

# THE MAKING OF THE NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION PLAN

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The National Environmental Action Plan, or 'NEAP', provides a framework for programmes of action in environmental management officially recognized by the Government of Sri Lanka. The Plan initially covers a five-year period, from 1992 to 1996, with the declared intention of continuing further as a rolling plan.

The NEAP is a unique document in many ways and Sri Lanka is one of the few countries to have such a plan. It has evolved through much public debate and discussion and represents the outcome of several early initiatives in environmental planning, particularly the Land Commission, the National Conservation Strategy, the Environment Sector Report of the Science and Technology Policy document and the NORAD Environmental Study of Sri Lanka, all of which preceded the NEAP.

The most recent stimulus for the formulation of the NEAP came from the World Bank Mission which, in 1989, initiated interest in developing a 'Environmental Strategy Paper' as it was called at the beginning. The World Bank document, which was completed in 1991, was referred to as the Environmental Action Plan (EAP), and when presented to the NGO community came under criticism for concentrating too heavily on 'donor convenient' areas. At the same time, the National Conservation Strategy (NCS) Report was converted into an Action Plan by the Central Environmental Authority. This NCS Action Plan, which had some 199 actions listed for implementation, was seen by the World Bank Mission as well as by some local officials as being heavily biased in favour of ecological conservation, with inadequate emphasis on development needs.

The advance preparations for the UN conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) which was held in Brazil in June 1992 provided an opportunity to bring together both conservation as well as develop-

ment needs in a balanced way. Thus the Sri Lanka Country Report for the UNCED or the 'Earth Summit' provided the more detailed and descriptive textual material from which the NEAP had been formulated. In fact, the NEAP and the UNCED Country Report evolved together, in a collaborative spirit, with much exchange of thought and information, as it was virtually the same group of persons who was behind both documents. Thus, while the UNCED Country Report provides the broad outlook of the Government of Sri Lanka on the vital area of Environment and Development, the NEAP represents its bone and the marrow.

Unlike a conventional planning document, the NEAP is selective and attempts to prioritize actions that are to be undertaken immediately, as well as in the medium- and in the long-term. The prioritization is based on five criteria, namely:

- (i) degree of public concern,
- (ii) need to preserve certain non-renewable resources,
- (iii) likely economic and social impacts,
- (iv) degree of coverage by existing programmes, and
- (v) feasibility in terms of resources, personnel and other constraints.

The NEAP also attempted to identify the likely investment cost in order to undertake the actions proposed. These estimates are, at best, approximate and tentative, subject to variation with changes in the socio-economic context; they indicate only rough orders of magnitude. In total, the NEAP envisages an investment of around four billion rupees or about one hundred million US dollars. Although this sounds quite high, it represents less than five percent of the total development budget. In other words, the NEAP proposes indirectly that Sri Lanka, and perhaps other

countries, should consider devoting at least up to five percent of their total development budgets to environmental management. It demonstrates that environmental management need not be considered as an 'additionality' or an 'extra burden' but as a vital, cost-effective, integral component of a national development strategy.

The NEAP recognizes several major areas that should receive priority attention. These include: land, water, mineral resources, coastal resources, forests, bio-diversity and wild life, urban and industrial pollution, energy, environmental education, culture and institutional capacity. Major environmental issues are identified under each of these headings and actions to address them are listed, with rough cost estimates and suitable implementing agencies. Some attention is paid to research in environment and the universities are cited in at least 12 different places in the NEAP. Similarly, non-governmental organizations are given much prominence in the implementation programmes.

The value of a plan lies much in its progress in implementation of the proposed actions. Some proposed actions are already being undertaken by different agencies. Thus, a new Soil Conservation law in formulated and the government has already initiated action to implement its main provisions. Similarly, an attempt has been made to formulate a Water Master Plan. There are many bilaterally funded projects which contribute significantly to the achievement of NEAP targets; some of them have begun even before the NEAP was launched. It is anticipated that the NEAP will play a significant role in moving Sri Lanka along a path of sustainable development.

#### References

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