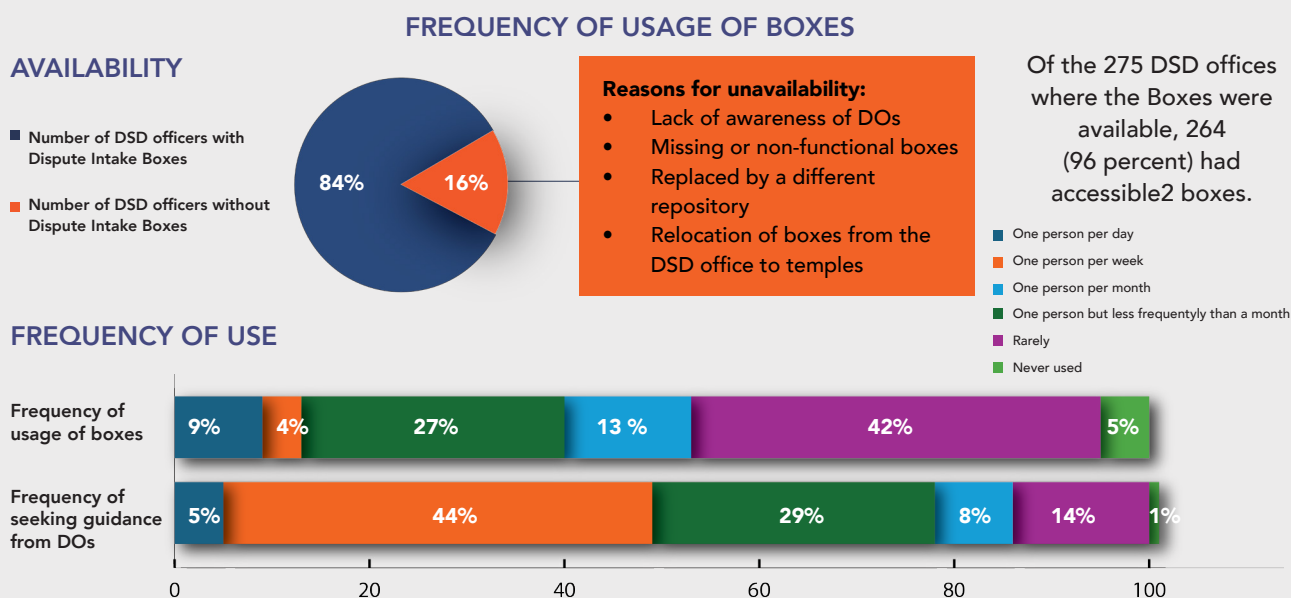


OPTIMIZING DISPUTE SUBMISSION TO MEDIATION BOARDS

To help people submit their disputes easily to Mediation Boards, the Mediation Boards Commission (MBC), with support from The Asia Foundation (the Foundation) through the European Union's Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR) project, launched a special Dispute Intake system in March 2022. Dispute Intake Boxes were placed in all 329 Divisional Secretariat Divisions (DSDs) across the 25 districts, streamlining submissions and improving public access to mediation services. In 2024, the Foundation conducted an island wide assessment to evaluate the effectiveness of the Dispute Intake Boxes with research support from Survey Research Lanka Pvt. Ltd.

All 329 DSDs were considered in the Mystery Audit of Dispute intake boxes.

Total sample size 554 included Mediator Training Officers, Mediation Development Officers (DOs), other stakeholders involved in mediation¹, and Community Mediation Board Chairpersons.



Very often, people reach Development Officers (DOs) with inquiries on dispute submission. But the frequency of using the Dispute Intake Boxes to submit disputes is low. According to Mediation Board Chairpersons, this low usage is attributed to several factors such as accessibility issues, psychological barriers such as apprehension (feeling unwelcome,

unfamiliar, or uncomfortable approaching the DSD office), misconceptions about the system's ability to maintain confidentiality, and protect sensitive information, and doubts about its efficiency. This underscored the need to raise awareness and build trust in the Dispute Intake Boxes.

USEFULNESS OF DISPUTE INTAKE SYSTEM

The system provides disputants with an alternative method of submitting disputes in a way that is safe and confidential. It offers space for marginalized communities (including marginalized women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, persons with disabilities)

and disputants with more sensitive issues such as domestic violence, an alternative to traditional systems of submitting a dispute directly to a Chairperson or being referred primarily by the Police which may seem intimidating or unsafe. The boxes

¹ Other stakeholders involved in mediation includes Community-Based Organizations (working on LGBTQ, women, youth, microfinance, and migration issues), Grama Niladari Officers, Police Officers, Religious Leaders, Lawyers, Justice of the Peace, Community Association Leaders (including Welfare Associations, Youth Associations, Women Associations, Rural Development Associations, Occupational Oriented Associations)

² In this context, "Accessibility" refers to the physical placement of the box within the DSD office, along with essential elements such as signage, directions, multilingual forms, and available staff support. These components ensure that the system is easy to use, enabling disputants to submit their disputes without difficulty.

are seen as a critical tool with the potential to foster trust and ensure grievances are addressed without stigma or retaliation.

"The idea behind the Dispute Intake Box is sound because it offers a safe space for people to raise issues that they might otherwise feel uncomfortable addressing in person." (Chairpersons Community Mediation Boards - Eastern/ North Central Provinces)

"Dispute Intake Boxes have made a huge difference, especially for marginalized groups who might otherwise not have a voice. They now have an opportunity to report their grievances without fear of stigma" (Community Based Organization Representative – Gampaha District)

AWARENESS AND CONFIDENCE

The awareness of Dispute Intake Boxes among DOs and other stakeholders involved in mediation is essential for responding to inquiries, assuring

disputants, and building trust in the system, as community members depend on them for guidance in resolving disputes.

Mediation Board Chairpersons, play a crucial role in facilitating the system and have recognized the system's value but points to widespread community confusion about its usage.

"Many people simply don't know the proper procedure for submitting a dispute via the Dispute Intake Boxes, leading to confusion and underutilization" (Chairperson Community Mediation Board – Kilinochchi District)

Community Based Organizations are confident that Dispute Intake Boxes are an effective tool for promoting transparency and trust within the community, as it provides a safe, confidential space for individuals to voice concerns without fear of reprisal, encouraging greater engagement with the dispute submission process.

"Since introducing the Dispute Intake Boxes, we've noticed a small increase in people coming forward with issues previously swept under the rug. It's an important step towards transparency and accountability in the community. Especially marginalized people" (Community Based Organization)

A DO's ability to provide quality guidance to community members on system usage depends on their level of awareness. Only 23 percent of DOs seemed to be aware of the dispute intake box process.

Awareness of the Dispute Intake Box system among other stakeholders involved in mediation was low. Only 21 percent aware of it. While 58 percent expressed confidence in the system, 31 percent were neutral, and 15 percent lacked confidence.

All Mediation Training Officers were aware of the system, but only 5 of 16 considered it the most familiar dispute submission method, indicating low recognition. Despite this, they attempt to include awareness raising on the system in mediator training sessions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **To enhance awareness of Dispute Intake Boxes and to build Public Trust:** Implement campaigns in Sinhala and Tamil explaining how disputes can be submitted through the Dispute Intake Box, and address misconceptions the public has about lack of confidentiality. Handle complaints transparently and enable visible resolution outcomes to reinforce the system's credibility.
- **Training for all Development Officers of each Divisional Secretariat Division:** Training DOs is crucial to help them assist community members in submitting disputes fairly and accurately, enabling them to support those seeking help at the DSD Office and encouraging more people to use the system. Establish a systematic approach to training new DOs.
- **Enhance Awareness of and Build Trust in the Dispute Intake Box System for other stakeholders involved in mediation:** As other stakeholders involved in mediation usually guide people to the system, they should receive awareness-raising to improve their understanding and confidence. This will help them encourage more people to use the system.

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