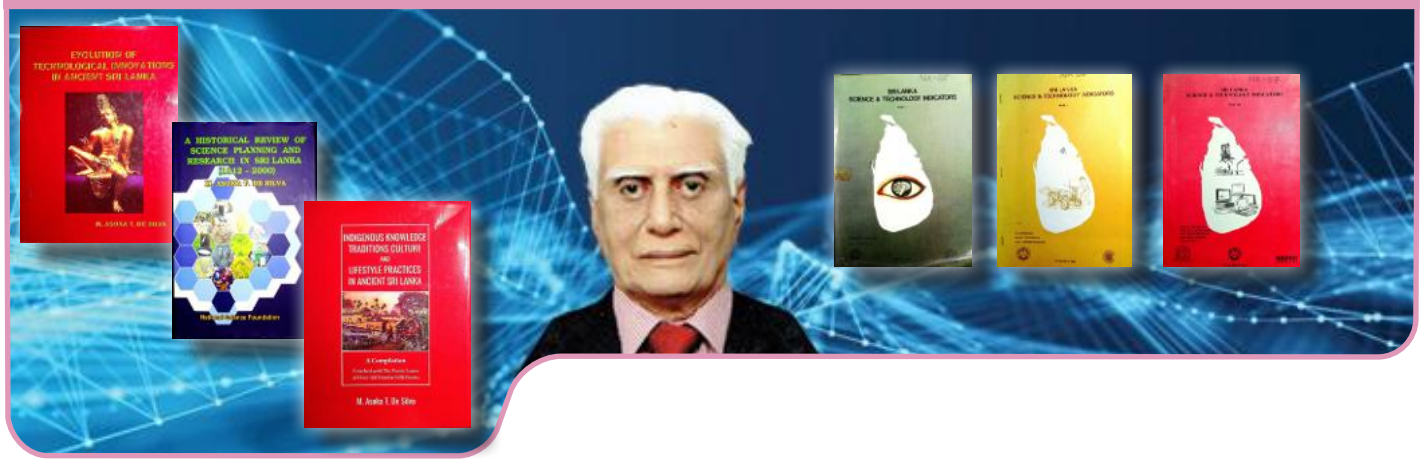
Tribute to M. Asoka T. de Silva

Geethika Yapa



Mr. M. Asoka T. de Silva's life and career stand as a testament to dedication, vision, and service to science in Sri Lanka. His professional journey began in 1955 at the Coconut Research Institute (CRI), Lunuwila, where he served as a Research Scientist in the Plant Nutrition Division. After successfully securing a postgraduate research scholarship, he pursued and obtained a Master's degree from the University of London, in Bristol, England. During his tenure at the CRI, driven by an unwavering commitment to advancing knowledge, he authored and published 27 research papers.

In 1977, Mr. Silva joined the National Science Council (NSC) as Assistant Secretary General. His responsibilities spanned the Council's entire mandate, which included initiating and sponsoring research, advising the Minister on science and technology policy, and fostering collaborations with scientists and organizations both locally and internationally. Through visionary leadership and exceptional administrative ability, he elevated these functions, ensuring that science was not only advanced but strategically harnessed to support national development.

When the NSC was reconstituted as the Natural Resources, Energy and Science Authority (NARESA) in 1982, Mr. Silva was appointed as Director of Scientific Affairs and later as Deputy Director General. He also served as Secretary of the Standing Committee on Science Policy Research, where his contributions significantly shaped the country's science policy framework. Later, at the National Science Foundation (NSF), his expertise was further recognized through his membership in the Science Policy Research Committee and the Committee on Traditional Knowledge, reflecting his enduring influence across diverse domains of science governance.

During his illustrious career, Mr Silva also served as an international Consultant to the CSC, UNCTAD, UN-ESCAP, UNESCO, UNDP, and several other agencies, which took him to more than 35 countries in South Asia, South Pacific Islands and West Africa.

One of his landmark contributions to research coordination was the analysis of more than 200 completed research projects under NARESA's Research Grants Scheme, published in 1986. This pioneering study offered fresh perspectives on accountability and the returns generated from research, and provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of public funding.

Between 1982 and 1990, Mr. Silva led a programme funded by the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries (SAREC). This initiative addressed critical barriers to scientific advancement in Sri Lanka. Among its many successes was the establishment of the International Contacts Fund, which enabled Sri Lankan scientists to present their work at international fora. By fulfilling a long-felt need, the programme enhanced Sri Lanka's

scientific visibility and fostered global collaborations. Its success was such that the NSF continued the programme with national funding after the SAREC MoU was completed. Mr. Silva's influence extended far beyond administration. He played a central role in science policy studies at the NSC, NARESA, and NSF.

In 1978, the country's first Cabinet-approved National Science and Technology Policy (NSTP) Statement was prepared by the Science Policy Research Committee of the NSC in collaboration with the Ceylon Association for the Advancement of Science (now SLAAS). This landmark document laid the foundation for a systematic approach to integrating science and technology into national development. In 1991, a Presidential Task Force was mandated to look into all aspects of S & T and specially, the implementation of the 7 – point S & T Policy statement developed by the NSC. Subsequently, the National Science and Technology Commission (NASTEC), formulated a comprehensive NSTP, which was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers in 2009. Mr Silva's sustained involvement in shaping Sri Lanka's science and technology agenda over three decades is a rare distinction, reflecting both his expertise and his enduring commitment to advancing national development through science-based policymaking.

Even after his formal retirement in 1994, Mr. Silva's expertise remained in constant demand. His pleasant personality, generosity in sharing his wealth of knowledge, and enthusiasm for work made him a trusted mentor and advisor. The staff of the NSF frequently sought his guidance, and he devoted his time generously to mentoring and supervising staff at all levels, including postgraduate researchers. His counsel was equally valued by the Council for Agricultural Research Policy (CARP) and the Sri Lanka Country Office of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), exemplifying his lifelong dedication to advancing science.

Spanning an extraordinary 63 years, Mr. Silva's professional career cannot be fully captured in words. He authored more than 100 scientific papers, technical publications, popular science articles, and book chapters, as well as four books. He was also renowned for his exceptional command of the English language and meticulous editorial skills. His official association with Vidurava as English Editor began in 2008 and continued until 2025, when declining health compelled him to step down. During his 18-year tenure, he ensured that the magazine's English content was clear, precise, and accessible, thereby enhancing its value as a scientific resource for students, teachers, and the wider scientific community. Beyond editing, he also contributed his own writings to Vidurava, including a notable essay to the 2018 special issue commemorating the NSF's 50th anniversary.

In 2022, the NSF conferred a Special Lifetime Award on Mr. Silva in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the popularization of science over several decades.

In conclusion, Mr. M. Asoka T. de Silva's legacy is one of unwavering dedication, intellectual excellence, and selfless service and is reflected in the institutions he strengthened, the national policies he helped shape, and the countless scientists and professionals he inspired. His life's work has left an indelible mark on Sri Lanka's scientific landscape and will continue to inspire those who believe in the potential of science to advance knowledge, strengthen institutions and improve society.



Dr Geethika Yapa
Former Head of Research Division
National Science Foundation

