



## RESEARCH INTELLIGENCE UNIT (RIUNIT) MARKS 20 YEARS OF OPERATIONS IN SRI LANKA AND THE MALDIVES

International research firm Research Intelligence Unit (RIUNIT) is proud to be celebrating 20 years of operations in Sri Lanka. Having initially established their presence in Sri Lanka in 2003, the firm has been able to expand its footprint internationally with offices in Bangladesh, Maldives, India and the UK and more recently in Nepal and Australia.

Founder and Chief Executive of the firm, Roshan Madawela says the RIUNIT's vision is definitely international and spoke to us about RIUNIT's journey and future plans.

**You are the founder of the Research Intelligence Unit (RIUNIT), a highly acclaimed company that is celebrating 20 years this year. How did this journey start?**

The journey started 20 years ago when both the macro and micro economic environment was very different in the world. What stirred me to start RIUNIT was to witness first-hand the asymmetrical relationship between the developed world, represented by its development institutions, and the recipient countries who were represented by their government agencies and ministries. This mismatch in technical know-how often did not result in the best outcome for any kind of aid or development project.

So in many such cases, I witnessed that there was a role for the Research Intelligence Unit. For us, being from the developed world, but having a ground presence in the emerging world and being emerging world and developing world centric, we were able to come in and facilitate a better relationship, better dialogue and ultimately better outcomes. Our efforts focused on how to maximise the benefit of any project for the recipients of development assistance and projects. That was the vision and that is how we started in 2003.



# ROSHAN MADAWELA

FOUNDER AND CEO

**What do you consider the company's most notable achievements?**

We played a significant role in the development sector in the early years. Being part of projects that aimed to reduce child malnutrition in the developing world, in the emerging markets, helping deliver benefits of peace, dealing with refugees, internally displaced people and working with various agencies in order to deliver those benefits were definitely achievements in the early years. Since then, the Research Intelligence Unit has been very much more commercially oriented and we are really amazed at the positive response that we've had from the private sector.

At the last count, we have facilitated over US\$700 million in project financing to Asian markets where we operate. To witness how these investments transformed the skylines of these emerging market economies, to watch these cities develop and grow and to see the skies silhouetted with amazing new buildings, malls, apartment complexes, housing projects, hotels and resorts is certainly a satisfying feeling.

Our company has also been working on connecting investors and investment opportunities with diaspora communities. This too has also helped to strengthen the bond between communities in the globe and get them involved in the development process. The diaspora community in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are particularly active in maintaining connectivity with their country of origin.

**The Research Intelligence Unit is a company with international reach. Did this evolve over time or did the company kick off in multiple locations from the onset?**

We started in the UK and that is for personal reasons. Then, again for personal reasons, the RIUNIT moved to Sri Lanka, followed by Bangladesh, Maldives, India and more recently, Nepal and Australia. We have always had a presence in the Middle East as well. The vision is definitely international.

**Can you touch on some of the reasons why the RIUNIT has been highly acclaimed for its work?**

Fundamentally, we believe that accurate information is critically important for a free-market economy to function in a way that is just and efficient. The availability of information and affordable information to smaller companies, individuals, investors and people at large who participate in the economy is very important. It is a philosophical and fundamental belief that we have a right to information in order to participate in a free market economy.

Secondly, we are proactive. We actually have surveillance systems in place for the industries that we advise on. We are like the eyes and ears on the ground for our clients and for ourselves. We are continually collecting data, qualitative data and quantitative data that is the cornerstone of market intelligence. Given the volatility of markets and economies and geopolitics in the current state of the world, we can hardly keep up.

Thirdly, we are innovative and open-minded to solve problems in ways that may not have been applied in the past. This is only possible by listening and heeding to local wisdom and insights whilst keeping a forward-thinking focus on the solution that is sought by our clients. Courage is needed to try new ideas.

Another reason is that the whole team values ethics and the truth along with hard work. These ethics are really important for any organization to flourish. We have been through a heck of a lot in terms of challenges recently - market will continue to fluctuate but our integrity, ethics and professionalism remains the same.

Furthermore, our policy briefs and forecasts have also been on-point. For example, we flagged the rise of illicit markets caused by ill-considered tax policy. We have highlighted to governments that if you try to ban X, Y and Z, it is likely to stir up and give rise to an illicit market which will essentially be non-tax paid. A

non-tax paid illicit parallel market in a developing economy can be disastrous because tax revenue is so essential.

Similarly, RIUNIT forecasts for our private sector clients have proven correct for often than not. For example, in real estate we flagged areas that are going to take off based on the fact that we have surveillance on what is happening on the ground. Our clients have managed to benefit from our advisory services and had very lucrative real estate investments in areas and projects that we have recommended. Twenty years ago, many people in the construction and real estate sector didn't think apartments would be popular in Sri Lanka due to a culture that valued houses and ancestral homes. Fortunately, we did our own research and our clients benefited.

**Which sectors does the company cover for its market intelligence services and studies?**

The RIUNIT covers anything that is included within the sphere of economic activity and also, in many areas, social interventions. Some of the sectors we have really excelled at include policy advisory work for sovereign entities and specific industries where we specialise and include real estate, construction, agriculture, power and the energy health sector. We also have expertise in evolving areas like IT. We are essentially there for any client that needs market research and needs to find out the feasibility of any endeavor.

In Sri Lanka our real estate market intelligence and advisory team have excelled and contributed to over 150 residential, commercial, retail, hotel and leisure, mixed-use and warehouse projects over the past decade.

**What does the future hold for the global economy and where do you see the RIUNIT in this future?**

Geopolitics is a major factor that drives change and it will continue to have a really huge impact on regional economies. The divides and the cracks in the global geopolitical scene are already visible and evident.

We see clear lines. I think much of the world tends to fit into one side or the other in terms of geopolitics. I won't go into that here. What we see in the West is that there has been a slowdown exacerbated by a cost of living rise and according to data that we have been looking at, this is not anything that we should be surprised at. The fact that certain policies were enacted during the pandemics and lockdowns, necessitated a certain market and macro-economic reaction, a reaction in inflationary pressures, supply chain bottlenecks, etc. These consequences were expected and they did indeed transpire to cause pain and hardship to working people everywhere.

On the plus side, we believe there will be slow recovery in the West. This is good as the West is essentially the market for most of the emerging economies in terms of consumption and hence western markets are the world's growth engines. That should not change too much. However, new technology, new values, new ways of doing things in line with sustainability, etc. will shape industries in ways that will both stifle and stimulate growth in the West.

From a regional perspective, countries like India, China, Indonesia, Turkey, South Africa and Brazil, will play a very pivotal role in stimulating and being a catalyst for growth within the regions where they operate. I think these economies may prove more important to smaller emerging and developing economies in the next few years.

**What drives you as a person and business leader?**

Development economics was my passion from the start. As the founder of the RIUNIT 20 years ago, the desire to contribute toward a more just economic system was the critical motivating factor. We want to believe that we can make a contribution as a company. We are not going to change the world alone, but we can push in a certain direction that we would like to see for future generations. I believe this to be what keeps our team going and that's what keeps me going as an individual as well.