



**PROPOSAL FOR BUDGET ALLOCATIONS TO
STRENGTHEN DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY AND
INCLUSIVE DATA FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

ABOUT THE SUBMITTER

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Short bio about the person/institution (50 to 70 words):

Hashtag Generation (HG) is a dynamic, human rights-based, non-partisan, youth-led organization at the forefront of creating a safer digital space in Sri Lanka. Since its establishment in 2015, the mission of HG has been to combat harmful narratives on social media by holding platforms accountable and advocating for a more responsible online environment. For nearly a decade, HG has deployed a dedicated team of social media analysts to monitor and report harmful narratives to major social media platforms. HG's consistent efforts have positioned it as a trusted partner of Meta, TikTok, and YouTube, strengthening HG's ability to drive meaningful transformation.

THE PROPOSAL

This budget proposal recommends two key measures to ensure that Sri Lanka's digital economy is inclusive of persons with disabilities:

1. **Establish a dedicated budget line under the Ministry of Digital Economy for "Digital Accessibility and Assistive Technologies,"** We are estimating that this would require 100 million¹ in the 2026 budget (For activities under this line refer annex 1).
2. **Allocate funding for an updated national disability survey** to provide reliable, disaggregated data (by gender, age, and region) to guide evidence-based, inclusive digital policy and budgetary decisions. Based on prior pilot studies and comparable survey costs, a reasonable order-of-magnitude estimate for a stand-alone survey is LKR 150–200 million.²

SHORT ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka's rapid digital transformation and the development of its digital public infrastructure (DPI) offer significant opportunities for economic growth but risks excluding persons with disabilities (PWDs), who make up 8.7% of the population. Most public digital platforms fail to meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1 AA), limiting accessibility for PWDs. The last national disability survey was conducted over a decade ago, leaving policymakers

¹ This figure is a preliminary estimate based on comparable government initiatives and typical costs for digital accessibility programs, including platform upgrades, accessibility audits, and assistive technology subsidies. The exact allocation can be revised based on the government's own cost calculations during budget planning

² depending on sample size, logistics, enumerator training, and data analysis. The final amount should be determined in consultation with survey experts or the Department of Census and Statistics

without up-to-date data. Existing budget allocations for PWDs have no dedicated funding for digital accessibility or assistive technologies. This proposal recommends (1) creating a dedicated budget line under the Ministry of Digital Economy for “Digital Accessibility and Assistive Technologies” and (2) funding an updated national disability survey aligned with international standards to provide current, disaggregated data for evidence-based policy and resource allocation.

TOPLINE VIEW

Objective of the Proposal

- ☐ Economic Growth
- ☒ Governance
- ☒ Justice and Rights
- ☒ Social Welfare
- ☐ Other:

<i>Implementing Agency:</i>	Ministry of Digital Economy
<i>Primary Beneficiaries:</i>	Persons with disabilities (PWDs), particularly women, rural and estate communities, and non-Sinhala speakers
<i>Cost Estimate (if available):</i>	LKR 100 million (Digital Accessibility & Assistive Technologies) + LKR 150–200 million (Updated National Disability Survey, indicative)
<i>Policy Type:</i>	Disability-Inclusive Digital Policy

HOW IT ADVANCES THE OBJECTIVES

Economic Growth:

Allocating budget resources for assistive technologies and accessible digital platforms encourages the inclusive engagement of individuals with disabilities in Sri Lanka's digital economy. This facilitates access to e-learning, e-services, and online job opportunities, tapping into an underutilized labor force, boosting local assistive technology markets, and nurturing entrepreneurship and innovation.

Governance:

Targeted funding establishes accessibility standards and ensures accountability through yearly audits of digital platforms. The revised national disability survey supports evidence-based policymaking, enhances resource distribution, and reinforces transparency in the implementation of inclusive digital initiatives across various ministries.

Justice and Rights:

Investments in digital accessibility reinforce Sri Lanka's commitments under the UNCRPD and CEDAW, allowing for equitable participation in digital environments. By tackling obstacles related to gender, language, and geography, these efforts reduce discrimination, encourage intersectional equity, and aid in monitoring both national and international rights obligations.

CASE FOR THE PROPOSAL

Sri Lanka is rapidly digitalising, with initiatives such as GovPay, e-governance portals, and the national digital ID system. This transformation offers significant opportunities for efficiency and growth. However, to be effective, it must also be inclusive, ensuring that no segment of the population is marginalised in the process.

One such segment is persons with disabilities (PWDs). As per the latest official data available, the national census 2012 estimates that approximately 8.7% of Sri Lanka's population are PWDs.³ Evidence shows that current digital services risk excluding PWDs. Most public platforms are non-compliant with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1 AA).⁴ A 2016 study analysing 47 Sri Lankan government websites found that over 90% failed WCAG checks, with common issues including missing alternative text, contrast errors, unlabeled form fields, and poor screen reader compatibility. Importantly, while 75% of government sites were not mobile-friendly, despite WCAG mobile accessibility guidance, posing a major barrier since smartphones are the main access point for rural and low-income users.⁵

Accessibility is rarely embedded into the design lifecycle of government websites. Without mandatory standards, routine audits, and training, even new platforms risk replicating past failures. Embedding WCAG 2.1 AA compliance at the design and coding stage through developer training, automated audits (e.g., WAVE, Axe, Lighthouse), and user testing with persons with disabilities would prevent these recurrent failures.

More recent research focusing on the visually impaired community confirms that these shortcomings persist, identifying five key barriers: poor navigation, low usability, lack of assistive technology integration, weak colour contrast, and missing accessible labelling.⁶

Even within the PWD community, digital accessibility challenges are compounded due to intersecting inequalities:

1. **Gender** – Women with disabilities have lower access to mobile devices, digital literacy programmes, and safe online spaces.
2. **Geography** – Rural and estate communities face added barriers from poor connectivity, patriarchal norms, and safety concerns.
3. **Language** – Assistive technologies are rarely adapted for Tamil or dialect variations, disproportionately affecting Tamil and Muslim PWDs in the Northern, Eastern, and estate regions.

These shortcomings undermine Sri Lanka's commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), while slowing progress towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 9 on industry, innovation, and infrastructure, and SDG 10 on reducing

³ UNPRPD, Situational analysis of the rights of persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka (2024). While there is a 2024 national census, it does not have updated disability statistics.

⁴ Daily News, 2025

⁵ Gopinath et al., 2016

⁶ Wijesundara et al., 2023

inequalities. Beyond rights concerns, exclusion from the digital economy perpetuates economic marginalisation; only 29% of PWDs are employed, with 71% outside the labour force.⁷ This represents a significant untapped contribution to national productivity and growth.

Addressing and closing these accessibility gaps requires reliable, up-to-date data. However, Sri Lanka has not conducted a national disability survey since 2012, resulting in significant gaps in gender, age, and region-disaggregated information, which in turn limits the ability to design targeted budgetary and policy interventions.

RATIONALE

The budget proposal has two recommendations. The rationale for them is as follows,

1. **Allocate funding for “Digital Accessibility and Assistive Technologies”.**

A separate budget line under the Ministry of Digital Economy would make allocations for digital accessibility for PWDs visible and trackable.

While Sri Lanka currently allocates funds for PWDs, these are largely welfare-oriented and do not focus on empowerment or enabling full participation in the digital economy. In the 2025 national budget, allocations included LKR 550 million for low-income disabled persons (medical assistance, assistive devices, and education support), LKR 100 million for a new disability identification system, LKR 50 million for vocational training centres and LKR 30 million for recreational activities of disabled children, bringing the total to at least LKR 730 million, plus various other smaller allocations across ministries.⁸ However, none of these allocations are directed toward digital accessibility. The result is that PWDs remain excluded from many national digital initiatives. Key gaps include,

- a. **No dedicated allocation** for assistive technology or digital accessibility in the 2022–2025 national budgets.
- b. **A lack of accessibility provisions for PWDs in major digital investments**
- c. Lack of resources for annual accessibility audits of government sites.
- d. **Lack of symbolic programmes** (e.g., sign-language training) that are integrated into broader digital inclusion strategies.

2. **Funding for an updated national disability survey**

The last comprehensive disability data in Sri Lanka came from the 2012 Census of Population and Housing, making the information over a decade old and limiting evidence-based planning and targeted interventions. Current data collection relies on integrated census modules, general national surveys (e.g., LFS, HIES), and fragmented ministry/NGO reports, which are insufficient for fully understanding the needs of PWDs. Without updated, comprehensive data, policymakers cannot accurately assess needs or allocate resources effectively, particularly for women, rural and estate communities, non-Sinhala speaking PWDs, and individuals reliant on assistive technologies.

⁷ Murugiah, 2023

⁸ Key expenditure components budget estimates 2025

To address these gaps, we propose funding a national disability survey, which could be:

1. Integrated with the next census for full enumeration of all PWDs, ensuring every individual is counted.
2. Conducted as a stand-alone, dedicated survey, using a scientifically designed sample-based methodology to estimate disability prevalence and accessibility barriers, aligned with international standards such as the Washington Group Questions. Although a stand-alone survey has not yet been implemented in Sri Lanka, this approach would provide reliable, disaggregated, and globally comparable data.

Based on comparable national surveys and pilot studies, the indicative cost for a stand-alone survey is approximately LKR 150–200 million, depending on sample size, logistics, enumerator training, and data analysis.

This survey would provide current, reliable, and disaggregated data by gender, age, disability type, and region, enabling policymakers to design targeted, inclusive digital and accessibility policies and allocate budgets effectively in line with international standards.

ANNEX 1

List of activities for a dedicated budget line under the Ministry of Digital Economy for “Digital Accessibility and Assistive Technologies,”

- Funding government digital platforms to achieve compliance with **WCAG 2.1 AA in the short term**, transitioning to **WCAG 2.2 compliance in the medium term**. *WCAG 2.1 AA is the current international baseline, while WCAG 2.2 (2023) represents the next global standard. Aligning with these frameworks will ensure Sri Lanka’s digital economy and public infrastructure (DPI) meet global best practices.*
- Allocating resources for annual accessibility audits of government sites.
- Ensuring all tools and services are fully accessible in Sinhala, Tamil, and English.
- Subsidize assistive technology tools (screen readers, Braille keyboards, hearing aids) for schools, government offices, and community centers.

PUBLISHED ANALYSIS AND REFERENCES

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