

## **Redefining Regional Development in Sri Lanka : Realities and Challenges**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

*The on-going debate on devolution and power sharing in Sri Lanka has also brought into focus the need to overcome regional imbalances in development. While regional development has been of central importance in the agenda of post-independence governments there has not been an overall vision for the purpose. As a consequence while significant gains have been achieved in the quality of life and income level of the Sri Lankan population (per capita GNP rose from US\$ 273 in 1980 to 841 in 2000 poverty continues to assail large numbers of the urban and rural population. Marked regional inequalities exist between the 'core' and the 'periphery'. There are also inter and intra regional differences within the periphery itself.*

*It is also evident that the approach to regional development has been largely reactive (responding to specific issues and problems) and not proactive (planning to realize the potential of regions).*

*The shift in government policy to make the private sector the engine of growth has also implications for regional development. This shift in policy is exemplified by the recently instituted Regional Economic Advancement Programme (REAP) that has replaced the District Integrated Rural Development Programmes (Karunanayake and Abhayaratna, 2002). The IRDPs had a commitment to target the poorer groups as well as the poorer areas. This may not be so with the private sector that is propelled by the profit motive. Hence a basic issue would be the manner in which REAP could respond to alleviate human and income poverty of the poorest segments of the rural population. It is also evident that the direct involvement of the private sector in promoting regional economic growth also envisages the government taking up the role of facilitator from that of implementor.*

*There are also other issues that have a bearing on regional development. Consequent to the open economic policy pursued by the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) since the late 1970s there has been increasing exposure to the forces of globalization leading also to the glocalization of regional 'space' and 'place'. Further complexities have been added by the move towards trade associations within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Hence, the resilience of regions in the face of these developments has to be taken note of regional development.*

*Another vital issue of concern to regional development is that of reconciling political devolution with a national strategy for regional development. This would necessarily bring into focus the issue of superimposing planning regions on administrative regions.*

*In view of the foregoing there is a clear need for redefining regional development in Sri Lanka and this paper is a step in that direction. The authors first look at the regional development process in Sri Lanka and proceeds to assess the status of national and regional planning. In regard to the last attention is focussed on regional development as implemented under both decentralized and devolved system of governance. The point is made that there has not been much engagement between the political and the development process. The paper then goes on to discuss issues in regional development that makes its redefinition of such vital importance. The final section proposes guidelines for redefinition with reference to (a) planning principles (b) political principles (c) spatial principles and (d) strategic principles.*

### **REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS IN SRI LANKA**

Regional development in Sri Lanka has seen the operation of concurrent processes, namely, a political process and a developmental process. The development process involved initiatives in the form of infrastructure development, land settlement and irrigation development, village settlement expansion, river basin development, Accelerated Mahaweli Development, District Integrated Rural Development and similar programmes. Most of these programmes and projects focussed on 'area development' rather than on regional development.

The political process initially involved the decentralization of the functions of the Centre that then gave way to devolution aimed at greater power sharing by the regions. However, the significant drawback of the two processes has been that they have, by and large, operated as independent processes without many interfaces in promoting regional development. In effect there has been a failure to integrate the two processes.

As shown below there were also other problems relating to the political process. The initial attempts at decentralization of central government functions in Sri Lanka started with the District Coordinating Committees setup in 1953. The Government Agent (GA) in each district headed this committee which coordinated the functions of all government departments at district level. Incorporation of the political leadership into the district level development process was initiated with the institution of the District Political Authority system in 1973. This was followed by the Decentralized Capital Budget in 1974 under which the Members of Parliament (MPs) were given the responsibility for the disbursement of funds allocated to each district, on a priority basis. A further development was the establishment of District Development Councils (DDCs). They were formed under the District Development Councils Act No.35 of 1980 with responsibility for planning and plan implementation. Therefore in the decentralization process the district was in essence the unit of operation where the administrative and planning boundaries were coincidental.

A clear shift in policy relating to sub-national level administration and planning was evident during late 80s. This was marked by the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution that was introduced in 1987 paving the way for the Provincial Councils Act No. 42 of 1987. This Act enabled the devolution of power to a system of Provincial Councils (Leitan, 1997). The *Pradeshiya Sabha* Act No. 15 of 1987 followed soon after leading to the establishment of