



The Role of the Belt and Road Initiative in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Sri Lanka

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Article Info

Article History:

Received 15 Feb 2024

Accepted 15 Jul 2024

Issue Published Online

01 July 2024

Key Words:

BRI

SDGs

China

Sri Lanka

Dynamics

ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road Initiative is a global strategy announced by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013 with potential to promote the sustainable goals presented through the agenda for 2030 by the United Nations in 2016. Most significantly, Sri Lanka was among the other 21 countries which embraced the implementation of belt and road initiative, and as of today, links between belt and road initiative and sustainable development goals have become an ongoing discourse in the international system. In the Sri Lankan context, numerous projects have been launched under the belt and road initiative and consequently, some contradictory ideologies related to this backdrop have appeared in the Sri Lankan scholarly context. This paper aims to examine the impact of the belt and road initiative on the sustainable development goals in Sri Lanka. The study employs both primary and secondary data collection methods, including observations and case studies for qualitative analysis. Primary data was gathered through direct observations, while secondary data was sourced from books, journals, and online articles. Key findings indicate a positive linkage between the belt and road initiative of China and sustainable development goals in Sri Lanka referring to economic, social and environmental sustainability. Moreover, multifaceted impact of belt and road initiative towards the sustainable development goals were identified significantly under the social, economic and environmental dynamics using the sustainable development theory. While the belt and road initiative has positively influenced the sustainable development goals in Sri Lanka to some extent, there remains a need for better project management policies to ensure sustainable development outcomes.

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Journal homepage:

<http://journals.sjp.ac.lk/index.php/vjhss>

<http://doi.org/10.31357/fhss/vjhss.v09i02.13>

VJHSS (2024), Vol. 09 (02),
pp. 196-213

ISSN 1391-1937/ISSN
2651-0367 (Online)



Faculty of Humanities and
Social Sciences 2024

1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the source of significant academic and policy debate in terms of how it is defined and how far it can contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 (Gu et al.,2019). SDGs are a set of 17 global objectives declared by United Nations (UN)in 2015 in terms of addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges such as poverty, hunger, quality education, health, gender inequality, affordable clean energy, innovation and industries, sustainable economic growth, and climate change actions, etc. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the BRI development strategy creating new opportunities for shared growth future among countries through policy coordination, connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people connections (CCICED,2022). Thus, along with the infrastructure development moving forward with global cooperation, the BRI supports addressing social challenges like poverty (SDG 1) hunger (SDG 2), and health (SDG3) through enhanced economic opportunities, food security initiatives, and global healthcare access. Moreover, people-to-people connection is a great platform to promote high-quality education (SDG4) all over the world. In an economic context, on the one hand, as most scholars argue, the robust development of infrastructure under BRI adversely supports industrial growth and innovation (SDG 9). On the other hand, by creating numerous job opportunities through infrastructure projects, the BRI supports economic growth attached to the 8th SDG. With regards to environmental perspectives, Chinese investments deployed under BRI's renewable energy projects are a way forward to ensure affordable, clean energy comes in the 7th SDG. Thus, in this manner, according to 2030 Agenda, the BRI proposed in 2013 by China's President, Xi Jinping, has significant potential to contribute to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda)

which is announced by United Nations in 2015 and later officially came into effect in 2016.

Against this backdrop, as Lu et al. (2018) emphasize, the BRI promotes excellent connectivity, economic chain, and the growth of job opportunities, investment, consumption, cultural exchange, and the spirit of regional cooperation among three continents namely Asia, Europe, and Africa by creating jointly built trade routes following the ancient Silk Road. Moreover, Recent high-level statements, including the third Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in October 2023, emphasize the interest of the Chinese government in terms of promoting SDGs at both national and international levels. Thus, given the definition of Sustainable Development, some scholars view BRI as a catalyst for promoting SDGs based on its' contribution for addressing global economic social and environmental goals. Most significantly, even though development objectives shared by the BRI appeared like the United Nations' SDGs (Nwachukwu, 2020), there is a remaining question to be addressed as how far the BRI could contribute to achieve SDGs in small developing countries. For example, the BRI is a long-term process for economic growth (SDG 8), resilient infrastructure (SDG 9) and sustainable cities (SDG 11) empowered by enhanced infrastructure and connectivity. Socially, the BRI's role in promoting good health (SDG 3) and quality education (SDG 4) is significant in upgrading the social well-being among the communities in small developing nations. Environmentally, the focus on renewable energy projects under the BRI supports to ensure access to affordable and clean energy (SDG 7) and advances in climate action (SDG 13). However, despite these aligned objectives, the extent to which the BRI can effectively contribute to the achievement of the SDGs in small developing countries is a critical question, considering different local contexts, governance challenges and possible environmental and social impacts. This underscores the need for

continuous evaluation and adaptation of BRI projects to ensure that they genuinely advance sustainable development in the developing nations line with the UN's SDGs.

In the Sri Lankan context, Sri Lanka was among the first countries to welcome the BRI and make it a component of its' national development strategy in 2013 (Wijayasiri &

Senaratne, 2018). Sri Lanka's involvement in BRI is significantly considered due to Sri Lanka's strategic location in the middle of the Indian Ocean (see figure 1) with an emphasis on Sri Lanka becoming an economic hub facilitating easy transit of goods from China to Sri Lanka and the Southeast Asian economies and beyond (Jayasinghe, 2019).

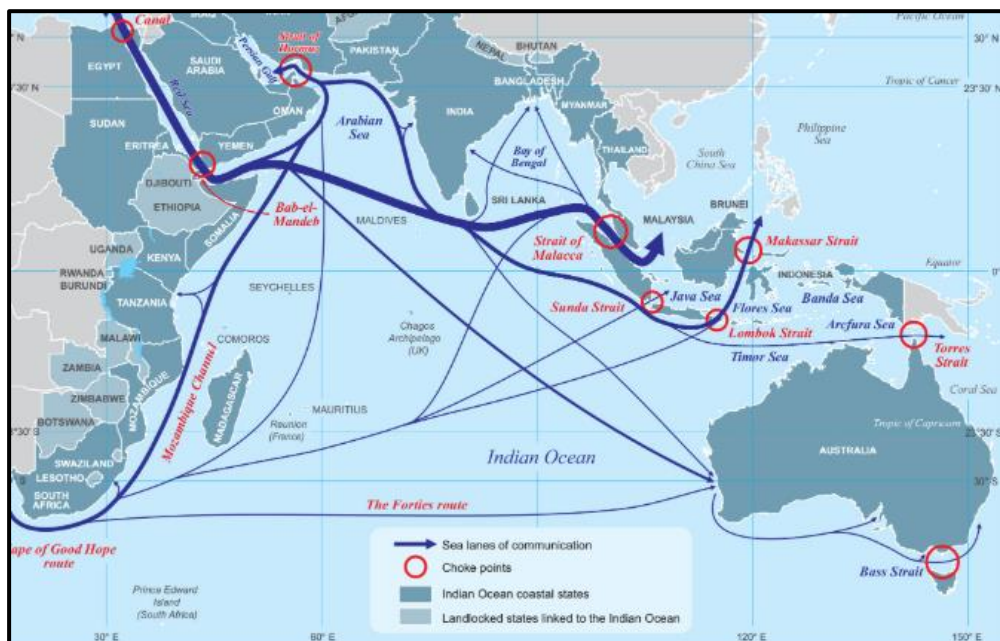


Figure 01. Sri Lanka's strategies location in Indian Ocean (Abhipedia, 2025)

Against this backdrop (Figure 1), some of the scholars have brought up both the opportunities and challenges of BRI such as debt trap risk and biodiversity issues on the sustainability development in Sri Lanka. Despite that, there should be more comprehensive academic discussions regarding how far BRI would contribute to achieve SDGs in developing countries concerning both positive and negative outcomes. Therefore, by considering the prevailing literature gap this study addresses the impact of BRI towards the SDGs in developing countries mainly based on its opportunities and challenges with special attention on Sri Lanka.

1.1 Significance of the research

Significance of this study can be addressed through both practical and theoretical perspectives. In practical perspectives, this research explores the role of BRI in ensuring the SDGs in the national level of Sri Lanka, particularly based on the opportunities and challenges it bring outs by this intercontinental mega infrastructure project. Similarly, this study contributes to bridge the existing literature gap about the significance of BRI and SDGs in the Sri Lankan context. With regard to the Chinese scenario, by analysing the impact of BRI in promoting the SGDs in the Sri Lankan platform, this study points to a wide approach for creating a

better win-win situation relevant to the BRI and SDGs connection.

Simply put, as this study centres on a couple of crucial factors either in national and international perspectives associated with Sri Lanka and China, policy makers in both countries would benefit implementing smart policies over the existing limitations in this current context. On the other hand, this research would encourage other researchers to make up the empirical gap which existed in the quantitative studies by contributing more statistical data relevant to the same topic.

1.2 Problem Statement

According to the literature, BRI and SDGs are two parallel platforms consisting of similar objectives and different scopes. Nevertheless, in the global context, the discourse woven around the role of BRI attached to the SDGs has been polarised. Even though certain previous studies reveal that the BRI has potential in making a significant contribution towards the achievement of SDGs in global, regional, and national levels, some of the other studies have witnessed that there are yet practical challenges associated with the relationship between BRI and SDGs. Thus, scholars such Rauf et al., 2018 underscore the positive potential of the BRI in driving progress towards the SDGs against the other scholars such as (Anarfo et al., 2019; Feng et al., 2019; Hahm and Raihan, 2018; Yanqiang et al., 2018,) who have brought out the positive significance of BRI in ensuring SDGs in developing countries in their studies. In this regards, one group of scholars argue that the BRI projects can significantly improve infrastructure, reduce poverty, and stimulate economic activities in developing countries, thereby advancing multiple SDGs whereas the others raise concerns about the several challenges associated with the BRI, including issues related to debt sustainability, environmental degradation, and socio-political consequences, which may mitigate the achievement of SDGs. Further, most notably Senadki et al (2022) suggest that the

numerous opportunities created by the BRI cannot be ignored by many developing countries that require help to boost their economic activities.

In this global context, many local scholars have been encouraged to study the opportunities and challenges of the BRI concerning Sri Lanka's political and economic stability. Given the Sri Lankan government's pursuit of ambitious reforms to promote SDGs, it is crucial to identify the BRI's role in achieving these goals in Sri Lanka. In this regards, despite of some presenters such as Ganga Tilakaratna who has addressed the international audience relevant to the topic of BRI and SDGs based on the case study of Sri Lanka, yet there is a lack of academic attempts in exploring the role of BRI in ensuring the SDGs in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, as desk research contributes to bridge the literature gap on BRI and SDGs in developing countries, this study aims to address the following research questions.

1.3 Research Questions

- I. What are the dynamics of BRI towards the achievement of SDGs in Sri Lanka?
- II. To what extent does BRI support SDGs in Sri Lanka?

1.4 Objectives of the study

Objective of this study contributes to bridge the existing literature gap. The main aim of this paper is to explore the role of BRI in ensuring the SDGs in Sri Lankan platforms and to address the question to what extent the BRI supports to achieve SDGs in Sri Lanka based on both practical and theoretical perspectives.

In addition, following objectives serve as the specific purposes of this case study.

Specific objectives

- To explore the opportunities created by BRI in ensuring SDGs in Sri Lanka

- To explore the challenges created by BRI in ensuring SDGs in Sri Lanka.
- To make some suggestions related to existed limitations relevant to the BRI and SDGs

1.5 Literature review

In 2013, two years before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, China launched the BRI (United Nations, n.d). In 2016, China positioned itself as one of the significant global proponents of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by producing a proposal for various countries to achieve the 2030 SDGs, and detailing strategies to implement the agenda (United Nations, 2019). As Senadki et al (2022) interpret, this initiative came after the launch of the intercontinental mega infrastructure project, also known as the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), which aims to promote rapid regional infrastructure development to achieve the ninth Five Year Plan. Nevertheless, given to the objectives of BRI priorities, UN agencies have urged China to bring the BRI in line with the 2030 Agenda. Thus, the BRI has now been integrated into the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) to achieve the SDGs (Renwick, Gu and Gong 2018). As the Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated at the opening of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, the BRI has significant potential to boost the incomes of BRI countries and the world at large.

“While the Belt and Road Initiative and the 2030 Agenda are different in their nature and scope, both have sustainable development as the overarching objective. Both strive to create opportunities, global public goods and win-win cooperation. Both aim to deepen ‘connectivity’ across countries and regions: connectivity in infrastructure, trade, finance, policies and, perhaps most important of all, among peoples” (UN News Centre, 2017).

Thus, simply given, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been brought up as

China’s contribution to a comprehensive solution for sustainable development (CCICED, 2022). Nevertheless, according to Solmecke, (2016) there are about 60 countries linked to the BRI trading route reaching about 63 percent of the global population and amounting to 29 percent of global GDP (2016). Thus, China aims to build a trade network that connects three continents - Asia, Europe, and Africa - while building land and maritime infrastructures that integrate the economies of the countries on the trading routes (Shah, 2016). Furthermore, as Senadki et al. (2022) cited in their paper, scholars such as (Feng et al.,2019; Yanqiang et al.,2018) have highlighted the progress of BRI over 65 developing countries which are associated with the goals of sustainable developments under specific sectors such as energy, ICT, transport etc. Similarly in this regard, World Bank (2018) emphasized that the BRI, expected to last 30 years and would create sustainable economic opportunities for poor and developing countries (World Bank, 2018).

Thus, several scholars such as (Anarfo et al., 2019; Feng et al., 2019; Hahm and Raihan, 2018; Yanqiang et al., 2018,) have highlighted the role of BRI in achieving SDGs in developing countries in their studies. For an example, as Anarfo et al. (2019) stress, the main objective of the BRI is to ensure that the infrastructure deficit in developing countries is significantly reduced to improve economic growth and achieve the SDGs. In a similar vein, Hahm & Raiha (2018), argue that the ambition of BRI is to assist developing countries and solve economic challenges affecting business growth due to the lack of standard infrastructure. Most interestingly, as per the reports of world Bank (2018), the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative has the potential to raise real income gains, raise incomes in BRI countries by 3.4% and increase global real income by up to 2.9% for the rest of the world. Accordingly, as sustainable infrastructure development plays a critical role in improving

the economic growth (Senadki et al., 2022) China's BRI around the globe ensures that all development initiatives align with the SDGs (Feng et al., 2019; Anarfo et al., 2019). Thus, the BRI has the potential to close major infrastructure gaps, accelerate regional integration, and increase economic growth in a manner that advances progress towards the SDGs (CCICED, 2022).

Noteworthy, even though some studies have revealed that the sustainable development remains at the core of the BRI project in all sub-regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, in contrast certain studies such as (Yanqiang et al., 2018; Rauf et al., 2018; Anarfo et al., 2019) have indicated several sustainability-risk challenges behind the BRI. Despite the BRI's potential economic benefit, one of its several concerns is the possible default on debt (Senadki et al., 2022). Furthermore, some studies reveal that the BRI may become associated with losses in wildlife movement and mortality through habitat loss, the spread of invasive species, increases in illegal logging, poaching, and fires; and cause deforestation through the construction of roads, power lines and power plants, and subsequent mining activity (CCICED, 2022). On the other hand, many informed citizens strongly believe the BRI is a trap for China to gain political influence in affected emerging economies in debt (Senadki et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, as developing countries desperately need funds to achieve the 17 SDGs (Smith, 2022), the overwhelming opportunities created by the BRI cannot be ignored by many Sub-Saharan and South-Asian developing countries that require help to boost their economic activities (Senadki et al., 2022). According to Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta:

“The Belt and Road Initiative gives our continent the opportunity to make a paradigm shift. Post-colonial Africa has been stuck in a rut... It will be a win-win situation when our people have the skills, assets and financing necessary to participate in the

development of the infrastructure corridors that will enhance connectivity, support trade, and reduce the cost of doing business between our countries... We will all win when the economic corridors we develop hasten industrialization; and when they hasten the development of domestic private-sector capabilities” (Xinhua News, 2017).

In this manner, BRI provides an existing, functioning framework of finance, organization, and project experience with which to potentially help Kenya deliver on its national economic programme, SDG strategy, and HCI interventions (Gu & Qiu, 2019). Indonesia, a Southeast Asian country, has involved itself in BRI and encountered both positive and negative impacts. Indonesia has profited from the BRI, especially with foreign direct investment (FDI) (Kamburwela & Abeyrathne, 2022).

Furthermore, Anarfo et al. (2019) states that the initiatives contribute immensely towards helping deprived countries with economic issues by providing the necessary resources to build sustainable economic infrastructure in transport, energy, Information, Communication and Technology (ICT), and others. Thus, as BRI-SDG synthesis emphasizes, BRI has the potential to transform the lives and economies of the participating countries.

In this global context, as a South Asian country, Sri Lanka has received more attention than other countries due to its geographical location (Jayasinghe, 2019). This location is critical in the BRI project since it could be an economic hub that provides facilities for the easy transportation of Chinese exports and imports. The cumulative value of Chinese infrastructure investment in Sri Lanka between 2006 and 2019 was US\$ 12.1 Billion (Wignaraja et al (2020). Wijayasiri and Senaratne (2018) identified trade, investment, hard and soft infrastructure, the economic hub, development of the global value chain, growth in tourism, discovery, and utilization

of marine resources, technology, and knowledge transfer employment opportunities as essential assistance. Jayamaha (2017) has discovered regional connectivity via ports, airports, roads, and transmission towers, increased foreign investments into the country, easy access to new exports markets, exploration of marine resources and the exclusive economic zone, and participation in the digital revolution in the financial services as the positive outcomes of BRI in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has benefited from BRI in several aspects and experienced several difficulties in power rivalry, autonomy, and independence, growing debt burden, transparency, and corruption (Kamburuwela & Abeyrathne, 2022). Further to this, some blame the BRI as the cause of the near destruction of the Sri Lankan economy. The Hambantota Port Project is given as a prime example to justify this position (Smith, 2022). As Kamburuwela and Abeyrathne, (2022) point out, Sri Lanka would lose some autonomy in how it manages these assets because ownership of important state infrastructure is linked to such Chinese firms.

Thus, in this context, despite the beneficial investment and numerous projects under the BRI in Sri Lanka, a remaining research gap is to be addressed on the impact of BRI under the background of sustainability. For instance, on the one hand, in addition to the positive outcomes like regional connectivity, increased foreign investments, and access to new export markets, there is deficiency in research on the role of BRI towards SDGs. On the other hand, there seems to be a gap between the policies governing BRI projects and the practical outcomes observed in Sri Lanka. Issues including transparency, environmental sustainability, and affordability indicate that current policies may not effectively address these challenges.

2. Materials and Methods

This is qualitative research mainly consisting of primary and secondary data. Based on the

primary and empirical evidence, the hypothesis is that:

- I. BRI is a long-term development process.
- II. BRI contributes the social development in the country.
- III. BRI contributes the economic development in the country.
- IV. BRI contributes the ecological development in the country

2.1 Data Collection Method

This study is comprised of both primary and secondary data. Observations were used as the main primary data collecting method and case studies were taken as the main primary data collecting method in this qualitative research. Indeed, the combination of primary and secondary data supports a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Thus, observations were used as the primary source of this study while taking books, websites, research articles, online magazines, journal articles, E-papers and public speeches as the secondary data sources to collect relevant data for this study (Figure 2).

2.2 Data Analysis Method

As qualitative research, the study mainly focused on descriptive analytical methods for data analyse. Descriptive analysing methods combined diagrams, tables, and figures (Figure 3).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Key Concepts

Belt and Road Initiatives in Sri Lanka

The BRI program is split between two main initiatives – a revitalised land route between China and Europe via Russia or the ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ (the Belt), and the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ (the Road), which aims to connect a multitude of countries via new sea routes and infrastructure (Wijayasiri, 2018). As China desperately needed an alternative

maritime link to the Indian Ocean to avoid the congested Strait of Malacca (Smith,2022), the geopolitically strategic location of Sri Lanka in the middle of the Indian Ocean acts as a significant trade hub for marine transportation from China to Sri Lanka and other Southeast Asian economies and so on. Sri Lanka has been an important stop on the Maritime Silk Road since ancient times. It lies along one of the world’s busiest trade routes, connecting Asia with Europe, and plays a key part in China’s BRI (Senaratne, 2018). Similarly, the port of Hambantota is indispensable for China’s energy security because the country imports two-thirds of its oil through shipping lanes south of the port (Wijayasiri, 2018). Thus, BRI of China brought together two countries to renew the past relationship traced back to over 425 BC

based on Scio-Cultural and economic links. According to Yi Xianliang, the former Ambassador to Sri Lanka,

“Both countries can further encourage people-to-people exchanges and bonds by deepening practical cooperation on education, science, technology, sport, health, think-tank, and media. Based on that, China granted more than 1200 scholarships, trainingship and internship to Sri Lanka every year since 2015”.

BRI have five key objectives namely, policy coordination, connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds (Figure 4).

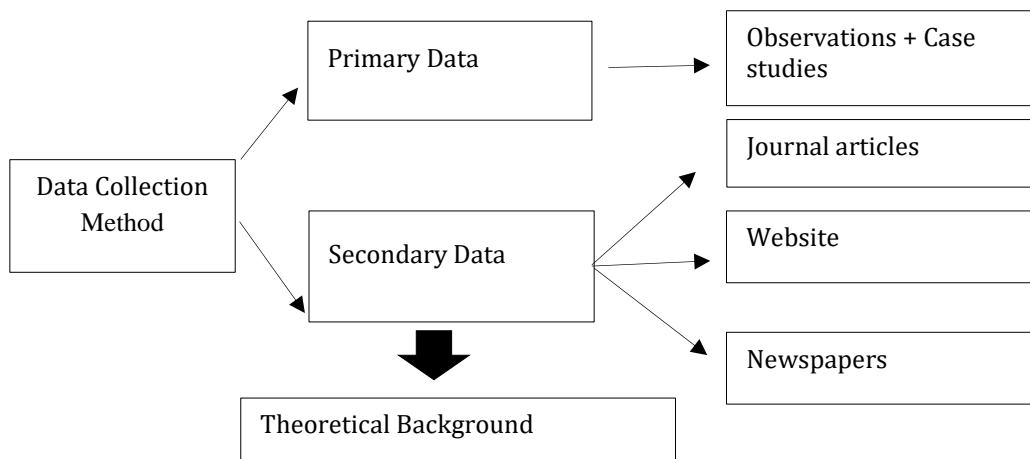


Figure 02. Data Collection Method

With the signing of the MOU on the establishment of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in October 2014, Sri Lanka has been aided from BRI for various infrastructure development projects, such as transport, water and sanitation, urban development, and information and communication. Hambantota Port, Norochcholai Power Station, Colombo Port City project, and the Mattala International Airport project have received remarkable

attention among the number of BRI projects in Sri Lanka. Similarly, Wijayasiri and Senaratne (2018) have noted that trade, investment, hard and soft infrastructure, the economic hub, development of the global value chain, growth in tourism, discovery, and utilization of marine resources, technology, and knowledge transfer employment opportunities as significant contribution of BRI. According to Jayamaha (2017), regional connectivity via ports,

airports, roads, and transmission towers; increased foreign investments into the country, easy access to new exports markets, exploration of marine resources and the

exclusive economic zone, and participation in the digital revolution in the financial services as the positive outcomes of BRI in Sri Lanka.

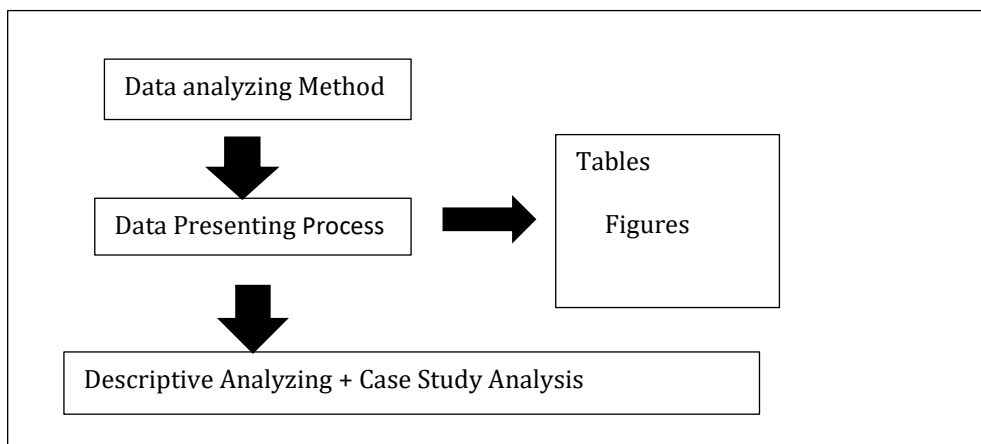


Figure 03. Data Analyzing Method

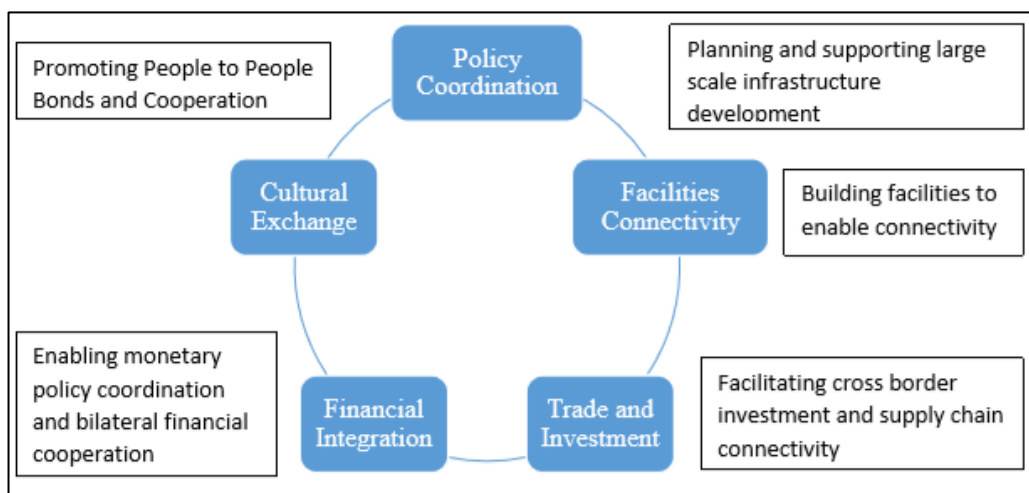


Figure 04. Five major Objectives of BRI; Policy objectives and opportunities in the five key areas (Voice of international affairs, 2025)

2.4 Sustainable Development Goals in Sri Lanka

On 1st January 2016, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development — adopted by world leaders in September 2015

at an historic UN Summit — officially came into force (United Nations, n.d). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the global movement to eradicate poverty, save the planet and uplift the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere. Thus, a set of 17 global aspirations which are calling for a

better world- we want -came to effect under the initiatives of social, ecological, and economic wellbeing. Moreover, those 17 SDGs can be reinterpreted using five main pillars such as people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership.

Over the period of 2018-2022, UN Sustainable Development Framework (UNSDF) provides the overarching framework for the work of the United Nations in Sri Lanka, in line with the national priorities, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. (United Nations, n.d). Most notably, those newly set global goals have been significantly inclusive more than ever with the involvement of government

actors, private sector, and the role of the civil society.

Accordingly, the above defined 17 SDGs which globally aim to contribute to economic growth, social inclusion and environmental sustainability can be indicated as follows (Figure 5).

In addition to above given, as the voluntary national review (2018) indicated, Sri Lanka's strategic development framework can be pointed out through three main plans namely long-term plan (Vision 2025: A country enriched), midterm plan (Public Investment Programme 2017-2020 and short-term plan (Blue Green Budget of 2018).



Figure 05. 17 Sustainable Developments Goals (United Nations, 2025)

Thus, most significantly, according to the BRI-SDGs synthesis report (2018-2021) which demonstrates the countries progress towards the individual goals associating 14 BRI participants, it indicates major challenges in 2nd, 5th, 6th, 9th, 10th and 16th SDGs in Sri Lanka while representing the goals; 3, 11, 14, 15, 17 as the sectors which have already encountered significant challenges. Nevertheless, according to the relevant data, Sri Lanka has

not been able to yet fully achieve the quality education which comes under the goals of 4th. Therefore, by referring to the above findings, it can be identified that there is a huge vacuum of the SDGs in Sri Lankan platform which can be fulfilled by the potential of BRI.

2.5 Sustainable development theory

In theoretical perspectives, the sustainable development theory was used to enrich the

theoretical framework of this study. This theory, which has originated in the concept of sustainability introduced by the Brundtland Report (1987), supports to balance the economic growth, social equity, and environmental sustainability. Most notably, the theory is significant in evaluating the various impacts of large-scale development projects such as BRI. Accordingly, the sustainable development theory mainly assumes that economic development, social inclusiveness and the environment sustainability are mutually interrelated. Similarly, it defines the development as a long-term process. In this regard, this theory evaluates the participation of numerous stakeholders for the phase of initial decision makings. Further to this, it highlights the necessity between the balance of global responsibility and the response of the locals.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Policy coordination

Policy coordination indicated in BRI, aims to facilitate mutual and friendly communications between countries to seek common ground on behalf of promoting disparities among nations. As a result, Sino-Lankan relations have seen frequent high-level visits. At the third Belt and Road International Forum in October 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe. Xi stated that China's willingness to import quality products from Sri Lanka and encouraged Chinese businesses to invest there, supporting Sri Lanka's economic transformation and sustainable development. He also welcomed Sri Lanka's emergence as a commercial center in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, China currently plays a remarkable role as one of the global partners in debt policy coordination in Sri Lanka. According to Spokesperson Wang Wenbin, China is ready to support Sri Lanka on the debt treatment. Added to that he invited other multilateral institutions and commercial creditors to take part in Sri

Lanka's debt restructuring based on fair burden-sharing. China provides assistance to Sri Lanka's economic, social development: FM spokesperson - BELT AND ROAD PORTAL (yidaiyilu.gov.cn). As well as, during the state councilor Shen Yiqin's visit on Nov. 20, 2023, she emphasized that China attaches great importance to its' relations with Sri Lanka and is willing to work with Sri Lanka to earnestly implement the consensus reached between leaders of the two countries. In addition, as of today under the strategic cooperative partnership of mutual assistance, more than ten cooperative agreements were signed pertaining to the areas of economy, trade, agriculture, and finance. Similarly, some other MOUs such as Comprehensive Implementation of Investment, Economic and Technological Cooperation, (2016), Promotion of Investment and Economic Cooperation" (2017), "The Outline of the Medium and Long-term Development Plan for Investment, Economic and Technological Cooperation" (2017) were signed between China and Sri Lanka which unfold so far, the potential of BRI associated with partnerships for goal. Thus, it is apparent that the aim of policy coordination and the 17th SDG (Partnership for the goals) goes parallel to each other.

3.2. Facility Connectivity

Connectivity of facilities is a key tool in facilitating economic development through Infrastructure projects of BRI. Accordingly, through BRI number of infrastructure projects have been launched in Sri Lanka (Figure 7).

The port of Hambantota is a strategically important inland harbour built in a natural harbour near the town of Hambantota, in the Southern Province, Sri Lanka. This is the second largest port after the Colombo Port and as a multipurpose port, which provides more services additionally to the port services such as maritime services, port related industrial zone, logistic and business

incubator while opening many job opportunities to the community. Thus, through this BRI, it promotes 2nd, 7th, and the 13th SDGs in Sri Lanka. This initiative aimed to build a secondary port at the coastal town of Hambantota, to alleviate capacity and crowding concerns with the primary port in Colombo. (Wijayasiri & Senaratne ,2018).

Nevertheless, in December 2016, an initial agreement between the two parties was signed, in which the Sri Lankan government was expected to sell an 80 percent stake in Hambantota Port for a 99-year lease worth \$ 1.12 billion (Patrick, National Maritime Foundation, 2017).

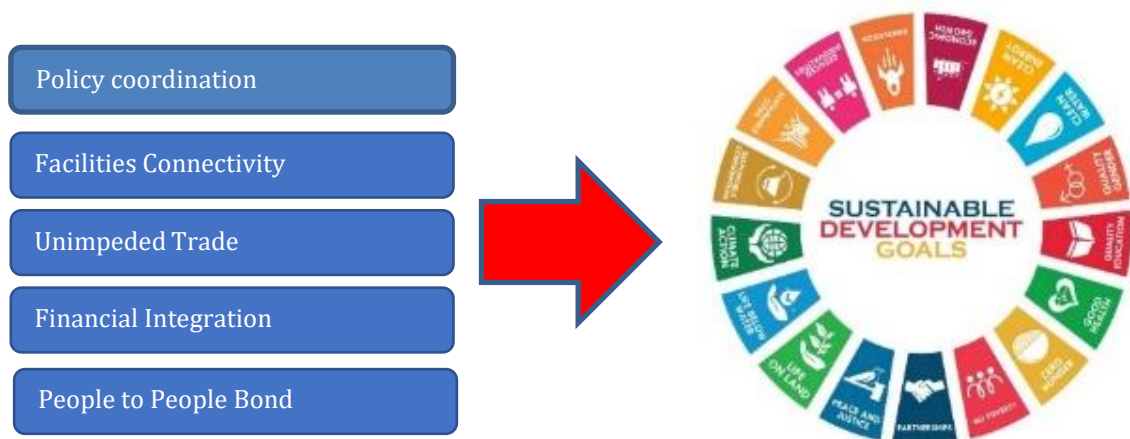


Figure 6. Demonstrating the relationship between BRI and SDGs

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The 96 km long, Southern Expressway project was commissioned in 2016 under China's EXIM Bank project loan. Through this project it aimed to improve the connectivity between Colombo and major economic centres while contributing to achieve 8th, 9th, and 17th SDGs in Sri Lanka.

Moragahakanda Irrigation development project was launched during the period of 2012-2017 with the aim of generating hydro power to the national grid and provide pure drinking water facilities to four Districts in Sri Lanka. This project would directly relate in Achieving 2nd, 7th, and 13th SDGs in Sri Lanka.

Colombo International Container Terminal is South Asia's first and only deep-water terminal. It can handle the largest vessels afloat. This project launched by BRI falls under the 11th SDG which promotes sustainable cities and communities. Around USD 500 million has been invested for this

project. This terminal has been awarded the best Container Terminal in Asia in the under 4 million TEUs category at the 2019 Asian Freight, Logistics and Supply Chain Awards (AFLAS) for the third time (Colombo International Container Terminals (LTD), 2019).

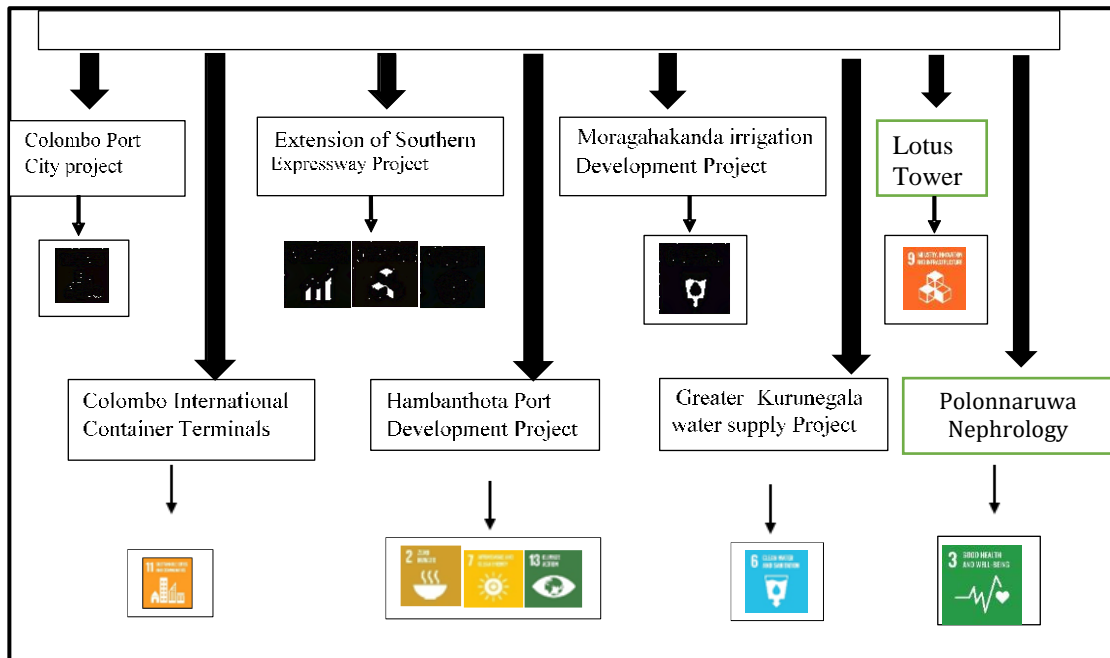


Figure 07. Demonstrating facility connectivity.

Table 01. Main Import Foreign Sources in Sri Lanka 2017-2021

Country	2017	2018	2020	2021	(%) Share	
					2017	2021
China	4191.22	4121.07	3576.96	4754.51	19.66	23.71
India	4495.99	4158.18	3002.09	4421.35	21.08	22.05
U.A.E.	1564.56	1705.35	887.8	1314.04	7.34	6.55
Malaysia	641.37	771.75	633.63	769.58	3.01	3.84
Singapore	1292.63	1344.47	616.45	723.61	6.06	3.61
Other countries	9137.99	9967.85	6869.2	8069.26	42.85	40.24
Total Impacts	21323.77	22068.67	15586.14	20052.37	100.00	100.00

(Department of Commerce, 2021)

Greater Kurunegala water supply also plays a vital role in BRI by contributing to achieve the 6th SDG while improving access to pure

drinking water and establishing a proper wastewater disposal system in Kurunegala.

As the website indicates, USD 77 Million has been invested in this project.

3.3 Unimpeded Trade

Under the Belt and Road Initiative, Sri Lanka and China signed the Lotus Tower agreement to build the highest TV tower in South Asia, with China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation (CEIEC) being the general contractor (Lotus Tower in Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2021).

Unimpeded Trade aims to encourage and uplift the global trade by facilitating the trade investment and establishing free trade zones. Through the BRI, it has contributed to achieve 8th, 9th and 17th SDGs in Sri Lanka. According to the International trade statistics report (2021), from 2017-2021 China acts as the largest import origin of Sri Lanka (Table 1).

Nevertheless, with regards to international Exports, as Sri Lanka export development board indicates, it is the 9th largest export destination for Sri Lanka. Thus, most significantly, as of today China has also emerged as the major development partner and the largest foreign investor for Sri Lanka, and China accounted for the highest amount of FDI in Sri Lanka. Similarly, there is a great potential for expanding trade relations, particularly based on the Free Trade Activities (FTA) between both the countries. Thus, Sri Lanka would have a comparative trade advantage for 566 products (at HS-6-digit level) through the agreement which is still under negotiation. According to the Institute of Policy Studies, Sri Lanka would uniquely benefit in exporting 24 products which are not imported by China from other countries, under this agreement. Accordingly, through unimpeded trade, it can be identified that BRI promotes to achieve 8th, 9th, and 17th SDGs in Sri Lanka.

3.4 People to people bond

The impact of people-to-people bond in Sri Lanka can be addressed through the sectors

of tourism, education, health and so on. Over a long time, tourism Industry plays a significant role as a main foreign exchange source in the Sri Lankan economy. According to the data of Sri Lanka Tourism Development authority (2017), currently, China remains as the second major source of tourists in Sri Lanka, accounting for 12.7% of total tourist arrivals.

As Senaratne (2018), noted, this growth in Chinese tourist arrivals to Sri Lanka has been facilitated by more air connectivity between Colombo and several destinations in China, operated by airlines of both countries. In turn, most significantly, it can be assumed that there is a high potential in uplifting the Sri Lankan Tourism industry with the development of Sri Lanka's infrastructure facilities through BRI. Under the BRI's focus on people-to-people contacts, China-Sri Lanka educational ties have grown. China has opened many educational platforms for Sri Lankan students, including scholarships, student exchanges, training, teaching, joint research and educational assistance programs.

Popular scholarships among Sri Lankans include Chinese Government Scholarships, Ambassador Scholarships, Confucius Scholarships and MOFCOM Scholarships. Additionally, the "Huawei Sky Seeds for the Future" is a newly introduced financial scholarship for Sri Lankan students. Based on academic performance, Sri Lankan students annually obtain 10-14 fully funded postgraduate Chinese scholarships and 10-20 undergraduate scholarships for numerous disciplines (Figure 8). In addition, notifying the primary goal of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as the ending poverty in the world, the Chinese Embassy has distributed 5,000 dry ration packs under the "Faxian Charity Project" in all five districts of Sri Lanka's Northern Province in the past few days. Chinese embassy distributes 5,000 dry ration packs in northern Sri Lanka - BELT AND ROAD PORTAL (yidaiyilu.gov.cn) accessed 09 February 2024. Further, under

China Foundation for Rural Development (CFRD)'s Smiling Children Food Package

Project, 10,000 Sri Lankan students will be benefited to realize sustainable development.

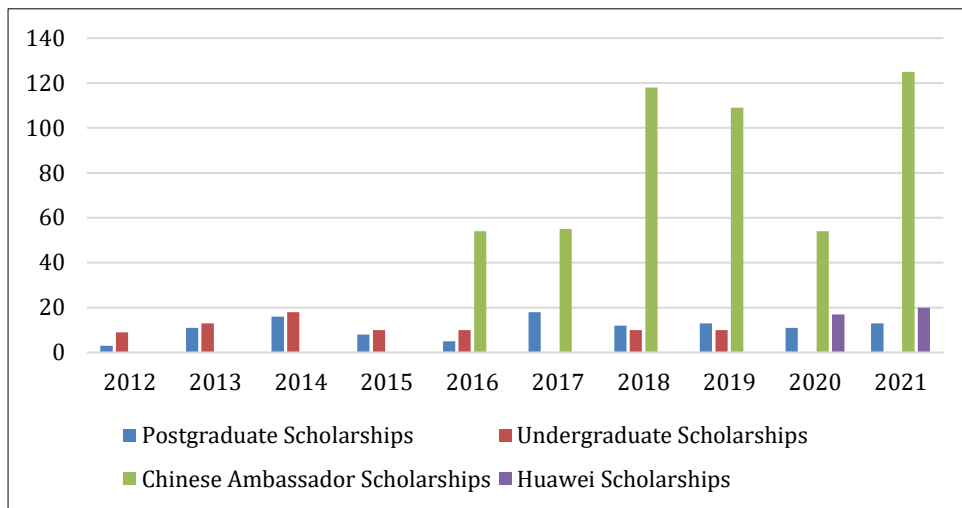


Figure 08. Representing the number of Chinese Scholarships during 2012-2021 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2021).

Thus, it is apparent that the BRI agricultural cooperation mechanism helped enable impoverished population in partner countries to access food and respond to food crises. Industrial investment and infrastructure projects under the BRI framework created a large number of job opportunities.

In this manner, through people-to-people connectivity under BRI, China has contributed to achieve sustainable development in the country by fulfilling 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 8th and 12th SDGs.

3.5 Financial Integration

Financial Integration which comes under BRI aims to facilitate capital for project development. Thus, it is very important to coordinate effectively between the capital and projects. In the Sri Lankan scenario, Sri Lanka is one of the 21 founding members that signed the MOU on the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in October 2014. Consequently, in 2019, AIIB approved a couple of development projects.

Thus, under the financial integration of BRI, Colombo Urban Regeneration Project (US\$ 200 million) was implemented by the UDA under the Ministry of Megapolis and Western Development with the aim of improving housing conditions of low-income communities. Similarly, with the intention of mitigating the risk and damage from landslides, “Reduction of Landslide Vulnerability by Mitigation Measures Project” was launched under the supervision of Ministry of Public Administration and Disaster Management. Accordingly, financial integration has been realized, promoting the 17th SDG under BRI.

According to the above key findings, the multifaceted impact of the BRI towards the SDGs can be identified under the social, economic and environmental dynamics in Sri Lanka. Thus, through an economic perspective, the infrastructure development, creation of numerous job opportunities, and advance consultation in debt restructuring process play a key role in achieving economic development in the country which significantly align with 8th (Industry,

Innovation, and Infrastructure), 9th (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and 17th (Partnerships for the Goals) SDGs. Further, BRI will facilitate Sri Lanka in upgrading its' maritime infrastructure which would lead to make ocean based natural resources more exploitable and marketable within the Sri Lankan Exclusive Economic Zone. Furthermore, given the concerns of digital silk route development, BRI would unveil numerous opportunities to cultivate the digital development in the country. On the other hand, through the deepening relations of BRI, the contribution made by AAIB can be identified as an alternative financial integration to the world bank and IMF. Thus, in the current context, the role of China as the main creditor in debt restructuring cannot be ignored in the profile of economic sustainability.

In the social context, quality education, good health care services, and the improvement of living standard can be identified as the main social dynamics of BRI towards the sustainable development in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the development of infrastructure allows access to the services and markets, upgrading the standard lifestyles for many Sri Lankans. Moreover, through the backdrop of people-to-people connections and developed transportation networks, BRI has a better access to promote education and healthcare services. Nevertheless, most notably, the outcomes of economic development have inversely affected the environment sustainability in Sri Lanka. The Norocholai power station, for instance, has been criticized for flouting domestic environmental norms; while other projects like the Hambantota port have met environmental challenges during the construction phase...Fine ash particles emitted from the Norocholai power station, which are linked to chronic illness in humans and animals, have been found in Colombo, 145 km away (Sunday Times). Thus, with regards to social and economic aspects in Sri Lanka, there is a mix impact on the SDGs since the role of BRI has most often been

discredited for the threats of debt trap, autonomy, corruption and illegal labour migration, sovereignty.

In this backdrop, Hambantota port case study can be taken to analyse BRI's impact towards SDGs under the economic, social and ecological dynamics in Sri Lanka.

Hambantota port project was initially started back in 2009. In 2010, the harbour was officially opened by the former president Mahinda Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka. Even though the Sri Lankan government's main objective was to gain more foreign earnings through the project more than never before, since this port was proven to be a white elephant, Sri Lankan government failed to repay the loans brought from China and consequently, upon the agreement signed by two parties, Hambantota port was handed over to China for 99 years in 2016. In addition to this investment, China was given control of 1500 areas of land adjacent to the port for the development of an industrial zone in Hambantota as cited by Jayasinghe (2019) in his abstract. Therefore, based on Hambantota port case study, it can be identified that although there are some significant economic and social opportunities centred on BRI strategy and SDGs in Sri Lanka, there is an uncertainty relevant to the failure of projects and the sovereignty of Sri Lanka. Most significantly, uncertainty of the infrastructure projects can be emphasized as the main threat pertaining to the BRI projects aiming to promote SDGs. Given the main facts of the sustainable development theory, it is a combination of economic, social and environmentally sustainable development. Similarly, key findings of the study exemplify the linkage between the BRI objectives and SDGs under the Sri Lankan context. Accordingly, a multifaceted impact of BRI towards the SDGs was identified under the economic, social and environmental dynamics in the country. Most notably, a significant impact on economic and social dynamics was explored. Nevertheless, in terms of the concerns of the environmental

sustainability, as there is significantly very little empirical evidence for them to be real, against this backdrop, this study finds lack of primary and secondary data to support the claim that BRI does not support to achieve the SDGs in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, based on the conclusions, this study reveals that there is a significant impact of the role of BRI on SDGs in Sri Lanka.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the key findings it can be identified that the Belt and Road Initiative provides a significant opportunity to a certain extent, which Sri Lanka can leverage to contribute towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals. Among the opportunities that Sri Lanka could gain so far through the BRI projects, mainly Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), infrastructure expansions, job creation, economic development, and knowledge transfer and technology play a major role in promoting SDGs in Sri Lanka. Those projects launched under the BRI strategy can be identified as the most value-added projects for the sustainable developments in Sri Lanka. Beyond the several challenges which have appeared with regards to the BRI, these findings imply that BRI has a significant potential in ensuring the SDGs in Sri Lanka. Further to this, as there are some challenges in BRI strategy mainly based on the uncertainty of the carried-out infrastructure projects, Sri Lankan policy makers should adhere to a smart policy to maximize the opportunities and minimize the threats while maintaining a win-win cooperative relationship with China.

5.1 Policy recommendation

Therefore, based on the above findings, following suggestions can be proposed to mitigate the negative impact of BRI over the achievement of SDGs in Sri Lanka.

Project governance which already existed in the country needs to be immediately amended and enhanced under a formal

transparent procedure. As it stands, there is no clear indication nor recommendations to estimate which projects are BRI projects or not and what China's lending policies are. Attached to this, knowledge management also plays an important role in the country where citizens can easily find the original records of BRI projects to analyse the current situation logically.

Secondly to get rid of the biodiversity risks created as a consequent of BRI projects, a formal way of checks and balances must be applied for the organizations of the project hosting country to adhere to the highest social and environmental protection standards.

Thirdly, policymakers should be trained to negotiate with smart bargaining decisions to create a win-win situation between two countries. It is essential to sharpen their capacity and soft skills to have a realistic understanding of and appropriate responses to the BRI and be able to evaluate, negotiate and regulate BRI projects. For an example, undertaking a risk analysis prior to any financial agreement would be beneficial for ensuring the SDGs in national level, as a developing country located at a strategically significant centre in the Indian Ocean.

Public awareness programs relevant to the significance of the BRI and SDGs should be promoted to eliminate the controversial ideologies which have appeared among certain communities.

5.2 Limitations

Lack of transparent records and the statistics on BRI projects indicate the limitations of this study.

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