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(/)

[Home \(/\)](#)

[News \(/news\)](#)

[Impact \(/sections/impact\)](#)

[Opinion \(/sections/opinion\)](#)

[Editorial \(/editorial\)](#)

[World \(/world\)](#)

[Sports \(/sports\)](#)

[Business \(/business\)](#)

[News Features \(/features\)](#)

[Spectrum \(/sections/spectrum\)](#)

[Montage \(/montage\)](#)

[Junior \(/junior\)](#)

[Youth \(/youth-observer\)](#)

[Jobs](#)

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(/marriage-proposal)



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Improved rural road network will drive economic growth - ADB

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[\(/#whatsapp\)](#)[\(/#viber\)](#)[BY INDUNIL HEWAGE \(/AUTHORS/INDUNIL-HEWAGE\)](#)[Business \(/business\)](#)**Somathilaka Kindelpitiya****Anil Perera****Sri Widowati****Roshan K Rodrigo**

Rural road development initiatives will essentially link farmers to nearby towns and facilitate market entry for smallholders and overall, an improved rural road network will have a positive impact on transportation, consumption, non-farm employment, and social development.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) in association with the Government has embarked on an ambitious project, the Integrated Road Investment program or iRoad project to develop and upgrade road network in rural geographies to improve the road between selected rural communities and socio-economic centres.

The ADB believes that road sector development particularly in rural areas will drive economic growth, create prosperity and most promote social inclusion.

The ADB has come forward as the main funding agency for the successful implementation of the iRoad project which is set to run up to 2027.

The iRoad program will include eight projects covering nine provinces. The pilot phase of the iRoad program commenced in 2015 in the Southern Province covering the Galle, Matara and Hambantota districts. Total funding provided under the iRoad 1 program amounts to US \$ 800 million followed by further funding of US \$ 900 million under the iRoad 2 program.

The project is being implemented by the Road Development Authority under the executing Authority of the Ministry of Highways and Road Development and Petroleum Resources Development.

ADB Country Director in Sri Lanka, Sri Widowati said that transport sector development is critical to achieve social, economic targets. She believes that the iRoad project will have a massive socio economic impact on rural communities, uplifting their day-to-day lives, enhancing their contribution to the development of Sri Lanka.

“The project will improve connectivity between rural communities and socioeconomic centres. Improved road connectivity will result in more employment opportunities and better prices for farmers’ produce, better schools and healthcare facilities, improved health indicators, and better school enrolment in rural areas.

“The ADB also plans to develop Sri Lanka’s railway and the port sector,” she said.

Upon completion, iRoad will be the largest single countrywide integrated road development project in Sri Lanka and will produce the much needed socio economic benefits to all Sri Lankans. The project will comprise 95 contract packages amounting to Rs. 2 billion each.

A direct workforce of approximately 40,000 and over 900 engineers will be engaged in work.

The iRoad Southern Province has so far improved 588.5 km of rural access roads, comprising 565.6 km of local roads and a further 22.9 km of national roads. The rural access roads have been improved to all weather standards and will be maintained for three years after completion of construction, under performance based maintenance.

The salient feature of iRoad project is the paramount attention paid to the social, environmental and road safety components.

During the road construction process, officers involved in this project have managed to maintain relative peace and tranquility in the surrounding areas and to protect wildlife.

All the roads of the iRoad Southern Province project have been developed in a non destructive manner by paying the due attention to protect the natural environment in these areas.

The project engineers have also taken adequate measures to control flood damage while maintaining specified road construction standards. They also believe that maintenance of the roads is equally important as improvement of roads.

The officers of iRoad Southern Province have also paid special attention to ensure that the project will improve convenience for people in these rural areas. To this end, every project officer has worked efficiently to ensure that their responsibility towards the project was successfully implemented.

Another salient feature of this project is the voluntary land donation process that involves the contribution of land strips by individuals to the project. During the course of the road development activities that took place in the Southern Province, people were continuously consulted through grievance redress committees.

As a result of the comprehensive public awareness campaign and meaningful consultations, 792 land owners volunteered to donate their lands by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) or consent letters to improve the road adjacent to their lands.

“Prior to the land donation process, we did about three to four consultations with the land owner. During the development of this project, land owners were flexible and accommodating by donating strips of their land for road development activities. After getting his or her consent, we commence the construction of the roads,” said Team Leader MGC-ECL JV, iRoad - Southern Province, Anil M.G. Perera.

“We also had to make sure that no economic displacement takes place and no permanent structures is demolished for any reason. We were able to establish a strong coordination mechanism among stakeholders to involve them in project activities.

“I have worked in six countries covering three continents and iRoad is the most logistically challenging project I have ever handled. During the implementation of the iRoad project, indigenous knowledge and other skills of the local residents were also used to deliver user-friendly roads. Technical experiments, using locally available resources in the Southern Province were successful,” Perera said.

Environmental safeguards is also one of the major compulsory components of the iRoad project and the environmental assessment and review framework has been prepared to guide selection, screening, categorisation, impact assessment, project implementation and monitoring of environmental safeguards according to the requirement of the government and the ADB Safeguard Policy statement.

At the design stage, a number of environment-friendly designs were proposed, hence iRoad was able to reduce unnecessary tree removal, introduce low cost soil conservation methods and protect biodiversity such as construction of barrel revetments instead of the traditional concrete retaining walls.

“Many large trees which could have been easily removed were left untouched by the officers of the project, which was a great challenge. The many challenges successfully faced by the officers during the iRoad project in the Southern Province meant that they could set an example for generations yet to come.

This was also seen as a necessity, so that they too may learn to be sensitive to the needs of nature and thereby its conservation.

As a consequence of the road development process, some trees had to be removed and a total of 4,081 trees were removed yet at a ratio of 1:3, and 12,243 saplings were planted to replace the removed trees. Of this, 8,000 saplings were planted along the Southern expressway between the Godagama–Pinnaduwa intersections.

For the first time, a tag number has been introduced for each sapling to enable the authorities to identify and protect these trees and safeguard the beauty of the countryside,” said Environmental Specialist, MGC-ECL JV, iRoad - Southern Province (SP), Roshan K. Rodrigo.

Appropriate protection with retaining walls was provided to houses adjacent to the road and slope protection was also provided to various establishments in mountainous areas. The iRoad has introduced a new road sign on the road surface to indicate elephant crossing places for the first time in Sri Lanka as a solution for road sign boards which have been damaged by elephants.

“In order to promote women’s participation in road development project, iRoad, SP provided equal opportunities for female and male workers in project activities. Men and Women employees have been paid equal wages for equal work,” said Social Gender and Resettlement Specialist – iRoad Project, Somathilaka Kindelpitiya.

Today, people in the Southern Province have better accessibility to travel to work and further development in their professions and livelihoods due to the iRoad project. It has brought villages close to the cities, while ensuring the protection of nature and the environment.

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[Home \(/\)](#)

[News \(/news\)](#)

[Impact \(/sections/impact\)](#)

[World \(/world\)](#)

[Sports \(/sports\)](#)

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[Columns \(/columns\)](#)

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