

Inauguration of the Strategic Review Process leading to Zero Hunger in Sri Lanka

28th September 2016

The inauguration of the Strategic Review Process leading to Zero Hunger in Sri Lanka was held on 28th September 2016, at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH), Colombo. The event was attended by a large gathering including the Honourable K.C. Logeswaran, Governor of the Western Province of Sri Lanka, Mr Esela Weerakoon, Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ms Renuka Ekanayake, Secretary, Ministry of Rural Economic Development and Senior Government officials, Ambassadors and Members of the Diplomatic Corps and UN Agencies, Provincial Council Members, former Ministers, former Foreign Secretaries, former Ambassadors of Sri Lanka, Members of the Civil Society, NGO's, the Private Sector, Women's representatives, Youth Representatives, the media and others.

The event commenced with a short film on "SDG 2: Zero Hunger and Improved Nutrition through Sustainable Agriculture" setting the tone for the activities of the morning.

The Keynote Address was delivered by Madam Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Lead Convener and Chair, South Asia Policy & Research Institute, inaugurating Sri Lanka's "Zero Hunger" Programme. A summary of the Inaugural Address:

It was a great privilege to be invited to be the Lead Convener for this project in Sri Lanka. This invitation was accepted, because the challenges of fighting hunger and malnutrition are so important. Millions of people around the world go hungry on a daily basis. In Sri Lanka however, there are no deaths arising out of hunger. Nevertheless, about 10% of the population remains malnourished. Of this, 20% are children under the age of 5 years while about 25% of pregnant mothers also remain malnourished.

Despite being a largely agricultural country, a significant number of Sri Lankan farmers do not earn a sufficient income to feed their families and provide other facilities. Sri Lanka has had a long history of handing out free rice rations by the state, a practice which can be traced back to colonial times under the British. Successive post-colonial governments then continued this practice resulting in free rations playing a key role in every election since independence, to the point of nearly bankrupting the economy.



The country is now considering policies to develop agriculture. There was a time in Sri Lanka where about 65% of the population in the country engaged in farming and most of these were small farmers engaged in tea, rubber, coconut, vegetable and paddy cultivation etc. Sri Lanka now has a well educated population but there is still a need for policies to improve the productivity of agriculture and agricultural produce. Notwithstanding the diverse policies implemented by various governments, there still remains a plethora of gaps in these policies [related to agriculture]. If there were no such gaps Sri Lanka would have been fully self-sufficient and exporting food by now. It is worth noting that, about 1800 years ago, during the period of the ancient kings, Sri Lanka did export rice to countries such as Indo China and Myanmar. Modern Sri Lanka has the skilled human resource and very fertile land but the issue is the lack of right policies to improve productivity in agriculture.

Another pressing issue is the lack of awareness among citizens on proper nutrition. Even educated individuals still seem to lack adequate knowledge concerning good nutrition. The Ministry of Health is currently conducting several programs to raise

awareness about nutrition in order to improve the health of the population, especially to avoid developing Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs).

The WFP and the UN have kindly extended their support to Sri Lanka to ensure that it eliminates hunger over the next few years. There is now scope for working in tandem with the Sri Lankan government, especially the Ministries of Agriculture and Health to achieve these objectives and goals in a shorter time as possible. There is no doubt that the government at the highest level will support this endeavour. What has been lacking in Sri Lanka has been better policies and better organization to implement those policies.

A key aspect of this program is to engage a large section of people so that it will not be a mere government initiative but one which involves the non-governmental sectors, support of the international organizations and members of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). There is a need to set up new structures to include all of this into a program such as this. The Sri Lankan government has previously been highly suspicious of NGOs, cultivating a hatred for them and the international community. However, this culture has changed now, with the present government attempting to engage NGOs and the private sector to participate in at least some government programs. This has been especially prominent in the government's reconciliation programs. What is evident is that the government alone cannot achieve the requisite goals and civil society engagement is essential. In Sri Lanka the civil society played a crucial role in the bloodless revolution seen on 8th January 2015 and are hence better organized and more willing to engage with the government and actively participate in the progress of Sri Lanka.

Ms. Una McCauley, United Nations Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka next addressed the gathering on "UN's contribution towards achieving SDG's in Sri Lanka". A summary of the speech:

The strategic review for the Zero Hunger programme in Sri Lanka is an important one, as, even though there are no individuals suffering from starvation in the country, hunger and especially malnourishment remains a significant issue. As a country that has been at the forefront of reaching global development targets, Sri Lanka's contribution as a nation to the regional and global development agenda will be important.

Taking Zero Hunger as an objective is essentially addressing sustainable development. If Sri Lanka is to design the best strategies and policies to achieve Zero Hunger, then it is essential that the various elements that lead to hunger or malnutrition/over nutrition are taken apart.

Hence this strategic review is going to be very important. In launching this initiative almost a year after the SDGs came into being, Sri Lanka is well positioned to tackle this overdue development challenge in the country.

Malnutrition, under nutrition and over nutrition in Sri Lanka has been the subject of many debates, some of which have been contradictory and controversial. No doubt there has been some progress made in this regard, but this has been insufficient for Sri Lanka to reach its MGD targets on malnutrition in 2015. Hence the SDGs with their more inter-sectoral and integrated characteristics are stronger global developmental tools with which the remaining challenges pertaining to nutrition can be addressed.

The government's multi-sectoral nutrition plan has been given a new lease of life. Its integrated approach allows both government and non-governmental engagement thereby tackling the vexing question of malnutrition and under nutrition in the country. Central, provincial, district and village level activities and integrated strategies is what will take to tackle these pockets in which people remain hungry or malnourished.

The costs of malnutrition are suffered not just by the individuals concerned (i.e. losses in terms of growth and health) but it also has wider implications in terms of loss of economic potential, increased costs of long term health care borne by families and communities, and the loss to production. This is why malnutrition matters to all and to all the SDGs and not just SDG 2. This is evident when all the SDGs with their strategies and goals are compiled together. Currently, there is a "cheat sheet" being prepared for Sri Lanka with all the SDGs in English, Sinhala and Tamil. Not only do SDGs look at the impact malnutrition has on individuals and communities and on their productivity but it also focuses on the sustainable production and quality of food, the modernization of the agricultural sector, the protection of the eco system in which food is produced, and the fair commodities market which are all vital to the sustainability of Sri Lanka's large agricultural sector.

A well educated and forward looking work force is a sound investment as is research and development in agriculture and food production. A key understanding of the eco-systems and impact on climate change are also going to be vital to reducing hunger globally and to bring it to zero in Sri Lanka.

This important strategic review of SDG 2, will serve as a model to the UN to see how the UN can support the Sri Lankan government with strategic reviews of others SDGs and how the government is positioned to achieve those SDGs. The UN hopes that, that will lead to existing good practice models pertaining to SDG 2 being replicated and adapted for other SDGs.

The UN will, as is the normal practice with middle income countries, move away from project based work over time and become more engaged in providing technical assistance. The SGDs are sometimes slated as UN goals and in as much as every country makes up the UN, these are indeed UN goals and the UN's goals in Sri Lanka. The UN in Sri Lanka will support the government to realise the SGDs as a central premise of everything it does in its future work. Human security, climate, governance and data are the four big blocks of the UNs work but each of the SGDs are located within those four blocks. The UN looks forward to the outcome of this strategic review to inform the UN's future work and hope that everyone together will position the country to reach Zero Hunger in a short period of time.

Ms. Susana Rico, Officer-in Charge, UN World Food Programme, Colombo Office next spoke on "Food Security in Sri Lanka". A summary of the speech:

There were a number of side events at the start of the UN General Assembly in September 2016 many of which were about Zero Hunger and the underlying theme was whether it is achievable. Zero Hunger for many countries is a just a small stone throw away and Sri Lanka is very well placed to make that leap.

As per World Bank and national statistics, economic growth in Sri Lanka has averaged about 7% over the past five years while outperforming other countries in most MDG goals such as reducing poverty, health, and environment sustainability. Primary education has been nearly universal while enrolment at the secondary and tertiary education levels is on the rise. Maternal and infant mortality too remain very low and hence the country has made great strides in reducing poverty and promoting prosperity.

However, as recognized in the national nutrition plan, the country's statistics on malnutrition do not match its indicators on health or economics. For example nearly 19% of children under the age of 5 years are acutely malnourished. This is about 1 in 5 children and translates to about 350,000 children. This figure further masks regional figures which in some cases can be as high as 33% which means in some areas in Sri Lanka about 1 in 3 children are malnourished.

17% of babies born in Sri Lanka are still under 2.5kgs which is a direct consequence of maternal malnutrition. Children born under weight will have a greater risk of impaired cognitive development and will in turn delay or undermine his/her future and that of the country's development. As per the Medical Research Institute, over 30% of women are anaemic and have micro-nutrient deficiencies. About 30% of these are food insecure. The same can be said of nutrition indicators and more needs to be done in terms of food security.

Sri Lanka currently produces sufficient food and is self-sufficient in some respects (e.g. self sufficient in rice, nearly self sufficient in other crops). Nevertheless, about 12% of the national population continues to be food insecure nationwide. This figure varies significantly from one area to another and in some regions masks the fact there is a significant portion of people who are food insecure. In Colombo for example, only about 4% of the population is food insecure but in some districts in the Uva and Northern provinces the figure can be as high as 30%-40%. These differences need to be urgently addressed.

In the stable context that Sri Lanka currently enjoys, availability, access, utilization and consumption of nutrition foods, will drive nutrition and food security. Access is the ability of a household to obtain adequate and sufficient food to achieve a healthy and nutritious diet. There are two aspects to this: first is physical access, that is access to food and markets; the second is financial access which is the ability to purchase an adequate diet. It is estimated that the cost of purchasing an adequate diet in Sri Lanka costs over LKR 11,000/per person/ per month. Hence there are those who still do not have enough money to buy or those who live in remote areas who do not have physical access to an adequate diet.

Health, hygiene, and feeding practices all bear on nutrition outcomes. Education and health support, especially in remote areas also remains vital. Food security and nutrition is therefore a very complex and thus requires the commitment and compromise of many stakeholders and involves a multitude of sectors and disciplines if these goals are to be achieved. This means that there must be collaboration between the government, CSOs and the private sector. Some important points to note are any strategy in this regard must include education of the young; education of women before they get pregnant; improved infrastructure; improved markets; addressing issues of poverty and energy; access to a healthy and diversified diet; and sustainable food systems etc. All of these issues bear on Zero Hunger and all of these have to come together for us to understand what the priorities are and how Zero Hunger goals are going to be achieved. It must be stressed that the conditions are present in Sri Lanka to make that leap and to achieve Zero Hunger goals, perhaps even in 3-5 years, provided however that the focus is on the areas that have greatest difficulties in terms of availability, access/utilization of the food, or the quality of the diet that is being consumed. An enormous difference can be made to the future of Sri Lanka. Even though it may seem like a dream, in the words of Nelson Mandela "it always seems impossible, until it is done."

"Sustainable Agriculture and Zero Hunger in Sri Lanka", a summary of the presentation by Dr Rohan Wijekoon, Director General/ Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture:

HE President Maithripala Sirisena has given a task to the Department of Agriculture (DoA) to gain self sufficiency in food crops that that can be grown in Sri Lanka by the year 2018. Therefore, the presentation pertains to the current situation and how Sri Lanka plans to gain self sufficiency by 2018.

Sri Lanka has become self sufficient in rice over the past six decades. In 1947, the country had to import 60% of its requirement to feed a population of just 6 million. However, as of 2015 Sri Lanka imports less than 1% to feed its population of 21 million. This self sufficiency in rice is primarily due to the numerous varieties developed by the Department of Agriculture (DoA) and 98% of the farming community is growing rice varieties bred by DoA scientists. With the current stock in hand, the entire nation can be fed until April 2017, even without the harvest from the Maha season.

Being self-sufficient in rice, the next step has been to focus on breeding programs to produce healthy rice options. This is a key goal of the National Food Production Program launched by HE President Maithripala Sirisena. The programme also aims to ensure environmentally friendly rice production by introducing machines to cut down weedicides as well as introducing a parachute system where rice plants are cultivated instead of seeds. Rice is the safest food to consume in Sri Lanka as the use of fungicides, and insecticides are almost zero while the use of many herbicides has been prohibited. Overall, only blue-band chemicals are being used in Sri Lanka and red-band chemicals (toxic chemicals) are banned in Sri Lanka.

The DoA has been developing new rice varieties with medicinal value e.g. 'Neeroga' basmati rice which has a very low Glycemic Index (GI) and antioxidant properties. These are being developed for the export market under the DoA's own branding, as Sri Lanka is not conducive for growing basmati.

Sri Lanka was self sufficient in Maize until 2013 but due to the per capita consumption of chicken increasing from 7kg to 10kg in 2015, Sri Lanka is currently not self sufficient in Maize. About 100,000 metric tons have to be imported to meet the local demand. As there is enough supply of paddy, the current strategy for maize is to take about 200,000 of the 500,000 hectares available for the paddy cultivation in Yala season and to utilize it for maize, soya and chilli cultivation.

Sri Lanka has reached self sufficiency in mung beans by adopting a new strategy of using paddy fields during two additional seasons in between the two traditional seasons of Yala and Maha. Hence importation of mung beans has been stopped from September 2016 onwards.

There is near self-sufficiency in ground nut. However due to a soil moisture issue, there are seeds of different sizes. Under the National Food Production programme, sprinklers will be provided to all farmers to avoid situation.

Self sufficiency in soya remains problematic at the moment as nearly 80% of the requirement is imported. This has been mainly due to the increased demand from the poultry industry. However, in 2016 seed production for soya was begun and therefore by 2018 Sri Lanka can gain self sufficiency in soya as well.

The big onion harvesting season starts in July and continues till October. There are enough locally produced big onions at the moment but from January 2017 till about June 2017, big onions will have to be imported. A technical strategy that will be implemented has been to pursue off-season cultivation in Hambantota, Monoragala and Mannar areas. Under such a strategy, self sufficiency in big onion can be achieved in 6 months. Sri Lanka is also self sufficient in big onion seeds.

There is no self sufficiency in Chilli as at least 75% of the requirement is imported. An additional problem with chilli is that although there is no red-band chemicals being used in Sri Lanka, chilli is imported from countries which use red-band chemicals.

One approach of the DoA has been to develop chilli villages e.g. Kahalla (near Sigiriya) where the first harvest is being harvested in about 35 hectares of land using a local hybrid variety. The DoA is currently looking to brand this as Kahalla chilli. For green chilli the strategy has been to encourage home growing as only 4kg of green chilli is needed per year and hence two plants per person is sufficient.

At least 50% of the demand is met by imported potatoes. The main issue here is the lack of land to grow potatoes. Attempts have been made to grow potatoes in Jaffna during the off season. However, the main strategy employed currently has been to improve productivity through the use of mini-tubers. About LKR 500 million has been spent for this in order to give this technology/greenhouses to farmers. It is expected that Sri Lanka will become self sufficient in potatoes by 2018.

The main issue with fruits and vegetables in Sri Lanka is that people only eat half of the required amount of 200g (200g each of vegetables and fruits). Sri Lankans habitually eat more rice than vegetables and thus people have to be motivated to eat more fruits and vegetables.

The DoA has been spending a large amount of money on providing facilities for off-season cultivation. The DoA is looking to tap into 360,000 hectares of coconut land in the country where fruits can be grown under the coconut trees. Of the fruits grown in the coconut plantations, the DoA hopes to brand Ceylon Pineapple, Ceylon Banana and Ceylon Rambutan.

The DoA is also developing 15,000 fruit villages. These villages also have a GAP (Good Agricultural Program). This is important as, without a GAP certification,

vegetables and fruits cannot be exported to the European Union. QR codes will be used to enable tracing.

The DoA is also pursuing a home gardening strategy but is doing so by providing edible landscaping designs. In other words, landscaping is done with edible plants which have difference colours and leaf textures. The DoA aims to do 500,000 home gardening projects in 2016 whereby the landscaping plan is developed in consultation with landscape architects and the seeds are given free of charge by the DoA.

Apart from increasing existing food crops, the DoA also hopes to add value to existing agriculture through agro tourism. Currently there are agro-parks and a program for tourism.

Sri Lanka is also moving from the green revolution to the white revolution although it is somewhat different from the white revolution seen in countries such as South Korea where crops are cultivated continuously inside poly tunnels. In Sri Lanka it will not be possible to do the exact same thing but what is being planned is to take the principle of tunnel/continuous production. Currently there are 46 different agro-ecological zones that use this concept and Sri Lankan scientists are working on developing these ecological zones. The key objective here is to cultivate continuously, all year around. This will enable Sri Lanka grow crops beyond their traditional areas (e.g. potatoes were traditionally grown in Nuwara Eliya but are now being grown in Jaffna).

Overall, the aim is for the country to move towards high-tech and mechanized agriculture so that agriculture will be a white collar job for future generations. Emphasis is also placed on environmentally friendly and clean agriculture.

Dr P.G. Mahipala, Director General/ Health, Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine spoke on “Health and Improved Nutrition” and a summary of the presentation:

In 2012 the UN Secretary General launched the Zero Hunger program in Rio and world leaders came together to pledge their support for the program. There are several elements to program which among others include achieving food security and improving nutrition, the latter of which comes within the purview of the Ministry of Health (MoH).

Access to adequate food is important and within this there are a few important things that need to be considered such as: ending malnutrition in all forms, reduction of wastage, increasing productivity and sustainability.

In 2015 world leaders pledged the 2030 sustainable development goals of which goal 2 has been identified as ending all forms malnutrition and achieving Zero Hunger. There were also several indicators identified such as reducing stunting, wasting and issues of excess weight.

The general practice when it comes to discussing health issues is to focus upon diseases and doctors tend to define health in relation to diseases but the scope needs to go beyond this. The WHO's definition of health for example states that health is a state of complete physical, mental, social and spiritual wellbeing. Hence the scope of health is not a mere absence of diseases. In this context the question of what is meant by wellbeing should be considered. Bhutan for example introduced a new indicator that looks at fulfilment and a state of positive emotions which has also been recognized by the UN system. What is pertinent to note is that health cannot be viewed independently of general development. Hence, since 2002 health has been incorporated into the UN's general development agenda culminating in it being included in the SDGs.

The socio-economic structure in Sri Lanka in the past was one where agriculture played a central role in people's way of life. Majority of people engaged in agriculture and had active lifestyles. In contrast, present day Sri Lankans have had to grapple with rise of NCDs and issues of malnutrition and over-nutrition. The UN views health as a fundamental right as does the Sri Lankan constitution. Similarly, there is a need to consider access to food as also being a fundamental right.

Sri Lanka's health system is a mix of the allopathic system (since 1505), Ayurveda system (300 BC from India) and indigenous medicine (over 2500 years). Hence when discussing nutrition it must not be limited merely to the allopathic system but must also involve the other two systems of healthcare as well. Overall in modern Sri Lanka healthcare and other social services have been developed not just in urban areas but also in rural areas. This may be attributed to the combined effect of universal suffrage being granted in 1931 and the fact that 80% of the population lived in rural areas, thus forcing politicians to equally focus on developing rural areas. As a welfare state Sri Lanka has also provided universal healthcare and free education, recognizing these as fundamental rights which have been an important investment in the population.

There have been numerous campaigns in Sri Lanka to eradicate diseases such as:

- Anti Malaria Campaign – 1922
- Anti-Filariasis Campaign – 1947
- Anti-TB Campaign – 1952
- Anti-VD Campaign – 1952
- Rabies Control Campaign – 1953 (Sri Lanka will be rabies free by 2018)
- Anti-leprosy Campaign – 1954

Many of the interventions made in the health sector have had a tremendous impact on nutrition despite the fact that in the global context, the per capita health expenditure in Sri Lanka has not been high compared to other countries (e.g. USD102 in Sri Lanka compared to USD 2507 in Singapore and USD 423 in Malaysia).

However, when it comes to nutrition Sri Lanka has not been performing well and there is still much left to do. One area where Sri Lanka has done considerably well in nutrition has been in promoting breastfeeding. Sri Lanka ranks first in terms of exclusive breastfeeding which is currently about 85.2%. However, this needs to be further increased to about 95%.

This policy dialogue will most certainly help Sri Lanka to move forward to address these issues. It is important that policy makers understand that there are disparities in malnutrition and underweight individuals at the district level in Sri Lanka. Hence different strategies need to be developed which take into account these district disparities.

The MoH developed several policies such as the National Nutrition Policy (2010) and the Maternal and Child Health Policy (2012) etc and thus the necessary guidelines are available in order to move forward. The approach taken by the MoH has been a life-cycle approach. For example, measures are taken to improve the mother's health before she becomes pregnant in order to improve the health and nutrition of the child.

The continuum of care is also important where there is a need to develop home care. This requires collaboration with NGOs and other organizations. The MoH also conducts field clinics and provides other facilities and resources (e.g. triposha and iron etc).

There is a need to get involved in different places and at different levels. The MoH has collaborated with the Ministry of Education to develop a healthy canteens policy as well as to provide mid day meals to school children. It is important to remember that while Sri Lanka faces a malnutrition problem there is also an over-nutrition problem developing in the country. For example, 26% of Sri Lankan women are overweight and this is directly related to issues of NCDs rising in the country.

Currently there are 842 healthy lifestyle centres located within hospitals. These are not for treating patients but for ordinary people to get their blood sugar and cholesterol etc checked and to get information on maintaining a healthy diet.

In terms of legislation, the most recent development has been the 'traffic light system' whereby food products (fizzy drinks, sugary drinks) with high sugar content

must carry a red label to warn consumers of the high sugar content. Sri Lanka is only the 3rd country in the world to employ this legislation.

Another issue that has to be addressed is the poor consumption of fruits and vegetables which has a direct link to the spread of NCDs in the country. The production of fruits and vegetables remains positive but the issue is the lack of consumption of these produce. Hence the population needs to be educated on this issue. In this light, the promotion of home gardening by the DoA is a positive development not just in terms of nutrition but also because it keeps people active and engaged in physical activity.

Given the extensive programs conducted by the MoH, there arises a question as to why nutrition continues to be a problem area in Sri Lanka. Hence there is a need for operational research and this strategic review is vital in terms of developing a clearer picture on the current issues pertaining to nutrition. Moving forward, some aspects to focus on which go hand in hand with nutrition issues are: reducing poverty, access to food and nutrition, reduction in food prices, increasing household incomes and most importantly sustainable behavioural change in the population and the possible adverse impact of media and advertising.

“Closing Remarks and the way forward”, a summary of closing remarks by Ms Susana Rico, Officer-in Charge, UN World Food Programme, Colombo Office

What has been reiterated by all the speakers has been the value of bringing different sectors and disciplines to work towards Zero Hunger. There are numerous positive initiatives being carried out in Sri Lanka at the moment and many good ideas and objectives are being traced. The impact of all of this work and thinking needs to be maximised by creating convergences and synergies of purpose. In doing so, the pockets of food insecurity and malnutrition that continue to exist in the country can be addressed.

As described by Madam Kumaratunga at the beginning, what is being proposed is that:

- this event will open the doors for an impartial, multi-stakeholder, consultative process;
- Which will help arrive at recommendations and to understand where the most pressing areas of interventions are required; and
- how and where each party can work to create synergies so that Zero Hunger can be achieved for Sri Lanka.

The review must be analytical and consultative so that everyone has an opportunity to integrate their programs, thereby contributing and sharing knowledge. Data must be analysed so there is some agreement as to where the baseline is and what the realistic targets are for Sri Lanka. The strategic review must take into account the significant initiatives that are currently conducted by government ministries and institutions. The value of this work must be multiplied.

Hence the small group of stakeholders are invited to meet on Friday, 7th October 2016 who will set the agenda for the next two months. The stakeholders' group will look at what methodology to use in reviewing the existing policies and data analysis. The group will also ensure that milestones are set for end November/mid December 2016 and to be completed by January 2017, so that the final outcomes/goals can be included by the stakeholders in their respective planning, budgeting and processing.

The project will require the active engagement of government institutions, ministries, research institutions, civil society, NGOs, donor governments, and the UN agencies. Any other individuals who wish to remain engaged in the initial meeting are encouraged to contact the SAPRI or the WFP.

The inaugural meeting ended on that promising note.