

# Chapter 5

## Reaching the 7th Millennium Development Goals (MDG) on Environmental Sustainability: The South Asian Response

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### Introduction

South Asia with one fifth of world population is an extreme disaster prone region. Recently in May 2011, the Secretary General of SAARC presented a draft SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters to the intergovernmental meeting in Colombo. He pointed to global statistics that over the past 40 years South Asia faced as many as 1,333 disasters that killed 980,000 people, affected 2.4 billion lives and damaged assets worth \$105 billion. Further, this loss is by far the highest among the recorded disasters in various geographical regions.<sup>1</sup> The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in pursuance of its mandate to review the global environment collaborated with South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to present South Asian Environmental Outlook-2009 (SAEO). The report reveals the state and trends of the environment land, air, water and biodiversity – and covers five key issues on climate change, food security, water security, energy security and managing urbanisation. The challenge highlighted in the report is

South Asia occupies about 5 per cent of the world's land mass, but is home to about 20 percent of the world's population. This is expected to rise to about 25 per cent by 2025. Three-quarters of South Asia's population lives in rural areas, with one-third living in extreme poverty (on less than a dollar a day). Their well-being is further compromised by indoor air pollution, which is a severe health hazard. The report highlights that South Asia is very vulnerable to climate change. Impacts of climate change have been observed in the form of glacier retreat in the Himalayan region. ... These glaciers form a unique reservoir, which supports perennial rivers such as the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra, which, in turn, are the lifeline of millions of people in South Asian countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Pakistan). This will exacerbate the challenges of poverty reduction and improving access to safe drinking water, two of the Millennium Development Goals.<sup>2</sup>

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It is this critical awareness of the existential threat to humankind that has impelled intellectuals and policy analysts to rethink the old traditional concepts of security and perceive the threats posed by the adverse impact of climate change as threat to human security which is defined as freedom from danger, fear, want and deprivation. This humanist view which links environment and security focuses on the welfare of humankind in a world which has globalised and wherein technology has weakened the geographical and cultural barriers.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Summit on Environment and Human Security***

The Third Annual South Asian NGO Summit on Environmental, Political and Economic Dimensions of Security held in February 1995 presented an alternative notion of human security for the third world. This summit maintained that war, economic decline, civil strife and government oppression were threats to human security in the third world. Further, the human security was also threatened by the so-called development process, which often leads to displacement of poor people, depletion of resources, degradation of environment, urban congestion leading to deterioration in the quality of life and climate changes which cause frequent natural disasters. The concept of political security which traditionally focuses on the military dimension is, therefore, incomplete without environmental/human-security issues. In this perspective, the very idea of development which is based on expropriation of the rights of rural communities and institutionalisation of injustice through an aggressive use of state power is the leading contributor to insecurity. The indigenous mode of existence which is more in harmony with the rhythms of nature is discarded in favour of the so-called modern and organised way of life. Few findings emerge as follows:

1. Environmental security cannot be isolated from poverty alleviation, governance and regional conflict resolutions.
2. Local communities were better able to manage natural resources in their own areas; development initiatives that bypass these locals are bound to mismanage and disrupt local societies.
3. Environmental security and women's empowerment are interlinked in pursuing development.
4. A practical and sustainable response would empower communities and create appropriate institutions.<sup>4</sup>

Late venerable Dr. Mahbub ul Haq, whose Human Development Centre in Pakistan provides us insightful reports on the state of human development in South Asia, expounds this new concept which passes through the MDG 7 is described as follows:

Human security, in the last analysis, is a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, an ethnic tension that did not explode in violence, a woman who was not raped, a poor person who did not starve, a dissident who was not silenced, a human spirit that was not crushed. Human security is not a concern with weapons. It is a concern with human dignity.<sup>5</sup>

South Asia has been acknowledged to be a region in crisis. The sense of crisis deepened in 1980s, when South Asian countries were caught in a vicious circle of low growth, poverty and inability to overcome their economic and social targets of development. The economic growth was uneven and generated sharp disparities between different regions and communities. The severe problems of endemic poverty and slow and uneven economic growth further compounded with the high population pressure. High rates of population growth rendered South Asia as the most densely populated region in the world (260 people per sq. km against the global average of 44 people per sq. km). South Asia has suffered extensive erosion of its natural resources in recent past. The most critical dimension of this erosion was deforestation of tropical forests. The deforestation has resulted in virtual breakdown of Himalayan ecosystem with consequent silting of river beds and annual flooding of vast areas in the region. With rising population pressure, this situation is deteriorating into ecological disaster.

Natural disasters are afflicting South Asia with increased frequency and ferocity – recent cyclones, particularly, the cyclone that hit India's east coast (Tsunami of 2004), earthquake of 2005 and devastating floods during July–August 2010 in Pakistan have been causing extensive damage to life and property. Besides, the high defence expenditure in the countries of the region not only adds to the fragility of the economies of South Asian countries but also points towards a deteriorating security environment in the region. Violence, terrorism and ethnic conflicts in several countries of the region have assumed serious proportions: a prolonged insurgency in Indian North-East, conflict in Kashmir, history of ethnic divergence between Sri Lankan Tamils and majority Sinhala population, violence against Mohajirs in Karachi, tension in Sind and Baluchistan, instability and uncertainties in Nepal in the aftermath of war by Nepal Communist Party-Maoist (NCP-M) against the constitutional monarchical democratic system, and fierce antagonism between warring political groups in Bangladesh. Further, narco-terrorism and religious fundamentalism have cast their pernicious, dark shadow on the subcontinent. The presence of US-NATO forces in the eighth member state of SAARC (Afghanistan) and the complex nature of the war in that country involving Pakistan and fundamentalist forces therein have aggravated the adverse politico-security situation in the region.

The Human Development in South Asia Report 2005 made the following seven important findings after analysing issues of human insecurity in South Asia:

1. There is a disconnect between economic growth and human development, and hence, the economic policies in the region have made people more vulnerable to shocks and insecurity in life.
2. The conflicts in the region between states and within are due to some deep-seated feelings of injustice and disempowerment.
3. The economic insecurity is the cause of many conflicts and disruption of life.
4. If health infrastructure does not improve, South Asia will go sub-Saharan Africa way in this regard.
5. Environmental degradation has reached such levels that huge disaster is imminent if no prompt action taken to avert this disaster.

6. Children and women are extremely vulnerable in South Asia.
7. The institutions of governance must protect and serve people rather than the rich and powerful.<sup>6</sup>

There is now an acknowledged plethora of scientific evidence that climate change is occurring primarily due to human activity. The emission of greenhouse gases (GHGs) and their effect on global warming leading to devastating consequences for the climate are now well known for quite some time. The debate on climate change has acquired urgency of late. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report provides strong evidence of the change in climate. It has noted that the CO<sub>2</sub> atmospheric concentration up from 280 ppm (preindustrial) to 379 ppm (2005) and GHG emissions up by 70 % between 1970 and 2004. This has resulted in rise in global mean temperature by 0.74 °C between 1906 and 2005. The 11-year period between 1995 and 2006 has been recorded among the 12 warmest years since 1850. Further, global sea level rose 1.8 mm/year during 1961–2003 and at a faster pace during 1993–2003 at the rate of 3.1 mm per year. The average warming in the future is predicted to be 0.2 °C per decade.<sup>7</sup> The adverse impact of these changes would increase the risks of natural disasters like floods, cyclones, drought, coastal erosion, landslides, water famine, food scarcity, adverse impact on human health, damage to fresh water ecosystems etc. The socio-economic impact of such adverse changes could be devastating for a densely populated region like South Asia. The second assessment report of IPCC in 1995 confirmed the rise in global temperature as being influenced by human beings. This report provided inputs for negotiations which culminated in landmark Kyoto Protocol in 1997. It divided the nations into two main groups, i.e. Annex-1 parties and Non-Annex-1 parties. The 145 developing countries were Non-Annex-1 parties. The protocol lays down the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ for Annex-1 and Non-Annex-1 parties:

1. Joint Implementation: Annex-1 countries can get credits for funding projects to reduce GHG emissions in other Annex-1 countries (mainly former Soviet bloc countries termed as economies in transition).
2. Clean Development Mechanism (CDM): Annex-1 countries can get credit for funding projects in Non-Annex-1 countries for projects which reduce GHGs.
3. International Emission Trading (IET): Annex-1 countries can buy and sell carbon credits where one country has exceeded its target and can sell its reductions by the tonne to another country.<sup>8</sup>

Ever since 1995, the parties to United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have been holding Conference of Parties (COP) in order to assess progress in dealing with climate change. The chequered history of international negotiations bereft of political will to accept common but differential responsibilities continued through annual COPs when in 2000, COP-6 reached an impasse in Hague. COP-6, however, resumed in Bonn in 2001 after US President George Bush declared official decision to abandon Kyoto Protocol and focused on financial support to developing countries. It committed to create a \$410 million fund by 2005. In 2001

again, COP-7 meeting in Marrakesh decided to set up a Climate Change Fund for mitigation and adaptation to climate change as well as Least Developed Country Fund for the poorest countries. The third IPCC Assessment Report in the same year provided new and strong evidence of global warming over the last 50 years. It cautioned against the wider security implications of the climate change due to melting of glaciers and rise in sea level.

COP-8 met in Delhi in 2002 and calling for sustainable development agreed that adaptation to climate change was as important as mitigation measures.

## South Asian Response

The kaleidoscope of South Asian poverty, deprivation and environment-related migration inevitably demands a regional response to the environmental threats. In fact, the complex nature of this crisis makes it a threat to the very existence of subcontinent population seeking a secure and dignified human life.

The heads of the state/government of 7 South Asian countries – Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – formally established the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in their first summit meeting held in Dhaka on 7–8 December 1985. They adopted a Charter for SAARC in this summit meeting. The basic objectives set forth in the charter were, inter alia, to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life; to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region; and to promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among countries of South Asia.

During the initial formative period between 1985 and 1990, five SAARC summits were held: Dhaka in December 1985; Bangalore, November 1986; Kathmandu, November 1987; Islamabad, December 1988; and Male, November 1990. With each summit making a contribution, the confidence of the member states deepened, activities expanded and the SAARC became a reality. The Charter of the SAARC signed at Dhaka Summit enunciated the objectives, principles and the institutional framework of SAARC. The principal objectives of SAARC being socio-economic welfare and cultural development of the South Asian peoples, emphasis was laid on the achievement of the goal of collective collaboration in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields.

The Third SAARC Summit which was convened in Kathmandu, Nepal, on 2–4 November 1987 decided, inter alia, to commission a study on the ‘Protection and Preservation of the Environment and the Causes and Consequences of Natural Disasters’ in a well-planned comprehensive framework. In fact, while deciding to commission this study, the summit leaders expressed their deep concern at the fast and continuing degradation of the environment including extensive destruction of forest in the South Asian region. They also noted that South Asia was afflicted with such natural disasters as floods, droughts, landslides, cyclones and tidal waves which have had a particularly severe impact causing immense human suffering.<sup>9</sup>

This study which was finalised in December 1991 was formulated after very comprehensive national studies by member states to bring out the conditions prevalent in the countries of the region on environment and natural disasters. These country reports mentioned the preventive and remedial measures taken with regard to adverse climate conditions and natural disasters. The study report noted that

The region is one of the poorest in the world and has a high rate of population growth and population density – the SAARC Member states comprise 20 per cent of the world's population living on 3.5 per cent of the total land area and generate only 2 per cent of the world's GNP. The pressures that these socio-economic conditions create on the natural environment are enormous. In addition, development programmes in the area of industry, agriculture and energy, which are necessary to improve the standards of living of the people, create environmental problems through the generation of wastes and heavy demands they put on natural resource base. SAARC region because of its high level of poverty.... Degradation of the environment has a particularly adverse effect on the poor, and results in increased natural disasters, especially in the high slopes of the mountain regions, dry and desertified areas, and in the flood plains. The natural resource base of South Asia Has to be managed extremely carefully and with great ingenuity to ensure increased productivity on a sustainable basis so that present and future generations can meet their needs and aspirations and live in harmony with their environment.<sup>10</sup>

The report made recommendations on measures to protect and manage environment and suggested measures and programmes for strengthening disaster management capabilities. Specific issues covered by recommendations on protecting and managing environment included strengthening the environment management infrastructure, environmentally sound land and water planning, research and action programme on mountain development in the Himalayan region, coastal zone management programme, integrated development of river basins, SAARC forestry and watershed programme, programme on energy and environment, pollution control and hazardous wastes programme, network on traditional water harvesting techniques, SAARC cooperative programme for biodiversity management, people's participation in resource management, information exchange on low-cost and environmentally sound habitat related technologies, SAARC network of environmental NGOs, participation of women in environment, SAARC Fund for environment, SAARC report on the state of environment and cooperation among SAARC members on environmental issues in international forums.

Further, the report incorporated measures and programmes for strengthening disaster management capabilities and covered topics on networking of institutions on natural disaster planning and management, establishment of a SAARC relief and assistance mechanism for disasters, cooperation on the development of modern disaster warning systems, programme for research related to drought prone areas and information exchange system on management of human activities in disaster prone areas.

Finally, the report suggested an appropriate institutional mechanism for coordinating and monitoring implementation of its recommendations in the form of a SAARC Committee on Environment.<sup>11</sup>

Coinciding with Public Scientific Conference held in Toronto, SAARC heads of States and Governments in their Fourth Summit held in December 1988 decided

to undertake a study on the greenhouse effect and its impact on the region. The unprecedented floods, cyclones and earthquakes during the year attracted their attention and they observed as under

The Heads of State or Government expressed their deep sense of sorrow and profound sympathy at the loss of valuable lives and extensive damage to property suffered during the year by Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan as a result of unprecedented floods, cyclones and earthquakes. In this connection, they recalled their earlier decision at Kathmandu in November, 1987 to intensify regional cooperation with a view to strengthening their disaster management capabilities and took note of the recommendations of the meeting of the SAARC Group of Experts on the Study on the Causes and Consequences of Natural Disasters and the Protection and Preservation of the Environment, that met.... They expressed the conviction that identification of measures and programmes as envisaged by the Group of Experts would supplement national, bilateral, regional and global efforts to deal with the increasingly serious problems being faced by the region as a result of the recurrence of natural disasters and the continuing degradation of the environment.<sup>12</sup>

This study recommended regional measures in sharing experiences, scientific capabilities and information on climate change, sea level rise and technology transfer. The studies on natural disasters/environment and greenhouse effect culminated in adoption of SAARC Plan of Action on Environment in 1997. Subsequently, there was a series of meetings of SAARC Environment Ministers and flurry of regional activity in the wake of this discourse acquiring critical global dimension.

### ***SAARC Common Position in UN Conference of Parties (COP4)***

SAARC member states also evolved a common position on climate change. On the eve of the Fourth Session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP-4) which was held in Buenos Aires, SAARC Environment Ministers met in Colombo on 30 October–1 November 1998 and agreed to urge Annex-1 countries to expedite signing of Kyoto Protocol for its ratification and coming into force and further to take urgent and effective steps domestically to implement commitments undertaken by them to reduce their emission of greenhouse gases. Significantly, they also emphasised fundamental prerequisite for designing emission trading, as provided in the Kyoto Protocol, is the determination of equitable emission entitlement of the parties. It was maintained that the entitlements cannot be derived from the past emissions which were inequitable.<sup>13</sup> Earlier, in tenth SAARC Summit held in July 1998, the leaders expressed their satisfaction on adoption of a common position prior to adoption of Kyoto Protocol in following words:

The Heads of State or Government expressed their satisfaction over the adoption of a common position by Member States prior to the Third Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Kyoto, Japan and welcomed the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in December 1997, and underscored the importance of the Protocol for the protection of the climate system.<sup>14</sup>

### ***SAARC Year of the Green South Asia: 2007***

SAARC declared the year 2007 as the Year of the Green South Asia. Its Fourteenth Summit in April this year reiterated that collaboration in addressing some of the common problems such as the arsenic contamination of groundwater, desertification and melting of glaciers and assistance to affected peoples should be deepened. They expressed deep concern over global climate change and the consequent rise in sea level and its impact on the lives and livelihoods of people. They emphasised the need for assessing and managing its risks and called for the adaptation of initiatives and programmes. Cooperation in early forecasting, warning and monitoring and sharing of knowledge on consequences of climate change were required for pursuing a climate resilient development in South Asia. They agreed to commission a team of regional experts to identify collective actions in this regard.<sup>15</sup> In December 2007, SAARC Council of Ministers discussed the issue of climate change and felt that given the vulnerabilities, inadequate means and limited capacities, there was need for rapid social and economic development in the region to make SAARC climate change resilient. SAARC Environment Ministers meeting in Dhaka in 2008 adopted a SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change. The objectives of the Action Plan were to identify and create opportunities for activities achievable through regional cooperation and south-south support in terms of technology and knowledge transfer, to provide impetus for regional level action plan on climate change through national level activities and to support the global negotiation process of UNFCCC such as Bali Action Plan, through a common understanding or elaboration of the various negotiating issues to effectively reflect the concerns of SAARC member states.<sup>16</sup> The thematic areas of the action plan included adaptation to climate change, actions for climate change mitigation, technology transfer, finance and investment, education and awareness programme, management of impacts and risks associated with climate change and capacity building for international negotiations. The action plan epitomised the predicament and frustration of the developing countries on the slow progress and virtual negation of the concerns of Non-Annex-1 countries defined in Kyoto Protocol which was reminiscent of older era when north-south stalemate debate was at its peak.

### ***Sixteenth SAARC Summit: Green and Happy South Asia***

The Sixteenth SAARC Summit held at Thimpu, Bhutan, in April 2010 was dedicated to the theme 'Towards a Green and Happy South Asia'. The Thimpu Statement on climate change adopted at the summit meeting called for a review of the implementation of the Dhaka Declaration and SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change and ensured its timely implementation. To achieve this, agreement to establish an inter-governmental expert group on climate change for clear policy directions and guidance was reached. It was also resolved that this group shall meet at least twice a year to



periodically monitor and review the implementation and make recommendations to the SAARC Environment Ministers.

The Thimpu Statement anticipated the probable failure of Cancun Conclave. It resolved to carry on with comprehensive regional self-reliance efforts. It directed the secretary general to commission a study on climate risks in the region and advocate awareness programmes. Green technology and best practices were to be promoted. It also decided to commission a study to explore the feasibility of establishing a SAARC mechanism which would provide capital for projects that promote low-carbon technology. Further, it was decided to set up a Low-Carbon Research and Development Institute in South Asian University.

An intergovernmental meeting on draft SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in May 2011 reached a broad consensus on the agreement. This agreement is scheduled to be adopted in the forthcoming Seventeenth SAARC Summit to be held in Maldives in November 2011. The draft agreement based on the principle of respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of all member states aims to put in place an effective mechanism for rapid response to disasters to achieve substantial reduction in loss of lives and loss of social, economic and environmental assets in times of a disaster.

## **South Asian Response: Critical Appraisal**

SAARC regional efforts for achieving MDG 7 lack political will and vision for the region. While the dangers posed by this threat to the humankind as a whole and more so to the poor and vulnerable regions are well acknowledged, the selfish lifestyles and consumption patterns make the future of dealing with the threats of climate change rather bleak. SAARC's boastful rhetoric on regional cooperation was recently exposed during July–August 2010 devastating floods which hit Pakistan. These floods not only destroyed infrastructure in several parts of Pakistan but affected a huge population of approximately 20 million people. Except for a pledge of a meagre US\$32 million by SAARC countries, there was virtually no action to help a member state suffering unprecedented damage due to this calamity. It was only in April 2010, i.e. only a few months before the devastating floods hit Pakistan, that Silver Jubilee Climate theme SAARC Summit was celebrated at Thimpu, Bhutan.

In fact, SAARC is a captive and victim of bilateral contentious politics in the region. The bilateral disputes between India and other SAARC countries, particularly between India and Pakistan, are deep rooted and defy the general global trend towards lessening of tensions in the post-Cold War period. The core issue between India and Pakistan does not seem to be Kashmir (as claimed by Pakistan) but a more fundamental difference on the nature of the 'states' of India and Pakistan – the contradiction between the State of Pakistan created artificially on the basis of religion and the secular ideology of the Indian State. Except for a brief interlude of 'Gujral Doctrine' to resolve contentious bilateral disputes on the basis of nonreciprocity, India has not shown any significant shift in her approach for resolving bilateral

disputes with her neighbours. This will continue to impede and delay access towards the achievement of MDG 7. The relevance of SAARC in respect of reducing bilateral tensions, enhancing regional security and promoting economic well-being of people is almost negligible. Its structure as an intergovernment body is seen as limiting its role and merely embodying the relationship between member countries and their interstate tensions. SAARC has generated considerable dynamism though at the social, NGO/civil society levels.

The common position adopted by SAARC during global negotiations on climate change is no consolation for the poor record on responding to disasters and joint efforts at modifying policy and action to adapt to and mitigate the threat of climate change. India, in any case, has joined other groupings like Brazil, South Africa, India and China popularly known as BASIC countries while indulging in bargaining on behalf of developing countries. The deliberations of Cancun Conclave in 2010 have further eroded any significance of common regional positions at climate negotiations. The common SAARC posture in achieving environmental sustainability has nothing more than an ornamental value to confuse people and civil society groups.

## Conclusion

Environment of Mother Earth is indivisible and does not observe political boundaries. National solutions are not enough to deal with this complex issue. Hence, regional collaborative efforts are required. These regional initiatives taken by SAARC on environmental issues to achieve MDG 7 seem to be quiet impressive. However, the problem is with the implementation. Some critics argue that there is roadmap which includes only the map and nothing is moving on the road. The implementation, thus, is unsatisfactory because of political tension among SAARC member states especially between the two largest members of SAARC – India and Pakistan. However, there is a strong willingness emerging in the establishment of both the countries to normalise the relations. There is also a strong pressure emerging from the civil society groups which are fast evolving in South Asia to improve the bilateral relations among nations in South Asia. If there is peace and cordiality among SAARC member states, environment-related declarations and resolutions can be implemented effectively and MDG 7 can be achieved.

## Notes

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