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Building a Country Brand Building a Country Brand: International Experiences and Implications for Sri Lanka

An LKI Roundtable with Simon Bell, former Director, A.T. Kearney's Global
Business Policy Council

Reported by Anishka De Zylva and Shenali Fernando*

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***Anishka De Zylva** is a Research Associate at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies (LKI) in Colombo. **Shenali Fernando** is the Project Coordinator at LKI. These *Takeaways* summarise the insights and discussion at a recent LKI event. They are not the views of the reporting author or the institutional views of LKI, and are not a complete report of the event.

Three key takeaways from the round table discussion with Simon Bell -

- 1. A country brand should be differentiated and credible, with citizens actually ‘living’ the brand.**
 - 2. Crucial components for building a country brand include: brand image consistency, a suitable policy environment, inter-agency coordination within the government, and coordination between the government and private sector.**
 - 3. Building a country brand is not costly; however, there should be a steady flow of funding from an independent entity to maintain the brand through political cycles.**
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Introduction

- Simon Bell, previously a director on A.T. Kearney’s Global Business Policy Council, addressed a Foreign Policy Round Table on “Building a Country Brand: International Experiences and Implications for Sri Lanka” on 23 January 2018 at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute (LKI).
- The round table was attended by representatives of the Prime Minister’s Office, Ministry of Finance, Office of National Unity and Reconciliation, Ministry of Development Strategies and International Trade, Export Development Board, the private sector, think tanks and other international and national organisations.
- The roundtable was moderated by Dr. Ganeshan Wignaraja, Chair of the Global Economy Programme at LKI.

Takeaways from Mr. Bell’s Presentation:

International Experiences

- New Zealand developed an overarching brand around its endemic ‘silver fern,’ which was applied to all products and services, including their national rugby team.
- South Korea’s ‘Creative Korea’ strategy unified the country under one brand to reposition itself in the global economy as a creative services powerhouse.
 - This branding strategy involved significant social and economic reforms, including a revamp of South Korea’s education system.
- Singapore rebranded from being a country known for its strict laws and penalties, to one viewed as conducive to innovation and attractive to creative expatriates.

Ingredients for a Successful Country Brand

- Coordination and holistic brand messaging across sectors, such as agriculture and tourism, is crucial.
 - Countries which have had uncoordinated brands include Brazil and Austria.
 - Brazil is known for its carnivals, and has found it a challenge to balance that lively image with a more serious one of being an emerging economic powerhouse.

- Building a country brand should begin from the highest level of governments.
 - New Zealand had high-level multi-stakeholder consultation, spearheaded by the Prime Minister’s Office, to develop its branding strategy.
- An independent institution to manage the national brand should be established; one that is not influenced by political or budget cycles and is capable of ensuring long-term funding for brand maintenance.
 - The India Brand Equity Foundation is a trust established by the Government of India to promote and create international awareness of the ‘Made in India’ label.
- A country brand should be differentiated, relevant and credible. Notable examples include Incredible India and Malaysia - Truly Asia.
- Citizens must live the brand. If the brand is built around innovation and creativity, policies for stimulating a research and development (R&D) ecosystem should be in place.
- Building a country brand does not require the services of public relations and advertising firms, but requires a team of intelligent people who strategically use digital media.

Status of Sri Lanka’s Country Branding

- Sri Lanka has strong tea and tourism brands.
- However, its tea and tourism images are not progressive, and it struggles with two negative images — the 2004 tsunami and the war.
 - Sri Lanka’s tea is associated with women plucking leaves, a ‘labour-intensive’ image, and its tourism is associated with men fishing on stilts, a lazy tropical island image.
- There are also many different and uncoordinated agencies communicating Sri Lanka’s brand, leading to inconsistent messaging.

Building a Country Brand in Sri Lanka

- Sri Lanka could build on current synergies between products, services and sectors to develop a country brand.
 - Sri Lanka has a range of products and services that are “fresh and stimulating,” like cinnamon and tourism.
 - Sri Lanka could also build a brand related to intelligence and innovation; its information and communication technology (ICT) and apparel sectors are engaging in innovation.
- Its ICT sector has developed a brand around the theme ‘Island of Ingenuity,’ which could also be applied to its tea, rubber, coconut, gems, apparel industry — among other sectors.
- A national brand could also have several linked phrases. Sri Lanka could apply the phrase ‘Island of Ingenuity’ to some sectors and apply the phrase ‘Island of Inspiration’ to others like tourism.

- To build a strong country brand, Sri Lanka should be transparent about its challenges and work to address them.
 - These challenges include ethno-religious issues, over-stretched infrastructure, poor R&D, and non-innovative oligopolies in certain industries.
- Sri Lanka could develop a model like India's India Brand Equity Foundation to (1) secure long-term funding for country branding and (2) ensure citizens conduct their businesses consistently with the brand image.

Takeaways from the Discussion:

- A brand slogan is not as important as the imagery associated with the country.
 - Japan has such a strong image that no one thinks about its brand slogan.
- Sri Lanka is both inward and outward-looking, and that poses a challenge to country branding; Sri Lanka needs to develop a strategy to leverage its ability to be outward-looking.
- There is confusion around what Sri Lanka's brand should be, and stakeholders have found it challenging to agree on an overarching brand.
- Broad political and social change is essential to developing a successful country brand in Sri Lanka.
- Successful sectors should lead in developing Sri Lanka's brand, at least in the short-run — for example, the country's ICT sector.
- Sri Lanka could consider following the branding strategies of countries like Slovenia that have faced catastrophes like war and terrorism, but have overcome negative perceptions because of their country brands.
 - While tourism to Indonesia and Egypt decreased after terrorist attacks, it normalised quickly because of strong images related to, for instance, Bali and the pyramids.
 - Similarly, the Ministry of Tourism in the Seychelles has a process for releasing positive news about the country prior to any expected catastrophes like cyclones.

Suggested Readings:

Aharoni, I. and Grinstein, A. (2017). How to (Re)position a Country? A Case Study of the Power of Micro-marketing. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*. 13(4): 293-307.

Che-Ha, N., Nguyen, B., Yahya, W., Melewar, T. and Chen, Y. (2015). Country Branding Emerging from Citizens' Emotions and the Perceptions of Competitive Advantage. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*. 22(1): 13-28.

Dinnie, K. (2016). *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice*. Abingdon: Routledge.

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