

Environmental care in economic developmer

by L C A de S Wijesinghe

The year 1992 also marked the launching of Sri Lanka's national Environmental Action Plan. This plan covered a brief period from 1992 to 1994. It was succeeded by other follow-up plans, the last being for the period 1998 to 2001. The time is now ripe for a reappraisal of the situation and the launching of a fresh plan to cover the next five years, a plan that should more meaningfully integrate environmental care with the whole gamut of economic development measures that have been outline by the Prime Minister.

A board review of the environment development interface as it stands today reveals that, although much has been done in setting up institutional mechanisms and providing the legal back-up for environmental protection over the past ten years, environmental degradation continues to bedevil the development process. This is seen in almost every sector. Space limitations will not permit me to give a comprehensive account of where we have failed to address environmental issues adequately. Neither is it necessary to do so in an article of this nature. I will pick out at random some of the areas of concern.

Sharp increase

In the Transport sector, the past few years have seen a sharp increase in air pollutants discharged by transport vehicles, most evident in the cities. Vehicular emissions, both gaseous and particulate, cause serious respiratory and other diseases. There is growing evidence of dangerous levels of lead in the blood of certain categories of urban dwellers, particularly among children. Regulations have been gazetted for controlling vehicular emissions, and these are expected to come into effect in January 2003, but there is still a long way to go before the technical, institutional and legal mechanisms are in place to enforce the regulations.

Many of our living resources are being harvested at unsustainable levels. These include fishery and forest resources for local use, and live fish and ornamental plants for export. Mineral resources are being exploited causing considerable ecological damage. These activities include sand, clay and gem-mining.

In the agricultural sector, soil erosion is widespread, causing severe decrease in soil fertility and the silting of reservoirs. With our economy heavily dependent on agriculture, and the extend of arable land in the country being severely limited, can we allow this state of affairs to continue? Some months ago a top official of the

ministry in charge of agriculture had self-righteously declared that his concern is increasing agricultural productivity and not protecting the environment. This is the general attitude still being adopted by most ministries i.e. that environmental care is purely the function of the "environmental sector".

Other sectors often look upon environmental protection as an irritant that stands in the way of implementing their development programs. So long as this attitude prevails, development program will continue to degrade the environment and undermine the progress of development.

Deterioration

The past few years has seen a sharp deterioration of the urban environment. Solid waste continues to be dumped by the roadside in residential areas. The beaches, once clean and healthy, are now littered with polythene bags and other plastic material and refuse of all sorts. Anyone walking along the beach from Mt. Lavinia towards Colombo will realize why Sri Lanka is fast losing its attraction as a beach resort in favour of the Maldives. And we depend on tourism as an important foreign exchange earner!

Environment should not be treated as a 'sector' of the economy in the same context as agriculture, fisheries, forestry, mining, industry, and so on. This is a view supported by the eminent Sri Lankans Dr. Gamini Corea and Prof. Suriyakumaran. Similarly, resources like land and water are not development sectors. Neither, in this context, is science and technology. I will here confine my attention to the environment.

The development sectors, by definition, add up to constitute the economy. The environment is a dimension in all these sectors. Environmental care, as appropriate to a particular sector, should constitute a part of that sector's development program. As against this view, it has been argued that if the environment is not considered as a development sector, it will be overlooked or given only scant treatment in the national planning exercise and when budgetary allocations are made by the Treasury. It is also claimed that the environment will not get due attention in the annual review of the economy by the Central Bank.

This is indeed a feeble argument. What the budget allocates to the so-called environmental sector as represented by the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources and the Central Environmental Authority constitutes but a fraction of the nation's contribution to environmental care. Take, for example, the investments that the industrial sector makes to deal with effluent, or the heavy invest-

ments that the energy Ministry would have to make in dealing with pollution from coal-fired plants. Surely, it is not beyond the capacity of the Department of National Planning the Treasury and the Central Bank to adopt a more enlightened view of the importance of environmental care in the mainstream of economic development.

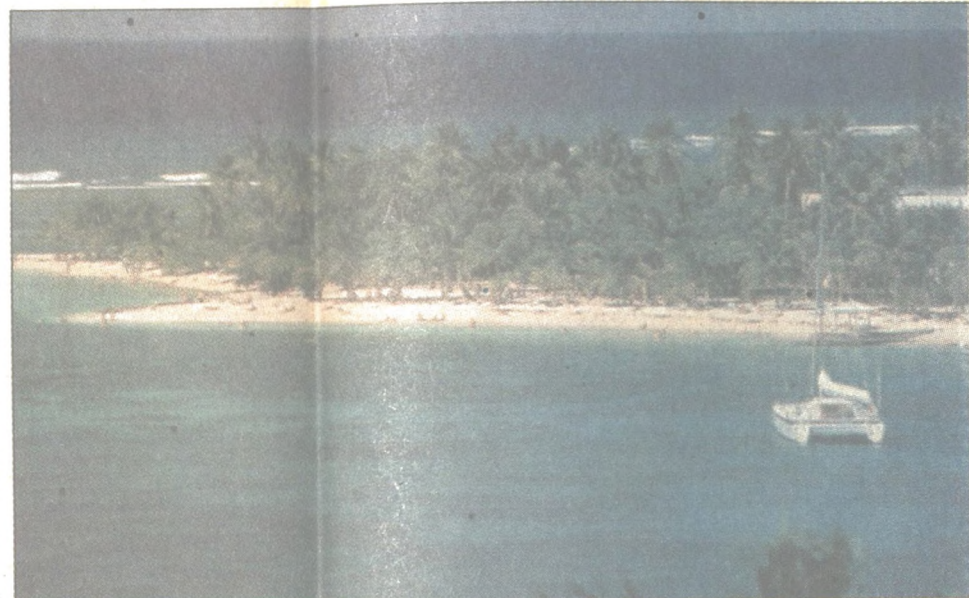
After ten years of environmental planning, we have still to define an explicit National Environment Policy - a policy, that all sectors of the economy would have to follow, a policy that will ensure that development programmes remain sustainable. This failure is perhaps one reason why some sectors distance themselves from taking firm action for safeguarding the environment while pursuing their development programs.

Sri Lanka's development programmes rely heavily on the use of natural resources, both living and non-living. Ours is a small country, and its natural resources are therefore limited. Adding to the problem is our high population density. While depleting natural resources, our efforts to advance economic growth also result in the discharge of waste products in quantities far in excess of the environment's natural capacity to break down and recycle.

This leads to polluted air and water and an unhealthy living environment. The National Environment Policy must be developed endogenously. In formulating our environmental policy we should not be dictated to by outside interests. In Sri Lanka's context howsoever it is worded, the policy should basically focus on three main elements the renewable resources of the country should be used within limits to ensure sustainability; the non-renewable resources (e.g. mineral products) should be used with due regard to optimal and long-term benefits to the people; and a clean and healthy living environment should be maintained. The policy principles and policy objectives should stem from these basic tenets.

Abide by NEP

Once it is developed, all the sectors of the economy, the public and private sectors included, have to abide by the National Environment Policy (NEP). The Ministry in charge of the environment should take on the responsibility of promoting, guiding, coercing if necessary and where possible, providing support for the implementation of the NEP. The Ministry should not directly implement specific projects. Implementing projects may give the Ministry some publicity, but it will result in the Ministry dissipating its efforts and detracting from its prime role of ensuring that the NEP is implemented. The



implementation of projects should be left to the Departments and the other sectoral Ministries.

Safeguarding

To digress for a moment, it is most refreshing to note that the Government has brought under one umbrella (the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources) the two Departments (Forestry and Wildlife) whose prime responsibility is safeguarding the nation's biodiversity. Included in the Ministry is also the mining sector that uses the country's mineral resources and, in the process, has the potential for causing environmental damage. To include a host of other sectors that use natural resources under this same ministry would be most impractical and counterproductive. Instead, those sectors should be induced to adopt conservation measures when using natural resources.

Whereas, when formulating the NEP, the focus is on the natural resources and the living environment, when implementing the policy, the focus should shift to the economic sectors. Each economic sector impacts on the environment in its own way. These impacts constitute the environmental dimensions of the sector, and they should be recognized and incorporated in the sector's development strategy.

True, we have had ten years of environmental planning and much has been done to address environmental issues. Environmental impact assessments (ELAs) and initial environmental examination (IEE) reports, as required by the National Environmental Act, apply to certain categories of projects. However, there are numerous activities that are outside the realm of ELAs and IEEs and continue to cause environmental degradation.

Admittedly, some sectors have included in their strategy statements that need for adopting measures for environmental protection.

But mostly such statements are not sufficiently specific and are only given marginal attention.

How do we step up the tempo of environmental care in the next five years so that the proposed development programmes will bear the stamp of sustainability? The National Environmental Action Plan 1998-2001 has provided a scheme for achieving this. It suggested the setting up of Committees on Environmental Policy and Management (CEPOMs) comprising representatives of different ministries and environmental experts. Unfortunately, their structure and functioning left much to be desired, and their performance cannot by any measure be considered successful. Using the CEPOM mechanism, with a more logical grouping of sectors and more precisely defined terms of reference, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, as now constituted, has a unique opportunity of making a bold national effort to enhance environmental care in the different sectors of development. For accomplishing this, a five-year programme has to be drawn up for the different sectors. The CEPOM mechanism should promote the integration of environmental dimensions into the development strategies of the different sectors and monitor the implementation of the five-year program.

Plan of action

Admittedly the national effort should focus on the main national environmental issues. It would, however, be a grave mistake to ignore the wide range of actions that the various ministries and departments could and should carry out to incorporate environmental care into their programs.

The plan of action that is drawn up should include all of these activities. It may be noted that many of them can be carried out at low cost and can easily be accommodated

within the respective institutions' budgets. The progress of implementation should be monitored through the CEPOM mechanism.

Where does the provincial administration come into the picture? There is a very definite role that the provincial governments should play in incorporating environmental dimensions into their development programmes. The National Environment Policy and the Environmental Dimensions of the sectoral strategies should be adopted, where relevant by the provincial administration and a corresponding action plan drawn up for addressing environmental issues within the province.

The actions will vary from one province to another. For example for obvious reasons, the Sabaragamuwa Province will not be concerned with coastal conservation but will be very much into ecological restoration of gem pits.

With the Prime Minister's pronouncement on resuscitating the economy, and his commitment to pursue a realistic program of economic development, there is now an excellent opportunity for the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources to make sustainable development a reality. It should spearhead the preparation of (a) a National Environment Policy, (b) strategies for addressing environmental dimensions in the different sectors, and (c) a plan of action for the environment that will ensure that environmental care is integrated into the mainstream of economic development. Such a plan would in fact be a National Agenda for Sustainable Economic Development.

(The writer is the Immediate Past President of the National Academy of Sciences and former Country Representative of the World Conservation Union. He was also a member of the Sri Lanka delegation to the Ecrt Summit).