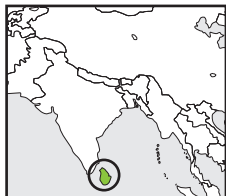


People and the environment should be first



The Government of Sri Lanka is implementing a neo-liberal, non-sustainable development model that has displaced and impoverished people and has no regard for environmental needs. Already ravaged by the longest civil war in Asia and by natural catastrophes such as the 2004 tsunami, Sri Lanka currently faces severe environmental issues including deforestation and loss of biodiversity. Meanwhile the gap between rich and poor grows wider. The defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has led to strong feelings of dissatisfaction among minority ethnic communities, who feel their control over their lands has been reduced. The Government's military victory has nullified civil society's political expectations.

Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR)

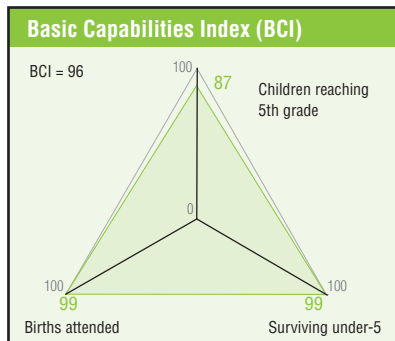
Sarath Fernando

The neo-liberal model currently in place in Sri Lanka continually displaces people from their livelihoods. It breaks up social cohesion and disrupts the collaborative relationship between nature and humanity as it strives to extract more and more resources from the environment in an aggressive and destructive approach.

In 1996, for example, the Government considered shifting rural agriculture from low-value crops (domestic food production) to high-value crops (for export). It was also suggested that farmers should be encouraged to sell their land plots and move out of the villages to seek non-farm employment. A subsequent policy document stated that the Government expected migration from the countryside to make rural/urban proportions 50:50 by 2010.¹

A tsunami that hit the island in December 2004 led to a death toll of 35,322 and displaced 516,150 people. In 2005 plans for rebuilding the country suggested the expulsion of all coastal fisher people.² Their land was to be used for the development of tourism zones and modernized cities, designed for a rich elite. It was also intended to switch into large-scale industrial fishing that would replace the small-scale, beach-based fishing on which people's livelihoods depended. Labour protection laws were to be revised to enable the free hiring and firing of workers, since it was assumed that investors were unlikely to come to countries where labour was protected by law.

Supporters of the neo-liberal economic growth model assume that the best way to make it work is by expanding exports through attracting foreign investment and promoting the private sector by providing more infrastructure facilities such as express highways, international airports, harbours, mega city developments, large tax holidays and cheap labour.

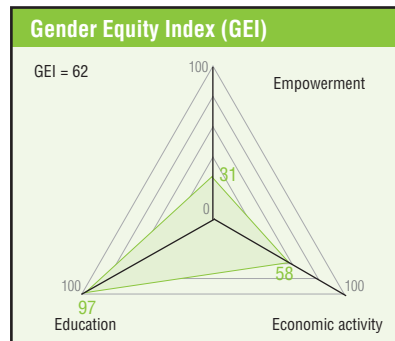


However this model has clearly failed to achieve its declared objectives over the last 33 years. Sri Lanka needs a different strategy, which has to address serious issues including poverty, unemployment, hunger and malnutrition.

Environmental issues

Sri Lanka is featured in several lists of "biodiversity hotspots" – meaning regions both biologically rich and endangered – along the Indian Western Ghats. It is home to as many as 140 endemic species of amphibians, for example.³ But now the country is facing important environmental issues, among them the loss of biodiversity. A report by Conservation International states that only 1.5% of the island's original forests remain.⁴

Most of these forests were lost during British colonial rule when they were cleared for rubber, coffee and tea plantations, but deforestation also took place during the 1980s and early 1990s when Government soldiers cleared the rainforests because they served as refuges for rebel forces. This also displaced small-scale farmers. Between 1990 and 2005 Sri Lanka had one of the highest deforestation rates of primary forest in the world with more than 18% of the remaining forest cover lost in that period.⁵ Over 2.5 million palmyra trees, for example, were felled for construction purposes alone. Reconstruction efforts in the wake of the



2004 tsunami also increased the pressure on the country's forests.

The impact of climate change is a major concern in Sri Lanka as well. For example, very heavy rains that continued from 2010 to early 2011 caused serious floods in many districts with huge losses in agricultural yields. This will intensify food shortages in 2011.⁶ Many reservoirs and waterways have been damaged and will require a large allocation of money for repairs. Erosion is making the soil much less fertile, so producers will need to spend more money on fertilizers. All these issues have led to increasing food prices, which are becoming almost unaffordable by the poorer sections of society.

Political unrest

The military victory achieved in the north over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (see box) has created an appearance of peace in the country, but minority ethnic communities have a strong feeling of dissatisfaction since their control over their lands has been reduced. It is feared that the continued military control of the area is set to provide opportunities for businesses, including foreign investment, that will take control of the land and other natural resources.

People's political expectations (such as for transparent elections and commissions for better functioning of the judicial system and civil service) have been nullified by the Government's military victory, which enabled the presidency to extend its powers and period of rule.

1 Government of Sri Lanka, "Connecting to Growth: Sri Lanka's Poverty Reduction Strategy," in *Regaining Sri Lanka: Vision and Strategy for Accelerated Development*, (2002), p. 83.

2 Amnesty International, "Sri Lanka – Waiting to go home, the plight of the internally displaced," (2006), <www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA37/004/2006/en>.

3 Conservation international, *Western Ghats and Sri Lanka*, <www.biodiversityhotspots.org/xp/hotspots/ghats/Pages/default.aspx>.

4 Ibid.

5 Mongabay.com, *Sri Lanka*, <rainforests.mongabay.com/20srilanka.htm>.

6 S. Patranobis, "Flood situation worsens, impending food shortage", *Hindustan Times*, (13 January 2011), <www.hindustantimes.com/Flood-situation-worsens-impending-food-shortage/Article1-649962.aspx>.

ASIA'S LONGEST CIVIL WAR

The Sri Lankan civil war was fought between 1983 and 2009. The parties involved were the Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a separatist militant organization.

The Tamil people, an ethnic group native to the southern regions of the Indian subcontinent, have historically occupied the northern and eastern parts of the island of Sri Lanka. They share the Tamil language and a long cultural tradition including poetry, sculpture and architecture, one of the best-known examples being the art of the Chola dynasty, which ruled southern India from 848 to 1249 AD.

The roots of the conflict go back to British colonial rule, when the country was known as Ceylon. A national liberation movement of Sinhalese people (the ethnic group that comprises the majority of the island's population) arose in the early 20th century calling for political independence, which was eventually granted by the British imperial authorities after peaceful negotiations. One of the policies adopted by the new State was to make Sinhalese the official language, and the 1956 Sinhala Only Act led to ethnic riots that escalated into the civil war.

The first documents regarding the establishment of an independent Tamil Eelam state began to circulate in 1963, and the Tamil New Tigers

(TNT) emerged in 1972 when several groups that had adopted the tiger emblem of the Chola Empire as their icon joined together.

In 1976 the TNT changed its name to Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and started a campaign of assassinations that included members of parliament. The beginning of the civil war was triggered by a LTTE ambush aimed at a Sri Lanka army patrol, which was followed by retaliations against the Tamil people including the killing of several civilians.

The war ended officially in 2009 when the LTTE admitted defeat. The conflict had a severe impact on the population, the environment and the economy, with an estimated 100,000 casualties of which more than 27,000 were Tamil militants.¹ The final stages of the war displaced almost 300,000 people from their homes into camps.² Allegations of war crimes committed on

both sides of the conflict include attacks on civilians, executions of combatants and prisoners, enforced disappearances, shortages of food, medicine and clean water for civilians trapped in the war zones and also child recruitment.³

The US-based Tamils Against Genocide group has presented evidence of discrimination, prosecution and even genocide against Tamils in Sri Lanka before, during and after the war, including embargos of food and medicine, disappearances, implementation of race-based citizenship laws, pogroms (in 1956, 1958, 1977 and 1983)⁴ and cultural genocide such as destruction of books and temples.⁵

1 ABC News, *Up to 100,000 killed in Sri Lanka's civil war: UN*, (20 May 2009), <www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/05/20/2576543.htm>.

2 Amnesty International, *Unlock the camps in Sri Lanka: safety and dignity for the displaced now. A briefing paper*, London, (2009), <www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA37/016/2009/en/5de112c8-c8d4-4c31-8144-2a69aa9fff58/asa370162009en.html>.

3 Human Rights Watch, *Sri Lanka: US war crimes report details extensive abuses*, (22 October 2009), <www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/10/22/sri-lanka-us-war-crimes-report-details-extensive-abuses>.

4 Tamil Mirror Canada, "Anti-Tamil pogroms in Sri Lanka – M. K. Eelaventhan," (15 January 2011), <tamilmirrorcanada.blogspot.com/2011/01/dec-2010-feature-anti-tamil-pogroms-in.html>.

5 Tamils Against Genocide, "Genocide in Sri Lanka 101: Sheet 2", <www.ptsrilanka.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=6&Itemid=16>.

Conclusion

The current growth model relies on improving the economy through competition in the international market. However the last 33 years show that this approach has failed to reduce poverty in Sri Lanka. Government figures showed 15% of the population living below the official poverty line in 2010, but the World Bank put the figure at 23%.⁷ Moreover economic disparities have been increasing; the richest 10% of the people hold nearly 40% of the wealth and the poorest 10% hold just 1%,⁸ and while the GINI index for 1985 ranked in the vicinity of 0.32, it climbed to almost 0.36 in 1995 and reached 0.41 in 2005.⁹

The social problems that have resulted from this model could be solved by the adoption of sustainable small-scale ecological agriculture. Based on an overall vision of developing a friendly relationship between nature and human society, the strategy would utilize people's creative potential to improve their livelihoods and life situations in a manner that protects and improves the environment. It could regenerate nature and its resources and enable the country to mitigate and adapt to climate change issues.

This approach is also based on understanding the way ecology principles could be applied to enhance soil fertility, maximizing the absorption of

sunlight by plants, allowing and enhancing natural biological control of pests by adopting principles of integrated pest management, improving the use of microbial activity and recycling of organic matter, preventing erosion, and timing farming seasons with greater understanding of natural cycles of rain and sun. This approach could be adopted very effectively to improve the productivity of land even in plots as small as 1/8th of an acre. It has the potential to reduce rural poverty while also addressing important environmental issues and becoming a much more sustainable model than the one that has been historically applied. ■

7 M. Hardy, "Poverty in Sri Lanka," *The Sunday Leader*, (4 April 2010), <www.thesundayleader.lk/2010/04/04/poverty-in-sri-lanka/>.

8 Ibid.

9 Trading Economics, *Gini index in Sri Lanka*, (2009), <www.tradingeconomics.com/sri-lanka/gini-index-wb-data.html>.