



HE President Mahinda Rajapaksa's keynote address at the Commonwealth Local Government Conference 2013

Tuesday 14 May 2013

His Excellency Yoweri Museveni, President of Uganda,

Mayor Lawrence Yule, Chairperson of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum,

Madam Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba, Deputy Secretary-General of the Commonwealth,

Hon Adolf Mwesige, Minister of Local Government of Uganda,

Mr. Carl Wright, Secretary-General, Commonwealth Local Government Forum,

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen.

It is my privilege to address you at this Commonwealth Local Government Conference in the Ugandan capital of Kampala. The selected theme of this Conference "Developmental local government: putting local government at the heart of development" is appropriate and relevant to us all. We in Sri Lanka are proud of our long history and the concept of local government has existed in Sri Lanka from ancient times. The village was the administrative unit of early settlements. I would like to share with you the evolution of local government in my country.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The Great Chronicle, the Mahawamsa, describing the life and times of our people, traces back the local government systems to the reign of King Pandukabhaya in the 4th Century BC, during which period, Anuradhapura was established as the first capital of Sri Lanka. Two systems of local government were put in place to administer the city and the villages.

Coincidentally, it is on a day like this, 28 years ago, on 14th May 1985, that the Sacred Bodhi Tree at Anuradhapura, a place of much veneration for Buddhists, was attacked by terrorists and 134 innocent pilgrims and worshippers massacred. There were no human rights organization objected to this at the time.

A system of village councils or Gam Sabhas had been in operation in the country prior to the colonial era. Its main objective was to administer irrigation and agriculture, the lifeblood of the people.



The success of this system was evident from the complex and elaborate network of irrigation systems put in place by ancient rulers which enabled rice cultivation in the dry zone. Sri Lanka was once known as the Granary of the East because of self-sufficiency in rice.

Architectural evidence of ancient buildings, monasteries and cities, as well as historical records, point to an advanced system of local administration and a productively active economy that existed in ancient Sri Lanka.

In 1818, following the uprising of the people led by the rural leaders against British rule, the Village Council system was abolished. However, it was re-introduced in 1856, by the British perhaps in recognition of its value and effectiveness. Village Councils administered all local affairs, addressed people's grievances.

At a broader and a higher level, the Kachcheri or district administrative system introduced by the British, diffused the centralized authority of the government, throughout the country. A number of legislative changes were introduced in subsequent years, and the administration was transferred to elected representatives. With the granting of Universal Franchise in 1931 elected local bodies were established at municipal, urban, town and village levels.

Sri Lanka has witnessed an evolution of this decentralized system of governance over the years. Successive governments have advocated the strengthening of effective forms of local administration in order to realize the aspirations of the people.

Local government has not only been practical but also effective in taking development directly to the people. Therefore, it is sustainable and helps to reduce poverty and provides a variety of vital public services. I am of the view that a certain level of state intervention is also necessary in order to ensure equitable distribution of the benefits, and social inclusivity.

As you are aware, the terrorist conflict ravaged my country for over three decades and prevented its development, both at rural and urban levels. Local Government was among the first targets of terrorism. The first victim of terror, we recall was the Mayor of Jaffna in the North. I wish to remember here all the local government leaders who were the victims of terror. With the defeat of terrorism in 2009, our first priority was to restore local government. My government has re-focused attention on economic growth and regaining the splendour of the past when my country was known as a "Paradise Isle". The twin pillars of durable peace and political stability have opened doors for Sri Lanka to move forward on accelerated economic and social development.

As a catalyst for our new development paradigm, we have maintained our GDP growth rate at 7 to 8 per cent. My government's policy doctrine "Mahinda Chinthana - a vision for future Sri Lanka" - has infused a new vigour to our development model, particularly in a challenging international economic environment. Today, nearly 80% of the population of Sri Lanka live in villages. Thus, for the success of any development initiative, it is imperative to address the needs of the rural communities.



My vision of a new Sri Lanka is to interface development between cities and villages. We must bring the facilities of the city to the village, and the value system and environment of the village, to the city. This will ensure a livelihood of quality for all Sri Lankans. Sri Lanka's local government system has been the main implementation body, giving effect to this process.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

We have also introduced a national food production drive under the "Divi Neguma" or livelihood development programme to create a self-reliant household economy with the objective of promoting economic growth through agriculture and food production, fisheries and livestock development and by energizing small and medium enterprises with a view to creating a value added economy.

At the village level, the "Gama Neguma" or village development programme... focuses on rural development and poverty alleviation, through the development of infrastructure, including water supply, irrigation, sanitation, public health and education. The key target is to create livelihood support systems and promote community based development, whilst retaining the strengths and features of rural life.

We are also keen to develop our townships, implemented under the "Pura Neguma" programme with the aim of improving small, urban areas in selected local government bodies.

The "Uthuru Wasanthaya" or the Northern Spring and the "Neganahira Navodaya" or the Re-awakening of the East programmes, are success stories we have embarked upon. Through these, we were able to re-construct what had been destroyed as a result of the terrorist conflict and re-settle and re-integrate the displaced into society.

At each stage of this development process, targeted government intervention has been made through a strong local administration system. Creative and innovative measures have been put in place to remove blocks and safeguard the vulnerable. In a decentralized structure, the central government plays an important role in providing the necessary capacity building.

Undoubtedly, proper safeguards must be put in place against corruption. Cumbersome administrative and bureaucratic delays tend to encourage corruption and must be guarded against. Public Private Partnerships can play an invaluable role in raising awareness and in realizing the community's full potential.

There are two other aspects of policy with regard to local government, which we have considered vitally important in our country. The first is related to training. It has been borne out by practical experience that local government institutions can be of real service to the people only if they are manned by officials who are adequately trained and equipped for the tasks assigned to them. We have, therefore, placed considerable emphasis on practical programmes of instruction.



The other aspect, equally important, is that local government institutions must operate within the overall framework of policy determined by the central government. This element of cohesion is absolutely essential to ensure the absence of contradictions and the delivery of substantial benefits to the people.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Youth are the future leaders of a country, and their participation in the development process is essential for the country to move forward. Experience in local governance can be an important learning process in broadening their horizons for upward mobility. They must be provided proper guidance on the need for a culture of rights, good governance and democratic practices. A functioning democracy must nurture leadership qualities at grass-roots level. These are also in agreement with the core values of the Commonwealth.

As a founding member, Sri Lanka maintains steady engagement with the Commonwealth. The vibrancy of this organization is in its rich network of shared resources, experiences and opportunities. Member States can benefit from this pool of resources in helping to strengthen their own local systems of governance, which would enhance the degree of empowerment of people.

In putting to good use the expertise within the Commonwealth, particularly in contemporary times of global economic difficulty, one has to understand that the richness of the Commonwealth derives from the diversity of its Member States. Therefore, their distinct value systems have to be preserved. In such a context, organizations such as the Commonwealth Local Government Forum can play a crucial role in creating a global environment across the Commonwealth for all stakeholders to work together and promote equitable and balanced economic growth.

Sri Lanka's experience with regard to local government, is, I believe, of relevance and value to the themes of this conference in a variety of ways. Our experience demonstrates the vital role of local traditions and culture in moulding the practices of local government institutions. It also highlights the unique significance of the part played by these institutions in sustaining and strengthening the democratic way of life. This is especially so, because democratic governance impacts most directly on the people through these institutions which bring government literally to their doorstep.

It is the elected representatives at the local level who perform a crucial function in keeping alive the people's faith in democracy, because it is they, who have the opportunity of identifying, and responding to the people's needs at the grass-roots level. It is they who form the essential link between the community at large and the organs of the central government. This is why, we in Sri Lanka have consistently regarded local government as the most practical expression of the ideals and aspirations of a functioning democracy.

I understand that at the last Commonwealth Local Governmental Forum in Cardiff, many of these issues of importance to Commonwealth Member States were discussed. I am confident that the thought process evolving from Cardiff will be progressively developed during the present Conference.



As part of Sri Lanka's engagement with the Commonwealth, my Government hosted the Asian Regional High Level Commonwealth Symposium in April last year, which focused on inclusive and pro-poor local development strategies through which all citizens in urban and rural areas would benefit. We are currently discussing a programme of partnership to be launched Next month, to strengthen local government to support the implementation of our national policy.

Your Excellencies will be happy to hear that my Government is actively considering some of these elements, essential for local development as core themes of the Colombo CHOGM. Growth with equity, inclusive development, youth and local entrepreneurship are some of the ideas being considered. As Chair in Office thereafter, Sri Lanka will actively work towards taking these ideas forward.

I wish you all a successful and productive conference.

May the noble Triple Gem Bless you all.