Welcome to the Sri Lanka Development Forum, after two and a half long years.

I open this Forum with poignant words of the President of Sri Lanka, in her address to the nation at the opening of the new Parliament on November 9:

"We have failed to realise the dreams of our freedom fighters to build a strong and united nation. The silent majority watched in horror, whilst a great nation with an ancient civilisation steeped in one of the finest cultural and architectural heritage of the world, nurtured in the traditions of the noble Buddhist philosophy of peace, tolerance, and love veered off into a terrifying era of ethnic, political and social violence."

The people of Sri Lanka seem to agree with the President. In formulating a new Country Assistance Strategy, my colleagues have been listening to Sri Lankan citizens from all walks of life. They said:

- The nation faces a deep crisis;
- Public institutions are politicised;
- Politicians are not accountable;
- People are not heard, and isolated; and
- Give us opportunities, not handouts.

My colleagues thus heard a singular message, that the nation suffers from a weakened capacity of the state to exercise its power judiciously and effectively, for the purpose of growth with equity and social harmony. They taught us the strategic weight of "good governance" -- strong institutions for sound policy decisions and implementation -- for Sri Lanka's renewal.

Frankly speaking, I was surprised. I have become accustomed to hearing such a message in similar consultations elsewhere in South Asia. I did not expect to hear it, with such a force of resounding consensus, from this nation of enlightened social vision, high achievements in human development and gender equality, long democratic tradition, proud public institutions, liberalised open economy, and sustained export-led growth. But, I now understand better the paradox behind each of these achievements, be it social divisions, violence, suicides, war, low trust in the political process, or persistent poverty of means as opposed to poverty of minds. I understand, moreover, that the citizens' call for "good governance" is against a yardstick quite unlike that of most other developing countries. A nation of people who have attained human development close to the OECD level expect, indeed, the standard of governance of OECD countries.
I have no doubt that our Sri Lankan colleagues with us today comprehend these problems deeply in ways that outsiders like us can never hope to. I believe that they, too, are keenly aware of the urgency for change. Governing a country that is deeply divided along many lines and is at war with itself must be a Herculean task. But, the citizens my colleagues consulted also said something else. They said: "Donors share part of the blame, but they can also be part of the solution."

Money is after all fungible. As such, I accept the joint accountability. I have no doubt that development partners want to be part of the solution. But, it must of course be a solution of Sri Lanka's own, to which partners like us can contribute our knowledge and experience. Many have struggled with their own social divides and even civil conflicts. All have had to build institutional capacity for good governance, which I dare say is a never-ending challenge and an evolutionary process of change. Sharing knowledge and experience is what this Forum is about - to learn together how we can advance a partnership to assist the sovereign people of Sri Lanka unleash their true potential.

To that end, then, I suggest we engage in a frank, open and even "spontaneous" dialogue for the coming two days. As I requested to the Heads of Delegation last night, please refrain from reading your prepared statements. The conference staff are prepared to distribute them to all participants, at your request.

In opening that dialogue, I offer two personal observations -- to put the Forum's specific agenda in a global context, and to put them in one particular broader perspective.

First, on a global context.

Peace and security of South Asia region is a significant factor for the world. I view this region as one "equaliser" for global geo-political relations, involving many nations including China and Russia, as well as the Islamic world.

This positive "equaliser" role will grow stronger as economies of the region grow. But, not just any growth. It must be growth with equity and social harmony among citizens in each and every country of South Asia. Otherwise, the very growth could make the region a "de-stabiliser", turning layers of its ethnic, religious and other diversity into a liability instead of an enriching asset that they can be.

Sri Lanka's challenge is, therefore, of global significance. Without peace and security of nation states, prosperity anywhere is a mere house of cards. Without growth with equity in all nations, that peace and security anywhere will also be just a house of cards. This, in my view, is the global context of this Forum.

Second, on a broader perspective -- about leadership and people's participation.

There are many factors we know about, and many we do not know about, that work to achieve growth with equity. I hold a view that quality of leadership -- in governments and throughout civil society -- is one such factor that is of enormous import.
Reducing poverty is about sharing tangible and intangible fruits of growth more equitably. Strategy, policies and actions to achieve it are about changes with winners and losers. This fact challenges people with vested interests in the status quo. It also challenges those with radically different political views about the course or process of change.

Visionary leaders inspire and raise the sight of the people above their lowest common denominator. They help their people see beyond the immediate personal losses to greater opportunities for all. Rapid economic growth can be achieved without such leaders. But, growth with equity and social harmony, redistributing income and wealth as nations grow, cannot be achieved without them.

Quality growth, with equity and social harmony, is not just about sharing the fruits of growth more equally, however. It is also about helping poor or socially marginalised people help themselves. That means listening to and learning from the wisdom of these people, with genuine respect. It means knowing their fears, and making a secure space for their empowerment and voice. It means valuing differences as society's wealth, and finding unity in diversity of views and perspectives whatever the roots -- be they culture, language, race, religion, gender or simply age. Citizens need to feel satisfied that they were consulted truly and participated actively in the process of change, feel convinced that they can honour a consensus, and share deeply in a common vision, strategy and actions. Such a participatory process of change is the only way to secure a sustainable development path.

Such a process demands humility in every citizen, particularly in leaders and the elite who are in the position to shepherd it. In the cultural context of many with power and privilege, humility does not visit naturally nor does it always stay for good. Yet, I dare say, no development process will ever be truly participatory without humble leadership -- leaders of courage who can draw strength from humility and gain power by giving it away.

I have come to see Sri Lanka as a nation blessed with a number of such leaders of far-seeing quality and courage. But, I have also come to sense that many are frustrated, entrapped in crevasses of a society deeply divided. I have thus come to view the role of external development partners as a facilitator for such leaders to serve their nation as catalysts for change.

In closing, I quote the President of Sri Lanka once again from that November 9th address:

"The people have now awakened to the call for peace and amity... History offers but a few opportunities to an individual or a nation to reach up to the stars. We have missed many chances. We cannot, we must not, miss this one last moment, rich with opportunity... And together, we must relentlessly strive to build a new nation, a united, strong nation, brimming with the vitality and joy of renewal, where all of us, whatever race, religion or caste we belong to, shall together build one nation, drawing strength from the richness of our diversity... Then, and only then shall we have the peace and the resources required for strong and stable economic development which will offer a good and decent life for every Sri Lankan citizen."
My own vision of development partnership for Sri Lanka is that of a strong teamwork, aligned to this dream of a nation breaking free to "reach up to the stars." A high-performance teamwork among us, looking for leaders of vision and courage who are champions of change, engaging with them as our counterparts, facilitating their work, and assisting such leaders "to reach up to the stars" with our reputation, our knowledge, our experience, and if necessary our financing.

That, to me, is the very essence of what we have come to call the "Comprehensive Development Framework". I hope we can practice it in everything we -- around this table -- do, individually and collectively, during the coming two days and beyond, working for the sovereign people of united Sri Lanka "brimming with the vitality and joy of renewal."