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Ensuring Sustainability through Environmental Assessments in Sri Lanka: A Critical Review of Status, Gaps, and Way Forward

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Abstract

This review critically examines Sri Lanka's environmental assessment framework, focusing on implementation gaps across different scales of development projects and their cumulative environmental impacts. The study evaluates current assessment mechanisms and proposes recommendations for strengthening environmental governance at national and sub-national levels. The analysis of Sri Lanka's environmental assessment framework reveals that while robust requirements exist for large-scale projects, significant gaps persist in addressing impacts of medium and small-scale developments. Despite their individual modest scale, projects such as small-scale tourism developments, informal settlements in sensitive zones, and scattered industrial facilities collectively contribute to substantial environmental degradation, often escaping rigorous environmental scrutiny. Critical weaknesses include inadequate attention to environmental examinations at local government level, poor implementation of Environmental Management Plans, and weak monitoring mechanisms. These challenges are exacerbated by insufficient technical expertise and staff capacity at provincial and local levels, alongside limited awareness among stakeholders, including financial institutions. Recommendations include establishing Strategic Environmental Assessment mechanisms for evaluating cumulative impacts, strengthening environmental examination procedures at Pradeshiya Sabha level, enhancing institutional capacity through increased technical staff and training, developing stakeholder awareness programs, and strengthening monitoring mechanisms. These measures aim to ensure sustainable development across all project scales in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *Environmental assessment, Cumulative impacts, Institutional capacity, Environmental management, Sustainable development*