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Achieving Sustainable Development Goals in
Sri Lanka: Prospects and Challenges**

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Achieving Sustainable Development Goals in Sri Lanka: Prospects and Challenges

SIRI HETTIGE

This paper is based on the text of the Inaugural Lecture delivered on the occasion of the institution of the Sri Lanka Chair at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg on 20 February 2017. After introducing the concept of Sustainable Development Goals as defined by the United Nations, the paper discusses the process of implementing changes to achieve these goals in Sri Lanka as well as exposing the challenges this faces. The selected areas that the author examines in particular are poverty, income inequality, employment, social security, education and public finance.

I Introduction

It is with great pleasure that I address the distinguished audience present here this evening and give this short lecture on the occasion of the inauguration of the Sri Lanka Chair at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University. I want to mention at the outset that my association with the South Asia Institute goes as far back as the late 1990s when a collaborative link between the University of Colombo and the South Asia Institute was established with the participation of several academics from the two institutions including some German and Sri Lankan graduate students. Since then, this academic link has continued to enhance academic collaboration between the two institutions not only facilitating the work of many academics and students over time but also contributing to institutional development. The establishment of a branch office of the South Asia Institute in Colombo and of a research centre dealing with social policy at the University of Colombo in the late 1990s have been significant outcomes of this cooperation. The



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inauguration of the Sri Lanka Chair at the South Asia Institute fits quite well with enduring academic ties that the institute has nurtured with Sri Lanka over many years. I consider it a great honour to be the first person to hold the Sri Lanka Chair in the winter semester of the current academic year.

Now let me turn to the theme of my lecture today. As it has already been announced, I am going to talk about sustainable development with a focus on Sri Lanka’s prospects and challenges in reaching sustainable development goals. There are many themes that academics from the South Asia Institute and the University of Colombo have worked on over the years by way of research and publications. Some of the key themes covered are poverty, youth, health, governance, conflict and peace. But today, when we look at the main policy discourses around the world, many social and natural scientists as well as global institutions have converged on a few very important themes and one of these is sustainable development. Even though the discussions and debates on the subject go as far back as the early 1970s,¹ the promotion of sustainable development has become critically important today in order to face several key global and local challenges, namely climate change, growing inequality both within and across countries and persisting or even increasing political conflict. Against this background, the new consensus that has emerged is that the conventional paths and strategies to development and public welfare are no longer appropriate, and therefore, national governments and global institutions need to explore more appropriate strategies and paths to development. It is in this sense that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) unveiled by the United Nations in 2015 represent a significant departure from neo-liberal development thinking that has swept across the world over the last three to four decades. It is also necessary to remind ourselves that the present SDGs were preceded by Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) declared by the United Nations in 2000 that the member countries were expected to pursue in order to address persisting human development issues. This was considered very

1 For earlier discussion on Sustainable development, see Meadows and Meadows (1972), Rifkin and Howard (1980), United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), Stivers (1976), and Brown (2011).



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important at the time because many developing countries were lagging far behind more developed countries in terms of most indicators of human development.

II From MDGs to SDGs

On the other hand, unlike MDGs, SDGs do not represent a set of discrete or simple indicators that can be easily measured and monitored in statistical terms. The achievement of SDGs implies a transformation of social, economic and environmental conditions both within and across countries (United Nations, 2015a). I will return to this issue later. Let me now look at how Sri Lanka fared with respect to the achievement of MDGs. To cut a long story short, I want to present a snapshot of Sri Lanka’s progress in the above regard and offer a brief explanation as to why the country did relatively better than many other countries in the region (see Table 1).

Table 1: Sri Lanka’s performance with respect to key MDGs

MDG	Indicator	1990	2006	2013
Eradicate extreme poverty	% below national poverty line	26.1	15.2	6.7
Universal primary education	% of children in primary school	88.0	97.5	99.7
Gender equality	Gender ratio in primary enrolment	94.2	99.0	99.4
Child Mortality	Per 1,000 live births	22.2	12.0	11.3
Maternal mortality	Per 100,000 live births	92.0	38.9	33.3
Combat malaria, HIV/TB	Prevalence rate	0.01	0.01	0.01
Environmental sustainability	Forest cover	33.8	27.5	29.6

Source: United Nations (2014).

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As is evident from the data presented in Table 1, Sri Lanka’s performance with respect to key MDGs has been quite significant. These include eradication of poverty, achievement of universal primary education, gender equality, child mortality and maternal mortality. What should be noted here is that Sri Lanka had already done well with respect to gender parity in primary enrolment. What is also noteworthy is the declining size of the forest cover of the country, from just over 33% of the landmass to just over 29% from 1990 to 2013, a development that deserves urgent attention, for the failure to reverse the declining trend can pose a significant challenge for the country.

From a longitudinal perspective, Sri Lanka’s progress in MGDs can be viewed largely as a continuation of a long term trend extending over a period of more than fifty years. So, Sri Lanka’s achievements in the case of most indicators can be attributed to broadly egalitarian policies adopted by successive governments after independence in 1948. In fact, some of these policies even predate political independence. For instance, the introduction of universal free education from primary school to university level goes back to the early 1940s (Jayaweera, 1986). So did the measures of land redistribution among landless peasants, no doubt resulting in a significant improvement of living conditions of the rural poor at a time of rapid population growth. The improvement of living conditions in rural areas prevented mass rural-urban migration, thus helping the country to avoid unplanned urban growth in the last few decades since independence. In retrospect, progressive social reforms backed by considerable public investments in rural infrastructure and the social sectors like education, health, public transport, irrigation, agriculture and food security played a major part in Sri Lanka’s social development (Jayasuriya, 2014).

Now, let me turn to the SDGs. In this regard, what should be noted at the outset is that, unlike MDGs, SDGs cover a much wider range of areas, many of which are very closely intertwined and interdependent. This was explicitly recognized by none other than the former Secretary General of the United Nations in his foreword to the 2015 report on Millennium Development Goals, where he noted ‘the need [to] tackle root causes and do more to integrate the economic, social and environmental dimensions of



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sustainable development’ (United Nations, 2015b). This also becomes clear when we look at the classification of SDGs in Table 2.

Table 2: A classification of sustainable development goals

Social	Economic	Environmental
Elimination of poverty		Clean water
Elimination of hunger	Industry, innovation and infrastructure	Clean energy
Good health	Production and responsible consumption	Marine life
Quality education	Decent work	Climate action
Gender equality		Eco-systems
Reduced inequality		
Sustainable cities and communities		
International partnerships		

Source: United Nations (2015a).

As is shown in Table 2, I have classified the seventeen SDGs into three broad categories, namely social, economic, and environmental. This is only for the sake of convenience, for it is possible to classify them in other ways, depending on various considerations. For instance I have listed international partnerships under ‘social’ but it can also be listed outside the above classification as it relates to international development.

SDGs obviously cover a wide range of issues and subject areas cutting across diverse fields of activity and disciplinary boundaries. It is unrealistic to try to deal with all 17 SDGs in a short lecture like the present one, besides the fact that it is also beyond my capacity to do so. Therefore, in the remainder of my discussion, I would like to focus attention on a few selected areas as illustrative examples in order to identify some major challenges Sri Lanka faces in trying to attain sustainable development goals by 2030. Needless to say, the country’s chances of overcoming these challenges are

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going to be determined as much by endogenous as by exogenous factors. While the former include political stability, governance and the public policy environment, the latter cover areas like the global economic climate, international cooperation and global policy consensus. In the above regard, we are all well aware of the fast-changing global political environment today, and we cannot say with confidence how the global or multilateral initiatives like the SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement are going to be affected by these changes. As we all know, right now, the global political environment is highly volatile and we do not know how public policies in different parts of the world are going to be shaped by changing global and local circumstances in the next decade or so. In other words, we are living at a time of great uncertainty. What is certain, however, is that key global challenges mentioned earlier, namely climate change, growing income inequality and persisting and even increasing conflicts and tensions are not going to disappear, clearly indicating the relevance of the multifaceted global initiative on sustainable development, for this initiative has the potential to address some of the root causes of unsustainable development or distorted development, inequality and conflict. On the other hand, the scope of my lecture is more modest in terms of its geographical coverage as it is focused entirely on a small island state in South Asia. It is also limited in terms of its coverage of issues. The areas that I focus attention on are given in Table 3.



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Table 3: Selected SDGs and some key issues

Sustainable Development Goals	Key Issues
End poverty	Widening social and economic disparities
End hunger	Persisting malnutrition
Decent work	Informalization of work and social insecurity
Equitable and inclusive quality education	“Diploma Disease” and low public investment
Reduce inequality	Increasing income inequality and low taxation
Healthy lives for all	New public health issues
Gender equality	Persisting gender gap and discrimination
Industry and innovation	Low investment in research and development
Peaceful and inclusive societies, and justice	Increasing ethnic tensions and issues of governance

Source: United Nations (2015c).

Before an attempt is made to discuss the key issues identified under the selected SDGs, a brief account of the present state of the Sri Lankan economy and society appears to be in order. The idea here is to provide a preamble to a more focused analysis of the issues that have a bearing on the prospect for the achievement of the SDGs.

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III Present State of the Sri Lankan Economy and Society

Sri Lanka’s economy underwent significant changes since the late 1970s under the influence of liberal economic policies adopted by successive governments over the last several decades. The establishment of a labour-intensive garments industry in the newly created Export Processing Zones in several areas of the country and the expansion of the private sector-led service industries reduced the significance of rural agriculture as a sector of employment. The overall unemployment rate declined in the years that followed. Increasing employment opportunities in overseas labour markets, particularly in the Middle East, also contributed to the reduction of unemployment in the country. On the other hand, decline of state sector employment tended to disadvantage educated rural youth who continued to aspire for government jobs (Hettige, 2016). As is well known in the country, these youths have played a significant part in much of the political turmoil in Sri Lanka over the last four decades and they continue to do so to this day (Hettige, 2010).

The inadequate diversification of the country’s economy and the slow expansion of its formal sector are two key structural problems that persist. While the proportion of employment in the agricultural sector has declined over time, it still accounts for a large segment of the workforce, i.e. 29%. But the industrial sector has not expanded significantly to absorb the people leaving rural agriculture. The industrial sector accounts for only 18% of overall employment in the country. Meanwhile, the service sector has emerged as the largest sector accounting for nearly 55% of employment and 62% of the GDP (Department of Census and Statistics, 2015).² What is significant is the story behind these figures to which I will return shortly.

Overall, Sri Lanka’s economy has grown significantly over the last several decades, despite the ethnic war that ravaged the country for nearly three decades since the early 1980s. This is evident from the data on income, employment and GDP growth. Yet, when we look at the outcomes of economic

² The highest post-independence unemployment rate of 24% of the labour force was recorded in the mid 1970s. In more recent years, it has remained just under 5%.

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growth closely, the picture becomes rather unsettling. In the next few pages I present and discuss some data to illustrate this point. This is done under several other themes as follows:

- a) Poverty and inequality
- b) Quality of employment
- c) Female labour force participation
- d) Social security
- e) Transition from labour intensive to technology Intensive production
- f) Crisis of public finance
- g) Low level of social investment
- h) Social justice and political conflict

The themes listed above deserve detailed analysis and discussion but given the limited space available here they will be dealt with very briefly.

IV Poverty and Income Inequality

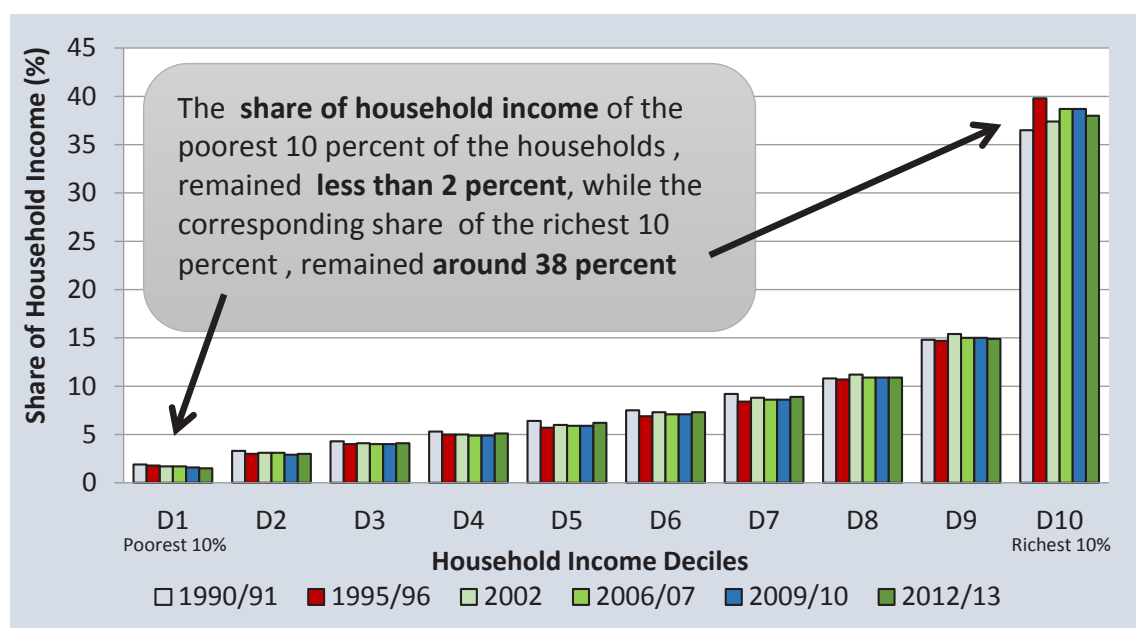
As we have noted earlier in this presentation, income poverty has declined steadily over the last few decades but income distribution has remained highly unequal. This has wide-ranging implications.

As the data shows, the distribution of household incomes remain highly unequal (see Table 4). This reflects at least partly the nature of employment. As mentioned earlier, a majority of the employed population earn incomes from informal sources, and their incomes remain unstable and unreliable (see Table 4). The nature of employment has a direct bearing on social security. As Table 5 shows, only a small proportion of the population is covered by state managed social security schemes like old age pensions and Employee Provident Funds (EPF). These conditions tend to encourage even elderly people to continue working in order to support themselves and

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often their families (see Table 6). As Table 7 shows, Sri Lankan workers have been migrating overseas looking for work elsewhere, and the Middle East has remained the most popular destination for them over the last several decades. It is estimated that over 1.6 million workers out of a labour force of about 8.5 million are currently engaged in temporary employment overseas. Most of them are concentrated in the Middle East, although, in more recent years, more and more people have also found employment opportunities in fast-growing East Asian countries like South Korea, Malaysia and Singapore. On the other hand, the exodus of labour for overseas employ-

Fig. 1: Share of household income by household income deciles 1990–1 to 2012–3



Source: Nanayakkara 2016.

ment has been a blessing in disguise for successive governments as worker remittances have remained the largest single source of foreign exchange for a country faced with a steadily widening trade deficit and mounting foreign

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debt.³ Today, worker remittances account for well over 50% of the country’s export earnings. Even more importantly, many families in all parts of the country subsist on inward remittances sent home by family members employed overseas. This is understandable given the fact that labor migrants originate from all regions of the country.

Table 4: Sectorial distribution of the labour force in Sri Lanka

Year	Employee public sector	Employee private sector	Own account worker	Unpaid family worker	All in-formal sector
1990	21.5	33.7	29.2	13.8	—
1998	14.5	41.2	28.9	13.6	—
2002	13.4	44.5	28.6	10.7	—
2006	13.4	42.1	30.8	10.5	61.6
2010	14.3	41.2	31.5	10.4	62.6

Source: Department of Census and Statistics (2012).

³ Sri Lanka’s trade deficit has been steadily widening over the last few decades. In 2017 the trade deficit stood at US 773 million, compared to 548 US dollars million a year earlier. This is mostly the result of a continuing decline of export earnings in a context of steadily increasing imports. For instance, exports rose only marginally by 0.6% compared to a steady rise in imports during the above period (Central Bank, 2017).

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Table 5: Social security coverage of employed population in Sri Lanka

Scheme	Number of members	% of working population
Government pension	880,000	6.5
EPF	1.9 million	14.0
Farmers’ Pension	607,000	0.5
Fishermen’s Pension	43,000	0.3
Self Employed Pension	47,000	0.4
Total	3,700,000	27.7

Source: World Bank (2007).

Table 6: Labour force participation of elderly population by gender

	Population by age group		Domestic work %		In labour force %		Unable to work / re-tired %	
	Male	Female	M	F	M	F	M	F
60-64	208,459	219,352	5.2	69.1	66.9	16.6	27.9	14.3
65-69	162,239	168,797	6.2	66.9	58.8	11.5	35.0	21.6
70+	249,011	253,726	7.8	50.0	38.8	6.8	53.3	43.2
Total	618,279	639,983	6.5	61.0	53.5	11.4	40.0	27.7

Source: Senanayaka and Sisira Kumara (2015).

The widening income disparities and increasing informalization of work have created a sense of insecurity for a significant proportion of people. While abject poverty has declined substantially, relative poverty and food insecurity continue to affect the lower strata of society. This is partly evident from the data on malnutrition indicating that about a third of the children

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below 5 years of age in the country suffer from moderate to severe malnutrition (UNICEF, 2013). The continuing mass exodus of labour, the low coverage of government sponsored social security schemes and high rates of employment among the elderly point in the same direction.

The above patterns of work and social insecurity are contrary to the concept of decent work as defined in the SDGs. Reversing these trends remains a serious challenge for Sri Lanka. In a country where the official unemployment rate is below 5% of the labour force and people living below the poverty line constitute less than 7% of the population, the key challenges seem to reside in the structure of the economy and redistribution of income through progressive taxation and other policies.

The developments in Sri Lanka following economic liberalisation in the late 1970s have led to a steady increase in wages. In fact, the average wage earner today earns as much as 200 times the wages paid for similar work in the late 1970s. So, Sri Lanka has long ceased to be a low-wage country in comparison to the countries in the South Asia region. This is certainly not a plus point from the perspective of foreign investors who are keen to reduce the cost of factors of production. Moreover, the continuing exodus of labor out of the country also contributes to both wage inflation and labour scarcity, and these conditions adversely affect the vital sectors of the economy, in particular agriculture and industry.

V Female Employment and Gender Equality

In spite of steadily declining unemployment in the country, the female labour force participation rate has lagged far behind that of males, a fact which points to some cultural and structural barriers to their entry into the productive regular labour force in the country.⁴ What is equally significant is the fact that the female unemployment rate is much higher than that of males. For instance, in 2015, the former was 7.6 % of the labour force, com-

4 Labor force surveys conducted by the department of Census and Statistics show that the female labour force participation rate in 2016 stood at 36.5% in composition to a male participation rate of 75% (Department of Census and Statistics, 2016).

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pared with 2.6 % of the male labour force (Department of Census and Statistics, 2015). The unemployment rate was much higher the more educated the women were. For instance, the unemployment rate among women with GCE (AL)⁵ and higher was as high as 12.3 % in the same year.

What is evident from the data above is that women’s economic empowerment remains a major challenge that has to be overcome in order to promote gender equality, which is a key sustainable development goal.

VI Social Security

As mentioned earlier, social security coverage in Sri Lanka remains low, which is largely due to the proliferation of informal employment, including self-employment in the informal sector. While rural agriculture continues to account for nearly a third of the gainfully employed population, those engaged in this sector are subjected to a wide range of vulnerabilities such as crop losses due to natural and other causes as well as market fluctuations. So the creation of stable, secure and adequately remunerative employment and the establishment of old age pension schemes to provide adequate income and access to public services like healthcare after retirement remains a major challenge for Sri Lanka.

⁵ General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level), which can be seen as similar to the British Advanced Level.



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Table 7: Migration for employment in Sri Lanka by gender

Year	Male		Female		Total
	number	%	number	%	
1976	524	99.05	5	0.95	529
1981	27,287	47.49	30,160	52.50	57,447
1986	10,618	67.00	5,191	33.00	15,809
1991	21,423	33.00	43,560	67.00	64,983
1996	43,112	26.50	119,464	73.50	162,576
2000	59,725	33.00	121,645	67.00	181,370
2006	90,170	44.60	111,778	55.30	201,948
2011	136,307	51.80	126,654	48.10	262,961
2015	172,630	65.50	90,677	34.40	263,307

Source: Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (2015).

As the data in Table 7 shows, overseas migration of labour has been increasing steadily over the last several decades. The economic and social conditions have played a significant part in promoting labour migration that has helped many low-income families to earn higher wages overseas to cope with increasing economic pressures. The lack of reasonably stable and lucrative employment has driven many men and women to look for overseas employment.

VII Transition from Labour-intensive to Technology-intensive Production

Many fast growing developing economies have experienced considerable wage inflation in the initial stages of development, and a common strategy adopted by many of these countries to remain competitive among investors

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has been to upgrade the skills of younger generations by providing them with advanced educational and research opportunities. However, for this to happen, the countries concerned have to invest heavily in education as well as research and development. This is what we observe across the world, particularly in newly industrializing Asian countries. For instance, the highest rates of research and development investments are recorded in countries like South Korea, China, Taiwan and Singapore (see Table 7). As is well known, the industrial sector in these countries attracts labour from other countries. As a result, technology products already constitute a major part of their exports today.

Table 8: Ten countries with highest amounts of research and development investment in the world

Rank	Country	Expenditure in US\$ Billions	% GDP
1	USA	473	2.7 (2013)
2	China	409	2.1 (2015)
3	Japan	170	3.5 (2014)
4	Germany	106	2.8 (2014)
5	South Korea	91	4.2 (2014)
6	India	66	0.85 (2014)
7	France	58	2.2 (2014)
8	UK	43	1.7 (2014)
9	Russia	42	1.1 (2014)
10	Canada	25.7	1.6 (2014)
	Sri Lanka	0.08	0.10 (2014)

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2017).



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Table 9: Rates of taxation and government revenue for selected countries

Country	Personal tax max. %	Corporate taxes %	Government tax revenue % GDP	Government exp. % GDP
Japan	50.0	38.0	28.0	42.0
USA	55.0	35.0	22.0	41.6
Germany	45.0	29.0	40.0	45.0
Australia	49.0	30.0	25.8	35.0
Denmark	57.0	22.0	49.0	57.0
Finland	61.0	25.0	43.6	55.0
Netherlands	52.0	25.0	39.8	49.0
Sweden	59.7	22.0	45.8	51.2
Pakistan	35.0	35.0	10.0	19.8
Bangladesh	25.0	27.5	8.5	16.0
Sri Lanka	15.0	30.0	11.6	21.4
India	30.0	30.0	17.0	27.0

Source: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/list of countries by tax rates](https://en.wikipedia.org/list_of_countries_by_tax_rates)>, accessed 24 July 2017, and <[https://en.wikipedia.org/government spending](https://en.wikipedia.org/government_spending)>, accessed 31 July 2017.

Even in the areas of general and higher education, public investments in Sri Lanka have been relatively low in recent years, not only in comparison to the situation in 1960s and 1970s, but also in relation to fast developing Asian countries (see Table 10). Sri Lanka’s education system is also a key factor that has a bearing on many issues in the country, including some of those impinging on SDGs. Given the multi-dimensional nature of education, I want to focus attention on one aspect here, namely, the need to make education more relevant, and to ensure that children do not remain entirely pre-occupied with acquiring paper qualifications. In other words, the need is to improve the quality of education in all parts of the country. This demands greater investments in education to address persisting issues such

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as rural-urban disparities in the distribution of educational resources, an increasing private-public divide, ethno-linguistic segregation, as well as the lack of emphasis on skill formation. Increasing the government budgetary allocation from less than 2 % of the GDP today to at least 3 % is necessary but this could be done only by having more resources in the public funds. Yet, the declining rates of taxation in recent decades have contributed to a reduction in the share of the GDP controlled by the state to a very low level, severely limiting its capacity to divert adequate resources into critically important sectors like research and development, education, as well as other social infrastructure (see Table 9). So, enhancing education remains a key public policy challenge for Sri Lanka.

Table 10: Public investment in education in selected countries

Country	1980	1990	2000	2013
Norway	5.2	4.8	4.5	7.3
Sweden	7.0	—	6.8	7.7
Germany	—	—	5.0	4.9
Malaysia	5.6	—	—	5.4
Thailand	2.6		5.4	4.1
Korea	3.5	3.3	—	4.6
India			4.3	3.8
Pakistan	2.1	2.5	1.8	2.4
Bangladesh	0.9	1.6	2.4	1.9
Sri Lanka	2.7	2.4	—	1.6

Source: United Nations Development Programme (2016).

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VIII Crisis of Public Finance

As is evident from the data in Table 10, Sri Lanka’s public investment in education has declined over the last several decades, whereas most of the other countries have either increased or at least maintained their investments at a higher level.

Moving to the area of health, Sri Lanka is currently facing the twin challenge of coping with rapidly increasing non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer on the one hand and emerging new public health epidemics on the other, the latter caused by unplanned urbanization, environmental change and unsound agricultural practices. Examples are an increasing dengue epidemic in urban areas, as well as the fast spreading chronic kidney disease in some agricultural regions of the country. Despite these challenges, Sri Lanka’s total investment in health, i.e. just over 3.5 % of the GDP in recent years, is among the lowest in Asia, let alone the developed Western countries, where it is well over 10% of the GDP. More than 50 % of the investment in the health sector comes from private expenditure.

IX Social Justice, Social Investment, and Conflict

Finally, I wish to say a few words about peace and justice, listed among the sustainable development goals. While the first relates to the unfinished agenda of national reconciliation in Sri Lanka, the latter is concerned with good governance in a broad sense. The country faced many setbacks due to the war that lasted for nearly three decades. Despite the end of the war in 2009, divisions on ethno-religious lines continue to threaten relative peace that followed the end of the war. I have argued in my earlier writings that public policy failures in the recent past have been largely responsible for the rise of ethnic conflicts in the country (Thangarajah and Hettige, 2007). Space does not permit me to discuss this issue here but suffice it to say that there is no silver bullet and that many evidence-based policy changes are required to bring about sustainable peace based on reconciliation and unity among conflicting parties. As regards governance, the change of gov-



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ernment in 2015 opened up considerable space for improving governance in the country and some significant steps have been taken to bring about much-needed institutional changes, in particular under the 19th amendment to the constitution that paved the way for the establishment of a number of oversight bodies in such areas as human rights, law and order, public administration and elections. Yet, there are growing criticisms of the government in recent months with regard to the efficacy of these institutions to reverse the negative trends and practices with respect to abuse of power, corruption, national reconciliation and justice. So, as far as peace and justice are concerned, Sri Lanka has a long way to go.

X Summary and Conclusions

So far, in my lecture, I have made an effort to indicate where Sri Lanka stands with respect to her journey towards achieving the SDGs by 2030. As we have seen, Sri Lanka’s record with regard to MDGs has been impressive for a country that has not only suffered from a devastating war but continues to have a relatively low level of GDP per capita which stood at about US\$ 3600 in 2016. Yet, reaching the SDGs by the target year of 2030 is a more daunting task. Even if we confine ourselves to the few SDGs discussed during the course of the present lecture, the interventions by way of policy changes and resource mobilizations needed are quite substantial. Even though there are no quick and easy technological solutions to many of the complex problems we are faced with in different parts of the world, technological advancement is also necessary to bring about the economic, social and environmental transformation envisaged in the context of SDGs. In this regard, it is also necessary to look at conventional wisdom embodied in indigenous knowledge in different parts of the world in order to find solutions to persisting and new problems that we face. On the other hand, the mass production-mass consumption formula that many countries have vigorously pursued in the recent past cannot be followed without undermining the very objectives of the new global initiative, and therefore, certain fundamental changes in the way we live, work and consume might have to be effected in order to make the sustainable development agenda a viable



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and practical policy option. In this regard, there is a clear need to revisit the public policy mix that has been followed over the last few decades. Sri Lanka’s chances of achieving the SDGs will depend to a large extent on the readiness on the part of policy makers to socially regulate the markets and find public solutions to a myriad of private problems citizens face in their day-to-day lives.



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