

## Strategic health planning in Sri Lanka: Evaluating health master plans from 2005 to 2025

Rahulan Kalainathan <sup>1</sup>, Sridharan Sathasivam <sup>1</sup>, Paul Roshan Gnanakunalan <sup>1, \*</sup> and Sathiyamoorthy Thangamuthu <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Health, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

<sup>2</sup> Teaching Hospital Jaffna, Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Health Master Plans are vital for guiding national healthcare strategies in alignment with economic and social development. In Sri Lanka, the Health Master Plan 2005–2015 and the National Health Strategic Master Plan 2016–2025 aimed to ensure equitable access to healthcare and improve population well-being. This case study evaluates these plans to provide recommendations for future development.

**Methods:** A comprehensive analysis was conducted, examining political, economic, and social contexts, demographic patterns, health demands, infrastructure, funding, and international cooperation. Key challenges were identified and prioritised using the "Eat that frog" technique, followed by root cause analysis to address issues of clarity, organisation, and strategic objectives.

**Results:** The evaluation highlighted significant challenges, including complexity, information overload, and lack of clarity in strategic objectives. Recommendations include conducting thorough sectoral analyses, setting clear strategic directions, and developing a prioritised investment portfolio aligned with global health goals. Continuity and alignment with international frameworks are also emphasised.

**Discussion:** The findings indicate that future health master plans should follow a standardised format, conduct thorough situational analysis, and set achievable objectives. Strategic directions should be clearly stated, considering historical and contextual factors, and aligned with global development goals. The Management Development and Planning Unit (MDPU) at the Ministry of Health is crucial in this process, tasked with ensuring systematic and continuous improvement.

**Conclusion:** This assessment provides valuable insights for enhancing future health master plans in Sri Lanka. Emphasising clarity, conciseness, comprehensiveness, and strategic alignment will be essential for addressing current challenges and achieving long-term health goals.

**Keywords:** Health Master Plan; National Health Strategic Master Plan; Healthcare Development; Health Policy Evaluation; Sri Lanka

### 1. Introduction

Health master plans are methodically designed to support a country's overall economic and social goals by ensuring equitable access to health services. These plans aim to enhance productivity by promoting a healthier population

\* Corresponding author: Paul Roshan Gnanakunalan, Email: [gproshan@gmail.com](mailto:gproshan@gmail.com)

capable of contributing to economic and social well-being. In Sri Lanka, the government has continually emphasised fostering a healthier nation through strategic health planning, which in turn contributes to economic, social, mental, and spiritual development [1]. The Health Master Plan 2005–2015 and the National Health Strategic Master Plan 2016–2025 serve as essential documents in this endeavour, guiding the development and implementation of health services in the country [2].

The significance of National Health Master Plans (NHMPs) in Sri Lanka is highlighted by their comprehensive approach to addressing health sector challenges. These plans take into account political, economic, social, and health contexts to identify sector problems and outline strategies and actions to address them [3]. The NHMPs also create a portfolio of investment project proposals aimed at preventing, resolving, or alleviating health sector issues. The most recent plan, the National Health Strategic Master Plan 2016–2025, is the second of its kind, following the Health Master Plan 2005–2015, which was prepared by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in 2003 [4].

### **1.1. Process of Developing a NHMP**

The development of the National Health Strategic Master Plan 2016–2025 was a collaborative and consultative process involving both national and international stakeholders. This process included consecutive meetings and discussions with stakeholders from the public and private sectors, political parties, non-governmental organisations, independent commissions, authorities, international development agencies, and the general public [5]. The National Steering Committee on Health Policy & Master Plan (NSC), chaired by the Director General of Health Services (DGHS) and comprising Deputy Director Generals of the Ministry of Health, played a central role in this process. Dr. D.A.B. Dangalla, Director of Policy Analysis & Development, was appointed as the secretary to NSC and served as the focal point for the preparation of the Health Master Plan 2016–2025. The committee held its first meeting in December 2014 [6].

A thorough health sector analysis is essential for understanding the overall health situation, analysing trends, identifying problems, and diagnosing their causes. This analysis should include a comprehensive review of political, economic, and social contexts, demographic and epidemiological patterns, demand for health systems and services, essential public health functions, human resources, infrastructure, equipment, funding, and international cooperation [7]. Such an analysis facilitates the design of policies, strategies, and implementation methods necessary for effective health sector development.

### **1.2. Health Master Plan of Sri Lanka**

*Health Master Plan 2005–2015:* With the theme "Healthy & Shining Island in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," this plan, developed by JICA, aimed to build on past successes and address contemporary and future challenges. It focused on epidemiological transitions, financial implications, policy frameworks, institutional reforms, and future health demands and expenditures [2].

*National Health Strategic Master Plan 2016–2025:* This plan consists of four volumes covering preventive care services, curative care services, rehabilitation services, and health administration and human resources. An additional document, the National Strategic Framework for Development of Health Services 2016–2025, was also published. The plan was developed using a common format, gathering development plans from relevant units and programs within the Ministry of Health [6].

### **1.3. Key Challenges and Strategic Objectives**

The development of these health master plans highlighted several challenges, including changing demographic and disease patterns, limited resources, increasing public demand and expectations, and the need for good governance and value for money in delivering quality services [8]. Strategic objectives were established to improve health service delivery, community health actions, human resource management, system stewardship, and health finance mobilisation and utilisation [9].

The evaluation of these plans reveals significant advantages and drawbacks. While the Health Master Plan 2005–2015 was well-organised, comprehensive, and clear in its objectives, it was expensive and lacked focus on implementation measures. The National Health Strategic Master Plan 2016–2025, although cost-effective and extensive, faced issues with organisation, information overload, and a lack of clear strategic objectives.

### **1.4. Objective**

To assess both "National Health Strategic Master Plans 2005 – 2015 and 2016 – 2025" documents and propose recommendations for future development of the Health Master Plan, which is in the pipeline.

## 2. Materials and methods

The design of this case study involves a comprehensive evaluation of the Health Master Plan 2005–2015 and the National Health Strategic Master Plan 2016–2025 of Sri Lanka. The aim is to identify the key issues within these plans and provide recommendations for future improvements. The study focuses on problem identification, prioritisation, and root cause analysis.

### 2.1. Problem Identification

To gather information on the National Health Master Plan 2016–2025, a mixed-method approach was employed:

- Review of Secondary Data: Extensive analysis of existing records, reports, and documents related to both the Health Master Plan 2005–2015 and the National Health Strategic Master Plan 2016–2025.
- Key Informant Interviews: Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including the Director of Policy Analysis & Development, to gain in-depth insights and perspectives.
- Discussions with Supervisor: Regular discussions with the study supervisor were held to validate findings and refine the focus of the research.
- These methods ensured a comprehensive understanding of the plans and the context in which they were developed and implemented.
- Through the methods outlined above, several major issues within the health master plans were identified. These problems were categorised and detailed for further analysis. The key areas of concern included variations between the plans, lack of continuity, complexity, and insufficient implementation measures.

### 2.2. Problem Prioritisation

To prioritise the identified problems, the "Eat that frog" technique was combined with the Eisenhower matrix. This approach helped in systematically ranking the issues based on their urgency and importance. With the guidance of technical experts, the most critical problem was selected for in-depth analysis [10].

- Root Cause Analysis
- 5 Whys Technique

The 5 Whys technique was utilised to conduct a root cause analysis of the prioritised problem. This method involves repeatedly asking "Why?" to delve deeper into the underlying causes. This approach ensured that the fundamental issues contributing to the main problem were identified, allowing for more targeted and effective recommendations [11].

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## 3. Results

### 3.1. Identification of Problems

The analysis of both the Health Master Plan 2005–2015 and the National Health Strategic Master Plan 2016–2025 revealed several key issues:

- Abrupt Variations and Immense Content Change Between Both Master Plans: The two plans differed significantly in content and structure, leading to inconsistencies and confusion.
- Lack of Continuity Between the Master Plans: There was no clear progression or link between the strategies and objectives of the two plans, hindering sustained development.
- HMP 2016–2025 Completely Ignored the Previous Master Plan: The newer plan did not build upon or reference the successes and lessons learned from the previous plan.
- Too Complex with Information Overload of Current HMP 2016–2025: The 2016–2025 plan was found to be overly detailed and cumbersome, making it difficult for stakeholders to extract key information and implement strategies effectively.
- No Common Structure/Framework for Better Understanding: The absence of a standardised format or framework between the two plans resulted in difficulties in comparison and comprehension.
- Lack of Implementation Measures: Both plans lacked clear guidelines and actionable steps for implementation, making it challenging to translate strategies into practice.
- Inadequate Direction and Indicators for Monitoring and Evaluation: There were insufficient indicators and benchmarks to monitor progress and evaluate the effectiveness of the plans.

- Time-Consuming and Costly Procedure: The development and revision processes of the plans were resource-intensive, both in terms of time and cost.

### 3.2. Prioritisation of Problems

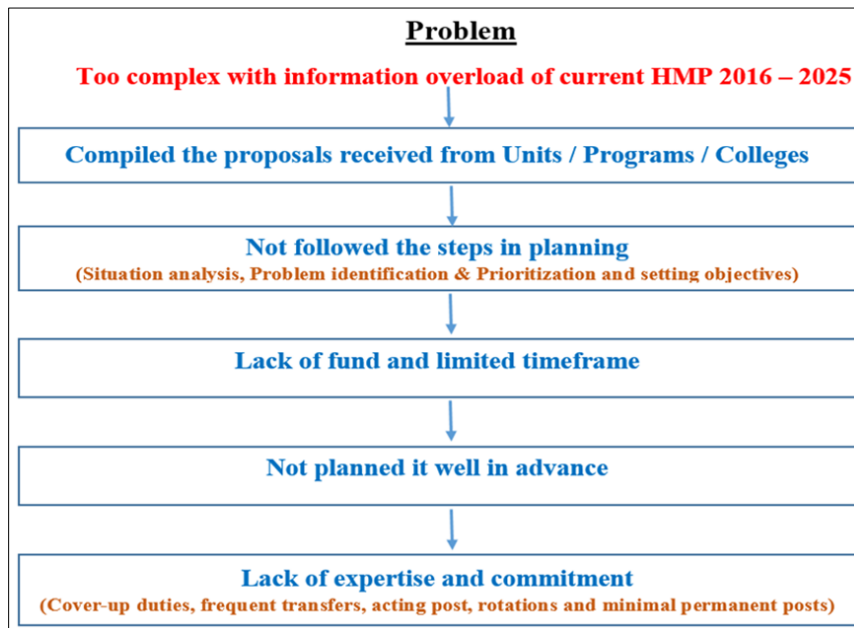
Using the "Eat that frog" technique combined with the Eisenhower matrix (Figure 1), the most critical issue identified was the "Too complex with information overload of current HMP 2016–2025". This problem was prioritised for further analysis and action.



**Figure 1** "Eat that frog" technique combined with Eisenhower matrix for identified problems of NHMPs

### 3.3. Root Cause Analysis

Employing the 5 Whys technique, the following underlying causes for the complexity and information overload of the HMP 2016–2025 were identified (Figure 2):



**Figure 2** Identification of Root Causes using 5 Whys technique

#### 4. Discussion

The assessment of Sri Lanka's Health Master Plan 2005–2015 and the National Health Strategic Master Plan 2016–2025 reveals critical issues such as lack of coherence and continuity, excessive complexity, and information overload in the plans. These issues hinder effective implementation and long-term health sector development. The 2016–2025 plan, in particular, failed to follow systematic planning steps, lacked implementation measures, and had inadequate monitoring and evaluation indicators. Resource constraints and frequent personnel changes further complicated the planning process.

To address these problems, future health master plans should adopt a standard format, conduct thorough situational analyses, and set clear, achievable objectives. Ensuring alignment with global health goals like SDGs is also crucial. The Management Development and Planning Unit (MDPU) at the Ministry of Health is tasked with developing the next master plan, which will involve extensive literature surveys, stakeholder engagement, and consensus-building for a standard format. By addressing the identified gaps and following these recommendations, Sri Lanka can develop more effective health master plans that contribute to national and global health objectives.

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#### 5. Conclusion

The assessment of Sri Lanka's Health Master Plan 2005–2015 and the National Health Strategic Master Plan 2016–2025 highlights significant gaps and areas for improvement. A National Health Master Plan must thoroughly examine the current health sector, considering its historical, political, economic, social, and cultural contexts. It should include a detailed health sector analysis, a matrix of health sector problems, intervention strategies, activities with monitoring and evaluation indicators, and a prioritised portfolio of investment project proposals.

For future health master plans, several key recommendations must be addressed:

- **Standardised Content Format:** A consistent structure that covers all necessary areas is essential.
- **Thorough Situational Analysis:** Identifying common and country-specific health challenges is critical.
- **Utilisation of Standard Tools:** WHO frameworks or similar tools should be used for problem identification.
- **Achievable Objectives:** Clearly defined, realistic goals must be included.
- **Strategic Directions and Actions:** The document should outline key objectives with strategic actions and indicators, along with timelines.
- **Consideration of Global Goals:** Future plans must align with MDGs, SDGs, and post-2030 global development goals.
- **Clarity and Conciseness:** The health master plan should be straightforward, comprehensive, and easy to understand.
- **Ensuring Continuity:** There must be a seamless connection between past, present, and future plans.

By addressing these recommendations, Sri Lanka can develop more effective, coherent, and sustainable health master plans that are aligned with both national priorities and global health objectives.

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#### Compliance with ethical standards

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##### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study.

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