

## **Growth with Rural Development: Sri Lanka's Serendipitous Contribution in an Age of SDGs**

### **1. Introduction: Rethinking the Economic Growth and Development**

Urbanization has generally been considered as a positive force for economic growth. Urban areas are centers of commerce, government, transportation, and infrastructure, and are places where education, employment, housing, and social services are plentiful. As such, industrial agglomeration in cities has been concomitant to the process of achieving economic growth (Kuznets 1968; Bairoch 1988). The rate of urbanization and the size of cities are generally proportional to income levels. With few exceptions (discussed below), most countries have joined the ranks of middle-income countries by shifting their 50% of populations substantially to urban areas (Spence et al 2009).

However, when urbanization goes too far, it exposes susceptibility to a variety of problems, which are particular to or significantly compounded by urban society, such as environmental pollution, slum development, poor sanitation, disease outbreaks, and poor urban infrastructure due to improper urban management and planning. These, coupled with unsustainable production and consumption patterns and the lack of capacity of public institutions to manage urbanization, could undermine sustainability through urban sprawl, pollution, and environmental degradation (United Nations 2018). The problems caused by this excessive urbanization are widely recognized by the international community and embodied in the SDG goal of "sustainable cities" and its related literature.

While the contribution of cities in economic activities has been emphasized, rural areas have been marginalized. The expansion of urban population has in general led to a decline in rural population, which in turn has led to stagnation of government services, occurrence of natural disasters, increase in abandoned land due to fewer agricultural producers, and disruption of ecological balance. The unsustainable situation faced by rural communities

then compounds urbanization. This vicious cycle calls for a challenge the doctrine of urban-oriented growth.

Against this global trend of urbanization, Sri Lanka (known as Ceylon until 1972) has taken an exceptional growth and development path.<sup>1</sup> The "Sri Lankan model" made remarkable achievements in social development, including improvements in poverty, low infant mortality rates and high literacy rates, as a result of its focus on welfare since gaining independence in 1948.

A low-income country for a long time, Sri Lanka has grown steadily and at an accelerated pace in the 21st century, joining the ranks of "upper middle-income" countries in 2019, while the South Asia region has maintained a very moderate pace (Figure 1).

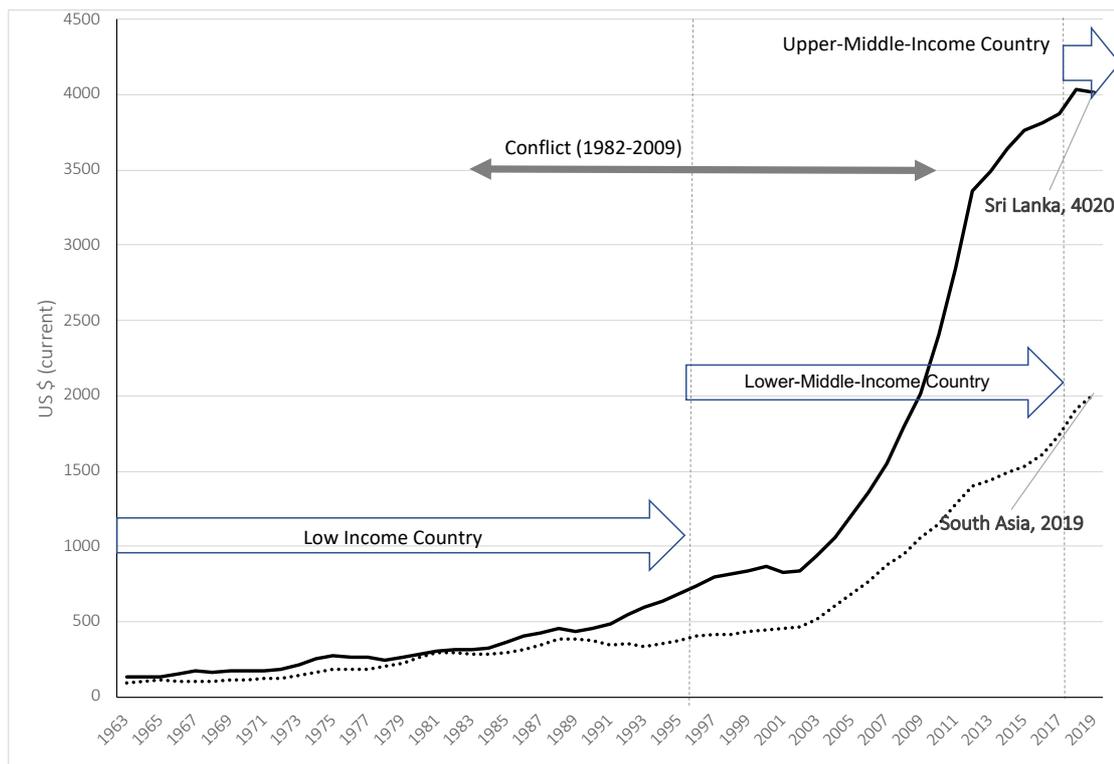


Figure 1. GNI Per Capita: The Wealth of Sri Lanka and South Asia

Source: Prepared by Author using World Bank data

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, growth indicates economic indicators such as GDP and GNI, and development is more holistic, considering quality of life.

Such growth has, however, been achieved *without* significant population shifts. Sri Lanka has maintained 80 percent of its population in rural areas, which remains virtually unchanged for nearly 200 years (Figure 2).

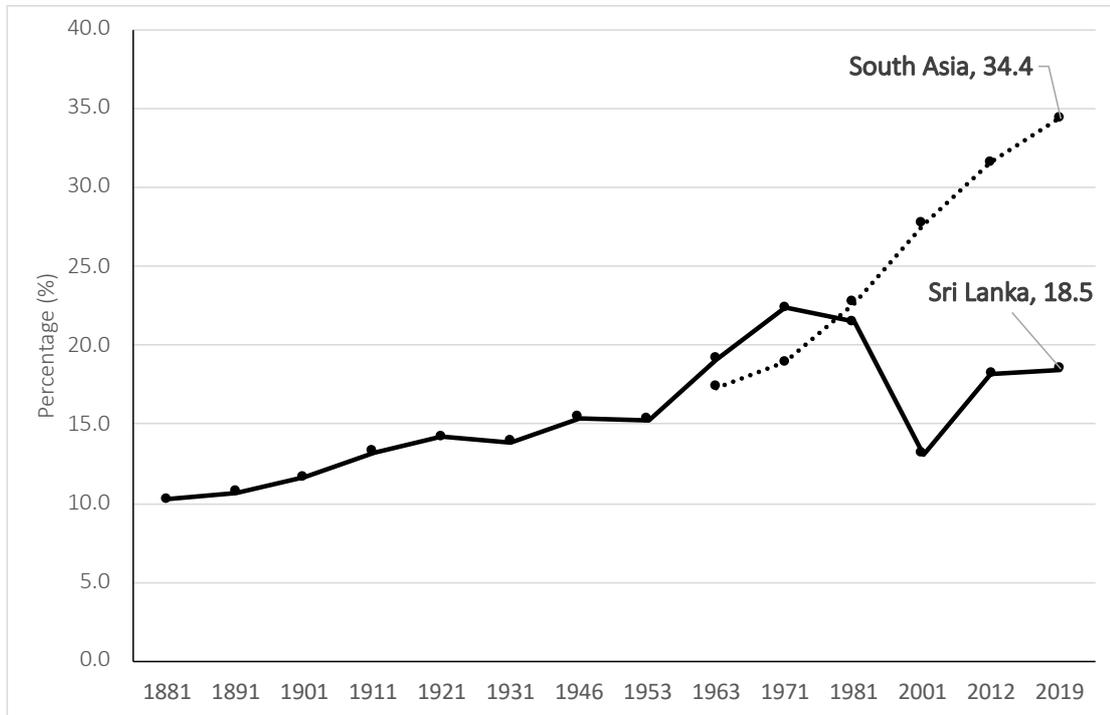


Figure 2. Urban Population: Sri Lanka and South Asia

Source: Prepared by Author using World Bank data

This paper therefore questions what preconditions and policy interventions have enabled Sri Lanka to maintain its rural population while achieving economic growth. In Sri Lanka, the provision of basic livelihood infrastructure (schools, hospitals, markets, banks, post offices, etc.) and guaranteed access to them, even in rural areas, has reduced the need for migration to urban areas. This paper examines the means by which Sri Lankan policy has fostered this development path, and its potential contribution to a world now facing a crisis of excessive urbanization. Its potential for charting a new development path is discussed largely in relation to developing, rather than developed, nations.

The global Covid-19 epidemic has exposed a further vulnerability of highly densely populated cities and provided an opportunity to question the sustainability of urban-centric development. This paper examines the case of Sri Lanka to critically examine the process of urbanization, which has been considered and actively promoted as an engine of economic growth. Sri Lanka's experience reveals an alternative path to development, albeit not necessarily planned as such, and may speak to the sustainable development called for by the SDGs.

## **2. Urbanization and Rural Development in Sri Lanka**

Urbanization, which has been thought of as supporting economic growth, is chiefly a process that occurs when populations move from rural areas to urban areas, but it can also occur when formerly rural areas are transformed into urban spaces.

Urbanization, which has occurred in many developed countries, has created and encompassed relatively clear boundaries between urban and rural areas (Lipton 1984). Industrialization and centralization have shaped the classical urban structure and facilitated rapid urban growth (Wou and Sui 2016). In recent years, however, the process has become more diverse, betraying the theory of concomitant urbanization, growth and development.

One such example is "urbanization without growth" in the sub-Saharan region (Fay and Opal 2000; Glaeser 2013; Jedwab and Vollrath 2015). In such cases, population shifts to the cities accelerates without sufficient expansion of employment opportunities or economic activity because the urban areas are not sufficiently developed. This pattern is not a catalyst for economic growth, but rather causes economic contraction or stagnation.

A separate phenomenon is the transformation of rural areas into an urban state without population migrating from rural areas. This phenomenon, termed "*in-situ* urbanization" has become prominent in the coastal areas of southeast China in recent years expected to replace the previous urbanization process through rural-urban migration (Zhu 2017).

In the past, urbanization through rural-urban migration accounted for a large proportion of China's urbanization, leading to problems such as soaring housing prices, air pollution, and traffic congestion in urban areas. *In-situ* urbanization has been encouraged systematically by policy initiatives since the late 1970s as a response to the problems caused by urbanization (Zhu 2017). It concentrates urban elements into designated zones areas within a rural area to create new cities. In the sense that it creates a "city" in a rural area instead of moving the population to an existing city, it can be considered urban, forming a city from a municipality.

*In-situ* urbanization can absorb a large amount of surplus labor in rural areas, promote the development of social and economic enterprises, reduce the gap between urban and rural areas, and effectively alleviate the problem of over-urbanization (Cai, Zhang and Wu 2015; Guo & Zou 2015). Indeed, given the historic polarization between megacities and rural areas, regions developed through *in-situ* urbanization may provide a more equal state. Nonetheless, this development path creates urban cities not no less susceptible to excessive urbanization. It is important to note that China's *in-situ* urbanization has been implemented systematically at the provincial level as a response to excessive urbanization along the traditional path on a nationwide scale.

Yet further models are based on the plausible argument that classical urbanization theorized in the West is not directly applicable to Asia. McGee's *desakota* model points to a blurred boundary between rural and urban where agricultural and non-agricultural activities are mixed. It is a process of urbanization that occurs in small villages (*desa*) and towns (*kota*) (McGee 1991). In *desakota* areas, much of the land is cultivated, so the landscape is rural, but the main income comes from non-farm activities, and there is a mix of families engaged in agriculture and those commuting to urban areas. Following the *desakota* definition of urbanization as the proportion of income generated by non-

agricultural means, some features of *desakota* are observable in the rural development of Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka's path of development does not resemble conventional urbanization. The rural population, which has accounted for 80 percent of the country's population stably for the past 200 years, has been maintained without an outflow of population to the urban areas. Sri Lanka has nine provinces, each of which is divided into districts. Each of the 25 districts in the country has a medium-sized town, and these districts are a collection of divisions. Divisions have small towns, which provide a level of social infrastructure necessary for daily life, such as hospitals, police, post offices, banks, and markets. Towns are small, spreading out to villages. Schools are widely dispersed to make it easy for children to attend.

This reduces the lure of major cities as a source of lifestyle improvement, prompted by the concentration of social facilities in cities in the traditional model of urbanization. Most necessities are available within the living area. Towns and villages are serviced by minibuses, while medium-sized towns are serviced by large mainline buses. Transport is inexpensive, so it is easy to travel to the cities. These conditions can be described as 'rural and adjacent to rural landscapes', as in the case of *desakota* areas.

Table 1 provides an overview of the typical economic growth, population shift and urbanization of the development paths discussed above.

Table1. Overview of Development Paths

Pattern	Exmample of Countries	Economic Growth	Population Shift (rural to urban)	Urbanziation
Conventional Urbanization	Developed Countries	○	○	○
Urbanization without Growth	Sub-Sahara Africa	X	○	○
<i>In-Situ</i> Urbanization	South-Eastern Coastal Region in China	○	X	○
<i>Desakota</i>	Indonesia.	○	Δ	○
"Growth with Rural Development"	Sri Lanka	○	X	X

Source: Prepared by Author

However, rather than utilising a definition of urbanization as the occupation of each household, as in the *desakota* model, this study engages with urbanization as the more commonly used definition of agglomeration of social facilities, commerce and industry in one *place*. Further it examines the policies that have facilitated ‘growth with rural development’.

Since conventional urbanization is a model experienced by many developed countries and may have limited power to explain the experience of the Global South, there has been a need for a concept of Asian urbanization that is compatible with "the unique ecological and historical conditions of Asia" (McGee 1991: 9). However, a country does not always fit into any one model. Sri Lanka is neither an in-situ urbanization nor a *desakota*-style urbanization. Its development is difficult to explain in terms of urbanization, but it exhibits numerous social benefits of rural areas, such as access to social facilities and quality of life, in addition to national economic growth.

In the dominant model of economic growth and urbanization, the maintenance of a large rural population has been framed in negative terms. It has been thought that rural areas are poor and maintain agricultural work because there are not enough industrial and employment opportunities in urban areas. In other words, no positive reason has been found for the phenomenon of rural population retention. Rural areas have a long history of being treated as a challenge rather than a solution for economic growth and development. This paper questions this assumption by exploring the positive aspects of rural population retention in Sri Lanka.

### **3. Evolution of the Rural First Principle**

This section first examines the historical, cultural and social circumstances that gave rise to the ‘Rural First Principle’ in Sri Lanka’s post-colonial policy. Though the Rural First

Principle was not an inevitable outcome of such, it explains the welfare policies (free education, free medical care, and the transportation network that supported them) that have developed an infrastructure sustainable for “growth with rural development.” These specific policies are discussed in the section 4. Section 5 evaluates their effectiveness in growth, development and the prevention of population outflow and excessive urbanization.

Since independence in 1948, Sri Lanka has developed the Rural First Principle and its development goals in reference to an image (whether historically accurate or not) of its most prosperous period in pre-colonial times. This image is one of rural prosperity. This section explores and clarifies the assumptions and background of the Rural First development ideology in Sri Lanka, concluding that rural glorification has reanimated an existing positive image of rural areas and of ‘being rural’ among the majority Sinhalese population. Having people maintain a positive image of rural areas has been one important factor in the maintenance of the rural population and has facilitated specific welfare policies.

### **3.1.The Prosperity: The pre-colonial**

The island of Sri Lanka is home to three major ethnic groups: the Sinhalese, Tamils, and Sri Lankan Moors. Among them, the Sinhalese may have accounted for around three-quarters of the population or more; the Tamil around a tenth and Sri Lankan Moors another tenth.<sup>2</sup> The island has two distinct climatic zones: the dry zone and the wet zone. The regional differences between these two climates affect the country in many ways, including agricultural productivity, rainfall, water quality and politics.

Map 1 shows that the dry zone covers the northern, eastern and southeastern part of the island, which accounts for 70% of the island's total area, and has only one rainy season per

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<sup>2</sup> In 2012, the Sinhalese accounted 74.9%; Sri Lankan Tamils at 11.2%; Sri Lankan Moors at 9.3% of the population; and others at 0.5% (Department of Census and Population 2012). Modern statistics also include later migrants, significantly the Indian Tamils, discussed below.

year. This area contains ancient cities such as Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa and is of historical importance as a source of civilization and Sinhala Buddhist culture. Although its environment and malaria have been barriers for both settlement and cultivation, the ancient culture and civilization was built on rice production and expanded by extensive and contemporaneously advanced irrigation works (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 1952).

Map1. The land areas of wet and dry zone in Sri Lanka



Source: Prepared by Keishi Nakao

On the other hand, the wet zone has a relatively long rainy season twice a year, and there are areas where agriculture is possible when rainwater and soil conditions are favorable. These differences in climatic conditions have long made the wet zones significantly more populous than the dry zones. However, in response to food shortages caused by two world wars and domestic population growth, the government undertook

several cycles of resettlement projects since the 1930s to relocate the population from the wet zones and to open up the dry zones. This marked difference in population density between the dry and wet areas was thus reduced.

Until the arrival of Europeans in the early 16th century, Sri Lanka was a prosperous society, self-sufficient in agriculture. Industrial development and innovation are evident in the two major cities of Anuradhapura (a cultural centre through the 5th-12th centuries) and Polonnaruwa (12th-13th centuries), which are now inscribed on the World Heritage List. In these ancient cities, large-scale irrigation projects were developed. The development of the irrigation facilities themselves began around 300 B.C., but the technology peaked at Anuradhapura and developed into a very complex design that enriched agriculture despite the dry climate with little rainfall.

With the expansion of such irrigation systems, the technological base of rice farming in Sri Lanka was contemporaneously advanced, and Sri Lanka became known as the granary of Asia. This allowed the Sinhalese to occupy almost exclusively the wet zone, and also much of the dry zone, to expand their rich agriculture. It was an ecologically balanced era, coupled with a Buddhist philosophy that paid equal attention to both production and distribution and emphasized a sustainable relationship between humans and nature. A temple could be found at the center of each village, forming village communities. Reservoirs (developed by irrigation), paddy fields, and temples provide a rich rural image for the people of Sri Lanka that is very much alive at the dawn of the third millennium.

### **3.2. Decline: British Colonization and Plantation**

Under the British colonial policy, tea plantations developed and formed a colonial export economy. To increase the profits of the plantations, the British enclosed the uncultivated land throughout the country. As a result, plantation land increased by 975%

between 1871 and 1931, while traditional agricultural land had shrunk by 20% by 1891 (Shanmugaratnam 1981). Apart from this, the productive capacity of the peasant economy was severely degenerated through various exploitative legal reforms to the disadvantage of farmers. Since plantation crops were more profitable to the export economy than paddy field, the British government neglected traditional agriculture and focused on developing plantations (De Silva 1977: 69, Esho 1999).

The British brought in workers from South India to support the expansion and development of plantations. They were from the lower castes and untouchables who were forced to work for low wages while living in communal housing. The fact that the British needed to import Tamil labor from South India demonstrates that the local Sinhalese, and perhaps local Tamils, were insufficiently compliant or adverse to work on the tea plantations. It is unlikely that the local population were organized, so the explanation must be systemic or cultural.

Firstly, plantation wages were lower than the income generated from agriculture and other sources (Caspersz 1985). Second, many Sinhalese were peasants working for large landowners, earning their livelihoods through their relationships with relatives and communities within the village. The comparison is difficult to make between peasants' traditional income, which was irregular and provided in kind by crops from the owners of the land, and plantation income, which comprised low wages but was paid regularly and often complemented with access to some degree of free medical and educational facilities. However, for the peasants, engaging in the plantation workforce inevitably required a leap into the unknown and separation from the community to which they belonged. The basic attitude of the landowner peasants, and those connected to them, was to maintain a stable livelihood and not to take risks at the expense of reduced income (Scott 1976: 5).

With the introduction and expansion of plantations, which expanded into large scale commercial export agriculture, the production of rice, the staple food of the Sri Lankan people, continued to decline due to the degradation of the land. The more the plantation economy expanded, the poorer the locals became and this system had a long term regressive effect on the indigenous economy and peasants. However, after the British had installed the low-caste Indian Tamil as laborers, the aversion of mixing with a lower caste cemented the undesirability of working on the plantations in the eyes of the Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamil.

### **3.3. Resurgence: The Emergence of Rural First Principle**

The rich Sinhala society of agriculture, which prospered through advanced irrigation and Buddhist beliefs based on harmony with nature, deteriorated during the colonial period, especially during the British rule, and this idea has shaped the direction of development since independence. After a short period of continuity, post-colonial development policy was implemented within a framework proclaiming to "recapture the glorious past" of pre-colonial prosperity (Hennayke 1996: 14).

At independence in 1948, power was handed over to the United National Party (UNP), the most Westernized and essentially pro-British political party in Sri Lanka. This group was "broadly Ceylonese (as opposed to the narrow ethnic divisions), largely Christian, largely high caste, highly urbanized, educated in Western style, largely engaged in Western style occupations, and was the highest class economically and socially" (Singer 1964: 47). It was not until the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) came to power after 1956 that the discourse of "restoring the glory of the past" became more colorful.

The SLFP campaigned extensively in rural areas and was elected with tremendous support from Buddhist monks, school teachers, and *Ayurvedic* doctors who seemed to be respected in rural areas. Their development policy was built around a narrative related to

the period when Sri Lanka was at its most prosperous, extolling village-based self-sufficiency. That pre-colonial ideal, the agriculturally innovative granary of Asia, was also related to a Buddhist philosophy of development, which emphasizes a sustainable relationship between man and nature, with equal attention to both production and distribution, which the people possess ‘naturally’.

This cemented a belief amongst Sinhalese Buddhists, who make up 70% of Sri Lankans, that they inherit an ancient and deeply rooted agricultural identity that distinguishes them from other ethnic groups (Moore 1985: 18). This ideology has also permeated politics, with the belief that (1) the rulers of the state must be Buddhists, (2) Sri Lanka is a Sinhala Buddhist country, (3) the preservation of Sinhala culture is the top priority of the rulers, and (4) it is the duty of the state to protect and defend the farmers economically (Hennayake 1996: 48-49).

Given this historical and cultural background, Sri Lanka created a development ideology that puts the protection and development of Sinhala Buddhists first, based on a rural lifestyle in harmony with nature while focusing on agriculture.<sup>3</sup> Since the majority live in rural areas, rural areas are also the most important electoral support base for the majority SLFP politicians. The cultural and religious background that encourages social harmony and mutual support is utilized strategically to form the Rural First Principle.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some argue that these development ideologies seek to exclude other ethnic groups in the country and that invoking a glorious past based on Sinhala civilization is a form of Sinhala ethnic nationalism (Woost 1990; Brow 1990; Kemper 1991). However, it is also true that a number of development projects that have been undertaken under the Rural First Principle have provided equal benefits without excluding other ethnic groups. In fact, politicians have engaged in indigenous development discourse only when their audiences are overwhelmingly Sinhala Buddhist (Hennayake 1996: 18). The specific policies that emerge from the "glorious past" narrative have worked without excluding other ethnic groups.

<sup>4</sup> Politicians have used emotionally-charged rhetoric to conceptualize and communicate development to the public, amplifying the meaning of development by selecting historically significant and traditional words from the literature. In addition to using such jargon to persuade people and justify their goals, they have embedded political rhetoric into the landscape through the renaming buildings, new projects, and roads. This is because these indigenous discourses on development are largely based on the historical and cultural ideology of the majority ethnic group, the Sinhalese.

Finally, the history of agricultural innovation is utilized to strengthen the self-image of Sinhalese as a 'naturally' agricultural people.

#### **4. The Infrastructures of Rural Sustainability: Specific Policies**

Social infrastructures such as education and health care are essential to people's lives. Conventional theory of growth places the majority of social facilities, alongside industrial agglomeration, in the cities. As such, the accessibility to these essential facilities has been theorized as a factor contributing to the population shift into urban areas (Mumford 1961; Rodrigue, Comtois and Slack 2009; Kasraian et al 2016).

Since independence, Sri Lanka has invested in welfare and is widely characterized as a welfare state. This is not only because it has made education and health care free. Sri Lanka has equally distributed schools and medical facilities across the country, providing people with access to these facilities without having to travel long distances. Access to these facilities is ensured by subsidized bus transportation that keeps fares low and operates on a regional basis. To be more precise, Sri Lanka's welfare is based on the geographical distribution of educational and medical opportunities and relatively egalitarian freedom of movement. The geographic distribution of education and health care and the transportation infrastructure reduce the incentives for population shifts into urban areas and allow people to enjoy the necessary social infrastructure while remaining in rural areas.

The post-1956 independent government would strengthen welfare, in part to address the grievances that Sinhalese peasants had accumulated through the protection and promotion of plantations under colonial rule. The primary concern of the government has been the issue of inequality in the country, which has been a determinant of social spending (Sudasinghe et al 2014).

The government made efforts to increase self-sufficiency by taxing the tea plantation sector heavily and using the proceeds to fund traditional agriculture sector and social welfare.<sup>5</sup> Sri Lanka strengthened and expanded the welfare system established by the British government and quickly reformed as a fully-fledged "welfare state".

The welfare policies in Sri Lanka that will be discussed in this section are food subsidies, free education, free health care, and transportation policies. Although transportation policy is usually treated as an aspect of economic policy, it is considered here as an important part of social welfare because it works to enhance accessibility to facilities that comprise the other welfare services, particularly when such facilities are distributed in rural areas. Among other things, the development of the bus network has enhanced the freedom of movement for the people and improved the overall well-being level.

#### **4.1. Food Welfare**

Sri Lanka's food policy began with rice rationing due to severe food shortages during World War II (1939-45). It was initially implemented as a temporary wartime measure, but later it was institutionalized socially, economically and politically, as food redistribution became the most visible tenet of the universalist character of Sri Lanka's social policy.

The government earned 90% of its foreign currency from the export of plantation crops, but also used the funds to purchase food imports. At first, rice rationing was limited to areas with rice shortages (Weerahewa et al 2016), but was later opened to almost all the people and continued for the next 30 years. Although food subsidy programs greatly benefited the poor and improved the overall nutritional status and quality of life of the population (ibid.), they were very costly to the government, partly because the recipients included high-

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<sup>5</sup> The government taxed tea, which was mostly owned by the British, five to ten times higher than coconut and rubber, which were owned predominantly by the Sri Lankans (Throbecke and Svenar 1987; Esho 1996).

income groups (Edirisinghe 1987), but also because most of the rice distributed was imported.

Economic liberalization in 1977-78 brought about a major change in food distribution. It excluded high income earners by introducing the "food stamp system". In 1989, this food stamp system was gradually replaced by a direct income transfer called the *Janasaviya* program for poverty alleviation. Under the *Janasaviya* program, households earning less than Rs. 700 per month were targeted and an allowance of Rs. 2,500 per month per household was issued for two years. With the change of government in 1995, the *Janasaviya* program was renamed the *Samurdhi* program, which continues to this day as one of Sri Lanka's signature poverty alleviation programs.

The main contents of *Samurdhi* are the distribution of food stamps, support for entrepreneurship through low interest loans from the *Samurdhi* Bank, improvement of infrastructure in the community and the provision of training. *Samurdhi*, which has now continued for more than 20 years, has attracted both criticism and praise. The most persistent criticism is that there is a political bias in the qualification of recipients (Gunatilaka 2010; Hennayakem 2006; Kelegama 2003; Nakamura 2005; Suzuki 2014; World Bank 2006).

Households outside of the intended income criteria are benefiting, and the selection costs are high for the small amount of support. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that *Samurdhi*'s main objective of helping the poor has contributed to reducing the poverty rate in the country. In fact, the number of poor people below the poverty line in Sri Lanka decreased from 28.8% in 1995/96 to 4.1% in 2016 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2020).<sup>6</sup> Rather than rushing economic growth based on a market system, Sri Lanka has

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<sup>6</sup> There are considerable political reasons for *Samurdhi*'s continuation despite these improvements (Bandara 2016; Gamage 2006; Glinskaya 2000).

implemented food subsidies that ensure that public policy interventions provide enough food to meet the daily caloric intake of the population. This has contributed to improved health and, consequently, to increasing national productivity (Sahn and Alderman 1996).

In other words, rural areas, which account for 80 percent of the population, have been able to obtain food and build up their basic strength through government support without having to move to urban areas in search of cash income to secure sufficient food. At the same time, local politicians have used these welfare programs to flexibly define the criteria for recipients, which has formed a co-dependency with the cultivation of an electoral support base.<sup>7</sup> Local people may qualify as beneficiaries through personal relationships with politicians. Migration to another region thus comes at a premium in the risk of losing access to the program. A series of food policies that benefit households and individuals have created collusion between local politicians and people, which in turn has strengthened the population stability of local communities.

## **4.2. Education**

Sri Lanka is a country that has achieved one of the highest literacy rates in South Asian due to the development of public education. It is consistently the highest in SAARC, reaching 93% as of 2019. This is on par with Malaysia and Thailand in Southeast Asia. The basis of this high literacy rate has been supported by a long history of education. Traditionally, basic instruction in reading and writing was provided in religious institutions such as Buddhist and Hindu temples (Prasangani 2014). Later, the British government developed modern educational facilities and provided subsidies, mainly to private (English

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<sup>7</sup> This political action to satisfy the voters seems to be self-evident to the government (Government of Sri Lanka 2003: 130).

and Christian) schools. The number of schools increased, but the benefits were not equally distributed across the island.

Sri Lanka introduced completely free education from kindergarten to university in 1945. This was the earliest welfare program established by the Sri Lankan government and it was hoped that the spread of education would prevent unemployment, improve living standards and foster more equitable distribution (Perera 1944: 5).

Simultaneously, the medium of instruction was changed from English to Sinhala and Tamil in elementary school (with some large, well-equipped English-medium high schools). A central school scheme was established, higher education was expanded to include universities, and student welfare measures were introduced, including scholarships for promising students from disadvantaged families and free daytime meals for school children. These have continued to this day, with free uniforms and textbooks, and subsidized buses and trains for commuting to and from school.

Among other things, the establishment of the Central School Scheme greatly benefited rural children by locating better quality educational opportunities in rural areas (De Silva 1981). In addition, students who perform well in the nationally administered examinations in the fifth grade can transfer to any school in the country, provided with free food and lodging.

There is also a system where students from rural areas are given preferential treatment in university entrance exams, and efforts are being made to avoid a gap with urban areas. Schools are located widely throughout the country, with primary education available on average within 2 km of each home and secondary education within 5 km of each home (Little et al 2011).

While there are differences in the facilities and types of extracurricular activities among the larger, national schools and popular urban schools, there is not a great disparity between

urban and rural areas in terms of access to education. Type 1AC is a 13-year school with arts and sciences majors. Type 1C is a 13-year school with arts only. Type 2 has up to grade 11, and type 3 has up to grade 8. In simplified terms, Type 1AB provides greater access to university than Type 1C, whereas Types 2 and Type 3 do not provide an easy path to university. The schools are equipped accordingly, with Type 1AB the best equipped and resourced. Table 2 shows that Type 3 and Type 2 schools are distributed in approximately equal proportion through the Districts. Type 1 schools, when aggregated, are likewise distributed in more-or-less equal proportion. However, there is a significant, but not severe, disparity in proportional distribution between Type 1C and Type 1AB schools. Likewise, in terms of absolute numbers, district size is a greater determinant of number of schools than population.

Table 2. School Distribution in the Country

Characteristics				Number of Schools	Distribution of School Types			
Province	District	Population	Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Total	1AB	1C	Type2	Type3
Western	Colombo	2,324,349	699	<b>402</b>	78 (19%)	79 (20%)	125 (31%)	120 (30%)
	Gampaha	2,304,833	1,387	<b>536</b>	71 (13%)	103 (19%)	176 (33%)	186 (35%)
	Kalutara	1,221,948	1,598	<b>418</b>	53 (13%)	66 (16%)	152 (36%)	147 (35%)
Central	Kandy	1,375,382	1,940	<b>650</b>	60 (9%)	164 (25%)	209 (32%)	217 (33%)
	Matale	484,531	1,993	<b>317</b>	20 (6%)	65 (21%)	102 (32%)	130 (41%)
	Nuwara Eliya	711,644	1,741	<b>550</b>	36 (7%)	90 (16%)	146 (27%)	278 (51%)
Southern	Galle	1,063,334	1,652	<b>429</b>	65 (15%)	76 (18%)	100 (23%)	188 (44%)
	Matara	814,048	1,282	<b>360</b>	44 (12%)	74 (21%)	113 (31%)	129 (36%)
	Hambantota	599,903	2,609	<b>321</b>	39 (12%)	70 (22%)	118 (37%)	94 (29%)
Northern	Jaffna	583,882	1,025	<b>448</b>	50 (11%)	47 (10%)	142 (32%)	209 (47%)
	Mannar	99,570	1,996	<b>135</b>	17 (13%)	21 (16%)	32 (24%)	65 (48%)
	Vauniya	172,115	1,891	<b>174</b>	13 (7%)	26 (15%)	40 (23%)	95 (55%)
	Mullativu	92,238	2,693	<b>126</b>	14 (11%)	14 (11%)	38 (30%)	60 (48%)
	Killinochchi	113,510	1,279	<b>104</b>	12 (12%)	14 (13%)	37 (36%)	41 (39%)
Eastern	Batticaloa	526,567	2,854	<b>360</b>	39 (11%)	54 (15%)	102 (28%)	165 (46%)
	Ampara	649,402	4,415	<b>441</b>	39 (9%)	65 (15%)	150 (34%)	187 (42%)
	Trincomalee	379,541	2,727	<b>313</b>	27 (9%)	66 (21%)	90 (29%)	130 (42%)
North-Western	Kurunegala	1,618,465	4,816	<b>880</b>	77 (9%)	182 (21%)	264 (30%)	357 (41%)
	Puttalam	762,396	3,075	<b>370</b>	36 (10%)	72 (19%)	150 (41%)	112 (30%)
North-Central	Anuradhapura	860,575	7,179	<b>563</b>	39 (7%)	99 (18%)	164 (29%)	261 (46%)
	Polonnaruwa	406,088	3,293	<b>252</b>	25 (10%)	33 (13%)	57 (23%)	137 (54%)
Uva	Badulla	815,405	2,861	<b>605</b>	46 (8%)	135 (22%)	176 (29%)	248 (41%)
	Moneragala	451,058	5,639	<b>293</b>	35 (12%)	51 (17%)	114 (39%)	93 (32%)
Sabaragamuwa	Ratnapura	1,088,007	3,275	<b>602</b>	60 (10%)	85 (14%)	250 (42%)	207 (34%)
	Kegalle	840,648	1,693	<b>526</b>	49 (9%)	94 (18%)	180 (34%)	203 (39%)
Total		20,359,439	65,612	10,175	1,044	1,845	3,227	4,059

Source: Prepared by author using the data from Ministry of Education (2018) and Department of Census and Statistics (2012)

### **4.3. Health Service**

Sri Lanka's has the highest life expectancy and lowest maternal mortality rate among South Asian countries. Several of these indicators are ahead of other developed countries in Asia and have been well received by the international community.<sup>8</sup> These can be attributed to free healthcare and decentralization of healthcare services.

The foundation of the Western-style healthcare system in Sri Lanka began with the establishment of the hospital system under British colonial rule (Kumar 2018). In particular, the malaria epidemic of 1934 highlighted the inadequacy of medical facilities in rural areas (De Silva 1977: 82) and led to significant improvements within a few years (Kumar 2018).

The provision of free health care services to all citizens was put in place in 1951. This included the development of preventive and curative services and the elimination of private medical practice (Alailama and Sanderatne 1997).

From the early days of independence until the late 1970s, the policy principle was that health care services should be distributed equally among all population groups and that the state should be responsible for, and give priority to, public sector health care services. It was only after economic liberalization in 1977 that private companies were admitted to the market. Currently, there are several categories of medical institution (Table 3). Their functions vary according to the number of doctors and the range of procedures they can perform. Currently, there are teaching hospitals, state hospitals, district hospitals, base hospitals, divisional hospitals, and simple clinics dispersed throughout the country whose main purpose is to train medical students in addition to providing medical care.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Sri Lanka had 36 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 2017, which is lower than Thailand (37), the Maldives (53) and South Korea (89). Similarly, the rate of children dying under the age of five was 5 per 100,000, ahead of Thailand (9), Maldives (9), and South Korea (18), countries that are economically richer than Sri Lanka. It has also successfully controlled and achieved the eradication of intractable communicable diseases such as polio (2014), osteomyelitis (2019), malaria (2016), and measles (WHO 2020).

Table 3. Distribution of Public Health Care Facilities

Division	Teaching Hospital	Provincial General Hospital	District General Hospital	Base Hospital Type A	Base Hospital Type B	Divisional Hospital Type A	Divisional Hospital Type B	Divisional Hospital Type C	Primary Medical Care Unit and Maternity Home	total
Colombo	7			3	1	1	6	2	5	25
Gampaha	1		2	1	2	4	1	7		18
Kalutara			1	3	2	2	7	6		21
Kandy	3		1		2		14	33		53
Matale			1	1			4	14		20
Nuwara Eliya			1	1	1	2	8	14		27
Galle	2			2	1	2	7	9	2	25
Matara			1		2	2	6	5		16
Hambantota			1	1	2		9	8		21
Jaffna	1			2	2		4	19		28
Killinochchi			1		1		1	6		9
Mullaitivu			1		2	2	2	4		11
Vavuniya			1		1		1	6		9
Mannar			1			1	4	5		11
Batticaloa	1			2	2	2	3	12		22
Ampara			1		2		1	6	3	13
Kalmunai				3	4		3	7		17
Trincomalee			1	1	3			11	1	17
Kurunegala		1		1	3	9	11	20		45
Puttalam			1	1	1	2	4	9		18
Anuradhapura	1				3	4	10	21		39
Polonnaruwa			1		2	1	4	4		12
Badulla		1		2	1	2	9	32		47
Monaragala			1		3	1	5	8		18
Ratnapura		1	1		4	7	7	18		38
Kegalle			1		3	6	3	10		23
total	16	3	19	24	50	50	134	296	11	603

Source: Prepared by Author using the data from Ministry of Health (2017)

These medical services are based on Western medicine, but Sri Lanka also has the traditional *Ayurveda* medicine. There is a national educational institution for training *Ayurvedic* doctors and a specialized medical school. Ninety *Ayurvedic* medical facilities are established to serve the many people who trust the indigenous approach. In rural areas,

there are still people who are skeptical or prejudiced against western medicine, and trust in Ayurveda remains strong.

The current Sri Lankan health care system is predominantly a public system funded by taxes and supplemented by a fee-paying private sector. The most striking feature of Sri Lanka's public health care system is that it is free to all. The central Ministry of Health and the nine provincial ministries of health manage the public health services, within which prevention and treatment are run separately. Prevention is handled by 350 health officers under 26 health districts. Each medically qualified health officer is teamed up with assistant health officers, nurses, midwives, and health inspectors, depending on the size of the population served. In addition, the maternal and child health system is well developed and highly utilized. Clinic-based care and home visits are available, and there is a referral system linking the field to the hospital, providing a full range of specialized care (Ministry of Health 2017).

While there are regional disparities in terms of quality and facilities, the medical workforce is widely dispersed. Practice experience in rural hospitals contributed to doctors' promotion prospects (Kumar 2018). Users can combine the use of public and private services, for example, receiving expensive inpatient care and surgery free at public hospitals, and outpatient care at private clinics with less waiting time. Routine prevention and most treatments are available at nearby public hospitals and clinics, and only for major illnesses do people go to the better equipped urban hospitals (Corey 1987).

The relatively even distribution of medical facilities has made it possible to receive "near and free" medical services. Public transportation plays an important role in expanding the range of travel options within the region as well as access to education and medical care outside the region.

#### 4.4. Public Transportation as Social Welfare

Public transport in Sri Lanka has played a role that goes beyond the function of mobility. In particular, the bus network has been expanded and low fares have been maintained, providing people with opportunities and options to access education and health care that are dispersed in both urban and rural areas throughout the country.<sup>9</sup> This has not only facilitated mobility between urban and rural areas, but also enhanced welfare provision by facilitating rural-to-rural transportation within the local region.

The conventional view of urbanization has theorized the development of transportation infrastructure as part of the agglomeration of industry and later commerce in urban areas. Daily migration was seen to move from urban to rural in a hub-and-spoke pattern. However, the maintenance and structure of bus transportation in Sri Lanka has likely prevented both the outflow of population to urban areas, partly by facilitating daily commuting.

Sri Lanka's bus transport policy has remained in deficit due to the government's preoccupation with keeping bus fares low.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the government has maintained subsidies even as profit margins have deteriorated (Kumarage 1999; Kumarage 2002; Gwilliams 2005; Kumarage and Jayaratne 2008, Kumarage et al 2009; Kumarage and Gunaruwan 2009). However, successive governments have tried to maintain the freedom of movement and convenience of the people even at a loss.

It has also been credited with enabling people to live in rural areas and commute to urban areas by expanding the bus transport network and maintaining low fares (Alif 1978;

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<sup>9</sup> Sri Lanka's public transport system also includes railroads, which the British developed to transport plantation crops. The railroad system has remained largely unchanged since independence. Lines extend only to major cities.

<sup>10</sup> Sri Lanka has historically had a very high rate of individual bus use (Kumarage and Jayartne 2008 ). This is due to affordable fares and an extensive bus network. In 2008, for example, the annual per capita travel distance per person was 3,500 km, the largest in the world at the time (Kumarage 2009). Since the end of the conflict (2009), the number of private cars and motorcycles registered has also increased, but the number of buses in operation, distance traveled, and number of passengers per day have likewise continued to increase. The purchase of a private car is also subject to a 100% tax.

Athukorala 2000; Kumarage 2009; Moore 1992). Enforcing low prices for the public good has always been an important political manifesto.

In Sri Lanka, the predecessor of bus services, motor transport services, started in the early 1900s. The bus business has developed through three periods. They are the private sector era (1907-1957) with little state regulation, the nationalization era (1958-1978), and the public-private competition era (1978-present) (Roth and Diandas 1996).

#### ***4.4.1. The Era of Nationalization***

Bus transportation in Sri Lanka was initiated as private enterprise and its operation were largely unregulated. At the time of independence, the government decided that bus transportation was a public good and should not be for profit. Subsidies were provided and fares were capped and fixed. At the time, the bus owners concentrated on routes with the highest number of passengers, which favored urban-to-urban routes and, to a lesser extent, urban-rural or rural-rural routes. As the disparity in service between urban and rural operations became more pronounced, the government moved to nationalize the bus service, establishing the Ceylon Transport Board (CTB) in 1958. The board brought all operating companies under its umbrella and required that bus services serve the public interest (Roth and Diandas 1996). This led to the expansion of about 80,000 km of routes in rural areas during the 1960s and 1970s. Although many of the routes were loss-making, they were subsidized by the government, and low fares were enforced for rural residents with low incomes.

As it became apparent that people were satisfied with the well-developed transportation network, the control of fares became an important political tool for government and political parties (Kumarage and Jayaratne 2008). Rather than trying to make the CTB

financially profitable, the government used it as leverage to gain electoral support by extending subsidies, expanding rural routes, and adopting student discounts (ibid).

By 1978, the CTB had become one of the largest public bus transport operators in the world, operating about 6,000 buses per day and employing 60,000 people (Kumarage 2009). As a result, Sri Lanka's bus network was equal to or better than that of Singapore, Bombay, and Madras at the time and was considered the best in South and Southeast Asia (Roth and Diandas 1996).

The government's main focus was to make up the difference between rising operating costs and revenues while minimizing fare increases, but debt was growing. As a result, the government has repeatedly attempted to decentralize the functions of the CTB and improve its management, but without much success.

#### ***4.4.2. Mixed operation: 1978 to present***

After a change of government in 1977, the private sector began to enter the market to reform the stalling state-run bus service. This further increased the number of buses in service, but complicated the schedules and transfers with the state-run buses. The private operators monopolized the profitable routes connecting urban areas and, as a result, most of the state-run buses were limited to providing services in rural areas.

During this period, private buses contributed to the diversification of services, investing in the operation of air-conditioned buses and the introduction of luxury long-distance buses for tourists and the wealthy.

On the other hand, although there were some differences in bus fares between state-owned and private buses, the national transportation policy consistently tried to maintain low fares and continued to revise fares without taking inflation into account. In 2002, in response to repeated criticism of skyrocketing operating costs, a fare adjustment system

was finally established, based on changes in input costs and fuel prices. Since then, bus fares have been revised almost every year, but have remained very low. The government is cautious about raising the bus fares due to both its role as a means of transportation for the people and as an electoral lever.

Currently the Sri Lanka Transport Board (SLTB) manages state buses and the National Transport Commission (NTC) manages private bus operators. In addition, three new programs were launched in 2005 in addition to the regular subsidies. *Gami Seriya* (rural bus service) and *Nisi Seriya* (night bus service) are aimed at compensating rural areas with unprofitable routes, enhancing service in rural areas with few passengers, and supporting night and early morning bus service between rural and urban areas. The *Sisu Seriya* (school bus service) also provides services to help students avoid traffic jams and get to school safely and on time. Thus, Sri Lanka's bus transport policy has consistently preserved low bus fares and the number of routes by adding various forms of subsidies, regardless of criticism and increasing debt.

## **5. Growth with Rural Development**

This paper questions the historical and cultural background and policies that have facilitated Sri Lanka's unique development to achieve economic growth while maintaining its rural population. Sri Lanka's post-colonial development goals have been rural-first, built on the narrative of a pre-colonial glorious past extolling village-based self-sufficiency. The resulting welfare policies were implemented based on these ideas, providing a social infrastructure that provided for necessities in daily life, tuned to the needs of those in rural areas. As a result, the attraction of migration to urban areas has been limited, and the rural population maintained. Sri Lanka thus experienced "growth with rural development" rather than the urbanization that is both assumed to be concomitant to economic growth in the

conventional model and featured in the other development models examined. Though this result is a consequence of Sri Lanka's policy, and can be seen as inevitable with hindsight, it is nonetheless a largely unintended outcome.

The post-independence government has changed frequently yet none have advanced urban planning or bullish economic growth plans (Corey 1987). Despite wide political differences in other areas, there has been consistency in their concern for welfare and transport policies based on a Rural First Principle. It is these policies which are essential for electoral success. In this sense, there is little evidence that the policies were aimed at discouraging urbanization, or at maintaining rural populations. In other words, despite the narrative of the SLFP encouraging a Sinhalese identification as an agricultural people, today's rural development and population maintenance in Sri Lanka is largely an unintended result.

This came at a cost. Sri Lanka was a low-income country with a great reputation until the early 1980s because of its dramatic improvement in terms of social development. However, Sri Lanka's economic growth has been slow since then and the country has been criticized as a failed case with over-emphasis on welfare policies (e.g. Keregama 2000; 2006). The newly independent Sri Lanka could have achieved sufficient economic growth to overtake Malaysia if it had made efforts to develop a market economy through proper urban planning and conversion of plantation profits into industrialization (Oshima 1982).

What the Sri Lankan government wanted to protect, even with the deficit, was its welfare policy. Any reduction in welfare would have upset the political balance found among the parties. This political agenda led to the maintenance of welfare in spite of repeated advice to the contrary from international organizations, which made rural life reasonably comfortable.

While the rural-first principle and Sri Lanka's specific welfare policies have minimized the disparity between urban and rural social infrastructure, they have incurred serious deficits. The question remains as to whether they are financially sustainable. Sri Lanka has joined the ranks of upper-middle income countries, but has stagnated in recent years, raising the question of a "middle-income trap". The economy relies on remittances from overseas workers to obtain foreign currency, which is 10% of its GDP, and its domestic industry has not developed. Separately, depending on how the Metro Colombo Urban Development Project or Port City Colombo, which has only recently been pursued by the government on a large scale, develops in the future, there is a possibility that urbanization may proceed rapidly. Whether or not the rural population will continue to be sustained requires further observation.

Nonetheless, lessons emerge from these unintended policy directions, especially in light of the problems associated with the growing urbanization that is occurring in many places.

First is the long-term intervention of the state to improve welfare. Interventions by the World Bank and IMF, as well as structural adjustments in developing countries, have generally called for a reduction in welfare policies. Apart from a few developed countries, the welfare state is usually viewed with a disapproving eye. Sri Lanka, however, has fended off these pressures and has continued its welfare policies resolutely. Leaving aside financial issues, there is no doubt that sustained public investment has improved the welfare of Sri Lanka. This has enabled people to have access to basic social infrastructure where they live.

Second is the protection of public transport in rural areas. Again, as urbanization progresses, rural public transport becomes unprofitable and it is usually more efficient to downsize, privatize, or abolish altogether. However, Sri Lanka has been trying to subsidize and maintain the unprofitable rural services. People do not need to move to urban areas because freedom of movement is relatively accessible even in remote areas. Rural-to-rural

transport also facilitates access to dispersed social facilities for free education and free health. Maintaining public transportation in these rural areas is a policy that can be implemented even in developed countries where urban populations are becoming unsustainable.

Third, and most important, is growth with rural development as a concept. The development path of Sri Lanka for these five decades or more challenges the conventional concomitance of development, growth and urbanization. Because Sri Lanka has not achieved the status of a high-income nation, this development path has been easy to ignore. However, high economic growth is reaching its limit of concomitance with human development because of the newly recognized problems of excessive urbanization. The worst of these – environmental pollution, slum development, poor sanitation, disease outbreaks, and poor urban infrastructure – will also vitiate the previous expected high economic growth.

The global Covid-19 epidemic has exposed a further vulnerability of highly densely populated cities and provided a further opportunity to question the sustainability of urban-centric development. Furthermore, the normalization of urban-led growth leads to population shifts to the cities, even when better lifestyle and job opportunities are not the reality, as in ‘urbanization without growth’. Moreover, this paper does not consider the many social issues associated with urbanization at the micro level. China has made some headway with policies leading to *in-situ* urbanization. Sri Lanka’s policy, albeit partly unintended, makes a serendipitous contribution to address excessive urbanization. Its population stability over a 200-year period points to a place where people can live for a long time whilst maintaining development and growth.

The key question for countries looking to learn from Sri Lanka is tough: whether to confront the unavoidable negative effects of pursuing economic growth at all other costs,

or to center development on " well-being," which cannot be measured by econometric indicators alone.

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