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What's Diaspora Got to do with it? Sri Lanka's Reconciliation Process¹

Sri Lanka's diaspora-to-population ratio is known to be one of the highest in the South Asian region. Sri Lanka is now exploring ways to engage its overseas community for future growth and reconciliation. Engaging these stakeholders in development (and ultimately reconciliation) necessarily relies upon sound knowledge of who they are. However, knowledge about them is not sufficient to foster collaboration. Trust-building is the foundation of effective engagement strategies, especially in the context of Sri Lanka.

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Introduction

With nearly three million Sri Lankan's overseas living across the world (approximately fourteen percent of the country's population), Sri Lanka's diaspora-to-population ratio is known as one of the highest in the South Asian region. This ratio is the product of different waves of migrations that are mainly attributed to: post-colonial developments, the need for better economic prospects, political instability – including the JVP³ insurrection and the 30-

¹ An earlier version of the paper was presented at the ISAS-organised South Asian Diaspora Convention (SADC) *Diaspora and Citizenship* panel discussion, which took place in Singapore on 20 July 2016.

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³ The JVP or the "People's Liberation Front" is a group inspired by Marxist ideas aimed at Sinhala youth that emerged in the late seventies and eighties that eventually became a political party, (Bennet, Owen 'The Patriotic Struggle of the JVP: A Reappraisal', 2013, http://jvpthesis.weebly.com/uploads/2/6/9/5/26/951649/jvp_thisis_final_1.pdf).

year civil war, and education opportunities. As such, the Sri Lankan diaspora is by nature not considered to be homogenous as it represents the many social, political, ethnic and religious ideologies and experiences that exist in Sri Lanka. In recognition of these differences, this paper highlights the process facilitated by International Alert⁴, which has been working in the field of Sri Lankan diaspora engagement since 2010⁵, to develop a ‘Roadmap for engagement with Overseas Sri Lankans’.

Definition of Diaspora

There are many definitions of diaspora which is defined at its simplest as the dispersal of a group of people from its original homeland⁶. Until recently, the term was most closely associated with the dispersion of the Jewish people, although there are extensive historiographies of the Armenian, Greek and African diasporas. Since the 1980s, the usage of the word had become increasingly widespread, so as to force a re-assessment of its meaning.⁷ Moreover, the lack of a common understanding regarding the term “diaspora” has been reinforced by the lack of a common definition acknowledged globally. This can be attributed to the uniqueness and differences of relationship and constituency maintained by each community with their respective homeland.⁸ It is evident therefore that the term ‘diaspora’ is incredibly contested within both academic and non-academic circles who attempt to deconstruct the term while constantly unearthing different meanings and connotations. Hence, it would be more sustainable to approach the concept of ‘diaspora’ as an evolving ‘process’, or a more ‘dynamic’ term rather than referring to it as a label, an individual or a group.⁹ For the

⁴ This builds on previous work done by Alert which included diaspora outreach and engagement trips between 2010 and 2014. In February 2015 Alert in partnership with the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies held a two day conference and workshop. The conference operated within the broad overview of what it means, (i.e. the contributions, challenges and limitations) for Overseas Sri Lankans (OSL) to positively interact with Sri Lanka and vice versa. Amongst the participants were Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) MP’s, OSL, members of CSO’s and members of the corporate sector. Amongst the range of other topics discussed were the need to understand and analyse the achievements and the role that can be played by OSL in engaging with Sri Lanka through avenues such as economics, education and reconciliation. Furthermore the opportunities and challenges of engaging with the diaspora in reconciliation efforts for a more open Sri Lanka, as well as the need to leverage the diaspora for investment and knowledge was discussed. In preparation for this conference, Alert held focus group discussion with recent returnees and diaspora members in December 2014 on their reasons for return, the challenges faced and what incentives and policy changes will influence professionals of Sri Lankan origin to return and contribute.

⁵ For further information, please see <http://www.international-alert.org/tags/diaspora>.

⁶ Cohen, Robin “Global Diasporas: An Introduction”, Routledge, Oxford, 2008, p1.

⁷ Kim D. Butler. "Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 10.2 (2001): 189-219. Project MUSE. Web. 8 Mar. 2016. <https://muse.jhu.edu>.

⁸ Key informant consultations by International Alert, August 2015.

⁹ Key Informant Consultations by International Alert, September 2015.

purposes here, diaspora is considered to be “individuals with distinct links (ethnic, social, cultural, economic) to a country of heritage other than their country of residence”.¹⁰

Over the past decades, the engagement of diasporas in issues conventionally seen as relating to development has generated increasing interest among a variety of stakeholders (including among governments and multilateral institutions)¹¹. However, the diaspora communities are unique in that they can be mobilised in a way that links, directly or indirectly, two or more countries. These potential resources, or “capitals”, are human; social; economic; cultural and political.¹² So today, the diaspora is best approached not merely as a social entity but also as a concept that helps explain the world of migration. It is an idea that is based on the three interrelated dimensions of movement, connectivity and return. As such, the diaspora communities are an important stakeholder within their host countries and their homelands. They have the ability to enhance and build relations that can either positively or negatively impact their country of origin. As a unique actor with multiple ties to the country of heritage and residence – in financial, emotional, cultural and political terms – they have the potential to play a significant role in peacebuilding, reconciliation and recovery. However, as diaspora engagement is not done in a vacuum, their importance and contribution must be taken into consideration within the national discourse and process for development and reconciliation. Whilst the important capitals are brought by the diaspora, they cannot substitute the need to cultivate and sustain domestic capital. Thus policies and programmes that aim to engage, enable and empower the diaspora should share the objective of better harnessing these resources for peaceful development and reconciliation. In the case of Sri Lanka, it is thus useful for the diaspora to be included in the dialogue on development and peacebuilding. This is particularly true in a country that has ended a three-decade civil war and that needs to mobilise and channel all possible avenues for greater progression in every sector.

One of the caveats in this discussion, however, is the recognition that the diaspora have a strong sense of identity that is derived from internal clannishness, external rejection (by the diaspora

¹⁰ This is the definition that International Alert has been using in its work. See International Alert (2015), What’s Diaspora Got To Do With It? Background Paper (http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/SriLanka_DiasporaEngagement_EN_2015.pdf). This definition is also in line with the Sheffer discourse on Diaspora as defined in Box 1.

¹¹ See IOM 2013, DIASPORAS AND DEVELOPMENT: BRIDGING BETWEEN SOCIETIES AND STATES, briefing note for the International Dialogue on Migration 2013 – Diaspora Ministerial Conference (<https://www.iom.int/files/live/sites/iom/files/What-We-Do/idm/workshops/IDM-2013-Diaspora-Ministerial-Conference/Background-Paper-2013-Diaspora-Ministerial-Conference-EN.pdf>).

¹² IOM 2013, DIASPORAS AND DEVELOPMENT: BRIDGING BETWEEN SOCIETIES AND STATES, briefing note for the International Dialogue on Migration 2013 – Diaspora Ministerial Conference

and of the diaspora) or a combination of the two, as well as a definitive ethnic or religious identity. These groups who have migrated over a period of time have perceptions and realities, which are conditioned by the circumstances of their departure and the ground realities at the time of migration. This has influenced their level of engagement with and support to the ‘homeland’. For most who left with unpleasant memories, they have no intention of engaging; for those who do engage, they most often do so informally. This scenario in particular is reflective of what happens in Sri Lanka as the diaspora are very diverse and often divided in terms of political ideologies, social status, ethnicity and religion¹³.

Challenges for Sri Lanka

One significant issue that needs to be highlighted is the terminology pertaining to diaspora. With the end of the conflict in 2009, there has been much confusion and contemplation about the term ‘Diaspora’ which was used to label a particular segment of the Sri Lankan community overseas that was perceived to be taking negative stances against the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL)¹⁴. In labelling this particular constituency as ‘enemies of the country¹⁵’, the GoSL, along with the media, played a crucial role in changing public perceptions about the diaspora¹⁶ by portraying them as entities that were working against the interests of the country. The fact does not refute that there are/were those elements working against the notion of sustainable peace in the country. However, the majority of those living outside the country are/were not opposed to any lasting solution for peace; provided that truth, justice and equity were observed. Despite the antagonism of the GoSL between 2009-2014 towards the diaspora, the ‘Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission’ (LLRC)¹⁷ identified the importance of constructively engaging with the diaspora, noting that they have the potential to ‘instigate and energise’ a

¹³ While the Sri Lankan diaspora comprises of Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim and Burger ethnicities, its ethnic composition differs from country to country. For instance, the diaspora in Canada constitutes a heavily concentrated Tamil community, whilst the diaspora in Italy mostly comprises of the Sinhalese community. Sri Lankans living in Australia and the United Kingdom however tend to encompass similar concentrations of all ethnicities. Consultation conducted by International Alert (IA) with a private sector representative (October 2015) which in particular noted “*that specific statistics of different diaspora ethnicities, or even the numbers of diasporas of respective host countries are not available by the respective SL missions abroad.*”

¹⁴ See for example <http://www.eyesrilanka.com/2014/04/28/tna-criticises-ban-on-diaspora-groups/>.

¹⁵ See for example: <http://www.tamilguardian.com/article.asp?articleid=11930>.

¹⁶ This has come out of the consultations conducted by IA.

¹⁷ See details of LLRC at <http://www.mea.gov.lk/index.php/media/news-archive/3146-the-lessons-learnt-and-reconciliation-commission-llrc-concludes-its-work-the-final-report-will-be-handed-over-to-the-president-on-20-november>.

movement that can potentially ignite a fragile situation. In particular, the Commission's Report highlighted that:

“It is clear to the commission that these ‘hostile diaspora groups’ can potentially undermine the genuine efforts in Sri Lanka towards reconciliation. The Commission feels therefore that the Government together with the relevant stakeholders, especially the civil society, should keep a comprehensive approach to harness the potential of the expatriate community.”¹⁸

Thus, in needing to deal with the Sri Lankan diaspora, there is a need for the term to change in order to create a space for discussion. From the work done, it was felt that the term should be changed to ‘Overseas Sri Lankans’ (OSL)¹⁹.

On the onset of developing this roadmap, it is important to understand the rationale for engagement for both OSL and the GoSL. Yet it is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model. Other countries that proactively engage with their diaspora, such as Bangladesh, India, and Ethiopia,²⁰ consider their diaspora as vital for developmental activities. As such, they have developed responsive policies to engage with their diaspora²¹. These countries recognize the vital importance of remittances, export markets, investment, as well as, the diaspora influencing public policies and sometimes foreign policies of host countries.

For Sri Lanka, in addition to policies, what are mostly needed are actual strategies for implementation²². In the case of the OSL, a clear strategy is yet to be put in place to address the needs and expectations of what today represents fourteen percent of the population. Thus, this roadmap seeks to develop a process that will assist in developing such policy for engagement with the OSL. This engagement between the OSL and Sri Lanka is needed to positively influence and promote lasting development, as well as a sustainable reconciliation process for the country.

¹⁸ See LLRC report at http://www.defence.lk/warcrimes/lessons_learnt_and_reconciliation_commission_final_report.html

¹⁹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sri Lanka (MoFA) for their purposes have been using this term in their work (based on consultations held by IA).

²⁰ Comparative analysis has been done on 11 countries that have significant diaspora policies (see appendix).

²¹ See for example ‘Institutionalising Diaspora Linkage: The Emigrant Bangladeshis in UK and USA’ prepared by IOM and the Government of Bangladesh (2004).

²² This is one of the consistent aspects coming out of the consultations that were done in preparation for this document.

Developing the Roadmap

Following the change of government, in 2015 and a more favourable line taken towards the OSL²³, a space has been created for positive engagement. It is therefore important to engage fully with the OSL. The outreach for such engagement, must be from both within and outside in order to build a sustainable relationship. This relationship has to go beyond the term of the current government in order for it to get currency and acceptance amongst the wider stakeholders of the Sri Lankan society. Given the past negative perception of Sri Lanka, among the international community (especially post March 2009), it is important to rethink and rebrand Sri Lanka's relationship with the OSL, in order for the latter to contribute towards promoting a positive perception of the country while building mutual trust.

However, if the OSL are to make meaningful changes, they must be empowered to do so and the GoSL must *acknowledge* them formally. There needs to be recognition of their contributions and channels created to ease the engagement process. The engagement needs to be diversified to encompass skills and knowledge transfers and networks, as well as partnership opportunities. This does, nevertheless, raise the prospect that GoSL needs to identify *its own* goals in undertaking this pursuit, as well as its capacities in reaching these goals. This will allow the government to tailor-make its policy and engagement approaches. For example, if the GoSL goal is to improve Sri Lanka's competitiveness in economic terms, its diaspora policy is more likely to emphasise the knowledge and skills that members of the diaspora can channel back to the country. It is in this context that this road map seeks to assist the GoSL, and other relevant institutions, to develop more coherent policies with regards to the OSL.

Putting the Roadmap into Practice: Recommendations and Implications

In order to address these challenges, the Roadmap has identified seven areas of engagement with the OSL, namely: 1) Social and Economic Development, 2) Skills & Knowledge Transfer, 3) Outreach & Exposure Links, 4) Media Engagement, 5) Arts & Culture, 6) Interfaith Engagement, and 7) Reconciliation. These areas were identified with the underlying understanding that any engagement with OSL should inculcate basic values that can act as the

²³ For example the de-proscription of certain Tamil diaspora groups by the GOSL (<http://www.sundaytimes.lk/151122/news/eight-diaspora-groups-269-people-deproscribed-172578.html>).

foundation for building community relations. As such, trust is factored in as one of the key values that needs to be inculcated when engaging with the OSL.

With regards to the sections on Investment, Development and Technical Expertise, the following are key recommendations to be pursued: encourage a role in addressing poverty and educational challenges, strengthen the process of remittances, encourage responsible investment by improving the general investment climate, facilitate ease of mobility for investors through special incentive schemes, enable diplomatic missions to help business linkages, open up avenues for OSL capital to fund sustainable investment, create temporary return programmes for skilled tourism, and initiate an information portal in the form of a ‘one-stop-shop’ to act as a hub for diaspora investors. In order to support the said initiatives, the section also highlights the need to take specific measures that will facilitate dialogue and amend legislations.

Analysis of outreach and exposure links led to recommendations, such as: recognizing the need to enfranchise the OSL and mobilizing them as a soft power. Further recommendations included: the establishment of a single unit / Ministry to administer policies on Diaspora which can formalize the engagement through an institutional framework. Specific initiatives (such as the ‘Meet the Ambassador forum’, or even the ‘SL Embassy open day) through which missions could enhance their reachability to the wider OSL communities and encourage greater cross-community relations are also proposed.

Moreover, it was observed through our consultations that one of the greatest challenges for the OSL in terms of their engagement with Sri Lanka is the often flawed/negative perceptions of their motivations and political alliances that are reinforced through local media. The media engagement section thus focuses on the need to develop a clear communication strategy by building capacity and sharing knowledge, but also bridging information gaps via creative means, including social media and arts channels so as to promote stronger connections between Sri Lanka and overseas communities. The remaining areas of engagement that are Arts and Culture, Interfaith Engagement, and Reconciliation mainly highlights avenues to contribute to the overall peacebuilding process in Sri Lanka. It includes recommendations such as the establishment of cultural centres, mapping exercises, an annual interfaith dialogue conference in Sri Lanka and the need to explore non-institutional level engagement while actively engaging the OSL communities in the broader reconciliation process. This framework points out a way for practical engagement that will then allow the GoSL to develop a policy for

engagement after trust has been built. Questions that arise in this framework concern the ways to engage in a qualitative and quantitative manner. The comprehensive engagement of the OSL also requires an enabling environment. In the absence of this, OSL members develop linkages and transfer resources back and forth between Sri Lanka and their countries of residence spontaneously, regardless of whether or not policy frameworks are in place to facilitate such transfers, and sometimes even in spite of the constraints they face. However, the degree to which they can contribute is directly related to their ability to be fully engaged and enabled to serve as architects of economic and social progress, including making an informed contribution to reconciliation and other aspects of peacebuilding. Thus policies that are developed need to also bear in mind the creation of an enabling environment need to be related to integration, social protection, citizenship, and the right of vote, as well as to return and to the possibilities of building partnerships between Sri Lanka and diaspora host countries. Lastly, in order to facilitate the transfer of skills and knowledge, OSL members who wish to engage in development will greatly benefit from programmes aiming at empowering them. These programmes facilitate the conditions that will allow OSL communities and individuals to strengthen their links and utilize the resources generated through human mobility to empower themselves, to decide about their own priorities and to contribute to their own well-being.

Conclusion

It is not a question of whether or not OSL should be engaged in Sri Lanka, but rather when and how they should be engaged. Engaging OSL in development (and ultimately reconciliation) necessarily relies on a sound knowledge of who they are, their associations and organizations, their socio-economic characteristics, their willingness to participate in development initiatives, and the most effective outreach strategies. However, knowledge about them is not sufficient to foster collaboration. The foundation of effective engagement strategies, especially in the context of Sri Lanka, is trust-building. Instilling trust and gaining confidence involves the integration of Overseas Sri Lankans into the Sri Lankan framework for development and reconciliation. This allows them to share their human, social and cultural capital, as well as to foster economic growth by bridging their countries of residence and origin. Their intercultural position ensures that they are uniquely placed to adapt to, become part of and contribute to multiple communities. This, in turn, may lead to greater social cohesion and further social and economic integration so that their contributions can truly be maximized.

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