

Mailvaganam Memorial Oration – 2012

2012 lecture was delivered by

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Sustainable Development - Is Sri Lanka on the right path?

Date: November 23rd, 2012

Venue: Physics Conference Room (PCR), Department of Physics, University of Colombo.

Summary:

The concept of sustainable development (SD) has received global attention over the last four decades and several international summit conferences were held to discuss agendas, action plans, goals and finances for achieving SD. Almost all nations have committed to take both policy measures and actions that would help them to achieve SD, and this includes Sri Lanka too. In compliance with agreements made at these summit conferences, Sri Lanka has established a high level council on SD headed by the President and with the ministers covering all developmental activities serving as members. The Ministry of Environment has been entrusted with the task of coordinating the council's activities and has produced several action plans.

The global summit conference on SD held in Rio de Janeiro in June this year, that is after 20 years from the first Earth Summit meeting held at the same venue in 1992, had in its agenda the development of a set of Sustainable Development Goals. The conference, however, failed to reach consensus on them and the task of completing the exercise was entrusted to a 30 member open working group who is expected to submit its report to the UN General Assembly by September 2013. During the deliberations, a number of developmental themes were highlighted and in this oration some selected themes will be discussed in view of the limited time. The themes that are considered are Poverty Eradication, Food Security, Water Resources, Sustainable Energy, Climate Change and Sustainable Peace. The extent to which various measures taken by policy makers in the country have fallen in line within the path for SD will be examined.

Poverty eradication, food security, water resources and land degradation are all interlinked. The poor majority cannot make a living if they do not possess any land, and even if they possess land, they are unable to cultivate them if there is no water on time. The limited water that is available needs to be shared between irrigating croplands and generating energy. The anticipated climate change could change the entire scenario in the future for better or worse.

Sri Lanka's high population and limited land extent imposes severe restrictions in its development agenda. There is a need to shift from food imports to local production to ensure poverty eradication and food security. The consumption of water needs to be rationalized eliminating waste. Electricity generation plan needs to be reconsidered to include low carbon fossil fuels in place of high carbon fuels as currently envisaged. Higher incentives need to be granted for investments on renewable energy to reduce dependence on fossil fuels. Advanced technologies need to be introduced in the utilization of biomass to improve combustion efficiency.

Early action is also essential in implementing the reconciliation process and devolution to ensure sustainable peace which is a pre-requisite for sustainable development.