

# **National Land Use Policy of Sri Lanka**

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**THE BIRDS THAT GLIDE THE SKY AND  
ANIMALS THAT ROAM THE FOREST HAVE AN  
EQUAL RIGHT  
TO LIVE AND MOVE ANY WHERE IN THE  
COUNTRY  
AS YOU HAVE. THIS LAND BELONGS TO THE  
PEOPLE  
AND ALL THE OTHER LIVING BEINGS; YOU  
ARE  
ONLY THE TRUSTEE."**

**ARAHATH MAHINDA THERO  
TO**

**KING DEVANAMPIYATHISSA  
(B.C.306)**

## **01. Background**

Land is the most important natural resource on which the livelihood of man depends. It is the prime resource and all other natural resources have been absorbed within it. Hence land can be treated as the fundamental natural resources; it is the basis for meeting all human, biological and environmental needs.

In a country like Sri Lanka, where the population is predominantly rural and depends on agriculture for their livelihood, scientific land use planning should be the prime activity approach to solve human environmental issues. These issues have become very sensitive particularly in urban areas and suburbs.

Improper land use can lead to various human, biological and environmental problems. During the last few decades natural disasters have been on the increase because of improper land uses in Sri Lanka. For example, human settlement and cultivation of annual crops on steeply sloping lands have resulted in rapid soil erosion, land slides and the silting of rivers, waterways and reservoirs, thereby reducing their capacity and causing floods. Furthermore, the productivity of fertile lands has been reduced due to improper land use. According to the available statistics nearly 44% of agricultural lands have been subject to land degradation.

There is also a significant imbalance between the ownership and tenure patterns of land. There are a large number of fragmented agricultural lands small in size and generally unproductive. Similarly, there is a large extent of agricultural land in plantations areas, a significant proportion of which is underutilized. It can be

concluded therefore, that in both areas systematic land use planning has to be undertaken, because of the urgent need to utilize the land resources efficiently.

A national land use policy will to make this task easier.

## 02. The Need for National Land Use Policy

The total land area of Sri Lanka is 6,552,500 ha. The land has been utilized for various purposes as indicated below.

Land Use Category	Extent (ha)
1. Agriculture (Tea, Rubber, Coconut, Paddy, & other crops)	2,605,647
2. Urban Areas	29,353
3. Forests, Wildlife, Reserves & Catchments areas	2,000,000
4. Underutilized Lands	728,800
5. Reservations (Reservoirs, Streams, & Irrigation Channels)	585,300
6. Steeply sloping lands, unsuitable for Agriculture	380,000
7. Barren Lands	77,000
8. Highlands over 5000 feet (1600m) above mean sea level	76,400
9. Mangroves & Marsh Lands	70,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6,552,500</b>

- I. Although the figures indicate that a large extent of land has been utilized for agriculture, nevertheless, when looked at from a productivity point of view the situation is unsatisfactory. For an example; the average yield per ha. of over 50% of the lands brought under Tea, Rubber, and Coconut cultivation is below the expected yield. In fact an extent of 7,28,800 ha already in use are

underutilized. This underlines the need to utilize agricultural land according to an accelerated action plan.

II. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the per capita extent of land in Sri Lanka was 10.53 hectares. With the increase in population up to 18.6 million by 2001 the per capita extent had decreased to 0.29 ha. As the population continues to grow the per capita extent of land will further decline rapidly in the future. This trend has contributed not only the fragmentation of lands into small unproductive units but also to an acute shortage of land. According to the Census of Agriculture 2002, there were 1,39,465 families not owning any lands. This has led to encroachments on state lands and an increase in rural / urban migration. Hence, solutions to these problems have to be sought through land use planning.

III. Land is a finite resource; hence it's total extent cannot be expanded. However the extent of productive land is decreasing because of land degradation. This highlights the need for proper land use, based on scientific principles

IV. The existence of a large number of institutions taking decisions on land use, the complex legal system not conducive to address policy matters and the lack of an integrated approach to land use have highlighted the need for a land use policy.

In Sri Lanka agriculture accounts for 20% of the Gross Domestic Production (GDP-2002) and provides employment to 33.1% of its workforce. At the same time agricultural production accounts for 25% the islands' exports. Hence, steps have to be taken to further enhance the contribution of this sector to the national economy.

The scope for enhancing the contribution is great because of the large extent of

underutilized lands, lands of low productivity and abandoned agricultural lands in the plantation sector to the national economy.

### **03. Policy Foundation**

The national land use policy will provide an appropriate policy framework, to ensure proper land use, food security, economic development and the maintenance of the productivity of the land at a higher level. Such a policy will not only provide a path for the protection, conservation and sustainable use of the land resource of the country but also offer an appropriate and ideal framework that will best meet the needs of the present generation while safeguarding the land resource for the future generation as well.

## **04. Main Principles**

While the National Land Use Policy will be based on technical factors, general principles will be formulated, taking into account the topography, climate, soils and soil erosion, forest cover, environmental issues, economic viability etc. The National Land Use Policy based on the above factors, has been guided by the following principles.

- I. The state on behalf of the people will function as the "trustee" of land to enable the present and the future generations to use the land on a sustainable basis.
- II. Land use will be based on the principle of zoning.
- III. Utilization of land will be based on its physical suitability.
- IV. Land utilization will be managed and monitored in order to achieve a balanced regional development.
- V. All the institutions engaged in land related activities will be directed to adopt an integrated approach to land management.

## **05. Policy Goal**

Rational utilization of lands as a resource, in the national interest, in order to ensure food security, a high quality of life, equity and ecological sustainability.

## **06. Policy Objectives**

- I. Prioritize agriculturally oriented uses relevant to the strengthening of national economy in order to ensure present and future food security
- II. Expand the role of the state in matters related to lands i.e. in addition to the allocation of land, provide guidance for the productive utilization of the land resources.
- III. Prevent the under use and improper use of lands.
- IV. Promote the capability of the land as a source of generating employment.
- V. Rational allocation of land for different purposes and promotion of land suitability evaluation.
- VI. Protect, conserve and manage all sources of water on state as well as private lands.
- VII. Bring about a rational distribution of population and settlement in order to achieve a balanced regional development and orderly economic growth.
- VIII. Minimize fragmentation of agricultural lands.
- IX. Prevention of encroachment of lands.
- X. Introduce effective tenurial reforms to promote the efficient use of land resources.
- XI. Take steps to minimize the vulnerability of land to natural and human induced hazards.
- XII. Promote land uses that minimize environmental hazard.
- XIII. Promote gender equity in the ownership, utilization and conservation of lands.
- XIV. Conserve bio-diversity.

- XV. Conserve soil & water
- XVI. Preserve historical, cultural, religious, and aesthetic values associated with lands.

## **07. Proposed Policy on Land Use**

The proposed policy on land use is presented under three main themes.

- I. Land and People
- II. Agriculture and Food Security
- III. Land and Nature

## **I. Land and People**

There is a need to provide more vitality to the agricultural sector in order to achieve a higher productivity by strengthening the role of the state as manager / facilitator. This will also help to minimize the increase in the extent of underutilized and unutilized lands in the country at present.

Encroachment on state lands has resulted in an increase in improper and inappropriate land uses. Hence, there is a need to prevent encroachments on reservations and highly environmentally sensitive areas.

Lands suitable for non-agricultural activities have to be identified such identified and development plans prepared for such lands.

In order to improve land management and productivity through land use planning, the laws and regulations related to land have to be reviewed and a new legal framework introduced.

While adopting an integrated approach to land resources management all the stakeholders in the use of land will be consulted and decisions taken through a participatory process.

## **Policies**

1. Land use plans will be prepared at the National, Provincial, District, Divisional, and Local levels. Land utilization will be based on these plans.
2. Zonal plans will be prepared to demarcate the suitable areas for settlement, agriculture and different development activities.
3. Allocation of lands by the state to the people will be based on land suitability evaluation.
4. Peoples' participation in the sustainable use of land resources will be enhanced.
5. Institutions providing services / facilities for land use will be strengthened so as to provide the people, with a better service.
6. The diverse land laws prevalent at present will be reviewed and a new legal framework relevant for land use planning will be introduced.
7. Land vested in state authorities, which are either under utilized or unutilized will be made available for proper development purposes.
8. Areas of cultural, archeological, historical, and aesthetic values will be protected.
9. Conversion of good agricultural lands for non-agricultural uses in urban fringe areas will be discouraged.
10. In order to promote regional development, urban settlement programs as well as rural settlement programs will be formulated and implemented

11. A Land Information Centre (LIC) will be established at the National level and maintained to facilitate exchange of information on land development and management.
12. Action will be taken to minimize the fragmentation of agricultural lands.
13. Action will be taken to rehabilitate degraded lands.
14. Action will be taken to avoid land uses that constrain sustainable development of Sri Lanka.
15. Steps will be taken to prevent encroachments on state lands.
16. Awareness and educational programs on proper and scientific land use will be implemented.

## **II. Agriculture and Food Security**

In formulating a National Policy on Land Use, priority should be given to food security and agriculture. The Policy will also focus attention on the rational allocation of land, improvement of productivity and guiding the conversion of agricultural land to other uses. It also envisages the expansion of the agriculture sector to ensure self-sufficiency in food.

## Policies

1. Ensure food security and income generation through the sustainable utilization of agricultural lands.
2. Diversification of agricultural land use will be encouraged only when land productivity can be increased.
3. Adoption of suitable and effective conservation measures will be a pre-requisite and essential condition for agricultural land use.
4. All marginal and uncultivated lands will be developed through appropriate land uses.
5. Agricultural lands, more suitable for paddy, coconut, rubber, tea, and minor export crops will be identified and developed. Conversion of these lands to other uses will be discouraged.

## **III. Land and Nature**

Land resources include all environmental and natural resources. Such as climate, soil, water, forest, minerals, bio-diversity, marshy lands and wetlands.

All the lands in the country can't be utilized for development. For the sustainable management of land resources it is necessary to protect and conserve some lands. The protection, conservation and improvement of the quality of natural resources, associated with land will ensure the long term well being of the land without damaging it.

## **Policies**

1. Environmentally sensitive areas will be identified and measures will be taken to protect and conserve such areas.
2. All the lands 1600m.above the mean sea level will be protected and conserved.
  - a) Current Land uses within that zone will be allowed to continue with appropriate conservation measures.
  - b) All the unutilized lands with less than 60% slopes will undergo land suitability classification to determine their uses. All unutilized lands with over 60% slope will be under permanent forestry and grass land.
3. In respect of state and private lands with slopes exceeding 60% situated 1600m. above mean sea level and without forest cover action will be taken to stabilize slopes through reforestation, agro forestry and adoption of soil conservation measures.
4. Natural forests which have a high biological and hydrological value will be conserved as strict conservation forests. Other forests will be allocated for regulated multiple use.
5. All forestlands and protected areas will be managed through management plans based on bio-diversity conservation principles.
6. Action will be taken to identify high, medium and low, landslide prone areas and steps will be taken to introduce appropriate conservation measures.
7. The reservations of all natural and man made watercourses and sources whether private or state will be demarcated and protected through appropriate conservation measures. If needed, action will be taken to acquire private lands.

8. In managing land and water resources, river catchments will be considered as the management unit.
9. Conservation and management of wetlands will be undertaken in accordance with land use plans.
10. Areas within the coastal zone vulnerable to natural disasters will be subjected to Land use zoning. Appropriate uses will be determined on the basis of the zoning.
11. Training, awareness and educational programmes relevant to the protection, conservation and improvement of the quality of the natural resources associated with land will be implemented.

# **ANNEXTURE**

## ***Definitions***

### **Land**

Land is the surface of the earth, where we live. It includes soil, underlying geology, topography, all natural inland water bodies, waterways and plant and animal life.

From a legal point of view, land is any soil or a piece of the earth's surface. It explains ownership with an implied ownership. It also includes plants, water, the atmosphere and buildings added by humans.

## **Land Use**

Land use is considered as the manner in which man has used the land. It reflects a spatial pattern of activity due to the past and present actions of humans pertaining to residential, commercial, agricultural, and recreational uses. It also includes lands under forest, fallow areas and land used for used for infrastructure development and other purposes.

## **Land Use Planning**

The systematic assessment of land and water potential, alternatives for land use, and economic and social conditions, in order to select and adopt the best land use options. Its purpose is to select and put in to practice those land uses that will best meet the needs of the people, while safeguarding resources for the future.

## **Land Alienation**

The transferring the ownership of the land from one person or body to another. In Sri Lanka land alienation is generally understand to mean the transferring of state land to private individuals.

## **Land Capability Classification**

The classification of land in terms of its overall potential for use in specified ways, or with specified management practices.

## **Land Suitability**

The fitness of a given area of land for a specified kind of land use.

## **Land Suitability Evaluation**

The process of assessment of land for a specified purpose. e.g. arable farming, conservation forestry. It involves the interpretation of information about landforms, soils, vegetation, climate and other aspects of land (physical land suitability) and social and economic information (economic land suitability), in order to identify and make a comparison of promising kinds of land use.

## **Sustainable Land Use**

Continuous use of the land without a severe and / or , the atmosphere permanent deterioration in quality.

## **Watershed**

The upstream area of a river basin, which "catches" stores and releases water to a river.

## **Food Security**

Food security means the fulfillment of food requirements of a country through imports or local food production. Therefore food security is not synonymous with self sufficiency in food.

## **Land Degradation**

Temporary or permanent lowering of the productive capacity of land.

## **Marginal Land**

Land of low productivity with respect to a given land use.