

EDITORIAL

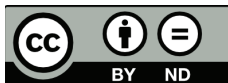
Why Social Science viewpoints are necessary for addressing the multistranded crisis in Sri Lanka?

The current crisis in Sri Lanka is multi-faceted with economic, political, and social aspects impinging on one another. The economic and political crises are the ones that are more visible as reflected in queues, scarcities, and mass mobilisations against the ruling establishments, issues that demand urgent attention and action. Underlying these seemingly fire-fighting emergencies are the need for understanding the root causes of the multi-stranded maladies, the need for preventive action based on sound policies and socially sensitive and well-informed crisis intervention strategies that are driven by objectively assessed actual needs of affected people and the resources available to tackle them rather than political motivations driven by short-term gains of one kind or another for the decision makers at the top and the need to accommodate those in the inner ring as against the competent personnel who may be more capable of addressing the actual needs on the ground by virtue of their skills and training. Social Sciences inclusive of Economics, Political Science, Sociology, Social Anthropology, Psychology, Education, Demography, Geography, Management, Law, and Social Work must be utilized in full and appropriate transdisciplinary blends in identifying and implementing required preventive action and immediate crisis responses in order to make sure that we will see the end of the crises at hand, do not remain entangled in them forever and better prepared when the next crisis hits us.

If there is any lesson to be learnt from the ongoing stalemate, it is that decision making at the level of

policy formulation in matters such as development, public finance, local or foreign investments, technology transfers, governance, environmental conservation and economic recovery, must involve not only the elected leaders and the designated officials who may be largely guided by common sense understanding of issues and exigencies within the systems in which they operate, including demands by diverse stakeholders such as those with vested interests, but also experts in relevant fields with a proven track record, analytical skills, intellectual integrity, autonomy and a capacity to stay above the competing pressures from diverse stakeholders in order to pursue common good and the needs of future generations (e.g. climate justice, need to safeguard the commons) as against the urgent needs of those currently preoccupied with accessing the scarce resources available. Social Sciences have the knowledge base required to sort out matters and guide crisis responses and policy directives and a capacity to generate suitable new knowledge where the existing body of knowledge is inadequate.

Economics and related disciplines including Business Studies and Management must be deployed to understand and respond to the escalating debt crisis, rebuilding of foreign currency reserves, overcoming commodity scarcities and more careful and rational administration of public finance. Rebuilding legitimacy of the state, cleaning up the political process, enhancing public accountability and broadening parameters of democratic participation to include youth, women, professional groups and disadvantaged social groups require critical



inputs from Political Science, History, Sociology, Demography and Public Administration. Responding to the unfolding social crisis inclusive of unemployment, indebtedness, bankruptcies, overseas labour migration, social tension, malnutrition, depression, suicide attempts, substance use and crime calls for variety of expertise from a range of disciplines such as Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Law and Public Health. While none of these disciplines will have ready made quick fixes to the complex problems the country is facing at present, we have to realise that the problems at hand cannot be tackled by hand picked 'yes' men with no sound understanding of the issues involved.

Mechanisms for harnessing social sciences

Different countries follow different modalities to harness Social Sciences for national development. For instance, publicly funded state institutions such as the Social Science Research Councils consisting of leading scholars in each field are used in countries like USA, UK, India, and the Philippines to support independent social research by eminent scholars on priority global/national issues and help establish a valid evidence base to be used in scientific as well as public discourses. Social Science think tanks are also set up and mobilised by the universities, foundations, civil society organisations or even political parties for advocacy and decision-making purposes. For instance, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is one such think tank committed to global peace and sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation in the US. Similarly, the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation in Germany is linked to the Christian Democratic Union (centre-right), and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation is affiliated with the Social Democratic Party (centre-left). In these instances, the respective Social Science think tanks may be influenced by ideologies, and particular political agendas, but there is a clear recognition of the perspectives and positions from which they make a case one way or the other and this may influence the application of the relevant ideas by the specific actors. It must be mentioned here that the relevant think tanks serve to not just reiterate and justify the actions of the respective political parties, but also change and reorient them in line with available evidence about the changing circumstances.

The absence of any credible mechanism to support and utilise Social Sciences in socially relevant ways exploring their full potential must be identified as an important factor contributing to the larger social crisis currently unfolding in Sri Lanka. Against this background, there are vastly different rhetorical and largely unsubstantiated claims about vital issues such

as incidence of poverty and malnutrition, educational disruption, suicides and the patterns and the extent of substance abuse in the country with neither the state nor civil society seeking to establish valid and reliable data bases that help monitor the relevant outcomes as against the policies and interventions pursued. Instead of recognising and addressing social issues, injustices of one kind or another and social grievances fueled by unemployment, hopelessness and sense of disadvantage to be countered deploying appropriate social policies, the overwhelming tendency has been to resort to arbitrary action, violence, state repression and outright manipulation in response to episodic waves of social resistance by avalanches of disaffected people in the north and the south. This has not resulted in long-term peace and stability or lasting development in the country as we know very well at this point in time. This is why required Social Science inputs are absolutely necessary for identifying and addressing the bottlenecks and real issues in society.

Towards socially responsible and publicly accountable research and publication

In Sri Lanka the expanding Social Science community should strive towards addressing issues of vital public interest in their research, advocacy, and dissemination of study results in whatever fora available. The policy failures we have repeatedly seen in Sri Lanka are largely due to the failure of the people in power to recognise potential contributions from sciences in general, including Social Sciences and the failure of the scientists to come forward and exert their due influence through advocacy and public debates in mass media and social media. Many of the social issues swelling up from the ground level go undetected or under detected until they explode after reaching a crisis level as there are no trained social workers, counsellors or other actors providing care and guidance in establishments such as universities, schools, workplaces or even institutions like prisons, drug rehabilitation centres, elderly homes, or services catering to international migrant workers.

Absence of any public institutions that systematically collect, disseminate, and analyse social data and conduct public opinion polls have added to the volatility of the situation. Traditional support mechanisms through family and kinship alliances, neighbourhood associations, charity and philanthropy or even religious institutions have been undermined due to the ongoing processes of social transformation and they have not been replaced by a cadre of well-trained professional care givers with adequate resources available to the people concerned. The result is accumulation of grievances on a massive

scale feeding into mass protests and social tsunamis of one kind or another. While economic recovery and social stabilisation clearly need appropriate social policies and programmes, addressing larger issues of social injustice and clearing obstacles for upward social mobility in ways to be identified through applied social research, trained social scientists such as social workers can also play a useful role in providing social care to supplement and strengthen existing social support mechanisms that help people cope with diverse problems they face.

There is also a clear need for the Sri Lankan Social Science community in and outside the country to forge alliances and collaborations, come forward to reflect on, comprehend and respond to the multistranded and multilayered crisis at hand and contribute towards expanding the frontiers of knowledge in the relevant fields in terms of addressing the vexed problems confronting all of us. This may require not only new approaches to overcome the economic and other obstacles the country is facing, new ways of practicing our disciplines and innovative educational initiatives where the teachers and students are pushed towards finding viable and effective remedies for the problems at hand. The existing body of Social Science knowledge may not have all the answers to the problems we are facing but this is where new knowledge and innovative remedies must be identified, introduced, and assessed.

While resource limitations and unsettled conditions in the country may pose serious challenges for social research in Sri Lanka presently, we must bear in mind that some of the key advances in Social Sciences were made in post-war Europe and North America and more recently post-Apartheid South Africa in situations not dissimilar to what we are going through at present. Knowledge production for understanding the world around us as well as knowledge production for tackling urgent human problems remain within the remit of Social Sciences in diverse fields ranging from Applied Economics to Applied Anthropology. With a long history of cultural heritage and established scholarship, democratic governance firmly established despite numerous challenges and reversals throughout the post-independence period and a rich heritage of biodiversity and cultural unity and diversity, a considerable repair work must be done, and we should all come forward to think ahead and outside the box to address the mounting challenges we face as a country. Social Science thinking must pave the way for forward looking social policies on the part of state agencies as well as progressive social movements geared to democratic reforms, broad-based development of a sustainable nature, and rational and optimum use of public resources in publicly accountable ways for advancing the common interests of all citizens in the country,

Kalinga Tudor Silva