

## **Trade National Single Window System (TNSWS) - Beyond the Facade: *The Reality Within***

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Sri Lanka's Trade National Single Window System promises a digital revolution in cross-border trade. But behind the announcements and MoU signings lies a more complicated - and revealing - story.

Lanka's Trade National Single Window System AKA the TNSWS - sounds like exactly the kind of reform a country in recovery desperately needs. A single digital portal where importers, exporters, and transshipment traders can submit all their documents once, to all agencies, in real time. No more running between offices. No more duplicate submissions. No more paper trails stretching across Colombo. The vision is compelling. The branding is sleek. The press releases are plentiful. But when you look past the polished presentations, the reality is both more human and more humbling.

This is not a dismissal of the TNSWS. It is, in fact, one of the most important trade infrastructure projects Sri Lanka has ever attempted. But the gap between its promise and its present state deserves honest examination - because the country's economic future may depend on how candidly its stakeholders confront that gap.

### **What the Single Window Is Supposed to Be**

The concept is well-established globally. A National Single Window (NSW) allows traders to lodge standardized information and documents with a single-entry point to fulfil all import, export, and transit-related regulatory requirements. Singapore's TradeNet - launched in 1989 - is often held as the gold standard. Korea, Mauritius, and Ghana have all implemented versions that dramatically reduced trade costs and clearance times.

By definition;

- A Single Window is ” a facility that allows parties involved in trade and transport to lodge standardized information and documents with a single-entry point to fulfil all import, export and transit-related regulatory requirements. If information is electronic, then individual data elements should only be submitted once” - UN/CEFACT Recommendation 33.
- Single Window Environment is a cross border, intelligent, facility that allows parties involved in trade to lodge standardized information, mainly electronic, with a single-entry point to fulfil all import, export and transit related regulatory requirements. If the information is electronic then individual data elements should only be submitted once - The World Customs Organization (WCO)

Sri Lanka's legal obligation is clear. The country became a signatory to the World Trade Organization's Trade Facilitation Agreement in February 2017, and establishing the TNSWS is classified as a Category C commitment under Article 10.4 of the WTO-TFA, with a commitment to develop the system and report to the WTO before 31st December 2030. Cabinet approval came in 2022. The Project Implementation Unit (PIU) has been established. International partners - USAID, the World Bank Group - are at the table. On paper, all the pieces are assembling. The question is whether they will assemble in time, and whether the result will be a genuine transformation or merely a digital repackaging of old bureaucratic habits.

### **The Long Shadow of Delay**

Here is the uncomfortable arithmetic of Sri Lanka's Single Window story: the conversation did not begin in 2022, or even in 2017. It is decades old, and the gap between announcement and action has been its defining characteristic.

2017

#### **WTO-TFA Ratification**

Sri Lanka signs the Trade Facilitation Agreement, creating the legal obligation to implement a National Single Window.

2018

#### **Action Plan, No Action**

The Department of Trade and Investment Policies lists the TNSW and Trade Information Portal among "key priorities." No portal is launched within the stipulated period.

2019

#### **2022 Deadline Set**

The Government commits to establishing a TNSW by end-2022 — an "indicative date" communicated to the WTO.

2022

### **Deadline Missed - by Eight Years**

Cabinet approves the project, but the indicative completion date is quietly extended to 31 December 2030 - eight years later than initially promised.

2024

### **PIU Established, Workshops Begin**

With USAID support, a Project Implementation Unit is set up. Awareness workshops are held. Deloitte is engaged for readiness assessments with 17 government agencies.

2025

### **MoU's Signed, Legal Gaps Analyzed**

In June 2025, MoU's are signed with 18 participating government agencies. The World Bank leads a Legal & Regulatory Gap Analysis. The OneTRADE platform is launched as the project's digital home.

The 2018 performance report of the Department of Trade and Investment Policies stated that the TNSW and Trade Information Portal were among the key priorities of the Trade Facilitation Agreement action plan, but it remained merely an action plan with no portal launched within the stipulated time period. That sentence, clinical in its bureaucratic cadence, contains multitudes. It describes a pattern - aspiration announced, momentum dissipated, deadline deferred - that has repeated itself for nearly a decade.

*"The establishment of a trade national single window system is a timely initiative as the country is recovering from an unprecedented economic crisis."*- K.M. Mahinda Siriwardana, Secretary to the Ministry of Finance, 2024

The words are true. But "timely" in a country where the indicative date was 2022 and the definitive date is now 2030 carries an unspoken weight. The crisis, in many ways, is also an opportunity - the external pressure of IMF reform commitments and WTO obligations provides a kind of accountability that was absent in the years of quieter procrastination.

### **The Reality on the Ground Today**

What actually exists of Sri Lanka's single window infrastructure today? Sri Lanka Customs and a few other regulatory agencies have already been connected to the TNSW. The other integrated agencies include the National Plant Quarantine Service, the Department of Animal Production and Health, and SLSI. A handful of connections in a system designed to integrate eighteen.

The existing portal at [nationalsinglewindow.gov.lk](http://nationalsinglewindow.gov.lk) describes itself modestly: set up to facilitate the trading community in Sri Lanka by providing access to a number of online systems developed for regulatory agencies involved in imports and exports, providing the facility to lodge online

applications for permits and view the progress of applications within the agencies. Three systems have been brought online for testing. This is proof-of-concept, not a revolution.

Meanwhile, traders with their Customs Declaration (CusDec) still have to go to the Sri Lanka Standards Institution and submit the same documents again. The redundancy that the TNSWS is designed to eliminate persists as the daily lived reality of Sri Lankan traders - the cost measured not just in time and money, but in competitiveness foregone.

### **Structural Challenges That Demand Honest Reckoning**

- The WTO deadline has already slipped by eight years from the original indicative date of 2022 to 2030.
- Only a small fraction of the 18 target agencies are currently integrated; interoperability remains aspirational.
- Legal and regulatory gaps across agencies were only formally mapped in late 2025 - years into the project's lifecycle.
- The system requires genuine digital readiness from agencies with historically fragmented IT infrastructure.
- Bureaucratic resistance and institutional inertia remain real - MoU signings are not the same as operational integration.
- Sri Lanka's private sector, still recovering from the 2022 economic crisis, needs results, not roadmaps.

### **The Geometry of the Problem**

A single window is not merely a technology project. That is perhaps the most frequently underestimated aspect of its complexity. The Trade National Single Window System is a complex trade-centric endeavour that essentially requires a close collaborative effort of the public and private sectors. Eighteen agencies, each with its own IT systems, legal mandates, institutional cultures, and political principals, must agree not just to connect, but to re-engineer their processes around a shared platform.

The World Bank's Legal and Regulatory Gap Analysis - completed in late 2025 - found precisely what might be expected: the validation workshop on the Legal and Regulatory Gap Analysis examined legal impediments, gaps, and recommendations, with findings put to the floor for validation, sparking active group discussions from government and private sector representatives alike. Gaps exist. The word "gaps" is doing significant work here. In practice, these gaps mean that laws written for a paper-based world must be amended, that digital signatures must attain legal validity, that data-sharing between agencies must be authorized rather than merely assumed.

None of these are insurmountable. But each requires political will, legislative bandwidth, and institutional coordination that Sri Lanka has historically struggled to sustain across change-of-

government cycles. The TNSWS previously known as the National Single Window and the Customs Single Window prior to that has now survived two changes of administration. Whether it survives the inevitable pressures of the current one - and the next - will determine whether 2030 is a genuine deadline or another deferred aspiration.

### **Why This Matters More Than Ever**

Sri Lanka's economic recovery is real but fragile. Despite strong recent economic performance, the recovery remains incomplete, with growth still below pre-crisis levels and poverty significantly elevated. In this context, trade competitiveness is not an abstract policy objective - it is a lifeline. Every day that clearance times are inflated by paper-based duplication, every shipment held up by an agency that hasn't yet integrated represents a real cost to real businesses trying to rebuild.

The TNSWS, when operational, will streamline the collection of information required for trade, leading to increased transparency and efficiency, reduced costs, and more potential revenue. The operative phrase is "when operational." The trajectory from where the system stands today to fully operational integration of 18 agencies by 2030 is steep. It is not impossible - but it requires treating the TNSWS not as a communications exercise, but as a genuine operational priority.

*The promise of a single window is, at its core, a promise about the relationship between the state and the trader. It says: you submit once, and we - across all our agencies - will sort it out between us.*

That reorientation - from "the trader serves the bureaucracy" to "the bureaucracy serves the trader" - is the real transformation the TNSWS must achieve. The technology is almost secondary. Singapore's TradeNet worked not because it had better software than its contemporaries, but because the government had fundamentally committed to making trade the priority. That commitment must be visible not in MoU ceremonies, but in the day-to-day behaviour of agencies, in the speed of legal reform, in the willingness to override institutional inertia.

### **Reasons for Cautious Optimism**

There are genuine reasons to believe this time may be different - or at least, somewhat different. The alignment of external pressures (WTO obligation, IMF reform conditions, USAID and World Bank technical assistance) with domestic political urgency (the economy requires visible reform wins) creates a window of opportunity that was absent in the quieter years of the 2010s.

### **Genuine Progress Markers**

- A Project Implementation Unit with professional leadership is now operational.
- MoUs formalising the commitment of all 18 agencies were signed in June 2025 - a structural milestone.
- The World Bank Group is providing detailed technical assistance, including legal gap analysis and framework design.

- USAID has supported stakeholder awareness, with 94 key participants already engaged.
- The OneTRADE digital platform provides a public-facing accountability mechanism.
- Deloitte's readiness assessment across 18 government agencies grounds the project in operational reality.
- GovPay integration signals progress on digital payments within the TNSWS ecosystem.

In a major stride toward modernizing Sri Lanka's trade ecosystem, the Ministry of Finance signed Memoranda of Understanding with eighteen participating Government Agencies on 24th June 2025, intended to formalize the commitment of all parties and ensure the active support and cooperation of the respective agencies. MoUs are not systems - but they are commitments. They create a record. They make non-cooperation visible. Used well, they are a tool of accountability. Used poorly, they are photo opportunities.

The difference will be determined by what happens in the months between the signings and the system go-live - by whether the legal amendments are drafted and passed, whether the agency IT systems are genuinely re-engineered, whether traders are consulted as the architecture is built rather than presented.

### **A Verdict Not Yet Written**

Sri Lanka's TNSWS is, as of mid-2026, a project of great promise and uneven progress — strong in aspiration, accumulating momentum, but still separated from operational reality by a distance that cannot be closed by workshops alone. The façade - the branding, the stakeholder events, the MoU photographs - is impressive. The reality within is more complex: a deeply necessary reform confronting the full weight of institutional inertia, legal fragmentation, and a history of optimism outrunning execution.

None of that makes the TNSWS less important. If anything, it makes it more so. Sri Lanka cannot afford, economically or reputationally, another decade of single-window aspiration without single-window delivery. The traders, the exporters, the businesses trying to compete in global markets while navigating Colombo's regulatory archipelago, deserve more than a deadline of 2030 that already represents an eight-year extension on an eight-year-old promise.

They deserve a system that works. And that system is possible. But it will require the government, its agencies, and its international partners to be as honest about the obstacles as they are enthusiastic about the opportunity. It will require, in short, the courage to look beyond the façade - and build what is real within.

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### **Sources & References:**

OneTRADE / TNSWS Project Implementation Unit (onetrade.lk) · Daily Financial Times · The Morning · The Sunday Times Sri Lanka · U.S. Embassy Colombo · Ministry of Finance, Sri Lanka · World Bank Group · WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement Database · USAID Sri Lanka

