

**OneWorld SouthAsia Annual Regional Meeting, 27-28 Feb 2007****Mid way through MDGs: Accelerating progress through ICTs**

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***Overview of Srilanka's achievements in relation to MDGs***

Srilanka has for long been extolled as a model low-income country, where extraordinary success in high attainments of literacy, school enrolments and health outcomes have been recorded, despite low per capita incomes. In fact Srilanka is far ahead of its neighbours in South Asia in relation to several MD Targets. In the case of some of the national MD Indicators it is even comparable to some developed nations in East Asia. Only a handful of developing countries can list as many achievements as Srilanka, on the social front. This is proved by the high rank amongst Asian countries in the Human Development Report of the UNDP for several successive years.

However, despite this impressive track record, Srilanka can ill afford to ignore or consider as irrelevant, the need to progress rapidly towards reaching the MDGs. And this is so for the following reasons.

1. Many of the MDGs are relative goals indexed to bench-mark levels in 1990. This means that a country which enjoyed superior social indicators in 1990 does not influence its prospects for attaining the MDGs in 2015.
2. Srilanka's performance on the very important MDG 1 (income poverty reduction) has lagged behind its performance on health and education indicators. This is because its GDP growth has been slow in the past 2-3 decades and economic growth didn't reach its potential.
3. Srilanka has experienced a diversity of outcomes even amongst the different social indicators. eg, while the country has done well in reducing infant and child mortality, it has not performed in a similar manner in relation to reducing child malnutrition (CM). This means that a large number of Srilankan children who survive infancy and childhood may end up suffering a lower quality of life - at least in terms of nutritional deprivation.
4. Finally, there are large intra provincial and inter district variations in MDG outcomes in SL. Even if Srilanka as a whole attains a particular MDG (as it has been shown in the case of gender parity, for example), some regions of the country may actually fall short of it.

### ***Linking poverty, infrastructure and achieving the MDGs***

Investments in physical infrastructure has not received as much attention as it has been in the case of interventions in Health and Education. Srilanka, with a population of 19.1 Million, literacy of 92%, the highest per capita GDP and one of the most de-regulated telecom sectors in South Asia, is poised to reach several MD Targets by 2015. But this forecast has been linked to improved infrastructure and enabling usage of ICTs, particularly in the rural parts of the country.

The strong correlation between development of infrastructure, expanding ICTs and eradicating poverty is well documented. Regions which lack infrastructure facilities and those with minimal computer/internet usage have the worst poverty. The largest number of telephone lines, internet connections and cellular subscribers are concentrated in the Western Province and in particular in the district Colombo, which accounts for >50 % of the GDP of the country.

There is also a considerable difference in the pace of poverty reduction in the different districts. Some districts have seen a 15% increase in poverty in the last 7 years while some others have seen a decrease in poverty by 72% during that same period.

Development of infrastructure (electricity, roads, water, sanitation) is not only essential for economic growth and poverty reduction, but it is also linked to childhood malnutrition and maternal/child mortality, all the health MDGs and to environmental concerns. There are wide variations between districts in all MD indicators and in some districts like Badulla and Monaragala where the incidence of poverty is as much as 60% higher than the national average and as much as six times higher than the incidence of poverty in the Colombo district, most MD indicators for all Goals are far from the national levels.

This highlights the need for targeting infrastructural investments and economic growth opportunities in the most underserved and the neediest districts that have poor MD Indicators.

## ***Reaching Targets and Predictions for 2015***

While South Asia is the poorest performing sub-region of Asia and one of the poorest performing regions globally in respect of MDG targets, Srilanka stands out as a better performer, having already achieved some of the targets and being well on track to reach the rest.

**Poverty** in Srilanka (measured by a variety of indices) is high and widespread and 23% of the population in 7 out of 8 provinces live below the official poverty line. Next to the North Eastern Province, the estate sector has the lowest per capita incomes and is the most poor. For MD Target 1, SL has the lowest figure of 5.6% of the population living below one \$ a day. However since 1990 (figure 3.8%) there has been a 47% increase in the incidence. This is a clear manifestation of economic growth not penetrating rapidly enough to all parts of Srilanka.

Potential to reduce poverty to 13% of the population is possible, by maintaining strong economic growth, continued expansion of education (primary, secondary and tertiary), sustained improvements in infrastructure and, by preventing income and consumption inequality from rising.

Although **Child Malnutrition (CM)** has been declining, still 29.4 % (lowest for South Asia) of children under 5 are under weight. While most of them are located in the poverty stricken parts of the country, child malnutrition exists even in the more prosperous part of the country. This poor performance is difficult to understand. One would expect that the interventions that allowed SL to achieve unusually low infant mortality rates and maternal mortality rates (IMR and CMR) relative to income, would have helped to lower CM. But this is not the case.

Access to nutrition education and counselling, specially targeting your girls, expectant mothers and women seem to have large pay offs in reducing this problem in the long term. According to analysts, expanding electricity coverage from 52% to 72% and thereby increasing opportunities for distance/on- line learning amongst other ICTs, would by itself decrease CM by 5%.

Although Srilanka has the lowest number of **out-of -school children**, large numbers of marginalised children from vulnerable districts are out of the schooling system. Nor do they have access to alternative methods of education using the distance mode or e-learning. To be on target for 100% enrolment and completion, sustaining qualitative improvements in Education must be emphasised and ICT usage for non formal education has to be facilitated.

Srilanka has managed to provide almost universal coverage of skilled birth attendance to women in most parts of the country. This has kept **MMR** and **IMR** figures significantly low. But continued political commitment and investments in health care must continue if SL is to meet the target of 6.3/1000 live births target for IMR by 2015. Providing access to education / learning to girls and young women is a well known to be a reason for SL's success in keeping MMR/IMR at healthy levels.

Having the highest contraceptive prevalence rates (>70%) and the lowest number of adults and children with **HIV** (3100) in South Asia are related to 96% female literacy and over 97% females enjoying primary, secondary and tertiary education. SL is expected to further reduce prevalence of **HIV, TB and Malaria** due to intense focus by the Government's National Campaigns and the immense donor support as well the increased awareness of these conditions.

Srilanka's GDP per unit of energy use, PPP \$ per kg oil equivalent stands at 8.3. We use three primary sources of energy – hydroelectricity, biomass and petroleum, representing 9%, 49% and 42% respectively of the 8,348 tonnes of oil equivalent consumed. But the energy demand is growing and industrialisation has caused air pollution to be a problem with health hazards especially in the Western Province.

In other areas of environmental concerns, lack of adequate garbage disposal, both an urban as well as a rural problem, impurities of **drinking water** causing fluorosis and other health concerns remain. This is despite about 79% of the population having access to drinking water and with SL having reached 69% of the MD Target (84%) for 2015.

In the case of access to good **sanitation** SL has reached its target for 2015 (85%) with 91% population having improved sanitation. Still, the disaggregated data show how regional disparities get masked by the national figure.

Although SL has the best record so far for reducing its slum populations, the number of people without **access to secure tenure** tripled to 780,000 in 2000. (figure in 1990 was 273,000). About 50% of Colombo's residents live in shanties and slums.

Srilanka **youth unemployment** is still high at 10.3 although it has fallen from 14.2 in 1995. Unless employment creation is paced up through the SME sector and other avenues, disillusion and unrest among the young unemployed will pose many problems.

Initiatives to build **partnerships with multiple stake holders** is still inadequate and this is evident by the lack of awareness and involvement in the MDGs by the corporate and other non governmental sectors in the country.

### *Srilanka's ICT infrastructure*

Access to Information and Communication Technologies in all South Asian countries is poor when compared to East Asia and Europe. Srilanka, although a better performer than most, is still lagging behind in its investments in ICT contributing to Srilanka's poor achievements in this field. Lack of adequate access to ICT by the majority of the population has been recognised as a serious need to address, in the short and long term.

*Telephone lines and cellular subscribers* per 100 populations are 16.5 today (in comparison to the Maldives 44.1/100 and India 8.4/100) and is a significant improvement from 1990 when it was 0.7/100.

*Internet users per 100 population* is 1.4 and we trail behind the Maldives = 5.8, India = 3.2, Bhutan = 2.6. The Computer Literacy Survey of Srilanka showed that only 28% of households have internet facilities.

*PCs per 100 population* is 1.7 and is much lower than the Maldives = 7.2.

According to recent surveys, about 70% of schools have electricity, 38% have computers and only 32% of school teachers are literate in computer usage. We have approx. 4 million students and 30,000-35,000 PCs giving a ratio of approx. 137 students for one PC. (*0.77 PCs per 100 students*) and about 15 PCs for every 100 teachers.

The number of *PCs in universities* (total number 15) vary greatly from university to university; for example, the University of Moratuwa (Engineering) ratio is about 1 PC for every 4 students for General Computing. (i.e. 25 PCs for every 100 students – this is only for Moratuwa).

*SchoolNet* (a system to network schools, students and teachers on line) is functional and we have 781 Schools, 78 Computer Resource Centers, 16 National Colleges of Education 8 Provincial ICT Centers and the Ministry of Education is connected to SchoolNet through dedicated leased lines. Internet access is available 24 hrs.

The primary objective of SchoolNet is to create a network that allows teachers and students to share electronic teaching/learning materials. There are many secondary objectives such as: Provision of Internet Access Dissemination of administrative information. However, due to the lack of electronic teaching/learning content, at the moment, Internet Access has become the most important function of SchoolNet.

In 2002 the Government of Srilanka established the Information and Communication Technology Agency (**ICTA**), an apex body responsible for ICT related policy formulation, programme development and project coordination with strong links and

partnerships with the private sector. Several projects developed by the ICTA are now expanding the reach and penetration of ICT in the rural parts of the country. The flagship project of the ICTA, *Nanasala* (initiated as *Vishva Gnana Kendra, VGK*) intends to create at least 3 Internet kiosks per Divisional Secretariat Division amounting to about 1000 centres island wide.

Broad band access, dial up connections are still very slow in entering the Srilankan markets.

### ***The key challenges to expansion of ICTs***

1. Poor telecommunications infrastructure
2. Unreliable, inconsistent internet connectivity
3. Uninterrupted power supply
4. Lack of local technical expertise (SL has only 6,000 IT professionals when it should have at least 200,000)
5. The cost of desk top computers, hand held and lap top computers, and electricity is still prohibitive
6. Govt allocations and emphasis on ICT development, increasing FDI for ICT and focussing on ICT in Govt poverty reduction strategies/programs (PRSP) are still not adequate
7. Insufficient motivation and emphasis for penetration into e-learning, e-commerce, e-medicine,

Srilanka is extremely fortunate to be a ‘more developed’ nation amongst its South Asian neighbours. Its achievements despite its 25 year old conflict are laudable. Still, recognising ICTs as a powerful tool to accelerate its journey towards the MDGs has been slow. SL must take steps to rapidly expand ICT access and take meaningful steps to interface ICTs into its PRSP. Using an ICT-MDG matrix as a guide for each Goal, Target and Indicator the MDGs must be mapped into the ICTs. The UN-ICT Task Force has given an excellent guide to how this can be done.

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