

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Desertification is the degradation of land caused primarily by human activities and climate variations which will eventually lead to the reduction or loss in its biological or economic productivity. Over 250 million people are directly affected by desertification, and some one thousand million people in over one hundred countries may experience its economic, social and environmental consequences.

The international community has long recognized that desertification is a serious threat to many countries of the World and in an effort to address this problem the Conference on Desertification in 1977 adopted a Plan of Action to Combat Desertification (PACD). In 1992, when the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) convened in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the question of how to deal with the issues of land degradation was on the agenda, since it was still of serious concern to most countries of the world. The Conference, therefore, requested the UN General Assembly to prepare by June 1994, a Convention to Combat Desertification. As a result the UNCCD came into force in December 1996. Guyana became a Party of the Convention upon its ratification on 24 September 1997.

The implementation of the UNCCD is coordinated by the National Climate Committee, functioning as the National Coordinating Body (NCB). It has responsibility for coordinating all activities relating to climate change, ozone depletion and desertification and is comprised of representatives of the main institutions dealing with these issues. The NCB operates under the purview of the Office of the President. The President of Guyana has the mandate for environmental issues including climate change and desertification. The Office of the Adviser to the President on Science, Technology and Environment is the National Focal Point and is responsible for coordinating the preparation of the National Report.

Guyana, richly endowed with natural resources, is dominated by its forests, mostly tropical moist evergreen rainforests, covering over 75% of the country's 215,000 square kilometers and which constitute a very significant resources not only for this country but also for the world. The forests constituting a part of the Amazon Basin, contain a wealth of biological diversity including several unique species and 144 recorded endangered wildlife species. The abundant natural resources include substantial mineral deposits notably bauxite, gold and diamonds. These timber and mineral resources existing within the interior of the country are highly extensive in nature, and to a great extent inaccessible because of undeveloped infrastructure.

In 1998, the Government of Guyana articulated and implemented the Economic Recovery Programme after a protracted economic decline in the 1970s and 1980s, accompanied by an intensification of poverty in society. The main strategy based on a major change in the economic policy was to create favorable investment opportunities for the private sector to utilize the country's natural resources. The new Government of 1992 embarked on a major expansion programme in the agriculture, forestry and mineral sectors and a rehabilitation of the infrastructure to support this programme, which has been pursued within the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication.

The increase in activities in the agricultural and natural resource sectors without effective regulatory and monitoring mechanisms, can lead to unsustainable practices such as over harvesting of timber resources or over utilization of components of biodiversity, which have long term destructive potential and can inevitably lead to land degradation. These activities also have implications for environmental management.

In 1994, the Government prepared an National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP) to identify the major environmental problems and to formulate appropriate policy measures to deal with these problems. The document identified the major environmental issues as coastal zone management, waste management and pollution control, natural resources management and mining. Land degradation has been identified with some of these environmental issues. The NEAP is currently being reviewed through a participatory process.

There are many institutions in the country that have some responsibility for environmental and natural resources management. In recognizing the need to have one single institution with responsibility for environmental management, the Government introduced a new legislation, the Environmental Protection Act No. 11 of 1996 to create the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA has the legal mandate to provide for the management, conservation, protection and improvement of the environment, the assessment of the impact of economic development on the environment and the sustainable use of natural resources. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) conducted for all major projects have to be approved by the EPA.

Although, it is the general perception that land degradation is not a major environmental problem in Guyana, cognisance should be taken of land degradation activities and climate variability. It is, therefore, imperative for Guyana to share experiences on land degradation and mitigating the effects of drought with other countries. In this regard, the CCD can be seen as the most appropriate mechanism for the exchange and sharing of information.

Since land degradation is not a priority issue, strategies to address it should be integrated into those designed to address issues of biodiversity, wildlife management, climate change, and coastal zone and natural resources management. In an effort to address these issues the Government has been increasingly promoting participatory decision-making and a policy to conserve and sustainably utilize the country's natural resources in keeping with Guyana's commitment to international conventions, treaties and other relevant instruments. Policies, strategies, action programmes and laws are, therefore, being prepared and implemented for the sustainable utilization of natural resources and the maintenance of environmental quality, which can also support the implementation of the CCD.

The development of a draft National Development Strategy represents the highest level of national planning in the country. It is an integrated document outlining the national strategy and policy in a number of priority areas including agriculture, environment, forestry, fisheries, mining, tourism and the eradication of poverty. The Strategy serves as a framework for policy and planning in the respective sectors of the economy.

The National Strategy for the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Guyana's Biodiversity was completed in 1997 through a participatory process, and articulates the national policy and strategy relating to the study, conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. The National Biodiversity Action Plan (NBAP) is a product of the National Strategy proposing a total of thirty two projects and other activities under broad programme areas. The mobilization of financial and technical resources are critical to the implementation of the Action Plan. The EPA has also been given the legal mandate for the conservation and management of the country's biological diversity

In the forestry sector, the Guyana Forestry Commission has formulated a number of policies and plans to improve management and conservation of forest resources in order to contribute to sustainable development, optimum use of the land resources and conservation of biodiversity. The draft National Forest Plan of July 1998 takes into consideration the National Forest Policy of 1997, and proposes a range of activities under five broad programme areas including land use, forest management, research and information, forestry training and education, and forest administration and governance. Guidelines for the preparation of Forest Management Plans and a Code of Practice for Forest Operations have also been prepared by the Guyana Forestry Commission. The revised legislation governing forestry has been forwarded to the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Natural Resources and the Environment for reviewing before being presented to Cabinet.

A non-governmental organisation, the Forest Producers Association was formed by the forest industry to promote and develop the interests of the forest sector and to collaborate on activities such as training, information, public awareness and institutional development.

Forestry research focusing on sustainable forest management and the conservation of biodiversity are being undertaken by a number of institutions including the Tropenbos-Guyana Programme and the Iwokrama International Centre for Rainforest Conservation and Development.

In order to improve the management of Guyana's natural resources in a sustainable way, a Natural Resources Management Project (NRMP) commenced in 1994 under a Technical Cooperation Agreement between the Governments of Guyana and Germany.

The project is intended to support decision making on natural resources management by supplying reliable and accurate information to national institutions. The project will develop a database on natural resources, establish land use planning procedures, prepare policy guidelines and legislation for natural resources management and strengthening institutional capacity.

The main activity in the wildlife sector is harvesting for the export trade and local consumption as exotic meat. There has been no significant management of wildlife resources in the country. The Wildlife Division of the Office of the President which regulates the wildlife trade does not have the necessary capacity to function effectively. However, wildlife management and protection is now being initiated in the country. The World Wildlife Fund - Guianas Forests and Environmental

Conservation Project (WWF-GFECF) is collaborating with the Marine Turtle Conservation Society of Guyana to study and monitor four species of marine turtles at Shell Beach in the Pomeroon. It is also funding a project on the development of a species management plan for wildlife trade in Guyana which is to be implemented by the EPA.

A draft fisheries Management and Development Plan for the period 1994-2004 has been prepared and is yet to be finalized. Fisheries resources utilization in Guyana is regulated under some four different pieces of legislation, all of which are outdated and inadequate. Revision of the existing legislation and finalization of the Fisheries Management and Development Plan will provide a strong basis for the management of fisheries resources.

In the mining sector, the major environmental impacts are pollution and land degradation. However, with the introduction of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), the initiation of public awareness programmes and regular monitoring by the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission and the Environmental Protection Agency, it is expected that environmental impacts will be minimized.

In the agriculture sector, the Ministry of Agriculture has a major responsibility in ensuring food security and efficient management of water resources for agricultural production. It has recently implemented the Land Administration Project which will effectively address the land tenure system in Guyana.

Financial resources required for the implementation of all sustainable development projects have been obtained from donor agencies, international financial institutions and through bilateral arrangements. The Government has also contributed significantly to these projects.

The NAP process will have to take into consideration relevant aspects of all the national policies and plans that focus on sustainable development and are related to the implementation of the CCD. The NCB will be responsible for coordinating the activities for the preparation and implementation of the National Action Programme (NAP). The NAP process will involve national awareness activities on land degradation and drought and collection of information on the utilization and management of natural resources, including land resources, especially by women and youths, projects considered relevant by local stakeholders and the use of traditional knowledge to combat land degradation.

The elaboration and implementation of the NAP which would require a substantial amount of financial and technical resources would necessitate that the Government seek assistance from international financial institutions including the Global Environment Facility, the Global Mechanism and the United Nations Development Programme.