

The National Science Council of Sri Lanka

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National Science Council—Sri Lanka

Historical Background

Concepts of planning for science, are not new, although it was only in the last quarter century that state-recognized organizations were set up, specifically for the planning of science.

Agitation for the establishment of such an organization in Sri Lanka was begun as early as 1948. A memorandum on the establishment of a Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in Ceylon was prepared by the Ceylon Association for the Advancement of Science (CAAS) and presented to the Prime Minister, Mr. D. S. Senanayake. This proposal was well taken and a draft bill on lines similar to that establishing the Indian Council of Industrial Research was prepared. Although this issue was pursued vigorously, the Government did not take any further positive steps towards establishing this Council.

In 1953, an IBRD team, appointed to report on proposals for the Economic Development of Ceylon, recommended the establishment of an Institute for Scientific and Industrial Research. The original proposals went askew from there on, and though the Ceylon Institute of Scientific and Industrial Research was established on 1955, a National organization for science in Ceylon had still got no more than a sympathetic hearing.

The need for some central organization for the planning and direction of scientific research in Ceylon was still keenly felt. Again the CAAS stepped in, and in an attempt to fulfill this need, even to a limited extent, the CAAS created within its own organization a General Research Committee (GRC).

Planning of science then came within the purview of this body of scientists. However, such a voluntary organization could do little other than advise the Government on some of its policies relating to scientific development. Lack of funds and non-availability of a full-time secretariat and the inaccessibility to data held in Government documents and files all contributed to the little impact this committee of voluntary officers could make.

Therefore in 1960, the GRC of the CAAS itself recognized this inadequacy and re-examined the original proposals for establishing a National body, which by statute would have overall responsibility for the planning and direction of the country's scientific development effort.

Ten years after the original proposals, the proposed National Research Council was yet not a reality. In the period 1961—1963, efforts for promoting this proposal were intensified, but final success was only to be achieved much later.

The sustained efforts of a few scientists led mainly by Professor N. G. Baptist, who pursued this issue in the face of much delay and frustration, merit very high commendation and their personal contribution toward the scientific development of the country should by no means be underrated.

The first official acceptance from Government of the need for a body like the National Research Council and the place of science in National affairs came in 1963, when the Prime Minister Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike addressed the Nineteenth Annual Sessions of the CAAS. She said "I assume that your invitation to me, as Prime Minister, to open this Conference is your method of expressing your view that Science and Scientific Research is of primary significance to our country. My acceptance of your invitation will, in itself, indicate to you the fact that I rate your work as of the greatest importance."

On this same occasion, the Prime Minister in conclusion said, "For its part, the Government has accepted the need for the formation of a National Body with the necessary authority to guide scientific activity.... I am glad to announce on this occasion that the Government holds the view that a body such as the National Research Council, which has been proposed for Ceylon by your Association, is most essential, and the necessary steps will be taken to constitute such a body as early as possible."

The Prime Minister following this took immediate action and a Committee, with the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education as Chairman, was appointed to work out details of an Act to constitute a National Research Council. However, with the change of Government in 1965, the establishment of this Council was delayed for a further period.

In November 1967, after almost two decades of agitation a bill to provide for "the establishment of the National Science Council of Ceylon and for matters connected therewith" was presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister, Mr. Dudley Senanayake, in his capacity as Minister of Planning and Economic Affairs.

The Act for the setting up of the National Science Council of Ceylon was approved by Parliament early in 1968. Although the CAAS had agitated for the Council to be directly under the Prime Minister, the Government created a new Ministry of Scientific Research and Housing and the Council came within the purview of this Ministry.

With the change of Government in 1970, the scope of the Ministry was expanded and a Ministry of Industries and Scientific Affairs under whose purview the Council presently functions, was created.

II The National Science Council : Its Structure and Organization

Set up by Act of Parliament No. 9 of 1968, the National Science Council became a reality in April 1968. The Council comprised twenty one members appointed by the Minister "from persons who had been closely associated with the pursuit, promotion or application of science". Selection was also based on the representation of six areas of research. viz. Physical Science Research, Biological Science Research, Agricultural Research, Industrial Research, Medical Research and Social Sciences Research.

The only full-time member of the Council was the Secretary-General, who in terms of the Act could be selected from among the members of the Council. On a later amendment to the Act, however, the Secretary-General ceased to be a member of the Council and was appointed as a full-time officer of the Council on terms and conditions determined by the Minister in consultation with the Minister of Finance.

The Council functions at two levels, firstly, it deliberates on issues of policy, when the full Council meets. Secondly, it functions through a Secretariat, headed by the Secretary-General. It was recognized that a full-time supporting scientific staff was necessary if the Council was to function effectively. The background thinking on the Council's activities, and initiation of new activities comes within the purview of the Secretariat's functions. Although adequate provision for the recruitment of such scientific staff was made in the cadre, a full-time Secretariat only became operative three years after the Council was established.

Early in its tenure of office, the first Council realised that to effectively carry out its major functions, certain changes in the structure of the Council would necessarily have to be made. Its failures were considered to be primarily due to the fact, that the Council as a whole had no direct links with the Ministries under which the major scientific activities of the country were carried out.

In order to achieve greater co-ordination among the sectors of research activity presently being carried out in various departments, universities, and research institutions, it was suggested and accepted that the Ministries having related functions should be grouped together, and that Standing Research Committees should be set up within these Ministerial Groups. The Chairman of these Standing Research Committees were then appointed as ex-officio members of the Council.

The Second Council re-constituted in May 1972 in terms of these proposed changes felt, that even the new structure still posed certain difficulties for successful operation.

The Council was of the opinion that radical alterations to the present legislation constituting the Council would be necessary if the Council were to function more effectively. A draft bill which incorporated changes which the Council felt were necessary, if the objectives outlined in the Act were to be achieved, was prepared and submitted to the Ministry of Industries and Scientific Affairs. The Minister has accepted these proposals and submitted for Cabinet consideration, a memorandum, for new legislation based on the lines suggested by the Council.

III The Objectives of the National Science Council

The mandate given to the National Science Council is wide, even in comparison to that of sister organizations of the economically more advanced countries.

Its functions are not purely advisory, and the Council by statute has been empowered to actively support research. The Council has the power to make grants in aid of specific research projects and to erect, equip or maintain research units or laboratories either independently or in association with any other organization involved in any sphere of scientific activity.

The attainment even in part of the objectives spelled out in the enactment has been the major concern of the Council, in the initiation phase. In its attempt to make the planning of science a concept acceptable to the majority of scientists in the country, the Council has met with a certain degree of criticism. This is necessarily so in any venture dealing with new concepts and is even more so in a developing society. In its initiation phase, the Council is only too aware of the limitations imposed on it, and it has also recognised that it is often only possible to attain not the most desirable objectives, but those which can be attained with the maximum available resources.

In its attempt to strengthen potential areas where progress is possible, the importance of the publication of the results of research must assume high priority. It is towards this end, that the Council has decided to publish in Sri Lanka a journal, the scope of which will extend to all branches of Science and Technology.

The support that the Council has had in this effort is worthy of mention. The contributors to this Inaugural Issue are all scientists of eminence in their special fields, and their contributions are of the highest standards. The Council can therefore regard this as a fulfilment of a due national need. We strongly hope that this effort will be a stimulus to our own scientists, and will generate within Sri Lanka's scientific community the effort towards the publication of results of indigenous research in conformity with internationally accepted standards.

A retrospective assessment of the Council, its history and organization underlines a significant fact. The foresight and planning that generated the first idea of a Science Council, the subsequent efforts towards achieving this goal, the final organization of the Council and now the evaluation of its functions and future, have been due at every stage to the efforts of Sri Lanka's scientists alone. This perhaps, has been one major venture, which was set up endemically without any foreign consultation or aid. The acceleration of Sri Lanka's development effort will bring about new challenges and opportunities to its scientific community. New problems will arise, and old problems persist. Research and development will have to be provided, and planned for and the National Science Council will have to continue its effort towards evolving a national framework for science in Sri Lanka. The effectiveness of the Council will depend in large measure on the close contact which it would necessarily need to establish with the scientific community. There is an increasing need to co-ordinate policies and programmes for research activities within universities, Government institutions and industry, and this cannot be achieved without the collaboration of the scientists within these organizations.

The Council cannot at this stage promulgate an inflexible "Science Policy" for the country, but its efforts are geared towards the development of a broad framework, within which enlightened decision-making in science can operate. This will not merely be a matter of [deciding priorities and allocating resources, but more important, the National Science Council will have to endeavour to create a climate in which scientific curiosity and sensitivity can flourish, for without these attributes, the investment on scientific research will show little or no returns.

We would like to end this note with a quotation from John Ziman, in *Public Knowledge* : an essay concerning the social dimension of science.

“The true sociology of Science is not concerned with the relationship between Science and Politics, or scientists and politicians, between Science and Industry, or scientists and industrial corporations, but with the social interactions between a scientist and his colleagues.”