increasing aid initiatives**

The extant literature discusses that (Deegan 2017; Alshuwaikhat, 2005; Saleh, 1996; Briffett et al., 2003; De Silva 2021), with expansion and development of cities and urbanisation during the last decade, polluting sources have increased dramatically while many communities still experience significantly poor living conditions (Deegan 2017). In some areas, there is little or no access to resources such as health, education, land, and infrastructure, which are necessary to transition into a better life (De Silva et al 2020; Deegan 2017). Many studies (Deegan 2017; Pachauri et al., 2014; Jones 2012; Alshuwaikhat 2005) argue that positive initiatives have taken place in the last two decades in relation to societies and environment but in reality, the negative impact on the environment is getting worse.

Sustainability initiatives remain a great challenge in DCs despite the significant rise in developmental aid flowing in, in the recent years (Ekanayake & Chatrna, 2010) which has heightened infrastructure development in the Asian region (Alshuwaikhat, 2005; Briffett et al., 2003; Saleh, 1996). DCs heavily rely on foreign aid and among the myriad of objectives attached to foreign aid, international development funding agencies have incorporated SDGs to donor agencies' strategies and aid initiatives (Lenssen & Van Wassenhove, 2012). International Donor agencies such as ADB and AusAid work in partnership with UN and link their operations to the UN 2030 SDG agenda (De Silva et al 2020, p 41).

DCs are reforming their public sector to become more efficient and to be competitive (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2015), in some cases as a matter of choice but others as a matter of necessity (Haque, 2013; De Silva et al., 2020). This is considered critical to the World Bank's mission of poverty alleviation and the achievement of SDGs in 2030. Therefore, exploring the contribution of the public sector accountability mechanisms and initiatives of public sector agencies in this context adds significant value to the SDG agenda.

Implementing accountability is more complex in the international development context with the growing number of stakeholders actively engaging in development co-operation (De Silva et al., 2020). Nevertheless, in the words of Ban Ki-moon, the former Secretary-General of the UN, an inclusive, robust yet flexible accountability framework is needed (OECD, 2015) to achieve SDGs.

## 2.2. Public Sector Environmental Accountability Relationship

According to Abhaywansa et al (2021), identifying environmental accountability relationships would be a steppingstone to understanding public sector accountability for environmental sustainability. Understanding power and accountability relationships within organisations can explain how organisations manage their environmental pressures and adopt new systems and processes in response to external influences and pressures (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003; Davis & Cobb, 2010; De Silva et al., 2020). Davis & Cobb (2010) explain that it is important to analyse “sources and consequences of power in inter-organisational relations: where power and dependence come from and how those that run organisations use their power and manage their dependence” (pp. 24). This determines the dependent organisation’s own survival and autonomy, while maintaining the stable relations with external agencies according to the concept of external control analysis (Lokuwaduge & Godage 2020).

A widely used definition of accountability focuses on the underlying power relationships. Boven (2010) defines accountability as “a social relationship in which an actor feels an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct to some significant other [forum]” (p.184). *Actor-Forum* relationships narrowly explain accountability as social interactions that can be studied empirically (Bovens 2006; Mulgan 2003). De Silva et. al (2020, p.44) cited “accountability includes the impact of individuals, corporations and government’s decisions and actions on people and the planet which extends the responsibility to the whole planet”, including the environment and not just the humankind (Hassan & Kouhy, 2015). Therefore, accountability in the context of sustainability means that the actors should take responsibility for the economic, environmental and social impacts resulting from their actions and decisions and be able to give account to the relevant stakeholders or forums at various levels.

Of the number of accountability typologies available in the literature, the three main types of accountability that are most relevant for the international development context of Sri Lanka are political, legal and professional accountability (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Dubnick, 2005; Boven, 2010).

Political accountability is central to public administration. Political accountability can be explained with a chain of *actor-forum* relationships (Strøm, 2000). In parliamentary democracies, voters elect their representatives who in turn delegate most of their authorities to a cabinet of ministers. Ministerial power is further delegated to other government authorities and civil servants (Boven, 2010). Constituencies could include elected officials, agency heads etc; despite who they represent, elected officials need to be responsive to the public and policy priorities (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987).

Legal accountability is based on a relationship between the controlling party and the public agency. Legal *forums* such as the judiciary system have high control to impose legal sanctions while the public agency is the ‘executor’ (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987). Legal accountability is of increasing importance as there is greater trust placed in the legal system and courts than in parliament (Boven, 2010; De Silva et al., 2020). Legal accountability will usually be based on specific responsibilities, formally or legally conferred upon authorities. Therefore, according to Boven (2010) legal accountability is the most unambiguous type of accountability. The *forums* in this case can extend beyond the judiciary system to partners in contractual agreement such as international donor agencies and the *actors* will be recipients of the funds.

Professional accountability refers to employees being accountable for their actions, if they don't, they may be reprimanded etc., (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Schillemans, 2008). These employees might be trained as engineers, accountants, auditors or any other professional with a strong association with professional bodies or tribunals where their practices and standards are monitored and enforced by the professional bodies (Boven, 2010). In the public sector international development context, the professional *actors* would be all employees who are working as project directors, general managers, managers and general staff in a professional capacity and *forums* would be professional bodies or governing bodies.

### **2.3. Impact of Foreign Aid on Public Sector Accountability for Sustainability**

Extant literature explains (Swedlund 2017; Alshuwaikhat 2005; Radelet 2006, De Silva 2021), recipient governments discharge varying levels of accountability depending on the account holder and associated consequences which influence the level of responsiveness to SD, including environmental sustainability (Kramarz & Park 2016). It is found that while DCs are benefiting from funding, there has been only minimal effort reported by DCs to satisfy donor agency requirements, despite initial commitments to international policies (Swedlund 2017; Alshuwaikhat 2005; Radelet 2006). There are reports that borrowing country governments have limited understanding of SD requirements and minimum compliance to government legislations and donor conditions with the intention of securing funding (Burton 2012; Alshuwaikhat 2005; Li 2017) and not particularly to meet long-term sustainability goals. Due to the asymmetric donor-recipient relationship, recipient governments are often willing to compromise and accept conditions in order to secure funding although it could be harmful in many ways (Burton 2012; O'Neil 2019). This further supports the argument that DC governments accept conditions with the intention of maximising revenue and not to be accountable for SD and the environment (Girod & Tobin 2016; Abayawansa 2021). Nonetheless, some DCs show high levels of accountability to international sustainability guidelines and conditions, indicating aid effectiveness to some extent, (Winters 2010).

It is argued that policies and conditions underpinned by donor agency agreements, formalised in the "Official Development Assistance" (ODA) agreements are not sufficient to achieve SDGs or strengthen the accountability of developmental partners when infrastructure is being built (Mahn 2017). Without increased attention and clear focus on SDGs, environmental degradation will continue to get worse in the future (Loomis & Dziedzic 2018). DAC donors are required to be signatories to DAC guidelines that outline best practice for development aid programs. They provide guidance on natural resources management and managing the environmental impacts of development projects, etc. (OECD 2015; Besharati 2019; Mulakala 2016). However, problems have arisen with the emergence of non-DAC donors like China whose government is not bound by such guidelines. This has resulted in unsustainable practices in international development projects (Besharati 2019; Hurley et al. 2019; Mulakala 2016; Ogbuoji & Yamey 2019; de Renzio & Seifert 2014). Thus, emerging donors such as China [through its Belt and Road Initiative] does not follow Development Assistance Committee Official Development Assistance (DAC ODA) requirements and so even minimal adherence to SD is not part of their contractual obligations.

In 2013, China launched its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which involves developing large-scale trade and commerce between and within strategic regions of the world. This plan involves around 64 countries (Ascensão et al. 2018; Teo et al. 2019) and Sri Lanka has benefitted from this initiative to a great extent. Despite the benefits attached to infrastructure development in the country to boost the economy and trade, economic development is damaging the environment and biodiversity, which is inevitable when

infrastructure building is unchecked. Although some improvements in raising environmental standards have been reported (Wignaraja et al. 2020), protecting the environment and natural resources is not yet a priority of the BRI (Ascensão et al. 2018; Teo et al. 2019).

#### **2.4 Environmental Accountability in Sri Lanka: International Development Projects**

Sri Lanka is highly dependent on international donors and funding agencies for its economic and social development projects. According to De Silva et al (2020), the key reasons for this dependence is the end of the three decade long civil war in 2009 and political conflicts over the years (Hopper et al., 2009; Lokuwaduge & Godage, 2020). As a percentage of GDP, foreign aid amounted to 31.6% in 2010 and it has increased to 42.6% in 2019 (Ministry of Finance 2019). Given the high dependency on international resources, historically, traditional international donor and funding agencies such as WB and ADB attempted to address environmental sustainability issues by incorporating environmental sustainability as funding conditions in DCs (Dijkstra 2015; Fukuda-Parr 2012).

According to the extant literature (Yapa and Ukwatte, 2015; De Silva et al 2020) Sri Lankan authorities' concern for the environmental sustainability has a long history and was a frontrunner in the region with the introduction of Geological Survey and Mines Bureau Forest Ordinance No. 16 in 1907, Land Development Ordinance No. 19 in 1935 etc (SACEP 2002). One of the main legislations introduced in the country during the last three decades is the National Environment Act (NEA) in 1980 which established the Central Environment Authority (CEA) and the Environmental Council, setting the accountability system and mechanisms. NEA stipulates tools to regulate the environment, Environment Protection Licensing (EPL) Scheme and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). EPL needs to be renewed every three years, renewal helps the authorities to generate some revenue while regulating the environmental protection measures used by potential environmentally sensitive industries and projects (CEA, 2015). EIA is a "written analysis of the predicted environmental consequences of a proposed project...during the planning, design, decision-making, and implementation stages of that action" (Arts & Morrison-Saunders, 2012 p.1).

Depending on the significance of the anticipated impacts, there are two types of reports submitted for approval – Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) and the EIA. Under the Gazette Notification No.859/14, CEA has published the type of project that would require EIA and IEE and the list of Project Approving Agencies (PAA) - the various government bodies that would approve proposed projects depending on the level of impact and the nature of the projects (CEA 2015). The EIA practices and procedures of every PAA ensure that high-quality environmental information is available to concerned public officials, as well as other interest groups and the general public before the government makes any significant resource commitment that has an impact on the environment. It is expected that a PAA integrate EIA requirements with other planning and environmental review procedures required by law or by agency practice, so that all such procedures run concurrently rather than consequently (SACEP, 2002 p. 140). Project Proponents (PP) may use consultants to prepare EIAs and make it available in the national languages. . According to the NEA, public is allowed to submit queries about the proposed projects and the EIA within 30 days. PAA and CEA would review the comments received and make the final decision on whether a project may be approved or not (CEA 2015).

In the year 1989 a Cabinet ministry was created as the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (MEF) to deal with the environmental issues and policy-making. According to SACEP (2002) inter-ministerial coordinating committees chaired by the secretary to the ministry are

setup for various purposes depending on the requirements from time to time and these committees coordinate the environmental policy activities while the CEA acts as the implementing agency for the policies of the ministry of environment. CEA has a wide range of powers including coordinating all regulatory activities relating to the discharge of wastes and pollutants, ensuring local authorities and international development projects are promoting the environmental compliance requirements for the sensible use and conservation of land and other resources when they carry out their development and business activities (SACEP 2002, CEA 2015).

### **3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study utilises a qualitative research approach (Hennink et al., 2010). Two major international development projects in Sri Lanka funded by traditional and non-traditional donors were selected for this study. STDP was selected as it was the first major highway project in Sri Lanka which was significantly funded by ADB and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) as traditional donors with a long-standing history of development cooperation with Sri Lanka. The CPCP was selected as the next case study as it is the largest foreign funded project in Sri Lanka's history. CPCP is funded solely by Export Import Bank of China (EIBC) – as a non-traditional funding agency, and it has been in the limelight for number of environmental sustainability concerns.

This study relies on the data collected using the documentary analysis. The documentary and secondary evidence include - archived documents, Hansard reports, as well as published information on websites of relevant ministries, newspapers, interest groups and international organisations (i.e. ADB, WB and UN) between 2001 and 2018. In order to understand the environmental sustainability policy improvements and changes in the public sector of Sri Lanka and to analyse the influence of international institutions, relevant documents from Ministry of Environment and the newly established Department for Sustainable Development documents were analysed. Documentary analysis grouped findings under the themes of (Creswell & Poth 2016), political, legal and professional accountability relationships and their actions or failure of actions in achieving SDG related outcomes i.e. EIA requirements for projects.

### **4.0 FINDINGS ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

With the growing number of stakeholders actively involved in the international development process, public sector accountability relationships have become extremely complex. This has in turn made it difficult to measure public sector accountability in the international developmental context of DCs like Sri Lanka, particularly in terms of environmental sustainability outcomes.

#### **4.1 Political and Legal Accountability for SDGs**

This section explores the political and legal accountability held by individual and organisational respondents. The main priorities in DCs are economic growth and poverty reduction (SDG- 01). International developmental organisations such as WB, IMF, UN and ADB are promoting economic growth and poverty reduction through foreign aid programs (Elayah 2016; Brett, 2016; Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2015) while safeguarding the environmental sustainability. MDG was developed to create a new global partnership of 191 UN member states to reduce extreme poverty by 2015 (Sachs 2012). Sri Lanka was one of the countries that signed the agreement.

According to Sri Lanka's parliamentary debate records;

*Sri Lanka's achievements are noteworthy. Sri Lanka was able to achieve the MDG targets of reducing poverty rates seven years before 2015 deadline (Hansard, Parliamentary Debates 29 Nov 2017).*

Moreover, the government of Sri Lanka reports that in order to achieve the SDGs of 2030, the Parliament passed the Sustainable Development Act in October, 2017. The Act provides a legal framework for the National Strategy to be prepared to facilitate the achievement of SDGs. The annual report of Ministry of Sustainable Development, Wildlife and Regional Development (MSDWRD), 2018 states the following:

*all subject ministries, line agencies, and subnational entities are required to prepare 'Sustainable Development Strategies (SDS)' within their subjects' scope...*

- All public entities that prepared SDSs are expected to carry out the implementation of SDGs within their scope. They are required to fulfil the following obligations.*
- Submit progress reports on SDS within periods specified by the MSDWRD*
- Carry out environmental and social audits for new development projects to ensure environmental and social security*
- Include a statement as to the compliance of their activities with NPSSD in the Annual Reports (MSDWRD 2018 p.37).*

In addition, the Sri Lankan parliamentary debates on the concern of environmental protection have been identified as follows:

*We have shown serious commitment towards the environment and brought strict laws to control polythene and plastics. In recognition of our dedication to the environment, Sri Lanka has been chosen to lead the mangrove protection initiative of the Commonwealth Nations. Our programmes; Environmental Protection, ... Sustainable Schools...have achieved over 90 per cent progress. We have prioritised managing waste, controlling environmental pollution, increasing environmental literacy and protection of the forest cover. The waste management system, though received with some criticism, is now a well-functioning system. (Hansard, Parliamentary Debates 8 May 2018).*

This evidence indicates a strong commitment to conditions and agreements made between the Government of Sri Lanka, international donor agencies and other international bodies. Nevertheless, after opening the Southern Expressway (STDP) to the public in year 2011, several complications have been reported in the media on environmental degradation. Cooray (2017) reports as follows:

*The environmental degradation, associated with expressway building, including the forest cover destruction, fragmentation of wetlands, and interference with the fragile flood plains, etc., contributes to this worsening flood situation and other disasters like landslides that go hand in hand with floods. Even the Cabinet spokesmen, in the immediate aftermath of the floods, claimed the bigger damage to life and property had resulted from landslides that came along with floods, rather than due to the floods per se.*

Sri Lanka's history suggests that there is no lack of policies and procedures to ensure environmental sustainability in the country (SACEP 2002). However, evidence indicated that the policy implementation is slow and fragmented (Gunaratne & Alahakoon, 2016). Due to the resource dependency nature, recipient countries such as Sri Lanka agree to foreign aid conditions without fully understanding and agreeing to long-term objectives of foreign aid projects (Amarasinghe & Rebert, 2013; Briffett et al., 2003; Momtaz, 2002; Alshuwaik, 2005). It simply becomes a political decision without the involvement of the relevant areas of the government, and a clear perception of the international development objectives by government agencies. As indicated in the report by MSDWRD (2018):

*Even though there are several legislations to address the land degradation problem in Sri Lanka, these have failed to address the problem due to poor implementation. (MSDWRD2018 p.63).*

Momtaz (2002) reported on the general perception about the EIA process in the international developmental projects in some Asian countries, "EIAs are conducted only because they are required by the government legislation and donor agencies, not to ensure sustainability of projects or to develop better management plans. In many cases, EIA is seen by proponents as an impediment to the implementation of development projects. It is regarded as a tool to justify projects rather than using it as means to derive the best decision" (Momtaz 2002 p. 176). Similarly, Hapuarachchi, Hughey & Rennie (2015 p.436) who explored the effectiveness of EIA in Sri Lanka adds that EIA consultants tend to "downplay the scale of projects to bypass an in-depth environmental and public scrutiny"

Similarly, UNEP SACEP country report on National Environmental Legislation and Institutions in Sri Lanka concluded that;

*Despite the enactment of strong legislation, the enforcement and compliance have been devastatingly weak. This can be attributed to inadequate awareness and education amongst the stakeholders; multiplicity of institutions ... (SACEP UNEP 2002 p. 64).*

Although, legal accountability between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and international institutions and donor agencies may seem strong with high level of adoption of international good governance practices and policies, the effectiveness of these policies in the long-term are not as significant. Aid and concessionary loan recipient countries like Sri Lanka are interested in foreign aid due to their financial and economic interests. Therefore, some of the benefits are short-lived or are only at a superficial level. This is associated with recipient government's lack of ownership of policies and incoherence between donor's objectives and recipient countries' objectives of foreign aid (Brett, 2016; Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2015).

To ensure continuous flow of financial assistance, GoSL pressures the public sector agencies involved in the developmental projects to meet the minimum project conditions to avoid legal sanctions enforced by the international donors and concessional funding agencies (Briffett et al., 2003; Momtaz, 2002; Alshuwaik, 2005).

During STDP, Sri Lanka was found to be non-compliant on social and environmental sustainability, Compliance Review Panel of ADB requested that ADB;

*suspend disbursements for the Project until the Project Proponent and the Government of Sri Lanka ensure that...The Project complies with all ADB Policies and Operations Manuals especially those pertaining to Resettlement, Environment... (ADB 2005 p.65).*

As evident, sanctions for non-compliance could mean suspension of funding. This may be evidence of the high level of Environmental Sustainability policy adoption in Sri Lanka, however without a clear commitment to long-term environmental sustainability outcomes, mostly to avoid sanctions, effectiveness of donor conditions is minimal.

Matheson et al., (2007) conducted a study on political involvement in senior staffing. The study indicated that due to power imbalance, civil servants do not feel free to speak the truth when senior public officials are politically appointed. Moreover, since the ministers are responsible for the departments' actions in the general public's eye, ministers would obtain the control of their administration by appointing loyal followers who would generally not question the decisions and actions of the minister (Matheson et al., 2007). If the ministers' decisions and actions are driven by self-interest and not on public interest, this can have detrimental impact, which is observed in countries like Sri Lanka (Amarasinghe & Rebert, 2013). Therefore, high level of political accountability can be observed between public servants and Department Heads of each ministry and between department heads and Ministers. However, if public servants are tasked to complete activities that are not driven by the interests of the public or SDGs, their high accountability will be directed for the wrong cause, hence the public sector of Sri Lanka will not be able to achieve the expected long-term SD outcomes.

A high level of political accountability is not observed between citizens and elected officials. A study conducted by Amarasinghe & Rebert (2013) from the International Alert NGO group on foreign aid trends in Sri Lanka identified the weak relationship between the state and the citizens in terms of accountability. The government is essentially following a top-down approach to development and public participation in the decision-making process is absent or very low. This is further emphasised in the CPCP, funded by the Chinese government, that has had significant setbacks due to public outcry and environmental sustainability concerns since its early stages.

In the case of CPCP, Iddamalgoda (2016) states, if the authorities were serious about the EIA process and the public participation, "an important document of such nature [EIA report] should have been presented to the general public in a simple language with limited technological and scientific jargon because those directly affected by the project are ordinary citizens of this country and would not be qualified to understand it's technical and scientific language". The public participation period was during the month of December, (2015). Iddamalgoda (2016) further adds that this outcome is disappointing "simply due to the reason that many who live in the coastal areas, who are deeply affected by the CPCP, celebrate one of their most important and most popular feasts of their Faith [during this time]. It is impractical and insensitive to expect from a community to read and understand a 400-page document [during this period of religious festivities]". Nevertheless, AsiaNews (04/07//2016) reporter Melani Perera reports that;

*In September 2016, the People's Movement against the Port City, which led the protest, presented an Environmental Impact Assessment of 400 pages, with 128 negative opinions on the construction.*

Moreover, EIA that was completed in 2011 fulfilled less than 20% of the requirements of the Coast Conservation Act in Sri Lanka. Environmental experts expressed their concerns and the significant negative environmental impact the project can have on the country (Dominicans for Justice and Peace, 2018; Daily Mirror 2018). Yet, authorities approved the project to resume and to continue monitoring environmental conditions that were not disclosed to the public (Mansoor 2018), violating multiple NEA requirements. Political influence is evident, especially in projects funded by non-traditional funding agencies such as EIBC. It is also significant to note that unlike traditional donors (ADB, WB), non-traditional funding institutions such as EIBC do not have mandatory environmental safeguard principles (Tracy et al., 2017), and they rely on borrowing country's environmental safeguard laws.

This is not the same with traditional donors, non-compliance of EIA requirements in the Southern Expressway was escalated to the supreme court of Sri Lanka and RDA and CEA were found to be at fault. Judgement states, "violation of the rights of the petitioners under the constitution of Sri Lanka... [and]... the principles of Natural Justice had not been adhered to (ADB 2005 p.70). Moreover, the Supreme Court ruled that the EIA had not been approved legally and that the alterations to the Southern Express Highway had not been studied in the EIA process (ADB, 2005). RDA was ordered to conduct a supplementary EIA. This emphasises that the GoSL and the donor and funding agencies are accountable to the ultimate powers of the legal system in the country.

In summary, despite high political commitment to SDGs demonstrated through adoption of legislations, implementation is significantly slow. Sri Lanka's public sector accountability relationships are significantly influenced by high political interference. Nevertheless, legal accountability to the Sri Lankan judiciary system and to traditional donors have been high, however absence of legal accountability to environmental sustainability in non-traditional donor funded projects leaves SDG compliance at the mercy of professional accountability of government agencies.

#### **4.2 Professional Accountability**

This section elaborates professional accountability related evidence. The governing body of environmental sustainability is the CEA in Sri Lanka. Apart from the CEA, Coastal Conservation Department (CCD), Auditor General and Ministry of Finance are monitoring and oversight bodies that are relevant in this study. To ensure environmental sustainability of international developmental projects, NEA, Safeguard Statements and policies of international donor agencies sets out EIA process, monitoring process, responsibilities and duties of environmental officers of CEA, project team and donor agencies. EIA is expected to play a major role in protecting affected communities and maintaining environmental justice, however this has not always been the case in Sri Lanka due to its inherent limitations (Pullenayegem, 2008; Alshuwaikhat, 2005; Briffett et al., 2003) and low level of professional accountability (Ogola, 2007).

Non-compliance of environmental conditions and lack of monitoring in the STDP was escalated to the compliance review committee of ADB (ADB, 2005). The affected communities and environmental interest groups were not given the opportunity to access the resettlement plans, environmental monitoring and mitigation plans which are part of the project approving conditions and loan agreements (ADB 2005). Nevertheless, project approving agencies and environmental officials have not followed through their duties to ensure environmental policy compliance.

Nevertheless, The ADB's accountability mechanisms allowed ADB's Compliance Review Panel (CRP) to demand the government officers to ensure STDP is compliant with environmental safeguards and report regularly until the project is brought into compliance (ADB 2005). Despite the mixed results, there is evidence to suggest that ADB as a traditional donor was able to steer the project in the right direction to meet environmental sustainability requirements. Athukorala (2017) reports that it appears that the regulatory bodies issue conditional approvals and not an unconditional approval for the projects. However, due to lack of resourcing, low accountability (Ogola, 2007) and political pressures on regulatory bodies such as CCD and CEA (De Silva et al 2020), officials do not follow up on conditions and engage in adequate levels of monitoring (MSDWRD 2018).

The NEA would act as the base framework for the legal, policy and institutional direction in Sri Lanka, however "there are several inefficiencies in the implementation of this framework. Limited capacity of implementing agencies for undertaking surveillance, monitoring and enforcement is a major factor responsible for this situation" (MSDWRD 2018 p.98).

*Land resources are being used by a number of economic sectors in the country, such as agriculture, forestry, irrigation, plantation industries, etc. Due to inadequate legal interventions, land is being utilized unsustainably (MSDWRD 2018 p.98).*

As a result, it can be expected that the environmental project officers and consultants do not feel pressured nor do they have significant authority to ensure compliance. They are merely fulfilling EIA requirement without a clear aim of ensuring long-term environmental sustainability. Nevertheless, traditional donor monitoring and compliance pressure can compel higher level of professional accountability.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

The study aims to explore the impact of the traditional and non-traditional donors on public sector accountability for environmental sustainability. In order to achieve this aim, the objective is to examine the dynamics of the accountability relationship process and the environmental sustainability performance in the international development projects. Environmental accountability has become a central focus in developed countries and increasingly becoming important in DCs in order to achieve SDGs. As a result of the issues highlighted in the literature, this research set forth to explore the dynamics between the government and donor agencies in achieving SDGs in infrastructure development projects in DCs, using Sri Lanka as a case study. This research examines the public sector accountability to environmental sustainability giving special reference to SDGs in international development projects in Sri Lanka funded by both traditional donors –ADB and JICA, and a non-traditional donor – EIBC.

The empirical evidence clearly shows that Sri Lanka is a leader in adopting policies to enhance environmental sustainability in the South Asian region. However, environmental degradation continued to be a significant issue that requires immediate attention in the country. Results indicate lack of public sector accountability as one of the main reasons for the failure in achieving environmental sustainability. This study found that the end of a three decade long civil war has resulted in a desire to improve the economic condition in Sri Lanka, which is a major catalyst for the rise of foreign aid and international funding entering the country for infrastructure development. Sri Lanka needs to find an effective balance between healthy economic growth and environmental sustainability in international developmental context to accomplish UN's SDGs.

As found in the study, the legal accountability relationships are identified to be strong. The Sri Lankan Government is displaying a strong sense of accountability to international donor and funding agencies as there is no lack of global policy adoption and establishment of governing bodies to support SDGs. However, it is argued in this study that the effectiveness of these strategies is not clear due to low level of enforcement and implementation. This is further evident in the top-down approach to political accountability relationships. Nevertheless, empirical evidence supports the independence of the judiciary system and the ability of the legal system to hold stakeholders accountable for their decisions and actions. However, a proper legal framework should be established to address environmental impact from international development and empowering authorities such as CEA to monitor effectively and exercise authority to hold stakeholders accountable for non-compliance. This is evident in the professional accountability relationships where a significant number failure in compliance of environmental standards that have been overlooked by authorities in STDP and the CPCP. Moreover, limited capacity has resulted in low level of accountability established between environmental officers and projects officers and governing bodies. Nevertheless, support from traditional donors have been able to steer professional accountability in the right direction. Nevertheless, this behaviour is not evident among the rapidly rising projects funded by non-traditional donors, as legal accountability to environmental sustainability is not established in non-traditional donor contracts.

This study conducted using secondary data collected from a documentary analysis. The findings of the study should be interpreted with caution as the data is limited by the interpretation of secondary data which may carry an element of subjectivity. Future studies can extend this by reviewing additional new documentary evidence and conducting interviews with stakeholders of development projects, traditional and non-traditional international donor agencies to understand the international development funding relationships and public sector accountability in Sri Lanka. This is one of the few studies that have investigated public sector accountability of environmental sustainability including UN SDGs in international development projects in Sri Lanka. Therefore, these findings will provide significant insight for practitioners to understand the dynamics of the Sri Lankan public sector accountability relationships with traditional and non-traditional funding bodies and their impact in achieving developmental objectives including SDGs in the region.

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