

WE MUST REBUILD TOGETHER



Over the past decade, tourism has been the fastest growing industry in Sri Lanka. It was tipped to soon become the country's largest income earner and the future of the nation. A few months ago, Sri Lanka was named the world's number one destination for travel. However, the prevalent situation in the country seeks to threaten the image we have built up over the years. Ivor Vancuylenburg, Tour Manager, Reisewelt, Germany, believes that we need to work together to rebuild the country. Having over 25 years of experience in the sector, he is confident that Sri Lanka can learn from examples across the world and continue its growth momentum in tourism. He believes Sri Lankan hospitality, food, culture have much to offer the world.

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To begin with, as a person who has been in the industry for a few decades, can you tell us how we can move forward?

To develop tourism in Sri Lanka, we must first establish more flights. In 2015, when the Government changed, all the direct flights from Europe were stopped. That is one of the biggest problems. You cannot develop tourism without flights from European countries, as most of our tourists are Europeans. Although we have flights from Europe via Middle East, these sectors prioritize filling their flights first. The first sector, either Frankfurt to Doha or Frankfurt to Dubai, is filled, and then there is no space for those who want to travel to Sri Lanka.

Now that we have pulled Sri Lanka out of the European market, meaning Frankfurt, Paris and Rome, the Government must negotiate with

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national carriers such as Lufthansa, Alitalia or Air France to land in Colombo. This means providing them proper landing rights, making it less costly for them to fly to Colombo. This offers tourists the option of more flights. Sri Lanka is not a business destination such as Bangkok, Singapore, or Dubai, which have many flights as a result.

Therefore, to develop Sri Lanka as a tourist destination, we should have more flights. Over the past ten years, we have established a good hotel standard, but these private hotels have no guests. We have been targeting two million tourists in Sri Lanka. After the end of the conflict in 2009, Sri Lanka was coming up as a destination. In Germany, in 2018, Sri Lanka was one of the best destinations. Many people predicted that by 2019 it would be among the top five destinations for

travel in Germany. Now the situation has changed. Therefore, things need to be done differently.

In the present situation, how do we move forward?

We should take Turkey as an example. There is good cooperation with the Government. Turkish Airlines is doing very well, flying from all the cities across Europe to Istanbul. Istanbul has built a new airport that is huge and fantastic. They are prepared to welcome tourists, and they have a lot of airports. In Sri Lanka, unfortunately, although we have Mattala Airport, it is not in operation. Even if it was in service, there should be flights coming in. There isn't a single tourist flight or charter flight. There are only a few hotels nearby. The only attraction is the wildlife park, which is too small to accommodate everyone. Therefore, the best option is Katunayake, where we have the possibility of taking tourists to the North Central Province, and then Down South.

The current situation is a huge problem. I have never seen hotels in Kandy and Anuradhapura at zero occupancies. Because of what has happened in Sri Lanka, hotels have sent 50 percent of their staff home as they cannot pay salaries. They have bills and taxes to pay and bank payments to make, how are they going to earn this money?

There is a need for a master plan. It is essential that the Government, Sri Lanka Tourist Board, Minister of Tourism, hoteliers and tour operators sit together and plan. Turkey faced a similar problem due to terrorist issues. What did they do? They were lucky to have their own flights from across Europe. They reduced the cost of their flights by 50 percent. You can travel to Turkey with 500 euros for 10 to 15 days, this is inclusive of the flight cost. They have large hotels and hotels with themes such as history and modern culture that are practiced. Theme hotels are an excellent opportunity for Sri Lanka.

If you take Dubai, they have clean beaches, good travel access, excellent infrastructure, and many flights. In 2020, there will be an Expo where they are aiming to attract 25 to 30 million tourists to Dubai. That is only tourists, but how many million people travel via Dubai everyday? It is a considerable number. Sri Lanka needs a master plan, and we need to work together. That means first the hotel rates must reduce and tour operator prices need to be cut, and flight rates must be reduced. This can only be done if Government taxes are re-

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duced. The Government must introduce a five-year tax break and a five-year plan to develop Sri Lanka to regain the position we had in 2018.

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Once the tourists come to Sri Lanka, what are the areas that we should promote to them?

Sri Lanka is a historical and cultural destination. Other countries promote their hotels and have different attractions, such as nightlife. But Sri Lanka has ancient cities that are cultural world heritage sites such as Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura, Sigiriya, and Dambulla. Tourists love visiting these places. However, the prices are too high, when you compare with entrance fees at destinations across the world. When it is included in a package, the people do not realize it. However, when they are traveling individually, they pay 25 to 30 dollars. There is nowhere in the world where the locals do not pay a cent while tourists have to pay a rate. Sigiriya is the only place where Sri Lankans are required to pay around 50 or 100 rupees, while tourists must pay 30 dollars or almost 5,000 rupees. This should not happen. As long as tourists realize they are not being used, then they will go home and tell their friends and family how they had a lovely time in Sri Lanka, that it is a beautiful place, and that the prices are reasonable. However, once they realize these things are so expensive, this will not be the case.

We must have a market study on the tourism industry in Sri Lanka as well as a study about the other countries. That is very important. The Government should do this research. For example, I traveled to Ireland last year with my family. We made our arrangements for the trip quite easily. When we went to a city, we could participate in a city tour easily. It was effortless to get on the big tour buses and join a tour group; there are many languages. There is no need to rush, and when you are with children, you need a lot of time to do things at your own rhythm.

I believe we need to introduce a beautiful theme for Sri Lanka such as 'Sri Lanka, the destination for children' or child-friendly destination in Asia. Previously, we were known as Ceylon. Today, people know when they buy Ceylon tea or jewelry. Now our name is Sri Lanka, it is not enough, there should be

something more defining in the name such as 'Paradise in the Indian Ocean'. There are many names created by travel agents and tour operators, but the Government needs to create a theme and invest in promoting Sri Lanka. Instead of purchasing individual tickets, there should be one ticket for all attractions. They should be able to buy it in Germany, France and anywhere in the world. Which means the Government receives the money even before the tourist arrives. The round ticket can be issued at an office at the airport with the passport details of the purchaser, therefore ensuring it cannot be resold.

Moreover, many tour operators take guests on a bus, they travel for hours and then stop to explore briefly. Why are we not promoting night or evening tours, where the weather is nicer? People hate to visit when it is hot. For example, in Anuradhapura, it is so hot that you want to get back on the bus as quickly as possible. But imagine arranging an evening walking tour in Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura when the sun goes down. There could be a nice path with lights. It doesn't require a lot of change or planning. Now the only place where you can attend a grand cultural show is Kandy. Something similar could be promoted in Anuradhapura (light and sound show). Whether they are in Polonnaruwa or Colombo, these events could be organized so there will be some attraction. Tourists will not only come to stay at a hotel and have their meals. There must be attractions in the city, nothing is happening right now. However, if you travel to Thailand, the Vietnam, or Myanmar, there is much to do in the evening. People can walk, relax, and shop. Therefore, tourism is not only for the hoteliers, Government, and tour operators. Thousands depend on it. These include people who sell pineapple, king coconut, spices, and handmade products.

Colombo, in itself, is a beautiful City with many ancient buildings and stories. Melbourne has a lovely walking tour, where they have inscribed marks/arrows on the road which you can follow according to a small booklet and map. There are explanations for each landmark. There are places to relax and eat. We can make something similar for Colombo.

Can you talk a little bit about the tourist segments attracted to Sri Lanka?

I believe Sri Lanka attracts two different age groups. One is 60 years and above who have worked hard to earn their money, and now they have no

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burden as their children are adults. When they travel to a country, they want everything to be organized, and they travel for around two or three weeks. They spend time in Sri Lanka and prefer a well-organized tour. The other group includes tourists between the ages of 20 – 30 years. They travel alone, book the flights individually, and make their plans by themselves. They do not have much money, but love to experience things. They usually book a small place over the internet and plan their trip spontaneously; they may read up and travel to Kandy for a night and then head to Ella. They look for attractions such as Arugambay. They would love to take part in some evening program. They do not want to stay in a hotel and do nothing all evening. It takes place in many countries, such as Turkey or Thailand. We book the hotel for bed and breakfast and take other meals elsewhere as there are many places to dine and experience the local culture.

With online bookings being so popular, why should a traveler seek a travel agent?

Pre-organising through a travel agent or operator is convenient. It is easier, especially when you are on a short 14-day holiday. For example, they do not want to stand around, waiting for the bus or train. For example, younger tourists tend to spend a long time here, such as a month. Therefore they can afford to spend time. But more mature tourists who holiday for around 14 days prefer not to waste any time. They try to do the maximum within the short time they have. Also, when you book through an operator, you are guaranteed that everything is organized.

Moreover, if there is an incident, the tour operator can arrange for a refund of money and travel insurance. Those who booked online do not get their money back. If you are with someone responsible, then if there is a mishap such as a hotel being fully booked or the vehicle breaking down or a natural disaster such as a cyclone, a travel agent can make necessary arrangements and take responsibility. But if you have arranged everything on your own, then you would have to wait and see. Sometimes you may not receive a ticket. It is a risk that these young people are taking. But that is how they have been brought up, and you cannot change it. I am sure their mindset will change once they are more mature.

Sri Lanka should make arrangements to attract families. There is a big vacuum, mainly due to the raised rates in the hotels in terms of

traveling cost. In Anuradhapura or Polonnaruwa, a child will cry because they do not want to walk in the sun. They would prefer to stay at the hotel. However, the parents want to visit the places, and they do not have the option to leave their child at the hotel. Therefore, to attract families to Sri Lanka, we need to provide them better rates, offer them a reasonable price, such as ticket free entrance for children, no Visa fees or entrance fees. I do not believe entrance fees should be charged from students, as they are children. When they travel with their parents, and they share the same room, the hoteliers should provide free accommodation and only charge for food. When parents travel with children, they love to provide them with the best. We end up shopping more for them. Therefore, this reaches the other sectors, such as those who sell clothes, fruits, toys, and souvenirs.

As a parent who travels with children, I know that we spend a lot of money on them when we travel because we do not want to hurt their feelings and we want them to enjoy. Therefore, we end up spending more money on them than us.

Therefore, the Government must introduce incentives through entrance fees and visa fees to attract children. There should be attractions such as boat tours, jungle safari, and walking safaris in the national parks to attract children. For example, in Paris, there are places such as Disneyland for the children. However, in Sri Lanka, there is nothing for the children.

What are the difficulties that the industry is facing?

I have friends who are hoteliers and those who are tour operators. They are all being taxed too much. You cannot do this, especially if you want tourism to prosper in the country. The Government must consider these matters with care. For example, a hotel pays almost 40 to 45 percent. It is too much. A new tax has now been introduced where tour operators have to pay five percent. The tour operator has a margin of 10 to 12 percent to be competitive and attract a group. The tour operators cannot have high rates. Therefore, the ten or 12 percent margin is the maximum. Sometimes they even go down to five to eight percent. If they pay a five percent tax, how will they be able to operate a business?

I believe this is something new that started two years ago. It is not reasonable. They have also imposed a one percent tourism development

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tax for the Tourist Board. But what has the Board done all these years? We need to promote new things for Sri Lanka. Hoteliers take loans to build a hotel. A friend of mine said it will take him 15 – 20 years to pay the bank back. When I paid back the loan for my house in Germany with Government support, the interest was one percent. The Government did it because they support young people to build their own homes. When talented young businessman makes a new hotel, it is ridiculous to charge so much interest. After the loan has been paid in 20 years, he will have to get another loan to refurbish it. This is terrible.

With regards to the liquor license, whether you have ten rooms or a 100 rooms the cost is the same. Obviously, a 100-room hotel has more guests than a hotel with ten rooms, and yet they pay the same amount. In the end, the guests look at the menu, see the price of the liquor and assumes the hotel is trying to take them for a ride. He goes to a liquor store by the road and buys his liquor, and wonders at the price difference. But the hotel cannot maintain regular prices because of these taxes. The Government should take care of the hotels. The operations of hotels and tour operators result in opportunities for thousands of people such as fishermen, farmers, and other producers and suppliers.

There is much that the Government needs to do to develop tourism. They should take care of this industry because that can be the best industry for Sri Lanka. Tourism can be number one for the country.

What problems do tourists face in Sri Lanka?

If we are charging tourists to visit places such as Sigiriya, they should at least have a nice and clean toilet. In many of these places, the toilets are dirty and it gives a very bad impression about our country.

In Sigiriya, there are honeybees. When they get disturbed, they attack the visitors. For safety, tourists have been provided uniforms. However, the children do not have a special outfit, so my children who paid half the rate, received an adult uniform. It should not happen. If they are charging money, then they should also have proper outfits for the children. When tourists arrive in Sri Lanka, they love to walk on the beach without any disturbance. But they are always disturbed by peddlers and salesmen. They are unable to sit for a single minute on the beach

and relax and enjoy the sunset without being disturbed. There should be some solution to this.

Moreover, when retailers see a foreigner, the prices are increased. The shops do not display the price. The price is set according to whether you are a local or foreigner. This is not professional. If you travel to Europe, for example, no matter who you are, the price is constant. Why does discrimination of this nature take place? Someone needs to take responsibility to eliminate this as it leaves a wrong impression on the country.

Tourism is also overcrowded at destinations such as Minneriya, Kaudula National Park and Nature Park in Habarana. The people are destroying nature. The Government should introduce a solution such as the maximum number of tourists per day.

I would not recommend any of my guests to visit these parks during peak times. Instead, I would tell them to visit Wilpattu or Kumana; even Yala is too crowded.

At Yala National Park they start at 6am, but after the morning session, the counter reopens at 2pm. I have never seen a national park in the entire world, which has two different times where tickets are sold. In National Parks in South Africa and Namibia, the sun decides the time, the park opens at sunrise and closes at sunset. You get wonderful photographs. Moreover, in Sri Lanka, you cannot purchase tickets online either. In other destinations, you can get the tickets beforehand. Sometimes we have to queue for one hour or more to get the entrance tickets as there is less staff to handle the crowd.

When you compare Sri Lanka with other countries in terms of price, is Sri Lanka expensive?

No, at present, you cannot call Sri Lanka an expensive destination, but it can be cheaper. For someone living in Europe, the cost is alright. However, there are other destinations which are less expensive than Sri Lanka providing better facilities. That is the problem.

I feel that in Sri Lanka, you don't get what you pay for. There is no value for money in Sri Lanka, and that is a problem. We have to improve.

When traveling in Sri Lanka, the traffic is horrible. The distance between Colombo to Kandy is only 110 kilometers, but you have to spend three to four hours traveling. From Colombo to Anuradhapura the distance is only 230 kilometers, and you travel for four to five hours. We are lucky

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to have the Highway making travel down south towards Galle and to the airport easy. However, these should have been done before. There is no proper infrastructure plan in Sri Lanka. There are many shops and houses without appropriate distances from the road being maintained. In Germany, if a road is being extended, there is a law which deems the distance that needs to be maintained between houses. In Sri Lanka, the house is on the pavement. Therefore, if the Government needs to expand in the future, there will be no possibility to do that. The only town in Sri Lanka where there is room for improvement is New Town Anuradhapura, which was developed in the 1950s. The roads are wide, and there is room for development. However, buildings would need to be broken down to expand roads in other areas, which people would not be willing to do.

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Imagine catering to two million tourists; does SriLankan Airline have enough flights? No, it doesn't. We are dependent on other airlines. But it will not do to depend on transit flights, because tourists prefer direct flights. We can then promote the country and it would be easier to tell the carriers to book seats for tour operators. Currently, they do not have adequate time, and you have say yes or no early. Tour operators then face the problem of having to sell the tour early, however, tourists in Europe rarely plan so far ahead. They prefer to make a decision closer to their holidays. They do not want to plan one year ahead. Yet, when they plan three or four months before, there are no tickets to Sri Lanka. When we flew Sri Lankan Airlines from these destinations, there were always seats available between Frankfurt and Colombo.

A flight with the flag or emblem of Sri Lanka is the biggest advocate. It is expensive to advertise on radio or TV for a few minutes. However, the SriLankan Airlines flight is in itself a promotion. Sri Lankan hospitality begins in this flight with the service, Sri Lankan food. Moreover, they do not waste time at airports and transits.

I hope the Government will decide to recommence operations to Frankfurt, Berlin, Paris, and Rome.

I also believe that all inclusive is not for Sri Lanka. Moreover, a la carte is better than serving a buffet. When you have buffet you overfeed the people, and there is a massive wastage. If you

have an excellent menu and if you are capable of serving these dishes with a good portion, the guests will be happy and will enjoy it better than a buffet. Moreover, Sri Lanka has wonderful beverages and liquor. Why do we need to serve cheap beer from other countries? Sri Lanka is not a wealthy nation, and people will rarely choose to enjoy a German beer or Indian beer, when there is good Sri Lankan beer. Why should we import beer from Holland, Singapore, and China? We are losing our own beer. We must promote Sri Lanka even within our hotels.

Sri Lankan fruits are the best. Why do we need to serve apple and grapes? In Germany, during the apple season, millions of apples fall on the ground and are uncollected. Therefore, tourists do not need apples, they need to be served our delicious mango, pineapple, and banana. We also have great wild fruits. The youngsters in the trade can be asked to develop cocktails and new beverages using these wild fruits. Serve a Sri Lankan meal cooked to grandmother's recipe. That is what I do in Kekirawa when I go there with my guests. We cook traditional meals in clay pots on firewood, and it is a big attraction. We must reclaim our history. They want to witness the tradition and simple lifestyle of the island, such as buffalos working on the fields.

Could you tell us about yourself and your journey?

I started my journey in the tourism industry after completing my studies in Switzerland following a Diploma in Hotel Management and Tourism. When I returned to Sri Lanka, because of my knowledge in the German language, I was offered an opportunity to work for NKAR travels, owned by Mr Nilmini Nanayakkara, the managing director. He allowed me to work for him, and I was with him until 2000. I had the opportunity to travel around Sri Lanka. He supported me to work freely with my ideas and knowledge. He never questioned my decisions. Once I received the itinerary, it was my duty to do my best for the guests. Many German groups were coming to Sri Lanka at that time, and I was in charge of the German tourists. After that, I was approached by the operator Reisewelt in Germany, who wanted me to carry out promotions in Germany. I traveled in and out of Germany going to ITB and other Tourist Fairs.

We traveled doing tourist roadshows explaining about Sri Lanka. At that time, we used slide presentations and promoted Sri Lanka. That was my first job when I met this gentleman. I got married in 2001. My wife is from Germany, and I settled

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down in Germany. We have two girls. They always support me, and I have come even today because they told me to visit Sri Lanka, visit my mother, friends and see the situation. I continue to work for Reisewelt and I am in charge of tourist development for all destinations in Asia such as China, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, India, and Nepal.

I was in Nepal two weeks ago. They are doing very well, moving from problems the country faced in the past. The Government supports the tourist sector. Here there is less support from the Government. If there were no private sector, there would be no tourism in Sri Lanka. That is the truth. I have been traveling to many wildlife destinations in Africa, such as Tanzania, Namibia, and South Africa. I joined the group as a leader. I visit America, Mexico, and Brazil, and I have joined a group to visit Alaska.

I have joined Europe cruise ships. Therefore, I am lucky to be a Sri Lankan who has visited over 90 countries in the world. I still find that Sri Lanka is the best. The opportunities that we have, especially to travel with guests to many attractions within a short time frame. If you really love Sri Lanka, you can promote the island. The opportunities are great for a beautiful country with beautiful people, good weather, good hotels, and good food. We have great fruits, which are not found anywhere in the world. Unfortunately, those who are responsible for the country's wellbeing should love this country. It is not only a business but also a passion. It is not merely about investing your money in another country. You must realize that you are doing it to for your mother country.

Could you tell us about your experience with Pada Yatra?

This had been a dream of mine because I had heard many stories about Lord Kataragama coming to Sri Lanka from India, when I was in Kataragama. I was very interested to know how he traveled to Kataragama. I imagined he would have started in Nagadeepa. The Lord Buddha too had visited Nagadeepa, and for a holy person such as the Buddha to have visited Nagadeepa there would have been a reason. I am sure even God Kataragama walked through Jaffna, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Kumana.

I wanted to walk this route. I already had some experience in long-distance walking as I followed the Jakobus pilgrimage in Spain. It is a special pilgrimage in Europe, which starts in France and spans across, Germany, Spain, and Portugal.

People walk for many days, for 500km, 1,000km or even 2,000km. The Pada Yatra is an ancient pilgrimage undertaken by worshippers of God Murugan or God Kataragama. This is a fantastic cultural event to take part in or write a book about. With help from my friends, I took all the necessary equipment such as a small tent, food, and water and observed the pilgrimage. My friends followed me on a jeep. I prayed and started in Nagdeepa, after making offerings to Lord Buddha and God Kataragama. I arrived on the mainland by boat. It took me almost 18 days to walk from Nagadeepa to Kataragama. I walked through the Kumana National Park. Some started the pilgrimage from Kumana to Kataragama, and they took five days. However, I walked through Kumana for two days and spent only two nights in the park. My friends provided me fruits and snacks, and after a small break I keep on walking till the lunch break at 2pm. I slept under trees, in Hindu temples, schools, and small buildings by the roadsides. It was one of the biggest things I had ever done for myself.

During this time, I met many people. I dressed like a priest in yellow clothes similar to a Sadhu in India. I wore shoes as I could not go bare foot. I walked a maximum of 55km a day. I am so glad that I was able to do it. When I was passing a bus stand, a young boy approached me and asked where I was going. When I said I was going to Kataragama, he took my hand, placed it on his chest, and said, "Please bless me. Give me some energy, power and love. I need it from God Kataragama." I was excited because I was not a priest. I had a stick and people tied offerings on my stick that they requested me to make to God Kataragama. While walking, I stopped for a King Coconut, and the seller would not let me pay for it and said that what I was doing was a great act.

Could you tell us about your Kinderhilfe project?

I started Kinderhilfe for Sri Lanka in 1993. When translated, it means child care or child support for Sri Lanka. So as a tour guide, when I used to travel with the groups, guests would bring some presents that they wanted to give children on the road.

But I was not willing to do it. One day I stopped at a school, got permission from the principal and a Buddhist monk and visited the little primary school close to Kekirawa in the North Central Province. On that day, we realized that to support Sri Lanka meant supporting the education sector of the country. In the evening, while we had our

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meals, the guests spoke to me about doing something for the education sector and help children. I then suggested that we start an organization, with a fixed income to support the children. I traveled to Germany in 1993, and along with my friends in Germany and the president of our organization, Mr Teiser, we registered Kinderhilfe in Germany. We provided foster parents, and they pay 80 Euros a year. It is a small amount for them. Using this money, we develop kindergartens and have built seven nursery schools. We have about 40 teachers, who receive a small salary but are happy as they understand what we are contributing to the village. The children from communities nearby attend the nursery. We have four nurseries in Kekirawa, one in Dehiattakandiya, one in Mihintale and another one in Medawachchiya. The children do not pay for anything as they receive a uniform, school materials, books, drawing paper, color pencils and watercolors. They only need to bring a bottle of water and a small meal. The people in these areas cannot afford to pay 1,000 or 1,500 rupees, which is the amount children in the North Central Province have to pay. We have been operating these schools for the last 25 years.

This is just only a small part of our donations. We also support single parents where mothers who are bringing up their children and we have also built little houses costing 200,000 rupees. This is a two room, solid house with a permanent roof, which we have provided to the people. A select group from Germany comes once a year, we work with them to clean, paint, and refurbish the kindergartens and homes. They stay in a house that belongs to our organization, and we serve them Sri Lankan food. They love to have Sri Lankan food. We carry out many repairs and carpentry work with the people in the village. Therefore, the guests who come with me also have this experience to work together to develop the country and do something religious.

We must develop the education sector in Sri Lanka. The kindergarden is the best foundation. The little child who is about three or four years must receive a good education because the development of Sri Lanka begins there. The Government should support these kindergartens, although there is some support, it is not enough. This support should reach kindergartens in all parts of the island, both rural and urban. I believe Sri Lanka will prosper even more so and recover swiftly from any set-backs in years to come as the children are the future of Sri Lanka. ☐