



SAARC Food and Seed Bank: Yet another Empty Vessel

Actions to take for Food Sovereignty in South Asia

1. Food Security situation in South Asia

Bangladesh has declined in the Global Food Security Index 2014. The index has been prepared considering the affordability, availability, quality and safety of food. Bangladesh is 88th among the 109 countries covered by the report prepared by the Intelligence Unit of 'The Economist'. Ranking of the other countries from the South Asia region are not that much satisfactory. India is in 69, Pakistan 77, Nepal 85 and Sri Lanka is in 60th position.

South Asia is the world's most densely populated region and having the largest number of undernourished people. It is the world's second poorest region with more than 500 million people living on less than US\$1.25 a day.¹ South Asia has 23% of the world's total population, but has only 2% of the total global income. The region houses 40% of the world's poor and 35% of the world's undernourished.²

Most of the rural poor of this region depend on agriculture for their livelihoods and thus agriculture, seeds or food security is some of the most critical issues for the mass people in this region.

SAARC, consisting Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Maldives, has the potentiality to play a key role in ensuring food security for its member countries. Considering the potentialities SAARC has taken two major initiatives i.e. SAARC Seed bank and SAARC Food Bank.

2. SAARC Seed Bank: Will it function ever?

Recognizing "the importance of regional and sub-regional collective self reliance in agriculture with respect to attaining seed security as a means of food security", SAARC leaders signed the agreement on SAARC Seed Bank in November, 2011. It was signed by the foreign ministers of the eight member states in Addu, Maldives summit of SAARC.

Even after three years of signing the agreement the proposed Seed Bank is yet to be fully functional.

According to the agreement, all the member countries have to ratify it. Though four countries so far i.e. Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Nepal have ratified it.

2.1 SAARC Seed Bank or Seed Trade?

If we analyze the objectives and the various characteristics of the agreement of the proposed Seed Bank we can find that it mainly focuses on 'improved varieties of seeds' which undermines the traditional role of seed systems of this region. In this region farmers have been depending on traditional mechanism of seeds production and preservation. By emphasizing on improved varieties of seeds the bank, in fact, is trying to promote the private

companies. One of its objectives is to 'increase seed replacement rate with appropriate varieties at a faster rate as far as possible so that the use of quality seed for crop production can be ensured'. So, it is clear that the bank took it out of the farmers' reach, as the farmers DON'T produce 'improved varieties' of seeds.

2.2 Ensure farmers' representation

A board consisting members from each member states, two members from private sector and one rotational basis farmer representative will govern the Seed Bank. Farmers' participation is significantly required since it is for the welfare of the agriculture. But the committee formation shows how marginal the farmers' representation is. Seats for private companies is secured but for the farmers', it is rotational basis! It is very clear that the private sector is getting double priority.

We demand, the definition of the 'Farmers' Representation' must be very clear as there are examples of abusing it.

2.3 Strengthening farmers' capacity

In the agreement, promotion of conserving genetic resources is not addressed. Seed production or preservation can't be sustainable without the capacity building of the farmers. But the agreement is silent about this. Empowerment of farmers is also absent.

2.4 Recognition of Local-indigenous varieties

The agreement focuses on standard, harmonized seed testing and certification, and facilitation of seed trade within the region. It has also recognized the importance of preserving local/indigenous varieties. But the mechanism should be defined. Only recognition is not enough to ensure sustainable agriculture. Sustainable development of the lives and livelihoods of farmers must be addressed too.

3. SAARC Food Security Bank: Have we learned from the past?

Recognizing the emergence concerns on food security need of a food bank for the SAARC member countries has always been in cards. In April 2007 the SAARC Food Bank has been established. This bank is an improved version of the SAARC Food Reserve which was established in 1988. The main objectives of the food reserve was to address the problem of food insecurity in the region by building up a food buffer stock. The reserve failed to meet the people's expectations mainly due to absence of political will. It also experienced various structural flaws and procedural shortcomings. So it is obvious that if we want an effective food bank we will have to address all the problems and bottlenecks those created hindrances for that reserve. But it seems that our SAARC leaders have not learnt from the previous unexpected experiences. If we go through the agreement of the food bank still we will find many bottlenecks.

1 Bishwajit et al. *Agriculture & Food Security 2013*, 2:10
<http://www.agricultureandfoodsecurity.com/content/2/1/10>

2 Excerpted from Kamalesh Adhikari, *Seed Banking in South Asia for protection of farmers' rights*

3.1 Merely inactive while function was much needed!

The goal of the SAARC Food Bank is 'to serve as a source of emergency supply of food from a resource of collective national reserves. One of the major aims of the SAARC Food Bank was to work as a mechanism of food security in the region in times of food shortage, high price volatility and natural disaster. But it has been failed in realizing its prime aim or intention. Some of its member countries have been affected from natural disasters like wheat crisis in Pakistan, and floods and cyclones in Bangladesh. But much desired operationalisation of the bank was absent during those disaster. Bangladesh has several devastating floods and calamities in the meantime, but regional food security umbrella had never delivered the goods. Bangladesh suffered from cyclone Sidr in 2008 and Aila in 2009 but the SAARC Food Bank did not lend a helping hand. Meanwhile, Pakistan suffered from a flood it had never seen before in 2010 but SAARC Food Bank was visible nowhere around, at least symbolically.

3.2 Need disaster to get the support from Food Bank! All the vulnerabilities and risks must be addressed

If any member country, like Bangladesh, wants to get any emergency support from the bank, to qualify for even for the applying for support from the food bank, it has to either go through a food crisis due to a natural shortfall as a result of natural calamity, or to experience a production shortfall i.e. 8 percent lower than the average production of last three years. It is mentioned in the Article V in bank constitution. Lack of supply in the international market or high price volatility, are not applicable as valid criteria for applying to the regional food bank. But these are crucial threats for food security. Bangladesh experienced a high food security concern in 2008 due to the price volatility. A similar situation was also experienced in 2010 and 2011 when there was a shortage of wheat in the international market. In this period, Bangladesh was unable to make use of the Food Bank mechanism, and consequently had to meet domestic demand by importing wheat at a very high price. SAARC Food Bank should also address these issues.

3.3 Food Stock must be Increased

There is a growing belief that the stock that the SAARC Food Bank is currently authorized to deal with is quite small and should be phenomenally increased to bring more food security coverage to wider segment of the people of the region. There is a pending proposal to double the amount to 4,86,000 metric tones. We believe that all parties must take the issue seriously and attempt must be made to further increase the stock to at least 1.0 million tones in near future.

Data shows that, the amount of readily available foodgrains under the custody of SFB in Bangladesh was about 40 tmt in 2011, which was only 4.7 percent of the total import. The amount available from the food bank will not even be remotely adequate if there is any national level disaster and

consequent food shortage.³

3.4 Procedural Flaws

The food bank has as many procedural and structural flaws that can be however resolved. One such problem is related to price fixation mechanism, experts say. The price fixation for food grains to be traded under SAARC Food Bank should therefore be further rationalized. It can be seen that a member state in need of emergency supply may buy food grains from the open market of another country, like the biggest Indian market at a lower price if it can do so. But food supply under the Food Bank umbrella has to be secured from the government stock which is always costlier because it may have elements of higher price support to farmers, in addition to cost of many other economic inefficiencies in transporting and maintaining the stock.

4. Need a common set of standards

SAARC Food Bank is yet to set a common standard for the food grains. There is a lack of unified quality specification. Quality standards such as percentage of broken grains, black grains, dead grains & foreign matters vary across countries. For example, allowable limits of dead grains in Bangladesh 4 %, India 10 %, Nepal 5 % , Sri Lanka 12 %.

5. Need a strong Political Will: People's interest must be on top

The SAARC itself has been failed to play its role in regional cooperation though still it has that potentialities. We can understand that, absence of political will and volatile-imbalanced regional politics are the main causes of the unexpected level of weakness of the organization. It has become mere talk shows of the leaders. There have been always tremendous people to people contacts and communication among the countries. Government to government cooperation has been demanded for many years. An effective regional cooperation mechanism can realize the interests of the mass people. Keeping the interest of the mass people on the top leaders of the SAARC countries should find out ways to make the seed bank and food bank effective. To ensure a secured South Asia these two banks must be effective. To make these two banks effective bureaucratic bottlenecks must be addressed and regional politics should give proper priorities to the people of this region.

³ Professor Mustafizur Rahman and Nafisa Khaled , LDC Issues for Operationalisation of the SAARC Food Bank: Bangladesh Case Study