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# Health Changes in Sri Lanka: Benefits of Primary Health Care and Public Health

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## Abstract

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is an island in the Indian Ocean that has achieved a unique status in the world with health indicators that are comparable with those of developed countries. This is illustrated, among others, by the reduction in both child and maternal mortality in the country. This achievement is the result of a range of long-term interventions, including providing education and health care free of charge, training of health care workers, developing public health infrastructure in rural areas, and adopting steps to improve sanitation, nutrition, and immunization coverage.

## Keywords

maternal mortality, primary and public health care

## Introduction

Sri Lanka is an island in the Indian Ocean, located about 31 km off the southern coast of India (Figure 1). It has a land area of 65 610 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of approximately 20 million. More than 84% of the population resides in the rural and estate sectors, and approximately 16% dwell in urban areas.<sup>1,2</sup> The country is governed by a parliamentary democratic system headed by a president with executive powers and is divided into 9 administrative divisions (provinces).

Sri Lanka is a low-middle-income country with an economy of \$49.55 billion (2010 World Bank estimate) and a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of about \$5077.98 purchasing power parity.<sup>3</sup> Despite the total expenditure on health being relatively low (approximately 4.2% of the GDP; Figure 2),<sup>4</sup> Sri Lanka is noted to have achieved a relatively high health status.

Health care delivery is from both the state and the private sector. The state health sector is decentralized with the Ministry of Health and the Provincial Health Departments providing a wide range of services, including promotive, preventive, curative, and rehabilitative health care. Public health services at the community level are provided by an extensive network of “health units” spread throughout the country. The overall use of health services in the country is high in spite of low cost.<sup>4</sup> Although health indicators are comparable with those of developed nations,

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