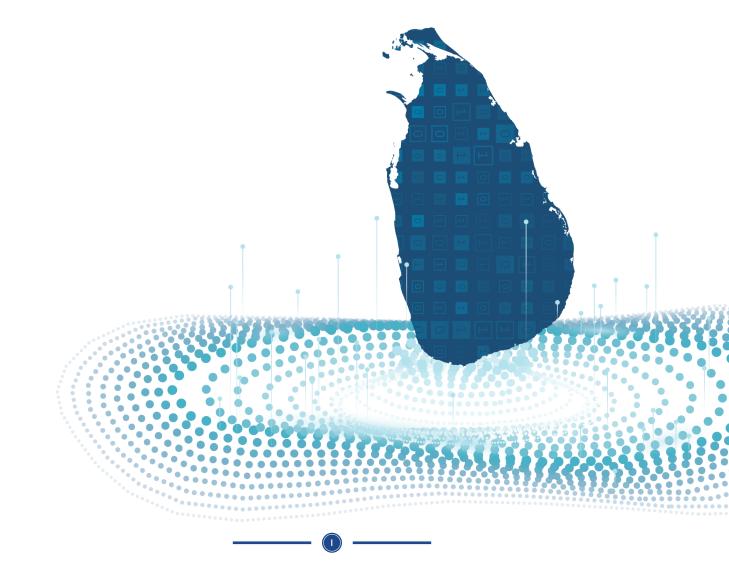# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN SRI LANKA

White Paper developed by the Committee on Formulating
a Strategy for Artificial Intelligence (CFSAI)

March 2024

Executive Summary

Sri Lanka is poised to harness the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to catalyze national progress, enhance the well-being of its populace, and bolster its global economic stance and comparative advantage. Spearheaded by the Presidential Secretariat, the nation is advancing on a multifaceted agenda. This includes the establishment of a cross-sectoral committee with significant involvement of academia, industry, and UNDP Sri Lanka to formulate a five-year National AI Strategy; a LKR 1.5 billion allocation from the 2024 National Budget that will also underpin early AI advancements; and a National AI Center will be designed and created in alignment with the Digital Strategy 2030, to orchestrate AI endeavors nationwide.

This white paper provides an analysis of the prevailing challenges to AI's rollout in Sri Lanka, proposing a strategic framework to capitalize on AI for societal benefit, elevate living standards, and maintain the nation's competitive edge. It underscores the imperative of fostering an AI ecosystem conducive to innovation, educational advancement, ethical technology practices, and synergistic alliances between the government, academia, private sector, civil society, and development partners and institutions. This initiative is aimed at establishing Sri Lanka as a leader in the effective and responsible use of AI.

AI in Sri Lanka

The prior work in Sri Lanka via the World Bank funded e-Sri Lanka programme have laid the foundations for digital transformation efforts in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has also shown to have developed several globally competitive technology companies backed by a home-grown technically skilled workforce. These baseline conditions create a unique opportunity for Sri Lanka as it seeks to become an AI-enabled nation. However, there are still challenges. The prior digital transformation efforts are incomplete. There is a scarcity of advanced AI engineering skills and a lack of executive and strategic expertise to develop strong AI business cases.

This is further exacerbated by the significant brain drain of the recent years, as well as inadequate levels of basic computer, digital, and data literacy amongst the population. The availability, accessibility, and representativeness of data are further issues, with the current open data portal falling into disuse. Effective AI development and deployment are further stymied by the lack of a robust data strategy and a data governance framework that place primacy on responsibly deriving value from data.
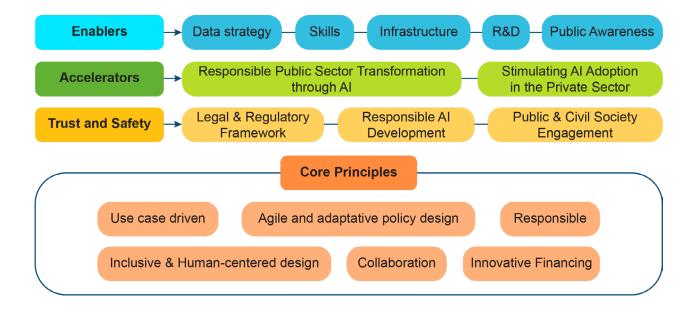
Moreover, the current technological infrastructure is insufficiently developed to support robust AI applications. Collectively, these issues underscore the urgency of a concerted effort to enhance the technical capabilities, business acumen, technology infrastructure, and data governance necessary for realizing the full potential of AI in advancing the nation's socio-economic objectives.

Vision for the National AI Strategy

The National AI Strategy that will be developed will be aligned and tightly integrated with the Government's upcoming Digital Strategy 2030. This strategic alignment aims to propel Sri Lanka into a new era of accelerated AI innovation, where responsible AI development and utilization serve as catalysts for fostering a digitally empowered society. Thus, the vision for the National AI Strategy is the *Rapid acceleration in the responsible development and use of AI to realize a digitally empowered Sri Lanka for innovation, inclusion & sustainable growth*.

Forging the path for increased AI competitiveness in Sri Lanka

The framework for Sri Lanka's AI Strategy development envisages coordinated action around ten areas within three categories, as outlined in the diagram below.

To realize Sri Lanka's AI vision, five critical enablers will need to be properly developed. These are foundational requirements for enabling AI development and use. These include:

- A cohesive approach to data underpinned by an actionable data strategy, that ensures the responsible sharing and efficient utilization of high-quality data to fuel AI development and broader digital transformation.
- Development of a skilled AI workforce through education, training programmes, and knowledge exchange initiatives.
- Building the necessary digital infrastructure to support AI research and application, including data centers and connectivity enhancements.
- Encouraging targeted AI research and development aligned with national priorities through partnerships with academic institutions, private sector, and international organizations.
- Developing foundational AI education and awareness campaigns advocate for the creation of a well-informed and discerning public in relation to AI.

In order to catalyze and accelerate the adoption and use of AI nation-wide, targeted action will be required in two areas:

- Integrating AI solutions within public service delivery and public sector operations to improve efficiency, transparency, and citizen engagement.
- Incentivizing private sector investment in AI technologies and fostering collaboration between startups, corporations, and government.

Finally, it is critical to ensure that the development and use of AI in Sri Lanka is safe and trustworthy due to AI's unique technical, ethical, and societal implications, distinguishing it markedly from regular software development. Sri Lanka will need an AI governance structure with rules and guidelines to ensure compliance but also one that fosters a culture of responsible AI development and use that are reflective of public interest prioritizing human welfare, safety, fairness, accountability, transparency, and privacy.

This can be achieved through three action areas:

1. Establishing a legal and regulatory framework that promotes innovation whilst ensuring safety and privacy. The framework should be capable of adapting to rapid technological advancements.
2. Development and implementation of inclusive and practical ethical guidelines, harmonization with global ethical standards, and the promotion of transparency, accountability, and public trust through understandable and responsible AI systems.
3. Involving civil society and the public in AI governance through open dialogue, consultations, and workshops to enhance transparency and trust in AI developments in Sri Lanka.

The Way Forward

Sri Lanka stands at a crossroads in its journey towards becoming a globally competitive AI enabled digital economy. This transformation may be gradual, but it demands concerted and focused collective action and urgency.

The government's commitment to this objective is reflected in the planned creation of the National AI Center, the development of a comprehensive National AI Strategy with an associated 5-year roadmap supported by a LKR 1.5 billion allocation in the 2024 National Budget for initial AI initiatives. These measures aim to accelerate the responsible development and use of AI, fostering a digitally empowered Sri Lanka that champions innovation, inclusivity, and sustainable growth.

The National AI Strategy will need to be practical, actionable, and realistic, prioritizing use-case driven, agile, and scalable AI solutions that align with Sri Lanka's unique societal and economic needs. Sri Lanka's National AI Strategy

must not merely be a policy document; it must be an essential and applied roadmap marking the beginning of Sri Lanka's journey towards becoming a regional leader in the development and use of AI.

As a national endeavor, it is essential that the strategy is developed in a transparent manner and that there is consultation and wide acceptance of this journey from the public, industry, and all political parties. This strategy should lay the much-needed foundational elements that can enhance the nation's position in the global AI landscape in close alignment with Digital Strategy 2030, which will deal with the broader digitization efforts in the economy. This necessitates the prioritization of skills development critical for AI, alongside establishing robust data and cloud-compute infrastructure needed to support AI innovation. This is an investment in Sri Lanka's AI future (and its broader national development), and the return will be substantial when it comes to fruition.

In the short term, while the fruits of foundational activities are yet to be fully realized, it is essential to also achieve quick wins. As such the National AI Strategy should address both immediate challenges and long-term goals, with pragmatic interventions designed to yield quick returns and set the stage for broader strategic impacts.

Realizing Sri Lanka's AI Vision: Preliminary Matrix of Actions

	Investing in the Needs of the AI Ecosystem	Ensuring AI Benefits All	Ensuring AI is Safe and Trustworthy
Short Term	• Develop AI Engineers through apprenticeships, workshops, and existing high-quality MOOCs and training in AI business case development for managers and executives. • Develop, finalize, and adopt policies for government to improve data sharing and foster use of commercial cloud platforms in alignment with SLPDPA. • Negotiate bulk cloud compute credits from international providers for government, academia, and startups. • Create a reference design for a national compute cloud infrastructure supporting government, academia, and startups. • Draft an investment strategy for a national compute cloud, identifying mixed funding opportunities.	• Reactivate and update the Government's Open Data Portal with more curated datasets and APIs. • Pilot a Data Maturity Framework in critical sectors to assess and enhance data practices. • Initiate targeted pilots in the use of AI in public-service delivery and improving government operations.	• Develop AI literacy among state sector employees and key policymakers through targeted education and awareness programmes. • Initiate public consultations to gather diverse inputs on AI governance, ethics, and regulation. • Develop a public discussion document on AI Governance for Sri Lanka • Establish an AI ethics board to guide ethical AI development and deployment.
Medium Term	• Establish a national AI innovation fund to support startups and SMEs in AI technology development and deployment. • Create an AI research consortium to foster collaboration between universities, research institutions, and industry. • Commit to long-term investments in government cloud and essential technologies for scalable, secure data storage and processing.	• Introduce AI-based solutions in critical sectors like healthcare, agriculture, and education. • Develop targeted training programmes for underrepresented groups in the AI field.	• Develop a framework for the ethical use of AI in public administration. • Initiate pilot projects to test the implementation of AI ethics guidelines. • Draft and implement an AI Governance framework for Sri Lanka through in-depth and wide consultations with all stakeholders.
Long Term	• Develop a national AI technology park as a hub for AI companies and startups. • Implement international exchange programmes for AI researchers and professionals to foster global knowledge transfer and partnerships. • Data and AI Literacy/ Education from primary to tertiary education	• Launch a national initiative to integrate AI technologies into public services. • Establish AI advisory services for SMEs to facilitate their digital transformation	• Formulate an AI safety certification process for AI systems and applications. • Establish a continuous M&E mechanism for AI systems to ensure ongoing compliance with ethical and safety standards.

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Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has experienced a significant resurgence over the last decade, particularly since the rise of Deep Learning in 2012 and the notable release of ChatGPT[1] in 2022. These developments have sparked global interest and discussion, reflecting both the aspirational potential and apprehensions surrounding AI. AI's rapid advancement, fueled by advances in the technology as well as more affordable compute costs, enhanced storage capabilities, and the availability of vast data quantities, has opened new avenues for leveraging technology to automate and augment tasks traditionally performed by humans. This technological leap is not just about efficiency; it's reshaping how work is conducted and profoundly impacting our daily lives and professional landscapes. For Sri Lanka to strategically leverage the transformative changes that AI is bringing to improve the quality of life for its citizens and to remain competitive at the global stage, Sri Lanka's current AI readiness needs to be critically evaluated.

The government has embarked on three major initiatives: (i) the formation of a multi-stakeholder committee[2] under the Presidential Secretariat, to craft a National AI Strategy for the period 2024-2028; (ii) an investment of LKR 1.5 billion from the 2024 budget to secure early achievements and fortifying the foundations for AI; and (iii) the establishment of the National AI Center set to lead AI initiatives throughout the country, in alignment with Sri Lanka's National Digital Strategy 2030 and is set to lead AI initiatives throughout the country.

Sri Lanka's AI journey isn't just about technology; it's about national transformation, i.e. it is about improving societal and economic conditions through digital empowerment, enhancement of the country's global standing, and ensuring that benefits reach all layers of society by fostering responsible AI development and use for sustainable growth and innovation. This White Paper, alongside the UNDP's forthcoming AI Readiness Assessment (AIRA) for Sri Lanka, collectively explores the issues currently impeding the effective development and deployment of AI in Sri Lanka.

The White Paper envisions a dynamic, five-year National AI Strategy (NAIS) to propel the country forward. Adaptable to global trends and fueled by continuous ongoing feedback during implementation, the NAIS holds the key to enhancing Sri Lanka's global competitiveness, attracting investment, and improving its citizens' lives. As the nation emerges from the economic crises and seeks reintegration into global markets, data and AI driven economic restructuring and poverty alleviation become crucial priorities. This is not just about catching up; it's about seizing the moment to become a proactive player in the AI-driven global economy. Success demands a united effort – sustained government commitment, collaboration with the private sector, academia, and civil society, and a shared vision for an AI-powered Sri Lanka. Only then can this nascent technology truly become a catalyst for inclusive growth, enhanced public services, and an empowered citizenry.

AI in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has nurtured several globally competitive technology companies backed by a home-grown technically skilled workforce. The World Bank funded e-Sri Lanka program, which ran from 2003-2013 helped pave the way for digital transformation efforts in Sri Lanka. Collectively these provide the baseline conditions from which Sri Lanka can chart a path towards becoming a successful AI-enabled nation. However, to effectively chart the course, an accurate assessment of the country's current AI landscape is imperative.

Sri Lanka is currently ranked 95th out of 193 countries in the Oxford Insights' 2023 Government AI Readiness Index, marking a ten-place improvement since 2022.[3] This progress is largely attributed to the government's commitment to

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1   *ChatGPT is a chatbot developed by OpenAI and launched on 30 November 2022.*
2   *Represented by government, private sector and multilateral organisations*
3   *The paper leverages insights from the Oxford Insights study, but for a more thorough understanding of the Government AI Readiness Index, its methodology, as well as its underlying pillars, dimensions, and the indicators used, please refer to the actual study. The 2023 report can be found at https://oxfordinsights.com/ai-readiness/ai-readiness-index/2023-govern-ment-ai-readiness-index-2-2/*

formulating an AI Strategy by fiscal 2024.[4] When we compare Sri Lanka to the other economies for each Pillar, the country's weakest score is for Data and Infrastructure (110th) as opposed to the Government and Technology Sector pillars (85th and 86th respectively).

Table 1: Oxford Insights Government AI Readiness Index for Sri Lanka

		2023	2022
Overall Score		**41.89**	**36.23**
Pillars	**Dimensions**		
Government		42.05	30.19
	Vision	50	0
	Governance & Ethics	28.37	28.9
	Digital Capacity	63.02	63
	Adaptability	26.8	28.85
Technology Sector		33.02	30.92
	Maturity	25.83	22.36
	Innovation Capacity	39.25	29.97
	Human Capital	33.98	40.42
Data & Infrastructure		50.6	47.59
	Infrastructure	28.77	28.77
	Data Availability	56.86	55.08
	Data Representativeness	66.17	58.92

When we look closely at the dimensions that make up each pillar, Sri Lanka fares best on the Digital Capacity dimension under the Government Pillar, where it ranks 64th amongst the 193 economies. The digital capacity score would have been much lower had it not been for the work of the Information and Communication Technology Agency (ICTA) of Sri Lanka through the e-Sri Lanka program since 2003, which has done much to increase digitization and digitalization in the country. It is important to note however, that this relative strength is still far from ideal for a vibrant AI innovation ecosystem to emerge.

An examination of the other dimensions reveals several key areas of concern.

The score for the Human Capital dimension puts Sri Lanka at 99th amongst 193 economies. According to SLASSCOM as of 2021, there are at least 13,000 and 2,000 IT and Engineering graduates respectively per year being produced in the country in both state and private institutions. AI degree programs both at a bachelor's as well as a master's level have only been recently introduced in some state and private universities and first graduates from these degree programs are only just now emergent.

While there's a substantial number of students graduating from IT and Engineering programs in the country having studied foundational skills of AI model development there are very few locally developed AI solutions in production, both in the public and private sectors. Even existing use of AI whilst limited, is mostly via the use of online platforms leveraging AI systems developed overseas, such as ChatGPT, Microsoft CoPilot, Google Colab, etc. Sri Lanka will not have a competitive advantage in trying to replicate these tools so increasing their use into existing workflows would be beneficial rather than attempting to recreate these tools.

At the same time, we also need more AI development in Sri Lanka for localized use cases. Academics have noted the increased interest in AI by students for their final thesis be it at the bachelor's or master's level. However, there are limited avenues to scale these projects be it in government or elsewhere due to the lack of an effective pipeline to take

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4   This is captured by the Vision dimension in the Government pillar, which should jump to 100 in next year's score once the
     Strategy is in place.

such projects and innovations towards actual deployment in real world contexts. Where we do see development and deployment of AI, is primarily among a handful of large corporates. Industry leaders in Sri Lanka partly attribute this to the gap in AI engineering skills required to transition AI systems into sustainable, production-level solutions. These include critical skills such as Machine Learning Operations (MLOps) and AIOps.

Data Engineers are also in scarce supply. UNDP's forthcoming AIRA for Sri Lanka also identifies a notable skill and knowledge gap, though it notes recent efforts to bridge these gaps with AI degrees being offered at several universities. Critically the AIRA also calls for increasing basic IT literacy and skills. As of 2022, computer literacy in Sri Lanka was at still only at 34.3% and digital literacy at 57.2%.[5] This means that even while we need to improve AI education, there is still much to be done in increasing basic computer, digital, and data literacy in the country. Additionally, there is a noticeable deficiency in executive expertise in constructing viable business cases for AI solutions. These gaps highlight the need for a focused approach in developing both technical and business acumen related to AI within the country. The human capital stock for Sri Lanka has also declined since 2022 (see Table 1) due to the migration-induced brain drain after the 2022 economic slump.[6] This decline underscores the urgency of nurturing and retaining local talent in AI.

The Government Adaptability dimension (172nd out of 193 economies) and the Technology Maturity dimension (72nd) show that there is significant room for improvement, particularly in fostering a technology sector capable of generating and supporting AI innovations. Whilst Sri Lanka fares better than most other economies in Technology Maturity, this is mainly due to non-AI related indicators within this dimension rather than the AI related ones.

Finally, in the Data and Infrastructure pillar, Sri Lanka's low score for infrastructure (121st) indicates the need for substantial development in this area to support AI technologies. The Tortoise Media Global AI Index (GAII) which ranks countries based on its capacity for artificial intelligence, ranks Sri Lanka as 60th out 62 global economies assessed in the latest 2023 edition.[7] The associated report highlights that Sri Lanka has particularly low levels of investment and infrastructure for AI. Much of the country has access to 4G wireless connectivity, but fixed/wired connectivity is still low. While 5G is emergent, expanding 5G connectivity will require significant investments. The forthcoming AIRA also identifies issues with existing cloud infrastructure in the country, especially the Lanka Government Cloud (LGC) that is dedicated for use by government. According to the AIRA, the budget for infrastructure and maintenance is insufficient and this has spill on effects whereby the infrastructure issues cause government systems to frequently experience outages.

While in Data availability Sri Lanka ranks in the middle (88th), in terms of Data Representativeness Sri Lanka is 132nd. If we want to ensure that the benefits of AI to flow to all segments of society, there is more that needs to be done. The forthcoming AIRA also notes that while Sri Lanka does have an open data portal it has not been properly maintained and updated. Furthermore, it highlights that there is only limited engagement by the government with external stakeholders regarding the availability of data in the broader economy. Even data sharing within government is limited according to the AIRA showing a need to increase awareness around effective data sharing practices within government.

These insights underscore the importance of the forthcoming AIRA, as a crucial input for the development of a comprehensive National AI Strategy. This strategy will not only focus on enhancing AI readiness but also on addressing the specific challenges in AI adoption and application, nurturing local talent, and building executive capacity for AI integration into business and governance.

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5   Source: Department of Census and Statistics.
6   While outward migration in Sri Lanka has occurred previously as well due to ethnic unrest, the most recent wave of outward migration has been primarily by professionals seeking better opportunities in the Middle East, Europe, and the US, contributing to a shortage of skilled workers in the country. See https://www.southasiamonitor.org/spotlight/brain-drain-sri-lanka-tragedy-long-term-economic-effect
7   For more information see https://www.tortoisemedia.com/intelligence/global-ai/#rankings

Forging the path for increased AI competitiveness in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka stands at a pivotal juncture in its technological journey, facing the imminent risk of lagging in global competitiveness if it fails to foster a thriving AI innovation ecosystem. Recognizing this urgency, the Government of Sri Lanka has established a dedicated committee under the Presidential Secretariat to craft a National AI Strategy. This strategy is not merely a visionary document, but a pragmatic and action-oriented roadmap aimed at rapidly enhancing Sri Lanka's AI readiness and capacity. The National AI Strategy aligns with the Government's upcoming Digital Strategy 2030, envisioning the swift and responsible development and utilization of AI to achieve a digitally empowered Sri Lanka marked by innovation, inclusion, and sustainable growth.

The Committee on Formulating a Strategy for AI (CFSAI) for Sri Lanka has been strategically formed with substantial non-governmental representation, especially from the private sector with expertise in in a wide range of areas needed to develop a thriving AI innovation ecosystem. Amongst others, members have expertise in Skills Development, Research, Infrastructure, Legal and Policy, Business Development. This composition underlines the multi-faceted approach required for a comprehensive, agile, and adaptable five-year national roadmap. UNDP Sri Lanka is also represented on CFSAI as a core partner to this effort. This roadmap is designed to remain relevant in the face of rapidly evolving global AI advancements and addresses both foundational elements and immediate challenges to stimulate early successes in the AI domain.

This collaboration signifies the Government of Sri Lanka's commitment to a multi-stakeholder approach in enhancing AI readiness nationwide.

Further emphasizing this commitment, the government has earmarked LKR 1.5 billion in the 2024 budget to foster early AI successes while simultaneously strengthening the essential foundations for AI. A key initiative, aligned with the forthcoming Digital Strategy 2030, is the establishment of a dedicated National AI Center. This center will serve as the linchpin for various AI initiatives outlined in the 2024 National Budget and subsequently guide the implementation of the National AI Strategy developed by CFSAI. The establishment of this center is a strategic move to ensure that Sri Lanka undergoes an economic and social transformation, leveraging the latest trends in digital technology and artificial intelligence.

The broader impact of AI integration is best realized when there is already significant digitization and digitalization of the wider economy. Through Sri Lanka's ambitious digital and digital economy strategies (i.e. Sri Lanka's Digital Strategy 2030), the country is poised to leverage technology and digitalization to drive economic competitiveness, growth, employment creation, sustainable development, and enhanced service delivery. As these initiatives progress, the AI capacity of the nation should concurrently mature, enabling the full potential of AI to augment these systems and deliver significant benefits to the community and economy.
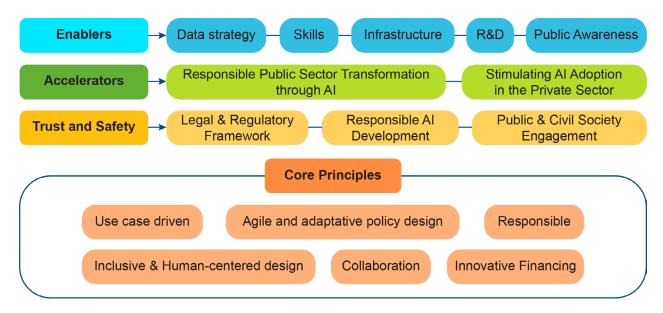
Figure 1: A framework for Sri Lanka's National AI Strategy

The National AI Strategy (NAIS) is a crucial element in Sri Lanka's path towards becoming a globally competitive, AI-ready nation. Its role extends beyond technological advancement, encompassing the enhancement of investment opportunities and the overall quality of life for Sri Lankan citizens. The strategy aims to kickstart Sri Lanka's journey in AI, setting the stage for long-term success in this rapidly advancing field.

The overall aim of this multi-pronged response to fostering a vibrant AI innovation eco-system in Sri Lanka is two-fold. Firstly, we must steadily build strong foundations with long-term commitment to develop the AI sector on multiple fronts. However, these foundational activities will take time to bear fruits. In the interim we must also have a short-term strategy that places primacy on quick wins which will provide lessons and further reinforce the foundation building activities. This is what the National AI strategy will collectively do, identifying short, medium, and long-term initiatives.

1. Critical Enablers

To realize Sri Lanka's AI vision, five critical enablers will need to be properly developed. These are foundational requirements for enabling AI development and use. These include skills development, infrastructure, a robust data strategy, research and development (R&D), and public awareness. Developing these enablers requires a strategic, multi-layered approach that considers Sri Lanka's context while drawing from global best practices. This involves a blend of government initiative, private sector involvement, civil society engagement, and international collaboration, with Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) playing a crucial role in ensuring that the benefits of AI are realized responsibly and inclusively.

The National AI Strategy should also delineate specific strategies for the development of local AI expertise and infrastructure, ensuring that Sri Lanka can independently develop and deploy AI solutions that align with its societal and economic priorities.

1.1 Data Strategy

Industry and government experts note that while Sri Lanka has made progress, there is still a need for greater digitization of existing data in Sri Lanka. The success of AI initiatives in Sri Lanka hinges on the availability and accessibility of quality digitized data, underscoring the need for a robust data strategy. Sri Lanka currently lacks a comprehensive data strategy, although various elements that would inform such a strategy exist or are forthcoming, for example, Sri Lanka Personal Data Protection Act (SLPDPA) of 2022, Cyber Security Policy (adopted by the Cabinet in August 2022), the forthcoming Cyber Security Bill.[8] There also other disparate data-related policies, some only in draft form without adoption by Cabinet. These include amongst others, Government Cloud Policy, National Data Sharing Policy, Information Classification Framework. The existing Digital Maturity Model (DMM) framework should also be enhanced based on learnings from prior implementation and with a particular focus on data.[9]

For a coherent national data strategy, it's crucial to align these existing and forthcoming policies to reduce overlap and ensure consistency. This is why a practical, overarching, and actionable data strategy is required, which has taken a comprehensive consideration of what data is available, where, and how it will safely be made available, and under what considerations, for use for AI innovations. By taking such a value creation logic to data through a data strategy, the government can enable effective, data-driven decision-making in government, which in turn can catalyze data sharing by the private sector.

Moreover, the data strategy should be the bedrock of all national digital strategies, providing a unified and authoritative reference for each data category within the government to ensure accuracy, consistency, and trustworthiness. A federated rather than a centralized approach to data management will allow for efficient utilization of high-quality data across various initiatives. A specialized subset of this data, appropriately formatted and curated, should be designated specifically for AI system development. This subset would cater to the unique needs of AI, such as high-volume, high-variety, and high-velocity data, essential for training and deploying effective AI models.

Open data initiatives are key to driving innovation, and the government's commitment, in the 2024 National Budget, to rejuvenate its open data portal will accelerate access to non-sensitive data for the private sector, academia, and researchers, fueling the development of new services. It would be prudent to also revitalize the National Spatial Data Infrastructure to ensure timely and high-quality spatial data is made available for AI innovations.

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8   The complete SLPDPA is available at https://www.parliament.lk/uploads/acts/gbills/english/6242.pdf. The Cyber Security Policy is available at https://cert.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Information-and-Cyber-Security-Policy-for-Government-Organizations.pdf

9   ICTA has developed and piloted a Digital Maturity Model amongst several government departments already. The model is available at https://lightingdigital.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Digital-Maturity-Model-Document.pdf

To operationalize SLPDPA and the upcoming Cyber Security Bill, a governmental data governance framework is needed to enhance data quality and safety. This framework should bolster public trust by aligning data practices with public expectations and using methods like anonymization and differential privacy, to protect individual rights, so that data sharing may be made easier.

An effective data strategy would have to be coupled with a citizenry and professionals that have the requisite literacy and skills to leverage data effectively and responsibly to derive value. These aspects are covered in greater detail in the Skills section later. However, it is pertinent to underscore the importance of data leadership and data stewardship in driving this vision forward. This leadership is not just about overseeing data governance; it involves fostering a data-driven culture, ensuring the strategic utilization of data, and navigating the complexities of data privacy and security to leverage data as a valuable asset and derive value from it. In 2021, the Information and Communication Technology Agency (ICTA) of Sri Lanka launched a framework to develop Chief Digital Information Officers (CDIOs) in the public sector. It is unclear how successful this has been nor how many CDIOs currently exist, but properly establishing this role withing public sector is crucial for steering data and analytics initiatives.

Significant investments in infrastructure and technology will be required. This includes expanding the government cloud for scalable, secure, and efficient data storage and processing capabilities. These are covered in the infrastructure section.

In summary, a comprehensive and effective data strategy can create a synergistic ecosystem where data not only drives AI innovations but also supports the broader spectrum of digital transformations across the nation. This strategic integration will be vital in realizing the full potential of digital technologies to drive the country's long-term development goals.

Table 2: Potential Initiatives for developing a robust data strategy

Timeframe	Initiative	Impact
Short & Medium Term	Finalize and adopt the Government Data Sharing Policy, Government Cloud Policy, and Government Information Classification Framework ensuring coherence and reduction of duplication.	Establishes standards for a data-driven government, creating a trusted environment for data sharing and use.
	Develop a Government Data Governance Framework to operationalize SLPDPA and the forthcoming Cyber Security Bill	Enhances data quality, safety, and ethical governance, laying the groundwork for secure data utilization in AI applications.
	Reactivate and update the Government's Open Data Portal to provide more curated open datasets and APIs.	Boosts transparency and empowers the private sector and researchers with data for innovation and service development.
	Reactivate and update the Government's National Spatial Data Infrastructure (NSDI) to provide more curated open datasets and Application Programming Interfaces (APIs).	Supports urban planning, environmental monitoring, and various AI applications requiring geospatial information.
	Based on learnings from prior implementation enhance the existing Digital Maturity Model (DMM) Framework with a particular focus on data for government agencies.	Standardized tool for assessing the state of data practices in critical government sectors.

Short & Medium Term *cont.*	Pilot the DMM framework on a few critical sectors to evaluate data availability, accessibility, and quality; develop strategies to address identified data gaps.	Drives up the quality and availability of data, enabling better AI-driven insights and decision-making.
	Develop preliminary template agreement(s) and associated guideline(s) for (i) intra-government and (ii) government-private sector data sharing.	Develops a systematic data sharing process.
	Establish pilot data sharing programmes for (i) intra-government and (ii) government-private sector to resolve issues and streamline processes.	Tests and refines data sharing processes in a controlled environment, reducing risks before a full-scale rollout.
	Draft a comprehensive National Data Strategy that includes data governance, management, sharing, and usage across all government sectors.	Provides a clear and strategic direction for leveraging data as a national asset, aligning with the national AI strategy.
Long-Term	Based on initial learnings, roll out Data Maturity assessments to all ministries and government agencies.	Standardizes data practices across government, fostering a data-centric culture and enabling data-driven governance.
	Develop and enforce regulations requiring regular data maturity assessments for continuous improvement.	Ensures ongoing adherence to data quality standards, adapting to technological advancements and policy changes.
	Formulate and disseminate standardized intra-government and government-private sector data sharing agreements and guidelines for use across the government.	Facilitates smoother and more consistent data sharing processes, accelerating collaborative projects and innovation.
	Develop mechanisms for responsible data-sharing across borders.	Facilitates international collaboration, enriching AI datasets with diverse global inputs, and enhances the innovation potential of AI solutions.
	Institutionalize Open Data practices into the operating procedures of all government agencies	Continuously fuels the innovation ecosystem by providing an ever-growing repository of data for public use.

1.2 Skills Development

Strategic investment in education, training, and skill development is crucial for leveraging AI in Sri Lanka, while also mitigating its impact on the current workforce amid increasing technological adoption. To ensure effectiveness, the skill development component of the National AI Strategy must be in alignment with the forthcoming Education Policy, particularly regarding AI education, to ensure a unified and synergistic approach to AI educational initiatives. Furthermore, there is still more to be done in increasing the overall basic computer, digital, and data literacy in the country.

It is of paramount importance to cultivate human capital that is proficient in developing data and AI solutions, formulating business cases, managing AI projects, and utilizing AI and that too in a responsible and ethical fashion. This requires targeted training programmes, particularly now as AI degree programmes only now start to emerge in Sri Lanka.

There is a need to strategically focus on cultivating skill sets and academic offerings with high-quality accreditation that meet the needs of the local Sri Lankan market and in areas where Sri Lanka can assert a competitive edge in the global AI development landscape. As the AI sector evolves on a global scale, specialized roles such as Machine Learning Engineer, Data Scientist, MLOps, AIOps, and Data Engineer are becoming increasingly defined, each with unique skill requirements and responsibilities. As mentioned earlier, Sri Lanka currently experiences a deficit in professionals qualified for these positions. There is an urgent call for the cultivation of these skill sets, including the requisite management competencies essential for AI product development and oversight. By nurturing a mindset geared towards product innovation and management, we can stimulate entrepreneurial activity and cultivate a workforce proficient in AI, driven to innovate for market needs as opposed to solely fulfilling the demands of existing multinational corporations and limiting themselves to an outsourcing capacity.

At the same time there is a need to cultivate a foundational understanding of data (the critical lifeblood for AI) among citizens but also to ensure that working professionals achieve a higher level of proficiency in analyzing and interpreting data. Recognizing this pivotal role of data in decision-making and innovation as well as AI, there is a need to integrate data literacy programmes into educational curriculums, ranging from primary education to professional development courses.

While AI programmes are emerging in Sri Lanka's tertiary education system, this should not be the sole focus. Collaborating with the University Grants Commission (UGC), educational institutions should strive to enrich existing IT, computer science, engineering, mathematics/ statistics degree programmes with foundational AI skills. These enhancements can be further bolstered by integrating capstone projects in AI in partnership with industry and government bodies, such as the forthcoming National AI Centre. Prioritizing a computer science degree with an AI concentration over specialized AI programmes may yield a more rapidly available skilled workforce. Additionally, leveraging high-caliber online educational platforms, like Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), can expediently broaden the pool of qualified candidates. In addition, recognizing the broader skills required in leveraging AI – both computer science and social science – will be crucial in shaping inclusive and ethical approaches to AI.

At the same time structured professional development, rapid skill enhancement programmes, and bespoke workshops are needed. This is inclusive of training for leadership and management in both government and private sectors to formulate and execute AI-driven business strategies. For example, in the United Kingdom, the government developed an AI Skills for Business Competency Framework that outlines skills, behaviours, and knowledge that employees should have to safely use AI.[10] This guidance is intended for non-technical employees and decision makers to understand the opportunities, limitations and ethics of using AI in a business setting.

Forging alliances between technology corporations and academic institutions would be also beneficial in this context. Models such as India's National Programme for Civil Services Capacity Building can serve as a template for nurturing such competencies within the public sector, coupled with a focus also on AI ethics and governance skill development. ICTA does already have an equivalent framework called "An Integrated Capacity Building Approach for Organizational Digital Government Transformation" focused primarily on digital transformation. Augmenting that with AI focused skills may be one approach that Sri Lanka can pursue.[11]

When formulating our skills development strategy relative to AI, it is critical to acknowledge the global evolution of AI adoption and its impending effects on the Sri Lankan job market. The labour market will undergo significant transformations and job displacement in the coming years due to AI, necessitating a forward-thinking and adaptive approach to workforce development. Even with a relatively modest on-the-ground deployment of AI within Sri Lanka, the ripple effects from global entities and supply chains could be significant. For instance, the proliferation of engineering automation through

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10   For more information please refer to https://www.turing.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-11/final_bridgeai_framework.pdf
11   For more information on the capacity building framework refer to https://lightingdigital.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/
      An-Integrated-Capacity-Building-Approach-v2.0.pdf

AI could influence the local IT sector, especially those engaged with international clients or multinational corporations.

There is a critical need for structured reskilling initiatives for the existing workforce and not just for newcomers. Collaboration with industry-specific associations and professional organizations would also be advisable to devise robust and applicable reskilling and continuous learning programmes to ensure that professionals retain their competitive edge. It is also essential to pay close attention to identifying and proactively supporting sectors that will be disproportionately impacted by the transition towards AI. Given that the service sector constitutes approximately 47 percent of the national workforce, the Sri Lankan economy has a limited cushion against the shifts induced by AI.[12] Thus, strategizing to fortify this sector against potential disruptions should be a priority.

To develop a future ready AI literate workforce there is a need for both short-term and long-term initiatives that build AI literacy and skills across various levels of society (See Table 3 below).

Table 3: Potential initiatives for building AI literacy and skills.

Timeframe	Initiative	Impact
Short and Medium Term	Develop AI Engineers through apprenticeships, workshops, and existing high-quality MOOCs	Enhance technical capability of Sri Lankans to build production-level AI systems, whilst also availing of global knowledge.
	AI Business Planning for business graduates and MBAs as well as shorter awareness courses for existing executives to understand the business impact of AI	Foster business acumen for AI integration and project development
	AI Awareness and Education for state sector employees as well as shorter awareness courses for key policy makers and senior public sector officials.	Increased awareness and preparedness for incorporating AI.
	Develop a definition for AI literacy in the Sri Lankan context	Helps sets up standards for measurement.
	Training in AI project design and management for senior public officials	Enhance public sector's ability to effectively manage AI projects
	Basic online awareness course in AI Ethics and Responsible AI use for public sector employees.	Increases awareness of AI ethics and responsible AI use amongst public sector officials.
	Introduction of AI and AI Engineering in university IT courses	Ensure a steady supply of AI-skilled graduates
Long-Term	Data and AI Literacy from primary to tertiary education	Build foundational data and AI knowledge across all education levels
	Develop accreditation standards for AI degree programmes (both Bachelors and Masters)	Ensures standardized high-quality tertiary education delivery from both state and private universities.
	AI Ethics certification programme for public and private sector professionals.	Ensures responsible AI use.
	AI in ICT and STEM curriculum, and support for AI clubs	Encourage early interest and foundational skills in AI among students

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12   As of 2022, the services sector contributed 47% to overall employment in Sri Lanka. See http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Resource/en/LabourForce/Annual_Reports/LFS2022.pdf

Long-Term cont.	New AI specialization degrees at universities	Develop advanced AI expertise and research capacity
	Integration of AI in entrepreneurship and business courses	Empower future leaders with AI-driven business design skills
	Integrate online resources and MOOCs into curricula	Leverage global knowledge resources for comprehensive AI education

These initiatives are designed to be operationalized and regularly reviewed to keep pace with developments in the AI space. They aim to address the current skill gaps and prepare the workforce for the evolving demands of the AI-driven future.

Recognizing the need for skilled AI professionals, the Sri Lanka 2024 national budget includes funding for new AI degree programmes in state universities and an introductory AI Skills development programme. Raising AI awareness amongst the public, promoting life-long learning, and democratizing AI knowledge are also key goals, aligning with initiatives like India's National Programme on AI.

Lastly, attracting and retaining talent, including luring global AI talent with incentives, is critical, especially considering the ongoing brain drain in Sri Lanka.

1.3 Infrastructure

Sri Lanka, ranking at 121st out of 193 economies on the Oxford Insights' Government AI Readiness Index, clearly shows the need for robust infrastructure to advance AI development and deployment. Essential components like reliable network connectivity and cloud computing infrastructure must be properly developed so that collectively it would provide cost-effective and manageable AI development solutions.

Within the Sri Lankan context, it's critical to assess these factors thoroughly.

High-quality network connectivity is essential not only for AI endeavors but also for broader digital economic growth. The sector's regulatory environment also requires strengthening to support Sri Lanka's future digital needs. Connectivity issues are dealt with comprehensively in the Digital Strategy 2030. Therefore, the National AI Strategy should underscore the need for comprehensive network connectivity via the proper implementation of the Digital Strategy 2030, rather than duplicating efforts.

Despite this, it remains crucial to reiterate the specific requirements for network connectivity for AI to flourish. High bandwidth, low latency, and dependable connections are crucial for efficient data transfer, real-time applications, and minimal downtime. Scalability is essential to meet growing demands, while edge computing capabilities minimize latency by processing data at its source. Ensuring interoperability across various AI devices and platforms is critical for collaboration and integration, laying the foundation for an AI-friendly ecosystem across diverse sectors.

While 5G technology is emerging in Sri Lanka and contributes to the infrastructure dimension in the Government AI Readiness Index by Oxford Insights, significant investments will be required to increase 5G connectivity. Extensive enhancements will also be required across the connectivity supply chain, including improved last-mile access, large-scale deployment of fiber optic networks, and enhanced international connectivity. The latter is particularly vital for leveraging global cloud computing platforms effectively. A business- and investor-friendly environment will be needed to meet the high investment costs that are required.

Cloud computing is vital to a thriving AI innovation ecosystem, providing scalable and on-demand computing resources and substantial data storage. This allows startups and researchers to develop and test AI models without significant initial infrastructure investment, facilitating collaboration and speeding up the development cycle.

Sri Lanka possesses in-country commercial cloud services and the government-specific Lanka Government Cloud (LGC), designed to offer secure and reliable infrastructure to government bodies. However, concerns about the maintenance and updating of LGC persist, and while global cloud providers like AWS, Google Cloud, and Microsoft Azure are available, they do not host services locally.[13] Encouraging these providers to invest in local infrastructure would require significant incentives, such as affordable and reliable electricity—a challenge given Sri Lanka's high electricity costs.[14]

Yet with the passing of the SLPDPA in 2022, government entities would require special authorization to store data internationally. Additionally, the costs of international cloud platforms can escalate quickly depending on usage, underscoring the need for a local cloud platform for research and early-stage AI innovation, reducing barriers for startups. Government investment in computing infrastructure should prioritize cost-effective and scalable solutions. Limited funds necessitate a strategic approach, such as fostering public-private partnerships to build necessary shared infrastructure. It's advisable to enhance existing cloud services rather than create a separate ecosystem. This approach requires a robust and forward-looking strategy for design and deployment.

It is vital to align the planning and commissioning of compute and data infrastructure with anticipated or potential AI use-cases. Sri Lanka's journey to becoming an AI-enabled nation should reflect a modular infrastructure build-out approach. Initially, the focus may be to prioritize support for data-driven decision-making. It is crucial that the infrastructure at this early stage supports these needs while also ensuring that deployment and operational costs remain manageable. Developing a reference design blueprint with associated standards at the onset is essential for building a flexible and robust cloud compute infrastructure that would meet Sri Lanka's evolving needs. Critically such an approach will facilitate rapid prototyping, interoperability of solutions, ease of porting, and encourage the adoption of open-source technologies. Such measures are essential if Sri Lanka is to eventually have a national AI infrastructure that is comparable to internationally recognized benchmarks, such as that of Singapore.

Government funding, ideally supplemented by bilateral or multilateral financial assistance, should initiate the development phase, attracting private sector investment thereafter. Such infrastructure would be a fundamental component of an eventual national Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) for AI development.[15]

It's essential that such cloud compute infrastructure be created with effective governance, compliance, and cost control in mind. How it is governed will be dictated by its intended use and the users that will be given access. In Sri Lanka's case, given existing needs, it would need to cater to the needs of government, academia, as well as startups, necessitating a multi-stakeholder governance approach. The Lanka Education and Research Network (LEARN) could serve as a template, with modifications to include additional user categories.

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13   *For more information about the Lanka Government Cloud refer to https://lgc.gov.lk/*
14   *Sri Lanka currently has the highest electricity costs in South Asia. See https://publicfinance.lk/en/topics/electricity-bills-in-sri-lanka-highest-in-south-asia-1707265066*
15   *The term Digital Public Infrastructure is broader than just the actual physical infrastructure. Within the context of Sri Lanka and its journey towards being an AI-enabled nation, the term Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) would mean a comprehensive ecosystem that combines advanced computing resources, accessible data repositories, high-speed connectivity, and supportive regulatory frameworks. It would foster collaboration among academia, industry, and government to drive AI research and applications. This infrastructure would include educational programs to build AI literacy, ethical guidelines for AI use, and funding mechanisms to support innovation, ensuring the responsible growth of AI technologies that align with public welfare and national development goals.*

Table 4: Potential initiatives for developing AI infrastructure.

Timeframe	Initiative	Impact
Short and Medium Term	Develop guidelines and processes for government organizations and statutory bodies to leverage international cloud computing platforms ensuring alignment with SLPDPA.	Immediately reduce critical barriers to the public sector developing AI innovations in the short term.
	Negotiate bulk credits for cloud compute from international providers for use by Sri Lankan government, academia, and startups	Lower barriers to AI innovation, enabling governmental, academic, and startup ecosystems in Sri Lanka to advance their technological capabilities.
	Develop a reference design blueprint for a compute cloud infrastructure for Sri Lanka to support the needs of government, academia, and startups.	Ensures that infrastructure is built out modularly and systematically.
	Develop an investment strategy for building out a compute cloud for use by academia, government, and startups	Helps identify mixed funding strategies and opportunities for external/ international investment.
	Coordination with Digital Strategy 2030 implementation.	Ensures that the network connectivity needs for AI are also properly implemented.
Long-Term	Commit to long-term investments in the government cloud and other essential technologies for scalable, secure data storage and processing.	Provides the necessary technological foundation for advanced AI applications and supports the growing data needs of the nation.
	Develop DPI for AI development	Lowers costs and barriers to developing AI innovations in long term. Develops critical synergies between public and private sectors. Increases standardization.
	Develop incentives for cloud compute platforms to be set up in Sri Lanka.	Increased competition and choice will lower costs and increase quality and standardization.

1.4 Research and Development

Sri Lanka requires a Research and Development (R&D) environment that not only drives technological advancements in AI, but more importantly, contributes to inclusive economic growth. When appropriately aligned with the country's needs, such an environment can cultivate an innovative culture and foster a vibrant AI innovation ecosystem. Given the rapid progress of AI technology currently seen in the world, it will be important for Sri Lanka to keep abreast of these advancements so that they can be adopted and locally disseminated in a timely manner.

To effectively align an R&D sector with a country's specific needs, it is imperative to focus on areas where AI can have a significant impact and which are of importance to Sri Lanka, such as agriculture, education, environmental sustainability, finance, government services, healthcare, and tourism. This targeted approach ensures that research addresses real challenges and opportunities, necessitating custom-built solutions tailored to Sri Lanka's needs and requirements. Global solutions may not adequately address local challenges due to variations in language, culture, societal norms, or specific conditions. Hence, local innovation and R&D in AI are essential for developing solutions tailored to Sri Lanka's unique needs, particularly in the aforementioned critical sectors. The objective here is not to duplicate global innovations,

which should be encouraged for adoption as needed, but rather to foster local innovations to address existing gaps. For instance, there is currently a gap in specialized Large Language Model (LLM) tools for Sinhala and Tamil , particularly in speech recognition.

Central to this endeavour is collaboration between academia, government research bodies, civil society, private sector, legal professionals, and the tech community. This partnership facilitates the seamless flow of knowledge, encourages practical applications, and facilitates the commercialization of research findings. Developing skills and supporting infrastructure, as outlined earlier, will be crucial in fostering such triple-helix collaborations involving the private sector, government, and academia. A robust university system that incentivizes academic collaborations locally and internationally will be vital for the emergence of such an innovation ecosystem. Encouraging international exposure will ensure that Sri Lankan academics stay abreast of the latest global technological advancements.

Financial support for R&D is equally essential. The 2024 National Budget has allocated LKR 8 billion for R&D grants, with a portion earmarked for AI. Supporting R&D within the private sector, including start-ups, through financial assistance, subsidies, tax incentives, and facilitating venture capital and private investments in AI start-ups and initiatives, is equally imperative.

Regular assessments of the AI sector's impact on economic growth and societal well-being will be needed. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) associated with the number and type of innovations brought to market would be valuable. These assessments can guide strategy adjustments and ensure that investments in AI R&D are aligned with the country's needs, fostering economic growth and societal development.

By articulating a clear policy for AI R&D, Sri Lanka can ensure that it not only consumes global AI advancements but also contributes, particularly in areas where local context and expertise are critical. This approach will not only enable more effective resolution of local problems but will also position Sri Lanka as a leader in AI innovation in the region.

Table 5: Potential initiatives for fostering AI R&D aligned with national needs.

Timeframe	Initiative	Impact
Short and Medium Term	Grants for AI R&D in priority areas	Stimulates localized AI innovation
	Grants for AI startups	Stimulates an AI innovation ecosystem. Can facilitate development of AI solutions for government public service delivery
	Initiate AI projects for the public sector in partnerships with private sector and academia	Enables productive and solutions-focused triple-helix partnerships on AI.
	Challenges and Hackathons to solve key problems with AI in identified sectors	Fosters communities of practice and cross-sectoral linkages. Further encourages opening key datasets.
	Government to Government (G2G) initiatives to foster international academic and research collaborations.	Ensures Sri Lankan academics are exposed to and can leverage global advancements in AI.

Long-Term	Develop an AI R&D Policy for Sri Lanka	Synthesizes short-term learnings to develop a glidepath for AI R&D innovation ecosystem in Sri Lanka
	Specialized sub-grants to encourage international academic collaborations in AI with reputed scholars and institutions	Ensures Sri Lanka academics continue to be exposed to and can leverage global advancements in AI

1.5 Public Awareness

Much public awareness of AI, where it exists, is often limited and shaped by the hype and pessimism prevalent in mass media. It is imperative to cultivate a well-informed and discerning public with a foundational practical understanding of AI, its diverse impacts on the economy and society, and strategies for mitigating potential harms. For instance, in Finland, initiatives like MinnaLearn's Elements of AI online course have successfully demystified AI for a wide audience, gaining global popularity.[16] Similar endeavors in Sri Lanka, offered in Sinhala and Tamil, are crucial for democratizing AI knowledge and empowering individuals and organizations to thrive in the AI era.

Therefore, investing in awareness campaigns and knowledge development for the public on AI is paramount. It is equally crucial to broaden their perspectives on potential career paths and foster an understanding of the skills necessary to navigate a world where AI is integrated into various aspects of daily life. Collaboration with civil society can further amplify knowledge dissemination efforts and contribute to nurturing a well-informed and discerning public discourse on AI. Furthermore, such efforts will contribute to establishing a robust trust framework for AI, as discussed later on.

Table 6: Potential initiatives for increasing public awareness in AI.

Timeframe	Initiative	Impact
Short and Medium Term	A basic educational series developed in Sinhala and Tamil and broadcast on public TV with accompanying short videos to be consumed via social media and the internet	Increasing the public's basic understanding of AI benefits, impacts, and harms
	Awareness campaigns targeting school children through the National Future Talent Initiative (NFTI)	Increasing student's awareness and understanding of AI including AI careers.
	Set up of AI clubs in secondary schools and/or inclusion of AI topics within existing clubs	Increasing awareness and understanding of AI amongst students.

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16   For more information see https://www.elementsofai.com/

2. Accelerating the realization of Sri Lanka's AI Vision

The eventual impact of AI will resonate throughout Sri Lankan society, fundamentally altering the way we live and work. Globally, developed countries are already witnessing rapid advances in public sector effectiveness, efficiency, and accessibility driven by AI. Sri Lanka stands at a crucial juncture where the adoption of responsible AI, particularly in the public sector as well as key economic sectors, can act as a significant catalyst for AI adoption nationwide. This adoption promises potential positive ripple effects that extend throughout society and the economy.

The use of AI in the public sector is anticipated to be the primary domain where its societal impact will be most profoundly felt. This sector's transformation through AI can serve as a substantial accelerator for AI adoption and trust across the country. Effective implementation in this area is not only about improving governmental operations but also about setting a benchmark for AI's potential in enhancing the quality of life. It is imperative for Sri Lanka to seize this opportunity to ensure its citizens do not miss out on the benefits that AI is bringing to the world.

Be it in the public sector or the private sector, it is important to recognize that transformation will not happen overnight. Furthermore, global experience suggests that finding the right use cases to scale requires experimentation. Scaling the wrong use case especially in the public sector will further erode public trust. As such it is important to encourage iterative, agile approaches that allow for experimentation and learning leading to sustainable fit-for purpose solutions that enhance public trust in AI. This includes shaping feedback loops, to highlight the role and benefits of AI to people's lives and livelihoods and to co-design innovations and approaches with citizens.

Thus, the focus for Sri Lanka should not only be on developing AI technologies but also on ensuring their responsible application, in both the public and private sectors. This approach will lay a foundation for trust and understanding of AI, paving the way for broader acceptance and integration across various sectors. Successfully doing so will be key in accelerating the realization of Sri Lanka's AI vision, aligning the country with global advancements, and ensuring that the transformative power of AI is leveraged for sustainable human development of the country.

2.1 Responsible Public Sector Transformation through AI

Successfully implementing AI within the public sector can provide an adaptable and replicable model for AI integration across sectors. More importantly, it can catalyze adoption of AI by both the private sector and society at large. Successful AI applications in areas like healthcare, agriculture, education, or public administration can showcase the potential benefits and efficiencies of AI. AI innovation in the public sector should strive for effective human-AI collaboration in the public sector and not automation. This will enhance overall outcomes in public service delivery and public administration whilst bringing about efficiencies. Such a demonstration of value can motivate the private sector to explore AI solutions. It is essential to recognize that these applications often require locally developed AI solutions, tailored to address specific Sri Lankan contexts and challenges.

The development of AI in the public sector will require supporting infrastructure and the cultivation of local AI expertise, both of which are currently limited. As mentioned earlier, building local capacity and readiness is crucial for nurturing innovation in AI that caters to the unique needs of Sri Lanka. This approach ensures that AI solutions are not only effective but also culturally and contextually relevant. However once built, this developed infrastructure and expertise can be leveraged by the wider economy, thus lowering the barriers to AI adoption. Such public sector investment should be leveraged to attract private sector investment and foster public-private partnerships especially in core infrastructure elements that will be needed such as data lakes, cloud platforms, and shared public computing infrastructure.

Encouraging external investment will be key given the Sri Lankan government's current limited fiscal space. Such collaborations not just in infrastructure but also in the development of AI solutions for the public sector would lead to a more robust AI ecosystem in the country fostering mutually beneficial collaborations. India's Manthan platform may offer

lessons for Sri Lanka, successfully connecting private sector, government, academia, and grassroots organizations for developing scalable emerging technology solutions (including leveraging AI) which can produce a social impact.

Recognizing the importance of the public sector to act as a catalyst for AI use, the upcoming Digital Strategy 2030 has called for the development of an AI Playbook for Government. Such a playbook would also provide guidelines for procuring AI technology and solutions.[17] This must be coupled with digital literacy training including in the use of AI. The 2024 National budget has also allocated resources to identify opportunities to integrate AI solutions within government agencies to enhance public service delivery and public sector productivity.

It is important however the government utilize a use case-driven iterative approach with a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) mindset in AI innovations. The MVP mindset that prioritizes developing a basic but functional version of the AI system, can allow for quicker deployment and early testing. Continuous impact assessments throughout trials are critical. The iterative approach and the feedback loop it provides are essential because they allow for the continuous fine-tuning of AI models based on real-world performance and user input. Further it will enhance overall accuracy and effectiveness and critically accelerate the knowledge and expertise of the public sector in developing fit-for-purpose AI solutions for public service delivery and public administration. Such experiential knowledge and expertise will further drive, the creation and implementation of an agile and adaptable policy and regulatory environment, that both spurs innovation in AI whilst mitigating its harms.

As the public begins to witness the tangible benefits of AI in the public sector, it can lead to greater acceptance and enthusiasm for AI technologies, spurring their adoption in other areas. This strategic focus on AI in the public sector not only addresses Sri Lanka's immediate needs but also lays the groundwork for a more widespread and effective use of AI across its economy, which could be key in overcoming current challenges and paving the way for a technologically advanced and prosperous future. These initiatives are integral to accelerating the realization of Sri Lanka's AI Vision, ensuring that AI benefits are felt across all levels of society and propel the country towards its ambitious digital transformation goals.

2.2 Stimulating AI Adoption in the Private Sector

In a competitive environment the private sector can be an inherent leader in spearheading innovation by exhibiting flexibility and bringing resources to bear. The private sector in Sri Lanka is already a key driver for inclusive economic growth for the country. Private sector adoption of AI can therefore spur further inclusive economic development of the country and can drive penetration and adoption of AI across both the economy and society at large. The creation, incubation, and growth of AI capacity within the private sector are critical for widespread AI adoption. Governments, including Sri Lanka's, often lack the resources to independently set up and maintain the necessary infrastructure and teams. This is where public-private partnerships become indispensable. Global examples have shown that such collaborations are pivotal in building AI capacity and fostering innovation.

A vibrant and capable private sector is essential for the research, design, build, and maintenance of AI systems. This is echoed in the Oxford Insights Global Readiness Index, where the 'Technology Sector' index measures the capability of the private sector to supply AI tools necessary for government and other sectors. It underlines the need for a mature technology sector with high innovation capacity, supported by a conducive business environment and robust R&D spending. To stimulate local AI innovation, we need companies capable of developing and maintaining sophisticated AI systems and research entities focused on localized solutions. This capacity building is not just about national progress; it also serves as a catalyst for attracting international investment and enticing global AI tech companies to Sri Lanka. Currently, Sri Lanka is not a primary destination for AI tech companies, and this is a narrative we need to change.

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17   *The UK Government's Guidelines for AI procurement can serve as a useful inspiration. See https://www.gov.uk/government/ publications/guidelines-for-ai-procurement*

By integrating AI, the private sector in Sri Lanka can pioneer the development of new products, optimize its operations, and enhance customer experiences. A global mindset when developing these products with an eye on the export market, will be key.

AI adoption in the private sector will also drive job creation and skill development in Sri Lanka. As companies invest in AI, there will be a growing demand for a skilled workforce proficient in AI and related technologies. This need will need to be met. Cultivating a knowledgeable and productive workforce capable of contributing to AI initiatives in the country is key to fostering a knowledge-based economy. When done right, collaborations of private sector with academia as well as civil society can provide mutually beneficial outcomes fostering a vibrant innovation focused R&D eco-system. There is much that government can do to kindle such collaborations. The afore mentioned Manthan platform in India is one such example.

The resultant increases in productivity and efficiency in the private sector can contribute to increasing the consumer surplus as cost of products and services become cheaper. Importantly if this transition is done right, and with proper support, this can spur economic diversification.

However, the private sector currently could display a cautious and narrow attitude towards AI adoption, given the current challenging macroeconomic environment in the country. This will need to be addressed and mechanisms must be found to stimulate adoption in the private sector. Offering financial incentives such as tax breaks, grants, or subsidies specifically targeted towards AI research and development. Even though this is challenging to do in the current macro-economic environment, the 2024 National budget has allocated some funds to incentivize AI Startups and for AI adoption by the private sector. Similarly, a business-friendly regulatory environment albeit with sufficient protections to mitigate the harms of AI, will play a significant role in easing the development and integration of AI in the private sector.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) can serve as a crucial tool for sharing resources and for risk mitigation. For example, collaboration with the government on shared infrastructure and AI solutions for the public sector can potentially meet the needs of both the public sector as well as the private sector. Collectively through these partnerships, private companies can gain access to government-funded research, infrastructure, and expertise in AI. This not only reduces the burden on individual companies but also aligns private sector innovation with public sector goals. These partnerships are especially crucial in developing local AI solutions where the public sector can benefit from the agility and innovation of the private sector. By aligning private sector initiatives with public sector goals, we can ensure that AI development is not only progressive but also inclusive and relevant to Sri Lanka's specific needs.

Fostering a dynamic AI startup ecosystem is vital. This includes establishing conditions conducive to innovation, such as supportive policies, access to funding, and collaboration opportunities. The focus should be on nurturing homegrown talent and startups, particularly those offering solutions in crucial sectors like healthcare, agriculture, and government services.

The National AI Center intended to be designed and established in fiscal 2024 will play a key role in championing AI initiatives throughout the country. To aide this process, UNDP will support the establishment of a Project Management Unit (PMU) as an initial step to ensure quick implementation of the AI Sri Lanka programme for which funds have already been allocated in the 2024 National Budget. Furthermore, entrepreneurship in AI must be encouraged and supported. A vibrant AI innovation ecosystem requires a thriving environment for startups to emerge. Funds have been allocated in the 2024 National Budget to support entrepreneurship in AI including for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with specific financial incentives for women entrepreneurs. The emergence of centers of excellence and innovation hubs can help foster a vibrant innovation ecosystem in Sri Lanka in AI development and use.

The private sector has been critical to Sri Lanka in bringing about inclusive economic growth. When we create the conditions for business to successfully leverage AI this can stimulate AI adoption throughout Sri Lanka's economy and society. This will lead not just to technological advancement, but also economic growth, job creation, skill development, and sustainable and inclusive development.

3. Creating a Safe and Trustworthy AI Ecosystem for Sri Lanka

Ensuring that the development and use of AI in Sri Lanka is safe and trustworthy is essential due to AI's unique technical, ethical, and societal implications, distinguishing it markedly from regular software development. This is not just about having laws and regulations, but rather about having an approach with wide consensus that ensures that AI is leveraged responsibly for the economic and social development of Sri Lanka. Such an approach would emphasize the protection of the rights and freedoms of individuals, meets societal expectations, and promotes religious and ethnic harmony.

A nuanced approach to this will be required, which doesn't treat all AI applications the same and provides for greater oversight including "human-in-the-loop" for higher risk applications and less arduous provisions for those that carry only minimal risk. This is needed so that we don't unnecessarily stifle AI innovation and inadvertently dis-advantage entrepreneurs with limited resources.

It will be important for Sri Lanka to ensure that the rule of law is paramount, be it in the development and use of AI or more broadly. This is also crucial for attracting foreign investment as it creates a predictable and secure environment for business operations.

3.1 Legal and Regulatory Framework

We need AI systems that are safe, reliable, and protects privacy. A robust legal and regulatory framework is essential to not only enforce compliance but also encourage practices that aligns with the best interests of Sri Lankan society. Ideally the law will be both specific and adaptable to technological advancements but also be reflective of public interests and concerns, thereby fostering a sense of shared responsibility and trust in AI applications. Since AI can penetrate all aspects of society, a multi-stakeholder governance model may be appropriate. Critically given AI's wide-ranging impacts, it is imperative that laws and polices related to AI keeps pace with technological development. This would require all legislative aspects of Sri Lanka to be kept current. Moreover, training in this area is imperative, including for the judiciary.

The SLPDPA of 2022 already includes elements addressing Automated Decision Making (ADM). However, it is still in the early stages of being implemented. Singapore's Model AI Governance Framework offers guidelines that balance innovation with ethical considerations, showing how legal frameworks can evolve in response to technological advancements and societal expectations. Singapore's government takes an active role in reducing barriers to responsible AI Innovation. For example, Singapore's Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) and the Personal Data Protection Commission (PDPC) jointly developed and launched the AI Verify programme. AI Verify is an AI governance testing framework and toolkit designed to enable organizations to voluntarily assess their AI systems in a responsible and trustworthy manner. The government also provides regulatory sandboxes where businesses can test new products, services, or business models without the normal regulatory consequences. Even the EU's AI Act (expected to be enacted into law by 2025) calls for dedicated support for SMEs.

In relation to Intellectual Property rights, different approaches could be considered when formulating an AI Strategy, including the Japanese approach which allows the use of copyrighted material in foundational models. It is also important that the National AI Strategy is aligned with Sri Lanka's Cybersecurity Policy and Cyber Security Strategy, as well as the upcoming Cybersecurity Bill (2024), which deals with implementation of Cyber Security Strategy and protection for critical information infrastructure.

Sri Lanka's approach to the legal and regulatory framework for AI should first and foremost place primacy on protecting individual rights and freedoms and ensure alignment with the existing constitutional framework for Sri Lanka. And while the development of trusted and responsible AI innovation is the goal of such a framework, it should also ensure that it

creates support mechanisms for private sector and especially SMEs to lower their costs for innovating responsibly and be compliant.

3.2 Responsible AI Development

It's important to recognize that AI solutions often function as socio-technical systems rather than mere technological fixes. While certain applications, like fraud detection in finance or specific industrial processes, can yield rapid success due to existing decision-making frameworks that can be readily upgraded for seamless AI integration, other sectors such as public sector programme enhancement, cancer screening, and autonomous driving present more intricate challenges. These complexities stem from inherent AI issues such as the black box problem, human-AI dynamics, accountability, and robustness/reliability, which extend to broader socio-technical systems.

Therefore, effective regulations and policies aimed at mitigating AI-related harms must be complemented by responsible and ethical practices governing AI development and utilization. Developing and implementing such practices necessitates active engagement with diverse groups in crafting the necessary guidelines and standards for ethical AI development so as to ensure they are inclusive and representative of broader societal values, while also being practical and actionable, offering clear guidance to AI developers and users.

Harmonizing these guidelines with international ethical frameworks is crucial for maintaining global competitiveness and interoperability, ensuring that AI systems are not only locally relevant but also globally responsible. The OECD's AI Principles, endorsed by over 40 countries, serve as a global benchmark for trustworthy AI, emphasizing inclusive growth, sustainable development, and well-being. Similarly, UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (AI) provides a framework to ensure that AI developments align with human rights and human dignity. Lessons from these frameworks can guide Sri Lanka as it endeavors to adopt an ethical approach to AI development and usage.

Fairness, transparency, and explainability of AI systems should not only be technical requirements but also mechanisms for building public trust. It is imperative to eliminate bias in AI decision-making processes and ensure that users and stakeholders comprehend how AI systems arrive at their decisions. In critical domains like public service delivery, healthcare, and criminal justice, AI systems should adhere to mandatory levels of disclosure and explainability, including depending on the use-case ensuring human-in-the-loop. By rendering AI systems more comprehensible and relatable to the public, we bridge the gap between AI developers and users, fostering a sense of collective ownership and responsibility.

Fostering a culture of accountability and contestability in AI development is equally vital. Encouraging developers and deployers of AI to conduct regular audits and impact assessments of their AI systems is essential to mitigating potential harms, such as bias.

3.3 Public and Civil Society Engagement

Engaging civil society and the broader public in AI governance is crucial. It is important to have open and meaningful dialogue with stakeholders from various sectors. This includes organizing consultations, workshops, and public forums to gather input and feedback on AI-related initiatives, policies, and regulations. By actively involving citizens, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), experts, and other stakeholders in decision-making processes related to AI in Sri Lanka, we can enhance transparency, build trust, and promote ownership of AI developments.

Collaboration between government, civil society, academia, and industry is essential for addressing the multifaceted challenges associated with AI governance. Sri Lanka must foster partnerships and networks that bring together diverse stakeholders to exchange knowledge, share best practices, and collaborate on AI projects. These partnerships should

be guided by principles of inclusivity, transparency, and mutual respect, with the aim of harnessing collective expertise and resources to advance the responsible development and use of AI in Sri Lanka.

Public and civil society engagement is integral to the development of a safe and trustworthy AI ecosystem in Sri Lanka. By fostering dialogue, raising awareness, fostering partnerships, and promoting accountability, Sri Lanka can harness the transformative potential of AI while safeguarding the rights and interests of its citizens.

The Way Forward

Sri Lanka stands at a crossroads in its journey towards becoming a globally competitive digital economy. The path forward requires a concerted effort to establish a dynamic AI innovation ecosystem, which is pivotal in avoiding the risk of being left behind in the global AI race. This transformation may be gradual, but it demands collective action and urgency. The design and creation of the National AI Center, the development of a comprehensive National AI Strategy and an associated 5-year roadmap, as well as the LKR 1.5 billon allocated in the 2024 National Budget for initial AI initiatives (i.e. AI Sri Lanka programme) reflects the government's commitment to this urgent cause of developing and leveraging a vibrant AI innovation system for the country's inclusive economic growth and societal development.

Collectively, these actions will help develop the conditions for the *Rapid acceleration in the responsible development and use of AI to realize a digitally empowered Sri Lanka for innovation, inclusion & sustainable growth.*

Successful implementation of the AI Sri Lanka Programme

The LKR 1.5 billion allocated in the 2024 National Budget for the AI Sri Lanka programme must serve as a catalyst for early successes and valuable learnings that will shape the AI strategy. This funding is instrumental in driving AI initiatives as part of the larger Digital Strategy 2030 framework. Initially these initiatives will need to be driven by a Project Management Unit (PMU) under the Presidential Secretariat, and with the active engagement of CFSAI.

It is critical that these initiatives of the AI Sri Lanka programme start immediately.

Required priority actions:
- Create the PMU under the Presidential Secretariat that is properly staffed and managed with external assistance, along with CFSAI involvement, to initially drive the AI initiatives intended under the 2024 National Budget. The activities of this PMU will be taken over by the National AI Center once the latter is established.
- Develop initial project documents for each initiative outlining the design, stakeholders, partners, and additional funding sources.

Setting up National AI Center

The design and development of a National AI Center which has been budgeted for in the 2024 National Budget will drive and champion AI initiatives not just in the public sector but also throughout the country. Initially this center will anchor and drive the various AI related initiatives intended under the 2024 National Budget, and later the implementation of the National AI Strategy that will be developed by CFSAI.

However, it is critical that the center be properly designed in a participatory manner to maximize its impact with wide support from the government, private sector, and civil society so it can be seen as a trusted entity to drive, catalyze, and champion AI initiatives in the country for the benefit of all. Given that AI is a cross-sectoral and cross-organizational issue, leadership from the Presidential Secretariat is key for the effective functioning of the National AI Center.

The Centre will be a key focal point ensuring policy consistency on AI aspects with the larger digital transformation efforts of the government, as well as for creating an enabling, inclusive, and responsible environment for AI innovations to emerge and thrive in Sri Lanka. Critically, the Centre needs to design and be a role model for working effectively together with the private sector, academia, and civil society.

Required priority actions:
- Develop a mandate for the center that includes amongst others:
  - Being the key focal point for AI related aspects in Sri Lanka and in particularly in government ensuring coherence in policy for developing a vibrant and inclusive AI innovation eco-system in Sri Lanka.
  - Become a role model for collaborations between government, private sector, and civil society.
  - Effectively and collaboratively implement the National AI Strategy once it is developed, driving AI initiatives and facilitating investments and partnerships (both local and external).
  - Ensuring periodic review of AI initiatives and adaptation based on the learnings from ongoing initiatives to foster a dynamic and adaptable policy and regulatory framework, capable of keeping pace with rapid AI advancements.
- Identify and partner with an organization that can create and run a participatory process for the design of the National AI Center.

Developing a comprehensive National AI Strategy

The National AI Strategy, currently in development by the CFSAI is central to this vision. It aims to provide a comprehensive 5-year roadmap for sustainable AI capability and innovation growth. This strategy must be practical, actionable, and ambitiously realistic, focusing on specific areas within the AI value chain where Sri Lanka can achieve global competitiveness.

A use-case driven approach is paramount, ensuring the development of agile and scalable AI solutions tailored to Sri Lanka's unique societal and economic context. This involves creating a technology environment that is not only advanced but also responsive and continually evolving based on iterative feedback and learning. Such a strategy ensures that each AI project contributes to the broader strategic goals and refinement of AI applications.

The National AI Strategy must be underpinned by a dynamic and adaptable policy and regulatory framework, capable of keeping pace with rapid AI advancements. This framework should foster a human-centered design approach to AI innovations and be responsible to democratize AI benefits, ensuring that efficient, locally tailored AI services and products are accessible to all citizens.

Critical to the success of AI in Sri Lanka are foundational enablers including a robust data strategy, enhanced technology infrastructure for AI support, and a digitally literate workforce skilled in AI development and application. Strengthening AI innovation in both the public and private sectors will serve as key accelerators in this journey. The strategy must also address AI-related risks, balancing the protection of individual rights and societal harmony with the support for responsible AI development.

Innovative financing approaches will need to be properly considered and brought to bear. This is particularly important given Sri Lanka's current economic constraints. As such it will be important to understand how and where different forms of funding can be leveraged in addition to public sector investment by the government. This could include leveraging bilateral and multilateral assistance/ aid in the initial phases and then leveraged to attract private sector investment including private equity investment in the latter stages. Private sector investment and private equity will be critical to spur a vibrant AI startup ecosystem.

Collaboration is a cornerstone of this strategy, emphasizing the need for local and international partnerships. These partnerships are vital for integrating global expertise, learning, and financing, thereby creating a robust and globally connected AI ecosystem in Sri Lanka.

Required priority actions:

- Develop and launch a National AI Strategy within the first half of 2024, ensuring consultation and wide acceptance from the public, industry, and all political parties and ensuring that the strategy gives primacy to the aforementioned aspects i.e. use-case driven, agile and adaptive policy design, responsible AI development and use, foster inclusive development and human centered design, promotes collaboration, and leverages innovative financing.

- Develop a road map as part of the National AI strategy that has short, medium, and long-term actions based on the principles outlined above as well as guided by this White Paper. Also identify key stakeholders that will own, lead and/or drive these initiatives. These initiatives should at the very least complement the Digital Strategy 2030 roadmap and ideally be integrated.

- Constitute an International Advisory Panel in consultation with CFSAI that will advise, guide, and provide expert insights to CFSAI on the National AI Strategy for Sri Lanka, and can help facilitate its eventual implementation by fostering external collaborations and investments related to AI in Sri Lanka.

Acknowledgements

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