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Focus on food value chain to achieve sustainable development: economist

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By Shabiya Ali Ahlam A top economist in the country yesterday urged the relevant stakeholders to focus on strengthening the nation's food value chain development so that the goal of sustainable development can be realised in a practical manner. "There is a significant role for the agricultural sector and food industry in terms of ensuring food security and sustainable development in Sri Lanka. Food value chain development is expected to play an important role in achieving sustainable development and there is a felt need to design a national food value chain development plan that complies with national agricultural and food policies and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda," said Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Executive Director Dr. Saman Kelegama.

opportunities to strengthen its agriculture sector, the IPS head stressed the nation was facing challenges, which inhibit the performance of the sector. "Limited land and labour availability for agricultural production and distribution among a large number of small semi-subsistence farmers are two key challenges the sector is faced with," stated Dr. Kelegama while highlighting its significant contribution to gross domestic product (GDP), employments and income of the people. The agriculture sector accounts for approximately

10 percent of the country's GDP, 28 percent of the labour force and 25 percent of the total merchandise exports. Moreover, the sector sustains the majority of the population and impinges on critical areas of poverty, food security and related social issues. The senior economist asserted that while value addition was largely done by the small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which do not have sufficient access to finance,

it was observed that most large enterprises did not wish to invest in Sri Lanka due to policy uncertainty. Adding to the dampening scenario are the outmigration of young males from the agricultural sector, land and soil degradation, inefficient resource use and climate change. Poor governance with respect to public provisions has also been observed over the years. While it has been argued that the growth in the agricultural sector helps in alleviating poverty in rural areas, Dr. Kelegama professed that the overall widening of inequality, particularly across geographical areas with less developed agricultural areas, could be observed despite significance overall reduction in the incidences of poverty over the past decade in Sri Lanka. "This phenomenon is reflected in the level of food and nutrition security in the country as well. Approximately 5.1 million or one in five is undernourished in Sri Lanka today," he shared. Latest statistics from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) indicate that 26.3 percent of children below age five do not have the recommended weight for age and 21.4 percent and 14.7 percent are suffering from stunting and wasting.

As of 2014, the depth of the food deficit was noted to be about 216 Kcal/capita/day. United Nations Sustainable Development Summit of September 2015 identified the importance of promoting sustainable agricultural practices and improving the livelihoods and capacities of the farmers, especially focusing on small-scale farmers and vulnerable food and farming systems.

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