

On A Quest To Serve The Grassroots By Ushering In Water Security And Livelihood Development

Minister of Irrigation, State Minister of National Security and Disaster Management, and the State Minister of Home Affairs, Chamal Rajapaksa, is first and foremost a man from Hambantota. Hambantota is his home and that of his paternal clan that led anti-imperialist and progressive movements and worked for the cause of the peasants of Ruhuna. Having grown up in the harsh and arid landscape of Hambantota, Minister Chamal's mission as a people's representative for over 30 years has been to transform the district and the lives of its people through irrigation development. It all began in the 1990s with the Hambantota Irrigation Rehabilitation Project, resulting in the watershed Mau Ara Reservoir Project and the Malala Oya Basin Development Scheme. As the Minister of Irrigation, he believes in the close connection between the village tank, the people, and livelihoods. The 'Wari Saubhagya' national program to rehabilitate tanks in the country aims to establish a nexus between water and agriculture production to mitigate rural poverty by augmenting production and livelihoods. The long-term mission of this wide-ranging program is to ensure food security and a thriving food culture based on safe farming

practices.

By Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane. **Photography** Menaka Aravinda.



As the Minister for Irrigation, the ‘Wari Saubhagya’ national program to rehabilitate 5000 tanks in all districts has been touted as contributing to the President’s Vistas of Prosperity policy document and the objectives of the Presidential Taskforce on Economic Revival and Poverty Eradication. Can you tell us how the Wari Saubhagya project will be aligned with the more extensive national program of the President?

The main objective of the ‘Wari Saubhagya’ program launched in line with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s ‘Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour’ policy framework is to renovate existing reservoirs and anicuts in the country. The program will use scientific methods to retain more water to facilitate livelihoods through water

provision for cultivation and consumption. There are 48,000 villages in Sri Lanka, consisting of 14,002 Grama Seva divisions. Every village in Sri Lanka is home to many minor irrigation systems that we call small lakes, which are very old. When we studied the network of tanks in the country, they ranged from tanks maintained by a few individuals or a single individual to tanks that the Department of Agrarian Development manages. Unfortunately, there has not been a wide-ranging program to rehabilitate these extensive networks of small lakes in the villages, except a few for a year, probably rehabilitating around 15 lakes annually.

Most rehabilitation works lacked coordination among agencies. They were conducted primarily in a disjointed manner. For instance, the main Department of Irrigation repairs some tanks. The Irrigation Department in the provincial councils restored some others, which were small-scale. But, with time, all those lakes went into a state of neglect. Most of them end up covered in moss. In some instances, people had encroached land where there used to be lakes, filled them, and made illegal constructions. Hence, tanks fall into neglect mainly due to the lack of state patronage. The second is the carelessness of the farmers using the tank. The result is that the tanks and their surrounding nature reserve get harmed. Understanding that the foundation to strengthening agriculture in this country is by creating an efficient irrigation system, the President invited the Ministry of Irrigation to rehabilitate the extensive network of tanks in the country.

The first step in this project was to invite the different agencies responsible for irrigation. Then, we identified the tanks and surveyed them with the assistance of the Surveyor General’s office to determine their borders. Technical officers at the provincial council irrigation development departments provided a technical report on the rehabilitation required for those tanks. We plan to implement this national program district-wise, covering all divisional secretariats according to a timeline with the assistance of State institutions. The machinery and equipment belonging to the armed forces and members of the civil defense force will help expedite the process. We also intended to go into the villages and secure community involvement from farmers’ organizations and voluntary organizations with the advice and supervision of a technical committee to clean those small lakes. Stakeholder involvement strategy saves money for the government. In addition, the Ministry chose various industries to distribute the dugout lake residue, such as mud for organic fertilizer for farmers, sand for the construction industry, and mud for the pottery industry.

We have developed a comprehensive plan to rehabilitate and restore 5,000 lakes

spread in 48,000 villages. They are set for completion in five years, amounting to at least one rehabilitated and restored lake for every Grama Seva division. People's representatives serving in the Pradeshiya Sabha would consult farmers to identify the villages in a village, from which we would select the small tanks requiring rehabilitation. Every Divisional Secretariat's Divisional Coordinating Committee would meet monthly with relevant project officers to share information, discuss issues and shortcomings, financial distribution, and use.

Today, we have rehabilitated more than 1,800 tanks under the program. The task has been accomplished jointly with the participation of the Mahaweli Authority, the Department of Irrigation, divisional secretariats, and the Department of Agrarian Development. Our program gives priority to the organization of tanks and their connectivity. Therefore, we cannot rehabilitate a village tank in isolation. We consider the 'Ellangawa' cascade system to ensure that irrigation rehabilitation is sustainable. Suppose we ignore the interconnected system of waterways known as the tank cascade system during heavy rains. In that case, upstream water torrents can destroy the rehabilitated tank situated downstream and flood the surrounding areas. That demands implementing a systematic irrigation rehabilitation process that considers the 'Ellangawa' structure. Therefore, the process should start from the tank situated upstream and gradually extend to those situated downstream. Accordingly, we have identified irrigation systems that operate on the cascade system for implementation. The 'Ellangawa' cascade system was declared a world heritage in 2017.

The objective of rehabilitating irrigation tanks is to tie up the whole program with economic development and production, as opined in the President's national policy document. Beyond assisting cultivation, we want to help farmers generate other sources of income around the rehabilitated tank, such as inland fishing, dairy farming, and home garden cultivation. So, the objective is to reap the maximum benefits, economic and otherwise, from a healthy and stable lake.

Meanwhile, the Wewgam Pubuduwa Irrigation Development Project and the Wari Saubhagya program will go hand in hand. The Wewgam Pubuduwa Irrigation Development Project is a climate-resilient integrated water management project. It covers the districts of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Kurunegala, Puttalam, Vavuniya, Mannar, and Trincomalee to rehabilitate more than 300 tanks, of which we have restored 150 tanks. The Green Climate Fund (GCF) facilitates the Wewgam Pubuduwa Project. It consists of upgrading minor irrigation systems, promoting climate-resilient farming practices, enhancing decentralized water supply, and

managing access to safe drinking water sources. We have extended this program to include rehabilitating tanks in the Hambantota district.

As the name implies, the objective is to revive the tank through rehabilitation. The village is awakened in turn, meaning to create an economic unit around a tank to usher in new income streams and economic prosperity among the villagers. The main objective of rehabilitating a village tank is to facilitate cultivation downstream. Otherwise, people living close to the tank hardly utilize its water to serve their needs, depriving them of the chance to cultivate their home gardens for personal consumption and supply the surplus to the market. Therefore, concurrent with the Wari Saubhagya program and the lake-village awakening project, the Ministry is promoting and intends to initiate training in inland fishery, animal husbandry, poultry, and dairy farming around the rehabilitated tanks. The objective is to usher in economic revival by augmenting incomes and fulfilling the Presidential Taskforce's Economic Revival and Poverty Eradication goals. We will remodel the lake surroundings to include parks for people to relax, making them public places that promote community engagement and, in turn, strengthen harmony.

What programs have been planned for implementation in the northern province under the Wari Saubhagya program?

Although the Jaffna Peninsula has no large lakes like in the rest of Sri Lanka, it has many small ponds, estimated to be around 4,000, with a retention capacity of millions of cubic meters of water. Historically, these ponds were utilized for water retention during the rainy season, but many require repair after years of neglect. The Ministry will summon all relevant institutions in March to initiate the rehabilitation of those ponds, which we aim to complete in a short period of two months. Transforming the three major lagoons in the Jaffna Peninsula has been in the pipeline for a while. The project will separate brackish water bodies into one large freshwater lake so that rainwater collects into the pools and is available for cultivation and consumption throughout the year. Under this project, barrages will be constructed to separate the lagoon from the ocean, and a series of canals will connect them to form a single freshwater lagoon. It is an essential project because Jaffna farmers are industrious, which we have witnessed during visits. If we can provide them with the facilities, they will improve their production capacity. There was a time before the open market policy when Jaffna farmers had created self-sufficiency in onions and chili. They had a good agricultural economy. If we give them a fillip through the development of the extensive ponds, we can help them. Many war widows can use this opportunity to engage in self-employment. Hence,

we want to complete this project in a short period of two months so that the farmers and other stakeholders can use them.

Can you tell us about the large-scale projects in implementation or completed under your Ministry?

The Moragakanda Development Project was a 30-year project to provide irrigation facilities to the water-starved cultivation land in northern, north-central, and eastern and northwestern provinces while opening up new land for agriculture development. In addition, generating and supplying hydropower to the national grid, increasing inland fish production, providing drinkable and industrial water requirements, ecotourism, and effective flood control are also among the project's objectives. The Moragahakanda reservoir has been completed, along with the Kalu Ganga reservoir scheme. In parallel is the construction of the North Western Province Canal Project, which will distribute water from the Moragahakanda reservoir to the water-stressed areas in the northern and northcentral along the proposed canal. The first phase of the north-central province canal is a 96-kilometer-long lake. The tunnel will be 28 kilometers long. We hope to expedite the work and finish it by 2024 to distribute water to the most challenging areas in the north and north-central province by directing water to the tanks in those areas. Anuradhapura has around 3,000 lakes that could receive water through this project.

The North Western Province Canal project will be 90km of new and upgraded canals. It will also include two underground tunnels, two new earth gravity dams, and the construction of the Maha Kithula and Mahakirula reservoirs, allowing a large area of land to be cultivated and improving people's livelihoods. The primary outcome would assist the government's drive to ensure food security. With sufficient water transferred to large and small village tanks, farmers will cultivate better while providing other indirect opportunities for income generation. The final objective is to see farmers grow and produce a surplus for the export market.

The Lower Malwathu Oya Reservoir project is located across the Malwathu Oya at Kappachchi, in Anuradhapura and Vavuniya districts. The reservoir will be within a dam built across the Malwathu Oya from the Bogoda area as per the plan. We intend to complete the project by 2024. At the end of this project, through the reservoir, many smaller tanks in the Anuradhapura, Vavuniya, and Mannar districts will receive water throughout the year to cultivate during both seasons. The shortage of water forced farmers to grow paddy only during one season, resulting in 34,000 paddy land remaining fallow for the rest of the period. The project receives

local funding. Another objective of the project is to provide clean drinking water to the people in those districts, an acute problem severely affecting them for an extensive-time period. The Provincial Tourism Ministry has implemented a massive tourism development plan for Thantirimale as an attractive major tourism destination. We are also promoting smart farming through technology to drive efficiency. Education is a vital component of this initiative. A reforestation plan is to be executed, extending to about 800 hectares.

Local engineers built the Kalugal Oya Reservoir Project in the Ampara district. They made the reservoir by constructing a 300-meter-long dam across the Kalugal Oya, which flows near the Bandaraduwa village in the Uhana Divisional Secretariat Division. The project will help irrigate 3,000 acres of new and old paddy lands. The project consists of the central 300-meter canal, two main canals of 12 kilometers and 4.5 kilometers on the right bank and a left bank, respectively. Apart from flood mitigation, the project’s objective is to develop inland fisheries.

We started on the Deduru Oya project when I was earlier minister of irrigation and completed it by 2014. Paddy lands in the Deduru Oya and the Mee Oya basins are cultivable during both seasons, benefiting over 15,000 agricultural families. About 50,000 families benefit from the supply of water for consumption, lift irrigation, and extension inland fisheries. When we launched the project, people objected, nevertheless we went ahead. Today, the people appreciate our efforts as their living standards have improved with more opportunities for income generation. They have a better yield. Under this project, when people lost their land, we gave them already developed land to compensate for their earlier land. That area is flourishing today. The Deduru Oya scheme has been brought under the purview of the Mahaweli Authority to help the people better. The Mahaweli Authority has extensive expertise in agriculture, irrigation, and income generation opportunities and provides training. The advantage of bringing the Deduru Oya project under the purview of the Mahaweli Authority is that unlike the disjointed and distributed work among various agencies, which makes it challenging to get all of them together, it has every expertise. That allows us to be actively involved with stakeholders’ families to help them better their livelihoods and increase incomes.

Recently we started a total rehabilitation of the Walawe Right Bank Rehabilitation Project to rehabilitate the section from Udawalawe to Chandrika Wewa under the South Bank Rehabilitation Project, with over 1,200 million rupees in investment and an extent of 42 kilometers. That will be a solution to farmers who have not received water despite assurances to provide water for cultivation. This new initiative will

reinforce all damaged areas of the lake.

The relocation of the Lungamvehera reservoir further downstream from its original location resulted in large numbers losing land. However, the water in Lunugamvehera is insufficient for cultivation. People relocated under the Lunugamvehera project have not cultivated due to scarce water. All the development surrounding this project went to waste. There were two alternatives to augment the water shortage in the Lunugamvehera area. One was through Uma Oya, and the more expedited project was to build a dam Veheragala to take water from the Menik Ganga. With the completion of the Veheragala reservoir, Kataragama also receives adequate water.

The Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project will be taking water from the Uma Oya River through a tunnel downstream through Ella to the Kirindi Oya in the dry zone annually by the construction of dams across the Dalgolla Oya and the Mahatotila Oya, two main tributaries of the Uma Oya at Puhulpola and Diyaraaba. The project will help large areas of cultivation in some of the water-deprived sites like Wellawaya, Thanamalvila, Ambegamuwa and concurrently contribute to the national food production drive, at the same time will help generate 120 megawatts of power to the national grid through an underground hydropower plant. The soil in Wellawaya and Thanamalvila are extremely irrigatable and full of nutrients. Moreover, Monaragala and Hambantota districts significantly contribute to paddy, fruits, vegetables, and milk production. We anticipate developing about 4,500 hectares of land under the Uma Oya project in Zone Two area in the Monaragala district. Irrigation water from Alikota Ara, Kuda Oya, Ussella anicut, Handapanagala anicut, and the Handapanagala main canals will develop the new areas. Through these three new tanks will be created. Monaragala is highly affected by water shortage, sometimes with no water for consumption, forcing water from Hulandawa Oya, a nearby village.

Only the Kuda Oya project could resolve the water shortage in Okkampitiya, Ethimale, and Kotiyagala. The construction of the Kumbukan Oya Reservoir Project will help provide water for irrigation to Monaragala, Hulandawa, Okkampitiya, Buttala, and for consumption. Such projects that direct water to water-deprived areas in the dry zone will facilitate farmers to cultivate throughout the year and not only during the season when water would be available. These projects will help the entire areas adjacent to these irrigation networks.

The objective of the Gin-Nilwala Project is to control the floods in these rivers and

use the excess water to avoid the shortage of drinking and irrigation water in the southeast dry zone. After 1977, authorities distributed the water in Nilwala through pumping stations for irrigation to address the issue of flooding owing to excess water. That resulted in 10,000 acres of land ending up as fallow land. That was an unsuccessful project. The project considered a multi-sector development project now in implementation is to provide drinking water. It also will supply the industrial water requirement of the Greater Hambantota Development area, meet the irrigation deficit of Muruthawela and Walawa systems, and introduce commercial agriculture developments. The Parliament Hansard will show that even as early as 1935, Dr. S A Wickremasinghe had sighted reasons for implementing the Nilwala Project. Before 2015, we had completed the feasibility studies. The problem we are currently facing in collecting the water in a reservoir pertains to the Madugeta reservoir associated with the Gin River basin bordering the Sinharaja rain forest, a protected area. Hence, we are in the process of identifying a place outside the reservation. The project will divert excess water of Gin and Nilwala Ganga basins to the existing Muruthawela tank and finally to Chandrika Wewa through a series of reservoirs, weir, transfer tunnels, and canals. We are in the process of completing this swiftly so that those affected by the floods caused by these two rivers will not bear the brunt of such disasters. We will use the excess water to benefit people living in arid areas in dire need of water.

The Ministry is in the process of studying the halted Kalu Ganga Development Project. The project was to have the main dam and two saddle dams. The project was to help irrigate new land, resettle families, and construct new roads to replace those affected by the new reservoir. The previous project site has undergone massive changes with new houses and tea plantations. Hence, we cannot disturb the current setup if we relaunch the project.

The Kelani Ganga was also the subject of a plan in 1957 to divert excess water to the Wayamba province with the help of a foreign country. In fact, in 1957, three foreign countries had prepared project proposals for three rivers, namely Walawe, Kelani, and Mahaweli. However, because they were not implemented on a timely basis today, we have to spend enormous amounts of money to mitigate the damages caused by flooding and water shortage. We are right now studying how best to divert excess water from the Kelani River to help reduce flooding while providing that diverted water to water-stressed areas in the country.

We have prepared mid-term and long-term irrigation plans for the country so that as governments change, irrigation projects can continue uninterrupted to fulfill the

entire country’s water requirements. An excellent example of the fate of irrigation projects when there is a government change is the Uma Oya Project. The projected completion date for the Uma Oya project was in 2015. But due to the delay, the cost has increased. There were issues because of water leakage but had they contained that leakage promptly, the project would have seen completion by 2016. Instead, it got abandoned for a while. The national grid would have had 120-megawatt power had the project reached completion. There would have been no power interruptions, and water-deprived people would have received water for irrigation and consumption. Had we stopped projects owing to people’s protests, a majority would not be living the life they have today. It is the country that benefits. It is unfair to provoke people to object to every proposed project. We have been very patient and lent a fair ear to their grievances to correct any shortcomings. But we must march forward mindful of the country’s future.

How do you align your development programs, such as irrigation development and livelihood and skills training, with eradicating rural poverty while ensuring irrigation system management for sustainability?

We develop irrigation tanks and provide land to the people. The problem is that although people have been given land for a long time under every government, there has not been a follow-up to ascertain how they manage land and generate an income. Everything requires a plan. Even creating new human settlements and irrigation development should have a plan to ensure growth. Haphazard cultivation negates market requirements. When farmers cultivate according to their likes and dislikes, the result is a disappointed farmer as they fail to secure a market for their produce, and then dejected, they abandon the yield by the wayside and complain. The surplus could be exported and not thrown by the wayside if everything has a plan. After all, there is a food shortage everywhere. That requires a long-term project and that we all stick to that plan to achieve success. I believe the problem is a lack of unity to implement a long-term plan for the betterment of the country.

Under the irrigation development plan of my Ministry, I want to make the intervention all-encompassing. The rehabilitation of irrigation systems cannot be an isolated exercise. That needs relating to the environment and people’s livelihoods. The overall objective is to elevate people’s living standards. So, in addition to providing people with an enabling environment to develop and cultivate quickly with the availability of water to increase the yield and grow throughout the year, we must keep up the momentum and provide them training and awareness of technology and market conditions. That is especially true as we focus on the

younger settlers, especially in the Mahaweli zones. If we give the farmers targets for cultivating crops, we must create an enabling environment. Surrounding every major irrigation project is the development of roads and other facilities so that villagers have access to essential services in urban areas. The proposed ‘Wari Sabha’ concept will assist farers and villagers in initiating income generation projects based on the village tank. We will promote internal fisheries. We will develop dairy and poultry farming and rearing of ducks, cultivate greens and the lotus yam for the market, encourage tourist attractions such as boat rides and safari rides along the repaired lakes. We are in the process of expanding the tourist bungalows in the Mahaweli zones. There are 34 bungalows available for local and foreign visitors. The ‘Thurunu Govi Saubhagya’ program aimed at the youth will be establishing 500 organic farms to produce for the local niche market and the export market. Additionally, young people with a keen interest in pursuing technical fields will be identified and provided with the necessary opportunity to pursue their interests and obtain the education required in their chosen field. However, continuity is essential.

To strengthen private sector companies exporting agricultural products, we must facilitate farmers to meet and sell their produce to private companies supplying to the export market. Apart from farmers, the private sector will provide jobs in their factories. We must encourage and support their role and connect them to more farmers as a government. The advantage of joining the private sector to villager farmers is that the latter learn to apply cultivation measures, including applying fertilizer and water according to the requirements of the private buyer who guarantees a market and a fair price. In turn, the farmer is encouraged and motivated to continue in agriculture. We can further promote farmers by providing them with awareness tours abroad.

The Hela Bojun Hal concept is operating successfully where food courts with open kitchens provide live demonstrations of Sri Lankan food and sweets, providing visitors a glimpse into the art of preparing some of them. As there is a great demand for it, we went a step further by transforming them into a one-stop-shop concept selling organic fruits and vegetables. Local farmers can sell their products aimed at vehicles passing by that will stop for refreshments. The Hela Bojun Hal concept has worked very well and supported women’s empowerment while promoting local produce. The same idea is being promoted in Kataragama to encourage pilgrims to patronize these stalls. We are doing the same in Thalawa, Anuradhapura. Such concepts will allow farmers to sell their products in an

additional way. We must connect irrigation and agriculture to other sectors like tourism so that the people living from it will have more opportunities to augment their income.

Since the human-elephant conflict has accelerated to the level of preventing farmers and villagers from living and working in a safe environment, we have initiated the island's first-ever Wild Elephant Management Reserve in Hambantota. Under the program, an elephant management reserve for elephants and other wildlife in land belonging to the Department of Forest Conservation and Sri Lanka Mahaweli Authority will be declared. Under this program, we plan to set up three new elephant corridors so that human settlements will not be affected by encroaching elephants.

As part of the northwestern province canal project, several divisional secretariat areas will be reinforced with a network of fences to prevent elephant infiltration. We also intend to repair and increase the water retention capacity of small tanks situated within nature reserves so that animals will use them and not wander into villages in search of water, which has led to conflicts.

We have initiated a floating solar panels project in the Mahaweli zone lakes to generate electricity, a World Bank-funded project.

You said that one objective of developing irrigation schemes was to promote the setting up of industries around them and make human settlements. In your vision for the long-term sustainability of irrigation schemes, how do you plan to ensure that they remain functional for years to come when there is irresponsible behavior on the part of people living around them and industries dumping waste?

We have focused on the environmental aspect surrounding irrigation schemes as well. We liaise with the environment ministry and Pradeshiya Sabha to stop dumping garbage and wastewater in and around irrigation schemes. We are in the process of formulating guidelines to ensure the sustainable use of water in rehabilitated tanks. In addition, there are invasive plants in these lakes needing control through various mechanisms. In the final analysis, the government can do as much as possible, but none will be successful without the people's contribution. Laws and regulations will mean nothing without all the stakeholders interacting with a tank.

It is a blessing for Sri Lanka to possess one of the best irrigation networks that a country would covet. Therefore, safeguarding our precious network of waterways for future generations and ensuring food security is everyone's responsibility. While education and creating awareness are crucial to altering behavior, commitment and conscientiousness as citizens will drive change. An effort of this magnitude requires stealth coordination and dedication of many ministries and agencies to ensure their smooth function and continuity.

The ownership of rehabilitated tanks is with the people. I intend to introduce a 'Wari Sabhawa,' an administrative set up led by the priest in the temple closest to a tank. Other religious leaders, school principals, and other individuals serving in the village join this group to help manage and sustain rehabilitated tanks.

We Have To Be Focused. Stakeholders And The Public Require Awareness And Education. Importantly, Intentions Should Be Genuine. Our Desire Should Be For The Long-Term Good Of The Country. Planning And Encouragement Are Needed To Prepare The Nation To Face The Future Possibility Of Food Shortage.

What are the objectives of the Mahaweli Way Forward program?

The Mahaweli development program launched in the 1970s has been one of today's most significant multipurpose development projects. There have been many victories in the past.

While as a country, we can be happy with the many successful outcomes of this project. We have to adapt to the new realities and make them relevant to the new generations emerging from the Mahaweli zones. The first thing that comes to mind when speaking of the Mahaweli is settlements and land allocation, the convention in the Mahaweli zones. Policymakers have hardly focused on the next generation of settlers. Have we stopped to focus on what lies ahead for the children of the original settlers? What other avenues do they have to pursue livelihoods when the family has only a single piece of land? How can a single property be divided among several children and expected to develop? Unfortunately, that is the plight of the families in the Mahaweli zones. The Mahaweli Way Forward program initiated in 2021 intends to provide a renewed focus to improve the living standards of the settlers, increase their contribution to the national economy and make the project a profitable venture.

When a single piece of land gets divided among many children, it ceases to be an economic unit. That is an aspect that requires serious consideration. Policymakers cannot be confident that their job is over with land allocation to families as they will continue to live on farming. The future of young people is indeed a reason for concern. As the name implies, the Mahaweli Way Forward program will focus on helping young people look beyond the confines of their parents to add value to their role in agriculture and beyond. The objective is to help them increase their income, expand existing income avenues, and introduce new revenue streams. Training and development are vital to driving the change that we envisage. It is a long-term program to drive innovation through the new generation. It is time we recognized young inventors in the Mahaweli zones. A 20-year-old young man in the H Zone in Anuradhapura had invented the machine to remove invasive plants from lakes. Although he had studied engineering technology for his Advanced Level, he had received extensive training from a technical school. It is time we identify the talent among young people in the Mahaweli zones, accept their creations, give them the recognition they deserve and the space to develop. The older generation of farmers has hardly improved the way they are used to working, with scarce development in terms of technology. Hence, the children do not see any advantage in pursuing their parents' work. They desire to enjoy better lives outside working in urban centers. However, they lack the skill to serve in diverse and demanding job markets. Through our Mahaweli Way Forward program, we want to create an industrious young generation ready to work and better their lives through improved incomes.

Your Ministry is very supportive of the organic fertilizer/farming initiative. Can you tell how farmers in the Mahaweli zones are readying for this change and their response to this transformative approach to farming?

The transformation to the use of organic fertilizer is taking place in the Mahaweli zones. The Mahaweli Authority is guiding the farmers of Mahaweli to earn a higher yield from organic farming. In support of this, the Cabinet approved a gazette declaring the Moragahakanda-Kalu Ganga Mahaweli F Zone, a sustainable development area for organic agricultural products. Under this initiative, people are cultivating organic vegetables, fruits, and other field crops in the section of the Mahaweli F Zone under the development of the Kalu Ganga project. Through this initiative, we want to ensure sustainable soil usage through soil conservation methods of setting stone bunds and natural hedges and promoting water conservation in farming to preserve irrigated water and its efficient use. The entire zone, including the tourism zone, is 5,600 hectares, with 1,441 hectares for

cultivation. According to the plan, the people will manufacture the organic fertilizer within the area. Currently, about 3,000 families are receiving training on the preparation and application of organic fertilizer. It is a long-term program to drive innovation through the new generation. We have to develop this initiative as we go on. The Mahaweli Authority has now started researching soil issues to provide better advice on producing organic fertilizer. In the long-term, to make organic fertilizer required for crop cultivation, it has been planned to establish two organic fertilizer production centers with laboratory facilities in Wellewela and Guruwela Mahaweli zones. As the first step, the Wellewela organic fertilizer production center will facilitate the annual production of 2,000 metric tons of fertilizer.

However, the issue is that many still have doubts about switching to organic farming. We can get a cue from how our ancestors cultivated their land, which provided sufficient food to fill the requirement. We need extensive research to add value to our fruits and vegetables to prepare for a future food shortage. Chemical fertilizer has destroyed the interdependence of the ecosystems to nourish each other. But that has not given us food security. But if we could cultivate using organic fertilizer in the days gone by, we can do it today. On a Pilipino Island I visited, they had the purple yam for lunch and prepared into ice cream for dessert. We can grow those crops extensively organically without facing a food shortage when we have such an abundance of yam varieties.

We have to be focused. Stakeholders and the public require awareness and education. Importantly, intentions should be genuine. Our desire should be for the long-term good of the country. Planning and encouragement are needed to prepare the nation to face the future possibility of food shortage. We should have the technology to produce a surplus and store any excess. Every process must be in place. However, the solution is not for those opposing organic farming to declare the reversal of the decision when they come into power. Sound decisions must be honored and sustained for the long-term. The organic farming initiative, if appropriately implemented, can uplift the rural economy. There needs to be an appreciation of our local produce to promote them globally. Our food habits must change to include appropriate nutrition, which is the aim of this initiative. Our food habits can be the solution to many of our health problems. I learned that the Uguressa fruit is good in preventing dementia. This tree used to grow extensively in our gardens, but we tend to discard them because we fail to identify their good. And as we prepare people in all the Mahaweli zones to cultivate food crops free of poisonous chemical remnants, our objective is to make them a model for the rest of

the country.

Can you tell us about your Ministry's progress with handing over a large number of title deeds to farming communities in the Mahaweli zones?

There are ten Mahaweli zones. One of the most significant issues confronting the Mahaweli settlers is the lack of land ownership, spanning over 30 years. For years they have been sent from pillar to post in government offices seeking legal ownership documents. That is very unfair on them as they are people working under very challenging circumstances, and it is their right to obtain ownership of land that they have taken care of for years. For instance, since the Walawa settlement in 1958, some families have yet to receive land ownership documents.

I have instructed officers to take the settlement plan for the area, color-demarcate, and strike off those who have already received deeds, those yet to receive illegal settlers and disputed land, and empty land. That way, it makes problem-solving easy. In Walawa alone, we have to hand over 43,000 deeds of ownership. We have already completed 10,000 deeds, which we intend to distribute starting in Walawa by the end of February. Likewise, we want to move to different Mahaweli zones to hand over a share of deeds to the residents.

In 2021, we distributed 35,000 deeds to the settlers. Our target for 2022 is to hand over 75,000 deeds of ownership to settlers living in the zones. We have to implement the process systematically with proper surveying and identifying the inheritance after the demise of the present owner. There are many issues concerning property ownership and inheritance. We had to intervene in providing a legal right to the settlers inconvenienced for far too long at government offices.

Moreover, this has given way to unfair practices. They are not treated equally by officers when they seek redress. Those with the means, the influence, and connections will get the job done, while those who do not have the clout resort to bribing. We need to be concerned about people's issues and engage in follow-up measures. At the same time, we must also focus on the officers' attitude in those government institutions. I am aware that when government officers serve for far too long at one station without promotion, they become apathetic in their job. They need exposure and upgrades to be motivated in their career, which we aim to change and implement. I intend to complete all the tasks undertaken under the Ministry of Irrigation and the Mahaweli zones.

As the state minister for Home Affairs under whose purview critical administrative units and officers belong, how do you intend to maximize them to serve the public better?

As the State Minister of Home Affairs, I am in charge of Grama Seva officers, development officers and technical officers, divisional secretaries, and government agents. These officers have a long list of duties to fulfill during demanding situations, such as disasters and other emergencies. We can gauge the load of work entrusted to these officers by the government's large amount of money on disaster management. At the same time, spending such a large amount of money also shows much more that we can do to mitigate the problems. We are often aware of disaster-prone and vulnerable areas that require intervention. We could avoid many disasters if we only take the trouble to identify susceptible spots, study them and apply solutions to minimize the damage and the loss of life. When we fail to be proactive, disasters strike, and matters get out of control.

But to change the way we have been operating, it is crucial to understand the ground reality. For instance, a Grama Seva officer has over 200 duties listed. As we know, although they are in charge of a small area, a Grama Seva officer is incessantly busy attending to people's day-to-day issues and more. But that is too challenging and too much of a workload. As we set to implement a new program, we are looking at the possibility of distributing their duties among the plethora of government officers serving in different state agencies.

I believe service delivery will be efficient if we identify the tasks relevant to an officer. For instance, we can distribute tasks among agriculture officers, development officers, Samurdhi officers, agrarian services officers, and family health service officers. These officers are working in their village, so they can undoubtedly be of service to the people of their town. The Department of Agriculture has officers who graduated in agriculture dedicated to advising farmers on a single crop but have much more expertise and knowledge to extend their work beyond. We must maximize their ability to provide an efficient service to the people to reap the best benefits. We are in the process of studying how best to make their duties practical and valuable to the people they serve. They should be skilled to uplift the people's lives in the village.

We must ensure that these officers are adequately compensated and motivated to perform their duties. We are focusing on a cadre that is educated and eager to be upwardly mobile and desire to maintain a certain standard of living. In a very

competitive social milieu, they too face many challenges, which they cannot fulfill with their current salary. When we embark on reforms, we must be prudent enough to recognize the core of an issue and introduce the changes. We hope to implement these changes through the divisional secretariats.

As the President of the Sri Lanka-India Parliamentary Friendship group, what sort of interaction do you intend to promote to improve relations between the two countries, and what are opportunities for Sri Lanka?

The existing association is being revived for the current Parliament, of which I serve as the President. I think restoring this group provides an opportunity to strengthen parliamentary exchanges and interactions between the two democracies.

The two countries can enhance multi-faceted bilateral relationships in many areas. Apart from enhancing people-to-people connectivity, there is a lot we can share in terms of culture, knowledge and skills exchange, and cooperation in helping with agriculture-related areas, technology, and economic engagement. India, as our neighbor, is a valuable ally and our mutual understanding allows us to reap tremendous benefits through this group.

I believe that Sri Lanka stands to benefit in every way from the interactions that can take place through this group, even economic benefits.

What have been your experiences as the Speaker of Parliament when you served as the President of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association when you had to host a significant event such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Conference?

As Speaker, when I attended the 57th session of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Conference in the U.K. in 2011, I was conferred the presidency of the CPA. When we hosted the CPA conference in Sri Lanka in 2012, the response was overwhelming. Nearly 800 delegates, including parliamentarians and parliamentary staff from 175 branches belonging to 54 countries of the commonwealth, attended the event. The event was an opportunity to change perceptions among countries with many misguided notions about Sri Lanka. It was one of the best-organized events and a precursor to the CHOGM in 2013.

The CPA conference was an opportunity to show Sri Lanka after the conflict had ended. Our hospitality was at its zenith. When some of the delegates expressed

their desire to visit Jaffna as they had heard a lot of negative media about the place, we did not hold back. We went out of our way to make the Jaffna trip truly memorable. The Jaffna trip changed their perceptions. It would have reinforced their views if we tried to avoid visiting Jaffna. But we made sure the impressions were good. It was a very well-organized successful event. Subsequently, when I visited Canada, I was recognized by those who had visited Sri Lanka for this conference. Their response resulted from their hospitality to them while in Sri Lanka.

The CPA is an excellent forum to strengthen understanding between countries, cultures, and cuisine. As the CPA chair, I visited several commonwealth countries, which exposed me to the different facets of their way of life and culture. It was an excellent opportunity to develop relations between nations differently. It is an opportunity to learn about each other.

On another positive note, my experience as Speaker of Parliament was memorable. I believe I conducted myself well and carried out the duties firmly and fairly. I managed a disciplined parliament because I pulled up members for their behavior.

You have been a member of Parliament for over 30 years. As the eldest in your family, can you tell us your political journey?

If I ever thought of entering politics at some point in my younger days, it was to help the Hambantota district in dire need of water. If elected to office, I wanted to use my office to provide water to the community and make the area verdant to improve the living conditions of the farmers. Today, with the district's development and its irrigation systems, the aridity in the region has reduced.

My family's involvement in the lives of the people in Hambantota began in the time of the English. After the English came to Sri Lanka, governance in Hambantota was by foreigners under whom Sri Lankan officers worked in local administration. But of course, the locals were not free. It all started with one Mudliyar Jayawardena from Habaraduwa who had felled a considerable number of the jackfruit trees from villagers' gardens to construct his house. The people had complained to D. M. Rajapaksa, my father's brother. D. M. Rajapaksa had written a petition to the governor, resulting in an inquiry and the removal of the Jayawardena's Mudliyar title. That was the beginning of the Rajapaksa family standing up for people and working for peasants' welfare.

My father and his brothers had studied at Richmond College Galle, and the school's

training had prepared them for leadership when they returned to the village. D.M. and D.A. first entered the election fray in 1931, when they both supported Party Leader Dr. S.A. Wickremasinghe, who contested the Morawaka Seat at the first State Council Election. The two brothers were closely associated with the Sooriyamal Movement and the leftist leaders. In 1936, S. A. had urged D. M. to contest the State Council as he was a good orator. But a week or two before the election, D. M. was arrested by the Walasmulla Police and was remanded in Galle. While D. M. was away in remand prison, his brothers had campaigned on his behalf. D. M. won by 12,000 votes. In those days, people voted for the color, and D. M. had chosen maroon, which was interpreted as kurakkan color, predominantly cultivated and consumed by the peasants of Giruwa and Magam Patthu. It was a compelling symbol of farmer representation. The villagers gave D. M. a grand welcome upon returning to the village. D. M. wore a maroon shawl to the State Council. He was pretty involved in many campaigns with communist parties. Upon D. M.'s passing, my father, D. A. Rajapaksa, refused to be drawn into the by-election for the vacant Hambantota Seat in the Legislature. However, on the nomination day at the Hambantota Kachcheri, he was declared uncontested as a member of the State Council for the Hambantota District.

At the 1947 elections, when Hambantota and Beliatta were two electorates, D. A. Rajapaksa contested from newly created Beliatta seat for the UNP while Lakshman Rajapaksa represented the Communist Party. In 1951, at our house, Prime Minister D. S. Senanayake, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, J.R. Jayawardena, and others had come for lunch after attending various ceremonies in the area. And it was after that our father crossed over to the opposition with S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. Upon this, Prime Minister D. S. Senanayake had told my father that although he knew that S.W.R.D. would crossover, he had not expected my father to follow. My father entered Parliament in 1952 and again in 1956 and held the Deputy Minister, Deputy Speaker, and Minister of Agriculture and Lands for a brief period in the Dahanayake Government. He lost his Beliatta seat in 1965 and passed away in 1967.

In the meantime, Mahinda was working as an SLFP organizer for Beliatta. Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike urged me to contest in the 1970 elections, but I had joined the Police force by then. Although she suggested my mother to persuade me to enter the contest as she felt Mahinda was too young, my mother also wanted Mahinda to contest. Neither did I want to, as Mahinda had been working for the party in Beliatta since 1968. Mahinda entered Parliament in 1970. Subsequently, our family members entered Parliament.

Just as much as Mahinda has been a people's man working on the field, Basil Rajapaksa has been with him helping him in all his campaign beginning from his journey in Beliatta. As the campaign manager, Basil operated both of Mahinda's presidential campaigns successfully and successfully launched the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, which ensured Gotabaya Rajapaksa's victory in 2019.

By 1985 I had left the Police. Mrs. Bandaranaike wanted me to contest, which I did from Mulkirigala. Before the election, there was much unrest by governing party politicians who used violence to intimidate voters at polling booths and stuffed ballot boxes. Even Mahinda was in remand prison during this time over trumped-up charges. Many people died during the shooting in the polling booth violence. Mahinda, who happened to be there, was arrested for allegedly being involved in the shooting. At the counting of ballots, there had been more votes than the registered number of voters. I lost by 1,300 votes. In the run-up to that election, the UNP did not have a single meeting in the area. Ananda Kularatne, the UNP candidate, was not in sight. I visited every house. Violence broke out the day before the election when many UNP supporters and ministers had come to the area and stayed in the district's homes.

As A Man From The Village, I Feel Close To Our Heritage And Their Importance In Supporting Farmers And Livelihoods. My Involvement In Irrigation Restoration Projects Providing Water To Villages Is Many. Part Of Developing Rural Sri Lanka Was To Help Settlers Obtain Ownership Of The Land They Cultivate, And I Am Happy That I Have Been Able To Provide Land Ownership To Thousands Of Farmers In The Country.

Mahinda and I won in the 1989 elections from the Hambantota district. And we have continued to serve in Parliament. During my time in Parliament, we have mediated resolving the most severe issues blighting the community: lack of water, roads, and electricity. I proposed to CBK to set up the Southern Development Authority focusing on the districts of Galle, Matara, Hambantota, and Monaragala. I suggested the construction of the airport in Hambantota.

Since 1994, I have served the people under various ministries. I have directly contributed to many significant projects in the country. The most notable projects that I proposed and initiated include the renovation of hospitals, construction of a modern hospital in Hambantota, renovation of courts, an institute for agro-technology and rural sciences. I was involved in port sector automation and Colombo port development, BIA Phase II expansion project, the Hambantota

botanical garden, the Hambantota bird park, Ranminitenna tele cinema village, the Hambantota beach children’s park, Bataatha agro-technology, and tourism park. My main contribution has been to the development of irrigation.

As a man from the village, I feel close to our heritage and their importance in supporting farmers and livelihoods. My involvement in irrigation restoration projects providing water to villages is many. Part of developing rural Sri Lanka was to help settlers obtain ownership of the land they cultivate, and I am happy that I have been able to provide land ownership to thousands of farmers in the country. Through the Hambantota Irrigation Rehabilitation Project, I wanted to improve the living standards of the district’s people. One of the most outstanding achievements under the new government of Chandrika Kumaratunge was the Mau Ara Reservoir Project that I initiated amid challenges, which I see as a milestone in the irrigation history in this country. The Mau Ara Reservoir Project and the Malala Oya Basin development Scheme utilized local technical skills and funds without any foreign collaboration.

I have learned is that when every new government that comes to power keeps changing the decisions taken by the predecessor, there will not be any accountability on the part of those who halt them. When policymakers stop projects without rhyme or reason, the country loses millions. In that case, those responsible must be held accountable, but that does not happen. We must stop that way of working. Any good initiative that an incumbent government implements should continue. Likewise, when a wrong decision costs a country, that too must be highlighted.







