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South Asian governments approve declaration on control and prevention of air pollution

In a meeting of SACEP (South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme) held in Male (Maldives) on 22 April 98, all South Asian Governments have approved a Declaration on Control and Prevention of Air Pollution. This declaration is the end result of a process started on the joint initiation of UNEP/EAP-AP based at Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok and the Stockholm Environment Institute. On 20 March 1998, representatives of South Asian governments, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Maldives met for a policy dialogue meeting held at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Bangkok, Thailand and agreed in principle to a draft South Asian Declaration on Control and Prevention of Air Pollution. The policy dialogue meeting was organised by the United Nations Environment Programme/Environment Assessment Programme for Asia and Pacific (UNEP/EAP-AP) based at AIT, and the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) based in Stockholm, Sweden as part of the Regional Air Pollution Program in Developing Countries, funded by the Swedish International Development Co-operation (SIDA) and managed by SEI.

The draft declaration was put before the South Asian environmental ministers for the official declaration at the Seventh meeting of the Governing Council of South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme (SACEP) held on 22 April 1998 in Male, the Republic of Maldives. The Governing Council meeting was inaugurated by Mr. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, President of the Republic of Maldives and attended by ministers and high level policy makers from South Asian environment ministries. It resulted in the approval of the Declaration on control and prevention of air pollution by South Asian governments.

The aim of the Declaration is to achieve intergovernmental cooperation to address the increasing threat of transboundary air pollution and consequential impacts due to concentrations of pollutant gases and acid deposition on human health, ecosystem function and corrosion of materials. Besides laying down the general principles of intergovernmental cooperation for air pollution abatement, the Declaration sets up an institutional framework linking scientific research and policy formulation. The Declaration also calls for the continuation of this process in stages, with mutual consultation, to draw up and implement national and regional action plans and protocols based on a fuller understanding of transboundary air pollution issues.

As a result of the Declaration the major implications in the short-term could be (i) evolving of an institutional structure at national level both for of policy response and the technical requirements; (ii) strengthening of monitoring arrangements; (iii) baseline studies to assess and analyze the air pollution issue; and (iv) development and/or adoption of national action plans.

In the long-term, the Declaration could be one of the central means for protecting the atmospheric environment in South Asia. In the years to come it could serve as one more bridge between different political systems and as a factor of some stability in years of political change. It could lead to the development of international environmental law and also create the essential framework for controlling and reducing the damage to human health and the environment caused by localized and transboundary air pollution. It is a successful example of what can be achieved through intergovernmental cooperation.

In addition to the Declaration, a follow up action plan has also been agreed. Follow up activities will be implemented in three levels. National, Sub-regional and Regional. In addition to the baseline studies and national action plans, a network of researchers and policy makers will also be established at the national level. At the sub-regional level, national level activities will be aggregated through SACEP. Dissemination of tools, methodologies, and

data will be done at the regional level through a regional resource centre. The follow up program will be implemented by UNEP/EAP-AP in collaboration with SEI and SACEP and with SIDA support.

The text of the Declaration:

Recognizing the potential for increase in air pollution and consequential phenomena due to concentration of pollutant gases, acid rain or acid deposition as well as the impacts on the health of humans and other living organisms in all our countries due to man made and natural causes; and also

Recognizing the potential increase in transboundary air pollution as a corollary of air pollution in each country; and

Realising that the potential for air pollution increase and its transboundary effects will accumulate in the absence of national measures to abate and prevent such potential; and

Reiterating in this context Principle 21 of the UN declaration on the Human Environment in 1972 which stated that states have, in accordance with the charter of the United Nations and the principle of international laws, the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environment policies, and the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other states or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction.

Keeping in mind that need for constant study and monitoring of the trends in air pollution with a view to understand the extent of our potential for damage to the environment and health in the member countries and taking consequential measures to strengthen and build capacity for such activities.

Stressing the need for development and economic growth that will help build up the quality of life and incomes of all the people of all the region, in particular the poorer sections of the population, having due regard to the need to have a clean and healthy environment.

Emphasising that air pollution issues have to be analyzed and managed in the wider framework of human and sustainable development within each country and within the region; and

Drawing from the experience of co-operation in the region in matters like cultural exchange and also from the experience in other regions like Europe and sub-regions of Asia like ASEAN and East Asia.

We declare that countries of this region will initiate and/or carry forward programmes in each country to

1. Assess and analyze the origin and causes, nature, extent and effects of local and regional air pollution, using the in-house in identified institutions, universities, colleges etc. building up or enhancing capacities in them where required.
2. Develop and/or adopt strategies to prevent and minimise air pollution.
3. Work in co-operation with each other to set up monitoring arrangements beginning with the study of sulphur and nitrogen and volatile organic compounds emissions, concentrations and deposition;
4. Co-operate in building up standardised methodologies to monitor phenomena like acid depositions and analyze their impacts without prejudice to the national activities in such fields;
5. Take up the aforesaid programmes and training programmes which involves the transfer of financial resources and technology and work towards securing incremental assistance from bilateral and multilateral sources.
6. Encourage economic analysis that will help arriving at optimal results
7. Engage other key stakeholders for example industry, academic institutions, NGOs, communities and media etc. in the effort and activities.

We also declare that we shall constantly endeavour to improve national reporting systems and strengthen scientific and academic effort in the understanding and tackling of air pollution issues.