
Sri Lanka's progress in the health sector and resilience to challenges commended at the ECOSOC

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By: Dinisha Fernando ECOSOC 8th July 2008: Sri Lanka Shares its Healthcare Experience Sri Lanka today submitted its informative National Voluntary Presentation, filled with healthcare triumphs and future promises in meeting healthcare related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Equipped with colorful and informative slides depicting data and statistics of Sri Lanka's progress, Dr. H.A.P Kahandaliyanage, Secretary to the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition, announced the triumphant results of Sri Lanka's efforts to promise proper healthcare to its people despite its struggles with terrorism and economic survival.

India, Cuba, and Bangladesh commended Sri Lanka's progress in the health sector despite the domestic challenges in the past few decades. China, Pakistan, Venezuela, Morocco, Algeria, and the Maldives also made statements highlighting Sri Lanka's successful development of the health sector and their resilience to recent events. Many countries asked Sri Lanka to share its success story with other developing countries, posing Sri Lanka as an example to its peers. Compared to other countries of its stature, Sri Lanka hosts an excellent healthcare system, which can be considered an incredible feat when considering recent domestic events. As Dr. Kahandaliyanage stated, "Our democratic political system withstood the violent challenge and our economy remained resilient against this threat and continued to grow at a reasonable rate of approximately 5% during the years of conflict." He was proud to state the overall message: "Our social sector indicators, among which health indicators occupy a significant position, continue to be well above those in comparable developing countries. Our life expectancy is high and literacy rates for both men and women above 90%. We have achieved almost universal primary education for both males and females. Overall, Sri Lanka is on track to achieve the MDG targets, and some have already been achieved at national level." Dr. Kahandaliyanage quoted two "salient features" of the government's system of management: free healthcare and convenient locations within a 3-kilometer radius for residents. At the same time, though, the private sector has been allowed to grow, proving to be a plus to both individuals who prefer alternative treatment and to the government as it cuts their costs. The nation's immunization program, was also hailed a "great success" with 97 percent of one year old children immunized against measles and allowing Sri Lanka to eliminate or to effectively control all vaccine preventable diseases. Furthermore, improvements in sanitation facilities have contributed to an increase in quality of life. The statistics shown depicted a vast improvement of citizens' health in response to these implementations. For instance, 97.6 percent of births were attended by skilled health personnel in 2006/2007. The infant mortality rate has declined from 19.8 per 1000 live births in 1990 to 11.3 in 2005, making Sri Lanka well on its way to achieving the MDG target of 6.6 in 2015. The mortality rate of children under five was less than half of what it was in 1990 and is projected to further decline by two thirds by the year 2015. Sri Lanka's efforts regarding immunization has reaped rewards as well, with the eradication of filariasis, leprosy, polio, measles and iodine deficiency disorders as well as confidence in fully wiping out malaria by 2015. In the midst of all this triumph, the fight for complete healthcare coverage is not yet over. The Sri Lankan government faces many challenges that, as Dr. Kahandaliyanage stated, are "mostly systemic and institutional, associated with the overall country situation in terms of macro-economic, developmental, historical, social, political and legal conditions." Although these obstacles do exist, Sri Lanka has still been able to serve its citizens with a "commendable record of experience in dealing with healthcare conditions in situations of emergency and crisis." The government has been committed to delivering healthcare in previous LTTE controlled areas and are today "determined to face the challenge of providing necessary assistance including healthcare to the civilians, who had previously been held hostage by the LTTE" with seven hospitals aiding displaced civilians, and additional medical personnel and increased bed capacity. Its response to civilians during the 2004 tsunami also reflects the commitment of the government. Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the United Nations Geneva 09 July 2009