

SACEP in dire financial trouble

Cogent case for a Trust Fund

By Mallika Wanigasundara

SACEP, the fledgling, 10-nation South Asian Co-operative Environment Program which was formed last year for the protection of the region's environment is scraping the bottom of the barrel. It is in severe financial difficulties.

For the financing of its institutional set-up it is entirely dependent on the contributions of its member countries. All of them have pledged varying amounts of money, but some of these contributions have not been received upto date.

This situation has to be viewed against two facts: the member countries are all of them poor countries, and five of them are classified as the least developed. In addition, UN agencies have made it clear that they will no longer meet the institutional costs of organisations such as SACEP. But, there will be no difficulty in garnering funds for professionally drawn up, viable projects.

Mr. K. H. J. Wijedasa, a member of the Sri Lanka delegation Chairman of the Central Environmental

Authority and Additional Secretary Ministry of Local Government, Housing and Construction, made an impassioned plea to member-nations to help SACEP overcome these initial financial difficulties. He was speaking at the meeting of the Governing Council now on at the BMICH.

He said that upto 1982 Sri Lanka, had made a contribution of

US dollars 110,000 approximately for the setting up of the institution and meeting its annual contributions.

UNEP had made a contribution of dollars 40,000 while Afghanistan (\$ 1500) and Pakistan (\$3000) had sent in their contributions. The contribution of Bhutan (\$ 1000) which was sent had got tangled up in some bank formalities.

Mr. Wijedasa also revealed that the Director of SACEP had voluntarily not taken his salary, and only the local staff had been paid.

He also made a cogent case for the setting up of a Trust Fund, which was one of the measures endorsed by the workshop which preceded the on-going meeting of the Governing Council.

Attempts made to tap financial support from Sweden and Denmark had not been successful so far, he said, but he called upon the membership to assist with the launching of such a fund.

He said that such a fund could yield interest to give SACEP stability and sustain the institutional set-up in the coming years.

A committee consisting of delegates from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and the Maldives was nominated to draft the resolution on the Trust Fund.

Lalith lauds SACEP's plan of action

Trade and Shipping Minister Lalith Athulathmudali said it was encouraging that the SACEP had worked out a practical plan of action for its very first Governing Council meeting where as many international committees and conferences produce a plethora of proposals and recommendations. Mr. Athulathmudali, as Chairman of the Governing Council, welcomed the delegates at the inaugural sessions on Thursday at BMI-CH.

He said:

"It is a matter to be happy about—and to be proud of—that the nations of South Asia, the majority of whom are caught up in the travails of the development process, have realised a danger far too long overlooked by the developed countries—that is, the subtle long term danger of environmental pollution. Today, many of the foremost industrial cities of the world appear to be almost smothered in environmental problems and they present timely warning to our own development programs. Development is a pressing need, especially for us in South Asia with our teeming populations and low income levels.

But we must pause to consider the commitments of development—and to avoid its pitfalls. There is a common saying in Sinhala that to fall into a pit at night is excusable, but to fall into one in day time is unforgivable.

"The need for a

breathable atmosphere has been felt since the world came into existence. Ever since the earth solidified out of its original cosmic gases and diffused materials dust has been the element in its atmosphere. Very early in history, too, man was tantalized by the possibilities of venturing out of his natural environment—into space and beneath the oceans. Wherever he went, he had to find a breathable atmosphere. The ancient Romans knew the fundamentals of man's requirements when they built public baths, aqueducts and drainage systems. With the fall of the Roman Empire, the Dark Ages ushered in not only the end of learning and culture but of hygienic living. It is ironic that with the dawn of the Industrial Revolution hygiene reached its nadir and man's life span shrank to 35 years.

Since then, man has directed every effort to "develop"—to grow economically, to improve his quality of life. It is an effort that has succeeded — and today, in many parts of the world, man lives better and controls more of nature than he ever did. But it is a fact—a regrettable and ironic fact—that for many years development has been permitted to be hostile to environment, to occur at the cost of it, to undermine and waste it. Man has often developed whilst paving the road to his own annihilation. A few figures remind us that natural resources are not unlimited. A Stanford University survey shows that an average citizen in USA uses 21 thousand gallons of petrol and 26 million gallons of water in a life time

of 70 years. It is also estimated that industrial progress in the last hundred years has added over 15 per cent to the carbon dioxide content of our air. Scientists say that further significant increases may warm up the globe so that the Arctic and Antarctic Ice Caps would melt and flood our major cities. A contrary argument is that the increasing smog pollution would form a shield against the sun's rays and start a return to the Ice Age. All this is controversial. What is not controversial is the fact that we are already beginning to suffer from the ignorance of long term effects of the exploitation of nature. There is little point in theoretical arguments regarding the habitability of the earth in the year 2000 AD. The point is that something should—and can—be done now. It is easy enough to forget the underlying dangers and yield to present convenience. At a seminar on "Man and The Future" held at the University of Kansas, the question of atmospheric pollution by the motor car was raised and an unanimous condemnation made of the invention as a threat to civilization. At the end of the conference all the participants got into their cars and drove away in this condemned invention.

It is heartening, then, that we in South Asia have awakened to a threat long overlooked in more developed countries. We have not merely awakened, but have put into effect a concerted program. It is a matter of pride that countries with relatively low income patterns, yet rich in history and culture, have got together—in a pragmatic manner—to work jointly to

preserve the environment without which we cannot survive. Such concerted action is necessary partly because the problem is not a national one, and therefore cannot be solved within the boundaries of a single country. It is also necessary to act together because the majority of the programme's members are as yet undeveloped in many ways—in technology, in expertise, and in financial capability. So, interchange and co-operation among them is essential. The idea of self-help which underlies the program is indeed a laudable one—indicating the increasing stature of developing nations in matters of global dimensions.

At a time when International Committees and Conferences produce a plethora of reports, guidelines and suggestions which never materialise into concrete proposals, it is encouraging to see that the Governing Councils of SACEP has already defined a series of practical projects. The pragmatic nature of these projects is clearly apparent when we regard the areas they cover—areas of basic importance to the people of South Asia such as fuelwood conservation, recycling of wastes and organised environmental education."

Make 1988, the year of trees for South Asia

—Gamini

Lands and Mahawell Minister Gamini Dissanayake yesterday proposed that 1988 be designated "The year of the trees for South Asia".

The Minister, who presided on the second day at the SACEP Governing Council meeting, said the adoption of his proposal would help the governments of the region to undertake massive tree plantation programmes.

The following are some excerpts from his speech.

"I am certain that at this meeting, you will be deliberating on many important issues, of the present and the future, as they must be of deep concern to us in our respective countries, and also together, as members of this South Asian Community.

"In my presentation today, I want to focus attention on one particular activity which is fundamental to providing for the basic needs of our people. I refer to our trees and forests. Indeed, trees have a bearing on a number of our economic needs and growth capacities. This is so precisely because of the wide ranging purposes served by trees and forests to all living beings. They are capital assets always and have contributed from time immemorial to economic and social activities of the community in various ways. An individual tree is a family asset and trees in a local community are a source of food, fuel, fodder, fertilizer and building material.

"Our great natural and exotic forests play a fundamental role in our agrarian economy by protecting water-sheds, lessening the run-off rate of rivers, ensuring soil fertility and providing the habitat for both wild life and the fast-depleting genetic plant resources. Man-made plantations especially rubber often covering hundreds of thousand acres in this part of the world also play the function of forests, and perform a vital role in the ecosystem.

"For reasons well known to you, the forests and trees have been exploited without any consideration to the ill-effects that such exploitation would cause to the environment and to our resource base. All developing countries in South Asia are well aware of the chaos and calamities caused by the rape of our forests, for whatever reasons, be it the greed of the rich or the need of the poor. Developing countries are now allocating considerable sums of money, though too little, for the re-rection, maintenance and judicious expansion of forest cover in keeping with the needs of ecological and economic requirements of the nations concerned.

"In this, we have a coincidence of a common interest from the developed countries, from whom, therefore, it would be possible to expect the strongest financial support. Most temperate climate countries have depleted their forests already and developed countries are extremely keen supporters of global efforts in the maintenance and consolidation of forest cover. There is concern as to maintaining the

levels of carbon dioxide and in conserving the ozone layer, in both of which trees play a vital balancing role. This interest of the developed countries is one of these rare symbiotic relationships in which giver and taker are both beneficiaries.

"In view of the very high priority allocated to this subject both by the developed and developing world, I wish to place before this Council a proposal I wish to propose that the year 1988 be designated The Year of Trees for South Asia, so that from now on we can resolve to develop in each of our countries programmes of needed scale and practical value, which could be implemented with assistance from developed countries and international agency sources, in order that this lost capital asset is restored to the required status. I have no doubt that if we resolve to undertake this programme with determination and professionalism, the world community too may adopt this model for replication elsewhere.

Examples of rehabilitation of forests are many in South Asia and elsewhere. Outside South Asia, perhaps I, may point to a remarkable exercise that China has completed under a family programme of planting 2000 million trees last year. Even allowing for lapses in maintaining them it does constitute a phenomenal achievement. This apart, during the 70's, China completed under state and official auspices, what must have been one of the most spectacular tree and forest planting programmes undertaken.

The village and social forestry programmes in some states in India are in a different way a spectacular example of what can be achieved. At the same time, in many places in our region the ravages of mountain slopes, as in Nepal and erosion from the coastal areas and the denuding of the forests go on. We need in South Asia the launching of a great redemptive programme, as an urgent and vital initiative to save the depleting forest asset and to launch out a rapid re-forestation programmes.

"The programme for us in SACEP will involve national level thinking and planning. As I mentioned, it is not simply environmental, economic and developmental. It will also give opportunities for an involved sharing of our common knowledge and experience in the environmental, economic and social aspects of forestry. It should involve exchanging research data, seed material and various other aspects of a successful national, regional and possibly, global project.

"I am making this proposal, especially in view of the fact that a co-operative effort will enhance and accelerate this vital activity. It may also perhaps become an outstanding symbol of our collaborative will and spirit in SACEP. I commend this to you in all earnestness and hope that, after your deliberations and appropriate refinements and formulation, you will consider the declaration of the year, 1988 as The Year of Trees for South Asia and set out its targets and the incumbent responsibilities for SACEP members."