

THE IMPORTANCE OF STOICISM IN EMPOWERING PEOPLE FOR ECONOMIC RECOVERY IN SRI LANKA: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is currently recovering from a severe economic crisis. This paper explores the role of Stoicism, an ancient Greek philosophy, in assisting individuals and communities cope with adversity, facilitating recovery. The article examines how Stoic principles such as resilience, emotional regulation, and focusing on what is within one's control can potentially reduce mental health deterioration, improve stress management, and contribute to economic recovery through improved mental well-being. Additionally, it proposes interventions at the grassroots level, grounded in Stoic principles, to improve community-level productivity and overall economic resilience.

Keywords: Community-level productivity, Economic Crisis, Mental Health, Stoicism

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Historical Context of Stoicism

Stoicism, founded by Zeno of Citium in the 3rd century BCE, emerged as a response to the societal instability and societal upheaval of ancient Greece. It advocates the development of virtues like wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance, all of which contribute to cultivating emotional resilience in the face of adversity (Long, 2002). Stoic thinkers such as Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca advanced the notion that while external circumstances are beyond one's control, an individual's reactions and thoughts can be controlled and shaped (Bennett, 2015). This emphasis on self-mastery and acceptance of external realities remains particularly relevant today, as individuals and communities face unprecedented crises, as is the case with Sri Lanka's current economic struggles.

Historically, Stoicism was instrumental in helping leaders like Marcus Aurelius navigate turbulent periods, including wars and plagues, while maintaining governance over the Roman Empire (Bennett, 2015). Similarly, the Stoic practice of enduring suffering with dignity has been crucial for individuals facing hardships, such as Epictetus, who rose from slavery to become a respected teacher and philosopher (Long, 2002).

Sri Lanka's Current Socio-Economic Difficulties

Sri Lanka is experiencing one of its most profound economic crises in modern history, with shortages of essential goods, escalating inflation, and a dramatic reduction in foreign exchange reserves (Institute for Health Policy, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic compounded these challenges, leading to widespread unemployment and poverty (World Bank, 2021). There has been subsequent political turbulence and changes in rulers. As the nation struggles with an unstable economy, the mental health of individuals and communities can be significantly affected (Institute for Health Policy, 2020). Given the interlinked nature of mental well-being and economic productivity, addressing these issues is crucial for Sri Lanka's recovery (Seligman, 2011).

Mental health has long been recognized as a crucial determinant of both individual and communal economic prosperity (Warr, 2002). Good mental well-being enhances cognitive functioning, boosts productivity, and enables individuals to contribute more effectively to societal development (Huppert, 2009). A comprehensive and accurate understanding of the crisis, along with the socio-economic dynamics at the individual level, is essential for addressing the mental health challenges faced by individuals and their families. Strategic self-interventions aimed at improving both personal and family financial and social status can significantly enhance mental health outcomes, which, in turn, lead to better economic and social improvements. Therefore, integrating Stoic principles into national recovery strategies could not only help mitigate the ongoing mental health crisis but also contribute to individual and broader economic recovery efforts.

Stoic Principles and Their Relevance to Sri Lanka's Recovery

1. 'Focus on What You Can Control'

The Stoic concept of the "dichotomy of control" posits that individuals should focus on what they can control and accept what they cannot (Epictetus, 2008). In the context of Sri Lanka's economic turmoil, this principle is particularly relevant. As citizens contend with macroeconomic forces beyond their control, such as international trade dynamics and government policies, they can still control personal responses, including upskilling, entrepreneurship, and community support. Evidence suggests that individuals who engage in proactive, solution-oriented behaviors experience lower levels of stress and higher resilience during crises (Seligman, 2011).

For instance, many Sri Lankans have turned to seeking foreign employment and engaging in small businesses as positive coping strategies, exemplifying Stoic resilience and resourcefulness. These actions highlight an important facet of Stoic philosophy: in times of hardship, individuals can focus on developing personal and communal solutions (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

One could argue that it is both natural and relevant to be concerned about external factors, even when they lie beyond one's direct control. However, Stoicism does not advocate for indifference or ignorance of these external events. Rather, it encourages the development of rational emotional responses to them (Epictetus, trans. 2008). This distinguishes Stoic practice from avoidance or denial, both of which are often counterproductive when addressing real-world challenges (Beck, 2011). Stoic philosophy emphasizes mindful awareness of external circumstances, coupled with a focus on cultivating internal virtues such as resilience, self-discipline, and wisdom (Aurelius, trans. 2006; Pigliucci, 2017). Developing effective coping strategies and enhancing one's understanding of socio-economic dynamics—within the limits of one's cognitive and educational capacity—are crucial steps in facing adversity. By concentrating on what one can influence while maintaining perspective on what one cannot, individuals can navigate hardship with greater clarity and strength.

Strategies for educating the public at the grassroots level about the ongoing crisis such as proactive approaches, economic opportunities, financial management strategies, problem-solving techniques, time management, and small-scale investment and business opportunities should be tailored to individuals' and families' educational levels, socio-economic factors, and individual strengths and weaknesses. Individual and family economic profiles and guidance can be provided through community leaders and local government and non-government officials. Pilot programs can be used to assess the effectiveness of these strategies, which can, in turn, inform and improve subsequent general and national interventions.

2. Resilience in the Face of Adversity'

Resilience, a cornerstone of Stoic thought, encourages individuals to perceive challenges as opportunities for growth (Southwick & Charney, 2018). Sri Lanka's history is rife with examples of resilience, from overcoming the 26-year civil war to the recovery efforts following the 2004 tsunami (Southwick & Charney, 2018). The economic crisis today requires a similar mindset, where adversity is not merely endured, but used as a springboard for adaptation and innovation. Studies on

resilience have shown that individuals who embrace adversity with a constructive mindset are better able to navigate long-term difficulties and contribute to collective societal recovery (Southwick & Charney, 2018).

The rise of digital entrepreneurship and remote work in Sri Lanka during the pandemic demonstrates how Stoic principles can lead to innovative solutions during times of economic uncertainty (World Bank, 2021). Furthermore, individual and family-oriented entrepreneurship and production initiatives at the grassroots level, while maintaining mental health well-being, should be encouraged (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

3. 'Virtue as the Highest Good'

Stoicism teaches that virtue rather than material wealth should be the ultimate goal (Long, 2002). This emphasis on ethical behavior, including wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance, can help foster a culture of ethical leadership and collective action in Sri Lanka (Bennett, 2015). For example, initiatives like "Gammadda," a grassroots movement focusing on rural development, reflect Stoic ideals by prioritizing the well-being of the community over personal gain (Seligman, 2011). In a nation grappling with corruption and inequality, embracing Stoic virtues may guide leaders toward more just and ethical decision-making processes (Bennett, 2015).

4. 'Emotional Regulation and Mental Well-Being'

Emotional regulation, a key Stoic practice, helps individuals cope with stress and negative emotions by focusing on what is within their control and accepting what is not (Beck, 2020). In Sri Lanka, the economic crisis has significantly affected mental health, leading to increased anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Institute for Health Policy, 2020). The Stoic practice of reframing negative thoughts and maintaining a balanced emotional state can be an effective coping mechanism (Beck, 2020).

Research supports the efficacy of Stoic principles in improving mental well-being. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Rational Emotive Therapy (RET), which are influenced by Stoic ideas, has been shown to help individuals manage anxiety and depression by promoting cognitive reframing and focusing on actionable solutions (Beck, 2020). In Sri Lanka, where mental health resources are often scarce, Stoicism provides an accessible and practical method for self-care and emotional regulation (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

5. 'Community and Solidarity'

Stoicism places significant importance on the interconnectedness of humanity. It encourages individuals to live harmoniously with others and contribute to the greater good (Long, 2002). This notion is deeply rooted in Sri Lankan culture, as demonstrated by the practice of 'Anyodhara Samithiya' a village level welfare society, which has been particularly evident during the economic crisis (Seligman, 2011). Solidarity and collective action, especially in rural communities, reflect Stoic ideals of community support and social harmony (Southwick & Charney, 2018).

Stoicism and Mental Health: Improving Coping and Stress Management

The Stoic practice of focusing on controllable aspects of life, reframing negative thoughts, and fostering resilience can help individuals manage stress more effectively (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Research in psychology has consistently shown that practices rooted in Stoicism, such as mindfulness, are effective in reducing anxiety, depression, and stress (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The application of these techniques in Sri Lanka can help prevent the deterioration of mental health, which is critical for maintaining personal productivity and overall societal well-being (WHO, 2021).

Mental health plays a pivotal role in economic productivity. Poor mental health can lead to decreased work performance, absenteeism, and high healthcare costs, all of which undermine economic stability (WHO, 2021). Conversely, improving mental health outcomes enhances creativity, problem-solving, and productivity (Harvard Business Review, 2018).

In Sri Lanka, where mental health services and promotional activities are limited, promoting Stoic practices at community level can reduce the economic burden (Seligman, 2011). Evidence suggests that businesses and organizations that invest in mental well-being programs see substantial returns in terms of increased productivity and reduced absenteeism (Harvard Business Review, 2018).

Economic Recovery Outcome Measurements Compatible with Stoic Principles

When considering economic recovery, particularly after crises such as pandemics or economic recessions, Stoic principles can inform more broader outcome measurements. Rather than focusing solely on GDP or market indicators, Stoic-compatible measures emphasize stability, well-being, and the moral and functional integrity of individuals and communities. The following are proposed outcome domains aligned with Stoic values.

1. Economic Resilience Indices

In economic terms, resilience refers to the capacity of individuals, households, and institutions to recover from shocks such as inflation, pandemics, or natural disasters. Measuring this capacity can be achieved through an Economic Resilience Indices (ERI), which encompasses multiple indicators. These include employment retention rates following a crisis, levels of household emergency savings, and income diversification, for instance, the percentage of households with more than one income source. These indicators collectively reflect a system's flexibility, adaptability, and preparedness for future disruptions (Briguglio et al., 2009; Rose, 2007).

2. Mental Health and Well-being Indicators

The Stoics emphasized the importance of mental equilibrium and rational emotional responses. Therefore, any recovery strategy guided by Stoicism must consider psychological well-being as an integral component. Relevant outcome measures include the prevalence of common mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety. Tools like PHQ-9 which is validated in both Sinhala and Tamil languages (Ukwaththage, 2023) as well as alcohol and substance misuse rates, which can be obtained from AUDIT scores (De Silva, 2008) and national health statistics. Other indicators include suicide and self-harm rates, school absenteeism due to

psychological distress, and the number of individuals accessing mental health services. Validated tools like the WHO-5 Well-Being Index and the Brief Resilience Scale may also be used to assess individual well-being (World Health Organization, 1998). In this context, economic recovery is considered incomplete if it leads to increased distress or eroded mental resilience—factors that undermine the Stoic ideal of inner peace and self-mastery (Nussbaum, 1994).

3. Individual Financial Literacy and Control

Stoic philosophy warns against attachment to material wealth and advocates for prudence in financial decision-making. Thus, financial independence and literacy serve as important markers of ethical and rational living. Outcome measures in this area include the household debt-to-income ratio, the percentage of the population with personal savings, and credit card default rates pre and post economic crisis and post stoic based interventions. Additionally, financial literacy can be directly assessed using standardized questionnaires that test knowledge of interest rates, budgeting, and investment principles. The proportion of the population participating in financial education programs is another valuable metric. These indicators not only reflect economic behavior but also demonstrate an individual's ability to govern their financial life in accordance with Stoic virtues such as temperance and wisdom (Pigliucci, 2017).

4. Purpose and Meaning in Work

Stoicism places a high value on purposeful action and sees work not merely as a means of income but as a path to virtue and societal contribution. Consequently, recovery plans should aim not only to restore employment but to ensure that employment is meaningful. This can be measured through job satisfaction surveys, assessments of alignment between job roles and individual qualifications, and rates of underemployment or precarious work. Access to vocational training and lifelong learning opportunities also reflects the availability of meaningful engagement and personal growth. Such data can be obtained from labor force surveys, education enrollment statistics, and employment records. Aligning economic policy with the Stoic pursuit of purposeful work supports not only individual fulfillment but also a resilient and ethical workforce (Nussbaum, 1994; Pigliucci, 2017).

A Criticism of Stoicism - Potential Passivity or Acceptance of Injustice

While Stoicism offers valuable tools for emotional resilience and rational coping, it has faced criticism when applied to socio-economic recovery, particularly in contexts marked by systemic injustice or corruption. Critics argue that the Stoic emphasis on accepting what is beyond one's control may inadvertently encourage passivity and resignation in the face of structural deficiencies such as economic mismanagement, inequality, or political corruption (Nussbaum, 1994). This could undermine efforts to mobilize collective action or demand accountability from institutions. Applied narrowly, Stoicism may promote a mindset that focuses solely on individual change, ignoring the need for systemic solutions. Socioeconomic problems like poverty, unemployment, or healthcare disparities often require public accountability, legal reform, and structural changes, not just internal coping mechanisms.

However, classical Stoicism does not advocate indifference to injustice; rather, it promotes rational and virtuous responses to adversity (Epictetus, trans. 2008; Aurelius, trans. 2006). Modern interpretations suggest that Stoicism can support strong and measured ethical resistance, civic engagement, and reform when coupled with public awareness and a sense of duty rather than emotionally driven community reactions (Pigliucci, 2017). Therefore, while Stoic principles can strengthen individual psychological resilience, their integration into recovery strategies should be balanced with mechanisms that encourage civic responsibility and systemic change.

Conclusion

Stoicism offers a valuable framework for navigating Sri Lanka's economic crisis. By focusing on what can be controlled, fostering resilience, and prioritizing virtue, individuals can enhance their mental well-being and contribute to individual and national recovery. Furthermore, by addressing the mental health crisis through Stoic principles, Sri Lanka may build a more resilient and productive workforce. Investing in mental health and well-being is not merely a moral responsibility but an economic necessity, as it directly impacts both individual and communal productivity.

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