



**Statement by Hon. (Dr.) Sarath Amunugama
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At the Inaugural Session of the High Level Segment of the Substantive Session of ECOSOC

**“Science, technology and innovation and the potential of culture for promoting sustainable
development and achieving the Millennium Development Goals”**

3rd July 2013, Geneva

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,

Science, technology, innovation (STI) and culture play a key role towards the achievement of global development goals. These elements hold a gamut of potential as main drivers in overcoming challenges of this Century such as extreme poverty, inequality and environmental degradation. The realization of Millennium Development Goals by 2015 in less than thousand days poses a great challenge.

STI bolster economic growth and strengthen the economic backbone of countries willing to compete in the global market. It advances and diversifies sectoral productivity in employment and industries, food and agriculture, water and energy and environment conservation. With population growth, resources become constrained. Therefore, the role of technological and scientific innovations becomes crucial. Once a country meets the basic requirements of its population, its people are in a better position to face economic and social challenges. Thus, our strong commitment is imperative to create an enabling environment for both STI and culture.

This year’s theme is particularly important for Sri Lanka. My country has been focusing on people-oriented socio-economic development since independence. In spite of a long drawn out battle against terrorism for nearly three decades, and being further constrained by the 2004 Asian tsunami and the impact of the global recession, yet we have successfully realized our MDG targets.

The introduction of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 boosted our drive for a more people-centered development path, mainly by our own efforts for the past 65 years. Sri Lanka has integrated MDGs effectively in to the national development agenda. In addition to several

targeted special programmes, government conducts a large number of development interventions with the aim of increasing opportunities for every segment of society.

In fact, we are trend setters in this field as recognized by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen. Our achievements are highlighted in regional and global statistics in terms of realizing or even surpassing many MDGs.

The first and the most important MDG has already been achieved, with a decline of poverty level from 15.2% in 2006/07 to 6.5% in 2012, surpassing mid-term targets. Sri Lanka has performed equally well even in the multi-dimensional poverty index. The multi-dimensionally poor in Sri Lanka is 1.9% in 2012. A zero poverty goal is set for 2016. This is mainly due to our better performances in terms of child mortality, nutrition, schooling, access to safe drinking water, sanitation and housing compared to many countries.

As recognized by Unicef, Sri Lanka's experience is among the most compelling in achieving the best indicators for child and maternal health and access to primary health care in South Asia. We successfully reduced child mortality in the last half century. The infant mortality rate of 9 per 1,000 live births in 2010 was a significant achievement when compared with many affluent countries. Sri Lanka also decreased the Maternal Mortality Rate – 30 per 100,000 live births in 2010. Near-universal free access to health, including widespread rural family healthcare and 98% of births taking place at institutional delivery centers support this success. Our immunization system is a global success. The average life expectancy was 74.9 in 2011, with women (77) living longer than men (72). We have an enviable record in combating Malaria, Tuberculosis and HIV/Aids. Many research papers refer to Sri Lanka's success in eliminating Malaria and Tuberculosis.

Under the MDG of Environmental Sustainability, our mid-term targets of 2010 have already been achieved with water and sanitation. Despite the recent expansion of the economy with increased infrastructure development and industrialization Sri Lanka's carbon footprint remains negligible at 0.6 tons per capita per year.

Sri Lanka has been committed to ensure gender equality many decades before the introduction of MDGs. In fact, women are the driving force behind many of our socio-economic successes. The Sri Lankan Constitution guarantees equal right to all citizens without discrimination. We also maintained gender parity in primary education reaching 100% in 2009/10. The percentage of women enrolment was greater than their male counterparts at all streams of education.

Education is a success story. Sri Lanka is internationally well-known for its very high literacy rate and easily achieving the universal primary education target. The net enrolment rate reached 99% in 2010, for both males and females. We have recently increased the age limit of compulsory primary education upto age 16. The national education policy now aims at enhancing the qualitative aspect of education, enabling children and youth to face emerging challenges of a global knowledge economy.

Sri Lanka uses new and emerging technologies and scientific innovations to meet its goals, and firmly believes it can improve upon these achievements. We are shifting from a traditional education system to a system of innovation and employability by introducing the necessary infrastructure for making Sri Lanka a regional knowledge hub. Accordingly, we placed more focus on science, technology and entrepreneurship, which has been heavily supported by our Technical Vocational Education and Training sector development strategy. The vision of the Government is to 'create a society where there is no person without skills' by 2020. Our National Science and Technology Policy aims to develop a timely knowledge-base on national development. Initiatives of technology transfer, the sustainable use of natural resources, and indigenous and cultural technology have been strengthened. Country-wide development programs are being implemented aiming at increasing ICT literacy from 35% to 75% by 2016, and also to promote science and technology innovation culture in the general education system. Special attention was made to expand access and to make appropriate structural changes to meet human resource demands. An ICT policy aiming at reducing the digital divide in the country has been adopted to bring in the common approaches in realizing development objectives.

The development of ICT infrastructure is being pursued with emphasis on the private sector. Cellular phone penetration stands at over 110%. Our Global Network Readiness ranking, which now stands at 3.88 (at the 69th place in 2013) has improved significantly. This infrastructure drive helps placing the country's ICT/BPO sector as the fifth largest contributor to the GDP.

Mr President,

Youth are the driving force of science, technology and innovation. Today, commercial agriculture, the garment industry and booming service sectors depend on the contribution of young people, particularly women. Entrepreneurial youth dominate the fields of ICT, eco-friendly technologies in energy, agriculture and industrial sectors. These initiatives, along with the scientific innovations and application of technology, have enabled reducing the country's unemployment to 4% in 2012. We coupled youth strategically with skills development in light of the youth's role in our development agenda. Collectively, we must create national and regional platforms to recognize their

talent and expertise. Sri Lanka, as the host of the World Conference on Youth in 2014, will provide a global platform to mainstream youth aspects in the internationally agreed development goals.

Food security is the main strategy in achieving all key MDGs. Food insecurity is no longer an issue for Sri Lanka as self-sufficient in the staple food production with a surplus of rice and maize and 85% of population for improved water sources. Our aim is to drastically reduce dependence on external food supplies. New technology, innovations and research in agriculture field have enabled us to increase our food production ensuring nation's food security by an eco-friendly manner. However, we have not forgotten our centuries old sustainable irrigation and agriculture practices, which is our cultural heritage.

Sri Lanka also identified the importance of Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) as a development mode of bridging regional growth disparities. New industries are encouraged to be launched away from urban localities, as to promote inclusive growth and eliminate poverty and unemployment. Banks are given incentives to engage in microfinance schemes. Agricultural exports are exempt from taxes and business-owners keep their profits for the first five years of operation.

Mr. President, Distinguished delegates,

It is important to note that developmental and technological needs vary from country to country. A systems-oriented approach is more suitable than a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Developing countries must obtain a clear understanding of conducive and sustainable practices that can be replicated domestically to address the challenges they face in the fields of science, technology and innovation.

We have to keep in mind that middle income countries, such as Sri Lanka, face specific economic, social and environmental challenges. One such concern is unexpected weather patterns that trigger droughts and floods causing damage to our food and energy production. We are still vulnerable to external economic shocks, but have the potential to advance in economic strength if a forward looking culture supportive of technology induced growth is achieved.

The unique policy mix improved Sri Lanka's status from low-income to middle-income, illustrating further potential for economic growth. We stand ready to help the region sharing our experience not in only achieving MDGs, but also in terms of establishing peace and stability in the region.