

## **Ensuring Right to Education in the Aftermath of a Global Pandemic: Legal Perspectives**

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The Chairperson, His lordship the Chief Justice, Jayantha Jayasuriya PC, my colleague who has taken his leave Hon. Dr. Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe PC, Hon. Justice Priyantha Fernando, Ms. Indika De Silva, Solicitor General, Mr. Palitha Kumarasinghe PC, Dr. Athula Pathinayaka Principal of Sri Lanka Law College, the Vice Chancellor of KDU, Dean of the Faculty of Law, academic staff, and the undergraduates.

First of all, I take this opportunity to thank the Vice Chancellor, the Dean, and the academic staff for organizing this event. I remember last year we had a similar research conference on a different topic, and I understood that the Law Faculty of KDU ranks 25<sup>th</sup> amongst 1600 law faculties and ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> in Sri Lanka. This is a great achievement because as the Minister of Education covering Higher Education, General Education, Technical and Vocational training, Science and Technology, and Engineering, this portfolio is important, especially in the field of research. Generally, in Sri Lanka compared to the general population of 22.5 million we ought to at least have 22000 researchers, but we only have 5000 researchers and among them, only 2000 engage in applied research. Today, however, we need more researchers to engage in applied research so the theme

today we have chosen is more relevant to applied research. With that, allow me to speak a few words about the effects of the pandemic in our country with special attention to the general education level of the country.

According to UNESCO statistics, nearly 100 million children across the world would move beyond the minimum proficiency threshold in reading and writing. Studies show conclusive evidence that the verbal and numerical skills of children have been as low as 10% during Covid 19. After I took over the Ministry just 3 months ago, I advised our Directors to conduct a survey, especially among Grade 1 and 2 students because those children are affected due to school days being less than 50% of the total in 2020 and 2021. If you missed the literacy and numerical skill and other 8 competencies within that two-year period of time you have missed your entire life, now we are taking measures to improve the literacy and numeracy of Grades 1,2, and 3, especially in public schools but also private schools. This is the effect of Covid 19 on education. Recently, I participated in a preparatory meeting of educators in Paris, and it reiterated that countries with low-income students are affected quite adversely. As a result, United Nations Secretary General initiated a fund named FED of 10 billion USD and it

was launched in New York on the 19<sup>th</sup> of September. I had the opportunity to attend that event at the UN Head Quarters along with all international organizations working together to help financially and technically to cover the losses occurred during the Covid 19 pandemic. We have already made a decision to table policy papers to the Cabinet and thereafter the Parliament and consult central oversight committees.

We are moving forward by reforming the entire educational system of the country after it was conceived. The Independent Education Act was introduced in 1945 by Dr. CWW Kannangara. Thereafter, in 1961 another milestone that occurred was the taking over of the privately managed schools by the Government and then in 1972 there was an attempt to reform education, However, I feel reforms are not enough to address the issues we are confronting. So, I think we have to transform education and by 2030 we have achieved Sustainable Development Goals for quality education for all as a country.

Since the early 1950s, we have improved our literacy by nearly 100% but we have to introduce technology. In 1999, the USA after having a survey decided to introduce STEM education and this system spread out to far East countries as well. To this day, we have 96 countries using this system. Recently, some countries like India added another discipline calling it STEM education, introducing the field of art and commerce. So, it is high time for us to also do this as well, as we are lagging behind.

There are emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, nanotechnology, and genome sequencing in some developing countries such as Vietnam which suffered over 25 years of war. They have stepped into such fields introducing the basics into the school curriculum. I do not know how many of our students engaged in science and technology are aware that we have a state-of-the-art nanotechnology lab in Pitipana which we started last year. So, it is high time to introduce STEM education into our system.

This conference is confined to law but when we consider the introduction of new laws and amendments to existing Acts, we have to think about the effects of doing so. As the Minister of Education, we are working towards transforming education in the areas of general education, higher education and we have some affiliations to some foreign universities. Recently, I visited the University of Toronto and York and had 2 Zoom conferences with university academics. Most of them are expatriates of Sri Lanka who are serving in leading universities in other parts of the world. One of my close friends, Prof. Sivananthan invented infra-red at Chicago University of Illinois and was awarded by President Obama. Another friend of mine, Dr. Bandula Vijith, invented stents in 1996 in Hart center in Houston. So, we have many academics and inventors we have produced in the past, now it is time our younger generation to engage in research in the field of law, science, and technology. We always talk about innovation but unfortunately how much do we allocate

from our national budget to research? Only 0.11%. Countries like Japan allocate at least 3% of their GDP to research. All developed countries develop as a result of Research and Development. There is competition among innovators and researchers. Normally in our countries, our research on particular subject findings is confined to papers so now we have a system where under our Ministry we link innovators with industry entrepreneurs which is what we lack at the moment.

So, I believe I have covered science, technology, and innovation and our plans to reform and transform education with technology and bridge the gap we lost during Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021, especially with primary education. Thank you.