

# Merl Syrex Chandana

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## CAREER OVERVIEW

- Leads applied AI research and policy at LIRNEasia; 1.5 years in analytics for the Government of Sri Lanka.
- Building public-interest AI with government and civil society partners in health, education, and other domains.
- Led inclusion of Responsible AI in Sri Lanka’s AI Strategy and drafting of the *Trustworthy AI* section.
- Led a 16-country Asia-Pacific hub for the 1st Edition of the Global Index on Responsible AI.
- Lecturer on data governance and AI ethics; speaker on responsible AI in government at national & international conferences; conducted training and awareness sessions for educators, economists, and market researchers.

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

**Team Lead - Data, Algorithms, & Policy (DAP)**  
*LIRNEasia* Sept. 2023 - Present  
Colombo, Sri Lanka

- Leads applied AI research & projects in collaboration with public sector and civil society organizations.
- Leads advocacy, policy engagement and communication efforts around public sector AI in Sri Lanka and in the Asia-Pacific region.
- Serves as the in-house AI expert across research strands—including *Future of Work, Education, and Social Assistance*—providing technical and strategic input

**Researcher & Project Manager** Jan. 2019 - Aug. 2023  
Colombo, Sri Lanka  
*Data, Algorithms, & Policy (DAP) Team, LIRNEasia*

- Conducted foundational research to establish new team focus areas, including analysis of online job portals and use of satellite remote sensing for public policy insights
- Secured funding from donors such as the Asian Development Bank and the Lacuna Fund to support these new research directions within the organization.

**Analyst (joined as Intern)** July 2017 – Dec 2018  
Colombo, Sri Lanka  
*Ministry of National Policies & Economic Affairs, Sri Lanka*

- Contributed with research & analysis to *Vision 2025*, Sri Lanka’s national development strategy at the time.
- Regularly participated in the weekly meetings of the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Cost of Living, and contributed with dashboards and analysis
- Received World Bank training in pension reform modeling; supported simulation of pension reform scenarios of the Sri Lanka civil service.
- Assisted in organizing “The Indian Ocean: Defining Our Future” diplomatic conference, hosted in Colombo, Oct 2018, convening regional leaders and global experts
- Helped coordinate the passage of the 1990 Suwa Seriya Foundation Act, which, upon enactment, established the legal framework for Sri Lanka’s first pre-hospital emergency ambulance service.

## POLICY INFLUENCE & PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

<b>Responsible AI Pillar Lead</b> <i>Committee to Formulate an AI Strategy (CFAIS), Sri Lanka</i>	<i>Oct 2023 - Jan 2025</i> <i>Colombo, Sri Lanka</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Advocated for the inclusion of a sub-pillar on Responsible AI within the National AI strategy and led the drafting of the <i>Creating a Safe and Trustworthy AI Ecosystem for Sri Lanka</i> section.</li></ul>	

- Designed, prepared, and delivered a 15-hour (4-session) module on *Data Privacy, Governance & AI Ethics* as part of the Executive Credential in Leadership and Public Policy program offered by the academy.

- Conducted a 4-hour training program on *Emerging Trends in AI in Secondary Education and Their Implications for Teachers and Educators* for secondary school teachers at Methodist College, Colombo.

## **EDUCATION**

- Graduated with Second Class Honors, *GPA: 3.18/4.2*

## **SELECTED PROJECTS**

- Used machine learning (ML) approaches based on mobile call records and remote sensing data to determine spatial distribution of poverty in Sri Lanka.
- Derived features from remote sensing data and contributed to the novel framework proposed for evaluating machine learning outputs to inform poverty alleviation policies.

- Conducted a scoping study of the major online job portals in 12 Asia-Pacific countries, analyzing their potential and challenges for economic analysis. Documented insights in a report and a draft journal article.
- Developed a data pipeline with scraping, OCR for image-based job ads, data cleaning, analysis, visualization, and NLP-driven modeling to assess the impact of COVID-19 on Sri Lanka's job market.

- Leading a UNDP-funded project exploring what's needed to deploy AI effectively and safely in the public sector.
- Conducting action research on real-world AI deployments in education and health to understand how to balance effectiveness with safety & document the lessons.
- Documenting, evaluating, and adapting leading global frameworks for the responsible deployment of AI systems.

- Led a Lacuna Fund-supported initiative to create an open, machine learning-ready dataset linking household-level energy use with socio-demographic attributes—supporting research on energy equity & climate.
- Worked with electricity distributors, survey teams, and energy experts to deploy a longitudinal survey, collect consumption data, implement privacy safeguards, publish the dataset openly, and promote its responsible use.

- Established, trained and supervised a regional network of 15 country researchers in the Asia Pacific
- Helped refine the index's assessment tool and led its pilot testing as a project steering committee member.
- Contributed to the global flagship report; currently drafting a regional report and driving country-level dissemination and policy engagement efforts in Asia.

- Developed a machine learning pipeline to classify built-up areas using LANDSAT satellite imagery to address gaps in outdated official urban definitions of Sri Lanka.
- Generated urbanization maps and identify urban, suburban, and rural zones to inform planning & policy.

## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

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- [1] Algama, C., *Chandana, M.*, Dias, V., and Amarasinghe, K. *Informing Public Policy with Machine Learning: Mapping Poverty in Sri Lanka Using Mobile Call Detail Records and Remote Sensing Data*. Manuscript accepted at *AAAI 2025 Workshop on AI for Public Missions*. Paper available at the [workshop website](#).
- [2] *Chandana, M.*, Muwahid, I., and Zainudeen, A. (2024). *Leveraging Job Portal Data in Asia and the Pacific. A Scoping Study*. Asian Development Bank. <http://dx.doi.org/10.22617/TCS240295-2>
- [3] *Chandana, M.*, Algama, C., Amarasinghe, K., (2025) *Residential Electricity Consumption: Dataset combining Multi-round Longitudinal Surveys and Energy Provider Data: A Datasheet*. Manuscript available on: <https://bit.ly/datasheetelectricity>
- [4] *Chandana, M.*, Ratnayake, T., Dissanayake, D., Algama, C., Amarasinghe, K., (2025) *A Tale of No Cities: Satellite Evidence of Underestimated Urbanization in Sri Lanka* (Working Draft).

## RELEVANT TALKS AND PANELS

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- **AI for Researchers - Driving Operational Efficiency (& More!..):** Primary resource person at a session organized by the Market Research Society of Sri Lanka to educate its members on how AI is reshaping the market research profession, held on July 24, 2025, in Colombo, Sri Lanka.
- **Data and AI for Development:** Panelist at RightsCon2025, held on February 26, 2025, at Taipei International Convention Center, Taipe, Taiwan.
- **AI for Economists:** Keynote speech at the 52nd Meeting of the Sri Lanka Forum of University Economists, held on January 31, 2025, at the University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka.
- **Global Index on Responsible AI - Lessons and Insights for the Philippines:** Presented at the Roundtable on the Global Index for Responsible AI, held on January 28, 2025, at the Discovery Suites, Pasig City, Manila, the Philippines.
- **Putting People First - Building a Safe & Trustworthy AI Ecosystem for Sri Lanka:** Presented at the introductory session of the Public Consultation on the Draft National AI Strategy of Sri Lanka, held on January 9, 2025, at Water's Edge Hotel, Battaramulla, Sri Lanka.
- **Responsible Artificial Intelligence:** Panelist at the Cambodia ICT Camp, organized by Open Development Cambodia, held on December 5, 2024, at the Bayon Era Hotel, Siem Reap, Cambodia.
- **Responsible AI with Human-Centered Innovation:** Panelist at the 42nd National Information Technology Conference (NITC) 2024, organized by the Computer Society of Sri Lanka, held on November 26, 2024, at the Shangri-La Hotel, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
- **Southern Perspectives - The Global Index on Responsible AI:** Panelist in a virtual webinar organized by the Data for Development (D4D) network, held on November 26, 2024 (virtual).
- **AI for National Economic Growth and Innovation - Enhancing Services and Driving Efficiency:** Panelist at the AI in Asia Summit, organized by the Sri Lanka Association of Software and Services Companies (SLASSCOM), held on November 5, 2024, at the Cinnamon Grand Hotel, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
- **AI and Privacy in the Global South:** Panelist at PrivacyNama2024 conference, organized by MediaNama on October 3, 2024 (virtual)
- **Exploring Online Job Portals for Economic Analysis in Asia and the Pacific :** Presented research findings in the ERCD Seminar Series, organized by the Asian Development Bank, held on April 27, 2023.

## PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

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- **Invited Reviewer International Conference on Learning Representations (ICLR)**
- **Invited Reviewer Multidisciplinary Engineering Research Conference (MERCon)**