DDC Pı ogı amme of the 1970s – *response*

by D L O Mendis

Dr Gavin Karunaratne's three part article in the ISLAND discusses the importance of the Divisional Development Councils development programme during the closed economy of the 1970s, from his perception as a Government Agent at the time. May I add to the discussion my own perception as an engineer in the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs, and later in the Regional Development Division of the Ministry of Plan Implementation.

The DDC programme began as a positive response by government to dissatisfaction among unemployed youth after the failed insurrection of early 1971 barely nine months after a new government took office after free and fair general elections in 1970. The insurrection took government and most persons by surprise, even those who had been sympathetic to the rhetoric of the leaders of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, like Susil Sirivardhana, the Oxford educated young Civil Servant attached to the Anuradhapura Kachcheri, who was later an accused in the insurrection case. In contrast to that positive response to an emerging social problem, what we see today is a negative attitude towards polarization in society that is all too evident with the rich getting richer and the poor getting desperate. The former, as we hear from news reports, have all the perks in city life with wine, women and song - and drugs. The latter are typified by the rural family that is disintegrating, with women being forced to seek employment as housemaids in west Asia and elsewhere. To compound it all, the impact of the armed conflict in the north and east is all pervasive. Lawlessness is rife.

The DDC programme started at a time when the Central Bank Annual Report 1973 had drawn attention to the increase in the number of public sector Corporations, and also to the general comparative inefficiency of this type of organization. The public corporation was created after independence especially to undertake development work on a scale that was beyond the scope of the private sector at the time, and at a pace that was outside the tradition of the public sector, with an outstanding exception, A N S Kulasinghe; but he was not in the country when the DDC programme started. Until 1956, the objective was to initiate new development through these public sector Corporations, and then hand them over to the private sector for further development on commercial lines. In the post-1956 era this objective was abandoned, the State Corporations Act of 1957 was enacted, and the public corporation in spite of its many known shortcomings and failures was henceforth considered to be the ultimate organization form for national development within the political framework of parliamentary democracy.

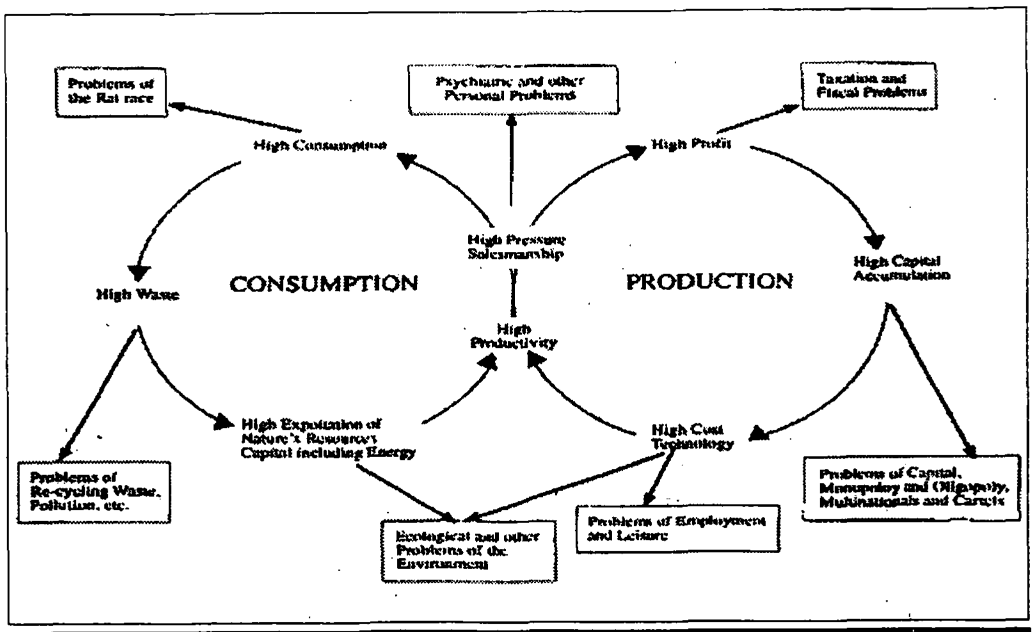

Figure 3: The vicious spirals of over-development3

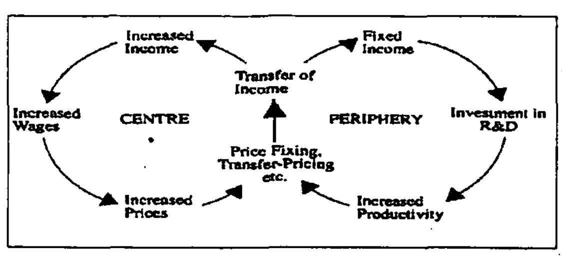

Figure 1: The Development of Underdevelopment

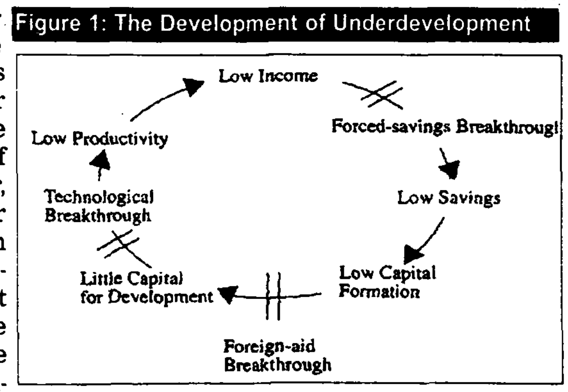

Figure 2: The vicious circle of poverty (after Nurkse)

Meanwhile, Multi purpose Consumer Co-operative Societies and Unions had proved their worth during the unsettled years of the second world war, and were thereafter continued with much hope for their effectiveness in the post war era. These organizations were set up for the distribution of consumer goods (generally imported), especially items of food that were on ration. Adapting this concept, Divisional Development Council projects were to be production co-operatives utilizing locally available resources, providing maximum employment opportunities, and using appropriate technology in development.

At that time the general characteristics of an appropriate technology were described as follows

(1) It stimulates economic progress by making use of locally available resources including manpower, and meeting local needs.

(2) It promotes social progress by enabling mass participation in the new development as well as wide sharing of attendant benefits.

(3) It should spread in the local environment and constitute a technical improvement compared to what existed previously.

(4) It should be progressive over time and improve in response to the developing economy's requirements.

(5)It should create employment where people already live and not in new distant work places.

(6) It should aim as far as possible to make its own capital equipment locally.

If successful, the D.D.C. concept would even provide an alternative to the public sector Corporation, as a form of organization for production and development. Thus the Five Year Plan of 1974 / 75 was conceptually different from the Ten year plan of 1959 that had been hailed as a landmark in development planning in the third world. To give one example of the difference, the Ten year plan had referred to the plantation sector as the equivalent of an industrial sector in the economy. The agriculture sector was represented only by traditional peasant agriculture or subsistence agriculture, and not by the plantations.

The DDC programme in the Five year plan had its share of failures during the early years, mainly in the Agriculture sector. Successful projects like those mentioned by Dr Karunaratne came later. Still later, failures were due to politicization in the search for employment, as documented by Ton de Wilde, onetime head of Appropriate Technology International, Washington DC who had earlier worked for Sarvodaya. But, in the Industrial sector there was success in the organization of Dispersed Production Co-operatives. Most noteworthy was a Blacksmiths co-operative in the Kotmale DRO's Division set up by a dynamic public servant W A Jayesinghe. He found that blacksmiths in several villages in his Division had a proud tradition of producing high quality tools and implements, a tradition going back to the days of Prince Dutugemunu who was said to have had a consort in the Kotmale valley. Kotmale blacksmiths' markets included the plantations in the vicinity, but through middle men traders.

Jayesinghe was appointed to the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs to transfer his concept of improving the productive capacities of the traditional industrial sector, to other administrative Divisions, from Colombo to Batticaloa and from Point Pedro to Dondra Head, because there are village blacksmiths and potters in virtually every village. Blacksmiths used scrap steel and iron and most of them depended on middle-men for supply of scrap and charcoal, and for their tools and implements like files, and to find markets for their products. In passing, I vividly remember a Light Engineering project in Jaffna where grapes were being grown, a classic example of 'walking on two legs' - industry and agriculture together.

As the only engineer in the Ministry of Planning at that time, I tried to publicize the DDC programme in the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science, and to engineers in the Institution of Engineers, and in the University of Peradeniya. In the SLAAS in 1975 I showed the situation in Sri Lanka as I saw it, by means of diagrams in a paper titled The Technology of Development and the Underdevelopment of Technology in Sri Lanka. Figure 1 is titled the Development of Underdevelopment, Fig. 2 is the Vicious Circle of Poverty, due to the economist Radnor Nurkse, and Fig. 3 is my response to this titled The Vicious Spirals of Over-Development. Visitors in the Planning Ministry used to take photographs of these Figures displayed on the walls of my room!

Professor Ranjit de Silva from the Faculty of Engineering, Peradeniya, visited Kotmale with some of his metallurgy students, and some blacksmiths from Kotmale visited the Faculty of Engineering, Peradeniya. Some interest was created among engineers in the private sector as well, notably the famous engineer - entrepreneur Mr T S Jinasena who visited Kotmale himself and offered useful advice, and Ray Wijewardena who supported the programme from Malaysia where he was working for FAO at the time. Unfortunately, Mr A N S Kulasinghe was then in exile in Malaysia, having been forced away from the land of his birth and the work that he loved, by a group of so-called progressive engineers soon after the 1970 elections. As a result, we were only able to get nominal support for the DDC programme from a few individual engineers in the State Engineering Corporation that he had set up, as against the massive support that would have been available if Kulasinghe was in charge.

To be continued