



COMPETITIVENESS: A SUSTAINABLE WAY OF COUNTERING VOLATILITY

Hennayake Bandara

General Manager /Chief Executive Officer
National Savings Bank

The World of Volatility

Volatility is part of everyone's life and no difference for organizations, economic sectors, economy and country. Even though most of us view volatility as an undesirable condition for sustainable growth, sometimes volatility itself unveils or paves the path for new opportunities, innovations and new thinking. Therefore, volatility is not an evil but a challenge that all of us need to face with. The success or failure of organizations and economies under volatility will be determined by how well they foresee the consequences of volatilities and the preparedness for minimizing any negative impact of them. This is crucial for achieving sustainable growth of businesses as well as the economy.

Today, more than ever, the whole world is faced with various types of volatilities such as economic, social, weather etc, etc. Some of these volatilities are predictable and could be prepared for while unpredictable volatilities such as natural disasters and weather calamities may cause severe damages to economy as well as people.

The purpose of this article is to explore a sustainable way of maintaining economic growth in times of volatility in the context of Sri Lanka and explain the improvement of productivity of all sectors on a sustainable basis, research and development, labour market efficiency, business sophistication and innovations and improvement of overall competitiveness of economy which are imperative for our march towards prosperity. The article consists of two components; first, the challenges Sri Lanka as an economy faces in improving its global competitiveness and then, the role of financial industry in improving the country's competitiveness.

Challenges Ahead

After a number of difficult years, a recovery from the economic crisis is tentatively emerging, although it has been very unequally distributed: much of the developing world is still seeing relatively strong growth, despite some risk of overheating, while most advanced economies continue to experience sluggish recovery, persistent unemployment, and financial vulnerability, with no clear horizon for improvement. In addition, rising commodity prices are eroding the purchasing power of consumers and are likely to slow the pace of recovery. Such uncertainties are being exacerbated by growing concerns about the sustainability of public debt amidst the slow growth



of some advanced economies. The damage that would be wrought by the first sovereign defaults among advanced economies since the 1940s is impossible to gauge, although the mere possibility of this eventuality has already hit investor confidence, put the very viability of the Euro into question.

Policymakers are struggling to find ways to manage the present economic challenges while preparing their economies to perform well in an increasingly complex global landscape. Given the extensive and necessary short-term efforts related to addressing the most pressing fiscal concerns, it remains critical for countries to establish the fundamentals underpinning economic growth and development for the longer term.

The complexity of today's global economic environment has made it more important than ever to recognize and encourage the qualitative as well as the quantitative aspects of growth, integrating such concepts as inclusiveness and environmental sustainability to provide a fuller picture of what is needed and what works.

In this context assessment of the productive potential of an economy and understanding of the key factors determining economic growth, help in raising income levels and opportunities available for the public and policymakers and business leaders for the formulation of improved economic policies and institutional framework/reforms.

Improving Competitiveness

Competitiveness can be defined as set of institutions, policies, and factors that determine the level of productivity of a country. The level of productivity, in turn, sets the level of prosperity that can be earned by an economy. The productivity level also determines the rates of return obtained by investments in an economy, which in turn are the fundamental drivers of its growth rates. In other words, a more competitive economy is one that is likely to grow faster over time. The concept of competitiveness thus involves static and dynamic components: although the productivity of a country determines its ability to sustain a high level of income, it is also one of the central determinants of its returns to investment, which is one of the key factors explaining an economy's growth potential.

Facing economic swings is one of the main phenomena that all of us today are faced with. The ability to face such volatilities is completely dependent on the competitiveness of the economy. Competitiveness, undoubtedly is a much talked of topic everywhere, but the question remains as to how far we have worked towards improving our competitiveness as an economy, industry, organization or even as an individual. If our efforts towards improving competitiveness are below the desired level when compared to our competitors, we are highly vulnerable to volatilities, particularly adverse ones. Achieving competitiveness and improving it on a sustainable basis is a major challenge for businesses as well as countries. Unless all private and public sector business organizations, government agencies, political authorities and all citizens pledge to render their utmost commitment towards increasing the competitiveness of a country, expectations of achieving prosperity will be remote.

High growth rates provide a propitious environment for enhancing competitiveness through structural reforms and growth-enhancing investments in order to make economic development more sustainable. Competitive economy has in place elements driving the productivity enhancements that support high incomes and that, at the same time, ensure that the mechanisms enabling solid economic performance going into the future are in position.

Benchmarking Competitiveness

Competitiveness is a combination of many ingredients, improving productivity and innovativeness being the two most important of them. Accordingly in order to improve competitiveness as a starting point, an economy should be benchmarked with similar well-performing economies in the world and then only it could develop a clear plan with timelines to move forward the economy while increasing competitiveness on sustainable basis. Same methodology needs be applied to various economic sectors and industries to benchmark their own competitiveness against sectors and industries of competitors. However, a fact one needs to be mindful of is that an economy cannot be benchmarked in its entirety; as certain economic sectors and industries resist benchmarking due to certain country-specific factors such as geography, availability of natural resources and climate.

The Global Competitiveness Report 2011-2012 of the World Economic Forum (WEF) serves as a guide for understanding of a country's competitiveness in the global economy. According to the overall competitiveness index in the Report that covers 142 countries, Sri Lanka ranks 52 whereas Singapore, Malaysia, China, Thailand and India rank 1, 21, 26, 39 and 56 respectively, which is a clear indication of the effort and commitment that should go into improving our competitiveness as an economy.

Figure 1: Competitiveness Rankings of Asian Countries

Country	Overall Competitiveness Ranking	Sub Index Ranking based on three categories of economies i.e. factor, efficiency and innovation driven		
		Basic Requirements	Efficiency Enhancers	Innovation and Sophistication Factors
Singapore	1	1	1	11
Malaysia	21	25	20	22
China	26	30	26	31
Thailand	39	46	43	51
Sri Lanka	52	65	69	34
India	56	91	37	40

Source: *The Global Competitiveness Report 2011-2012- World Economic Forum (2012)*



As can be seen under the Efficiency Enhancers sub-index in the above figure, Sri Lanka ranks the lowest in the region at the 69th rank and it indicates that the country lags behind the rest of the region in the areas of higher education & training, goods market efficiency, labour market efficiency, financial markets development, technological readiness and market size, which are the pillars of the index. In other words, this sub-index shows the level of a country's productivity and preparedness and Sri Lanka needs to brace itself for a number of challenges ahead.

Competitiveness and productivity will amount to nothing unless they are accompanied by sustainability. A country should always aim at a sustainable growth, the rate of which can be sustained in the long run. Sustainable Competitiveness, a more meaningful alternative to global competitiveness, can be defined as the set of institutions, policies, and factors that determine the level of productivity of a country while ensuring the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The Sustainable Competitiveness Index (SCI) accounts for the elements required to make competitiveness sustainable over the longer run, in economic, social, and environmental terms such as governance, education and health, infrastructure, innovation as well as demographics, social cohesion, and environmental stewardship. This index provides a deeper understanding of the drivers of longer-term sustainable competitiveness while highlighting the relationship between competitiveness and sustainability. The competitiveness of Asian economies, including the 'Tiger Economies' is called into question by the SCI developed by the World Economic Forum as it ranks most Asian economies low. SCI ranks none of the Asian economies high, while Singapore and Malaysia are ranked 'stable' and India and China at the lowest. Sri Lanka however has been ranked as 'slightly lower' along with Thailand, which holds some promise for the country to attain a sustainable economic growth. As explained above, these benchmarking exercises are quite essential as they indicate a country's relative position and help to improve the areas that are lacking in competitiveness.

Research and Development: Key Enabler of Innovation

Today, more than ever, innovation, enterprise and intellectual assets drive economic growth and increase standards of living. Innovation is instrumental in creating new jobs, providing higher incomes, offering investment opportunities, solving social problems, curing disease, safeguarding the environment, and protecting our security. To facilitate achievement of these objectives, the relevant government agencies must create appropriate incentives for continued growth in innovation and technology development and embrace sound policies for assuring broad social diffusion and access to key scientific and technological advances that enable us, as the 17th Century Scientist Isaac Newton first observed, "to stand on the shoulders of giants". Stimulation of innovation and creativity, directly affects economic performance and creates economic growth through increased productivity, increased trade and investment, and expanded economic activity that enhances consumer welfare.

Research & development (R&D) and innovation are important for both individual firms and for the economy as a whole. R&D is a component part of the innovation process, characterised as work that increases the stock of knowledge or results in the creation of new products. The introduction of new products or processes, or improvements to existing ones to increase efficiency

and cut costs is a prerequisite for firms to survive, evolve and grow in an increasingly competitive environment. The ongoing process of innovation improves and increases the rate of technical progress in the economy and is recognised in empirical studies as an important source of productivity growth, which is ultimately a key determinant of economic growth.

A country's dedication to finding new knowledge is demonstrated by their investments in Research and Development. In terms of Gross Expenditure on R&D (GERD), which is an indication of an economy's relative degree of investment in generating new knowledge, Sri Lanka's expenditure as a proportion of GDP is 0.15 - 0.20% (Source: Ministry of Technology & Research, Sri Lanka) which is far below the developing countries' average of 1%, world average of 1.44% and the developed countries' average of 2.3%. Low productivity of the country invariably reflects under-investment in innovation and having identified this, the Ministry of Technology and Research plans to achieve GERD of 1.5% by 2016.

Equally or more important as research and development is creating an innovation-embedded organization culture. Recent investigations about innovation reveal that companies that innovate successfully and steadily do so by managing innovation holistically in a systematic, integrated fashion across the entire enterprise. They incorporate innovation into every activity that touches customers, partners, suppliers and all stakeholders. A common phenomenon is that companies in less developed economies are more focused on cost-led transformation while developed or emerging economies seem to be focused on fundamental product and service innovation. In an organization that has innovation embedded to its culture, people will continuously seek ways and methods to improve a product, which will demand them to be aware of the subtlest of changes taking place in the market as well as update their talent every day. If their business cannot quickly create new products or services that customers will buy, they will not survive. However, innovation does not just mean the end product or service changes; innovation also includes taking costs out of processes or forming strategic alliances to collaborate. Each aspect of the business is fair game for reinvention. The fact that new channels like mobile phones are becoming more important for local banks is a case of re-invention in the areas of channel optimization.

Labour Market Efficiency: Key Enabler of Productivity

The efficiency and flexibility of the labour market are critical for ensuring that workers are allocated to their most efficient use in the economy and provided with incentives to give their best effort in their jobs. Labour markets must therefore have the flexibility to shift workers from one economic activity to another rapidly and at low cost, and to allow for wage fluctuations without much social disruption. The importance of the latter has been dramatically highlighted by the recent events in Arab countries, where high youth unemployment sparked social unrest in Tunisia that spread across the region.

Efficient labour markets must also ensure a clear relationship between workers incentives and their efforts to promote meritocracy at the workplace, and they must provide equity in the business environment between women and men. Taken together these factors have a positive effect on worker performance and the attractiveness of the country for talent, two aspects that are growing more important as talent shortage looms on the horizon.



According to the WEF's Global Competitiveness Report 2011-12, Sri Lanka's labour market efficiency ranks the lowest in the region at 117th place while the rest of the region Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, China, Korea, India and Indonesia are ranked 2nd, 20th, 30th, 36th, 76th, 81st and 94th respectively. Sri Lanka's poor performance at pay and productivity, redundancy costs, hiring and firing and flexibility of wage determination raises concerns over its labour market efficiency, a situation that adversely affects the sustainability in growth.

Developing Talent is an important aspect of labour efficiency. The case for developing talent has always been clear: if an organization is to achieve its primary objectives, it must align talent with strategy by developing a workforce with the necessary capabilities. Talent development not only equips but also inspires employees to perform. It motivates them to make the most of the skills and capabilities they acquire. However it is important that organizations are futuristic in developing talent. At the rate the business environment changes, employees' talents and skills too become dated and should be replenished by a new stock of talents. We find that the companies today are heavily investing in developing staff for requirements in-hand and bridge skill gaps that will become more pertinent in the long run. If a company wishes to maintain its growth on a sustainable basis, they should prepare their staff for future uncertainties and should motivate employees to lose no time to adapt to the new rules of the market.

Business Sophistication & Innovative Business Models

Business sophistication is the quality of a country's overall business networks and of individual firms' operations and strategies that brings about higher efficiency in the production of goods and services and leads to increased productivity of a country. Sophisticated business practices are important for a number of reasons. When companies and suppliers from a particular sector are interconnected in similar other groups, efficiency is increased, greater opportunities for innovation in processes and products are created, and barriers to entry for new firms are reduced. Individual firms' advanced operations and strategies in areas such as branding, marketing, distribution, advanced production processes, and the production of unique and sophisticated products spread out into the economy and lead to sophisticated and modern business processes across the country's business sectors. The criteria that measure business sophistication are local supplier quantity, local supplier quality, state of cluster development, nature of competitive advantage, value chain breadth, control of international distribution, production process sophistication, extent of marketing and willingness to delegate authority. However, it has been identified that Sri Lanka, as a country lags behind in several areas notably in product process sophistication, local supplier quality and extent of marketing.

The productivity and competitiveness of an organization depends very much on the rate at which it adjusts its business model to the new business climates and new customer demographics. Business model is how an organization creates, delivers, and captures value. As the external environment changes disrupting the smooth functioning of an organization and jeopardizing the standards of doing a business, organizations should invent new models backed by new processes and technologies to create, deliver and capture new values demanded by the changed environment.



Capitalizing on Changing Demographics and Consumer Preferences

Customer demographics, psychographics and geographies change all the time and more so nowadays due to a number of reasons such as technological advances, urbanization and rising income. It can also be seen that a new consumer class mostly consisting of professionals is pushing its way up from the bottom of the pyramid and is flexing its buying power. There will be winners and losers as businesses pivot to address markets and customers they are less familiar with. Capitalizing on changing customer preferences also includes that the right market choice, i.e. which markets are most critical for growth is identified.

Role of the Financial Services Industry in Increasing Productivity and Innovation

The recent economic crisis has highlighted the central role of a sound and well functioning financial sector for economic activities. An efficient financial sector allocates the resources saved by a nation’s citizens, as well as those entering the economy from abroad, to their most productive uses. It channels resources to those entrepreneurial or investment projects with the highest expected rate of return rather than to the politically connected. A thorough and proper assessment of risk is therefore a key ingredient of a sound financial market.

Business investment is also critical to productivity. Therefore economies require sophisticated financial markets that can make capital available for private-sector investment from such sources as loans from a sound banking sector, well-regulated securities exchanges, venture capital, and other financial products. In order to fulfill all those functions the banking sector needs to be trustworthy and transparent, and as has been made so clear recently, financial markets need appropriate regulations to protect investors and other sectors in the economy at large.

Figure 2: Performance of Financial Services Industry in Asia: A Comparative Analysis

Country	Rank			
	Interest Rate Spread	Soundness of banks	Availability of Financial Services	Affordability of Financial Services
Sri Lanka	34	41	40	35
China	31	64	60	41
India	66	32	45	32
Malaysia	15	28	20	11
Singapore	68	5	14	5
Thailand	60	43	46	36

Source: *The Global Competitiveness Report 2011-2012- World Economic Forum (2012)*



Sri Lanka's financial sector enjoys a reputation for being stable, trust-worthy and well-regulated. Its stability has been undisputed and taken in the context of Bank failures in other parts of the world, Sri Lanka's financial system has withstood all external and internal volatilities and been hailed as quite stable and robust by the international community. The Central Bank as the regulator has played a vital role in ensuring the stability of the industry by tightening regulations, strengthening standards and focus on corporate governance, risk management and capital adequacy requirements and introducing new regulations such as the Finance Business Act No.42 of 2011. Despite the popular perception that regulations are counter-productive, proactive and effective regulation and supervision facilitate industry players to build more capacity so that they are better equipped for competitiveness in the face of volatility. Meanwhile, the industry players too have adopted a proactive approach to system resilience by building adequate capacity in the areas of risk management, capital and liquidity and by continuing the momentum to expand themselves across the country into all market segments. However, the role of financial sector in increasing its productivity and competitiveness needs to stretch far beyond the traditional.

- **Traditional Profitability Metrics: Can They Be Used in Modern Retail World?**

Today even traditional profitability metrics, such as branch profitability, are being challenged. Most banks measure monthly branch profitability using a common framework. Essentially, they create a P&L for the branch, which includes revenues (based on spreads and fees), credit costs, operating costs and allocated expenses. The asset and liability balances attributed to the branch are based on the accounts "booked" to it when a customer originates the account. Fees are also largely based on activities related to customer accounts booked to a branch, although some branch P&Ls also include other line items, such as usage fees for ATMs located in the branch.

Under this traditional profitability construct, it can take years for branches to be deemed "profitable." That is, customer numbers and associated balances attributed to the branch need to accumulate over time before spread and fee revenues exceed direct and allocated costs. Bankers undergo an anguished waiting game hoping that their branch placement "bets" will pay off.

Such a manner of measuring branch profitability is clearly inadequate, and certainly not one that any modern retailer would use. It credits the branch at which the customer first originated his or her account with the balances of the account, even if the customer has never again set foot in that branch. It offers no incentive for the provision of high-quality service in the time period it is most needed (when the branch is being opened) because direct compensation expense is charged to the income statement while balances are low. It muddies the contribution of other sales and service channels to overall customer satisfaction and profitability. Finally, it can delay decision-making about whether the branch is truly contributing value to the bank.

To counter this, a more accurate picture of branch-level profit performance needs to be constructed. Such a picture should be more sensitive to actual performance during the



reporting period as opposed to prior periods. It should reflect the effectiveness of the branch as a sales and service channel. Finally, it should be more sensitive to the operational “levers” that management can push or pull to influence the performance of the branch.

One approach would be to change the items driving the monthly branch income statement. Rather than holding assets and liabilities accrued over time on its own balance sheet, the branch would be credited only for loans or deposits generated during the month. The bank would purchase the deposits or loans from the branch at their economic net present value (One analogy is the mortgage-banking business, in which loan production offices “sell” the loans downstream rather than holding them on their own books). The branch would also be credited for the customer service transactions it performs during the month. Monthly operating expenses, direct and allocated, would be deducted to arrive at a true monthly P&L amount. This would provide managers with a better understanding of branch performance.

- **Improving Banking Industry Performance and Competitiveness: New Performance Metrics**

After the financial crisis that began in 2008, banks particularly those in crisis-hit countries are taking steps to improve their performance measurement capabilities in light of changed economic and market conditions and new management needs. For example, new regulatory structures are affecting the underlying economics of banking businesses and capital requirements are increasing for most banking businesses. Therefore, understanding industry changes taking place on those countries will be much beneficial for local banking industry to improve own competitiveness and productivity to become more competitive at regional and global landscapes. Also right understanding of certain measures they adopt in post-crisis environment will definitely help us to increase our readiness for unprecedented crisis in future.

However, maintaining of revenue growth on continued basis will be a challenge if economic conditions weaken beyond the tolerable levels and due to ineffective regulatory restrictions. Banks will have to manage costs better, deepen relationships with customers and enhance product mix and pricing decisions. These and other factors will force local banks to re-examine and improve the ways in which they measure and report business performance. Some major areas of emphasis and trends emerging across the industry are, reviewing and enhancing organizational management profitability-reporting methodologies, emphasizing the use of business-unit key performance indicators (KPIs), refining customer-profitability and channel-profitability measurement and analytics, improving alignment of the components of the performance management process, improving systems support and automation of the performance management process and improving data quality and consistency.



- **Investing in Data Availability, Quality and Consistency: Prerequisite for Dealing with Volatility**

During the recent financial crisis, banks struggled to pull together complete and accurate reports of their positions, exposures and counterparties. Performing stress tests was an onerous exercise due to data gaps and inconsistencies.

The situation was an eye opener for regulators, boards and management of banks about the necessity of data quality to run banks effectively. Regulators, boards and management all concluded that significant improvements in data quality were necessary to run banks effectively in the post-crisis era. Therefore, going forward local banking industry also needs to look into improving data quality on continuous basis since accurate information plays a significant role in decision-making irrespective of crisis.

As a result, the key data improvement activities in the banking industry that will enhance performance management and reporting include:

- **Data governance.** Banks are required to place improved data governance approaches. Among these are specifying organizational responsibilities and processes for data definitions, ownership, validation and change control.
- **Data sourcing.** Multiple data sources need to be rationalized. Enterprise data warehouses to be built and implemented to serve multiple purposes, including performance measurement and reporting. The creation of data marts for unique users and user groups need to be developed under disciplined and rigorous governance.
- **Data quality.** In parallel with the actions described above, significant efforts need to be taken to improve data quality. This involves cleansing data in source systems and making sure that required data attributes are complete and accurate. Data quality maintenance processes are being enhanced so that data do not go stale or become corrupted over time.

Of course, individual banks face their own performance measurement circumstances and needs, such as integrating acquisitions into existing profitability measurement, budgeting and forecasting systems and tools. Bank finance, information technology, treasury, risk, operations and business unit managers will need to work together to improve performance management processes and systems at their institutions.

- **Line-of-Business (LOB) KPIs**

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are at the heart of a performance management initiative, and are meant to provide strategic measures of success (or failure) rather than just measuring non-



critical activities and processes. KPIs can provide “business alignment” across all levels of an organization (business units, departments and individuals) with clearly defined and “cascaded targets” and benchmarks to create accountability and track progress.

Businesses thrive or fail based on their ability to identify, define, track and act upon KPIs. Executives and line-of-business management are increasingly feeling the pressure to establish the right KPIs to enable timelier and more accurate decisions. The faster and more accurately KPIs can be accessed, reviewed, analyzed and acted upon, the better chance an organization has for success.

At most large banks, monthly organizational profitability reporting is sophisticated and well-accepted. However, bank executives are looking for measures that will assist them in understanding potential future performance, as well as in analyzing historical financial performance.

The use of enterprise and LOB-specific KPIs in management reporting is growing. Banks are determining which KPIs will allow them to gain insights into the underlying performance of the business beyond a purely financial view. Reporting on KPIs that truly drive value provides more information upon which to make decisions and engage in strategic discussions about the business.

Determining the KPIs that will be used requires developing a model of the business and analyzing the “levers” that have the greatest impact on its performance. It also calls for defining the levels in the LOB hierarchy at which the KPIs will be reported.

Each bank needs to establish their own KPIs which are appropriate to LOBs based on its strategy and views of the business. For the most part, KPIs currently in use are fairly simple and intuitive. However, as driver-based models become more precise and complex, LOB KPIs are likely to evolve as well. Some typical KPIs used for retail banking LOBs include: new accounts opened; account attrition; balance growth; products per household or customer; delinquencies; net promoter score; and headcount. KPIs can be developed for subsets of the retail LOB, including product lines such as mortgages, credit cards and insurance.

- **Refining Profitability Reporting**

Banks are continuously working towards developing “customer-centric” strategies which involve customer segmentation, needs and behavior analysis, product features, sales and service process design and pricing strategies, among other attributes. To develop and implement customer-centric strategies, banks need a deep understanding of customer profitability and economics on annual- and lifetime-value bases.

Banks need to enhance their customer-profitability calculation and analysis capabilities. Capturing accurate and comprehensive data on customers’ overall relationships with the bank in terms of accounts, products, and sales and service interaction need be a major focus, as in refining profitability-calculation methodologies. Understanding which



customers or groups of customers are profitable or unprofitable provides banks with information upon which to make marketing and pricing decisions.

More channels, such as online and mobile ones, are being added to traditional channels like branches and call centers. Investments in such channels must be optimized. Consequently, banks need to improve their analyses of channel economics, which involves developing models of channel costs, usage patterns and impacts on sales and customer retention.

Productivity & Competitiveness: A Sustainable Solution for Volatility

Volatility does not necessarily result in vulnerability, if a country's economy has the capacity to absorb the shocks of volatility. A country may be open and exposed to/integrated with the global economy but will still maintain low vulnerability, if the economy maintains a high level of competitiveness and productivity through continuous innovation.

Volatility, no matter how unwelcome, is a much-needed opportunity for organizations to break away from the status-quo and find sustainable ways of maintaining business growth. Enhancing competitiveness and productivity is key to expand your capacities so much so that undesirable conditions created by volatilities can be easily absorbed and be turned into advantage.

Sri Lanka, being an emerging economy transitioning from the factor driven stage to the efficiency driven stage, has much potential to achieve the status of innovation driven economy, the height of competitiveness. Towards this end, the banks, playing the crucial intermediation role of mobilizing from the surplus units to the deficit units in the economy are expected to make the most productive use of funds to promote the sustainability of the economy and the bankers' challenge today, is to innovate new metrics to ensure optimization of the performance, productivity and profitability of the industry.