



A REVIEW OF P. SUMANAPALA'S NATIONAL AND SUB-NATIONAL PLANNING APPROACHES IN SRI LANKA*

Siri Gamage**

Western Sydney University, Australia

Development planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation at the national and regional levels assume high significance in contemporary society as they involve economic development, poverty alleviation, social engineering, and preservation of quality of life. Involvement in efficient economic development planning and implementation in various administrative units has been part of state responsibility at varying levels since independence. However, complexities have emerged in the field of planning with the expansion of neoliberal, free market economic ventures initiated and implemented by the private sector - local and foreign - making the process of planning quite challenging.

Coordination of planning and implementation activities including budgeting, provision, and careful utilisation of resources among various levels of government plays a crucial part in the process. At this juncture, whether Sri Lanka is facing up to this challenge in terms of political, institutional (bureaucratic), and procedural dimensions is a reasonable question to raise.

In this regard, gaining an understanding of how the development policy and planning has evolved since independence and acquiring a sense of the challenges facing planners as well as how to address them are necessary steps. Sumanapala's National and Sub-National Planning Approaches in Sri Lanka (1948 - 2018): A Critical Review provides the reader with a useful resource to achieve these objectives. The author who has held important positions in the Department of National Planning of the Ministry of Finance and the Finance Commission (responsible for provincial budgets) has utilised his academic training as an economist to produce this publication. He holds a Master's degree in Regional Development and Planning from the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, the Netherlands. The book details measures to arrest regional disparities by, for example, entrusting local government with more responsibilities, ensuring better coordination, investing in industries in agriculture areas, and focusing on vulnerable groups (pp. 64-67). A series of recommendations to address

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** Author e-mail
gamage.siri@yahoo.com

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other continuing issues are also included in the final two chapters. There are numerous insights that present day planners and students of development planning can gain by reading the book.

Successive governments since independence have introduced a number of development plans and policy approaches/frameworks at the national level, along with a range of development initiatives that has been instituted to develop regions and sub-regions. The latter entails policies and strategies adopted at the macro level in order to address regional disparities. In terms of the changes in planning approaches, “governments from 1948-1977 accorded a prominent place for economic planning. Governments that came after 1977 adopted a less interventionist liberalised economy approach. They provided policy directions to private investors considered as the engine of growth for viable projects and utility services” (p. 29). However, compared to other countries in the region such as Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia, Sri Lanka has not performed well in the economic frontier, judging by economic indicators. Upon analyzing socio-economic data, the author states that the objectives and targets set out have not been achieved satisfactorily due to domestic and international factors some of which are beyond the control of the relevant authorities (p. 81).

Since the introduction of Provincial Councils in 1987, national planners had to work with their counterparts in the provinces – both on the political and bureaucratic levels. However, the duplication of development plans by the line ministries and Provincial Councils has emerged as a major issue. The concentration of industrial, commercial, and service activities in and around the capital have not changed during the last seven decades either.

The book includes chapters that engage with

national and regional planning approaches, provincial planning, and challenges of development planning. It analyses the planning strategies adopted by various governments during the 70 years since 1948 at the national and regional levels.

Chapter 1 deals with definitional issues and the nature of policies and plans implemented in various periods. Reasons for poor performance are also outlined (pp. 30-31). For the 2015-18 period, planning indicators are given. The government vision is explained as one which seeks “to graduate the economy to an upper-middle income status by 2020” (p. 25). In order to achieve this vision, “the government adopts an economic strategy based on social market concept with the twin objectives of achieving higher growth and promoting social equity” (p. 25). Developing regional and rural economies through strong small and medium enterprises is part of this policy agenda.

Chapter 2 deals with national planning approaches including their theoretical backgrounds such as Classical and Neo classical, Core-periphery, Dependency, and Neo Marxist. The distinction between capitalist and socialist development concepts are elaborated while pointing out that in the 20th century the US and the Soviet Union adopted a mixed economy model incorporating elements of both the market economy and centralized planning by the state. The details on theory in the chapter remain very basic and descriptive. The author does not engage critically with the theoretical approaches mentioned or their suitability to the Sri Lankan context. However, the chapter elucidates reasons for regional disparities and emphasizes the need for balanced regional development across provinces.

The book provides a historical overview of the planning architecture and global influences, while making note of specific policy documents current at each period.

The period between 1948-2018 is divided into nine categories. Under each, the author describes economic plans and programmes undertaken by various governments. However, critical evaluation of these policies and plans is absent. The author does not evaluate the success or failure of various approaches adopted by governments or present his own evaluation of each approach. Rather, the chapter runs as a descriptive outline, which nonetheless is useful for the reader unfamiliar with the subject and desires to do further research.

Chapter 3 deals with Provincial Councils (PCs) and planning - an area that has been researched on and understood relatively less in relation to development planning and practice. Since 1987, some legislative, executive, and financial functions have been devolved to PCs. The subject of local government institutions come under the supervision of PCs, as per the lists of reserved, provincial, and concurrent functions. The Finance Commission is responsible for working out how to apportion funds for the Provinces. The chapter outlines the steps followed in provincial development planning and the distribution of block grants (pp.72-72). The author describes the Results Based Management Approach in contrast to the Input-Output Approach that was adopted in 2011 under the guidance of the Finance Commission. These details are also descriptive and normative.

In the summary section, the author highlights how the Province rather than the District became the unit of planning, and the role of the Finance Commission in maintaining a sound fiscal relationship between the national government and PCs. He states that regional disparities have not been minimized even after 30 years, though some improvements can be observed in some socio-economic indicators pertaining to education, health, poverty, nutrition, water

supply, and sanitation (p. 77). Importantly, the author makes suggestions for improving regional disparities including the allocation of funds to less developed areas within Provinces, and facilitating the ability for the PCs to borrow funds for commercially viable projects as the provinces do not receive adequate funds from the government (pp. 78-80). Chapter 4 considers key challenges of development planning in the country, which is seen as a drawback. Among them are the increasing trend of unequal distribution of income and wealth, prevalence of pockets of acute poverty and malnutrition (provides information but no sources are listed), unequal distribution of means of production e.g. land in old colonization schemes, concentration of economic power in the hands of a few in the business community (upper middle-rich), tax evasions by the rich and upper middle classes leading to lack of domestic resources for development, and unemployment and under employment among youths. The last is important as it reflects the non-utilization of productive labour. The growth of elderly population and the need for rationalizing the social security system, weak investment by private investors in the productive sector, issues in supply-driven projects in rural areas, waste and corruption in the public sector, bureaucratic bottlenecks in regional and local levels, and the lack of popular participation in development planning and implementation are other challenges. Maintaining a balance between politicians, bureaucrats, and technocrats in planning and implementation is seen as an important measure for better policy outcomes, and to create an environment attractive for private investors.

These are useful general propositions that other researchers and policy makers can expand through research and further policy dialogue. Though the author mentions technical sustainability of projects in passing, no concerted effort is made to discuss this

subject in depth. The author states that objectives and targets in relation to national and provincial level development plans and policy frameworks have not been achieved, without undertaking a thorough analysis of available data to base such claims on. The analysis is very basic and limited to some socio-economic indicators. He does not add his own insights gained from extensive experience in the field either.

Chapter 5 is devoted to conclusions and recommendations, where the author identifies two major issues: 1. The gap between the rich and the poor and 2. The disparity between developed and less developed regions. To address these, state intervention is necessary rather than relying on free enterprise dogmatically. He emphasizes the need for a wider discussion with civil society and other stakeholders, but no other measures are conceptualized. The author emphasizes the need for a stable and conducive policy regime and direction for the private sector. Among the recommendations (pp. 90-92) are the need for a comprehensive policy review to uncover lessons learned, improving the technical and institutional capacity of planning units in line ministries and PCs, the need for regular dialogue between national and provincial planners, and the need for a training institute for development planners. The weak institutional relationship between Provincial Councils and local government authorities in relation to financial and development matters is identified as a major issue. Several complaints of the LG authorities are also listed, such as the PCs not giving due consideration to their proposals, and insufficient funding.

The strength of the book is not in its theoretical considerations (as the author has not shown how the theoretical frameworks described early on in the book can help in planning today), but in the details of the planning process, policy and programmes implemented at the national and provincial

levels, the nature of the challenges they face, and possible solutions. Given the descriptive and basic nature of the content, undergraduates following economics and other social sciences in universities will find the book a useful resource. In future editions, the author needs to provide the sources of his quoted information by following standard referencing styles.