

Diaspora Engagement Forum on Digital Economy

Background and Rationale

Sri Lanka stands at a pivotal moment in its digital transformation journey. Guided by the Digital Economy Blueprint, the nation is committed to an ambitious trajectory: **expanding the digital economy from roughly 4% to over 12% of GDP (USD 15 billion) and increasing digital exports to USD 5 billion.**

Supported by progressive policies, including virtual Special Economic Zones (vSEZs) and new capital and labour mobility frameworks, the country offers a unique value proposition, combining high digital literacy rates and exceptional affordability with a globally competitive talent pool. However, realizing these targets requires more than just domestic policy, it demands a bridge to global markets.

The Sri Lankan diaspora represents a powerful, yet underutilized, strategic asset in this equation. Comprising professionals, academics, and corporate leaders across the globe, this network holds the key to accelerating the country's digital trajectory. By strategically engaging this group, Sri Lanka can leverage deep expertise, investment capital, and market access to reverse brain drain and supercharge the local startup ecosystem.

The proposed **Diaspora Engagement Forum** is designed to act as this catalyst, with the primary goal of positioning the diaspora as a central contributor in achieving the national target of a USD 15 billion digital economy and to leverage their expertise to help define the strategic roadmap and policy direction. By identifying actionable pathways to bridge local innovation with global expertise, the forum will serve as a launchpad for accelerated digital growth, establishing Sri Lanka as a premier regional hub in the global tech landscape.

Objectives

The key objective of the proposed forum is to engage the diaspora as a vital contributor in achieving Sri Lanka's digital exports goal of USD 5 million and digital economy goal of USD 15 million. This will be enabled through the following focus areas:

- **Attract Tech Investment:** Enhance the global visibility of Sri Lanka's global digital ambitions and position it as a competitive hub for tech investment, backed by strong government commitment and potential for exponential growth.
- **Reverse Brain Drain:** Inspire skilled expatriates to return by showcasing improved quality of life, education, and family economic opportunities.
- **Showcase GovTech's Role:** Present GovTech's mandate and position it as a platform for diaspora talent to shape and drive Sri Lanka's digital future.

- **Strengthen Ecosystem Linkages:** Leverage diaspora networks to expand access to capital, export markets, partnerships, and innovation collaborations and to connect diaspora expertise with local startups, universities, corporates, and government initiatives to foster mentorship, co-creation, and capacity building.

Target Participants

The forum is designed as a curated, high-impact convening that brings together diaspora investors and global tech leaders, including venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, and senior executives of multinational firms, alongside highly skilled professionals considering a return to Sri Lanka. It will also engage policy influencers, academics, and researchers from the diaspora who can shape innovation agendas and guide capacity building, together with local ecosystem participants such as GovTech leadership, startups, entrepreneurs, and key institutions like the BOI, Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, and “Work in Sri Lanka.” The event aims to convene at least 50 diaspora participants and 50 local stakeholders to catalyze collaboration and drive the country’s digital economy ambitions.

Target Invitee Personas

To ensure maximum impact, invitations will be extended to individuals who align with national priorities, specifically those capable of deploying capital, creating employment, or shaping policy. We seek representation across high-impact geographies (US, UK, EU, ANZ, Singapore, Middle East) fitting the following profiles:

1. The Global Investor & Capital Deployer

- Sri Lankans in VC firms, are angel investors, or private equity leaders handling global capital.
- **Key Characteristics:**
 - Demonstrated ability to deploy investment capital into startups, SMEs, or infrastructure.
 - Access to international partnerships and global supply chains.
 - Aligned with Sri Lankan digital export expansion and wealth creation.
- **Strategic Value:** Direct Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), market access, and financial structuring expertise.

2. The Tech Executive & Industry Builder

- Senior leaders at major global technology firms (e.g., MAANG) or specialized high-growth tech companies.
- **Key Characteristics:**
 - Deep expertise in priority sectors: AI, Software Engineering, FinTech, HealthTech, etc.
 - Capacity to facilitate remote employment or establish local engineering/RnD teams (GCCs).
 - Influence within global tech networks to drive corporate partnerships.

- **Strategic Value:** Capacity building, technology transfer, and uplifting the local engineering talent pool.

3. The Policy Influencer & Academic Thought Leader

- Distinguished professors, policy experts, research directors, senior advisors in foreign governments, think-tank leaders, or corporate strategists advising on governance and economic reform.
- **Key Characteristics:**
 - Expertise in public sector digital transformation, economic policy, or scientific innovation.
 - Ethical leadership and a reputation for shaping industry standards.
 - Interest in defining the regulatory frameworks for Sri Lanka's digital economy.
- **Strategic Value:** High-level advisory on policy direction, governance frameworks, and research-led innovation.

4. The Academic Innovator/R&D Leader

- **Who they are:** Distinguished researchers and scientists leading labs or departments in cutting-edge fields (AI, Biotech, Material Sciences, Engineering).
- **Key Characteristics:**
 - Focus on **applied innovation** rather than pure theory; individuals bridging the "lab-to-market" gap.
 - Owners of patents or leaders of university-backed spin-offs.
 - Connected to global research grants and collaborative study opportunities.
- **Strategic Value:** Infusing local universities and startups with mentorship, world-class R&D capabilities and fostering deep-tech innovation.

5. Entrepreneurs Seeking to Return

- Founders of successful ventures abroad who are seeking to establish operations or headquarters in Sri Lanka.
- **Key Characteristics:**
 - Active in high-growth sectors (SaaS, EdTech, TourismTech) with a desire to scale locally.
 - Possesses the "founder mindset" to navigate and energize the local business ecosystem.
 - Seeking to leverage local talent for global competitiveness.
- **Strategic Value:** Immediate job creation, acceleration of the startup ecosystem, and diffusion of global innovation culture.

6. The Returning Professional

- Experienced mid-to-senior tech professionals currently abroad, actively planning to resettle in Sri Lanka with their families.
- **Key Characteristics:**

- Specialized skills in digital infrastructure, project management, or operational excellence.
- Motivated by quality-of-life improvements and a desire to contribute to nation-building.
- Willingness to transition into GovTech or leadership roles within local firms.
- **Strategic Value:** Reversing brain drain by injecting global best practices and operational maturity into the local workforce.

7. The Next-Gen Innovator & Ambassador

- High-achieving young professionals or researchers excelling in global tech, finance, or academia.
- **Key Characteristics:**
 - Digital natives driving trends in emerging technologies and creative industries.
 - High influence among peer networks and digital communities.
 - Strong desire to reconnect with their heritage and "give back" through mentorship.
- **Strategic Value:** Serving as talent multipliers, mentors for local youth, and long-term ambassadors for Sri Lanka's brand.

Proposed Format & Modality (High-Level)

- **Date:** March-April 2026 (Date TBC)
- **Duration:** 2 day event
- **Location:** Day 01: Premium Business Venue, Colombo (Core Proceedings), Day 02: Satellite Events & Closing Networking Gala
- **Event Type:** Closed-door, curated, high-impact diaspora forum
- **Format:** Keynotes (livestreamed), curated Roundtables, Policy White Paper sessions, Ecosystem Immersion (satellite events).
- **Output:** Post-event platform to facilitate and track commitments and collaboration opportunities. Identify interested diaspora members and

Proposed Activities

- **Digital Roadmap & Policy Showcase:** Presentations by GovTech and key institutions detailing the Digital Economy Roadmap, national digital infrastructure & DPI, and economic commitment via reforms (regulatory, labour, capital mobility, investment incentives). Articulate direct diaspora contribution to the \$5 billion digital export target.
- **Success Stories: *The Return Dividend*** - High-impact case studies (e.g., WSO2, Senid, Vega, Intrepid) featuring returnee-led companies and innovations, emphasizing economic success, professional fulfillment and community impact.
- **Networking & Mentorship Exchanges:** Curated matchmaking between diaspora experts, local founders, researchers, students, and senior policymakers.
- **Sector Breakouts & Deep Dives:** Optional, thematic sessions on high-growth sectors: AI & Emerging Tech, FinTech/Digital Payments, Higher Education/R&D, and Startup Ecosystem Acceleration.

- **Returnee Support Hubs:** Dedicated desks providing practical guidance and information packs on non-technical friction points: Investment support, Immigration support, and Family Relocation.
- **Optional Satellite Events:** Highly curated, small-group site visits to showcase key components of the local ecosystem, such as innovation centers (e.g., VEGA), accelerators (e.g., HatchWorks), university R&D hubs, and leading technology centers. For each satellite event, include a brief intro keynote that highlights relevant opportunities (eg: a keynote on available investment avenues preceding the pitch event.)
 - Digital Economy Experience Center Hackathons - Innovating with DPI
 - Venture Capital & Pitch Event: A dedicated session providing validated local startups the platform to pitch to diaspora, Global Investors/VC Partners.
- **Policy Co-creation & Whitepaper Sessions:** Structured working sessions on critical policy areas to directly feed into a post-event Whitepaper consensus document.
- **Closing Gala:** High-end dinner for final relationship building, informal deal structuring, and celebrating collaborations.

Post-Forum Activities

To ensure sustained engagement and long-term value creation:

1. Diaspora Engagement Platform

- A dedicated LinkedIn Diaspora Community Group that connects Sri Lankan diaspora professionals with national digital development initiatives. The group will allow members to showcase their expertise and express interest in contributing to Sri Lanka's digital economy through advisory support, investment, mentorship, capacity-building, and knowledge-transfer programs, while also providing clear guidance on how they can get involved in local innovation and talent development initiatives.
- The community group will also include a dedicated person responsible for posting structured pathways and clear processes for those interested in establishing local operations or forming partnerships. This helps convert diaspora interest into tangible outcomes such as job creation, technology adoption, and market expansion.
- Over time, this ecosystem can expand to support diaspora engagement across other key sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and healthcare, maximizing its impact on Sri Lanka's broader economic transformation.

2. Continuous Mentorship Program - Industry pillar ownership

- Organizes mentorship into key pillars of the digital economy
- Multiple Mentorship Formats
- Mentor, Mentee profiling and matching

3. Policy Advisory Groups

- Provide high-level expert input
- Strengthen evidence-based policy design
- Provide implementation oversight
- Create long-term strategic continuity

4. Regular Follow-up Dialogues

- National Updates
- Diaspora Contributions & Success Stories
- Ecosystem Opportunity Spotlight
- Policy & Regulatory Dialogue
- Open Discussions
- Quarterly Engagement Report

5. Investment Facilitation Desk

- Personal investment guide
- Fast-Track Company Setup and Licensing
- Investor Opportunity Matching
- Digital Investment Portal
- Investor Starter Pack (PDF + Web)
- Diaspora Angel Fund

6. Talent Return Pathway Support

- Information and facilitation for returning families (schools, housing, regulations, employment).
- Build digital handbook + portal
- Set up helpdesk + curated partner list
- Develop relocation guidance materials
- Identify 20–30 pilot diaspora families
- Begin 1-on-1 concierge pilot
- Launch monthly webinars
- Build returnee community groups
- Establish job-matching dashboard