

Ensuring National Security through Reconciliation and Sustainable Development -The Role of Armed Forces in Sustainable Development

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Introduction

The involvement of Armed Forces in sustainable development has been a subject which has focused attention of many countries. This has happened due to several reasons. The major reason being the importance of utilizing the services of professional armies for many facets of sustainable development. The second reason is the need for collaboration of many different Governmental Agencies helping the nations to build strong institutions and thriving economies. The third reason is the emphasis given to the idea that global security is routed in people and communities. It is not a new concept but has taken a long time to pick up the attention of the leading countries.

In an essay written by William S Becker titled “Indefensible Society” it is said that;

“Though we may be confused and frightened, we can see the dim outlines of a new world order much different from the old. It is an order promoting life rather than death, peace rather than terror, self-realization rather than frustration, community rather than alienation and personal opportunity rather than powerlessness. From this new order, we can construct a “defense plan” which allows

each of us to be not a terrified bystander to the drama of international affairs, but a direct participant in the healing of the planet, contributing to world security daily in our homes and workplaces. The plan begins with the assumption that we are insecure not because we lack sufficient military forces, but because we lack internal coherence as people, as a society and as a community of nations.

In other words, genuine security is more about fabric than fortress – more about building the strength and resilience of every household, every business and every community, each a thread in the fabric of society. The military's embrace of sustainable development is a very important step in that direction."

An Active Partner in National Service

In this article, I will briefly outline what I think the role of Sri Lanka Armed Forces should be in sustainable development in terms of nearly seven years of my involvement with the Armed Forces in various stages, in particular, the involvement *with the* Armed Forces in maintaining essential services during the most critical period of Sri Lanka's conflict involving the ruthless terrorist group the LTTE, while I was handling the most difficult task as Commissioner General of Essential Services. In My tenure of office between 2006 - 2009, was my first experience in working with the Armed Forces. When the main land route (A9) to Jaffna had to be closed due to security reasons, the biggest challenge thereafter was to send supplies to Jaffna only by sea and air. Transportation of cargo by sea became extremely difficult as the vessel owners were reluctant to sail due to constant LTTE attacks in the sea. The Government then requested ICRC for its support by allowing the vessels to sail with its flag on board. However, the ICRC did not respond due to LTTE's pressure. It was then that Sri Lanka Navy voluntarily obliged to provide security despite their being involved with LTTE sea tigers practically every day. In addition, the ports of loading in Colombo and unloading in Jaffna were completely manned by the Sri Lanka Navy. Loading and unloading operation was in their hands in order to expedite such activities. When the Point Pedro Harbour had to be closed down due to an LTTE attack on ship loading flour, Sri Lanka Navy within a month expanded the Fishery Harbour for unloading of cargo at Myliddy and thwarted LTTE strategy to breakdown supplies. The transportation of cargo to the main go downs in the Jaffna city, supervision of its delivery and provision of security for transportation were completely in their hands. Sri Lanka Air Force obliged to transport essential medicines that require refrigeration facilities by its daily flights which were used to facilitate troupe movements from Colombo to Jaffna. Such was the support extended by the Armed Forces to sustain the lives for the people and to promote life of the civilians rather than death. The most important humanitarian activity involved in this operation was keeping the civilians in Jaffna contended and secure through laying the foundation of trust between civilians and the Armed Forces. I consider these services as part of the strength of the military service which could be used to sustain development even in emergency situations.

The next step is my experience with the Armed Forces in post-conflict development in the Northern region, the more recent experience and what may be termed "**the Sri Lankan success story**" in the aftermath of the biggest operation launched by the security forces in May 2009 that ended nearly 30 years of armed conflict in the country involving LTTE.

Peace, stability and sustainable development

The prevalence of peace and stability is a prerequisite for sustainable development in any country. Without peace and stability sustainable development will not be a subject on the national agenda for development. The Armed Forces have secured the country from terrorism and laid the foundation for peace and stability. This is the biggest contribution made by the Sri Lanka Armed Forces for sustainable development in our country. The development that has taken place in the Northern Region since 2009 provides ample testimony to the importance of restoration of peace in the region helping to charter a new course of development from conflict to stability. The development of economic and social infrastructure and resuscitation of the economic base and restoring peace in the region have paid outstanding dividends in less than three years. The contribution of the Northern region to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has increased almost threefold.

The Role of Armed Forces in Post-Conflict Development

In order to understand the role of the Armed Forces, it is useful to briefly describe their involvement in post conflict development. In the resettlement policy adopted by the GoSL the Armed Forces were considered a strong partner to the resettlement process. Prior to resettlement, there were two major challenges i.e. demining and restoration of the basic infrastructure. In demining operation, it was Sri Lanka Army who took the lead role supported by the donor assisted external agencies. Sri Lanka achieved an impressive record in demining operation having cleared more than 90% of hazardous area of which nearly 75% was cleared by the Army Unit. This was the foundation for a successful and rapid resettlement programme. Equally important was Sri Lanka Army's contribution to rehabilitate damaged infrastructure. The consignment of heavy machinery imported to facilitate rehabilitation of damaged infrastructure was handed over to the Engineering Division of the Sri Lanka Army. Their services were used in all rehabilitation i.e. access roads, minor tanks, clearing of cultivable paddy lands (180,000 hectares which were abandoned) and restoration of irrigation system. The end result of this contribution was the achievement of resettlement of nearly 250,000 people within the first six months of year 2010. These humanitarian interventions contributed to restore the lost confidence of the people. The Armed Forces utilized its their trained manpower and skills with utmost efficiency to assist the development momentum in post-conflict situation.

Towards a New Direction: What the Security Forces Can Offer?

The Armed Forces in Sri Lanka are blessed with highly professional soldiers. In recognition of their talents and the skills, the major task of Urban Development in Colombo has been placed under the purview of the Ministry of Defence. The Armed Forces have commenced development and town planning in Colombo City, which was not seen for the last 40 years. As was seen in the Northern Province, the country is privileged to harness their ability. Their involvement in economic development will certainly help in reducing the cost and increasing productivity and efficiency. The next asset the Armed Forces possess is their skilled labour force which could be used for development of vocational training in the country. I believe, this asset will help in improving the quality and standard of vocational training in Sri Lanka. It is time that we took cognition of this fact.

In my experience, the most impressive talent I noticed was in the field of administration and management. I, as an officer from the Administrative Service, noticed these with satisfaction. The systematic procedures, managerial skills, the mastery of planning, monitoring and achieving expected targets are all lessons which the public service of Sri Lanka could use to enhance its capacities in these fields. The knowledge of the Armed Forces in information technology is another area to draw experience from. I have suggested that the officers of the Sri Lanka Administratives service, particularly the new entrants be exposed to training by the professional military personnel. With these interactions, the Armed Forces too would benefit mutually through exposure to each other's experiences. Interaction between the two disciplines is useful in increasing productivity and efficiency which is a major contributory factor for sustainable development.

Why have the Armed Forces moved in to a new direction? The Government of Sri Lanka has made significant investment in the Armed Forces not to capture any other land but to restore and maintain law and order. Sri Lanka Armed Forces have moved out of their stereotypical role and embarked upon new engagements in rebuilding the nation. There could be people who find it difficult to perceive the new role because their minds are still preoccupied with stereo type of the Armed Forces. They have effectively drawn expertise from in a lot of areas during their long years of experience. It is a coherent force that can be used in the next phase of development. In the field of sustainable development, the security forces are an effective tool because their expertise could be used in construction, development of infrastructure and maintenance of social fabric. For example they have been engaged in not only reconciliation of people from North and South but North with North as well. There are various social problems among the Tamil community, such as Northern vs. Eastern Tamils, caste issues, etc. These issues did not surface when they were living under tyranny of the LTTE. After the dawn of peace, they are experiencing normalcy in life and all such social intricacies have begun to surface. Security forces blend in with all categories of people irrespective of their caste and creed and have created a space for people to socially interacted with the Security Forces. The Armed Forces interact with Northern people from all sectors during the post-conflict situation. Even when there was tension among their own people, the Armed Forces played a role of "go-between" to bring them together, because they are the nearest point of contact for the remote villagers. The outside world is ignorant of this social transition because they do not have such experience.

The intention of the Armed Forces is to heal the land removing the threat of terrorism and that is only one aspect of the role of the Armed Forces. There are other important roles that they could perform. The most important among them is the creation of social bond for the next generation to continue by strengthening the North South interaction to regain what had been lost for 30 years and creating a situation to sustain the ongoing social and economic development, so that our next generation will not have to go through what the country and the Armed Forces have gone through for many years. I am not speaking on behalf of the Armed Forces, but what I have seen as a civil servant. It was easier for me to work with them because of their understanding, transparency and sincerity.

Lot of people criticize the involvement presence of the Security Forces' in development -

Why not? They are part of public service and have redefined their role. Of course, they have drawn lessons out of the 30 years of conflict which the world could benefit from. True, there have been mistakes. They did learn lessons from having defeated terrorism and are willing to share their experience with the outside world.

Conclusion:

There is a definite role for the Armed Forces in development of a country and that role adds to sustainability because the Armed Forces, unlike other agencies, have a fall back role. Today they can use the mammoth but tomorrow they may have to take a weapon. The Armed Forces have a conscience to protect of the country. They serve the country by reducing the threat for security because task of the Armed Forces is to heal the nation and build internal coherence as people, as a society and as a community of the nation.

