

# The Colombo Plan in the 21st Century

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It was on 1 July, 1951 nearly half a century ago that the Colombo Plan, a regional inter-governmental organisation, was established on the initiative of seven countries as a unique experiment in international economic cooperation aimed at faster economic and social development, as well as to increase the well-being of the peoples of newly independent countries of South and South-East Asia. The conceptualisation of a new methodology of international economic cooperation evolved at the Conference of Commonwealth Foreign Ministers held in Colombo in January 1950 at which several world leaders representing their countries participated. It was at a time when the developed countries were searching for a mechanism as well as a modality for assisting less developed countries of Asia, that the Colombo Plan took shape, based on the theme of self-help and mutual help among countries as a model for international economic cooperation. The ideas of North-South and South-South Cooperation evolved out of the intellectual underpinning provided by the establishment of the Colombo Plan.

It also helped in the evolution of a new social theory for international economic cooperation based on regional cooperation and collective economic self reliance. It was one of the first attempts by a group of countries to visualise the world as one as far as economic well-being of the peoples were concerned and view all countries, whether developed or developing as partners in development. A notable feature of the Colombo Plan was that it could develop a system of bilateral aid within a multilateral framework. Several themes in the area of economic and social development articulated by the Colombo Plan fifty years ago find strong resonance even today.

Two themes have consistently underscored the Colombo Plan programmes from its inception. They are the overriding importance given to human resources development as a key to growth and the beneficial effects which emanates from North-South and South-South Cooperation in the development process. While recognising the need for physical capital to provide the lever for growth, the Colombo Plan also emphasised the necessity to raise the level of skills of people to absorb new technologies so as to utilise capital more efficiently. Thus, in the early years of the Plan, the assistance of developed to developing countries consisted both of transfer of physical capital and technology as well as a strong component of skill development. Thus, while infrastructure in terms of roads, railways, dams, hospitals, fertilizer plants, cement factories, steel mills, etc. were being constructed in member countries through Colombo Plan assistance, large numbers of people were being trained to manage such infrastructure and the burgeoning industrial economies.

The Colombo Plan has been a driving force in emphasising human capital as the bedrock of economic development, a factor which has been increasingly recognised as the key to unlock the door to prosperity of nations. The contribution of the Colombo Plan in human resources development of member countries has been immense. Recognising technical skills as a crucial prerequisite for growth, the Colombo Plan with the assistance of developed countries provided advanced skills training to professionals of developing member countries in all aspects of economic and social activity which included training in areas of general and technical education, medicine and health, food, agriculture and forestry, engineering, administration, social sciences, population studies, transport and communication, banking and finance, taxation, journalism etc. to name a few. In fact, the alumni of the Colombo Plan is the largest in the region for any inter-governmental organisation.

Besides human resources development, another theme which the Colombo Plan pioneered was the concept of each nation helping itself and others in the process of economic development. The Colombo Plan stressed that development need not be a one way process of learning, where developing countries merely adopt the blue print of developed countries for growth but through sharing of development experience and in the adoption of best practices, the collaboration between the developing and developed countries in the growth process could be made even more meaningful. This could not only be through cooperation among the developing and developed countries but more importantly through cooperation among developing countries themselves. The concept of North-South and South-South cooperation which evolved out of the framework provided by the Colombo Plan has now become an important component of any sustainable international economic cooperation effort. Because of its decades of experience in experimenting and fine tuning the concept of South-South Cooperation, the Colombo Plan has been recognised as a pioneer as well as a proponent of this theme of development in the region. The very composition of the Colombo Plan member countries has contributed to the organisation being able to experiment as well as deduce new paradigms in this sphere.

While the Colombo Plan started off with seven countries, three from South Asia i.e. India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and four developed countries: Australia, Canada, New

Zealand and U.K., over the years the composition of the membership expanded to include not only countries of South Asia but also those of South East and East Asia and the Pacific. At present the member countries of the Colombo Plan include: Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia (provisional member), Myanmar, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the United States of America. When one looks at the composition of the member countries of the Colombo Plan, it is not difficult to realise the comparative advantage the organisation has in promoting south-south cooperation in developmental activities. Members comprise several developed countries, countries of the Commonwealth in the Asia Pacific region and countries of regional groupings such as ASEAN and SAARC. These countries are in varying stages of economic development and integration in the world economy where each country has some unique development experience to share with one another.

The current programmes of the Colombo Plan are in the areas of public policy formulation in an environment of globalisation and market economy, private sector development as a prime mover for growth and south-south cooperation as an instrument for evaluation, dissemination of information and technology and sharing of best practices. The Colombo Plan also provides skill development opportunities for technicians in the middle level — an indispensable human resource required for productivity increases, through another of its programmes, the Colombo Plan Staff College for Technician Education in Manila. The Colombo Plan has also a Drug Advisory Programme which is one of the oldest in the region and recognised as an initiator of several creative approaches to tackle the problem of drug abuse in member countries. By establishing linkages among institutions of excellence in the region, the Colombo Plan facilitates interaction of professionals in different development fields, which promotes generation of new ideas and approaches to social and development issues. In all the programme activities, the Colombo Plan works closely with member governments, regional organisations, international organisations and NGOs so that the synergy and resources of all participating organisations could be utilised most efficiently.

Besides promoting human resources development and south-south cooperation in the development process, the uniqueness of the Colombo Plan is in the structure of the organisation itself. When one considers international organisations it conjures up huge bureaucracies which are incapable of adaptation and change. Endowed with a lean bureaucracy and a flat organisation set up, the Colombo Plan has

emerged as a most effective mechanism for programme delivery. The Colombo Plan is a good example of institution building where the institution evolves organically to meet new challenges. The Colombo Plan was visualised as an organisation which has at its core the capacity and flexibility to change according to the changing needs of member countries. It was a mastery achievement in fashioning a framework for an inter-governmental body devoted to developmental issues which while providing adequate room for constitutions and deliberations, avoided the mistake of having too many committees and decision layers which enlarges bureaucracy as well as slows down decision making.

Most of the decisions of the Colombo Plan

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are made at the Council represented by heads of missions of member countries in Colombo, and long-term strategies are chalked out at the Consultative Committee which meets biennially. One of the characteristics of the Colombo Plan which has unique value and which few inter-governmental organisations have in the same measure is that the Colombo Plan provides a forum where no resolutions are voted on and where decisions are arrived at consensually among member countries. The promotion of effective development is the sole interest and objective of the organisation in which development issues of whatever kind are open for co-operative and constructive discussion in which all countries participate on equal terms. The spirit that imbues the Colombo Plan is one of respect by member countries for each others' views, and the sharing of experience, knowledge, technology and assistance among

member countries is one marked by humility in giving as well as in receiving.

The world economic environment has changed dramatically in the last fifty years. Since the Colombo Plan was established some of the member countries which were developing countries when they joined the Colombo Plan and benefitted hugely from the various Colombo Plan programmes have now graduated to the status of developed countries. Many member countries have become fast growing middle income countries. Several are in the early stages of growth. With this changed economic status of member countries, the Colombo Plan in the coming years can play even a greater role in the flow of technology, skill development, experience sharing and

adoption of best practices using the concept of south-south co-operation in the region as well as outside the region. One of the initiatives the Colombo Plan has been taking in the last one year has been to extend the concept of south-south co-operation to other regions using the expertise of Colombo Plan member countries as well as involve the private sector in south-south co-operation not only for human capital development but also as a mechanism for enhancing trade and investment among member countries within the region.

Development of human capital the software aspect of growth has been central to all Colombo Plan activities. As the world is entering into an age of knowledge and information revolution, human capital development becomes even more important for faster economic growth as well as for the well-being of peoples of member countries. In such a changing environment where creative knowledge is setting the pace of growth, the relevance of an organisation like the Colombo Plan specialising in human resources development becomes even more pronounced and crucial.

At a time when deliberations in world bodies are more discordant than cooperative, it is indeed refreshing that the Colombo Plan, one of the oldest inter-governmental organisations continues to provide a unique atmosphere of its own characterised by cordiality and cooperation where all member countries come as equal partners in development attempting at finding ways to tackle pressing issues of development and poverty reduction. In a world where globalisation in the economic sphere is providing strong centripetal forces of integration, while at the same time political and nationalistic movements are taking the world in disruptive ways, an organisation which has co-operative endeavour among nations as its credo, can play a strong harmonising influence and provide a stable foundation where, nations, communities and individuals can pursue individual well-being without losing the global outlook which is so necessary for collective well-being of all peoples of the world.

The thesis developed by the outstanding Economist Mancur Olson in his book "Power and Prosperity: Outgrowing Communist and Capitalist Dictatorships" which suggest that institutions and systems which cater to greater encompassing interest of peoples provide greater stability as well as serve as a trigger for faster economic growth could be relevant at the international level to the Colombo Plan as one institution which endeavours to look at the collective well-being of all countries of the Colombo Plan region. The concept of enhancing the well-being of the peoples of member countries through co-operative effort releases the creative energies of nations and sparks a sense of participation and solidarity in economic processes which transcends boundaries. The unique experiment which the Colombo Plan started in international economic co-operation stressing human resources development and south-south co-operation seems to echo the same if not greater relevance and appropriateness in the new century as it was when it was originally conceived.