

EDITORIAL

Socio-economic Boom in Southern Province of Sri Lanka and the Role of University of Ruhuna

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Abstract: The Southern Province of Sri Lanka provides numerous socio-economic benefits to the country. As the apex higher education institute in the province, the University of Ruhuna (UoR) was initially established as a university college in 1978 and converted into a university in 1984. The University has contributed to uplifting the socio-economic status of the province since its inception, through knowledge dissemination, introducing technology and innovations, solving problems in industries, etc. Socio-economic boom of the southern province was investigated and the UoR's role in improving the economic status of the province to get out of the prevailing economic crisis in the country was examined. This paper identifies the province's major economic activities in the agricultural sector, marine resources, tourism, and economic centres. Being a regional maritime hub, there is a huge potential for the province to gain foreign revenue for the country. Unique cultural values and natural beauty attract more tourists to the province. The economic centres must be utilized efficiently with a proper plan to gain maximum benefit from them. Effective contributions to improving health, agriculture, engineering and technology, fisheries in the province, and boosting southern culture and lifestyles are the priority areas identified for the University to cater for the province.

Keywords: *Agriculture, Regional maritime hub, Tourism, Southern Province, University of Ruhuna, Socio-economic*

Introduction


Sri Lanka is a tropical island in the third-largest ocean, the Indian Ocean, and is home to around 22 million people by 2020 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020). Sri Lanka's position in the Indian Ocean is very strategic, from a logistical point of view as it is located very close to the silk route, the sea route which connects East to West (Rathnayake, & Edirisinghe, 2015). It is blessed with a great culture, warm climate, and fascinating biodiversity, making itself an attractive tourist destination known as the "Pearl of the Indian Ocean."

The provinces are the Sri Lanka's first-level administrative divisions, and there are nine provinces in Sri Lanka (<https://www.edumin.sp.gov.lk>, <https://soslc.lk>). The Southern Province is the country's most southward province covering an area of 494698 hectares, and is further subdivided into Galle, Matara, and Hambantota Districts.

Sabaragamuwa Province and Uva Province border the province to the North, the Eastern Province to the Northeast and the Western Province to the Northwest. It is the 7th largest province by area and is home to approximately 2.5 million people, the third most populated province in country. The province has provided numerous valuable services to strengthen the country's economic development since ancient times. The available resources and unique cultural values of this Province, has led people to engage in economic activities comfortably. Being the most significant higher education institute in the province, the University of Ruhuna plays a remarkable role in the province's development.

In this paper, I will discuss the socio-economic boom in the Southern Province and the University of Ruhuna's role in improving it to a better status.

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Economic Development of the Province

Agriculture

The annual average rainfall of the province is 2000-2500 mm. Since Galle and Matara districts are in the low-country wet agro-ecological zone, they receive relatively higher rainfall than the Hambantota district. Hambantota receives less rain due to its agro-ecological position in the low-country intermediate dry and low-country dry zones (<http://lk.chm-cbd.net>). The different agro-ecological zones with different rainfall, soil types, and terrain conditions facilitate diverse crop cultivation. Agriculture has become a dominant economic activity, contributing to the province's 30% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (ADB 2012). With the aid of the rainy season, and the three major rivers of Gin, Walawe, and Nilwala, paddy cultivation has become the major cultivation in the province during the yala and Maha seasons. The total production was 8437000 bushels in the province for the Yala season in 2011 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2022). Moreover, tea, rubber, coconut, and cinnamon are other major crops that cater local demands and exports to foreign countries, earning foreign revenue for the country. Therefore, the agriculture sector has significantly influenced reducing the poverty of the people in this province.

Marine Resources

The Southern Province is one of the coastal provinces in Sri Lanka. It is exposed to the Indian Ocean from the south, indicating massive prospects for the country's economic development. East-westbound shipping lanes cross Sri Lankan waters just six to seven Nautical miles off Dondra head in the Southern Province. Annually 60,000 ships, out of approximately 100,000 global shipping fleets, pass through the southern tip of Sri Lanka opening a wide window of opportunity to expose our main harbours for anchoring and provide various services (i.e., food, bunker oil supply, marine lubricants and freshwater supply, offshore supplies, bunkering, etc.) to passing ships. These kinds of sea connectivity opportunities have provided a 40% advantage on the own GDP of number of coastal states. Most connected countries such as Germany, Hong Kong, Singapore, the USA, and the UK are gaining benefits through marine connectivity. Sri Lanka has to leverage the location and resources for the country's growth by promoting Sri Lanka as a "sustainable maritime hub," whereas Sri Lanka's vision and mission to gain the same advantage is questionable. Moreover, the shipping

sector shows more promising capacities. There are 1.5 million seafarers globally, and only 1% (16,000) are Sri Lankan. The country is planning to increase this number to 50,000 within the next five years. Currently, Sri Lankan seafarers bring approximately US\$350 million in foreign revenues per annum, and the target is to make it \$ 1.5 billion per annum within the next five years. The Fisheries Sector plays a significant role in the Sri Lanka Economy. It contributes to food security by providing 90% of fish production to the local market and by providing 65% of animal protein (MOF, 2020). The active fishers are approximately 276,000. However, the ancillary fisheries communities increase this number by almost two and half fold. The fisheries sector's contribution to the country's GDP is almost 1.4% (MOF, 2020). There are thirteen fishing harbours in the province to facilitate the fish landing areas and to make a better market chain between fishers and buyers. There is a traditional non-destructive, unique fishing technique in the Galle district, Southern province, called "stilt fishing." Further, the province's unique fishing technology (i.e., stilt fishing) related to artisanal knowledge, and its unique embedded culture, add more value not only to the fisheries industry but also to the tourism industry as well (Deepananda, 2016).

Tourism

The tourism sector also performs an equal role in Sri Lanka's economy. Total employment capacity in the tourism sector is more than 150,000; contributing approximately 8% of the GDP, reaching Rs. 6.5 billion. Further, the sector expects to increase tourist arrivals by up to 2.5 million in 2022, with expected revenue increase from the current US\$ 500 million to US\$ 2 billion. There are many tourist destinations in the Southern Province. One of the UNESCO World Heritage sites, the Galle Fort was built during the Dutch period (Sri Lanka Archaeology, 2022) and it is one of the best tourist destinations in Sri Lanka. There are protected forests and marine sanctuaries in the province to explore nature. Sinharaja Forest Reserve, Kanneliya rain Forest Reserve, and Kottawa Conservation Forest are the main land biodiversity hotspots. In contrast, Hikkaduwa Marine National Park, Rumassala Marine Sanctuary, Little Bases and Great Bases, and Polhena Fisheries Management Areas add more value and potential for further development of the economy, being local and foreign travel destinations of the province. The province's unique cultural values (i.e., traditional dancing, masks, folk arts - puppets) have provided additional

value to the tourism industry.

Economic Centres

The Mattala International airport, commercial harbour, regional airports, and international conference hall like economic centres are the prime indicators for the province's development over the last two decades. International and regional airports add more potential and opportunities to the province's economic development. As Sri Lankans, we are living under the worst economic crisis in the country. If we utilize these resources efficiently with a proper plan, we can attract more local and international investments in the country to improve its economic status.

The Role of University of Ruhuna

The University of Ruhuna has ten faculties, ranking fourth in the Sri Lankan university system. Therefore, it has the utmost potential to tap all these opportunities while providing the leading role to direct the country and southern province in a fast development tract.

Effective contributions to improving health, agriculture, engineering & technology and fisheries in the province, and boosting of southern culture and lifestyles have to be the priority areas for the university to serve the province in particular and the country in general while becoming one of the centres of excellence in education in the country. Research symposia like Ruhuna University Research Symposium must explore such opportunities, and the university's research and development activities must focus in this direction. The university faculties should research the issues in major regional sectors, and the findings need to be implemented. Public Private Partnerships (PPP) are a vital tool in such endeavours, in which both parties benefit from their own developments. Considering the context of this paper, it would be beneficial on many levels if this symposium open new avenues for Ruhuna academics to explore more horizons to serve the province and the country in a more effective and meaningful way to take the country out of this dire state in a short time span.

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