



PEOPLE'S ENTHUSIASM MADE US GO FORWARD

The Address of the
Hon. R. Premadasa,
Prime Minister of Sri Lanka
at the International Housing
Awards Ceremony held
under the auspices of the
Building and Social Housing
Foundation of the United
Kingdom at Princess Anne
Theatre, London,
3rd October 1988

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*Your Grace—Lord Archbishop of Canterbury,
Distinguished Guests,*

I accept the International Housing Award of the Building and Social Housing Foundation. I do so with deep humility and profound gratitude. I am particularly happy to have received this Award today. Today is World Habitat Day. Last year on Habitat Day I had the privilege of presenting the 1987 Awards at the United Nations. This year receiving this Award for Sri Lanka, in the United Kingdom is of special significance. It is this great country that provided Sri Lanka with housing assistance long before the other donors came into the scene.

I would like you to share with me the wisdom of the Great Teacher Lord Buddha on the subject of shelter. The Lord Buddha said:—

“He who gives food is a giver of strength
He who gives clothing is a giver of complexion
He who gives a mode of conveyance is a giver
of comfort
He who gives light is a giver of sight
He indeed is a giver of all whosoever gives a
place to dwell.”

The selection of the Million Houses Programme of Sri Lanka for this Award has special meaning. The Million Houses Programme is Sri Lanka's contribution to the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. You have honoured my country and

location, size, design and timeframes are made by families who will occupy the homes they build. It is our belief that democracy demands decision-making. Democracy calls for the acceptance of responsibility by the common citizen. Wisdom is not the monopoly of the powerful, the educated, or the knowledgeable. Our motive is minimum intervention by the state and maximum participation by the people.

The Sri Lankan programme does provide a role for the government. The development of financial incentives and packages and the supportive technical structure are of paramount importance.

The provision of public amenities, the supply of technical personnel and the removal of legal impediments also need priority attention. The Ministries involved also have another critical function. That function is the creation of an atmosphere conducive to innovation and psychological mobilization. Yet, if we are to foster the spirit of entrepreneurship, we have to understand the limitations of government involvement. After all, the end-user is the best judge of what he wants.

The notion of ownership is another central theme in Sri Lanka's strategy. It is a powerful incentive. When effort is rewarded with title, there are no limits to the personal initiatives that move men. With it goes liberation from the scourge of the rental society—the threat of eviction. With it

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comes pride of ownership and interest in maintenance.

At the very onset of our efforts we determined three vital guidelines. First, we seek no major foreign aid to support our housing construction efforts. Second, we rely on local technology to the maximum. Foreign aid and foreign technology have their place. They are, however, no substitute for local skills. And the best capital investment is the labour of the house builder. A third guideline is the encouragement of exponential development through housing. The rapid growth of local centres of culture, commerce, education and social service are the frequent by-products of our programmes.

The touchstone of our ideas is the results we accomplish. When our government was elected in 1977, we were confronted with a sadly inadequate housing situation. Population growth, attrition of existing stock, the absence of a long term shelter policy, and the higher aspirations of our citizens created a situation which left us with a negative housing balance.

We had to take emergency action. Our immediate strategy was to create one hundred thousand homes as soon as possible. The target for completion was six years. We not only achieved this goal, we exceeded it by a further 53,000 housing units. The beneficiaries were primarily the poor. The enthusiasm was nationwide. The lessons we learned were basic to our next stage of growth. The idea of housing as a new organizing principle

in our development efforts began to gather momentum.

In 1984, we launched our One Million Houses Programme. The purpose of this effort was to build and rebuild the shelter infrastructure of Sri Lanka. By the end of 1989, we should complete the construction of one million new houses. Now, our housing stock is gaining on population growth. Quality and quantity go together.

Perhaps the core of our experience is that it has been vigorously implemented in conditions conventionally associated with duress. Foreign aid is scarce. International terrorism, encouraged and afflicted on us from outside our borders, makes life difficult. Escalating inflation escalates costs. Yet, the enthusiasm of our people has enabled us to go forward. It is this spirit of enthusiasm which you have recognized today through your Award.

I have dwelt on the Sri Lanka experience at some length. Moreover, I believe, our programmes have some relevance for other developing nations – states whose commitment to development is no less total than our own. It is to this larger framework for development that I now turn.

The development enterprise is the lifeblood of poorer nations. It is the hope of most people in the world. The International Year of Shelter for the Homeless demonstrated the viability of housing as a vital and vitalizing new force for development. To the Developing Countries the acceptability of

this strategy was universal. The combination of effectiveness and receptivity provides an irresistible logic. It is a logic which suggests that a New International Spatial Order is a development idea whose time has come.

A New International Spatial Order will be a massive effort for social justice and development. It will establish priorities for housing and living space. If properly coordinated and monitored by and through the United Nations, this effort can provide the vital thrust for development. It could link the inadequacies of the present with the delivery of decent living conditions to the global masses.

Such a New International Spatial Order will have a transcending impact on human values and aspirations. It will infuse new life into the most primary of all human organizations – the family. It can provide and stimulate a multitude of other development activities. It can bring hope to those who live in the poorest regions of our planet.

The International Year of Shelter is now over. But, a great deal remains to be done. The development process has to be made more relevant, especially in the area of shelter. In the less affluent regions of the world at least 100 million people are without homes. Hundreds of millions of others occupy dwellings that are inadequate by any standard of decency. If we fail to serve these needs the entire development effort stands indicted. In that sense, the International Year must not end. It must be the beginning of a whole new approach.

As we face our future we must have institutions to match our visions. At several international forums, during the past year, I made five proposals that will make the spirit of the International Year endure. First, I proposed that we target a global objective of shelter for all by the year 2000. Second, I called for the establishment of an international credit institution specifically for global housing – a World Housing and Shelter Bank. My third proposal urged the commencement of a network of Regional Research Groups on Settlement Policies, Technology Sharing, and Shelter Education. Fourthly, I have emphasized the need for the creation of an international pledging system where nations will make specific commitments to accelerate the building of shelters.

My fifth and final proposal called for the establishment of a specialized international agency. Perhaps this could be within the United Nations system. It's objective is the promotion of shelter. It's approach should be non-political and non-partisan. It should involve substantial participation from non-governmental organizations and even commercial interests. This institution could truly be a global parliament for housing, as well as a coordinating and implementing agency.

For us in Sri Lanka shelter is both a material and a moral activity. The moral component of development has been sadly neglected. Unless we make it a noble crusade we will not fulfil the message and the injunctions of all the great faiths of history. Almost without exception, they extolled

care of the poor, shelter for the homeless, and development of the full human being. The great faiths, also with much unanimity, advocate peace on earth.

The future of mankind hinges on many imponderables. Most critical among them is a great struggle between the forces of creativity and the forces of destruction – and the battlefield is human destiny. If the trend of the past prevails, the human prospect will be one of gloom, if not doom. Modern technology, without tested wisdom will make it a reality sooner or later.

However, if we can draw on the wisdom of the past and adapt it for our age, new forces of creativity can be unleashed. We do not need massive techno-projects and huge capital investments to do this. Little people in little ways, sustained by moral purpose, can achieve much more. They can bring an enrichment to the quality of life of ordinary men and women everywhere. That is the true purpose of development.

It is with these reflections in our minds that we in Sri Lanka launched on our development adventure. We have accomplished much. Yet, much lies ahead. Occasionally, the journeyman tires and falters. Sometimes troubles and pains are inflicted from unexpected quarters – making them all the more painful. Progress is disrupted. The pace of advancement slows. The spirit needs refreshment. At such moments, the Award you have so graciously bestowed today will encourage the

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people of Sri Lanka. That is why I thank you not only for myself, but also in the name of the poor and underprivileged of my country. It is their commitment that has earned Your Award.

I Thank you.

M. Chandana

