MEASURING PROGRESS AND WELL-BEING BEYOND GDP IN SMALL STATES

Mr. Chairman, when first I was asked to present on the topic, I will confess to being slightly at a loss wondering what exactly I could tell this august gathering on measuring progress against GDP size. Ordinarily, in preparation for such an assignment I first gather my thoughts and in the days immediately leading up to the presentation day, I put those thoughts together. It would be different on this occasion.

First, I underestimated the logistics in getting here from my country. I honestly did think I could have worked on my presentation en route. I was, however, badly mistaken. Following nearly twenty hours of air travel over two days in actual time but which seemed like three days when one takes into account the time difference of nine and one half hours between the city of Colombo where we are and the city of Castries in the Caribbean where I am from, I arrived in Sri Lanka. Following a short but excellent cultural presentation at the airport, an hour's drive later I was at the hotel.

The hotel appeared impressive enough with the brochures touting it as among the best on island comparable with any elsewhere in the world. Its allure would have to wait, however, for exhausted as I was from my travels, once there I simply wanted to get to my room and have a shower. That, it turned out, was easier said than done and the next two hours would find me seated in the lobby with a group of extremely loud delegates – I imagine they were all happy to again be on terra firma – on my right and a group of scampering conference organizers on the left.

Eventually, amid the chaos – I was told this was due to the large numbers of delegates arriving simultaneously – I was assigned a room. A supervisor accompanied me to this. I had barely had time to savour the eleventh floor view when my luggage arrived courtesy a pleasant bellhop. It was then that I remembered my assignment. I immediately plunged into my carry-on and came away with my MacBook Pro and Ipad hoping to go online. At that point I was filled with the thought of "nice hotel equals lots of internet." Soon enough the two machines were powered up and ready to roll. Everything was in place, everything that is, except an Internet connection. I noted a network cable which I connected to my lap top. Nothing happened. I moved towards a wi fi connection. Sadly, even as the machines picked up two available such connections related to the hotel, below these, in somewhat finer print, were messages informing the potential user that there was a cost to these.

At that point I recalled the structured organization in the smaller and less affluent hotels I have several times spent many a night at and in every one internet was available free of charge.

It seemed to me that it is always at the more expensive and supposedly better hotels that there is an Internet charge.
Yes, Internet, the one thing that every conference attendee would have in common. In our tastes and cultures we are all different. Those who are gathered here in Colombo come from the Caribbean, from Asia, from Africa and from North America. Some of us are vegetarian; some who are not vegetarian don’t eat certain meats while there are others who I daresay would choose meats over vegetables at every turn. So yes we are different in culture and in tastes. We even dress differently. At conferences such as this one, however, with all of our differences the one thing we all appear to have in common is the need for technology to be available to us. In effect the Internet.

Ironic, isn’t it that our meals, which can vary vastly in costs, are within the cost of the room, yet the Internet, which is standard in cost, is absent from this. A major difference between the small and steady hotels on the one hand and the more affluent ones on the other.

Mr. Chairman, as it is with the hotels where the quality of amenities, which form part of the basic package, is not necessarily compatible with their supposed five-star ratings so too it is with progress and well-being not being necessarily linked to the size of the countries’ GDP.

It may be a good measure for determining economic size but GDP is to my mind woefully inadequate as a measure of progress. It certainly gives us no comfort in so far as quality of political representation is concerned. Consider the 2000 United States Presidential elections. Its massive GDP, notwithstanding, following that particular election it can lay no claim to being a model example on how to democratically decide on our leaders. I say unequivocally and without fear of contradiction that the progress of the electoral processes in our smaller islands with our comparatively meager GDP has far exceeded what obtains in the United States and other larger “GDP” states. I need not even raise the issue of Italian politics and the effect of wealth on it.

And never mind the so-called stringent finance campaign laws in the large GDP states the fact is these laws have done nothing to limit the massive funds which eventually decide the outcome of elections. Consequently, the leaders who emerge in these countries are often those who are better financed as opposed those who are genuinely the choice of the people. The money’s choice as opposed to the people’s choice is who prevails.

The latest survey in the current United States presidential elections shows that just one percent (1%) of the population provides ninety percent (90%) of the campaign financing. Moreover, that two percent (2%) of the population controls ninety eight percent (98%) of the wealth. Clearly then, GDP cannot be utilized as a tool to measure progress and well-being.

In the English-speaking Caribbean, while our GDP may be a far cry from what obtains in the industrialized world, none of these industrialized countries can boast greater democratic processes than we do. With but one blot since our individual attainment of independence, every government has been elected by the will of the people. We may be young democracies – Jamaica and Trinidad
& Tobago the longest independent countries, both celebrate heir 50th anniversary of independence this year — but we have always freely and fairly elected our leaders.

Our smaller GDP has not diminished our capacity to upholding fundamental rights and freedoms. We have progressed from the days when demonstrations were seen as distractions not to be tolerated. Today, demonstrations, whether industrial or political, are common place to the point of being protected by law. Our labour laws are some of the most worker friendly in the world while some of us have provided proper health care to our citizens long before Obamacare found its way into the Lexicon.

Neither has our small GDP affected our ability to produce world-class citizens. My small island of Saint Lucia, just 238 square miles in size with a population of just over 160,000, has produced two Nobel Laureates, one each in the disciplines of Economics and Literature, making us the world’s leader in the production of laureates on a per capita basis.

My island’s neighbor to the north, the lovely Jamaica, has for two consecutive Olympic games, stunned the world with the magnificence of their athletes. That island now has the distinction of having the two fastest men ever to grace planet Earth.

To our south, an even smaller nation than my own, the Spice Island of Grenada, had one of its nationals, a 19-year-old no less, capture the hearts of the thousands within the London stadium and the millions who viewed it on television, with a gold medal performance win in the 400 metres race, which has drawn comparisons with the legendary Michael Johnson’s superb runs.

The very tiny, size-wise, Barbados has produced the man universally acknowledged as the greatest cricketer the world has ever known in the person of Sir Garfield St. Auburn Sobers. Mind you, this is a sport we began playing under the yoke of colonialism.

Trinidad & Tobago has produced the literary giant V. S. Naipaul and I dare not forget another of Jamaica’s gifts to the world, the legendary Hon Robert Nesta Marley OM. Consider that Bob Marley’s “One Love” composition has been voted as the song of the century. That son of Jamaica is also credited with bringing to the world’s attention, the atrocities of the apartheid system and famously predicted Zimbabwe’s freedom with his Zimbabwe production and his call for “Africa to unite.”

Mr, Chairman, clearly there is not a field that our small Caribbean states have not excelled in even though our economic muscle pales into insignificance when compared to the GDP of the economic powers.

Despite our limited resources and relatively meager GDP size, our countries have not allowed this to diminish our capacity towards building democratic institutions. And yes while we may, within our respective territories, have differing points of view on how best to push our nations forward, every idea
that we have, every suggestion that is put forward and every conclusion which is acted upon resides in sound democratic traditions.

Within the Caribbean we have been able to form two groupings which have both resulted in benefits to all of our countries individually and the groupings as a whole. In the sub region we have formed the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) which has one judicial system and one single currency. We have done what larger economies have attempted and still bicker over decades later. How many regions share a single high court? We are about to go one step further and widen the Court to include the wider region. These discussions are on going.

At the wider level we have the Caribbean Common Market (Caricom). This too has been fairly successful although if one has to be fair, there remains room for improvement.

Our single greatest achievement, though, and one which I daresay came about precisely because of our small GDP’s is the West Indies Cricket team. In this regard we field not twelve individual country teams but instead a single unified team. That team, which represents a mere 7 million people ruled the world for sixteen consecutive years. No other team has been at the hem of any sport for as long.

Mr. Chairman, this conference has as its theme “Ensuring a Relevant Commonwealth for the Future” and I say here without fear of contradiction that these our small states, notwithstanding our small GDP have contributed mightily to world order, whether politically, socially, academically or in the sporting arena. I go further and say that had our small GDP been a significant factor, I can assure you that this world of ours would have been poorer for the lack of our participation.

I thank you.