



SRI LANKA

CHILDREN FIRST

**A Deep Dive into the
National Child
Protection Authority's
Role in Child Protection**

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FOREWORD

Child protection is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of a just and equitable society. At iProbono, we are deeply committed to the protection of children, as the most vulnerable members of society.

We have undertaken this assessment of the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) to shed light on its performance and identify areas for improvement. This report is a testament to our belief that a robust and effective child protection system is essential for a brighter future for Sri Lanka's children. By analysing the NCPA's work, we hope to contribute to a more comprehensive and child-centred approach to child protection.

We acknowledge the tireless efforts of the NCPA and its dedicated staff. However, we believe that there is significant room for improvement. By highlighting the challenges and opportunities, we aim to stimulate constructive dialogue and inspire action. We urge all stakeholders, including government officials, civil society organisations, and the public, to work together to strengthen child protection mechanisms and ensure that every child in Sri Lanka has the chance to thrive.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'A' followed by a horizontal line and a small flourish.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, "Children First: A Deep Dive into the National Child Protection Authority's (NCPA) Role in Child Protection," provides a comprehensive evaluation of the NCPA's performance from 2014 to 2022. The NCPA's mandate, outlined in Section 14 of the NCPA Act, encompasses a wide range of functions, including ensuring child protection, providing advisory services, formulating policies, coordinating and monitoring child protection efforts, investigating child abuse cases, and conducting public awareness campaigns.

The report critically assesses the NCPA's performance in each of these areas, drawing upon annual reports, statistical data, and insights from stakeholders. While the NCPA has made significant strides in child protection, several key challenges and areas for improvement have been identified.

One significant challenge is the slow implementation of the National Child Protection Policy, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis. Expediting the implementation of the five-year Action Plan for the policy roll out and establishing robust monitoring frameworks, coupled with clear accountability measures are crucial to ensure the effectiveness of child protection initiatives. This would involve setting clear timelines, allocating adequate resources, and regularly tracking progress against established benchmarks.

Another area of concern is the limited impact of public awareness programmes and the lack of comprehensive data on programme outcomes. While the NCPA has conducted various awareness campaigns and training programmes, a more in-depth analysis of their long-term impact is necessary. This could be achieved through rigorous evaluations, including surveys, focus groups, and

impact assessments. Additionally, the NCPA's statistical reports exhibit inconsistencies and lack vital criteria, hindering a comprehensive assessment of its performance. To address this, the NCPA should standardise data collection and analysis methods, ensuring consistency and accuracy across different reporting periods.

We observed the need for the NCPA to strengthen data management processes. While the installation of a data-sharing system is a positive step, its complex nature and lack of coordination have hindered its full utilisation. The absence of a formal inter-agency committee and standardised data-sharing protocols further exacerbates the issue, leading to inconsistent strategies and ineffective information sharing. To address these challenges, the NCPA must prioritise data management and analysis, leveraging technology to streamline processes and enhance collaboration with relevant agencies.

The NCPA's establishment of video evidence units is commendable. However, the limited availability of these units, primarily confined to the Western Province, significantly restricts their accessibility to children from other regions. Consequently, only 1.4% of cases in 2015 and 0.6% in 2021 child abuse cases were able to utilise this crucial tool for justice. To address this issue, it is imperative to allocate sufficient resources to establish video evidence units in key locations across the country. This expansion will ensure that children from all provinces have equal access to this vital service, empowering them to provide evidence without the trauma of repeated court appearances.

We also observed that the establishment of the "1929" ChildLine hotline has facilitated increased reporting of child abuse cases, the persistent delay in delivering justice remains a significant challenge. This delay can have a detrimental impact on child victims and their families. To expedite the justice process, the NCPA should collaborate with the judiciary to streamline

procedures, allocate adequate resources to the legal system, and advocate for reforms that prioritise child abuse cases.

Furthermore, there is a need for the NCPA to establish a centralised database to track cases, analyse trends, and inform evidence-based decision-making. This would enable it to identify gaps in service delivery, allocate resources effectively, and develop targeted interventions. While the NCPA has made significant strides in child protection, this report highlights

areas where further improvements are necessary. To optimise its impact, the NCPA should prioritise resource allocation, interagency collaboration, and community engagement. By strengthening monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, raising public awareness, and fostering partnerships with both government and non-governmental organisations, the NCPA can effectively address emerging challenges and enhance its ability to safeguard children's rights.



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. PURPOSE

The NCPA is the central authority responsible for child protection in Sri Lanka, and plays a pivotal role in safeguarding the well-being of approximately 7 million children. This report analyses the NCPA's performance by reviewing its publicly available annual reports from 2014-2022 [1] and statistical data on child abuse complaints from 2012 [2], as well as the reports of the Auditor General. Given the critical role of the NCPA in safeguarding children, a thorough assessment of its performance is essential. This report fills a significant gap in the existing literature. It follows recent Right to Information (RTI) action initiated by the Chairperson of the Stop Child Cruelty Trust, Dr. Tushara Wickramanayaka with legal support from iProbono [3], to access critical data related to child abuse convictions from 2010 - 2021 and annual reports over the period of 2020 - 2022.

We analyse the NCPA's compliance with the National Child Protection Authority Act No. 50 of 1998 (hereinafter referred to as 'NCPA Act'), by focusing on:

- » Its operational efficiency in investigating, prosecuting, and preventing child abuse cases,
- » The quality and accessibility of data pertaining to child abuse and NCPA activities,
- » Potential areas for improvement to enhance the NCPA's effectiveness in safeguarding children.

The report offers strategic recommendations to significantly enhance the NCPA's operational efficiency and impact. By optimising data reporting, streamlining procedures, and fostering stronger partnerships, the NCPA can be positioned as a leading force in child protection. We urge the NCPA to prioritise these recommendations and take swift action to implement the proposed changes.

1.2. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE NCPA AND ITS MANDATE

The National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) of Sri Lanka is a statutory body established in accordance with the NCPA Act, which provides the legal framework for the NCPA's establishment, functions, and powers.

The NCPA's primary function is to protect the rights of children and prevent child abuse. It is tasked with developing and implementing laws related to the prevention, protection, and treatment of child victims of abuse. It also serves as the principal advisor to the government on matters pertaining to child protection.

According to Section 39 of the NCPA Act, child abuse [4] refers to *any act or omission concerning a child that violates relevant sections of the Penal Code [5], the Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children Act [6], the Children and Young Persons Ordinance [7], or compulsory education regulations [8]*.

The Act also applies to children in armed conflict at risk of physical or emotional harm [9].

[1] "Annual Reports". *National Child Protection Authority*, 2024

[2] The "1929" complaints statistics can be found on the National Child Protection Authority website. The statistics are disaggregated to No. of complaints per district and types of abuse. Statistical data is available from 2010 to 31.06.2024

[3] Right to Information Win for Child Protection in Sri Lanka - iProbono.

[4] *National Child Protection Authority Act, No. 50 of 1998*.

[5] *Penal Code of Sri Lanka*

[6] *The Employment, Young Persons and Children Act No. 47 of 1956*.

[7] *Children and Young Persons Ordinance No. 48 of 1939*.

[8] Ministry of Labour, Trade Union Relations and Sabaragamuwa Development. "The National Policy on Elimination of Child Labour in Sri Lanka." Ministry of Labour, Trade Union Relations and Sabaragamuwa Development. Date Accessed: 09.10.2024

[9] see footnote [4]

Section 14 of the NCPA Act outlines a comprehensive list of functions mandated to the NCPA. These functions include ensuring the safety and protection of children involved in criminal investigations and proceedings, providing advisory services to the government on child protection matters, and formulating and implementing child protection policies. Additionally, the NCPA is responsible for coordinating and monitoring actions to combat child abuse, reporting and investigating cases of child abuse, and intervening to protect children at risk.

The authority also conducts public awareness campaigns and works on building capacity within the child protection sector. Key findings from the NCPA statistical reports from 2012 - 2022 reveal a consistent pattern of cruelty to children [10] as the most frequently reported type of abuse, with a total of 23,884 complaints, averaging 1,990 complaints per year. This figure is followed by lack of compulsory education, neglect, and sexual harassment [11]. These alarming figures underscore the urgent need for effective child protection mechanisms, highlighting the critical role of the NCPA in safeguarding Sri Lanka's children.



[10] Section 308A of the Penal Code defines child cruelty as follows: "Whoever, having the custody, charge or care of any person under eighteen years of age, wilfully assaults, ill-treats, neglects, or abandons such person or causes or procures such person to be assaulted, ill-treated, neglected, or abandoned in a manner likely to cause him suffering or injury to health (including injury to, or loss of sight of hearing, or limb or organ of the body or any mental derangement), commits the offence of cruelty to children.

[11] Section 345 of the Penal Code defines sexual harassment as follows: "Whoever, by assault or use of criminal force, sexually harasses another person, or by the use of words or actions, causes sexual annoyance or harassment.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study involved a comprehensive review of the available NCPA's annual reports, statistical records, and the Auditor General's Reports from 2012 - 2022 (wherever available). These documents were analysed using a qualitative approach to identify key themes, patterns, and trends related to the NCPA's functioning, governance, financial performance, and accountability.

A key component of the methodology was meeting with the Chairperson and other officers of the NCPA to clarify gaps in information and gain further insights into the organisation's operations and challenges. This consultation, held on 30.10.2024, allowed for in-depth analysis of the intricacies of programme execution, data collection processes, and reporting mechanisms [12]. By engaging directly with key stakeholders, we aimed to gain insights and contextual knowledge that informed our analysis and recommendations.

We conducted a comparative analysis to assess changes in the NCPA's overall performance over time. This evaluation assessed progress against the following criteria over the period between 2012 - 2022

- Performance and efficiency in carrying out its mandated functions
- Resource allocation and utilisation
- Coordination with local and international stakeholders
- Policy influence
- Challenges and constraints

To enhance the validity and reliability of the analysis, data triangulation was employed. This involved a comparison of findings from various sources to identify consistent patterns and discrepancies. By synthesising data from annual reports, statistical records, Auditor General's reports, and insights from the Chairperson of the NCPA and other stakeholders, the analysis aimed to present a well-rounded assessment of the NCPA's effectiveness in fulfilling its mandated functions.



[12] Stakeholder Consultation with Officials of the National Child Protection Authority on 30.10.2024

3. FINDINGS

3.1. PERFORMANCE OF MANDATED FUNCTIONS

3.1.1. Advisory Functions

The NCPA of Sri Lanka plays a crucial role in advising the government on matters related to child protection and the prevention of abuse. Established under the NCPA Act, the authority is entrusted with providing strategic guidance and policy formulation, which are essential for creating a comprehensive framework to safeguard children.

Over the past decade, Sri Lanka has faced severe challenges in ensuring child safety, with increasing reports of child abuse in various settings. The NCPA's strategic advisory role has been vital in navigating these issues, providing the government with the necessary guidance to develop robust policies aimed at protecting the most vulnerable members of society. The effectiveness of the NCPA's advisory functions significantly influences the country's ability to develop policies that are both preventative and protective, ensuring a holistic approach to child welfare.

Given the breadth of its mandate, the NCPA's advisory role is instrumental in shaping national policies that address the complex landscape of child protection. It not only guides the government in policy development but also plays a pivotal part in coordinating efforts across various sectors.

This section assesses the NCPA's performance in fulfilling its advisory responsibilities, against its stated mandate, over the past decade, **focusing on its involvement in policymaking,**

the implementation of its recommendations, and initiatives spearheaded to foster collaboration among stakeholders.

The NCPA's advisory functions include:

Section 14 (a)

To advise the Government in the formulation of a national policy on the prevention of child abuse and the protection and treatment of children who are victims of abuse

Section 14 (b)

To advise the Government on measures for the prevention of child abuse

Section 14 (c)

To advise the Government on measures for the protection of the victims of child abuse

Section 14 (f)

To recommend legal, administrative or other reforms required for the effective implementation of the national policy for the prevention of child abuse

Involvement in Policy-Making

A key instrument in the endeavour the NCPA's role in safeguarding children's rights in Sri Lanka is the five-year Action Plan (2020-2025) [13], designed to operationalise the National Policy on Child Protection [14]. In 2022, the development of the five-year Action Plan was concluded [15]. The NCPA has actively engaged in stakeholder consultations with various ministries, including the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Mass Media, to facilitate the plan's implementation. However, NCPA officers, during the consultation, expressed concerns regarding implementation delays, citing COVID-19 as

[13] News - COPE Committee Recommends for an Expedious Implementation of the National Policy on Child Protection." *Parliament.lk*, 2021, parliament.lk/en/news-en/view/2057?category=33&tmpl=component&print=1. Accessed 09.10.2024.

[14] *National Policy on Child Protection 2020*

[15] *Annual Report of the National Child Protection Authority, 2022*.

a significant contributing factor [16]. Moreover, the Chairman of the Committee on Public Enterprises (COPE), Prof. Charitha Herath, has publicly expressed his disappointment, urging the NCPA to expedite the process [17]. These **delays** could have serious consequences for children's safety and well-being. Slow progress risks undermining the policy's potential benefits and hampers the NCPA's ability to address pressing child protection issues effectively.

Despite significant delays, the NCPA officers have reported ongoing efforts to disseminate awareness about the National Child Protection Policy. The Policy Resource Pool has been actively conducting field visits and organising awareness programmes targeted at government sector personnel, including police officers, NCPA field workers, Ministry Officials, and Probation Officers [18]. In light of the economic challenges faced in 2022, following the COVID-19 pandemic and political unrest, the implementation of awareness programmes was reported in 2022. Notably, 19 officers of the District Secretariat and Provincial Councils have been trained as resource persons to disseminate information on the National Child Protection Policy [19].

Moving forward, it is essential for the NCPA to not only expedite the implementation of its five-year Action Plan but also to **establish regular monitoring frameworks**. Such mechanisms would ensure that initiatives like the Child Protection Committees remain active, and that policy recommendations lead to tangible improvements on the ground. Addressing these gaps will be key to strengthening child protection mechanisms in Sri Lanka.

Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

The decline in operational School Child Protection Committees (CPCs) poses a significant threat to child safety in schools. While the "*Surekum Pauwa*" programme establishing CPCs initiated by the Ministry of Education [20] aims to foster a safer school environment, the decreasing number of active CPCs undermines this goal. By engaging school communities, this initiative creates a proactive and supportive setting that helps prevent abuse [21]. The number of **CPC's in operation in schools saw a decline from 3,165 in 2018 to 2,392 in 2021**. This reduction in coverage from **35% to 23%** of all schools across the island, potentially compromises the safety and well-being of children [22]. This decline may be attributed to factors such as resource constraints, lack of awareness, or waning community engagement. It is imperative to revitalise and strengthen CPCs to ensure the safety and well-being of children.

By providing adequate training, resources, and ongoing support, the NCPA can empower committees to effectively address child protection concerns. Additionally, raising awareness about the importance of CPCs and their role in safeguarding children is essential to encourage community participation. Failing to address this issue could have severe consequences, including increased vulnerability of children to abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

Additionally, over the past decade, the NCPA has undertaken several key initiatives in collaboration with government bodies, related ministries, and other stakeholders to promote child protection. Among these efforts are directives and guidelines aimed at addressing child safety in specific environments.

[16] See Footnote 12

[17] See Footnote 13

[18] See Footnote 12

[19] See Footnote 15

[20] Ministry of Education Circular No. 17/11

[21] Annual Report of the National Child Protection Authority, 2019

[22] "Child Sexual Abuse in Sri Lanka." *Stopchildcruelty.com* 2020

Notably, the NCPA and the Ministry of Labour Relations and Productivity Improvement collaborated to **develop the Hazardous Occupations Regulations** [23], designed to protect children from being employed in dangerous work settings. These regulations aim to mitigate harm and exploitation, ensuring that children are safeguarded against hazardous labour practices. Additionally, the directive to ensure compulsory education reinforces the right to education by mandating school attendance, thus reducing the risk of children being exploited or forced into labour. However, the annual reports fail to encapsulate the implementation of these regulations or their overall success. This lack of comprehensive data and analysis makes it difficult to assess the positive impact of these measures on child protection [24].

The NCPA's guidelines also extend to childcare facilities, promoting consistency and high standards across the country. Key documents, such as the **Daycare Guideline 2019** [25], the **General Child Care Curriculum** [26], and the **National Guidelines & Minimum Standards for Child Development Centers in Sri Lanka** [27], provide frameworks that help ensure safe and nurturing environments for children. These guidelines, along with a draft National Policy on Day Care Center Facilities, emphasise the authority's commitment to enhancing the quality of child care services across the nation.

However, the lack of comprehensive data and analysis on the implementation and impact of the above measures hinders a comprehensive assessment of their effectiveness. By evaluating the outcomes

of these initiatives, the NCPA can identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. This evidence-based approach will enable the NCPA to refine its strategies, allocate resources effectively, and ultimately enhance its impact on child protection in Sri Lanka.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Accelerate Policy Rollout

Set specific, time-bound milestones for each phase of the five-year Action Plan to streamline and expedite the implementation process.

2

Enhance Monitoring Frameworks

Establish regular monitoring protocols and reporting mechanisms to evaluate the five-year Action Plan's progress. Ensure quarterly evaluations with transparent reporting to both government and public stakeholders.

3

Increase Resource Allocation

Secure adequate resources, including funding and staffing, to support implementation. Prioritise resource mobilisation for high-impact areas identified within the five-year Action Plan to sustain child protection initiatives.

4

Revitalise CPCs with Targeted Support

Provide consistent financial and logistical support to ensure that CPCs remain operational. Regular training and resource provision for committee members can strengthen their effectiveness.

5

Strengthen Engagement with Local Communities

Implement community outreach initiatives to encourage participation and maintain awareness. Involve local leaders and stakeholders to enhance community ownership and accountability.

[23] The Gazette Extraordinary of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka No. 1667/41 published on 20.08.2010

[24] New Education Act for General Education in Sri Lanka: Final Report

[25] National Guidelines for Child Day Care Centres in Sri Lanka 2019

[26] Trainers Guide: General Child Care Course for Careers in Child Caregiving, 2019

[27] National Guidelines for Minimum Standards at Child Development Centres in Sri Lanka 2019

3.1.2. Awareness and Education

In a country where child protection faces numerous challenges, including underreporting of abuse and cultural barriers, raising awareness and educating the public are fundamental strategies for change. By fostering greater understanding of children's rights and promoting proactive prevention, the NCPA seeks to empower communities, families, and children to effectively address and prevent instances of child abuse. Its mandate encompasses a broader spectrum of activities aimed at safeguarding children's rights and promoting their well-being. In this section, the effectiveness of the NCPA's awareness and educational activities will be examined, focusing on the reach, consistency, and impact of its programmes in enhancing child safety across Sri Lanka.

The NCPA's awareness and education functions include:

Section 14 (d)

To create an awareness of the right of a child to be protected from abuse and the methods of preventing child abuse

Section 14 (p)

To provide information and education to the public regarding the safety of children and the protection of the interests of children

Section 14 (r)

To organise and facilitate, workshops, seminars and discussions, relating to child abuse

These legal provisions form the basis of the NCPA's strategic efforts to engage with communities across the country, emphasising that protection begins with awareness.

The NCPA's commitment to these goals is evident through various initiatives, each aimed at building a culture of vigilance and proactive prevention.

Encouraging broader societal involvement, the NCPA promotes a holistic approach that integrates awareness, education, and collaboration underpins its approach to child protection, fostering a knowledge-based framework that guides its strategies. Collaboration with stakeholders enables the NCPA to develop evidence-based solutions, which are critical for addressing the root causes of abuse. By providing resources through its website, publications [28], and other platforms, the NCPA aims to equip the public and various stakeholders with practical knowledge and tools to protect children. This includes accessible guidelines for identifying and responding to abuse, ensuring that essential information is readily available. Recognising the importance of cross-sector collaboration, the NCPA works closely with industries like tourism to minimise the risk of child exploitation. By engaging stakeholders and sharing best practices, the NCPA aims to create safer environments for children in diverse settings, reflecting its comprehensive approach to child protection.

Public Awareness Programmes

The NCPA's implementation of the *Jana Pawura* programme and its public education campaigns represent significant strides towards strengthening child protection in Sri Lanka. By fostering community engagement and awareness, these initiatives aim to create a protective environment for children. The programme's emphasis on data collection, village-level mechanisms, and targeted interventions for vulnerable groups, such as children from migrant worker families, demonstrates a comprehensive approach to addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by children. However, the long-term impact of these initiatives and their effectiveness in preventing child abuse will depend on sustained efforts, adequate resource allocation, and strong coordination between the NCPA and other relevant stakeholders [29].

[28] Progress and Performance Report 2021 (page 79)

[29] See Footnote 21

Stakeholder Awareness Programmes

The NCPA is actively engaged in conducting awareness programmes for government officers on national guidelines for child day care centres, positive discipline for primary school teachers, and psychosocial management for employees, implementing the "*Diriya*" programme to provide mental health and psychosocial assistance to abused, at-risk, and extremely vulnerable children, conducting awareness programmes in schools and coastal areas through the "*Siyapath Surakum*" [30] project, providing psychosocial management services and training programmes for staff and children in detention homes, certified schools, and child development centres and offering psychosocial training programmes for school counsellors to enhance their ability to support students' mental health [31]. The NCPA, in collaboration with the Ministry of Transport and Highways, expanded its outreach to include school van drivers [32].

NCPA efforts further include capacity building programmes to empower stakeholders like medical professionals [33], teachers [34], and law enforcement personnel [35], conducting targeted awareness campaigns for both stakeholders and children to promote child protection [36], advocating for laws and policies that strengthen child protection measures, and establishing

essential mechanisms such as hotlines, special task forces, and school protection committees [37].

One key observation regarding awareness programmes conducted for health professionals, from 2015 [38] to 2018 [39], there was a notable increase in the number of beneficiaries, suggesting a growing emphasis on training health professionals in child protection. The years 2019 [40], 2020 [41] and 2021 [42] saw a sharp decline in training activities. This can be attributed to the Easter Sunday Terror attack in 2019 and COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 which likely disrupted the NCPA's operations and diverted resources to address immediate crisis response.

The substantial drop in 2021 may indicate ongoing challenges in recovering from the disruptions caused by the pandemic and the bombings. Additionally, the 2022 reports lack any data on awareness programmes conducted for health professionals.

Programme Evaluation

While the NCPA has implemented a wide range of programmes, a comprehensive analysis of their long-term impact is challenging due to several factors. The annual reports significantly lack detailed data on the outcomes and impact of specific programmes making it difficult to measure the long-term effects of these initiatives. The NCPA faces limitations in terms of human and financial resources, which can hinder its ability to conduct

[30] See Footnote 21

[31] The NCPA offers various psychosocial services such as counselling, awareness programmes to children, parents along with trainings to schoolteachers, NCPA officials on providing said psychosocial services. Psychosocial services are also offered via the "1929" Child Helpline. The NCPA also prepares guidelines, curriculums on psychosocial services for the prevention of child abuse.

[32] See Footnote 12

[33] Trainings are conducted for nursing officers, doctors engaged in postgraduate medical degrees, family health services officers, public health inspectors, trainee dental officers.

[34] Trainings are conducted for teacher trainees of the National College of Education.

[35] Trainings are conducted for police officers and officers at the Police Training Academy.

[36] Programmes include awareness workshops to children and families at village level, tea estate communities, coastal communities and fishing communities

[37] See Footnote 12

[38] No. of health professionals who received trainings in 2015 is 620

[39] No. of health professionals who received trainings in 2018 is 2118

[40] No. of health professionals who received trainings in 2019 is 1770

[41] No. of health professionals who received trainings in 2020 is 117

[42] No. of health professionals who received trainings in 2021 is 48

thorough follow-up assessments and evaluations of the said programmes [43]. The officers of the NCPA highlighted a significant disparity between the scope of the NCPA's efforts and the extent of their reported activities. While the NCPA is actively engaged in various initiatives, including community-based skills training to enhance child protection knowledge and the identification of child abuse, the current reporting mechanisms fail to adequately capture the full impact of these efforts.

While the reports often outline the activities carried out, they rarely provide specific metrics, benchmarks, or targets against which the success of these initiatives can be measured. Without clearly defined goals or criteria for success, it becomes difficult to assess whether the programmes are effectively addressing the issues they aim to resolve. Furthermore, this lack of information on the direct outcomes and impacts of the programmes makes it challenging to determine whether resources are being used efficiently or if adjustments need to be made to improve the effectiveness of the NCPA's strategies. Without more transparent and comprehensive reporting, it is difficult for external stakeholders, including policymakers, donors, and the general public, to gauge the true extent of the NCPA's impact and hold the organisation accountable for its performance.

Programme Delivery

The Auditor General's Annual Reports have raised serious concerns regarding the management and implementation of numerous projects [44]. Delays in meeting project milestones and failures to achieve stated objectives suggest ineffective project management practices. Contributing factors to these issues include a lack of adequate human resources, equipment, and infrastructure [45]. These setbacks may stem from a lack of adequate resources and infrastructure,

and they risk undermining the NCPA's efforts to address critical child protection issues in a timely manner. Furthermore, misaligned project priorities can lead to missed opportunities, diverting attention from urgent needs and diminishing the organisation's overall impact. Addressing these issues will be crucial for the NCPA to fulfil its mandate more effectively.

Strengthening project management practices, ensuring adequate resources, better monitoring and evaluation of programmes and prioritising critical initiatives will be essential for enhancing the impact of the NCPA's programs.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Introduce Outcome-based Reporting

Shift annual report structures to include outcome metrics alongside activity data. Establish success criteria such as the percentage increase in child abuse reporting or reductions in abuse incidence within targeted areas.

2

Development of Flexible and Adaptable Training Programmes

Allowing for delivery in various formats (e.g., online, hybrid, in-person) to mitigate the impact of future crises.

3

Conduct Impact Assessments

Implement regular impact evaluations to measure the long-term effectiveness of campaigns and programmes. These assessments should analyse behavioural changes and identify areas needing improvement.

4

Implementing a comprehensive evaluation framework

Using surveys, focus groups, and impact assessments, the NCPA can assess the effectiveness of its programmes in changing attitudes, behaviours, and knowledge levels. This data-driven approach will enable the NCPA to identify areas for improvement, optimise resource allocation, and demonstrate the value of its interventions to policymakers and stakeholders.

[43] See Footnote 12

[44] Annual Reports of the Auditor General 2020, 2021, 2022

[45] Annual Report of the Auditor General 2021

5

Strengthen Project Management Practices

Adopt robust project management protocols, including clear timelines, assigned accountability, and interim project reviews. The NCPA should adopt project management tools and methodologies that streamline planning and execution.

6

Address Resource Gaps

Increase human resources and infrastructure capacity by requesting government support or exploring partnerships with CSOs and international organisations. Focus on improving infrastructure in rural areas where child protection challenges are often most severe.

7

Expand Campaign Scope with Targeted Outreach

Develop campaigns that address the unique challenges faced by specific communities, including rural and underserved areas. Utilise local languages, culturally relevant messaging, and trusted local figures to enhance engagement.

8

Collaborate with Multi-sectoral Partners

Engage with sectors such as education, health, and social services to ensure a wider reach of child protection education. Partnering with local community organisations can improve the dissemination of knowledge and sustain campaign effectiveness.

preventive measures are not only developed but also consistently implemented and maintained across different levels of society.

Proactive engagement would reflect the NCPA's commitment to addressing the multifaceted nature of child abuse, which often requires cross-sector cooperation. In this section, the NCPA's performance in building and sustaining collaborative networks, as well as its success in consulting with relevant parties to develop and implement child protection strategies, are evaluated.

The NCPA's coordination and consultation functions include:

Section 14 (e)

To consult the relevant ministries, Provincial Councils, local authorities, District and Divisional Secretaries, public and private sector organisations and recommend all such measures are necessary, for the purpose of preventing child abuse and for protecting and safeguarding the interest of such abuse.

Section 14 (l)

To advise and assist Provincial Council and local authorities, and non-governmental organisations to co-ordinate campaigns against child abuse.

Section 14 (q)

To engage in dialogue with all sections connected with tourism with a view to minimising the opportunities for child abuse.

3.1.3. Coordination and Consultation

Effective coordination and consultation are critical to the NCPA's mission of preventing child abuse and safeguarding children. As the lead body responsible for child protection, the NCPA is tasked with bringing together a wide range of stakeholders—government ministries, Provincial Councils, local authorities, and both public and private organisations—to create a unified, multi-sectoral approach to child protection. By engaging these entities, the NCPA aims to ensure that

Coordination Efforts

The NCPA actively fosters collaboration with various stakeholders through multiple channels. Notably the consultation revealed that the NCPA organises quarterly CSO Forums to engage with civil society organisations [46] but reporting suggests a failure to include local CSOs working in child protection. Additionally, monthly board meetings are held, inclusive of representatives from various ministries including the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Health, Ministry of

[46] See Footnote 12

Education ensuring a multi-sectoral approach to child protection. Furthermore, the NCPA actively participates in sectoral parliamentary meetings, contributing to policy discussions and legislative processes related to child protection.

The NCPA has established a pioneering forum, bringing together key stakeholders including the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, to address critical child protection issues within the tourism sector. Collaborative efforts with government bodies between NCPA and Department of Probation and Child Care Services are essential for robust oversight and enforcement of regulations safeguarding vulnerable populations [47]. The NCPA has organised awareness programmes in the coastal districts targeting hotel owners, community members, and lodge owners [48] to combat child trafficking [49]. Save the Children has played a pivotal role in establishing the multi-stakeholder coordination mechanism that unites key government and tourism sector stakeholders to prevent and address child trafficking [50]. This collaborative approach aims to enhance the identification, protection, and referral of child victims.

The stakeholder consultation also highlighted the role of the "1929" ChildLine hotline as a cross-sectoral complaint mechanism. Hotline workers can effectively redirect complaints to the appropriate authorities for further investigation. Furthermore, the NCPA, in collaboration with Sri Lanka Telecom, is currently developing an institutional

database to streamline data management and analysis [51].

Data Sharing

As stated above, the NCPA's mandate includes coordinating data related to child abuse, however, a more comprehensive and collaborative approach to child protection is increasingly recognised as necessary [52]. Despite the installation of a data-sharing system, its complexity has hindered its usage, as highlighted by the Auditor General's report [53]. This lack of coordination and data sharing has far-reaching implications. For instance, inconsistent strategies implemented by local authorities can lead to uneven protection for children across different regions. The absence of a formal inter-agency committee and standardised data-sharing protocols further exacerbates the issue, hindering effective information sharing and response to child protection concerns. Additionally, the lack of an integrated data sharing system for relevant agencies hampers timely and efficient information exchange, making it difficult to track cases and identify trends in child protection [54]. To address these challenges, a more comprehensive approach is required, involving greater collaboration between agencies, the development of standardised protocols, and the implementation of an integrated data sharing system to facilitate effective data sharing and coordination. These steps are essential for ensuring that child protection measures are not only comprehensive but also responsive to the evolving needs and challenges in safeguarding children across Sri Lanka.

[47] An Assessment of Child Rights Risks in Sri Lanka's Accommodation and Tourism Sector – Save the Children (page 38)

[48] See Footnote 12

[49] Annual report of the National Child Protection Authority, 2020

[50] Enhancing collaboration among law enforcement, juvenile justice, child protection services, care institutions, and civil society organisations is vital to combat child trafficking.

[51] See Footnote 15

[52] The UNICEF report found that there is little to no data sharing on the following indicators children in conflict with the law, diversion and sentencing measures; and found that there is a lack of routine monitoring of children in detention centres, crimes against children, children in administrative detention and child protection.

[53] 2020

[54] Hamilton, Prof. Dame Carolyn, and Dr. Amelia Smith. An Assessment of Routine Data Collection Gaps in the Justice for Children Sector in Sri Lanka and Recommendations on Improving Systems and Addressing Data Gaps. UNICEF Sri Lanka, Oct. 2023.

As UNICEF [55] rightly pointed out, there is a dire need to address these coordination shortfalls which in turn can significantly enhance the NCPA's role in protecting children. Establishing formal inter-agency committees, implementing standardised data-sharing protocols, and developing an integrated ICT system would enable more effective communication and collaboration among all relevant stakeholders. These steps are essential for ensuring that child protection measures are not only comprehensive but also responsive to the evolving needs and challenges in safeguarding children across Sri Lanka.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Form Strategic Alliances**
Establish formal partnerships with industry stakeholders, particularly in tourism, to prevent child exploitation. Engage private-sector entities and CSOs to build a comprehensive support network for child protection.
- 2 Create Inter-Ministerial Task Forces**
Form collaborative task forces with key ministries to address pressing child protection issues. These task forces can facilitate coordinated interventions and streamline policy implementation across sectors.
- 3 Develop a centralised, interoperable data sharing platform**
To facilitate seamless information exchange between relevant government agencies, CSOs, and other stakeholders involved in child protection. This platform will enable real-time data sharing, improve coordination, and enhance the effectiveness of child protection efforts.

3.1.4. Monitoring and Enforcement

The NCPA is entrusted with the crucial responsibility of monitoring and enforcing the laws related to child protection. This function ensures that legal frameworks designed to prevent and address child abuse are not only implemented effectively but also consistently upheld across the country. Through vigilant monitoring, the NCPA aims to identify gaps in enforcement, enhance legal compliance, and ensure that children receive the protection they are entitled to under the law.

This section will analyse the NCPA's performance in its monitoring and enforcement roles, focusing on its effectiveness in ensuring compliance, addressing legal breaches, and safeguarding the well-being of children in vulnerable situations.

The NCPA's monitoring and enforcement functions include:

Section 14 (g)
To monitor the implementation of laws relating to all forms of child abuse.

Section 14 (h)
To monitor the progress of all investigations and criminal proceedings relating to child abuse.

Section 14 (j)
To take appropriate steps where necessary for securing the safety and protection of children involved in criminal investigations and criminal proceedings.

Section 14 (n)
In consultation with the relevant ministries and other authorities to supervise and monitor all religious and charitable institutions which provide child care services to children.

[55] Ibid

[56] See Footnote 12

Monitoring Progress of Investigations

In 2021, five law reform reports were discussed by the Ministry of Justice and the NCPA [56]. These reforms are aimed at addressing critical areas such as building child-friendly court systems, procedures for video evidence, aligning domestic laws with international standards for the definition of a child, introduction of guidelines for police investigations relevant to children, and development of a sentencing guideline for judges in relation to child abuse and child offenders [57]. These initiatives underscore the NCPA's commitment to implementing positive measures to safeguard the well-being of children involved in criminal investigations and proceedings.

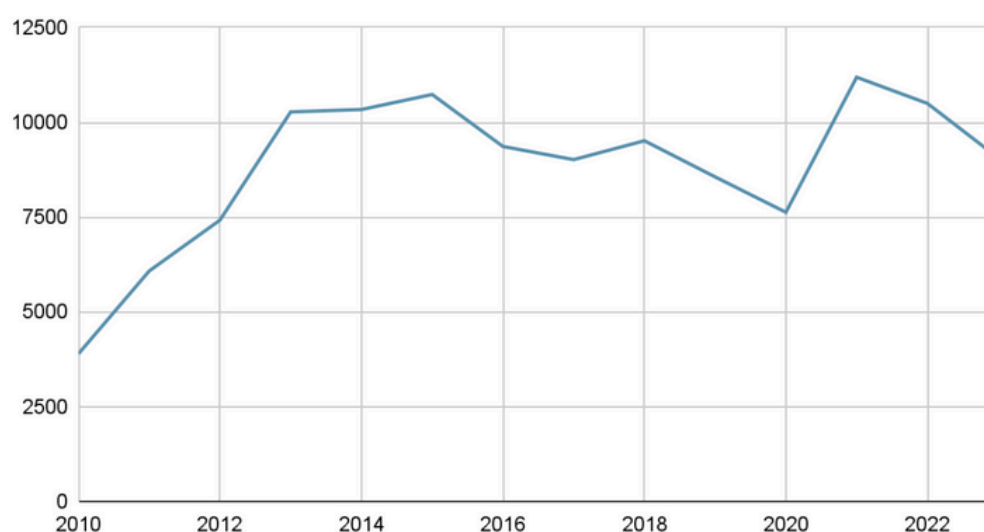
In 2010, the NCPA initiated the "1929" ChildLine, establishing a 24-hour toll-free Child hotline [58]. This platform has facilitated increased reporting of child abuse cases, providing a safe and accessible channel for individuals to seek help. The NCPA's child helpline has significantly improved the reporting of child abuse cases. Since its inception in 2010, the number of reported cases has steadily increased.

In 2010, the NCPA received 3,892 complaints. However, in 2011, the number of complaints increased by approximately 56% compared to 2010. In 2015, the number of complaints increased by approximately 77% compared to 2011. The number of complaints decreased slightly in 2022, by approximately 2% compared to 2015, recording 10,497 cases [59].

While these figures are encouraging, a discrepancy has emerged between the number of cases reported on the NCPA website and those documented in their 2022 annual report. **The website statistics indicates 10,497 cases, whereas the annual report states 9,574 complaints were received through the "1929" helpline [60].** This discrepancy of 923 complaints raises concerns about the accuracy and consistency of the information shared by the NCPA.

The NCPA is mandated to monitor the progress of all investigations and criminal proceedings related to child abuse. This responsibility aligns with the emphasis on the importance of follow-up on cases referred to relevant authorities. However, due to limited resources, the NCPA officers highlighted that they are faced with challenges in effectively monitoring

No. of Complaints Received via "1929" ChildLine



[57] See Footnote 28 (page 37, 38)

[58] The "1929" ChildLine responds not only to the emergency needs of children, but also links them to appropriate services ensuring their long-term care and rehabilitation.

[59] See Footnote 2

[60] See Footnote 15

and following up on these cases, potentially compromising the overall effectiveness of child protection efforts [61].

Video Evidence Unit

The Evidence (Special Provisions) Act No. 32 of 1999 enables the NCPA to video record child victims of abuse, providing a safer and less traumatic environment for them to give evidence for court proceedings [62]. However, the limited availability of video evidence units, currently confined to the Western Province at the National Child Protection Authority in Colombo [63] and in 2021 a video evidence unit was established at the *Lama Piyasa* [64] in Ragama [65]. This presents significant challenges for child victims from other provinces. These children are often required to travel long distances to provide evidence, causing unnecessary hardship and distress. In 2021, the Cabinet approved for the establishment of video evidence units in 9 provinces [66] but the stakeholder consultation indicates that there are delays in implementation due to inadequate resources and a lack of trained staff [67].

Our analysis of reported child abuse cases and the subsequent utilisation of video evidence reveals disparities. While the number of reported cases has remained relatively consistent over the years, the proportion of cases where video evidence was recorded is notably low. For instance, in 2015, out of **10,732 reported cases, less than 2% of these cases resulted** in video evidence being recorded. **Similarly, in 2021, only 63 out of 11,187 cases less than 1% of these cases utilised video evidence.** This trend persists across the analysed years, indicating a persistent

challenge in effectively utilising video evidence to support child abuse investigations and prosecution.

Human resources dedicated to video evidence recording are also limited. From 2015 to 2020, **the NCPA had only one video evidence recording assistant**, thus curtailing capacity to conduct video recordings. While the number of trained officers increased to 3 in 2021 and 2022, this is less than what is required. There remain seven vacancies for this position within the NCPA cadre [68]. This increase in capacity likely contributed to the significant rise in cases with video evidence in 2022, totaling 197 cases [69].

Psychosocial Support

Additionally, the NCPA plays a crucial role in providing essential psychosocial support to child victims of abuse. This support is delivered through various channels, including the "1929" Child Helpline, District Psychosocial Officers, District Child Protection Officers, and Divisional Child Protection Officers [70]. The NCPA also conducts individual and group supervision sessions with District Psychosocial Officers to enhance their skills and knowledge.

Key psychosocial interventions provided by the NCPA include psychosocial assessments to identify children who require protection and support, providing guidance and education to promote positive mental health, offering counselling services to children who have been abused, are at risk of abuse, or are experiencing mental health challenges and providing support to parents and guardians to enhance their child-rearing practices and promote the child's well-being [71]. Key initiatives include, the

[61] See Footnote 12

[62] The Video Evidence Units were established in an effort to reduce the traumatisation and revictimization of children in the Court process. This unit allows for the child's evidence to be recorded at the unit instead of Court.

[63] See Footnote 12

[64] "*Lama Piyasa*" was designed as part of the Creating Safe Communities for children project of the Sri Lanka College of Paediatricians and Plan Sri Lanka and opened in 2015. This safe house accommodates child victims up to the age of 17 years.

[65] *National Guideline for the Management of Child Abuse and Neglect: A Multi-Sectoral Approach*. 2014. (Page 26)

[66] See Footnote 21

[67] See Footnote 12

[68] Annual Report of the National Child Protection Authority 2021

[69] See Footnote 21

[70] See Footnote 31

[71] Ibid.

NCPA developed the trilingual manual for Psychological First Aid For Children [72], conducting psychosocial programmes in coastal areas [73], and conducting awareness programmes for staff of detention homes and child care institutions.

Recognising the significant positive impact of psychosocial support, the officers of the NCPA emphasised the urgent need to increase the number of trained professionals capable of providing specialised care to child abuse victims [74]. By investing in the training and capacity building of psychosocial support providers, the NCPA can further enhance its ability to address the complex needs of children affected by abuse and trauma. The 2022 report highlights a **critical shortfall in psychosocial officers at the NCPA. The absence of a dedicated psychosocial officer and the understaffing of divisional psychosocial officer positions, with almost two thirds**, underscores the urgent need to address this gap [75].

Cyber Surveillance Unit

In 2021, the Cyber Surveillance Unit of the NCPA was established to protect children from online violence, and safeguard the rights of victims of online sexual abuse [76]. In an effort to combat the rising rates of online sexual and gender-based violence against children, in 2024, the NCPA, in collaboration with the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), launched a dedicated portal [77] on the NCPA website to facilitate the reporting of online child sexual abuse. This initiative empowers individuals to report online child sexual abuse imagery anonymously, enabling the IWF to take swift action to remove such harmful content [78].

The limited availability of resources, particularly in terms of human resources and funding, has hindered the effective implementation of key initiatives such as the development of video evidence units across the island. Additionally, the lack of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the impact of interventions and identify areas for improvement remains a concern. To ensure the effective protection of children, it is imperative to address these challenges through increased resource allocation, strengthened capacity building, and enhanced coordination among relevant stakeholders.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Expand Video Evidence Unit Network

The NCPA must advocate for the establishment of additional video evidence units in all 9 provinces across the country to ensure equitable access to this critical service for child victims.

2

Strengthen Resource Allocation and Capacity Building

The government and relevant stakeholders should prioritise adequate resource allocation to the NCPA, including funding for staff recruitment, training, and infrastructure development.

3

Enhance Data Management and Analysis

Invest in robust data management systems and analytical tools to enable the NCPA to track trends, identify gaps, and inform evidence-based decision-making.

4

Strengthen Partnerships and Collaborations

Foster stronger partnerships with government agencies, CSOs, and international organisations to enhance coordination, share expertise, and leverage resources.

[72] See Footnote 21

[73] Annual Report of the National Child Protection Authority 2018

[74] See Footnote 12

[75] See Footnote 15

[76] See Footnote 21

[77] The NCPA launched a portal in collaboration with the Internet Watch Foundation to report on cases of child online sexual abuse. Complaints can be made anonymously and is available in Sinhala, English and Tamil:

https://report.iwf.org.uk/lk_en

[78] Ibid.

5

Explore Innovative Technologies

Utilise technology to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of child protection services, such as online reporting platforms, mobile applications, and artificial intelligence tools for data analysis.

6

Regular Evaluation and Monitoring

Implement regular evaluation and monitoring mechanisms to assess the impact of the NCPA's programmes and interventions, identify areas for improvement, and inform future strategies.

7

Expand Psychosocial Support Services

Increase the number of trained psychosocial professionals, particularly in rural areas, to ensure adequate support for child victims and survivors.

3.1.5. Research and Data Management

A robust foundation of research and data is essential for developing effective strategies to combat child abuse. These functions will enable the NCPA to gather critical insights, track trends, and identify emerging issues, all of which are vital for shaping informed policies and interventions.

The NCPA's research and data management functions include:

Section 14 (m)

To prepare and maintain a national database on child abuse (m)

Data Collection

A recent assessment by UNICEF points to limitations in the current data collection and reporting practices [79]. Currently, the NCPA primarily relies on data from the

'1929' Child Protection Hotline where complaints are reported directly to District Child Protection Officers [80]. This approach likely underestimates the true scope of child abuse in Sri Lanka, as it excludes incidents not reported through these channels. While the NCPA and the Police utilise a cloud-based database for child protection data, its potential for efficient information gathering and sharing is not fully realised [81]. Despite the automated transfer of information between the two agencies, the reliance on manual data entry processes, such as the requirement for physical signatures on monthly reports, hinders timely and accurate data collection.

Data Management

In 2023, UNICEF conducted an assessment of the overall data maturity of child protection actors in Sri Lanka [82]. The assessment used survey responses to evaluate the maturity level of data management processes across different stakeholders. The NCPA scored an average of 40% across four key areas:

1. Data Infrastructure
2. Standardisation of Data
3. Data Transmission
4. Data Use, Demand, and Dissemination [83]

Notably, the NCPA received a particularly low score (22%) in data standardisation, highlighting the lack of uniformity in how child protection data is collected and categorised [84]. This disparity underscores the lack of consistency in data collection and categorisation practices within the NCPA, which could contribute to miscommunication between agencies, hinder effective case management, or cause inconsistencies in how child abuse cases are handled across different regions. In contrast, the police demonstrated a higher overall maturity level, scoring 57%, and consistently outperforming the NCPA in all evaluated areas [85].

[79] See Footnote 54

[80] Ibid

[81] Ibid

[82] Ibid

[83] Ibid

[84] Ibid

[85] Ibid

As previously noted, the NCPA's statistical reports are compiled to report the number of complaints received by the NCPA "1929" hotline. **Despite providing valuable data, the statistical reports published by the NCPA exhibit inconsistencies and lack vital criteria such as the number of cases investigated and respective outcomes.**

By standardising data categories, enhancing data presentation, expanding data collection, conducting in-depth analysis, and collaborating with other agencies, the NCPA can improve the quality and usefulness of its statistical reports. This will enable a more accurate assessment of its performance and identification of areas where improvements are needed to effectively protect children in Sri Lanka.

In addition to the statistical reports, the annual reports of the NCPA also exhibit significant deficiencies that impede their effectiveness in evaluating the NCPA's performance and impact. A primary shortcoming is the absence of clearly delineated goals and objectives, which hinders the measurement of the NCPA's progress and assessment of its effectiveness. Without identifying specific targets and desired outcomes, determining the NCPA's progress and success becomes challenging. Furthermore, the discrepancy between the number of cases reported on the NCPA statistics and those documented in their 2022 annual report raises concerns about the accuracy and consistency of the information shared by the NCPA. The statistics on the "1929" Helpline from 2022 indicates in 2022 10,497 complaints of child abuse were reported, whereas the annual report states 9,574 complaints were received through the "1929" helpline [86]. these reports further complicates the measurement of the NCPA's progress and

effectiveness against specific benchmarks, creating challenges in determining whether the NCPA's interventions are effective or if resources are being optimally used. This includes a lack of information on resource allocation, decision-making processes, and accountability mechanisms.

This inconsistency highlights the need for improved data management practices and transparency in reporting. To enhance the credibility and utility of the NCPA's annual reports and statistics, it is essential to address these shortcomings and establish a robust framework for goal setting, performance measurement, and data quality assurance. The absence of key performance indicators (KPIs) within these reports further complicates the measurement of the NCPA's progress and effectiveness against specific benchmarks, creating challenges in determining whether the NCPA's interventions are effective or if resources are being optimally used. This includes a lack of information on resource allocation, decision-making processes, and accountability mechanisms.

The lack of standardised data collection protocols and the absence of a robust data monitoring framework limit the strategic use of data for evidence-based decision-making. While efforts have been made to capture data on child abuse victims, there is a notable gap in the monitoring of information on children in conflict with the law. The NCPA, despite its potential role as a coordinating body, has not effectively facilitated inter-agency collaboration to address these issues.

The NCPA of Sri Lanka has published annual statistical reports detailing the number of child abuse complaints received through its hotline, categorised by type of abuse and district. While these reports provide valuable insights, they fall short in offering a comprehensive evaluation of the NCPA's overall effectiveness.

[86] See Footnote 15

Reporting Child Abuse

While the exact percentage of children subjected to child abuse in Sri Lanka is difficult to determine due to underreporting, the available data provides a concerning picture. Key findings from the NCPA statistical reports from 2012 - 2022 reveal a consistent pattern of cruelty to children [87] as the most frequently reported type of abuse, with a total of 23,884 complaints, averaging 1,990 complaints per year.

In 2020, with a child population of 7,330,059, the NCPA received 8,165 complaints of child abuse, representing approximately 0.11% of the child population [88]. In 2021, with a child population of 7,389,000, the number of complaints rose to 11,187, representing about 0.15% of the child population [89]. This increase could be attributed to the COVID-19 lockdowns, which may have led to increased stress and domestic tensions, exacerbating child abuse. Although these figures represent only a fraction of the actual cases, they highlight the alarming prevalence of child abuse in the country. It is crucial to recognise that these statistics likely underestimate the true extent of the problem, as many cases go unreported due to various factors, including fear, stigma, and lack of awareness [90].

Regional Differences

Regional unevenness in awareness of complaint procedures resulting in regional disparities in the reporting of child abuse cases. The Colombo district has consistently topped the list of districts with the highest number of child abuse complaints reported to the NCPA via the '1929' ChildLine. This trend has intensified over time, with the district's share

increasing from 13.58% of all complaints in 2014 to 19.44% in 2021 [91]. By addressing these disparities proactively and prioritising outreach and awareness campaigns in regions with lower reporting rates, the NCPA can ensure that all children, regardless of their geographic location, have equal access to protection and justice.

In order to accurately evaluate the NCPA's performance, it is essential to collect disaggregated data [92] on outcomes of investigations, including the number of cases investigated, findings, and actions taken; the number of children rescued from harmful situations; conviction rates of perpetrators; and trends and patterns related to age, gender, perpetrator profiles, and victim-perpetrator relationships.

Additionally, the NCPA is tasked with:

Section 14 (o)
To conduct, promote and co-ordinate, research in relation to child abuse and child protection

By investing in research, the NCPA can gain valuable insights into the evolving challenges and opportunities in child protection, enabling it to refine its strategies, improve programme delivery, and ultimately strengthen its efforts to safeguard the rights and well-being of children.

Research Publications

While the NCPA has undertaken some research initiatives, such as the study on child disciplinary methods in schools [93], and the publication of the Child Protection Journal [94], but its availability on the NCPA website is limited. There is a need for more comprehensive and ongoing research to assess the effectiveness to improve the impact of its programmes. For instance, regular publication of the journal would provide a platform to disseminate research

[87] See Footnote 10

[88] Statistics for Child and Women Centred Development (Page 32)

[89] See footnote 2

[90] Sathiadas, M.G., Viswalingam, A. & Vijayaratnam, K. Child abuse and neglect in the Jaffna district of Sri Lanka – a study on knowledge attitude practices and behavior of health care professionals.

[91] Colombo district consistently records the highest number of complaints, averaging around 1,418.6 cases per year, followed closely by Gampaha and Kurunegala districts. In contrast, Mannar district reports the lowest number of cases.

[92] See Footnote 2

[93] The study revealed that although school counsellors are present in the system, the training and awareness of their mandate is questionable. Adequately trained school counsellors should be available at all schools.

[94] On the NCPA website, only the 2019 volume of the Child Protection Journal is available.

findings, share best practices, and stimulate critical discussions within the field of child protection.

By maintaining a comprehensive database, the NCPA must facilitate the accurate monitoring of cases, enhance transparency, and support data-driven decision-making. This data not only helps to identify the prevalence of various forms of abuse but also can inform the allocation of resources and the development of targeted prevention strategies.

Additionally, through research initiatives, the NCPA can deepen the understanding of the root causes of child abuse, assess the effectiveness of existing measures, and identify areas requiring further attention.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Expand data collection channels
Include reports from allied child protection organisations, schools, hospitals, and independent social services. This broader approach will allow the NCPA to capture a more comprehensive view of child abuse incidents across diverse settings. Integrate these additional sources into a central, cross-referenced database to improve overall accuracy and transparency in tracking child protection cases.

2 Implement a standardised data categorisation framework
To align with best practices in child protection. This framework should define clear, consistent categories for abuse types, case status, and outcomes to support uniform data entry and retrieval. Training NCPA personnel on this standardisation will further enhance data reliability and facilitate better coordination with other agencies, particularly the police, which scored higher in data maturity.

3 Enhance annual and statistical reports
Include detailed, disaggregated data on investigation outcomes, convictions, rescues, and intervention success rates. The reports should also address regional discrepancies by providing data normalised by district child population, enabling more accurate regional comparisons. Introducing key performance indicators (KPIs) will allow stakeholders to measure progress and identify areas for targeted improvements.

4 Establish a dedicated research unit within the NCPA
To conduct annual studies focused on trends, regional variations, and root causes of child abuse. Collaborate with academic institutions and international organisations such as UNICEF to conduct large-scale research projects and leverage global best practices. These findings should be incorporated into annual planning cycles, ensuring evidence-based adjustments to policies and intervention programmes.

5 Enhance resource allocation transparency
Include detailed budget breakdowns within annual reports, showing expenditures by programme and region. This should also highlight the prioritisation of resources toward high-risk areas based on reported abuse prevalence and regional needs. Introducing an audit process for major child protection programmes will further ensure that resources are used effectively.

6 Develop a centralised case management system
Ensure accessibility to relevant stakeholders, including law enforcement, healthcare providers, and social services, to promote real-time information sharing. Establish clear data-sharing protocols that balance privacy with the need for coordinated action. Regular cross-agency training on data handling standards will also support consistent, effective collaboration in managing child protection cases.

3.1.6. Complaint Handling and Referrals

The NCPA serves as a critical point of contact for the public to report instances of child abuse. By receiving complaints and referring them to the appropriate authorities, the NCPA ensures that allegations of abuse are addressed promptly and effectively. This function is essential for creating a safe and accessible channel through which individuals can seek help and protection for children at risk.

The NCPA's role in complaint handling and referrals is mandated to involve assessing the credibility of reports, coordinating with law enforcement and child protection services, and ensuring that appropriate action is taken. This process not only facilitates immediate intervention but also helps in building trust within the community, encouraging more people to report cases of abuse. In this section, the NCPA's performance in managing complaints and its effectiveness in collaborating with other authorities to address reported cases will be examined, highlighting any challenges and successes in providing timely and appropriate responses to incidents of child abuse.

The NCPA's complaint handling and referral functions include:

Section 14 (k)
To receive complaints from the public regarding child abuse and where necessary, to refer to such complaints to the appropriate authorities.

To effectively fulfil these responsibilities, the NCPA has established several mechanisms, including the 24/7 Child HelpLine hotline 1929 [95], the Special

Police Unit [96] and for cases of online sexual violence against children through the IWF portal available on the NCPA website [97]. Moreover, complaints can be directly made at the NCPA head office, or to the NCPA offices available in all districts at each divisional secretariat.

Complaints Referrals

The "1929" Child Line hotline provides a confidential platform to report instances of abuse, neglect and exploitation of children. Hotline staff are trained to handle such reports and ensure that they are referred to the appropriate authorities. The Special Police Unit within the NCPA oversees the referral process and follows up with divisional police stations to ensure timely investigation of reported cases.

These mechanisms are meant to strengthen the NCPA's commitment to providing a safe and accessible means for children to report child abuse and to ensure that reported cases are investigated promptly. However, a significant obstacle hindering the NCPA's effectiveness in addressing child abuse is the persistent delay in delivering justice. Despite the concerted efforts of the NCPA and other relevant agencies, a substantial backlog of child abuse cases remains unresolved within the judicial system.

Complaints Resolution

In 2022, the Daily Mirror [98] Newspaper in Sri Lanka reported that, between 2011 and 2021 [99], 47,136 complaints of child abuse remained unresolved by the end of that year. As of 2022, at least 257 cases filed by the NCPA's Special Investigations Unit were pending in the High Court, while another 423 cases were awaiting resolution in various Magistrates Courts across the country [100].

[95] See Footnote 58

[96] The Special Police Unit of the National Child Protection Authority was established to fulfil the specific mandates of Section 14(g) and (k) of the NCPA Act, which involve monitoring child abuse laws and addressing public complaints. The Unit is responsible for forwarding child abuse complaints received through the 1929 helpline to relevant police stations. Within 48 hours, the Unit follows up with these stations to inquire about the actions taken and provides further guidance, as necessary.

[97] See Footnote 75

[98] Wickramasinghe, K "Legal crisis hindering justice for Sri Lanka's vulnerable children?" Published 21.02.2024

[99] 100,592 complaints reported to the NCPA from 2011 to 2021

[100] See Footnote 96

NCPA Former Chairperson attributed these delays to the Attorney General's Department's challenges in obtaining judicial medical officer reports, DNA reports, and other essential technical documentation [101]. The NCPA's Action Plans for 2020 and 2021 failed to prioritise complaint resolution, a core function of the authority. Despite spending significant funds on consultants and database development [102]. The NCPA has struggled to implement effective systems for handling complaints.

The backlog of the above mentioned 47,136 cases carried forward were discussed during the stakeholder consultation [103]. While NCPA officials indicated that these cases have been investigated and resolved, there is a lack of concrete evidence to substantiate these claims. It appeared during the consultation that the NCPA's current practice is to consider a case as resolved once it has been referred to the relevant authorities, even if there is no follow-up to ensure the protection of the child. This approach does not fully align with its mandate to supervise and oversee investigations and ensure the full protection of children. Furthermore, the Auditor General's Reports over the past decade have highlighted significant discrepancies between the number of complaints resolved and the total number of complaints received by the relevant authorities. Despite a substantial increase

in unresolved complaints, the rate of complaint resolution remains low. The reports have identified a lack of follow-up on complaints, limited investigative activities, and a slow pace in resolving issues. This suggests a systemic problem in the complaint handling process that needs to be addressed urgently.

These delays have a profound negative impact on child victims and their families, leading to prolonged trauma, psychological distress, and a sense of injustice. The persistent backlog of child abuse cases underscores the urgent need for reforms within the judicial system to expedite the resolution of these cases. Investing in adequate resources for the judiciary, improving the efficiency of legal processes, and addressing the challenges faced by the Attorney General's Department are crucial steps towards ensuring timely justice for child victims of abuse. Such reforms would not only expedite the resolution of cases but also contribute to the overall effectiveness of the NCPA in addressing child abuse.

To ensure effective complaint resolution, it is imperative to strengthen the mechanisms for investigating complaints, expedite the resolution process, and provide timely feedback to complainants. Additionally, regular monitoring and evaluation of complaint handling procedures are essential to identify and address any shortcomings.

[101] See Footnote 96

[102] See Footnote 45

[103] See Footnote 12

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Establish a Dedicated Task Force within the NCPA
Working in collaboration with the judiciary and law enforcement agencies, to prioritise and expedite the processing of unresolved cases. Streamline case handling by adopting a triage system that categorises complaints based on urgency and severity, and allocate additional resources to expedite investigations and referrals.

2 Advocate for an Expedited Judicial Process for Child Abuse Cases
Possibly through a fast-track court model. This could involve designated child protection courts within existing judicial structures. Additionally, allocate resources to the Attorney General's Department to streamline the processing of medical and forensic documentation for child abuse cases, ensuring more efficient support to NCPA referrals.

3 Enhance the NCPA's Complaint-Handling Procedures:
By implementing a centralised, real-time tracking system that monitors the status of each complaint from intake through resolution. Develop clear follow-up protocols to ensure accountability at each stage of the investigation. Regular monitoring and evaluation of complaint management procedures, paired with comprehensive training for NCPA staff on effective case management, will strengthen the organisation's ability to address each case adequately and promptly.

4 Improve the Referral and Investigative Mechanisms:
Integrating digital tools to automate referral tracking and case updates. Establish key performance indicators (KPIs) for complaint handling and referrals to evaluate the timeliness and quality of actions taken by the NCPA and partner agencies. Training programs for hotline and police unit staff on trauma-informed communication will further ensure that interactions with victims and their families are sensitive and supportive.

5 Develop and Implement an Annual Action Plan with Specific Objectives and Measurable Outcomes Focused on Complaint Resolution:

Allocate budget and resources strategically toward this function, ensuring that database enhancements and consultancy inputs directly contribute to improving complaint handling processes. Annual performance reviews should evaluate whether funds and efforts are being optimally utilised for complaint resolution and support services for victims.

3.1.7. International Collaboration

Child abuse is a global issue that often transcends national borders, making international collaboration a vital aspect of the NCPA mandate. By liaising and exchanging information with foreign governments and international organisations, the NCPA can enhance its ability to detect, prevent, and respond to all forms of child abuse. This collaboration helps in addressing cross-border challenges such as trafficking, online exploitation, and international adoption issues, ensuring that children receive protection no matter where they are.

The NCPA's international collaboration functions include:

Section 14 (s)

To liaise and exchange information with foreign Governments and international organisations, with respect to detection and prevention of all forms of child abuse

The NCPA's efforts in fostering international partnerships are aimed at sharing best practices, enhancing investigative capabilities, and aligning with global standards for child protection. Through these collaborations, the NCPA can also participate in international forums, contribute to the development of global strategies, and bring innovative solutions back to Sri Lanka. This section will assess the NCPA's effectiveness in building and maintaining international relationships, its engagement in global initiatives, and the impact of these collaborations on enhancing child protection mechanisms in the country.

Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships

To enhance international collaboration and knowledge sharing, the NCPA has engaged in various discussions with international organisations. In 2020, a significant milestone was achieved with the organisation of a roundtable discussion involving representatives from the NCPA, the Max Planck Foundation, and the Sri Lanka Judges' Institute. This virtual discussion focused on addressing challenges and identifying best practices related to children's interactions with the justice system. This event marked the first of five planned consultations aimed at developing comprehensive Best Practice Guidelines for the Sri Lankan Justice System [104].

The NCPA's officers emphasised the collaborative efforts of the NCPA with leading CSOs working in the field of child rights. The NCPA regularly convenes quarterly CSO forums to facilitate dialogue, knowledge sharing, and joint action. This collaborative approach is evident in the NCPA's partnerships [105] with organisations such as World Vision, SAARC Development Fund, Child Fund, UNICEF, Save the Children [106] and the Internet Watch Foundation [107]. While the NCPA highlights its collaborations with foreign CSOs, it notably lacks partnerships with local grassroots organisations, creating a disconnect between the NCPA and those working directly on the ground.

The stakeholder consultation [108] also acknowledged the capacity building programmes conducted by INTERPOL in the area of online surveillance, which aim to strengthen law enforcement agencies' ability to combat online child sexual exploitation and online surveillance.

Similarly, Save the Children has been instrumental in establishing a multi-stakeholder coordination mechanism that brings together key actors from the government and tourism sectors to prevent and address child trafficking. This collaborative approach aims to strengthen the identification, protection, and referral of child victims of trafficking [109].

Unfortunately, there is limited information available regarding cross-jurisdictional sharing of best practices and the impact of such programmes and partnerships. To better understand the effectiveness of these initiatives, the NCPA should consider sharing more detailed information about its efforts and outcomes.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Enhance Transparency and Reporting

The NCPA should develop a comprehensive system for tracking and reporting on international collaborations, including specific objectives, outcomes, and lessons learned. This information should be publicly available to increase transparency and accountability.

2

Strengthen Capacity Building

Invest in capacity building programmes for NCPA staff, focusing on areas such as international negotiation skills, project management, and data analysis. This will enable the NCPA to effectively participate in international forums and implement best practices.

3

Prioritise Data Sharing and Knowledge Management

Develop a robust data sharing and knowledge management system to facilitate the exchange of information with international partners and to track the impact of interventions.

[104] The virtual discussion was held on 26th August 2020 and included 5 consultations.

[105] Key stakeholders include the Ministries of Women and Child Development, Education, Justice, Health, Mass Media, Defence, Tourism, Social Protection, Youth and Sports, Foreign Affairs, and Foreign Employment, as well as the Departments of Police, Labor, Probation and Child Care Services, the Children's Secretariat, and the State Ministries of Pre-Schools, School Infrastructure, Skills Development, and Vocational Education.

[106] See Footnote 12

[107] See Footnote 75

[108] See Footnote 12

[109] See Footnote 50

- 4 Foster Strong Partnerships**
Actively seek out and strengthen partnerships with local and international organisations, governments, and CSOs to leverage expertise, resources, and networks.
- 5 Advocate for Increased Resource Allocation**
Advocate for increased funding to support the NCPA's international engagement and capacity building efforts.
- 6 Leverage Technology**
Utilise technology to facilitate international collaboration, such as video conferencing, online platforms, and secure data sharing tools.

3.1.8. Support for Vulnerable Groups

This section will evaluate the NCPA's initiatives in recommending and implementing measures for the protection and reintegration of children affected by armed conflict, assessing the effectiveness and impact of these programs on their recovery and future prospects.

The NCPA's support for vulnerable groups function includes:

Section 14 (i)

To recommend measures to address the humanitarian concerns relating to children affected by armed conflict and the protection of such children, including measures for their mental and physical wellbeing and their reintegration into society.

Support to Children from Post-Conflict Region

Children affected by armed conflict in Sri Lanka represent one of the most

vulnerable groups, deeply impacted by the three-decade-long civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) [110]. Rooted in ethnic tensions, the conflict subjected children in the north and east of the country to violence, displacement, and, for some, forced recruitment [111]. The trauma, loss, and instability these children endured highlight the necessity for comprehensive support systems focused on mental health care, education, and reintegration efforts.

Recognising the unique challenges faced by these children, the NCPA is mandated to recommend measures that address their humanitarian concerns, ensuring their safety, well-being, and successful reintegration into society. Children in conflict situations often experience trauma, loss, and disruption, necessitating targeted interventions to restore their sense of security and belonging.

The NCPA's commitment to supporting these vulnerable groups involves advocating for comprehensive strategies that encompass mental and physical health services, educational opportunities, and community support systems [112]. By focusing on both immediate and long-term needs, the NCPA aims to facilitate the healing process and promote the resilience of children who have been exposed to violence and instability [113].

The NCPA, mandated to address the humanitarian concerns of children affected by armed conflict, has been actively engaged in supporting vulnerable war-torn children. In 2012, the NCPA launched the programme to assist orphaned children living with foster parents and relatives in the Northern Province. This programme focuses on providing essential school supplies to children in districts like Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, and Vavuniya [114]. The stakeholder consultation highlighted that the NCPA has been providing psychosocial support, welfare assistance, and educational funding to children in war-torn areas [115].

[110] Annual Report of the National Child Protection Authority 2015

[111] This programme targeted six hundred orphaned children living with foster parents and relations in the Northern Province. Previously the Surathma programme launched by the NCPA targeted 200 orphans providing welfare assistance.

[112] Despite the end of the war, a significant portion of the Tamil population remains displaced. While political and civil rights issues have decreased, incidents of torture and enforced disappearances continue to occur.

[113] The study revealed the devastating impact of war on children. Children accounted for 20% of landmine victims, 38% of amputees, 36% of stunted children in war-affected regions, and 50% of displaced children living in camps.

[114] Ibid

[115] See Footnote 12.

The consultation emphasised the critical need for increased resources and personnel within the NCPA to effectively support and protect these vulnerable children.

To accurately assess the NCPA's impact on supporting vulnerable children, greater transparency in annual reports is crucial. This transparency should encompass detailed information about the specific steps taken by the NCPA to uphold the rights of child victims of war. Additionally, the reports should provide insights into the effectiveness of these programmes, including measurable outcomes and impact assessments. By providing such comprehensive information, the NCPA can demonstrate its commitment to child protection and empower stakeholders to evaluate the organisation's performance.

Support to Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities face significant challenges stemming from stigma, discrimination, and societal prejudices. They are alarmingly more likely to experience violence, neglect, abuse, and exploitation compared to their peers without disabilities [116]. Despite limited research, available studies highlight the elevated risk of physical, emotional, and sexual violence, particularly as they reach adolescence. A 2012 study revealed that 1.67% of children aged 5-19 years live with disabilities [117].

To address these vulnerabilities, the NCPA has developed a Methodology to Identify Children with Invisible Disabilities [118].

This tool aims to empower child protection officers and communities to better recognise and support children with disabilities, particularly those whose conditions may not be immediately apparent. By improving identification and understanding, this methodology can contribute to more effective prevention and intervention strategies, ultimately safeguarding the rights and well-being of children with disabilities.

While the NCPA has taken a commendable step by providing a guide to uphold the rights of children with disabilities, there remains a significant knowledge gap regarding the practical implementation of these guidelines. It is essential to delve deeper into the specific strategies and actions undertaken by the NCPA to translate the handbook's principles into tangible outcomes. Furthermore, assessing the impact of the guide is crucial to gauge its effectiveness in addressing the challenges faced by children with disabilities. By evaluating the outcomes and lessons learned, the NCPA can refine its approach and identify areas for improvement. To ensure comprehensive support for vulnerable children with disabilities, it is imperative to share more detailed information about the guide's influence, as well as other initiatives undertaken by the NCPA. This transparency will not only enhance accountability but also inspire further action and collaboration among stakeholders.

[116] Children with Disabilities | UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children

[117] Lack of data on disability, pervasive stigma, widespread lack of awareness, and poverty create countless barriers to equality and accessibility for children with disabilities.

[118] This guide bridges the knowledge gap for both professionals working with children with disabilities and the general public.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Expand Outreach and Access**
Increase outreach efforts to identify and reach vulnerable children in remote and marginalised areas. Establish strong partnerships with local communities, CSOs, and government agencies to facilitate access to services.
- 2 Strengthen Psychosocial Support Services**
Provide comprehensive psychosocial support services to help children cope with trauma and loss, including counselling, and community-based interventions.
- 3 Ensure Long-Term Support**
Develop sustainable mechanisms to provide ongoing support, such as scholarship programmes, vocational training, and livelihood initiatives.
- 4 Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation**
Implement robust monitoring and evaluation systems to track progress, measure impact, and identify areas for improvement.
- 5 Advocate for Policy Reforms**
Advocate for policies that prioritise the rights and well-being of children affected by armed conflict, including access to justice, reparations, and social services.
- 6 Foster International Cooperation:**
Strengthen partnerships with international organisations to mobilise resources, share best practices, and advocate for the rights of children affected by armed conflict.
- 7 Data Collection and Analysis:**
Conduct comprehensive research to gather accurate and up-to-date data on the prevalence of disabilities in the country. Analyse the data to identify specific needs and vulnerabilities of children with disabilities.

8

Awareness and Sensitisation:

Implement targeted awareness campaigns to dispel myths and misconceptions about disabilities. Train professionals, educators, and community members on inclusive practices and child protection.

9

Impact Assessment:

Regularly evaluate the impact of NCPA's initiatives and programmes to identify areas for improvement.

3.1.9. Response of the NCPA to other critical needs

The NCPA's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

In April 2020, just a month after Sri Lanka's first recorded COVID-19 case, UNICEF and the NCPA raised serious concerns about a significant increase in child cruelty cases reported to the "1929" hotline [119]. This alarming trend coincided with the nationwide curfew implemented in March 2020.

During the three-week period following the imposing of the lockdown, the proportion of child cruelty complaints among all reported child protection cases surged from 10% to 40% [120].

Furthermore, the NCPA's Cyber Crimes Unit observed an increase in online violence against children, as many children spent more time online during lockdown periods [121]. This stark increase underscored the urgent need for heightened attention and intervention to safeguard children's well-being during the pandemic.

The NCPA demonstrated remarkable commitment to maintaining essential child protection services throughout the pandemic. Despite the nationwide curfew, the "1929" hotline remained fully staffed

[119] UNICEF has reported a significant global increase in domestic violence against women and girls, which has been attributed to government-imposed lockdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[120] In the three weeks between March 16 and April 7 2020.

[121] The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns led to a surge in cybercrimes against children. With schools and other activities shifting online, children spent significantly more time on digital devices, making them more vulnerable to online predators. Increased internet usage coupled with reduced adult supervision created opportunities for offenders to groom and exploit children.

and operational, ensuring that children in need continued to receive support [122]. As highlighted by a Former Chairperson of the NCPA, this unwavering commitment was crucial in protecting vulnerable children during this challenging time [123].

The NCPA took steps to support vulnerable children by conducting a Rapid Need Assessment to identify their specific needs. However, the annual report lacks detailed information regarding the impact of this assessment on the implementation of targeted interventions [124]. While these initiatives are commendable, further analysis is required to assess their effectiveness in mitigating the negative impacts of the pandemic on children's well-being [125]. A version of this programme was implemented and led by trained NCPA counsellors and fully integrated within the government structure. This version made use of trained officers, and used a curriculum developed in collaboration with Save the Children, World Vision Lanka and a community development organisation, Leads.

Through this intervention, the NCPA successfully managed over 2,500 cases providing virtual psychosocial support to around 5,110 children [126]. The virtual system provided a lifeline for children during the pandemic, offering critical psychosocial support when traditional face-to-face services were disrupted. Also, it strengthened community resilience by equipping local networks with the necessary skills to provide support [126].

The NCPA's innovative response to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated its commitment to protecting children's well-being. By establishing a robust virtual psychosocial support system, the NCPA played a vital role in ensuring that children continued to receive essential care during a time of crisis.

The NCPA's Response to the Easter Sunday Terror Attack

Following the attacks, counselling and psychosocial support was offered to child victims [128]. Despite these efforts, there is limited information on the steps taken by the NCPA to uphold child rights during this crisis.

The NCPA's Response to the Economic Crisis

The economic crisis of 2022 has exacerbated the vulnerability of children, who have historically been marginalised and exploited due to their inherent disadvantages. To effectively address child poverty, a robust social protection system must incorporate specific measures to ensure equitable access to essential services for all children.

One of the most pressing concerns arising from the crisis is the increased risk of child labour, trafficking, and exploitation. Additionally, the rise of cybercrimes perpetrated by and against children highlights the urgent need to protect children in the digital age. The vulnerability of children makes them susceptible to online harms and risky behaviours [129].

[122] "UNICEF and NCPA "Gravely Concerned" by Rise in Child Cruelty Cases since Start of COVID-19 Curfew | Daily FT." Wwww.ft.lk, 9 Apr. 2020, www.ft.lk/breaking_news/UNICEF-and-NCPA-gravely-concerned-by-rise-in-child-cruelty-cases-since-start-of-COVID-19-curfew/10526-698705. Accessed 10 Oct. 2024.

[123] Ibid

[124] See Footnote 49

[125] The NCPA, with UNICEF's support, rapidly established a sustainable virtual psychosocial support system to meet the urgent needs of children during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included the training of 268 NCPA Officers, which included 25 district Psychosocial Officers and 243 Divisional Child Protection Officers, in remote psychological first aid, psychosocial support, and referrals, the integration of a virtual system with village-level social workers to ensure effective outreach and follow-up, and the development of the "Look, Listen, Link" strategy to guide efficient responses to children's urgent needs

[126] UNICEF 2020: UNICEF and NCPA gravely concerned by increase in proportion of child cruelty cases report to NCPA Hotline since the start of the COVID-19 curfew.

[127] Ibid

[128] See Footnote 12

[129] See Footnote 115

3.2. RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND UTILISATION

3.2.1. Financial Analysis

The NCPA in Sri Lanka plays a pivotal role in safeguarding the rights and well-being of an estimated 7 million children within the country. However, the NCPA's effectiveness is significantly influenced by the efficient allocation and utilisation of its resources, which has come under scrutiny in recent years.

The NCPA annual reports, Financial Statements, Income Statements, Cash Flow, Auditor General's Annual Reports indicate several significant shortcomings.

3.2.2. Under-utilisation of Funds

Large grants have been observed to remain unspent, indicating a surplus in the NCPA's budget [130]. This suggests either inefficient planning or implementation, or a lack of capacity to utilise the funds effectively. Funds allocated for specific projects have been found to be delayed in disbursement, leading to project delays and potentially reduced impact. This could be attributed to bureaucratic hurdles, insufficient staffing, or a lack of clear guidelines for fund utilisation.

For instance, the Auditor General's Report for 2021 highlighted that the National Child Protection Fund, established in 2010 to prevent child abuse and protect victims, had not been utilised for its intended purposes since 2018. As of December 31, 2021, a balance of Rs. 2.8 million remained unallocated, and three funds totaling Rs. 1.9 million had been dormant for periods ranging from one year to over eleven years, underscoring

the urgency of addressing this financial stagnation.

3.2.3. Mismanagement of Funds

Instances of financial irregularities, such as misuse of funds, have been reported, suggesting a lack of oversight and accountability within the NCPA. The NCPA's financial reporting has been criticised for its lack of transparency, making it difficult to track the use of funds and identify potential irregularities.

The Auditor General's Report for 2022 highlighted the underutilisation of a valuable asset: a piece of land leased in 2016 for Rs. 18 million remains idle. This raises concerns about potential mismanagement of resources and lost opportunities. The stakeholder consultation [131] revealed ambitious plans for a new building with state-of-the-art facilities, which seems unrealistic given the NCPA's reported resource constraints [132]. A recurring theme throughout the consultation was the lack of adequate funding and resources, which hampers the NCPA's ability to fulfil its mandate effectively.

3.2.4. Accounting Deficiencies and Financial Irregularities

In addition to the aforementioned issues, the NCPA's financial management practices have been subject to scrutiny due to several accounting deficiencies and financial irregularities, raising concerns about the NCPA's ability to effectively utilise its resources:

- **Unexplained Differences:** The NCPA has experienced unexplained differences between its financial records and physical assets, suggesting potential discrepancies in inventory management or asset valuation.

[130] See Footnote 67

[131] See Footnote 12

[132] The NCPA, failing to fulfil its mandate to investigate child abuse cases, has cited a lack of authority as an excuse. While the NCPA can receive complaints regarding child abuse, including rape, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and violations of the Children and Young Persons Ordinance, NCPA officers have stated that it lacks the power to initiate investigations into these matters.

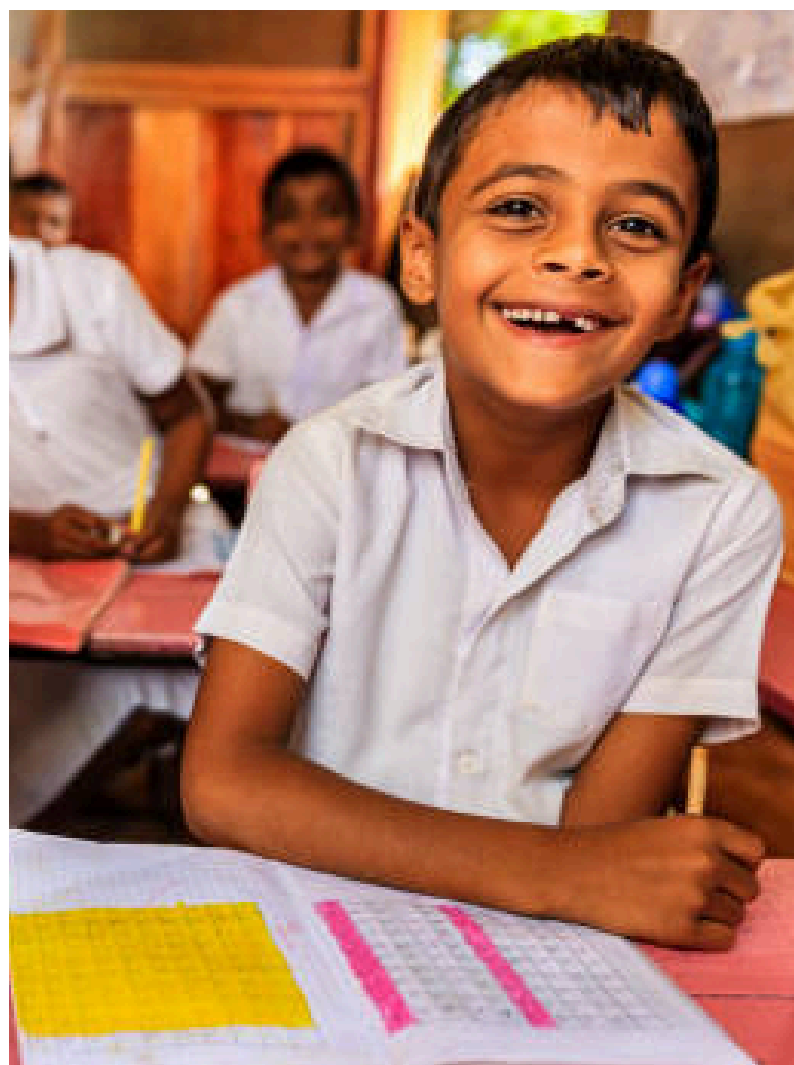
- **Unsettled Liabilities:** The NCPA has been found to have a significant number of unsettled liabilities, including outstanding payments to creditors. This could negatively impact the organisation's financial health and reputation.
- **Carrying Forward Significant Current Asset Balances:** The NCPA has been carrying forward significant balances in its current asset accounts, without taking appropriate action to invest or utilise these funds effectively. This could result in a loss of potential earnings or investment opportunities.

3.2.5. Human Resources

The Auditor General's reports have underscored significant discrepancies and inefficiencies in the NCPA's staff administration. These deficiencies have profound implications for the NCPA's capacity to effectively safeguard the rights and well-being of children in Sri Lanka.

A critical issue is the substantial number of vacant staff positions within the NCPA, contrasting sharply with the officially sanctioned positions. This understaffing significantly impedes the organisation's ability to deliver essential services and respond promptly to child protection needs. Furthermore, the NCPA faces a dire shortage of Divisional Child Protection Officers, who are indispensable for providing frontline services and addressing cases of child abuse and neglect. This shortage severely limits the NCPA's reach and effectiveness in protecting children at the local level. Low salaries for development officers and field officers, significantly challenge the effectiveness of the NCPA as it has led to high turnover rates and hinders the NCPA's ability to retain skilled personnel [133].

Ineffective supervision and oversight within the NCPA can be a contributor to operational inefficiencies and potential mismanagement. The combination of understaffing and ineffective supervision can lead to delayed responses to cases of child abuse and neglect, potentially jeopardising the safety and well-being of children. The NCPA's inability to provide adequate services to children and their families due to insufficient staff and resources further exacerbates the situation [134]. Consequently, the lack of adequate child protection services can increase the vulnerability of children to abuse, neglect, and exploitation.



[133] See Footnote 12

[134] During the stakeholder consultation, it was revealed that the NCPA's capacity to fulfil its mandate is severely hindered by a significant staffing shortage, with only about 50% of its positions filled.

4. WAY FORWARD

This report, *Children First: A Deep Dive into the National Child Protection Authority's (NCPA) Role in Child Protection*, reflects the progress and challenges encountered by the NCPA in advancing the welfare and rights of children in Sri Lanka. The NCPA has played a central role in advocating for child protection, developing policies, and implementing programmes aimed at safeguarding children from abuse, exploitation, and neglect. Its initiatives have provided crucial support for vulnerable children and have contributed significantly to the national discourse on child protection.

While the NCPA's achievements are commendable, this assessment reveals areas for further growth. Gaps remain in resource allocation, interagency coordination, and community outreach, all of which are essential to sustaining impactful change. Strengthening monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, increasing public awareness, and fostering collaboration with both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders will be key to addressing these challenges and improving the effectiveness of the NCPA's interventions.

A key theme emerging from the analysis is the need for improved reporting in the NCPA's annual reports. Greater clarity, detail, and information regarding implemented programmes would enhance the reader's understanding of the NCPA's work. A revised format for annual reporting could significantly improve the NCPA's public perception. To ensure long-term impact, the NCPA should **prioritise the standardisation of its reporting practices**. Consistent and comprehensive reporting will enable better monitoring and evaluation of its

programmes, identify areas for improvement, and inform evidence-based decision-making. By establishing clear reporting guidelines and utilising standardised data collection tools, the NCPA can generate reliable and comparable data that can be used to assess progress and inform future strategies. Additionally, the NCPA should invest in robust follow-up mechanisms to evaluate the long-term impact of its interventions. By tracking the outcomes of its programmes over time, the NCPA can identify areas where additional support may be needed and refine its approaches to maximise effectiveness.

To further enhance its impact, the NCPA should prioritise **collaboration with civil society organisations (CSOs) that specialise in child protection**. These partnerships can provide valuable resources, expertise, and innovative approaches to address complex child protection issues. By working together, the NCPA and CSOs can leverage their collective strengths to create more comprehensive and effective interventions. Engaging with international organisations and experts can help the NCPA stay abreast of global trends in child protection and adapt its strategies accordingly.

By prioritising the needs of children and promoting a collaborative approach, the NCPA can continue to build on its foundational work and further its mission of safeguarding children across Sri Lanka. Ultimately, the findings of this report underscore the importance of a steadfast commitment to placing children first, ensuring that every child is given the opportunity to grow in a safe, nurturing, and supportive environment.

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