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**THE ROLE OF SACEP IN PROMOTING
REGIONAL/SUBREGIONAL CO-OPERATION
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN
SOUTH ASIA**

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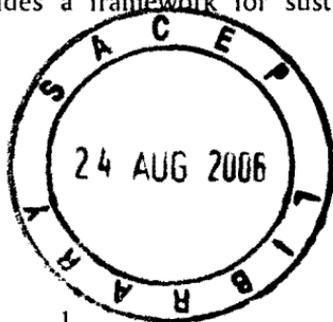
Introduction

The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in Sweden, brought a new dimension to the environmental movement by emphasizing the interdependence between the environment and economic development. This conference also drew the attention of the world community to the environmental issues that would change people's life styles and that in many ways would threaten the future well-being of the world-if resource consumption was not changed to a more sustainable pattern.

With this recognition, the United Nations established the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) to assess these issues and make recommendations. The Commission concluded that a new development path was required: one that sustained human progress not just in a few places for a few years, but for the entire planet into the distant future.

Sustainable development, as the Brundtland commission defined it, is a process in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investment, and the orientation of technological development and institutional change meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

In 1992, UNCED articulated the concept of sustainable development, which recognises that environment and development are inextricably interconnected. The broad goals of UNCED were laid out in Agenda 21, which provides a framework for sustainable development.



Over the past two and half decades and particularly after UNCED, considerable advances have been made by countries in Asia to reinforce national policies, regulations and institutions for promoting the goals of sustainable development. However, the achievement of sustainable development remains a formidable task, with challenges arising from prevailing of unsustainable practices in the region, such as:

- the over-exploitation of natural resources;
- subsistence farming;
- the destruction of forest resources;
- inefficient firewood use practices;
- unplanned land use, urbanisation and industrialisation;
- the use of inappropriate technologies; and
- inadequate consideration of environmental elements in development policies.

SACEP: Premier Body of Environment in South Asia

After the United Nations Conference on Human Development, the countries of South Asia became aware of the need for new avenues of regional co-operation in environmental management, protection, and preservation. The South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) was set up by the member countries to foster sub-regional co-operation in the areas of sustainable development.

SACEP has been conceived with the approval of the ministerial meeting of South Asian Countries in 1981, with a deep concern towards the feasibility of regional co-operation on environmentally-oriented development activities. SACEP became a legal entity in 1982. To date, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have ratified the Articles of Association of SACEP.

Aims and Functions

The aims of SACEP are:

- to promote and support the protection, management and enhancement of the environment, both natural and human, of the countries of South Asia, individually, collectively, and co-operatively; and
- to encourage the judicious use of the resources with a view to reducing poverty, reducing of socio-economic disparities, and improving the quality of life of the people.

The functions of SACEP are:

- to promote co-operative activities in priority areas of the environment that are of mutual interest;
- to ensure that these activities result in benefit individual or collective benefits to the member countries of the region;
- to extend support as needed through exchange of knowledge and expertise available among the member countries;
- to provide local resources towards implementation of projects and activities; and
- to encourage maximum constructive and complementary support from interested bilateral and multilateral sources of assistance.

Principal organs

The Principal Organs of SACEP are the Governing Council, the Consultative Committee, and the Secretariat

The Governing Council is the principal review and deliberative body of SACEP in which the member states are represented at the ministerial level. The Governing Council is responsible for determining the policy and programmes of SACEP.

The Consultative Committee consists of representatives of the respective missions of the member states of SACEP Secretariat in Colombo. The Committee meets quarterly at the SACEP Secretariat. It is responsible to facilitating the implementation of programmes and policies determined by the Governing Council through close, informal co-operation, and for promoting the dissemination of information on the concepts and operations of SACEP in general.

The Secretariat, consists of a Director General, who is Chief Executive Officer and acts as Secretary at the meetings of the Governing Council and the Consultative Committee. The Secretariat also has an International Officer and supporting staff.

SACEP's Programme Activities

A number of projects and programmes in the field of environment have been implemented since 1982. With the assistance of UNEP, SACEP reviewed its progress and formulated strategies to implement its programmes: SACEP's Strategy and Programme 1 (SSP - 1) 1992-1996 and SACEP's Strategy and Programme 2(SSP-2) 1996-2000. The criteria for formulation of these programmes included:

- collective regional priorities and Interests;
- consistency with Agenda 21;
- current programmes of international, regional and national organisations and agencies; and
- the prospective availability of external funding for various Programmes and Projects

Besides SSP-1 and SSP-2, the South Asia Regional Sea Programme is also being implemented by SACEP. A meeting of Plenipotentiaries of the five marine member states, held in March 1995, formally adopted the action plan for the implementation of the South Asian Regional Seas Programme.

The meeting also designated SACEP Secretariat as the secretariat for the implementation of this programme.

Regional/Sub - regional Activities in Promoting Sustainable Development

The sustainable development priorities of South Asia are highly variable within the region, depending on land area, population, resource base, level of pollution, status of economic development and technology advancement. Nevertheless, these priorities can be grouped as

- reducing poverty, reducing socioeconomic disparities, and improving the quality of life of the people;
- integrating environmental considerations into the development processes;
- environmental capacity building in key areas such as,
 - ❖ sustainable policy development;
 - ❖ integrated planning;
- management tools and techniques like
 - ❖ economic instruments;
 - ❖ human resource development, especially in relation to environmental education and training;
- environmental information systems and databases; and
- the application of cleaner production technologies and the transfer of environmentally sound and sustainable technologies.

SACEP, is implementing a number of projects aimed at developing regional cooperation to facilitate national capacity building efforts to manage environmental issues, develop basic infrastructure, and to enhance the exchange of information in the region. SACEP, plays a lead role in the conservation of ecosystems and sustainable use of bio-resources, the assessment of regional environmental issues, and the enhancement of awareness through various projects.

Regional/Sub-regional Co-operation for Formulation and Implementation of Projects and Programmes

In 1983, 15 priority subject areas in the field of environment were identified and approved by the SACEP Governing Council as the felt needs of the member countries. These areas were divided into six broad categories:

- Environmental Management, including:
 - ❖ EIAs;
 - ❖ environment and development;
 - ❖ technology; and
 - ❖ the development of renewable and reusable resources.
- Environmental Legislation;
- the Management of Natural Resources, including:
 - ❖ conservation of mountain ecosystems;
 - ❖ social forestry;
 - ❖ wildlife and genetic resources conservation;
 - ❖ the conservation of coral, mangroves, and coastal areas;
 - ❖ island ecosystems, and
 - ❖ tourism and environment;
 - ❖ Desertification
 - ❖ Energy and the Environmental; and
 - ❖ Education and Training

The 7th Governing Council meeting, held in Male in 1998, amended the subject areas according to the various subject areas of Agenda 21. Fourteen subject matter areas with focal member countries have now been identified as follows:

- Conservation of Biodiversity: India
- Sustainable Tourism Development: Maldives
- Management of Coral Island Ecosystems: Maldives
- Management of Fresh Water Resources: Bangladesh
- Desertification: Pakistan
- Environmental Legislation: India

- Participatory Forest Management: Nepal
- Sustainable Agriculture and Land Use: Sri Lanka
- Sustainable Human Settlements Development: Sri Lanka
- Waste Management: India
- Science and Technology for Sustainable development: Pakistan
- Education and Training: India
- Air Pollution: Pakistan

Each SACEP member country has also nominated subject area focal point and a person who will proposals relating to project implementation in their subject areas. The identification of subject area focal points ensures that an institution in one of the member countries is being strengthened in a particular field in which it aims to become a centre of excellence, while at the same time sharing its expertise and assisting other countries of the region. This also reduces the cost of getting expertise from other regions.

Mechanisms for project implementation have been so designed that the focal points will play a vital role in the formulation and operation of the regional programmes in their respective subject areas. This type of mechanism ensures that all programmes of the organisation are "country needs driven" and that they achieve the overall objectives set out in Agenda 21.

Regional /Sub-regional Programme for Sustainable Development

Activities to foster sustainable development in the member countries are undertaken within a strong framework of regional and subregional cooperation. The overall focus of SACEP activities is on environmental management and on supporting of sustainable development at a subregional level and includes following areas:

- Capacity Building and Institutional Strengthening;
- Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity;
- Ecosystems Conservation and Management;
- Environmental Information and Assessment; and
- Education and Enhancement of Awareness.

Capacity Building and Institutional Strengthening:

The member countries of SACEP have a real need of capacity building for assessment, reporting, data management, plan preparation, programmes and monitoring. With this realisation, many activities (such as Integrated Coastal Zone Management Training, Environmental Management Seminars, High level Judicial Meeting on Legislation) have been launched on an effort to build familiarity with recently developed economic and environmental instruments, technologies, policies, conventions and protocols, and management concepts. Such types of activities have played catalytic roles in enhancing skills for sound and sustainable management of resources.

An appropriate institutional and legislative framework is important for the effective implementation of sustainable development concepts. Over the last decade, tremendous progress has been made in the region in establishing institutional machinery for environmental management, and in enacting appropriate legislation for pollution control and natural resource management. However, there are still conflicts regarding functional responsibilities (mandates) between environmental and sectoral agencies and weakness in enforcement and monitoring mechanisms. In the case of institutional strengthening, SACEP has established the SACEP Environment and Natural Resources Center (SENTRIC) and a Geological Information Survey (GIS) training lab at the University of Paradeniye, Sri Lanka. SACEP has conducted a seminar/workshop in environmental compliance and enforcement in order to review the status of legal instruments in the region and to assess weaknesses in the institutional and legal framework and enforcement mechanism.

Conservation and Sustainable uses of Biological Diversity

South Asia contains highly stratified life-forms and represented by an equally rich diversity of species. Sincerely, some of the world's mega-biodiversity areas are located in this region. Nevertheless, rapid loss of biodiversity is increasing due to habitat destruction, deforestation, unscientific land use, over exploitation, pollution, forest fires and inappropriate introduction of alien species. Urgent and decisive action is needed to conserve and preserve genes, species and ecosystems with a view to promoting sustainable management of biodiversity resources. SACEP has undertaken a number of projects in this area, such as;

- the assessment of faunal biodiversity in the South Asia region;
- the assessment of floral biodiversity in the South Asian region;
- training on protected areas and coral reef ecosystems.

The outputs of these activities have helped member countries to exchange information and experiences and development methodologies and action plan.

Ecosystem conservation and management

Various types of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems with the richest mangrove and coral reef resources are located in the region and the resources of these ecosystems should continue to play an important role in the development of the economies. However, they are facing the threat of environmental degradation from natural and anthropogenic impacts (i.e., unchecked human intervention and pollution discharges from a number of sources). Regional cooperation in the conservation and management of ecosystems, especially ocean and marine ecosystems, is needed to sustain these life-supporting system as an integral part of the region's environment.

SACEP has given priority to these areas, and the first meeting of plenipotentiaries in December 1998 endorsed an action plan with the following priority subject areas:

- **Priority Area 1:**
Integrated Coastal Zone Management;
- **Priority Area 2:**
Development and Implementation of National and Regional Oil Spill Contingency Planning;
- **Priority Area 3:**
Human Resource development through Strengthening Regional Centers of Excellence; and
- **Priority Area 4:**
Land-Based Sources of Marine Pollution;

A draft report of the Regional Oil Spill Contingency Plan has been prepared. A consultative meeting on land-based sources of marine pollution in South Asia recommended future actions, such as preparation of national status report, exchange of information, and the establishment of databank.

Environmental Assessment and Information Networks

Environmental assessment and information for environmentally sustainable development planning and management are major concerns for South Asia. SACEP is intensifying efforts to catalyse national and regional action to strengthen assessment, reporting and data management capacities of institutions undertaking environmental assessments for *State of the Environment* reports and planning for sustainable development.

Industrial and Urban Pollution Assessment

Pollution is an emerging environmental issue in South Asia, as it is in many parts of the world. The rapid growth of cities, together with associated growth in industry and transport systems, has made the region increasingly concerned with emissions.

The seventh meeting of the Governing Council of SACEP, held in 1998 in Maldives, approved the Male Declaration on Control and Prevention of Air Pollution and its likely Transboundary Effects for South Asia. The Male Declaration makes provision for baseline study and an action plan for air pollution. Implementation of this project began in January 1999.

Future Direction: Areas for Regional/ sub-regional Co-operation

SACEP is playing a very important catalytic and implementing role in various areas of environmental management for sound and sustainable development in the region. A recent evaluation report by a NORAD's Evaluation Team has that SACEP should indeed be responsible for the implementation of projects at a subregional level (along with networking, coordination, reporting and monitoring) because there is no alternative subregional body which could fulfill this role.

There are still many areas which need immediate attention, especially:

- capacity building;
- information networks;
- technology transfer; and
- planning and management, including:
 - ❖ land-use planning, and
 - ❖ waste management,
 - ❖ traditional practices and techniques.

SACEP is planning to implement activities related to

- pesticides and waste management;
- air pollution;
- sustainable agriculture and land use, and
- strategic EIA training.