

COLLECTIVE ECOLOGICAL AGRICULTURE, A SOLUTION TO FOOD CRISIS

Excerpts from the
**Dr. N. M. Perera Memorial
Oration – 2022**
by Dr. C. M. Wijayaratne

When the people of Sri Lanka are badly hit by the economic crisis and the pandemic another blow is predicted. This is a severe food crisis. Already the food price rise has affected the people leading to cutting the food intake of the majority of the people drastically. About half the population manages with one meal a day and the malnutrition rate has gone up to about 20%. Thus beside the immediate problem of hunger, the future generations too will be badly affected. Long standing dependence on chemical fertilizer and imported seed varieties together with the use of modern equipment, dependent on foreign fuel supply, has hit the farmer badly. The prediction is that this year the Yala crop will be reduced by more than half. This situation has also affected other third world countries.

A similar food crisis accompanied the severe economic crisis of 1972. For instance, at that time when we were more dependent on imports than now, the magnitude of the food crisis led to the importation of a ton of sugar, which was around £ 40, to rise to £600. Dr. N.M. Perera as the Minister of Finance informed the people of the magnitude of the crisis and assured the people that he would take necessary action to emerge from the crisis. The Foreign Exchange Reserve had dropped to USD 1.3 billion and the availability of dollars to buy the bulk of our food requirements from abroad became impossible. On his insistence imports of all non-essentials were banned. This reduced the drain of the dollars, so that the required food and other essentials could be imported. With the support of the Minister of Agriculture, Hector Kobbekaduwa, an intensive grow more food campaign was launched and it received the enthusiastic cooperation of the entire society. Dr. N.M. Perera raised the allocation for Science and Technology to promote value added industries making



Dr. N.M. Perera

use of local raw materials, under the leadership of T.B. Subasinghe, the Minister of Industries.

ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Dr. N.M. Perera placed the burden of the economic recovery on the rich and spared the poor. He did this by raising the tax maximum to 75% and spared the poor by not having indirect taxation like VAT. The BTT indirect tax was also directed to the higher income companies. The Government promoted producer cooperatives as well as consumer cooperatives and the left inclined population saw to it that the cooperative movement functioned efficiently and was free of corruption. Direct communication between the two eliminated the huge profits that are being made by the middlemen and traders today. In addition the Marketing and the Food Control Departments were activated and they also helped to provide a mobile service to link the producer and the consumer.

Little donor assistance was received from abroad. By 1974/75 the Foreign Reserve had gone up to USD 3.5 billion and the economy became stable with no budget deficit in 1974 and a budget surplus in 1975. In recognition of the yeoman service done by Dr. N.M. Perera and the LSSP (Lanka Sama Samaja Party) the reward was the forcing out of Dr. N.M. Perera

from the post of Finance Minister and the kicking out of the LSSP. This was because the "International Community" led by the USA, Britain and other foreign imperialist powers, stated that they were prepared to invest in Sri Lanka now that the economy was stable. The Communist Party left the coalition in 1976. You may wonder why the imperialist powers insisted on the ejection of the LSSP and Dr. N.M. Perera as a condition for their investing in Sri Lanka. One was the nationalization of the plantations and the key sectors of the economy, thereby putting an end to much of the direct exploitation of our economy and people. The other main reason was the implementation of the Senaka Bibile Medicinal Drug Policy.

The latter by calling for international tenders by the State Pharmaceutical Corporation (SPC), which Senaka had set up, the whole island's requirement of medicine, was obtained at a low price. The bulk purchase of such a large quantity led to the medicinal drug mafia (the multinational corporations) having to cut their profits to a large extent. For instance the Roche Company of Switzerland, the producer of the sedative Valium (their trade name for the generic product diazepam) was forced to drop their selling price from 92 cents per tablet to 52 cents. The Ranbaxy Company of India tendered to sell it for only 2 cents.

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When we confirmed that this product had received a certificate of good manufacturing practice the decision was taken to test it here and, as it proved effective, it was ordered in bulk by the SPC from Ranbaxy. The Roche Company lost 90 cents while it became possible to use that 90 cents to obtain other medicines for our patients. Not surprisingly the LSSP is

hated by the capitalist class both here and abroad.

DEPENDENCY ON FOREIGN INPUTS

The scarcity and high prices for food today in Sri Lanka is not due to a global drought. It is due to bungling in decision making and the dependence on agriculture based on foreign inputs, like chemical fertilizer, weedicides, pesticides and the use of imported seed varieties that are dependent on them. There are many companies and persons that make a huge profit out of this system of agriculture.

Both the farmers and the consumers are exploited by the producers and dealers who employ these foreign inputs. The suggestion that we should turn towards organic farming based on a totally different system using local resources has been ridiculed by the profiteers. Unfortunately many Sri Lankan scientists and researchers who have been trained abroad also support this point of view. We are at this moment transforming agriculture on the basis of this concept of "collective ecological agriculture" as a solution to dependence on foreign inputs throughout many third world countries in South and East Asia, and Africa. For instance in Pakistan this project covers an area larger than Sri Lanka and in India he is operating in several different States and also in countries like Vietnam and Sudan.

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Grow your own food to ease economic burden