

Pathfinder View Point

The Flagship Project Megapolis: Concept and Scope in Sri Lankan Context

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The new government, elected to govern the country for the next five years, has vowed to implement its flagship Megapolis project which was included in its election manifesto. It was reported that the conceptual plan was initially mooted in 1991 by the then young Sri Lankan Minister of Industries, Science and Technology, Ranil Wickremesinghe, when he made a presentation in the presence of the visiting Japanese Prime Minister, Hon. Toshiki Kaifu. The objective of the presentation was to seek Japanese government assistance to implement this mega project. In spite of this initiative, further development of the concept came to a halt with the change of the government in 1994. Once again, during the 2001-2002 period the same urban development concept was considered for implementation, at least on a phased basis, giving priority to reclamation of the sea near Galle Face and areas adjacent to Colombo 03 to develop an extended city within Colombo. The new government is now ready to embark upon its flagship project as the Western Region Megapolis Project (WRMP) which will help transform the entire Western Province, enveloping the Colombo, Gampaha, and Kalutara districts and positioning Colombo as the best city in the South Asian region.

Model of Megapolis: Characteristics and Developments in Global Context

The concept of 'Megalopolis' (also known as Megapolis in current context) ("great city" in Greek language) has been popularized by French geographer Jean Gottmann. The general characteristics of his concept of Megalopolis are: high population density; concentrated money market (from the nation's capital to the largest financial institutions, security exchanges, and insurance companies); revolution in land distribution (rather than maintaining the traditional push-pull relationship between rural and urban areas, the Megapolis saw a new pattern of symbiosis emerge between the rural and the urban, partially as a result of a new counter-pull of manufacturers in suburban areas); job creation and enhanced trade; fluid transportation between areas (through highway, railroad, and airport infrastructure)

Gottmann, in his research, notes the need for a more fluid system of traffic in a Megapolis as its cities become more integrated and interdependent than in the rest of the country.

The Megapolis model, adopted in the U.S., has positively addressed the problems originating from growing congested transportation networks that are creating diseconomies, which in turn affect the economic vitality and quality of life in the cities and regions. The model is also based on the belief that if the cities in adjacent regions work together they can create a new urban form that will increase economic opportunity and global competitiveness for each individual city and for the nation as a whole.

These clustered networks of cities will have to cooperate in the formation of a structure that takes advantage of their complementary roles while addressing common concerns in the areas of transportation (railways and highways), inclusive economic development, environmental protection etc. The new Megapolis model will contribute to improving social and economic cohesion along with a better territorial balance, and will support more sustainable development by emphasizing collaboration on important policy issues, infrastructure investments and instruments for facilitating economic growth and job creation.

In Europe and Asia, similar network cities are already being seen as the new competitive units in the global economy. The European Union and national governments in Europe, China and Japan are investing hundreds of billions of dollars in new intermodal transportation and communication links and other infrastructure to underpin the capacity, efficiency and livability of these regions. In all of these places, new high-speed rail networks are integrating the economies of formerly isolated regions.

The case for pursuing the Megapolis model is also reinforced by the key message contained in the World Bank's World Development Report (WDR) 2009 titled 'Reshaping Economic Geography'. It pointed out that economic density (value of economic activity per sq. km) was a crucial determinant of competitiveness in today's globalized economy. Colombo's density is well below that of Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and several Indian cities. The WDR (2009) argued that the most effective way of promoting long-term growth is to facilitate geographic concentration and economic integration, while pursuing policies that make basic living standards more uniform across the country.

Western Region Megapolis: Making it a Smart Reality

As earlier indicated during the visit of the Japanese Prime Minister Kaifu, the then Prime Minister brought the concept to the attention of the visiting delegation as well as many Sri

Lankan policy-makers. His renewed interest in the recent past was evident when the UNP unveiled the Megapolis concept for the entire Western Region during the Colombo municipal election (2011). According to Mr. Wickremesinghe's project plan, the proposal includes business centres in the financial districts around Pettah, a cruise centre, a marina and waterfront promenade which will eventually be developed into a harbour front district. The project also includes a recreation and entertainment district around Beira Lake and a shopping complex district around Slave Island. The key goal is to transform the entire Western Province by improving /developing essential infrastructure, such as ICT, Transportation, Communication, power and energy and creating the most exciting and liveable cosmopolitan modern city with an all 'Inclusive development plan' spanning more than 3 decades.

According to the project details, the proposal also includes a comprehensive plan to address the shelter needs for Colombo's shanty-dwellers. A multi-storied housing complex for both low and middle-income families has been proposed with the assistance of experienced architects and town planners of a Singaporean firm named CESMA. The initial plan maps out a detailed long-term development project estimated for a population of two million.

WRMP does not end with improvements of conventional physical connectivity but will encompass making the cities within the region, Smart - Digitally Smart. The Megapolis of the future will provide its citizens, including business enterprises with highly efficient and productive solution to day-to-day needs. Smart parking, integrated transport system, real time traffic information and management, smart power grids to provide the necessary amount of electricity depending on the demand which will increase the efficiency of utilization, smart street lighting, smart city maintenance and many other modern technology related characteristics will be incorporated by primarily the enterprises which will operate or provide services within the WRMP area.

With regard to project implementation particularly making the Megapolis digitally smart, Sri Lankan planners can learn from selected European cities as well as from few Asian Megapolis. For example Songdo, South Korean city is projecting itself as world's first Smart City.

Implementing the WRMP: Integrating Land Mark Initiatives such as Port City Project

Implementation of this flagship project is to be entrusted to a newly formed ministry backed by a highly respected professional team of Sri Lankan advisers. In addition, a new legislative framework is likely to be put in place to ensure speedy implementation.

The implementation of this initiative is accelerated by the fact that ongoing projects, including the Colombo Port City Project, are already in place. This project envisaged reclamation of the sea, creating a virgin land area and facilitating ultra-modern real estate development, including creation of a marina and yacht club, a central boulevard, super luxury apartment complexes and a five star hotel, shopping and entertainment centre, office space, a mini golf course, and many other modern facilities.

The advantageous aspect of this Colombo water front development project is its business model which has no impact on the cash-strapped government coffers. The entire project cost amounting to US\$ 20 billion is to be funded by FDI. In addition to FDI to be invested in the reclamation of the sea and real estate development, the project will also entice a large number of foreign investors to buy, lease or rent the business and residential facilities to be created under this Colombo Port City Development.

Similarly, several other initiatives of the Urban Development Authority (UDA), implemented in the recent past, are reported to be components of the Megapolis project concept developed by the current Prime Minister decades ago.

In summary, the existence of some of the development initiatives, which are being already implemented, will facilitate realisation of the Megapolis and also facilitate attracting foreign direct investments for the specific components as the full scale implementation takes place.

Recommendation for efficient, speedy and beneficial outcomes

- As already indicated, the project should be supervised and managed by a highly professional and business- like team who are willing to consider out of the box solutions.
- With regard to funding and management of each of the components, local and foreign investment, technology and expertise must be promoted and facilitated.
- Wherever the government contributions are required, Private Public Partnerships (PPPs) should be considered as the first option.
- De-politicisation of all policies and actions related to the project should be strongly ensured.

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