Connecting the Dots to a New Sri Lankan Dream

How innovation, adaptability, and entrepreneurship can help a nation thrive on its own terms.

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At Davos in January, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney voiced what many were hesitant to admit: “We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition… The old order is not coming back. We shouldn’t mourn it. Nostalgia is not a strategy.” For Sri Lanka, this reality is unmistakable. The rules-based global system we depended on for decades is giving way to a more fluid, contested, and multipolar world. Tariff pressures, stalled trade agreements, and intensifying competition have created

formidable headwinds.

Anxiety is natural. Yet a multipolar world is not only a challenge — it is an opportunity. It rewards resilience, adaptability, and entrepreneurial instinct, qualities Sri Lanka has in abundance. Our ability to move quickly, identify niche advantages, and build bridges across divides will determine whether we simply endure or genuinely thrive. Our recovery depends heavily on exports to markets grappling with their own uncertainties. At the same time, we remain reliant on imports to sustain exports and meet domestic energy demand. In 2026, we cannot ignore how global disruptions may affect our economic, food, and energy security. But recognizing vulnerability allows us to prepare and respond strategically. Travelling across the island and speaking with traders, farmers, entrepreneurs, and especially young Sri Lankans, one conclusion is clear: we are far from realizing our potential. Few countries possess assets as distinctive as ours. Ceylon cinnamon is unmatched. Our Ayurvedic heritage offers authentic wellness experiences sought worldwide. Our geographic location places us at the heart of key shipping routes. Our workforce is educated, capable, and entrepreneurial when empowered. Yet we frequently underperform. In tourism, we pursue volume rather than focusing on wellness, eco-tourism, and adventure segments where we have genuine competitive strength. In agriculture, we export bulk commodities instead of earning premiums through branding and value addition. Industrial zones developed with ambition remain underutilized. Without technology transfer, stronger quality standards, and deeper integration into global value chains through strategic foreign investment, we risk remaining stuck in a low-value model.

For decades, the Sri Lankan dream centered on departure. Success meant building a life abroad. Today’s youth, however, are not leaving because they lack belief in their country. They leave because they struggle to see a pathway linking their skills to meaningful opportunity at home. Digitally fluent and globally connected, they confront fragmented industries and unclear prospects. We must therefore focus on building opportunity ecosystems – interconnected networks of skills, technology, finance, and markets that create visible routes to prosperity.

Agriculture offers a powerful example. Modern farming now includes greenhouse cultivation, aquaponics, drone technology, IoT-based monitoring, precision soil testing, cold-chain logistics, and digital marketplaces. It creates space for technologists, researchers, logistics experts, marketers, and entrepreneurs to participate alongside farmers. HNB’s Sarusara initiative embodies this approach, aiming to develop 30,000 agripreneurs, with over 15,000 already engaged. With the

right tools and training, tasks that once required four days can now be completed in ninety minutes.

Modernization enables farmers to move up the value chain, connecting smallholders to corporate buyers and export markets while blending traditional knowledge with advanced technology. This ecosystem mindset must extend beyond sectors to regions. Economic activity remains concentrated in Colombo, yet provinces such as Uva, Sabaragamuwa, the North, North Central, East, and South hold immense untapped promise. Access to ports, available land, and emerging energy infrastructure provide clear advantages.

The Northern Investment Summit illustrated how aligning capital with regional strengths and priority industries can translate potential into scaled opportunity. Financial institutions must evolve alongside the nation. In 2026, banks face liquidity pressures, tighter asset-quality oversight amid renewed credit growth, and rising digital risks. HNB’s 2026–2030 strategy responds with investments in AI, machine learning, stronger security, and selective international expansion to diversify income.

In a multipolar era, institutions must become multipolar too — building resilience beyond borders to better serve communities. Sri Lanka’s new dream is to stay, build, and connect globally, empowering a new generation through collaboration across finance, business, education, and policy.