



'The will to
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*Address of The Hon. R. Premadasa,
Prime Minister of Sri Lanka at the
Inauguration of The Second Congress
of Local Authorities for Development
of Human Settlements in Asia and the
Pacific, Nagoya, Japan - 21st July, 1987.*

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*Mr. Chairman,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen*

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I welcome this opportunity to inaugurate the 2nd Congress of Local Authorities for Development of Human Settlements in Asia and the Pacific. In doing so, allow me to thank the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and the City of Nagoya, for their joint sponsorship of this distinguished gathering. The contribution of ESCAP to the development of our region is well known. The historic city of Nagoya, now almost four centuries old, has shown how urban renewal can blossom out of destruction. It is appropriate that these two entities, ESCAP and Nagoya City, join together in hosting this Congress. They deserve our grateful thanks.

Since your last Congress in Yokohama in 1982, the global political and social environment has changed significantly. All of us who have a special interest in local government are encouraged by a worldwide trend towards decentralization. About a century ago, the growth of modern communications and the expansion of the powers of the modern state began. Centralization in political administration became fashionable. Many newer nations, liberated from colonialism after World War II, adopted this same system. Increasingly, we are now realizing that administrative centralization is an idea whose time has lapsed. It is an idea whose results have been unsatisfactory.

Around the world, many political and ideological systems have come to this conclusion. Call it what you will—devolution, divestment, regionalism, localism—this is the age of decentralization. Such recognition is

greatly satisfying to those of us who believe that authority is best vested in people. Of course, it imposes new responsibilities on those of us involved in local government. In Asia and the Pacific, many of us are among the first generation to experience this. It is by our performance and by our results, that the concept of decentralization will be judged in our time.

Decentralization coupled with the transfer of power to the people at grassroots level has many advantages. In Sri Lanka, we are gradually moving towards the establishment of a total system of decentralised administration. I am happy to say that the 4,400 Gramodaya Mandalayas (grassroots level people's organisations) have rendered yeoman service. They have major achievements in fields of Shelter, Primary Health Care and the All-Island Home Garden Programme. Encouraged by this 250 or more elected Pradeshiya Sabhas or Grama Rajyas (Divisional level mini Parliaments) will be established shortly. The Gramodaya Mandalayas will continue to service and support the Pradeshiya Sabhas. All this is an example of what decentralization can do.

I would like to remind you of what the British Economist E. F. Schumacher said about development. He said that development starts with the people and their education, organization, and discipline. If we are to achieve our development objectives, we must take the people into our confidence and give them confidence. The decision making process has to be transferred from the centre to the periphery. It is important that we broaden the base of the political structure. In this way, more and more people can participate in government. This is the only way in which a "top down" process can be reversed to a "bottom up" process.

Mr. Chairman,

Among the most critical areas in which we local administrators will be evaluated is human settlements. This is rightly so. The condition of human settlements in our world is dismal. In the less affluent areas, at least 100 million people are without homes. As you well know, countless others, several times this number, reside in sub-standard dwellings. This is tragically true in both rural and urban areas of the Third World. It is often true in other regions.

In our part of the world, almost 80 percent of the population live in rural areas. The burdens of their life are increased by the poor quality of their dwellings. However, in many ways, the existence of those people who live in cities is even more unsupportable. About one-quarter to one-half of all city dwellers in our region live in illegal settlements. This means that they are usually without publicly provided basic services—services such as water supply, sewage and drainage systems, garbage removal, electricity and the like. That people continue in these conditions is a shameful indictment of the social organization and administrative structures in which they live.

The problem is as much one of structures as of resources. This is why HABITAT—the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements—recommended “National governments promote programmes that will encourage and assist local authorities to participate to a greater extent in national development.” It is now eleven years after HABITAT. We are witnessing the slow realization of that mandate.

A critical part of this process involves the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. In 1980, the 35th General Assembly of the United Nations

adopted a Sri Lankan proposal for a special year for this purpose. During the past several months, we have been celebrating this year. The International Year has received wide support across ideological and political barriers.

However, the concept of the International Year will be sterile if it does not embrace two considerations—a strengthening of grassroots organizations and longer-range continuity. Allow me to say a word about each. National governments, by their nature, are somewhat removed from local concerns. It is local government which can and should attend to these primary matters. Local government means the involvement of people at a very basic level. This type of motivation is inspired by people who can see and meet those in authority, can participate in the affairs of the community, and can benefit from the results of self-help. I am convinced that there is no other way to initiate large-scale social action in the modern world. This, indeed, is a fundamental message of the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless.

Distinguished Participants,

The Year of Shelter must not terminate at the end of 1987. If we are to obtain maximum benefits from the enthusiasm generated recently, we must develop programmes and institutions of a lasting nature. This is why I have made five specific proposals to the United Nations Commission on Human Settlements.

In brief, these are:

- First, the extension of the IYSH to a Programme for the provision of shelter for all by the Year 2000.
- Second, the initiation of Regional Research groups on Settlements, Technology and Education.

- Third, the creation of an independent international credit institution— global housing and shelter bank.
- Fourth, the commencement of an international pledging system to accelerate settlement building, develop long-range forecasts and strategies, and create a sense of international accountability.
- Fifth, the establishment of a specialized agency or international institution within the United Nations System to promote shelter and allied activities.

These proposals have important implications for local authorities. Their purpose is largely to support grassroots efforts in housing and allied areas. The international shelter effort is currently somewhat fragmented. If it becomes more cohesive, it can have a much greater impact on the work of local authorities – an impact which will reach into the community. Local and global programmes can thus be effectively integrated. This is why I hope that all of you and the institutions you represent will involve yourselves in the International Year and its continuing outcome.

All of us in the Asian and Pacific region are committed to the concept of development. Some of us, such as our host country, have done exceptionally well. Others are still making their way through this complex process. In these efforts, we have used a variety of strategies and programmes. We have used industrial development policies, agricultural advancement programmes, social change strategies, basic needs approaches, and many other plans and efforts. Most of these plans have had worthy goals. Some have achieved certain gains.

However, it is a sad but inescapable fact that the condition of our people requires much more improvement. I believe that this reflects the changing

context of development. It underscores the need for a new approach to this task. It is now increasingly evident that shelter can become a new organizing principle through which a renewed development effort can be created. This is an effort in which local authorities, community groups, and individuals at the grassroots level can give leadership and see immediate results.

Last week, in addressing the International Union of Architects in Britain, I called for a New International Spatial Order. This order envisions a massive effort for social justice and development through priority for housing and living space. Such a programme will have a tremendous impact on our values and aspirations. It can give new spirit to that old and central institution called the family which is so important for our societies in this part of the world. It can provide a multitude of other development channels. It will also reduce the need for large inputs of foreign resources. Above all, a New International Spatial Order envisages local authorities as essential implementing agencies – a function for which they are best suited.

These sentiments about the effectiveness of local government as instruments of development are not theoretical. They are founded on the Sri Lankan experience of the past decade. It is an experience which gave those engaged in it fresh insights into the development process.

When our Government was elected to office in 1977, Sri Lanka faced a critically inadequate housing situation. This situation would have brought social chaos if it had continued. Something had to be done immediately.

In 1978, we began building. Our target of one hundred thousand houses was to be achieved in six years. However, by 1983, we had exceeded our goal by fifty three thousand housing units. In 1984, we launched the One Million Houses Programme. Today, its outreach extends to ten thousand of the twenty five thousand villages in our country and forty nine of our fifty one urban areas. I am happy to inform you that our target of one million houses will be achieved by 1989. Sri Lanka is now one of the few nations in which the growth of housing stock has exceeded population growth.

Mr. Chairman,

This is not a miracle. It has been achieved by two strategies – the strategy of self-help and the strategy of linking local government to development. In the first instance, we focused on involving the family in planning and construction of new homes. They made decisions. They selected alternatives. We have used modest housing loans to underwrite this programme. But the key ingredient of mobilization has been ownership. Each family was guaranteed ownership of the house they built. This unleashed an amazing creative energy. Today, we have reduced the cost of an average family dwelling to US \$ 210 in rural areas and US \$ 325 in cities. Very little foreign aid has been required for these efforts.

Another feature of our efforts has been the reduced role of government intervention. The involvement of the state has been limited to support and instruction – minimum intervention with maximum assistance. This approach has allowed innovation to flower. It has reduced the bureaucratic tyranny which discourages those who have to deal with government.

Little of this would have been possible if we had not decentralized administration. All important governmental decisions, and there are still several to be made, are the functions of local authorities. They organize programmes, select beneficiaries, administer loans, collect recoveries, and channel resources. We have found that this approach revitalizes local government. It creates a new confidence between family, community, and administration. The strategy that began as an experiment has come to stay – not because it was imposed, but because the people wanted it. It has produced results.

Allow me to reinforce these observations with a few examples from our own experiences in the One Million Houses Programme in Sri Lanka. I would like to reflect on three important processes: How the human being was put at the centre of the process of change – how housing was made a central organising principle of development – and how shelter became a people's movement.

Firstly, by putting the human being at the centre of the change process, we have made many gains. When the human being is made the primary resource, latent creativity and energies are released from within. Capital, technology, skills, and finance become secondary considerations. In fact, the will to build supersedes all other considerations. Let us not forget that most of our peoples are continuously engaged in a struggle to survive. At the same time, let us recognize that they are capable of taking initiatives. In our shelter strategy, we unleashed and realized this capacity. We gave initiative the necessary backing. The end result is that the state intervenes minimally while the people participate maximally.

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Secondly, housing is now being recognized as a central organizing principle of development. Housing has become a catalyst as well as a stimulus for all our basic needs and development efforts. It contributes to production, employment, development of skills, improved health and sanitation, moral and spiritual development. It has also contributed to the provision of improved infrastructure, such as roads, electricity, water supply and communal facilities. Compared with other approaches, this development cost is substantially lower.

Thirdly, housing has become a people's movement. The family takes all the decisions regarding design and building. The family assumes full responsibility for production as well. By offering a land and some assistance to build, the people have been given a stake in life. They have a vested interest in the democratic and free market systems, which we believe in.

There is, if you will forgive me, some patriotic pride in these accomplishments. However, we have yet a lot to learn. That learning experience can be enhanced by international exchanges of the type your Congress is engaged in here. Allow me to suggest that the work of this Congress must not terminate when we part. Let us develop contact committees that can further our exchanges on a continuing level.

In that context, non-governmental organizations, many of which are represented here, have a vital role to play. They are the conscience of development. All those engaged in the task of government need such correctives. And so, we must encourage their constructive involvement. I hope that there will someday be a NGO international forum on human settlements so that we can obtain another perspective on our efforts.

Human settlements are a developmental issue. They are also, most importantly, a moral issue. Housing and shelter is the birthright of people – an investment in humankind that is a fundamental entitlement of every citizen. As a commitment, it is not enough to write it into legal documents and national charters. It must be enshrined in the human heart.

Mr. Chairman,

I am a political child of local government. It is in municipal politics that I first became acquainted with public service some 40 years ago. Since those distant days, I have also held the office of Minister of Local Government twice. I know that while the great issues of state are debated at national levels, matters of individual human concern find their resonance in local politics. It is here that personal joys and sorrows, aspirations and expectations, are enacted. It is here that the drama of life finds its fullest expression, as those of us with local government experience understand.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Participants,

The religious and philosophic tradition of both Sri Lanka and our host country Japan, is nourished by the wisdom of Buddhism. The message of Lord Buddha enjoins us to practice the ethic of compassion and loving kindness, of Ahimsa and Metta. Here is a concept of personal faith and public service that enriches all of us who engage in community action. And this, I know, is what inspires many of you here today. It is in this spirit that I wish your Congress every success.

I thank you.





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