Methodology of the Sri Lanka Barometer Public Opinion Survey
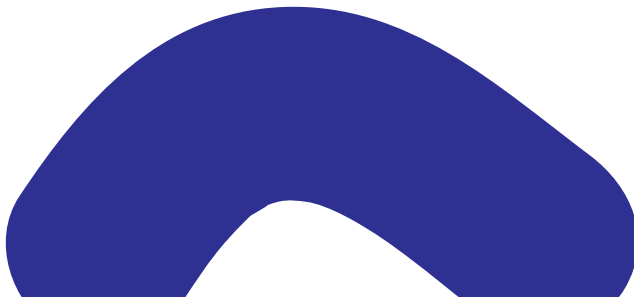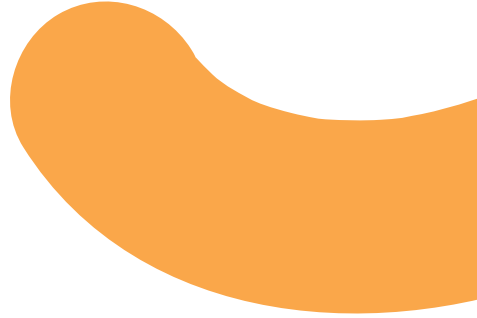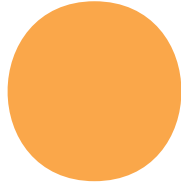
The Sri Lanka Barometer (SLB) uses a quantitative survey methodology to measure people's attitudes, opinions, and beliefs on a wide range of social, political, economic, and cultural issues. As part of a special class of public opinion surveys, it is designed to provide nuanced information about people's views at various levels of disaggregation.

Unlike traditional opinion polls, which often focus on a single issue or moment in time, the SLB canvasses people's views on a broad range of themes related to reconciliation and social cohesion, and traces how these evolve over time. Additionally, the SLB is grounded in an extensive conceptual framework derived from existing theory and practice, and employs larger, more robust sampling designs and sample sizes, enabling more stable measures of public sentiment over time. While traditional opinion polls play an important role in capturing immediate public views, the SLB complements these efforts by offering greater resolution on topics of interest, more detailed analysis and explanation, and a contextual understanding of longer-term societal dynamics.

The SLB collects data using a structured survey questionnaire based on its conceptual framework. The conceptual framework evolved from extensive community consultations and qualitative and quantitative research undertaken before the implementation of the first iteration of the SLB. Based on all these inputs, the framework was built to comprise eight conceptual dimensions, each consisting of several sub-dimensions, and within these, different social indicators. These indicators represent the actual measurement of people's views about the major concepts of the dimensions and sub-dimensions, and provide the basis for the quantitative analysis of the different thematic areas.

The SLB questionnaire itself consists of several different types of questions, as follows:

- Questions recording the demographic characteristics of respondents, including age, gender, religion, spatial location, etc.
- Questions using 5-point Likert scales to assess strength of opinion on a range of social, political, economic, and cultural issues, such as agreement/disagreement and approval/disapproval.
- Single mention questions to which respondents answer in their own words. These responses are then post-coded after data collection is complete.
- Single mention questions with pre-defined response options.

Once the questionnaire is finalised in English, it is translated into Sinhala and Tamil using the double-blind method, to ensure the greatest possible accuracy of key terms and concepts. Thereafter, the questionnaires in all three languages (Sinhala, Tamil and English) are scripted to a Computer Aided Personal Interviewing (CAPI) platform and, once in the field, administered through face-to-face interviews. Using appropriate sampling, the respondents are selected to ensure adequate representation of all provinces and population groups.

After conducting the SLB Baseline Survey in 2020 and a first follow-up survey in 2021, the SLB has adopted a biennial survey interval, following the South African model. This survey interval is sufficient to measure societal trends over time while also addressing concerns of feasibility, economic viability, and sustainability. A pilot survey with a sample of 60 respondents is conducted for each survey to ensure the validity and reliability of survey questions prior to administering the survey country-wide.

The survey questionnaire undergoes a rigorous review process prior to every new iteration. This entails evaluating indicators and survey items from both statistical and substantial/contextual relevance, making adaptations where necessary or meaningful. Moreover, while core indicators that track trends in public opinion on reconciliation are retained, new questions/items are incorporated into each successive iteration to capture topical issues which arise over time. Examples of these include survey items on the impact of the COVID pandemic in 2021; the economic crisis in 2023; and changes in the post-election period in 2025.

Sampling Framework

The sample is selected from a sample frame of Sri Lankans 18 years of age or older. According to the Department of Census and Statistics in 2012, the national population was 20,359,439, of which 70% (14,230,273) are 18 years or older. The sample has adequate representation from geographical clusters – which includes urban, rural, and estate, as well as province and district clusters and ensures fair representation of the different groups within the population, including gender, age, ethnicity, and religion.

The sample has a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of 1.6% at the national level. Briefly, this means that for any obtained results, there is likely to be a variation of 1.6% in the obtained figure. For instance, if the survey found that 55% of people agreed with a statement, a 1.6% margin of error means that this figure of 55% actually ranges between 53.4% (55%-1.6%) and 56.6% (55% + 1.6%).

Given the sample size, the margin of error necessarily increases when moving from the national (full sample) to smaller jurisdictions (subset sample). For this reason, the SLB Report focuses its analysis at the levels of disaggregation (national, provincial, sector, ethnicity, age cohort, and gender) at which the margin of error is smallest and within acceptable bounds for explanation.

To achieve a statistically acceptable confidence at different levels of disaggregation requires a sample larger than one which is only seeking to have confidence in results at national level. In the Sri Lankan context, the sample size for such disaggregated analysis was determined to be above 3,500 and below 4,000 respondents. Based on this sampling estimation, the final sample for the previous iterations are as follows:

Survey Year	Sample Size
2025	3876
2023	3876
2021	3860
2020	3880

This sample size represents the optimal balance between statistical power, which is the ability to interpret results with sufficient degree of confidence, and affordability, which relates to the significant costs required to undertake fieldwork research. While a sample lower than 3,500 may have provided adequate confidence in results at the national level, this confidence would decline steeply for sub-national disaggregation such as province, ethnicity, religion, etc. Likewise, while a sample of over 4,000 would have boosted confidence, the increase in confidence would have been marginal and come at a significant financial cost which would not have justified the marginal increment in confidence.

To ensure adequate representativity at all levels of disaggregation, the sample is selected using a multi-stage random sampling technique, where the total national level sample is distributed across the 25 districts based on the Probability-Proportionate-to-Size sampling (PPS). The arrived district level sample is further stratified into urbanity and ethnicity based on the PPS sampling method. Briefly, PPS sampling ensures that the selection of sampling units corresponds proportionately to the size of the sampling group within the population. Firstly, to ensure an adequate sample size at the district level, the sample is adjusted to arrive at enough data points at the district level. The sample arrived at the district level is

distributed across urban, rural, and estate strata within each district based on PPS sampling. Thereafter, random Grama Niladhari (GN) division selection is carried out within each district to reflect the respective urbanity sample.

Additionally, in the 2021 study, it was observed that while the national representation of the Muslim ethnicity is 8%, the survey covered only 5%, and the Up-Country Tamils' sentiments were not presented in the report due to inadequate sample size, highlighting a limitation in the ability to disaggregate data by minority ethnic groups in the country. To address this issue, adjustments were made in the 2023 study sample, and carried forward to in the 2025 survey, to ensure adequate representation of each ethnic group within the overall sample enabling accurate data disaggregation by different ethnic population segments in the country. Since 2023, the following sample quotas were achieved for each ethnic group:

- Sinhalese – 64.4% of the sample
- Sri Lankan Tamil – 16.2% of the sample
- Up Country Tamil – 5.1% of the sample
- Muslim – 13.7% of the sample

While the overall GN selection is carried out randomly, in case the selected GNs are not adequate to represent different ethnic groups' sample quotas discussed above, certain GN divisions are replaced purposively, ensuring the same urbanity focusing on areas where specific ethnic communities are concentrated.

Following completion of the survey, to address differences in sample representation between the national population and the survey sample, a data weighting process is conducted. This involves creating a weighting variable by cross-referencing urbanity, gender, religion, and age categories. For this task, the 2012 population statistics published by the DCS is used. Trimming is applied to reduce the effect of extreme weights.

See Annex 1 for the weighted sample size of each survey iteration.

Data Collection Method

Once the Divisional Secretariats (DS) is selected, GN divisions within each DS are picked from a list extracted from the DCS of Sri Lanka. GN selection is done using a systematic random sampling method.

The left-hand rule is used in approaching households from the selected GNs; households on the left-hand side of the road from the starting point are selected to be interviewed. Enumerators are provided with pre-identified starting points

– landmarks such as schools, churches, temples, hospitals, and government offices – and lists of the households for random selection. The household skipping pattern is applied to households on the left-hand side of the road after a successful interview to establish a fair spread of the sample at the primary sample units (PSU) level. Considering the proximity between houses, the skipping pattern applied in Urban and Estate areas is three households, while in rural areas with less household density, the skipping pattern is two households.

Individual respondents for the interviews are defined as anyone aged 18 years or older, who lives in the selected housing unit, eats from the same kitchen, and returns to the household at least weekly. All individuals meeting these criteria in the selected households are recorded sequentially in the CAPI system, along with their gender and age. A respondent is then selected from the household through the CAPI using the Kish Grid method.[1] If the respondent selected is not available for the interview at the time of the first visit, two more attempts at contact are made. If unsuccessful, the original respondent is replaced with another respondent using the same random process.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis is presented as composite indicators and as single-item indicators.

A composite indicator is constructed based on multiple survey questionnaire items used to measure a single concept (e.g., demand for reconciliation, political trust, religious intolerance). In most cases, composite indicators are comprised of three or more survey items, which are scored by respondents on a 5-point Likert scale and then rescaled from 0 to 10 to facilitate interpretation and visualisation. This approach makes the results more intuitive – since many people are more familiar with interpreting a 0 to 10 scale – as well as allowing for more nuanced measurement of the resulting scores and comparisons across groups and with other composite scale scores. The final results are presented as single mean scores for each composite indicator.

It must be noted that while the scores are rescaled, they do not materially change in relation to each other. That is, actual responses that are low on the 1 to 5 questionnaire rating scale are still placed low down on the rescaled composite scores from 0 to 10, and vice versa for higher scores.

[1] The Kish Grid method is used in household surveys to randomise the selection of a respondent in the household. This method helps avoid selection bias and provides a systematic approach to selecting a respondent, ensuring that each survey participant has an equal probability or chance for selection.

Essentially, the rescaled scores for any respondent still occupy the same relative position when compared to other respondents, ensuring there is no distortion of their actual responses. This means that any comparisons across respondents or groups of respondents (by province, ethnicity, gender, etc.) are not in any way impacted by the rescaling process.

Single-item indicators are constituted of individual survey questionnaire items and are designed specifically as single survey items to understand specific issues (e.g., meaning of reconciliation, barriers to reconciliation). The data from single-item indicators is presented in the form of frequencies (percentage of the population) at the national level.

Psychometric Validation of Indicators

The SLB survey indicators undergo rigorous psychometric validation to ensure the robustness, credibility, and reliability of the measurements used. This process builds on previous survey iterations and includes testing for both reliability and validity during the pilot stages. Following each survey, a full psychometric validation is conducted to assess the integrity of questionnaire items and the conceptual indicators they represent. This ongoing review confirms the strength of existing indicators and provides guidance for refining or revising new ones. Aligned with global best practices, this approach reinforces confidence in the survey instrument and its findings.

Detailed validation of the measurement scales can be made available upon request.

Annex 1 – Sample Profile

Item	Category	2020 (%)	2021 (%)	2023 (%)	2025 (%)
Gender	Men	47.5	47.4	44.1	47.6
	Women	52.5	52.6	55.9	52.4
Age*	< 20	4.6			
	20-29	21.6			
	30-39	21.4			
	0-49	18.7			
	50-59	16			
	60+	17.7			
	18-30		26.3	31.5	
	31-45		32.5	28.2	
	46-60		26	24	
	61+		15.1	16.3	
	18-29				26.3
	30-44				30.9
	45-59				25.1
	60+				17.7
Ethnic Group	Sinhalese	78.5	79.7	75.5	74.1
	Sri Lankan Tamil	15.5	14.5	10.5	11.7
	Muslim	5.5	5.7	9.4	9.4
	Up-Country Tamil			4.4	4.5
	Burgher			0.2	
	Malay			0.1	
	Other	0.5	0.2		

Item	Category	2020 (%)	2021 (%)	2023 (%)	2025 (%)
Religious Affiliation	Buddhist	78.2	74.2	71.11	70.2
	Hindu	10.9	11.6	12.1	12.4
	Muslim	5.9	5.7	9.5	9.8
	Roman Catholic	4	7.1	6.1	6.2
	Other Christian	0.9	1.4	1.2	
Spatial Location	Rural	77.8	76.4	76	77.3
	Urban	17.4	18.8	20	18.7
	Estate	4.8	4.8	4	4.1
Province	Western	25.4	29.9	29.9	27.2
	Central	13	12	12.5	12.7
	Southern	12.7	11.6	12.1	11.3
	Northern	7.1	5	4.9	7
	Eastern	7.9	7.8	7.1	7.6
	North Western	11.3	11.6	11.7	11.7
	North Central	6.4	6.7	6.1	6.4
	Uva	6.5	6.2	6	6.2
	Sabaragamuwa	9.7	9.3	9.7	9.8

Item	Category	2020 (%)	2021 (%)	2023 (%)	2025 (%)
Occupation	Unpaid Care-Work	1.3	5.9	3	21.2
	Private Sector Paid Employee	12.9	13.5	12	16.1
	Own-Account Worker (Self-Employed/Without Employing Staff)	16.9	16.1	11	14.1
	Daily Wage Labourer	8.3	12.5	10	9.2
	Unemployed – Not Looking for a Job	27	23.7	32	8.1
	Student		2.1		7.5
	Government Paid Employee	10.1	8.9	6	6.9
	Unemployed – Looking for a Job	10.6	9.2	7	5.3
	Retired	1.3	0.8	7	4.7
	Contributing to Family Enterprise (Unpaid Family Worker)	4.6	3.4	2	4
	Semi-Government Paid Employee (Contractual Employee)	1.3	1.2	1	1.7
	Employer	0.9	0.7	1	1.1
	Housewife	2.4			
	Farmer		1.6		
	Other				0.3
	Refuse to say/Don't know	2.4	0.5		

Item	Category	2020 (%)	2021 (%)	2023 (%)	2025 (%)
Educational Attainment	Passed Primary Education (GCE Ordinary Level - O/L)	29.2	31.7	34	32.3
	Attended Primary Education (Grade 1-10)	32.8	29.7	32	25.7
	Passed Secondary Education (GCE Advance Level – A/L)	18.6	16.3	18	20.5
	Attended Secondary Education (Grade 11-13)	9.8	14.4	9	12.1
	University Degree	3.9	3.8	3	3.5
	Diploma				2.2
	Vocational Qualification	2.2	1.5	1	1.6
	Never Attended	2.2	1.8	2	1.1
	Post Graduate Diploma	0.8	0.4	1	0.5
	Post Graduate Degree	0.5	0.4		0.4
	Other		0.1		