



An Evaluation of the UNEP Regional Seas Programme

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ABSTRACT

The UNEP Regional Seas Programme is the only global programme to address the coastal and marine environment degradation issues at regional level. It involves the regional states sharing the common marine region to adopt ecosystem approach for sustainable management and use of the marine and coastal resources. Majority of the countries are participating in the RSP and have adopted Action Plans and about 50 instruments to address the specific problems of regional marine and coastal areas. However the implementation and outcome of the RSPs has not been uniform throughout the globe.

KEYWORDS

UNEP, Regional Seas Programme, Coastal Areas.

1. Introduction

United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) was established as an outcome of Stockholm Conference, 1972 by United Nations General Assembly resolution. The main objective was to establish an institution which acts as focal point for all environment related activities.

United Nations Environment Programme Regional Seas Programme (RSP) was inaugurated in 1974. This programme focuses on dealing with global marine and coastal environment issues and aid states to conserve their marine and coastal ecosystem. It involves states, sharing a particular regional sea for the purpose of its protection, conservation and sustainable use of the marine environment. The Regional Sea Programme applies ecosystem approach and sustainable development approach in addressing the coastal issues.

2. Regional Sea Programme: An Overview

The RSP requires adopting an Action Plan by neighbouring states for the particular marine region, according to that region's specific environmental needs. It also takes into account the region's social, economic and political conditions. Every action plan consists of five essential components: (i) evaluation of current situation (ii) management activities (iii) environment legislation (iv) institutional arrangement and (v) financial arrangement. Even though each marine region is different in terms of its problems and actions, yet a comparative study of problems and actions of different action plans is done so as to figure out the best practice and thus benefit from one other's knowledge and experience. UNEP is advocating the application of ICZM concept through RSPs.

Today, RSP covers 18 Regional Seas Area including Black Sea, South Asian Seas, and East African Seas; and included more than 143 countries and comprises of about fifty international treaties. Out of these programmes, six programmes are directly executed and supervised by UNEP, i.e. Caribbean Region, East Asian Seas, East African Seas, Mediterranean Seas, North-West Pacific Region and West African Region. Other regional programmes such as Black Sea region, North-East Pacific region, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, ROPME Sea Area, South Asian Seas, South-East Pacific Region, and Pacific Region are UNEP associated programmes. These affiliated programmes are not directly administered by UNEP, and have their own governing body. Whereas, the Arctic Region, Antarctic Region, Baltic Sea, North-East Atlantic Region, and Caspian Sea are five independent Regional Seas Program. These independent programmes have not been set up under UNEP but are engaged in the RSP's activities. Collectively, they are known as Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans (RSCAP).

From the abovementioned areas, fourteen have adopted their own binding treaties and various protocols on specific issues

such as land-based pollution, off-shore exploration, etc. The main issues addressed by the treaties and protocols are related to coastal zone management, biodiversity, land-based sources of pollution, marine litters, shipping and exploration pollution and small islands.

In 2004, a strategic partnership was adopted to link RSP to Large Marine Ecosystem (LME) projects, implemented by the UNEP. The aim of this initiative is the evaluation and management of LMEs situated within the Regional Seas areas. The joint collaboration helps developing countries in using LMEs as 'operational unit' to put RSP into definite action. All the work and activities of RSP are regulated by the UNEP Regional Seas Branch headquarters in Nairobi. The Program Secretariat/Regional Coordinating Units (RCU) and Regional Activity Centres (RAC) overlook the implementation of RSP at regional scale. Each RCU is in charge of implementing the legal documents relevant in the area.

It also executes the public relations activities of the action plan; collaborate with other international bodies, governments and supervise capacity building work of its RACs. Therefore, RACs are accountable for the implementation of different components of the action plan at the fundamental level.

3. Regional Sea Programme: An Appraisal

RSP is considered to be a global program having regional components. It has been instrumental in creating a web of regional institutions for conservation of a particular sea area. However, the success rate of all the RSP is varied- Mediterranean Action Plan was launched in 1975 whereas some other areas inaugurated their action plan much later. Some of the regions like Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea have also adopted protocols to deal with land-based sources of pollution and activities (LBSA) whereas other area like Baltic and North-East Atlantic have incorporated annexure addresses land-based sources of pollution. In sum, the action plans of different regions varied from general to specific to tackle diverse issues. Further there are cases where states have signed the protocol but couldn't ratify it. This strategic initiative of UNEP is also confronting financial and institutional challenges. Though, some of the RSPs have good financial assistance due to the participation of industrialised countries, yet there are many regions which are in need of sufficient funds. The high costs of the programmes are one of the main reasons that state parties have been reluctant to invest in the RSP. Moreover, due to lack of political will or economic needs, states may consent to the plans but in fact do not implement such plans.

In 2008, an important development took place in Mediterranean Sea region related to coastal zone activities with adoption of Protocol on Integrated Coastal Zone Management in the Mediterranean. The protocol entails strengthening and

devising policies, laws and action plans in conformity with the ICZM principles and objective.

UNEP's Regional Seas Program is generally considered to be efficacious because of several reasons. Firstly it aims to cover limited geographical area thereby facilitating the countries to manage it efficiently. Secondly the action plan is adaptive enough to address the needs of the specific region. Thirdly it encourages cooperation between governments, regional and international institutions, in order to ascertain the scope of action plan. Fourthly the action plan is based on regional knowledge which aids in establishing priorities. Fifthly the programme is an all-inclusive: includes monitoring and evaluation, legislation, institutional and financial arrangement necessary to implement the action plan.

RSP has assisted in the formation of database containing survey of all major actors involved in the management and conservation of coastal and marine environment in their respective regions. In addition, RSP has catalysed the participation of governments in drafting hard law, i.e. conventions and protocol in their particular regions for the management of coastal and marine environment.

The RSP website gives detailed information regarding all major actors, meetings, reports, latest development in the field, links to partner websites, etc. to augment the effectiveness of RSP and to ensure dissemination of data. RSP has been collaborating with other international organisations like International Maritime Organisation (IMO), Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and etc. to promote collective information and communication policy, and making sure the participation of RSP at international platforms. RSP is also working with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to implement numerous monitoring and assessment initiatives in respective RSP regions, using radioisotope technology to detect the path and presence of polluting materials. In 2009, RSP in joint collaboration with IMO has issued a manual on natural resource damage assessment after major oil spills incidents.

4. Conclusion

The UNEP's RSP is one of its programmes through which it tries to address the coastal and marine environment issues. To manage shared resources, cooperative regional management is necessary. In general, steady progress has been made by cooperating countries in establishing and implementing regional frameworks to deal with coastal and marine issues. In some regions, the progress and outcome of the RSP has not been as expected due the lack of political will, social and economic requirements of the countries sharing the common water body. However UNEP RSP can be instrumental to conserve and manage marine and coastal resources as this program is flexible and adaptive to deal with issues of the specific region. Also RSP provides a platform where the neighbouring states can share their own issues in implementing the regional conservation action plan. As the programme includes the essential features like monitoring, review, legislation, discussion, dissemination of information etc, RSP can be effective in tackling the coastal and marine problems.

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