

# Handing-over of a prosperous Sri Lanka to our children

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He is a member of “Seniors for Motherland” which is a volunteer social group established in 2019 that wishes betterment of Sri Lanka. The author wishes to express his sincere thanks to all those who responded to the sample survey. He is specially grateful to those who volunteered to review the first draft and made valuable comments. A special thanks goes to W.A Jayasundara (Attorney-at-Law) who was instrumental in design of this survey research.

### Introduction

Sri Lanka as a country has deviated from its true potential for growth and prosperity that its peoples deserve is a nearly foregone conclusion among those who know Sri Lanka reasonably well, especially those who have good memories of the not-so-distant past. Understanding the historical evolution of issues faced by Sri Lanka and their root-causes is imperative for thinking afresh about bringing back Sri Lanka to a new, sustainable, people-friendly development trajectory. As responsible citizens every parents’ dream is to hand-over a prosperous Sri Lanka to their children.

This report is based on a survey of a group of academics and professionals based in Sri Lanka and overseas. The objective of the survey was to gather information on progress over time in terms of socio-cultural, political, economic and environmental aspects of Sri Lanka. The survey included two broad questions. First, it probed on the historical evolution, focusing on “What went wrong?” since Sri Lanka’s independence in 1948 to today. Second, the survey asked the respondents’ views about Sri Lanka’s strength as a nation, “What is Sri Lanka good at?”.

The information collected provided a useful starting point to a deeper probe on the questions posed above. This report presents findings of the survey.

### The survey and method of analysis

The survey included 60 independent people, with the following distribution.

In terms of gender, the respondents included 22 per cent females and 78 per cent males. Of the total respondents, 57 per cent live in Sri Lanka, whereas the balance 43 per cent of respondents are scattered across many countries.

In terms of their background, the sample consisted of 8 academics, 50 professionals and 2 self-employed/unemployed persons. Age categories of respondents were as follows: 6 aged 30 or below, 28 aged between 31 and 50, and 26 above 50 years of age.

All participants in the sample showed a keen interest and enthusiasm in supporting the survey.

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A drawback of the survey was that it was not based on any random sampling technique. However, the approach is considered suitable for the purpose, given that the respondents are independent thinkers, known to have no affiliation with any established political parties and groups or to have a bias towards them.

The analysis used a technique known as the “Design Thinking Technique” in processing and analysing the survey data, which has gained popularity among social scientists and researchers dealing with qualitative data on human-centred problem situations.

<https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/what-is-design-thinking-and-why-is-it-so-popular>

### **Is the statement “Handing-over of a prosperous Sri Lanka” valid?**

The above statement implies two things. First, it raises the question “whether there is such an assertion of the existence of a prosperous Sri Lanka?”. Many will argue that there is nothing like that or even may not exist in the foreseeable future. It is believed that Sri Lanka is currently in an unsustainable economic, social and political trajectory. Indeed, many respondents expressed that Sri Lanka is sliding fast towards an abyss with no prospects for improvements in any sphere. In general, most agreed that Sri Lanka is in dire straits in many aspects, including the economy, the political structure, social order and the environment.

Second, it also implies that there is a possibility for realising prosperity in the not-so-distant future if Sri Lanka takes a credible course of action soon. On the one hand, this requires a clear understanding of “What went wrong?” and, on the other hand, a new assessment of “What Sri Lanka is good at?”. These two aspects are fundamentally important in an attempt to design a course of actions aimed at making available a prosperous county to the next generation.

### **Sri Lanka’s resource-base**

Regarding “What Sri Lanka is good at?”, a significant proportion of the survey respondents opined that Sri Lanka can still reach a state of prosperity, provided that the country implements a set of corrective measures without further delay. Most respondents identified that Sri Lanka has several advantages over many developing countries or even comparable to some high-income countries regarding its resource endowment.

Based on the survey responses to the question of “What Sri Lanka is good at?”, the answers were divided broadly into three categories:

1. Human resources
2. Natural resources
3. Man-made resources

#### **(1) Human resources**

Many respondents associated human resources with attitudes, skills, knowledge and experiences. One respondent identified the deep commitment of Sri Lankan parents to

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educate their children as a great asset because that is something that Sri Lanka can utilise to enhance the human resource endowment within a short span. Another respondent indicated that “Sri Lankans are talented, creative and resourceful”, adding that “those talents and creativity end at the individual level, but as a group Sri Lankans are a total failure”. The challenge before the country is to harness the innate talents of Sri Lankans at the individual level and design ways to inculcate their capacity to cooperate within the larger society for the greater good.

As revealed by the survey, another asset is the “philosophical foundations of religions practised by Sri Lankans”, a unique and remarkable feature that Sri Lanka could use to build bridges across many peoples across the globe. Imagine having a rich culture and literature-based centre of excellence in the Northern province, linking Sri Lanka with more than a billion Hindus across the Polk strait.

## **(2) Natural resources**

Natural resources are the endowments that nature has gifted for our use. It is an undeniable fact that Sri Lanka possesses a variety of natural resources in abundance. Sri Lanka is a small island, but it has several climatic zones, ranging from mild temperature to warm weather and wet/dry zones. Anyone could travel from Colombo to the hill country and feel a mild temperature with different tundra-like flora. Its heritage of medicinal and herbal plant species is unparalleled with any tropical country in the world. Unfortunately, the country’s natural flora and fauna are disappearing fast due to wanton development, even without understanding their actual value. Yet, all is not lost; they are at a reasonably recoverable level if Sri Lanka can take action fast enough to protect them. Sri Lanka also has valuable mineral deposits, including gems, graphite and ilmenite. While Sri Lankan gems are well-known all over the world, other minerals are equally important. Consider the case of ilmenite, ore of titanium, the primary source of titanium dioxide, used in paints, printing inks, fabrics, plastics, paper, sunscreen, food and cosmetics.

### **(iii) Man-made resources**

Sri Lanka inherited an excellent built environment. The system of tank irrigation in Sri Lanka goes back thousands of years. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations recognised, in 2018, Sri Lanka’s Cascated Tank-Village System in the dry zone as one of the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS), among 50 such systems in the world. The system is a small part of the country’s well known, ancient hydraulic civilisation dating back to 300BC.

Besides all historical monuments and heritage, Sri Lanka also inherited a well-developed road network and large and functional plantations agriculture. Most notably, the tea plantations continue to produce high-quality tea, providing much-needed foreign currency and a stable income source.

## **Opportunities, potential and challenges**

To identify “What Sri Lanka is good at?” the survey probed opportunities and potential of Sri Lanka. ‘Opportunity’ was broadly defined as resources currently being used and could be expanded in future, such as Ayurveda and herbal treatments and higher education. “Potential” is defined as a resource available but not being utilised efficiently. Examples

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include medical tourism, local fruits and geographical location as those resources that Sri Lanka has been using most inefficiently. They have tremendous potential as foreign exchange earners for the country. Sri Lanka's development drive has failed to produce results so far due to the inefficient use of most of the resources mentioned above, opined several during the survey.

### **What caused Sri Lanka to fail to utilise its resources more efficiently?**

Some attribute a more significant part of the current state of affairs in Sri Lanka to many challenges the country has faced since independence.

The survey asked the respondents, "What are the root-causes for Sri Lanka's failure?" This question resulted in a total of 366 answers covering challenges that need to be addressed, which can be broadly classified into three layers: problems (93 answers), symptoms (35 answers) and root-causes (228 answers).

For the purpose of this analysis, "a problem" is defined as an outcome directly felt by the people, e.g., rising food prices. It is not a root-cause but an outcome caused by something else, such as a fall in food production or a reduction in imports. A "symptom" is an indicator that eventually leads to a problem. An example is low productivity in the agricultural sector which is leading to higher food prices. Root-causes are the fundamental factors of symptomatic outcomes and problems faced by people. In farming analogy, a root-cause could be low profitability or lack of technological advances in agricultural production. The relationship between the three layers; root-causes, symptoms, and problems is depicted in the following figure.



By classifying all the 366 answers received in the three categories, it was possible to identify ten broadly defined root-causes, causing Sri Lanka's development more challenging.

These include:

- (i) Practice of democracy
- (ii) Attitudes and ethical behaviour
- (iii) Economic management
- (iv) Environment management
- (v) Fiscal responsibility
- (vi) Judiciary system
- (vii) Education system
- (viii) Utilisation of human resources
- (ix) Foreign debt
- (x) International relations and geo-politics.

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The section below briefly explains the above ten challenges. The focus is not to discuss ways and means for overcoming the challenges, which is beyond the objective of this report.

### **(i) Practice of democracy**

One respondent summarised the 'practice of democracy' as "not understanding democracy and freedom" Another respondent summarised this as: "short-sighted behaviour of the majority of the people when exercising their democratic rights". At a more fundamental level, this could be due to the ignorance of the majority of citizens, which allowed political parties and politicians to exploit citizens' rights for their benefit. Some opined that "not electing appropriate personal as political leaders", as a fundamental root-cause.

The lack of democratic rights within political parties was also highlighted as a root-cause, which led those at the leadership within parties to become de-factor rulers and disregard the majority of people's views in selecting suitable people in elections. Some also opined that some Sri Lankans believe in the feudalistic system, where the master decides and protects the subjects while the subjects offer their loyalty.

### **(ii) Attitudes and ethical behaviour'**

'Attitudes and ethical behaviour' refers to the manners, feelings and behavioural qualities of the people. Sri Lankans are considered to have maintained high standards of ethical behaviour, with tolerance, caring for one another and hospitality. They extended that naturally to all, including the animals. Some responses indicated that these qualities have been deteriorating and replaced by greed, selfishness, disregard for humans and animal lives and intolerance.

### **(iii) Economic management**

Several respondents identified 'economic mis-management' as one of the fundamental root-causes of Sri Lanka's failure as a nation to advance. As a result of economic mis-management by successive governments, Sri Lanka cannot generate a livable income for most people, provide employment opportunities for the youth, maintain price stability, or generate adequate national savings and earn foreign exchange. These failures have led to Sri Lanka's inability to lift the quality of life in general and many people out of poverty, food insecurity and destitution. The agricultural sector is a prime example of Sri Lanka's failure to manage its resources, which has resulted in inadequate agricultural output, continued reliance on food imports, and food and nutritional insecurity among a significant proportion of people. Other areas that respondents highlighted include the continued reliance on low-end tourism (high-spending tourism vs low-spending tourism) and lack of industrial development, including primary industries such as textiles, food processing, chemicals. Despite having a highly skilled labour force, Sri Lanka has also failed to penetrate the software industry as some of Sri Lanka's neighbours.

### **(iv) Environment management**

Many respondents claimed that the destruction of Sri Lanka's rich flora and fauna systems has accelerated overtime, leading to the loss of much-valued bio-diversity and its capacity to regenerate. Research has well-documented evidence to suggest that Sri Lanka's forest cover is fast declining despite claims to protect them. The so-called human-elephant conflict

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is simply a manifestation of the declining forest cover in Sri Lanka, as humans encroach natural habitats, causing wild animals to enter farms and human settlements. The challenge before Sri Lanka is to stop this destruction and find ways to restore the loss of flora and fauna, enabling to enter the path of sustainable development again.

#### **(v) Fiscal responsibility**

Irresponsible fiscal management has led to use of government income and expenditure that ended up in wastes that become a burden to the people, many opined. Not adhering to accepted norms of government fiscal prudence, accountability and transparency and following standard procurement practices has caused a significant imbalance between internal (fiscal balance) and external (trade and foreign exchange) accounts. Many respondents highlighted massive government investments on projects with insignificant returns and that do not enhance the country's productive capacity.

#### **(vi) Judiciary system**

The judiciary system in the country was a matter of concern for many of the survey respondents. They have mentioned that people tend to disrespect law and order due to various reasons. Examples are parents trying to admit their kids to so-called popular schools through illegal means such as bribery.

The most fundamental tenants of law and order in any country are: 'rule of law', 'equality under the law', 'fairness' and 'equal treatment'. Those who discussed the judiciary system advanced the idea that the apparent disregard for law and order stemmed from callous disregard by the ruling class in order to fit their agenda and use them for their advantage. Due to these reasons, many people opined that there is a tendency to lose peoples' confidence in the judiciary system. Unless Sri Lanka can restore the supremacy of the judiciary and equality under the law, there is little hope to regain peoples' trust in the judiciary.

#### **(vii) Education system**

Many of the respondents mentioned that the current education system has failed to produce creative minds and skilful people with the right attitudes. One example is the failure of government officials to think and act creatively. Another example is allocating resources favouring popular schools while schools in rural areas with a lack of resources are left behind. The quota system for the entry to the limited number of seats in higher learning institutions that the government in the 1970s introduced as a remedy for equalising the differences in access to resources gave rise even to more issues, including mistrust of the Tamil community.

#### **(viii) Utilisation of human resources**

Respondents pointed out that a significant reason for the development failure in Sri Lanka is the non-usage of appropriate human resources in key and responsible positions in line with the best expertise and skills, regardless of their social status, family connections, and other favours. Instead of using the best minds of the land for the country's development, Sri Lanka has failed to minimize the brain-drain, depriving the country's potential for producing goods and services within the country for domestic and overseas markets.

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### **(xi) Foreign debt**

As a result of short-sighted economic and political decisions by successive governments, especially obtaining foreign loans for non-productive projects and activities, Sri Lanka has ended up in a 'debt trap', making it extremely difficult for managing the scarce foreign resources.

### **(x) International relations and geo-politics**

It is well-known fact that Sri Lanka has gained interest among the world's superpowers due to Sri Lanka's strategic location. One example given by a respondent was that the decision by G7 leaders at their recent meeting to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). "The quad" consisting of the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, has a particular maritime interest in the Indian ocean. Power struggles by foreign superpowers have severe effects on Sri Lanka's political and economic independence.

### **Final remarks**

A recent survey among Sri Lankan academics, professionals and other thinkers has revealed that Sri Lanka as a country has deviated from its true potential for growth and prosperity. Understanding the historical evolution of issues faced by Sri Lanka and its root-causes is imperative for thinking afresh about bringing back Sri Lanka to a new, sustainable, people-friendly development trajectory. Based on the survey findings, this report identifies ten challenges of current state of affairs of the country. The report also highlights the resource-base that Sri Lanka possesses which can support igniting growth and prosperity.

Further delving into these aspects is required to identify a path(s) to a prosperous future for Sri Lanka. This task is left for the next stage of this study.

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