

Resilient Sri Lanka – the Changing Horizon

Despite the several crises and disasters Sri Lanka had gone through, it has effectively recovered and bounced back fast, quite different to many other countries and communities.

Sri Lanka has had its share of crises and disasters. Being a part of the British Empire, it too had to face severe socio-economic hardships and uncertainties during the World wars I and II. Since then various forms of socio-political, economic and environmental disruptions, crises and disasters have happened. However, it is in a sense unique and interesting to note how Sri Lanka has been able to bounce back to normalcy, relatively fast. This is called 'Resilience'.

To define it for common understanding, 'resilience' is the capacity of a system, enterprise, community or a person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances.

Events of disruption

When we consider a country as whole, in comparison to an entity, single community or a family, it is much more complex. Yet, what is seen in Sri Lanka is extraordinary.

The most recent disruption, which is very clear in our memory is the 2004 December 26th Tsunami. 35,352 lost their life. and nearly 500,000 people were displaced, according to US Geological survey statistics. Also it has been reported that over 70,000 homes were completely destroyed.

Sri Lanka also went through a prolonged ethnic conflict, primarily in the north and east of the country and between 80,000 to 100,000 people lost their lives in addition to several people and servicemen became seriously incapacitated during the conflict. Though in both these events, the nation flipped over to catastrophic levels, but has been able to bounce back to normal or new normal eco and social status, as seen today.

Historically, Sri Lanka has faced many crises and disasters from time to time. During 1934/1935, 5 million cases of Malaria had been reported with 80,000 deaths. The epidemic had reached serious levels of contagious. According to WHO statistics, systematic eradication measures had been in place from the very start and the number of reported cases had reduced to 210,000 in the year 2000 and in 2014 the number of cases reported was only 124. Today in February 2015, the number of cases reported is almost nil. This is a great achievement. Similarly diseases and epidemics such as polio, whooping cough, cholera and TB which once were spreading across the country killing thousands, have been brought under control

Due to it's Geographic location Sri Lanka, is constantly exposed to meteorological threats such as severe droughts, floods, cyclones and earth-slips. The constantly faced weather related events has had its own score of losses .They have become more frequent in the last decade. Global warming may have a contributory role in it. Risk management measures have been systematically introduced, to reduce the harsh impacts of the natural disasters, along with emergency response infrastructure.

Culture of preparedness

The history provides ample evidence, how the ancient kings of Sri Lanka build resilience to such weather related crises. The hydraulic civilisation found in the dry-zone of Sri Lanka constructed by the ancient kings, thousands of years ago, display an evidence of remarkable human effort to mitigate the risks of

drought as well as severe flooding. They had the foresight to build huge dams and reservoirs to trap rain water. Benefits of them were multi-folded: it prevented inundation the rice fields and crops during heavy rains and to prepare for the drought, when water become scarce for sustenance of human life and also for irrigation. It is interesting to note the project management practice adopted by the ancient kings. It is unique as they got the entire community engaged in the construction of all these intricate engineering schemes, instead of forced or slave labour. Records indicate that there are over 10,000 reservoirs scattered in the dry zone of the country. They are no doubt, can be considered ancient disaster risk reduction plans.

These efforts have continued over the years for resilient Sri Lanka, and furthermore, today's science and technology has been adopted to rehabilitate many of them and the construction of huge reservoirs such as the 'Victoria dam' under the Mahaweli Development programme, with approximately 1900 sq. km. catchment area.

People and culture – a key contributor

It is relevant to reflect and examine what factors and elements that helped this small island nation for the speedy and smooth recovery from all these crisis and its ability to bounce back to normalcy. As highlighted the nation as a whole, had survived remarkably well, after so many devastating events.

There is no empirical evidence or research to determine what exactly this 'model of success' is. Several hypothesis can be considered. Is it the collective effort to suffuse the system with distributed intelligence and redundancy, or is it the preparation for anticipated threats, or is it the unique nature of the Sri Lankan culture with a strong value system based on 'karma'? It could be a good opportunity for more detailed study.

As a professional who has specialised in this discipline of business and community resilience and disaster management, there are couple of key elements that ensures timely recovery, restoration, and resumption.

Perhaps, the culture and people always have a key role in the restoration of normalcy. Sri Lanka being predominantly a Buddhist country and the core principle of Buddhism being, loving kindness (*metta*), compassion and caring (*karuna*), rejoice at others success (*muditha*) and equanimity or self-composure both in joy and in sorrow (*upekha*) could be a major factor of influence. People have a strong belief that practicing of boundless mind of love, extinguishes all sorrows and anxieties in the hearts of living beings. This human behaviour is clearly evident during any disaster whether in the village, city and nationwide, forming effective clusters or groups- a hallmark of its society. People willingly and enthusiastically come together and help people around and each other, freeing those in difficult circumstances.

The legendary English cricketer Ian Botham has said “ *We wanted to show our grandchildren that the life isn't easy; that terrible things happen but you have to pick yourself up, dust yourself and carry on....!*” . “*The Sri Lankans are the best example of this – they're always smiling and there is no bitterness about the unfair hand they've been dealt, with the civil war and tsunami. They are the reason my wife Keith and I keep returning*” . This supports the social resilience and the human character mentioned earlier.

Public and social Infrastructure

The good public and social infrastructure is another key factor that pushes speedy recovery. Sri Lanka is just one of the very few countries in the world that provide completely free education from the kindergarten to the final year at the university. This had resulted in Sri Lanka reaching the highest

literacy rate in the South Asia i.e. 98.1% (higher than our neighbouring countries such as Singapore – 95.9%, Thailand -93.%, India -74.4% , Pakistan - 55% and),.

Public health services are also free to all citizens. Including hospitalisation and surgery. For those who need, private medical facilities are available which operates in parallel. The medical education in Sri Lanka is considered one of the best in south-asia , now producing medical doctors in over 50 distinctive specialities. Preventative medicine is mandatory in Sri Lanka. All citizens are health literate and practice of good sanitation and cleanliness. Anyone visiting a home in the remotest village in Sri Lanka can witness this. The urban poverty as seen in most of Sri Lanka’s immediate neighbours, which has cascading impacts on the socio-economic system, is well under control.

Preparedness for the unexpected

People in Sri Lanka today are far more prepared to face unexpected events or disasters. At the time of the boxing day tsunami, Sri Lanka was utterly unprepared to face an event of such colossal. Sri Lanka is one of the very few countries that has a ministry responsible for ‘Disaster Management’ with a cabinet minister responsible for its activities. Its main role is to achieve ‘A safer Sri Lanka’. Ongoing education, public awareness as well as research on disaster management in Sri Lanka is remarkable. However, more needs to be done in adopting international best practices.

Changing horizon

With today’s development in globalisation, technological advancements, geo-politics, climate change, social conflicts, social demographics etc. the view and the horizon is in constant motion. Leave alone big or small business and entities, for a country is immensely complex to plan for the future. . The need is to correctly understand these changes. They could be opportunities or threats, and the planners need to be cognizant of them to adapt fittingly. It is common understanding that predictability decreases with time but the future is a consequence of the current trends. Research suggests that resilience pertains to the ability of a system to sustain itself through change via adaptation and occasional transformation. The interplay between the external forces, internal forces and the response capability determines the resilience of a country or community.

Let’s have a quick look at five of the significant internal concerns seemingly vulnerable from Sri Lanka context.

Social and communal harmony: This is vital for Sri Lanka’s stability. Being a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country, every effort has to be directed toward prosperity of every individual. Opportunities and the environment for every child to achieve his or her aspirations could pave the way for stability and social harmony. The past provide valuable lessons to build the future. Sri Lanka could be a shining example to the rest of the world, all becoming partners of prosperity.

Unionised labour: The importance and complex nature of trade unions in a democratic country like Sri Lanka, has to be understood. Right strategies and the maintenance of trusted relationship with the trade unions would result in harmonious and resilient work force..

Employment: Economic development of the country with the creation of right skill sets and knowledge that is needed for the time is known solution for employment. According to latest published statics, the unemployment rate in Sri Lanka is 4.5%. Though it compares well with the developed and developing countries, keeping the unemployment rate low is a key factor for nation’s progress and resilience.

Preparedness for natural disasters Disaster risk reduction and better preparation to unforeseen events are not one-off activities. Best practice suggests that it has to be strategic and ongoing, as a part of day

to day activity. We should not wait for a disaster to happen. Rehearsing, testing the plans, and awareness building are some of the regular activities. Though managed centrally through the 'National Disaster Management Centre' provisional council governors need to be incorporated and made responsible for implementation of disaster risk reduction measures, in their territories. There need to be constant monitoring of, especially the 'hot spots', which are vulnerable to earth-slips, floods, droughts or health hazards. Protection of human life is the top priority and viable implementation frameworks, policies and procedures could ensure the operation of critical services at all levels during emergencies. Today the new technologies such as early warning systems, intelligent wireless communication networks, emergency alerting are being used in many countries, and Sri Lanka need to examine their suitability.

Utility distribution; Sri Lanka's public utility act covers three essential utilities for day to day living. They are electricity, water and petroleum. Any protracted disruptions to the supply of any of them could be catastrophic. The Governments have been taking measures to upgrade the infrastructure from time to time. However it has to be aligned to growing demands and potential challenges. It is interesting to note that almost 50% of Sri Lanka's electricity is hydropower and the balance is from thermal and a small part from sources which are renewable such as wind and solar power. Emphasis need to be more on renewable energy (also called clean energy) for Sri Lanka. With a vast renewable energy resource base, Sri Lanka can look forward for a better future, than most countries.

Conclusion

Resilience is a strategic capability. Sri Lanka has demonstrated well, its ability to face disasters or crisis and its uniqueness to bounce back to normalcy. Over the years, successive governments have introduced key changes to public service and the national infrastructure, to progressively build country stability and to mitigate the risk of failure. Due to the rapid changes that are happening in the world we live, strengthening the level of resilience and capability, need to be ongoing. Absence of frameworks, policies, guideless concerted effort is needed to effectively integrate the work already being done for better results. Some measures are essential to continually monitor the country's level of disaster preparedness and be made transparent.

Key words: Resilience, Disasters, Tsunami, preparedness, People, Response, Public and Social Infrastructure

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