

**Our Sri Lanka 2025: Engaging Persons of Sri Lankan Origins Overseas
(PSLOO)**

**Organised by the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA) and
International Alert (IA)**

27 & 28 February 2015

Union Ballroom - JAIC Hilton, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Speakers and Organizations present:

- Ms Shirani de Fontgalland, Former Head of the Criminal Law Section of the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Division, The Commonwealth Secretariat.
- Mr Eran Wickramaratna, Deputy Minister of Highways & Investment Promotion.
- Voices for Reconciliation (VfR), UK.
- Achieve Real Change (ARC), UK.
- Dr Vajira Kulatilake, Chief Executive Officer of National Development Bank.
- Mr Anushka Wijesinha, Independent Economist.
- Ms Helen Jones, Director, Youth Affairs and Education, Royal Commonwealth Society.
- Mr Ravi Karunayake, Minister of Finance.
- Prof Rajiva Wijesinha, Former State Minister for Higher Education.

Day 01: 27th February 2015

Introduction and Overview of the Conference

Mr. Jeevan Thiagarajah (ED, CHA) & Mr. Amjad Mohamed Saleem (Project Manager, IA)

Mr. Jeevan Thiagarajah, Executive Director of the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, inaugurated the conference by commending its timely nature. Given the formation of a new government, new possibilities and opportunities for engagement are expected to open up between the GOSL and the diaspora. This conference is the first of its kind in SL.

Mr Amjad Saleem, Project Manager at International Alert-Sri Lanka pinpointed the importance of building cross community interaction especially in view of increasing mobility and interconnectedness with PSLOO, in order to create an environment of positive contribution and connectivity. Mr. Saleem stressed how the negative connotations surrounding the word ‘diaspora’, have thus far hindered Sri Lanka from any longstanding positive engagement with the diaspora communities. Is it possible to use cross-community engagement to challenge such perceptions? How can we create open and inclusive spaces for diaspora groups, policymakers, politicians and individuals in Sri Lanka? How can the government of Sri Lanka, as well as communities abroad generate positive and progressive dialogue with each other?

Such bold questions set the stage for the conference to proceed towards reaching key recommendations, which will be highlighted at the end of each session.

Keynote Speech

Ms. Shirani de Fontgalland Goonatillake, former Head of the Criminal Law Section of the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Division, the Commonwealth Secretariat

Engaging with Sri Lanka: What does it mean to each of us? Contributions, Challenges and Limitations by Ms Shirani de Fontgalland

Ms Shirani, the first speaker of the conference, began her keynote address by discussing the diversity of persons of Sri Lankan origin who have migrated from Sri Lanka, including those who were born overseas or have never lived or visited the country. She claimed that the diaspora is not a

homogenous entity, thus any interpretation of such people as a “diaspora” or as an “actual community” is flawed. This also constricts the rich contributions that can be made by such Sri Lankan persons living abroad.

Ms. De Fontgalland-Goonatillake also looked at how the diaspora can contribute as agents of peace towards catalysing positive societal change. For instance, a number of groups representative of diverse sections of the Sri Lankan diaspora have come together to raise funds and resources with the intention of assisting Sri Lanka. Albeit diaspora engagement with Sri Lanka shifting over time at crucial turning points on a personal level and also in the historic and political context of the country, persons of Sri Lankan origin (including second and third generations and perhaps even later generations) have contributed to Sri Lanka in numerous ways, economically by way of remittance of earnings, investment in business and social development projects, in cultural affairs and in relation to their own families, societies and villages.

Diaspora communities also can play a critical role in crisis situations by applying their knowledge, experience, skills and networks to give support and assistance both during and after the crisis. This was evident in the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami as well as during the peace process and post conflict era. Such positive diaspora engagement needs to be facilitated and strengthened and also requires supportive and collaborative engagement with the Government of Sri Lanka and society actors.

Remarks

Hon. Mr Eran Wickramaratne, Deputy Minister of Highways and Investment Promotion.

Deputy Minister Mr Eran Wickramaratne stated how following the recent election (Jan 8th), an environment more conducive to issues such as the above to be voiced openly without fear or favour has emerged. In this light, Sri Lankans living abroad are welcome to play an active and constructive role in development and reconciliation efforts in the country; as well as contribute via remittances, investment and culture.

However, Mr. Wickramaratne also focused on a range of practical elements affecting PSLOO, such as visas, dual passport, citizenship as well as other regulatory constraints, which need to be revised in order to fully engage PSLOO in reconstruction and reconciliation processes.

The Minister also welcomed infrastructure investments and capital injection for development by the PSLOO, as well as their knowledge and expertise via technology transfers. In order to initiate this, Sri Lanka may need to study the successful case of India in attracting its diaspora back to the country and tapping into their expertise and capital.

Given how the Sri Lankan diaspora has done well for themselves, their contributions would immensely benefit the nation in its post-war reconstruction projects; especially at a time when the country is at a significantly historical crossroad.

**Session 1: Understanding and Analysing the Achievements and the role played by PSLOO
in engaging with SL (Economic/Education/Reconciliation)**

Speaker: Ms. Vajini Pannila, representative – Voices for Reconciliation (VfR)

Opportunities and Challenges of engaging with the UK Diaspora in reconciliation efforts

Voices for Reconciliation (VfR) is inclusive of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious group of young British Sri Lankan professionals. For the past four years VfR has encouraged discussions pertaining to inter-ethnic and inter-religious reconciliation whilst engaging with communities in Sri Lanka and the UK as well as with civil society and policymaking spheres in both countries. The group facilitates dialogue and workshops where members of Sri Lanka's diverse communities can discuss their experiences and views within safe and informal settings.

Ms. Vajini Pannila commenced her speech by rightfully defining the terms 'diaspora', which refers to disparate groups that have dispersed away from their motherland; and "reconciliation" which relates to the reparation of relations and compatible ways of thinking. Ms. Pannila asserted that the diaspora is not a single entity; but distinct clusters based on faith, age and other socio-economic factors.

The VfR methods and approaches towards reconciliation therefore, are focused on engaging such disparate groups to share their viewpoints regarding Sri Lanka. For instance, the dialogue workshops were conducted in a manner that would facilitate open and honest discussions, aimed at encouraging a sense of shared understanding amongst different ethnic groups.

A pressing issue that was recorded by VfR was how university students whom fall within the PSLOO category in the UK are being rapidly polarised, with divided views often resulting in heated discussion. Thus, VfR has started to engage with budding artists to see how their work can contribute towards the pursuit of peace via expressions of identity. Writers within these groups have often produced articles on democracy and personal journeys of being a PSLOO. Having recognised the role of art and culture in fostering reconciliation, VfR has organised a variety of events and exhibitions centred around the theme of reconciliation.

As a result, many hardlined PSLOO members have gradually changed their views, thus creating a ripple effect. VfR was pleased to see how a number of such Sri Lankans living abroad did return to Sri Lanka, as a result of the awareness and understanding created, concerning the indispensable nature of their contributions towards rebuilding post-war Sri Lanka.

Challenges:

Quite a number of individuals encountered difficulties when accepting the word 'reconciliation'. Some perceived it from a political angle, others saw it as having a destabilizing effect, whilst the rest were disillusioned regarding the matter.

Moreover, there appears to be a mutual breakdown of understanding between the diaspora and local Sri Lankans. For instance, the diaspora is seemingly unsure as to what is expected of them. They also face the double-edged sword of being blamed for not doing enough or for interfering too much.

Recommendations:

- Rebuild trust and relationship across communities; i.e. between communities in Sri Lanka as well as PSLOO communities.
- Promote empowerment through education, whereby school/university curriculums should recognize the contributions and experiences of all communities in the country. There should be a place for reforming diverse experiences of history.
- Empower the diaspora towards initiating meaningful change, whilst coming into terms with the past. c) The diaspora must be empowered to make meaningful change.

Speaker – Mr. Jayan Perera, representative Achieve Real Change (ARC) – Business division

Professional development projects done in Sri Lanka and the outcomes achieved (ARC)

The Achieve Real Change (ARC), a voluntary organisation, was formed in 2012. It is an organisation of young professional British Sri Lankans who aim to utilise their skills and interests to identify and design initiatives to promote community cohesion and development in Sri Lanka and the UK. It engages with Sri Lankan communities of all ethnicities in UK and Sri Lanka to implement projects related to Health, Business and Sport and has dedicated teams for each of these areas. Mr. Perera touched on the three approaches as their delivery model: Professional Skills, UK-SL partnerships, Community and Cohesion needs.

ARC believes that there is a clear business need to build management teams that reflect the community and promote upward job mobility throughout businesses in Sri Lanka, as it is essential towards promoting sustainability, profitability and community relations. ARC has identified visible graduate skills gaps, perceived lack of youth opportunities and the need to promote diversity as business objectives in Sri Lanka. In order to compliment this, ARC works closely with communities in the North and East of SL to identify viable employment and training opportunities for Sri Lankan youth. For instance, ARC is currently working with MAS Vaanavil where they introduced the concept of a diversity internship project and the need to identify with growth needs. ARC Business has also provided consultancy support to MAS holdings in order to define a programme that is socially inclusive, encourages intern skills development and while providing real business value to MAS in the long term.

Another significant initiative undertaken by the ARC Business division is the “ARC Business Turbo Boost” project; which is a one-year multi-faceted soft-skills development programme consisting of three main elements: deputising, networking and the turbo boost camp. Through Turbo Boost, ARC aims to develop the soft skills of six pre-selected executive grade employees in order for them to take on increased responsibilities at Vaanavil within an accelerated period of time. It is also expected that this will encourage the rapid acquisition of technical skills and boost the leadership skills of local employees to ensure diversity and inclusion at all levels of workplace hierarchy.

Speaker: Ms. Shevanthi Nayagam, representative Achieve Real Change (ARC) Health division

ARC Health has procured ties with a large portion of Sri Lanka diaspora population, related to the healthcare sector; who are keen to strengthen pre-existing connections while creating new ties with professionals in the healthcare sector in Sri Lanka, who lack representation by formal medical or dental bodies.

Most importantly, ARC health has also recognised the importance of addressing the interface between physical and mental health for patients with Chronic Kidney Disease in Sri Lanka. The team has been working actively with policymakers, healthcare professionals, Civil Society Organizations and the Sri Lankan Ministry to initiate interactive, multi-disciplinary health and patient-safety workshops, whereby issues such as the lack of awareness and communication leading to medical malpractice, were highlighted

The ARC Health team has also been developing screening tools and psycho-social infrastructure for doctors and nurses in Anuradhapura to deal with patients of chronic kidney disease.

Discussion and Recommendations

The 1st session was followed by an animated discussion amongst the audience members. Especially, young professional British Sri Lankans in the audience admitted to the difficulties in trying to integrate members of the diaspora with the motive of initiating positive change. For instance, albeit having the professional skills and expertise to offer value added services, they are limited in their monetary capabilities. Moreover, there is a pressing need to understand relevant community needs in order for professionals to source the suitable skills for the right job.

Given the difficulty in establishing mutual trust between Sri Lankans and PSLOO, it is vital for diaspora communities to take into consideration the needs of locals. Likewise, the locals need to understand that the diaspora is willing to help by passing down their professional expertise and knowledge.

Considering how the diaspora is often perceived by locals as ‘meddling’ in subject matters, they need to be mindful and act as mere facilitators of positive change.

It is important for Sri Lanka to prioritize innovative diaspora contributions such as patient safety workshops, especially as a country renowned for its commendable healthcare sector.

Partnerships with organizations, constant communication and evaluation, identifying key leadership cadres and mentoring workshops are essential.

Given the international community's negative perception of Sri Lanka's human rights record, it is vital that the diaspora is able to project positive views in terms of cross-ethnicity and multi-faith engagement. Thus, Sri Lanka needs to rebrand its relationship with the diaspora towards a more positive spectrum.

The majority of second and third generation Sri Lankans living overseas carry scarred memories passed down by their parents. This is a complex issue which requires multi-faceted solutions such as reaching out to people at different levels, which may allow space for the emergence of constructive discussions. For example, faith leaders in Sri Lanka can be inclusive in an attempt to harness progressive solutions.

In engaging with the diaspora, there is a vital need to eliminate the miscommunication and misunderstandings that occur on both sides, while changing the perceptions of the second and third generation Tamils and Sinhalese living abroad. The government of Sri Lanka should be receptive to the needs of PSLOO across ethnicities and pledge to ensure their safety and ease travel procedures if they were to visit Sri Lanka in the future.

Processes of healing, justice and acceptance of guilt by both parties are important. Sri Lanka should attempt to look towards South Africa, which fostered the concept of 'Ubuntu'. There is no future without forgiveness and it is important to perceive people as human beings, belonging to a Sri Lankan community. "Naming the hurt is a way to move forward and sharing stories are part of the healing process, which aid in renewing and rebuilding broken relationships." (Desmond Tutu)

Session 2 - Engaging with PSLOO towards an Open Sri Lanka; Challenges and Opportunities

Speakers: Dr. Vajira Kulatilake, CEO – National Development Bank

Mr. Anushka Wijesinghe, Independent Economist

ARC Representatives

The second panel discussion followed the theme: *Engaging with PSLOO towards an Open Sri Lanka; Challenges and Opportunities*. Dr. Vajira Kulatilake, CEO of the National Development Bank, opened up by highlighting the great brain drain that occurred in Sri Lanka due to the conflict. While Sri Lanka is now in a strong position to make a major economic leap forward, the country must make use of PSLOO in terms of business opportunities and entrepreneurial skills. Economist, Mr. Anushka Wijesinha followed up by pointing out that the largest amount of engagement in terms of investment by PSLOO is in form of remittances. However, there is a great diversity in motivations, interests and ‘hang-ups’ among the diaspora community which must be accounted for when designing programmes and policies for diaspora engagement. For example, the age group 24-44 has the highest proportion of individuals willing to donate professional time to a Sri Lankan institution/activity while other age groups are more inclined to contribute with remittances. Mr. Wijesinha continued to argue that regulatory mechanisms and constraints to remittances or investments must be further discussed. Sri Lankan entrepreneurs struggle to find finance as Sri Lankan institutions do not understand modern and entrepreneurial business models, which is where the country can learn a lot from its ex-pat communities.

The third panel represented the UK diaspora organisation Achieve Real Change (ARC) who raised points regarding challenges and opportunities of their work in Sri Lanka. ARC is a group of young professionals that work to facilitate for greater inter-ethnic collaboration and reconciliation both in Sri Lanka and the UK through three strands; Business, Health and Sport. Among the challenges, the group raised the difficulties of finding likeminded organisations to work with and to establish continued support to build on their work and allow for sustainable practices. They acknowledged how language is often a barrier and called for mechanisms through which one can learn Tamil or Sinhalese in the UK without being stigmatized. There lies great opportunity in engaging on professional grounds as it allows you to sidestep political and sensitive issues. Initiatives like ARC

can therefore be key in building bridges and connections across Sri Lanka and PSLOO. There is also great opportunity in strengthen cross-sector collaboration to include a wider range of actors.

DAY 2: 28th February 2015

Introduction

Day two opened up with Mrs. Helen Jones from the Royal Commonwealth Society, London, giving a presentation of recommendations for diaspora engagement that had been work out during a pre-conference workshop with UK based PSLOO in London. Mrs. Jones reiterated the need for learning from other countries experience with diaspora engagement, e.g. India, South Africa and China. Ms. Rukhiya Khatun from the London based TUTU foundation gave an overview of the concept of Ubuntu, and how this can be a key tool for reconciliation even in Sri Lanka.

Session 3 - To Assess Possible Policy Frameworks that Provide Further Space and Positive engagement for PSLOO in regard to Social, Economic and Political Development in Sri Lanka.

Speakers: Mr. Rajiva Wijesinha, former State Minister for Higher Education.

Mr. Anushka Wijesinghe, Independent Economist

Session three started with former State Minister for Higher Education, Rajiva Wijesinha, to criticize the lack of institutional/organisations memory of documents such as the LLRC and the Draft National Reconciliation Policy and/or initiatives related to these. Pointing to the LLRC report, Mrs. Wijesinha encouraged greater engagement with its recommendations on the diaspora in particular and to follow up with full implementation using all relevant stakeholders. He further stressed how we can achieve reconciliation through children, youth and cultural affairs. Following this, Mr. Wijesinhe presented four key recommendations:

1. Set up syndicated abroad that can adopt UK educational system in SL in order to introduce new teaching materials etc.

2. Encourage volunteers to teach for shorter and longer periods.
3. Getting expert advice for reform and reconstruction.
4. We should seek investment for the establishment for private education. Provinces can start universities, which they don't know they can. There needs to be strong focus on technical and vocational knowledge and partnerships should be set up to include PSLOO for learning and knowledge exchange.

The second speaker of the day, Mr. Anushka Wijesinha reiterated his points from the previous day and further encouraged cross-country lessons learned and to focus on initiatives such as Turkey's TOKTEN, UN TOKTEN, China's Thousand Talents and Thailand's reverse brain drain programme as a model to tap into PSLOO.

Discussions and recommendations:

- Participants raised the issues of healing, changing perception of and within the diaspora and how to open up space for dialogue. One participant also stressed how the diaspora-Sri Lanka interaction is a two-way process where both sides can learn and thrive from each other's cultural, political and social experiences.
- A centralized unit should be set up to deal solely with diaspora engagement and provide information for both diaspora and policy makers.
- This agency does not have to be a department within the MFA but would need assistance with a lot of implementation from the MFA. The unit should rather provide advising on certain schemes and recommendations, than doing the implementation.
- Third parties can play an important role as facilitators for dialogue and engagement. They can also be the provider of a centralised unit. Furthermore, third party organisations can be central in bringing back lessons learned from other countries, and share the experiences from Sri Lanka.
- Perceptions of the diaspora influence the opportunity for interaction. Some of these perceptions must be challenged and discussed to reach a more common ground, conducive for productive and mutual engagement. For example, the diaspora have a perception that SL in general feels the diaspora are not doing enough or they are interfering too much. We must

also challenge the perception that the diaspora is mainly destructive and related to the LTTE. *Challenging perceptions will also allow us to reach a more coherent understanding of Our Sri Lanka 2025 – what do we want and what can we do to reach here?*

- A representative from MAS Holdings stressed the role of the business sector to communicate skill gaps and how they want the diaspora to engage to fill this gap.
- It is also crucial that we keep evaluating the work that has been done to encourage lessons learned and see to what areas more efforts must be focused
- The issues was raised that discussions related to diaspora engagement tend to be heavily focused on business/economic opportunities. Both panellists and participants raised their concerns that we must also acknowledge diaspora contributions in terms of skills and knowledge transfers, network and partnership opportunities.
- Lack of network and contacts in Sri Lanka is another barrier for diaspora contribution/engagement. We need a better approach on how to strengthen and improve networking opportunities.
- There must be a revised visa policy. There is also a need to reconsider the high costs of dual citizenship status.
- We must unlocking the potential of the age group 25-44, that have an interest in engagement other than purely remittances.
- There needs to be a greater push for trust, and laying the groundwork for trust in order for diaspora-Sri Lanka partnerships/activities to formalise.
- There is an interest from the GoSL in bringing back people in general. Both the diaspora and the business community need a coherent and strong government system and policies. However, they must also take responsibility for improving the opportunities for diaspora engagement

Based on the recommendations from the conference, there are potentially 3-4 stakeholders we will target: GOSL, diaspora, third parties, and the role of host governments.