

**Establishing a Centre of Excellence on Ocean Sciences and Environment for  
the Indian Ocean Rim Countries at the Institute of Policy Studies**

**June 30<sup>th</sup> – July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014  
Hilton Hotel, Colombo**

*Organized by the*

**Ministry of External Affairs, Sri Lanka,**

**and**

**Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS),**

**CONCEPT NOTE**

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## **BACKGROUND**

The Indian Ocean Rim region, which is home to nearly one-third of the world's population, carries high economic significance due to its strategic location. The region possesses a variety of natural resources which are vital for trade and environmental stability. Already, around half of the world's trade travels through this region and its contribution to global economic welfare, therefore, is crucial. While such economic gains are a result of rapid globalization, the Indian Ocean region on the other hand, has now also begun to feel the negative impacts of globalization, coupled with global environmental threats such as climate change.

Ocean resources play a significant role in the economies of the rim countries and hence, the sustainability of the ocean environment is very crucial. Unless timely actions are taken, these environmental issues can significantly affect the region's economic development and environmental sustainability. Moreover, to tackle such issues which are common to many or all Indian Ocean rim countries, individual actions of countries are fast becoming inadequate and hence require regional cooperation. This need has been recognized by the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). The member states of IORA at their 10<sup>th</sup> Council of Ministers' Meeting (CMM) in August 2010, accepted Sri Lanka's suggestion to establish a Centre of Excellence for Ocean Sciences and Environment and thereby invited Sri Lanka to prepare the proposal for its implementation.

Accordingly, a concept paper was submitted to the Cabinet of Sri Lanka emphasizing the need for a regional level centre for Indian Ocean rim countries to serve as the focal point in facilitating research, capacity building, and resource mobilization to address the relevant environmental issues at regional level. Subsequently a detailed project proposal was prepared by the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS) to launch the project to establish a Centre of

Excellence (CoE) for Ocean Sciences and Environment. The proposal has been accepted by the IORA.

## **PROPOSED CoE**

The proposed CoE has the vision of building scientific and technological capacity in research and training in Ocean Sciences and Environment, for sustainable collaborative utilization of ocean resources, and thereby to support regional collaboration among Indian Ocean rim countries. Accordingly, the goals of the proposed CoE are: to serve as a partnership of institutions involved in Ocean Sciences and Environment in the Indian Ocean rim countries, to support scientific and socio-economic research in relation to the geographical area, and to carry out education and training services to build capacities of the institutions and persons in the region.

Given the geographically strategic location and importance, it has been agreed to locate the CoE in Sri Lanka. The Centre will originally be launched as a five-year project, which shall evolve in to an independent institution at its maturity. Government of Sri Lanka will provide the seed capital for the project.

The CoE will be represented by a key agency of each Indian Ocean rim country. These key agencies will act as the focal points which will link relevant national level stakeholders and partner agencies, with regard to CoE activities. The project shall be implemented by the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS) – which will also be the focal point for Sri Lanka, with the partnership of the local stakeholders/partner agencies namely, The National Aquatic Resources Research and Development Agency (NARA), Ocean University of Sri Lanka (OCU), Marine Environment Protection Authority (MPPA), Geological Survey and Mines Bureau (GSMB), Central Environmental Authority (CEA), and the Coast Conservation Department (CCD).

A steering committee convened and chaired by the Executive Director (ED) of the IPS will be in charge of the project. The committee will be represented by the IPS, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of Sri Lanka, and the above stakeholders and partner agencies.

The major functions of the project during the initial stage include designing the institutional structure, logistical requirements and resource formation for the development of the CoE to function as an independent regional entity by the end of the project duration, and forming the academic framework necessary for the CoE to function as an independent regional entity.

The project activities will be undertaken by a Project Management Unit housed at the IPS. The Unit will include a team of experts which cover all the subject areas addressed by the CoE, and administration staff. The team of experts will be led by a team leader, who will report to the Executive Director (ED) of the IPS. The administration staff will constitute of a coordinator, who will also report to the ED and a secretary to undertake coordination, facilitation, and relevant administrative tasks.

## **PRIORITY AREAS**

While the natural environment in the Indian Ocean is faced with numerous issues, there are key issues which need to be taken up in a prioritized manner. They include matters related to bio-security, climate change, energy, and other oceanic resources.

*Bio-security:* Marine bio-security usually refers to the protection of marine environments from non-indigenous species. Bio-security has direct implications on biodiversity in any ecological system. Risks on marine bio-security can be many. It has been found that invasive alien species (IAS) are posing a significant threat to marine biodiversity, where ballast water is viewed as a major pathway for the spreading of IAS. However, comprehensive studies on bio-security are

rarely found in the case of the Indian Ocean. In this regard, it is very important to assess risks for marine bio-security in the context of Indian Ocean rim countries.

*Climate Change:* Climate change is expected to bring about negative impacts on marine biodiversity. It can lead to a number of local extinctions in several regions, including the tropics, which is pertinent to the Indian Ocean region. In addition, climate change is expected to increase species invasion, which will again have detrimental impacts on marine biodiversity. Natural catastrophes are also expected to increase due to the impacts of climate change. Such extreme events cause economic losses as well as environmental damages. In addition, a number of economic sectors are vulnerable to climate change impacts as they are heavily dependent on biological, chemical, and physical, processes of the oceans.

*Energy:* The Indian Ocean is blessed with a vast amount of renewable energy sources as well as oil resources, which are not yet fully utilized. There are several methods of obtaining energy from the Ocean namely, ocean winds, ocean waves, tides and tidal currents, ocean thermal energy conversion, salinity gradient, biomass conversion, ocean currents, and ocean geothermal.

*Ocean Resources:* Indian Ocean possesses a range of valuable natural resources including fisheries, sea minerals, coral reefs, etc. There have been issues related to the over-exploitation of certain species of fish in some geographical areas, due to over-harvesting. Conflicts in fishing among the countries, is also commonly observed. Fishing resources also face threats from pollution and global warming. In addition, coral reefs are also under threat of depletion due to human induced activities, including climate change. Coastal ecosystems and the recreational services provided by them play a very important role in tourism, fisheries, and the livelihoods of the coastal communities etc. Therefore, the degradation of coastal ecosystems can have negative impacts on national economies. In addition to the economic importance of ocean resource management, territorial claims by the rim countries and related political aspects also

have become important concerns in the recent past with regard to Indian Ocean. Such issues have to be taken up through close collaboration among the countries.

The issues related to ocean environment are interlinked and caused by a number of man-made and natural factors. A high level of regional collaboration is needed to tackle them. However, studies in regard to the key marine environmental issues are lacking in the context of the Indian Ocean region, which remains a main obstacle when formulating effective regional policies, plans, and strategies, for the management of ocean environment. The proposed CoE can serve as the focal point in facilitating research, capacity building, and resource mobilization, for the Indian Ocean region.

## **THE WORKSHOP**

As an initial step, the IPS and the Ministry of External Affairs, Sri Lanka, will organize a workshop to discuss the matters in relation to the launch of the CoE.

Accordingly, the major objectives of the workshop are:

- To present the structure and implementation of the proposed CoE among the member countries and local partners, and get their comments and suggestions
- To establish a network between the member countries to exchange and share ideas in relation to Ocean Sciences and Environment, via the proposed CoE, and
- To identify specific priority issues that the CoE has to focus on in its initial stage, which can be fed into the formulation of a regional action plan

The workshop brings in the key persons from the member countries and local experts, to finalize the structure and implementation of the CoE and discuss the priorities for the initial

stage of the CoE. It is also expected to produce an outcome document highlighting the deliberations of the workshop and the steps towards actual implementation of the CoE.