

Climate Change in South Asia: Opportunities and Options for Enhanced Regional Cooperation¹

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*The Science of AR5 WG1 and the Consequences*³ recently released by the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)* observes that atmospheric temperature in South Asia has increased from 0.4 to 0.8 Degrees Celsius than that of the pre-industrial era. It predicts a temperature rise of 2–3^o C and 3–5^o C in the mid (2046-2065) and long (2081-2100) terms. Projected midterm changes in precipitation in this report are: 10–20% decrease in December–February and 20% increase in September–November. Predicted long term change includes: 10% decrease to 10% increase during December–February and 20–50% increase in September–November. Like temperature, annual precipitation is projected to increase across most of the region. Concurrently, the same report describes in detail the catastrophic impacts of climate change on water resources, food security, human health, sea-level rise and biodiversity.

The catastrophic projection becomes a big surprise neither to non-state actors including research community nor to the state actors of South Asia. South Asian non-state actors, especially the research community, have been contributing to the development of climate discourse for the last few decades, while the state actors at SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) have also demonstrated their significant collective attention on issues and concerns relevant to climate change since the commissioning of two SAARC researches, respectively the *Regional Study on the Causes and Consequences of Natural Disasters and the Protection and Preservation of the Environment (1987)* and *Greenhouse Effect and its Impact on the Region (1988)*.

SAARC was established in 1985. Its membership includes: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Australia, China, European Union, Japan, Iran, Mauritius, Myanmar, South Korea and United States have been enjoying observer status in this entity. Recently China and Myanmar have expressed their interests to upgrade their status as full members while Russia has expressed interest to be an observer.

SAARC has identified 16 areas of cooperation among member states. Albeit many of these 16 areas could be considered crosscutting issues, at least four (e.g. agriculture and rural development, energy, poverty alleviation, and science and technology) could be linked directly with 'environment'. SAARC has a charter and several agreements and conventions; charter bodies include Summit, Council of Ministers, Standing Committee, Programming Committee and Technical Committees. There are several Working Groups to formulate and oversee programmes and projects. The Kathmandu based Secretariat is supported by several Regional Centres established in different member countries.

Following the two research initiatives already mentioned, albeit not sufficient in relation to the urgency, a number of initiatives centring around environment, climate change and natural disasters have been agreed up by the key SAARC mechanism i.e. the Meeting of Environment Ministers (Council of Ministers) and Technical Committee.

¹ This note is prepared for igniting discussions at a national seminar organised by Equity and Justice Working Group (EquityBD) Bangladesh and Campaign for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods (CSRL) on 17 February 2014 at the National Press Club, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

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³ Version embargoed until Monday, 30 September 2013, 7am GMT. Pages 49-51

SAARC has produced the following elemental policy-programme-action plans for addressing environment, climate change and natural disaster in the region:

1. SAARC Environment Action Plan (1997);
2. SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change (2008) devised under the directive of SAARC Environment Ministers' Dhaka Declaration on Climate Change (2008) which was followed by Thimphu Statement on Climate Change (2010);
3. South Asia Environment Outlook (2009); and
4. Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management (2006-2015)
5. Additionally, as planned under Action Plan 1997, a **SAARC Convention on Cooperation on Environment** has been devised covering "cooperation in the field of environment and sustainable development through exchange of best practices and knowledge, capacity building and transfer of eco-friendly technology in a wide range of areas related to the environment. The implementation of the Convention has been entrusted to a Governing Council, comprising of the Environment Ministers of Member States. The Convention will enter into force after it has been ratified by all Member States."⁴

Regional Centres such as SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre-SCZMC in Maldives (2004) and SAARC Forestry Centre in Bhutan (2007) formed under the 1997 action plan; SAARC Meteorological Research Centre in Bangladesh (1992) and SAARC Disaster Management Centre in India (2006) constitute the institutional framework of SAARC to address diverse aspects of environment, climate change and natural disasters. As stated before on areas of cooperation, similarly, SAARC Energy Centre in Pakistan and SAARC Agricultural Centre are the two other Regional Centres that could be linked with environment, climate change and natural disaster related cooperation.

An Intergovernmental Expert Group on Climate Change has also been established by the Thimphu Statement.

The mandate of SAARC Disaster Management Centre was also extended for devising a Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism; accordingly, "the modalities for setting up a Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism including the finalisation of a SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters are currently under consideration."⁵

The stated review clearly indicates that at least the state-actors of South Asia have collectively devised some policy, programme and action plan and established institutional arrangements, although no significant changes are visible in practices that help the people of the region.

SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change covers actions in the following five major areas focusing on adaptation, mitigation, technology development and deployment, and joint mobilisation of resources:

1. Education and awareness;
2. Regional capacity building inclusive of CDM development and joint research and investigation;
3. Regional joint research and development, sharing of knowledge and information, and south-south cooperation for technology development and deployment;
4. Regional cooperation on raising of financial resources for programmes on adaptation and mitigation; and
5. Joint implementation of projects.⁶

⁴ <http://www.saarc-sec.org>

⁵ Ibidem

⁶ Krishnaswami, Srinivas and et al (undated. 2011?): Review and Assessment of SAARC Declarations on Climate Change. Commissioned and published by Climate Action Network South Asia (CANSA) in 2011. Pages 18-23

Reviewing the events and programmes implemented by SAARC, CANSA (Climate Action Network South Asia) expresses doubt whether activities implemented for addressing knowledge gaps, capacity building and training have actually achieved the objectives of capacity building. The report reads that there is no evidence whether regional capacity building initiatives have any linkages with national level initiatives. It also finds that there is no monitoring and evaluation of the projects. The report says instead of designing and implementing joint programmes, the SAARC Secretariat is organising events with no implications. On the financial front, the action plan failed to mobilise even the bare minimum of funds required.

Building resilience for vulnerable communities, agriculture and energy/low carbon development are some crucial areas where SAARC should take immediate joint programmes and projects beneficial to countries. Adoption of special measures by SAARC for the least-developed countries (LDCs) is also prioritised in the CANSA assessment. There should be regional collaboration between countries for facilitating inter-country rapid response during emergency situation to save lives.

Climate change is a global phenomenon and countries and regions function within and under certain multilateral arrangements in this globalised era; therefore national and regional initiatives cannot ignore the global process relevant to climate change. Consequently, SAARC as an observer to the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) has started to intervene in the climate negotiations to raise common voice.

Conversely, as SAARC is a regional entity with members at different levels of development, it is terribly difficult to devise a common position on many of the negotiating agenda. Albeit all SAARC countries are members of the biggest negotiating group 'G77 & China'– developing (India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) and least-developed (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal) countries have different set of defensive and offensive interests in the negotiations. In November 2013, the Warsaw Conference of Parties (CoP) has clearly demonstrated how India, as a member of BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China– so called major emitters), Pakistan, as member of Like Minded Group, and least developed parties like Nepal and Bangladesh, as members of LDC Group, negotiated their own interests while for the first time in history the 'G77 & China' failed to devise a common position on upcoming agreements.

Considering the common vulnerability and diverse stages of development (and consequent political grouping), the non-state actors of South Asian countries that are very often guided by dominant discourses and influenced by donor-agenda, need to fix their role to:

1. Influence national governments for making SAARC a well-functioning regional entity;
2. Identify areas of common interest for devising joint regional programme and projects to protect lives and livelihoods of the vulnerable communities;
3. Clarify the special and differentiated rights and obligations of countries with different levels of development by participating in bilateral, regional, plurilateral and multilateral negotiations;
4. Monitor how programmes and projects are being implemented by national and regional entities, and how convergence and divergence are managed in policies including laws, rules, regulations, conventions and agreements etc.

Collaboration is required between states to make SAARC a functional. Partnership between state and non-state actors including civil society organisations and private sector are crucial in promoting peoples' interests in countries. Cooperation is an essential element for research, policy and advocacy organisations and social movements across the region to make national governments and regional entity accountable to the people.

There is not much time left till the next SAARC Summit, scheduled in Nepal later this year.

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