

LAND USE PLANNING IN SRI LANKA

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Sri Lanka's per capita land resources are shrinking with its increasing population and heavier pressures on land; and if present trends continue it is estimated that per capita land availability could be halved by the end of the century. Further aggravating the situation is the fact that in recent years numerous state authorities have been delegated the responsibility for developing and managing the country's land resources. In this paper Dr. K. de Alwis, Head of the Land Use Division, Irrigation Department, argues that it is imperative for Government to formulate a national land use policy that will define the jurisdiction of each of these government agencies; establish a definite set of guidelines to be followed by them; and also that specific national objectives in use and management of land are set out. He also outlines an organisational set up necessary to fulfill these objectives and suggests an implementation strategy.

The total land resources of Sri Lanka are limited, being roughly 16 million acres in extent. Per capita land resources, however, are shrinking rapidly with increasing population and, if present trends continue, should be approximately halved by the end of the century. There would be, on average, less than 60 perches of arable land per person by the year 2000. In the meanwhile the demands for land for agriculture, housing, industry, recreation, transport, forestry, etc. will correspondingly increase.

Fortunately, however, land is a renewable resource (except for some limited uses like mining) and can be used as such indefinitely if put to the correct use and scientifically managed.

LAND USE POLICY

Land is a national resource and, therefore, even though a considerable part of it is privately owned, the use of land cannot be left entirely to the discretion of the owners — be they private individuals, corporate bodies or State organizations. The use of any tract of land has a profound impact on the surrounding lands, the catchment in which it occurs, the environment, the economy and the well being of the country generally. The public interest as well as the interests of future generations should be safeguarded by ensuring that the use of land is regulated to give optimum benefits while conserving it as a renewable resource.

The State has always been the biggest single land owner in this country. But until recently, most State-owned land consisted

of forest reservations or waste land having considerable potential for future development but requiring vast capital-intensive development programmes.

After the Land Reform Act was implemented, however, the State also came into possession of nearly 400,000 ha. of the choicest agricultural land taken from private individuals and from local and foreign companies. Thus, the State is today in a position to develop, manage or dispose of a major part of this country's land resources and to exercise considerable regulatory control (through Acts like the Agricultural Productivity Law) over the entire remaining extent.

With the creation of the Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka, the Greater Colombo Economic Commission, the District Councils, etc., however, the responsibility for developing and managing the land resources of Sri Lanka has been diffused. Each agency formulates and carries out its own development plans according to its priorities and objectives. Except in the case of the Mahaweli Authority which has made a special effort in this direction, there is little co-ordination among these plans and the environmental impacts of these development programmes are not always considered.

It is therefore imperative that the Government formulates a national land use policy which (1) defines the jurisdiction of each of these statutory agencies, the District Councils, other local authorities the Central Government and private land owners over the general regulation and control of land use within their boundaries (2) establishes a set of land use guidelines to be followed by government agencies, firms or private individuals, including the prohibition of certain types of land use and management which threaten the resource base itself, and (3) states government and national objectives in the use and management of land.

Land use Planning

The formulation of a land use policy alone will not, however, ensure the rational utilization of the land resources of this country. Legislation should be enacted and institutional arrangements made to see that these resources are utilized in accordance with sound principles of land use planning and management. Unco-ordinated and unplanned land use will lead not only to a waste of capital and human resources but also to possible permanent damage to this valuable natural resource.

What is Land Use Planning? It is a four-stage process. The first stage consists of a survey and inventory of the physical resources

of land such as soil, climate, hydrology, etc. The next step is to decide, on the basis of this information, what possible uses the land could be put to without damaging it as a resource. The third stage is to evaluate the degree of physical and economic suitability of the land for these different possible uses and to state these as a set of economically feasible land use options. (Land Evaluation). The final step is the selection of preferred alternatives for each type of land, based on the land evaluation as well as on the other social, economic and political considerations.

This final decision is usually taken at the highest policy making (i.e. political) level. But since it would be a choice among a number of physically and economically viable alternatives, there would be no danger of land being allocated to uses for which it is not suited if a proper land evaluation preceded the final decision on the use of any tract of land.

Organizational set-up for land use planning

Broad classes under which different uses of land can be grouped are (1) urban uses including housing (2) mining (3) transportation (4) tourism (5) recreation (6) plantation agriculture (7) irrigated agriculture (8) non-irrigated medium and small scale agriculture (9) pasture (10) chena (11) forestry (plantation and conservation) (12) wild life and (13) man-made reservoirs and canals. Decisions have to be taken regarding the suitability of land not only among these broad classes but within each class regarding the details of use e.g. whether to grow rice or sugarcane or cotton on land suited for irrigated agriculture.

Such decisions require background information regarding the soils, climate, vegetation, hydrology, underlying geological material and other attributes of land and also about desirable land qualities for each projected use. For these purposes, an organization with the necessary multidisciplinary expertise to assess the suitability of land for various potential uses and evaluate the corresponding costs and benefits of each of these uses—is absolutely essential.

An organization of this type would be able to assist in formulating an overall National Land Use Plan and in siting of major development projects. It could also advise various Ministries, Departments, Corporations, District Councils and even private land-owners on the technical and economic feasibility and environmental impact of any proposed project involving the use of land.

Land Management

Good land use planning will ensure only that lands are allocated for appropriate uses. Continued management of the land is, however, also essential if the land resource is to be preserved without degradation. A body which is capable of continuously monitoring cases of both inappropriate uses of land and poor management of land leading to its degradation is therefore needed to give effect to the national land use policies and ensure proper utilization of the land resources of the country. Such an organization would have to be provided with the necessary legislative backing and powers of enforcement if it is to be effective in checking the misuse of land.

Implementation

The implementation of this strategy for the use of and management of the land resources of Sri Lanka will require

1. the adoption of a national Land Use Policy
2. the establishment of an agency — preferably a Land Use Authority — that will work within the framework of this policy.
 - a) establish a set of land use guidelines to be followed by all land users
 - b) provide basic information on the characteristics of the land resource and its suitability for different uses
 - c) provide assistance in Land Use Planning
 - d) monitor current uses of land with respect to both the appropriateness of use and the hazard of land degradation resulting from poor management.
 - e) have power to take action to correct misuses of land referred to in (d) above
 - f) recommend any changes in legislation required to protect the land from degradation and destructive hazards and to preserve it as a renewable resource.
3. the setting up of a high — level inter — Ministerial Committee to co-ordinate policies and activities among different land using agencies and to ensure that the land use policies and guidelines are followed.