



# INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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**P**rof. Michael Warren, Director, Centre for Indigenous Knowledge for Agricultural & Rural Development which is popularly known by AGROCIKARD, Mr. W.B. Dolekumbura, Vice Chancellor, University of Sri Jayawardenapura, Rohan Ulluwishewa distinguished Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen.

Having listened to an overview that was given by Vice Chancellor and a penetrating speech by Prof. Rohana Ulluwishewa, I find my task very formidable. Being a Minister who is generally invited to various types of symposia, on various subject matters, this task has been a challenge to me, and rather it has been a strain on me because I have to prepare my self for any kind of speech that has to be delivered to an allied audience, and therefore, these invitations keep me going.

when I was invited to be the Chief Guest of the Symposium on Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable Development, I was puzzled whether I would have that kind of knowledge to stand up before this podium. However, I took it as a challenge and I wish to make contribution to stock of knowledge that is existing in regard to indigenous knowledge and sustainable development. On this subject I am glad to be associated with Prof. Michael Warren, Director, Centre for Indigenous Knowledge for Agricultural & Rural Development, the person who created the Centre I presume in October 1987, who made a pioneer contribution to indigenous knowledge and who is acknowledged as an authority on this subject matter. I have seen some lectures on the occasion of the inauguration of CIKARD including a lecture by an economist from the University of Leden in Netherlands, who spoke on Ethno Systems as an integral part of indigenous knowledge and ethno system, ethnic based knowledge put into a system as against cosmopolitan system or cosmos system. He tried to develop this ethno system into a ethno science.

Although the Ministry of Environment & parliamentary Affairs launched a series of programmes to commemorate the International Year for the World's Indigenous People, your symposium on indigenous knowledge and sustainable development go well beyond the frontiers of our scope. We were concerned to preserve and develop the traditions and practices of the indigenous people. But you have selected indigenous knowledge to encompass many and diverse areas of activity such as resource use, medicine, science and development, agricultural tradition and education, farming, traditional food plants, treat crop practices, health, animal production, irrigation systems, water use practices, inland fisheries, food preservation, painting and food processing. All these subject matters were taken from your agenda today, and therefore, I should say that the deliberations of this symposium will help us to construct a set of indigenous knowledge that would be compatible with the norms of sustainable development.

I will cite an example from Economics that knowledge has to be built up or improved with a considerable amount of research and development, and also with a considerable amount of cost. For example there are many economic theories that have been expounded on the basis of some assumptions. Some variables are given. Even the usual demand and supply curve are drawn on the basis of a number of assumptions. Some variables are given. Even usual demand and supply curve are drawn on the basis of a number assumptions. The Canesian Economist too bypass the inclusion of innovation. He had a short-term analy-

sis and Canes himself said that in the long run, we all are dead, and therefore innovation to me, this is my own interpretation. Later I found in the papers on indigenous Knowledge, that innovation has been considered as an internal part of Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable development. Innovation - can be product innovation or process innovation - is connected with knowledge. It may not be in a black-box. I have called it a technological black-box. Therefore new knowledge has to be created. I am glad that there is a Sri Lanka Resource Centre for Indigenous knowledge studies at the University of Sri Jayawardenapura. To me knowledge it is a dynamic concept. It is not a static one. It keeps on changing. Knowledge should be adaptable, flexible and useful. Indigenous knowledge is somewhat stationary although tested through ages. I know Prof. Warren will not agree with me when I say that indigenous knowledge is somewhat stationary because I have seen in his writings that he has described indigenous knowledge as dynamic and living. But with the sophisticated development of science and technology and diffusion of technological innovations, the knowledge or rather the indigenous knowledge takes a new phase. Therefore knowledge has to be sustainable too. So indigenous knowledge is connected with sustainable development. Therefore it has to be interpreted in terms of sustainable development and also in terms of Research & Development. So, we are making an original approach to indigenous knowledge which is a step towards documentation of indigenous knowledge in various important aspects. There are two views on this subject matter, this is again my interpretation. One is how to make use of modern and growing knowledge without impairing susceptibility.

Prof. Ulluwishewa, in his absence, indicated that modern Knowledge need not be rejected and at the same time we argue that indigenous knowledge may be useful and therefore he argued the case for a combination of both, if possible to the welfare of the country. The other issue is how to adopt indigenous knowledge to the present production process. Let us see what indigenous knowledge is. Prof. Ulluwishewa of course defined what is indigenous knowledge. As local knowledge, a knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. This knowledge is the information base for society. Indigenous knowledge as I indicated before, according to Dr. Warren, is dynamic. It changes through indigenous creativity and innovativeness as well as through contact with other knowledge systems. If that be the case, indigenous knowledge is useful. We do not have to be exceedingly nostalgic about indigenous knowledge, but at the same time we need not be suspicious about it, thinking indigenous knowledge is out of date or rather historically dogmatic.

The present challenge is as to how we could appropriately make use of indigenous knowledge for attainment of our modern social and economic goal. Indigenous knowledge systems, may be according to Dr. Warren, those dealing with natural and physical environment; those dealing with the social environment. In other words, indigenous knowledge systems may deal with a host of subject matters. What is important that they are adopted to local, cul-

tural and environmental conditions. They are also useful for solving agricultural and environmental problems. First in my opinion we should properly understand what indigenous knowledge means, its nature and practices, before we pass judgement on indigenous knowledge. This indigenous knowledge may again vary from time to time. Indigenous knowledge is rarely documented, those passed down from generation to generation. Before analysis or adaptation or rather adoption, we document indigenous knowledge and preserve it. How much indigenous knowledge that has been lost with the passage of time cannot be ascertained.

Prof. Ulluwishewa in his speech maintained a few factors that may have contributed to the death of using traditional indigenous knowledge, including the death of old aged people resulting in the loss of indigenous knowledge. I was thinking of myself as to how this indigenous knowledge has been lost and what the reasons were. One is non-availability after some time. Most indigenous knowledge has traditionally passed down by word of mouth. The lack of usefulness in respect of complex and problems surfacing later in the society. The fiction with modern, technical and technological knowledge which is more result-based and apparently more rewarding and more easy to use. There are other reasons that I can imagine, I have been jotting down one by one, in order to get myself organised on to the reasons that have led to the dissipation of indigenous knowledge such as conscious and unconscious overlooking. The unknown character of it, less preservation or monopolisation. In Sinhala we can use the word "Sinhala" monopolisation and you will not pass it down, not all that knowledge is passed down. Indigenous Medicine or Ayurvedic Medicine are dying today either because they are not passed down from one generation to another either they are not released to the next generation. Because of the type of "monopoly" some people have; and also the decline the number of persons preserving indigenous knowledge and passing them on. The less and reduced participation in the process of dissemination of indigenous knowledge, the nature of effectiveness or less effectiveness of indigenous knowledge to deal with some emerging new problems and situation, the nature of its unorganised character, failure to conceptualise various ideas of indigenous knowledge, use or overuse of modern knowledge in preference to indigenous knowledge.

A tendency of the present generation to attach more value to modern knowledge may be due to wrong value judgement or may be due to the reason that they are unfamiliar with indigenous knowledge or may be due to the reason that they are comfortable and easy with modern knowledge than the knowledge that prevailed in the past.

Many research studies have been done. After that I came to know of these research studies even on the initiative of Dr. Warren by the IOVA University of the USA, and whilst entering this Auditorium I saw a book there containing 25 papers under the title "Indigenous Knowledge & Sustainable Development"....