

Do the public trust the information given on Covid-19 Cases and Deaths in Sri Lanka?

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Abstract

The public trust on the number of Covid-19 Cases and Deaths is a key determinant towards adherence to the requested health measures during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Provision of information to the public on Covid-19 cases has been placed a high priority in the Covid-19 control operation of Sri Lanka. The objective of this opinion survey was to assess the public trust in the numbers of Covid-19 cases and deaths in Sri Lanka. An online survey was developed using google forms and was disseminated among known networks and through the Facebook from 25.10.2020 to 30.10.2020. Over 61 % of the respondents said that they trusted the numbers received on Covid-19 cases and deaths through official sources within the last week in Sri Lanka. Sixty-nine percent (n = 117) identified a health officer as the most trusted person to receive information on Covid-19 cases and deaths. In the meantime, eighteen percent (n = 31) stated a military officer to be the most trusted person to receive information. Fifty-two percent (n = 94) of the respondents strongly believed that there was community transmission in Sri Lanka, the while 35 % (n = 63) believed so. A website of the most commonly used medium to obtain the numbers on Covid-19 cases and deaths, (n = 107, 57.2%), followed by mobile alerts (n = 100, 53.5%). Television was the third most commonly used medium, 97, 51.9%. The information provided by the government on Covid-19 cases and deaths could attract different levels of trust. A trust worthy figure such as a health officer should declare information on Covid-19 cases and deaths. Making such information available online could help improve community trust.

Key words: Public Trust, Covid-19, Information, Right to Information

1. Background

The public has a right to know the information concerning the safety of their life, health security being no exception. The right to information is a fundamental human right, and provision of information should be considered as an integral part of emergency response, rather than an external burden by the government (UNESCO, 2020). Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated the need to share information on health security with citizens more than ever before. For example, a cross sectional survey conducted in USA has shown that government information sources of information among the public (Fridman et al., 2020).

The Right to Information by the citizens has been enshrined in the constitution of Sri Lanka, as well as in other legal arrangements (Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 2016). Sri Lanka has adopted a mechanism to collect, collate, and disseminate data about Covid-19 cases and deaths (Epidemiology Unit, 2021a; Widanapathirana et al., 2020). While the preventive and curative health authorities at all levels work 24/7 in outbreak control activities, a large proportion of their time is devoted to the management of numbers of Covid-19 cases and deaths. Information from the tri forces and the State Intelligence Service has complemented the public health data management system (Sri Lanka Army, 2021; State Intelligence Service, 2020).

After the collection of data on Covid-19 cases and deaths, numerous media are used to disseminate the above information to the general public. The Epidemiological Unit provides daily situational updates regularly (Epidemiology Unit, 2021b). Press conferences are held by the health, security and government information officials to disseminate information on Covid-19 cases and deaths (Department of Government Information, 2021; Health Promotion Bureau, 2021; Sri Lanka Army, 2021).

While a whole of the government of approach has been mounted for Covid-19 prevention and control, one key area of this operation is the provision of information on cases and deaths to the general public. The desired community-level action by the public will be determined to a large extent by the trust that the public has in the numbers of Covid-19 cases and deaths provided to them by the government through the official channels. The objective of this opinion survey was to assess the public trust in the numbers of Covid-19 cases and deaths in Sri Lanka.

Methods:

An online survey was developed using Google forms to achieve the above objective. The composition of the questionnaire was as follows:

- Age, Sex and District
- Trust in general on information on numbers of Covid-19 cases and deaths
- Trusted official to give numbers of Covid-19 cases and deaths
- Community belief on existence of community transmission
- Methods to receive information on numbers of Covid-19 cases and deaths

The questions were formulated to recall the last fourteen days as the response period of the survey. Individual identification information was not collected. The questionnaires were distributed in Sinhala, English, and Tamil languages via Facebook among known networks. In addition to that, the questionnaires were distributed through boosted Facebook posts over five days targeting Sri Lanka. The boosted Facebook campaign alone reached 30, 944 persons with 1483 post engagements from 25.10.2020 to 30.10.2020. The responses collected through Google forms was downloaded as google sheets document. The data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

Results:

A total of 187 respondents completed the survey. The respondents of the survey comprised mostly of those from the Colombo district (n = 67), followed by the Gampaha (n = 33) and Kurunegala (18) districts (Figure 1).

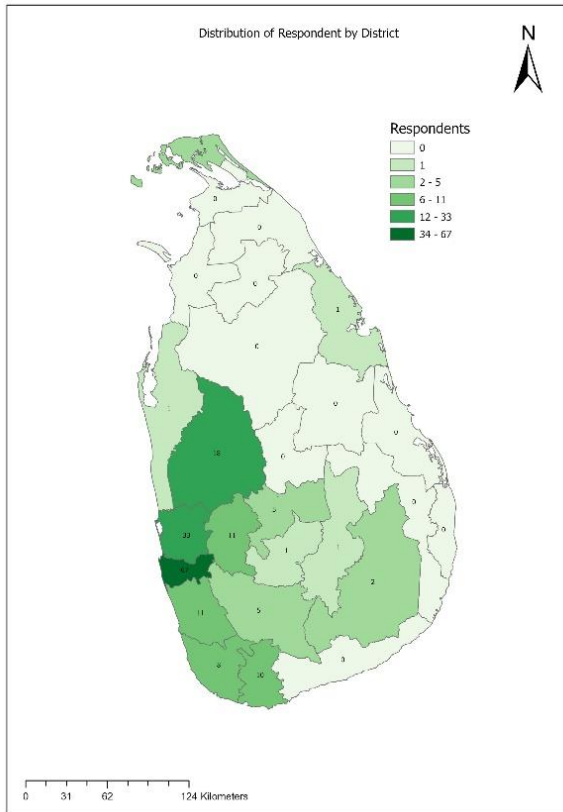


Figure 1: Map of Distribution of Respondents by District

The age distribution of respondents is given in Figure 2.

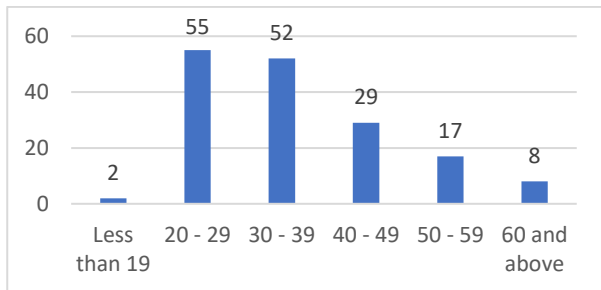


Figure 2 : Age Distribution of the Respondents

Most respondents belonged to the 20 – 49 age range.

Table 1 : Distribution of Gender of Respondents

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	95	53.07
Female	73	40.78
Prefer not to say	11	6.15
Total	179	100

As per Table 1, most of the respondents were males, 95, 53.07%.

Table 2: Trust on Numbers Received on Covid-19 Cases and Deaths through Official Sources within last week in Sri Lanka

Response	Number	Percentage
I trust very much	33	18.2
I trust somewhat	78	43.1
No idea	8	4.4
I do not trust	49	27.1
I do not trust at all	13	7.2
Total	181	100.0

Over 61 % of the respondents said that they trusted the numbers received on Covid-19 cases and deaths through official sources within the last week in Sri Lanka. Eighteen percent of the respondents (n = 33) trusted the numbers very much while 43.1% (n = 78) trusted them somewhat. Twenty-seven percent (n = 49) of the respondents said that they did not trust the information, while seven percent (n = 13) said that they did not trust the information at all. Table 3 shows the most trusted persons to receive information on Covid-19 cases and deaths in Sri Lanka.

Table 3 : Most Trusted Person to Receive Information on Covid-19 Cases and Deaths

Response	Number	Percentage
Health Officer	117	68.8
Military Officer	31	18.2
Officer from Government Information Department	22	12.9
Police Officer	0	0.0
Total	170	100.0

Sixty-nine percent (n = 117) identified a health officer as the most trusted person to receive information on Covid-19 cases and deaths (Table 3). In the meantime, eighteen percent (n = 31) stated a military officer to be the most trusted person to receive information. Thirteen percent of the respondents (n = 22) believed an officer from the Government Information Department to be the most trusted person to receive information. None of the respondents identified the police officer to be the most trusted source of information on Covid-19 cases and deaths. Table 4 shows the public opinion on the existence of community transmission in Sri Lanka.

Table 4 : Public Opinion on Existence on Community Transmission in Sri Lanka

Response	Number	Percentage
Strongly believe	94	52.2
Believe	63	35.0
No idea	10	5.6
Do not believe	9	5.0
Do not believe at all	4	2.2
Total	180	100.0

Fifty-two percent (n = 94) of the respondents strongly believed that there was community transmission in Sri Lanka, the while 35 % (n = 63) believed so (Figure 3). Seven percent of the respondents either did not believe or did not believe at all that community transmission was happening in Sri Lanka. Table 5 shows the

distribution of sources of information on Covid-19 cases and deaths in Sri Lanka.

Table 5 : Media from Which Numbers on Covid-19 Cases and Deaths are Received

Response	Number	Percentage
Website	107	57.2
Mobile Phone Alert	100	53.5
Television	97	51.9
Radio	26	13.9
Friends and Relatives	24	12.8
Others	3	1.6
News Papers	1	0.5
Social Media	1	0.5

As per Table 5, a website of the most commonly used medium to obtain the numbers on Covid-19 cases and deaths, (n = 107, 57.2%), followed by mobile alerts (n = 100, 53.5%). Television was the third most commonly used medium, 97, 51.9%.

Discussion

Right to information is a must, not an option even during emergencies such as Covid-19 (UNESCO, 2020). While a large volume of resources is invested on information management with regards to Covid-19, often little attention to the trust that the public has towards such information (Widanapathirana et al., 2020). This public opinion survey is of importance in eliciting this much important yet often forgotten aspect of Covid-19 information management.

The findings of this public opinion survey demonstrate that around 61% of the respondents had trust in the numbers provided by the official sources. This is a positive aspect reflecting the success of the government efforts to win the trust of the public by sharing accurate and timely information on Covid-19 cases and deaths. These findings on public trust on government information was similar to in a research conducted in USA (Fridman et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it should be kept in

mind that around 34 % of the respondents did not trust the information provided. This must be taken seriously since those who do not have the trust of official information could be the “vectors” of infodemics which have been a frequent complication of the Covid-19 outbreak (Jaiswal et al., 2020).

One of the keys findings of the public opinion survey is that 69% of the respondents believing a health official to be the most trusted person to receive information on Covid-19 cases and deaths in contrast to a military officer, 18%. This highlights the need to have a healthy person as the main person delivering numbers about Covid-19 cases and deaths since the public seems to be trusting health personnel more than a military person in times of a health crisis. As the Covid-19 crisis is escalating in the country at a tangent right now, the numbers on Covid-19 cases and deaths must be communicated through the most trusted person, who, as per the findings of this public opinion survey, is a health official, to the general in a regular basis.

The community transmission of Covid-19 as well as strategies to face it, if it occurs have been discussed (Fernandopulle, 2020; Mashood et al., 2020; Wijesekara et al., 2020). However, during the survey, attempts were made to understand how much this perceived as an issue by the general public. The opinion survey shows that most of the respondents believed that there was community transmission in the country. This is an indicator of how technical and political doubts on an issue could push the public to adopt a pessimistic viewpoint despite the expert opinion being in contrast to that. The need to emphasize measures that communities should adopt to prevent and control the disease than dragging them into the confusion of complex concepts which is unlikely to bear any meaningful public action must be the focus of crisis communication strategies.

There are some limitations of the public opinion survey which needs to be taken into

consideration. Firstly, the number of respondents of the survey seems to be quite low, less than 200, despite the survey has reached over 30,000 individuals with over 1400 post engagements, as per the Facebook analytics of the boosted posts. This could be due to pandemic fatigue that the community probably would have been undergoing at the time of the survey. This was quite an unexpectedly low response from the survey team.

Secondly, the persons who have responded to the survey would have excluded persons who do not use internet or social media. Hence the generalizability of the survey can only be done to the internet and social media users.

However, this survey, provides an important piece of information from community point of view with regards to the trust over the information provided on Covid1-19 cases and deaths.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

It is important to obtain inputs about the public trust on information provided on Covid1-9. Such information on public trust could in turn help the government and other stakeholders could take corrective measures to improve public trust. Such inquiries of the public trust on the numbers of Covid-19 cases and deaths must be conducted at regular intervals to realign the existing processes.

It is important that a trust worthy figure such as a health officer distributes information on Covid-19 cases and deaths during the pandemic. Internet and websites seem to be commonly used by the public to obtain information on Covid-19 cases and deaths. Being responsive to the trust of the public with regards to the information on Covid-19 cases and deaths could in the long run could contribute to the resilience of communities.

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