

“CLIMATE CHANGE AND SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION: A REGIONAL RESPONSE”

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—Abstract —

The expansion of environmental politics is seen as a major revolution and has also expanded a form of political activity in international relations. Environmental issue like climate change appeared frequently on the international agenda even within the banner of some regional cooperation that negotiate some binding climate agreements. Although South Asian countries are negligible contributors to global warming, yet climate change is generally acknowledged as a threat to the region. From what we have seen these countries are steadily experiencing various grievance of climate change for the last few years be it in the form of devastating floods, droughts, cyclones and storms, food shortages, rise in temperature as well as irregularities in rainfall patterns. It is true that climate change is a trans-boundary difficulty to the region where none of the countries can maintain in isolation. Fortunately, South Asia's susceptibility to climate change has been an agenda in SAARC forum since 1987, when it decided, inter-alia, to commission a study on the protection and preservation of the environment. This paper will examine the response of SAARC with regard to the problem of climate change in the region.

Key Words: *Climate Change, South Asia, SAARC.*

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The expansion of environmental politics is seen as a major revolution, it has also expanded a form of political activity in international relations. Environmental issue like climate change appeared frequently on the international agenda even within the banner of some regional cooperation that negotiate some binding climate agreements. A home to one of the oldest civilizations of the world, SAARC region (South Asia) consists of eight states of different sizes and

capabilities (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and The Maldives) who are negligible contributors to global warming, yet climate change is generally acknowledged as a threat to the region. (Ulka Kelkar and Suruchi Bhadwal, 2007/2008). The region spread from the arctic temperatures of the Himalayas to the arid areas of south-eastern Pakistan and western India to the intense tropical humidity of Bangladesh, southern India, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. (The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 17: 1974). Although South Asian countries are negligible contributors to global warming, yet climate change is generally acknowledged as a threat to the region.

Widely recognised as one of the most significant challenges the world is facing, climate change has moved to the centre stage of public concern in a remarkable way and in a very short space of time. (Anthony Giddens, 2011). It is predicted to have severe consequences for South Asia, particularly its agricultural sectors, which employs more than 60% of the region's labour force. (Oxfam GB (2009a)). Due to its unique geography South Asia cannot afford to ignore the jolt of climate change. (Saul Bernard Cohen, 2003). In fact, it is already affecting the region. Owing to high population density and extreme poverty, it is allegedly affecting a large number of people across the region in various ways. (Oxfam GB (2009c)). Floods, droughts, food shortages and cyclones, which already have massive blows, are likely to become more severe and more frequent across the region. (Parry, M.L. et al. (2007)). These blows will be keenly felt in the coming decades. Natural disasters are becoming more frequent and intense. Land and water are becoming more scarce and difficult to access. Increases in agricultural productivity are becoming more difficult to achieve. In India, the area affected by floods was more than doubled in the 50 years between 1953 and 2003. In Bangladesh, 60% of the country is already flood prone. The 2010 floods in Pakistan affected 20 million people. Other countries of the region will be of no exceptions. Agriculture in South Asia is heavily reliant on the monsoons, which account for more than 70% of the region's annual precipitation. But, climate change is predicted to have severe consequences on agriculture and the rural poor in South Asia. (Oxfam GB (2009a), Oxfam GB (2009b)). Therefore, climate change is real, serious, and inescapable, and its looming effects, certain and uncertain, may prove to be destabilizing on a massive scale.

Rise of temperature led to glacial melt which eventually result to rise of sea level. Sea level rise will have significant effects on the low-lying coastal systems and islands. Much of the Maldives may be submerged by the end of the century if the worst-case scenario becomes a reality. (NAPA, 2006: 18-36). Parts of Bangladesh also will be submerged, affecting over a tenth of the population. (Oxfam GB

(2009a), Oxfam GB (2009b)). Sea level changes too will effects on salinity levels, thereby amplifying storm-surge effects and changing both sedimentation patterns and ocean currents. It has been projected that by the end of the century, millions of people across the region could be rendered homeless due to rising sea levels. On seeing these possible effects in the region, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which is a platform for the people of the region has taken some steps to tackle this menace of climate change. (Dawn, 1980; The Pakistan Times, 1980).

Climate change challenges are hugely demanding, interconnected and increasingly viewed as the foremost problem of the 21st century. South Asia, which consists of eight states of different sizes and capabilities, extremely vulnerable to climate change. (Stern, 2006). The fourth report of the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change published in 2007, highlighted that the climate change would bring about the following challenges to South Asia:

1. Melting of glaciers in the Himalayas would increase flooding and this in turn would affect long-term water resources and availability in South Asia.
2. Climate change would compound pressure on natural resources and environment owing to rapid urbanization, industrialization and economic development.
3. Crop yields in South Asia would likely decrease up to 30% by the middle of the twenty first century.
4. Periodic floods and droughts would impact on the health of the population.
5. The rising sea level would exacerbate inundation, storm surge, soil erosion and other coastal hazards. (IPCC Fourth Assessment Report, 2007).

With the region's population poised to rise by another 800 million people by 2050, several of these problems will be compounded. (World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision, 2007).

With the rising urgency to respond to its effects, climate change has become a core issue for SAARC. Its vulnerability has been in focus in SAARC forum ever since the Kathmandu Third Summit in 1987 when SAARC expressed its deep concern of the continuing degrading environment. Back then, SAARC 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. This study was finalized in 1991, suggested an appropriate institutional mechanism for coordinating and monitoring implementation of its recommendations in the form of a SAARC Committee on Environment. (Kathmandu Declaration SAARC Summit, 1987). This could be

considered as a decisive step forward for the common good of the regional citizenry.

It was at the 5th SAARC Summit the Heads of State focused and took climate change as a part of its agenda. It noted with alarm the unprecedented climatic changes predicted by the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). It was at this Summit SAARC urged the international community to mobilize additional finances; to make available appropriate technologies to enable the developing countries to face the new challenges arising from climate changes and sea-level rise; it also decided to observe 1992 as the "SAARC Year of Environment". (The Malé Declaration, 1990). At the Colombo Summit SAARC recognised the degradation of the environment. Back then, it realized the need for additional resources to pursue an environmentally sensitive process of development that will banish the underlying causes of environmental degradation. It also expressed its conviction that the framework could be laid for an equitable global partnership of all countries with a view to safeguarding the environment. (Sixth Summit Colombo Declaration, 1991).

At the Sixth Summit SAARC leaders urged the member countries to promote cooperation amongst themselves for enhancing their respective disaster management capabilities and for undertaking specific work-programmes for protection and preservation of the environment. (Sixth Summit Colombo Declaration, 1991). At the Seventh Summit SAARC leaders expressed their satisfaction over the adoption of a common position by Member States in the Sixth Summit. This Summit voiced its determination to practice intra-SAARC consultations on matters of common environmental concern. (Seventh SAARC Summit, 1993). SAARC recognised that international cooperation is vital for building up national capabilities, transfer of appropriate technology and promotion of multilateral projects and research efforts in natural disaster reduction. (The Eight Delhi Declaration, 1995). Soon after, it reiterated its view that member states should take all necessary steps in vital areas such as sharing and developing scientific capabilities to protect and manage the environment. It also decided that the meeting of SAARC Environment Ministers should be institutionalised henceforth as an annual event. (The Ninth SAARC Summit, 1997). At the Tenth SAARC Summit its heads of state noted that the SAARC Environment Ministers would be meeting in Sri Lanka in late 1998, where they expressed their deep satisfaction at the positive outcome of the Environment Ministers' Conference held in Malé. (Tenth SAARC Summit, 1998). They urged that the Ministers should also mandate any specific measures required for SAARC to further strengthen cooperation on environmental issues, with other international

or regional organizations engaged in the same field. At the next summit they noted the satisfaction about the growing public awareness of the need for protecting the environment within the framework of regional cooperation. They also reiterated their call for the early and effective implementation of the SAARC Environment Plan of Action as endorsed by the SAARC Environment Ministers. They also felt the need to set up a system for cooperation in the field of the early warning as well as preparedness and management of natural disasters along with the programs to promote conservation of land and water resources. (The Eleventh SAARC Summit, 2002). They stressed for the speedy compliance of the State of the Environment reports, to expedite the preparation of SAARC State of Environment report and the commissioning of the work on drafting a Regional Environment Treaty as well as for the effective implementation of the SAARC Environment Plan of Action which is of utmost important to the region which is highly prone to natural calamities. (The Twelfth Summit, 2004).

The Dhaka Summit that met in 2005 further decided to consider the modalities for having a Regional Environment Treaty in furthering environmental cooperation among the SAARC Member States. The SAARC leaders welcomed the decision of the Council of Ministers to establish a SAARC Forestry Centre in Bhutan. It also endorsed the decision of the Special Session of the SAARC Environment Ministers to further enhance the capacity of the existing SAARC institutions namely, SAARC Meteorological Research Centre and SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre to carry out their mandated tasks. (Thirteenth SAARC Summit, 2005).

SAARC declared year 2007 as the Year of Green South Asia. The SAARC members emphasised the need for assessing and managing its risks and impacts and called for adaptation of initiatives and programmes as well as cooperation in early forecasting, warning and monitoring; and sharing of knowledge on consequences of climate change for pursuing a climate resilient development in South Asia. (Thirteenth SAARC Summit, 2005). They also agreed to commission a team of regional experts to identify collective actions in this regard. (Fourteenth SAARC Summit, 2007). Periodic meetings of the SAARC Environment Ministers have been held to take stock of progress and to further enhance regional cooperation in the area of climate change. In addition, a Special Session of the Environment Ministers in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean Tsunami was held in Malé in July 2005. The SAARC Environment Ministers meeting in Dhaka in 2008 adopted SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change. (SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change, 2008). The objectives of the Action Plan are 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 the UNFCCC such as Bali Action Plan, through a common understanding that would effectively reflect the concerns of SAARC Member States. (SAARC Workshop: Climate Change and Disasters – Emerging Trends and Future Strategies, 2008).

The SAARC Summit in Colombo in 2008 reiterated the need to intensify cooperation within an expanded regional environmental protection framework, to deal in particular with climate change issues. They called for an in-depth study on “Climate Justice: The Human Dimension of Climate Change” to come up with a rights-based approach that would highlight the human impact when responding to the effects of climate change. In addition a Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism was to be created to adopt a coordinated and planned approach to meet such emergencies under the aegis of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre. The SAARC Summit held at Thimpu, Bhutan in April 2010 was dedicated to the theme of Climate Change. The Summit declaration was termed ‘Towards a Green and Happy South Asia’. In addition, there was an agreement to establish an Inter-governmental Expert Group on Climate Change to develop clear policy direction and guidance for regional cooperation as envisaged in the SAARC Plan of Action on Climate Change. It was resolved that the Inter-governmental Expert Group on Climate Change shall meet at least twice a year to periodically monitor and review the implementation of this Statement, make recommendations to facilitate its implementation and submit its report through the Senior Officials of SAARC to the SAARC Environment Ministers. (Sixteenth SAARC Summit, 2010).

In fact Climate Change was the major focus of the Sixteenth Meeting of the Heads of State of SAARC. Then, the Eight Heads of State adopted the 'Thimphu Statement on Climate Change', and discussed ways to jointly fight climate change which includes establishing an inter-governmental expert group on climate change, and planting ten million trees in the region over the next five years (2010-15). (Hindustan Times, 2010). It was at this Summit it emphasized that global negotiations on climate change should be guided by the principles of equity, and common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities as enshrined in the UNFCCC that should be conducted in an open, transparent and inclusive manner. (UNFCCC, 1992). The Thimphu summit provided an opportunity to devise a common climate agenda as a regional group, although as a regional group SAARC has not functioned appropriately in any previous climate negotiations. To laid emphasis on further strengthening regional cooperation

among the member states of SAARC, Zillur Rahman the President of Bangladesh said that SAARC countries have to work collectively through exchanging data of weather and climate as well as technological and IT- knowledge. (Nam News Network, 2010). In May 2011, an Inter-Governmental meeting to draft SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters held in Colombo reached a broad consensus on an Agreement that aims to put in place an effective mechanism for rapid response to natural disasters. This agreement is scheduled to be adopted in the forthcoming Seventeenth SAARC Summit to be held in Maldives in November 2011. (The Hindu, 2011).

Being a transnational issue, climate change adaptation measures are usually developed at the international, national, regional and local levels. Consensus for a joint approach to combat climate change in South Asia can be seen within the framework of SAARC. In addition, climate change has been considered important even on the national level in all SAARC countries and adaptation activities are currently going on. At a national level, the countries of South Asia have developed their own National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPA). Individually, these countries have developed their national climate change strategies and action plans, including the National Climate Change Adaptation for Sri Lanka 2011-2016 period that aimed at systematically moving the country towards a climate change resilient future (Nayana Mawilmada, 2010: 1-56.); the National Action Plan on Climate Change of India which outlining existing and future policies and programs addressing climate mitigation and adaptation (National Action Plan on Climate Change Government of India, 2008); and the draft National Climate Change Policy in Pakistan that was later approved by its federal government. (Suhail Yusuf, 2011). Afghanistan has also undertaken national policies, strategies and legislation that address natural resource and land management issues. (Ali Azimi and David McCauley, 2003). Through the Planning Commission, the Royal Government of Bhutan too has developed a Vision Statement with a visionary strategy known as “Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness.” Its emphasis is on maintaining forest area, developing environmental friendly power generating sources and balancing economic development environmental conservation. (Mozaharul Alam and Dago Tshering, 2004: 20-21). Again, the Maldives was the first country to sign the Kyoto Protocol on 16th March 1998 and it ratified the Protocol on 30th December 1998. The first National Communication of the Maldives to UNFCCC was submitted at the 7th Session of the Conference of the Parties to UNFCCC held in Marrakesh in 2001. The National Greenhouse Gas Inventory, National Mitigation Plan, Vulnerability Assessment and Adaptation Options are included in the

national communication of Maldives. In 2008, the government adopted the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP), focussing on some priorities like food security, social protection and health and comprehensive disaster management. (Asian Development Bank). Nepal has a National Strategy for Sustainable Development (NSSD) under the name of the Sustainable Development Agenda for Nepal (SDAN). But these plans and policies have not yet resulted in significant adaptation efforts at the national level. In many cases, only limited amounts of resource have so far been committed. (Wiseman, K. and R.P. Chhetri, 2011).

The initiatives that begin by understanding the vulnerability of communities to existing challenges of climate change may help build a solid foundation to work ahead. Aware of such problems, policymakers in South Asia have identified the need for reductions in vulnerability and disaster risk in some SAARC Declarations because its members know that without drastic action its furies in future will be more difficult and costly to the region. Hence, the stand of SAARC signatories at regional level is very clear when all its members participated in the Summits actively.

There is no doubt that declarations of SAARC have delivered a little breakthrough to response to the effect of climate change. The policies and initiatives established and framed by SAARC as well as of the signatory's governments to protect and combat climate change appear essential. However, after a quarter-century when it came into existence, SAARC still remains an under-performing regional association. Regulation efforts in SAARC have so far been unreliable, it remain short of a strong link between national climate change strategies, plans, and existing disaster risk reduction and other relevant policies. (Charlotte Sterrett, 2011: 1-95). Due to the global ongoing debate there seems to be a lack of conceptual understanding even between SAARC members as to what constitutes adaptation and what represents good and sustainable development. Hence, although leaders have pledged to review the implementation of the Dhaka Action Plan and to establish an expert group under it to develop a clear policy direction, it remains to be seen whether actions will follow their expression. Measures that were so far undertaken by SAARC to manage climate change have been inadequate. Even the 2007 ministerial meet in Dhaka and the 'SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change' which is one of the most significant initiatives taken to strengthen regional cooperation in the areas of environment, climate change and natural disasters yielded no concrete results. Action has been slow coming and pledges to implement the Dhaka Action Plan (2009 - 2012) have yet to be initiated. As a result, responses to climate change are failing to effectively address

the full range of knock-on consequences. Although, there is increasing debates on the trans-boundary security implications of climate change in the region, yet there is little understanding of the regional level that will determine whether and how cooperation can effectively and peacefully adjust to changing environmental conditions. (UN General Assembly, 2011). Since no concrete action has been taken even the Thimpu summit which is expected to yield an agreement on the region's strategy to deal with climate change has remained on paper. A fundamental problem in SAARC is that climate-related financing, policies and programmes have not adequately provided substantial back up. As a result, it is to say that SAARC have played a relatively small role in international climate change policymaking in the region. Therefore, if SAARC is to be an institution responsible for climate change, certain adaptations measures need to be adopted to ensure that the region is climate change protective.

If its member states fail to take concrete action, the region where the people are living today will be very different in a few coming decades. So, it is in SAARC commitment and power to prevent this from happening, but this requires each individual government all over the region to play their part collectively. A consensus effort is necessary to prevent the potentially devastating consequences. Ultimately it is up to each of these countries to take action to slow down and eventually reverse global warming through everyday awareness. An international association like SAARC formed to effectively address different kinds of shared problems; climate change must be the issue. Therefore, it is high time to combat cohesively because working together among neighbours on environmental issues like climate change will be beneficial for all subcontinental neighbours who have common problems and have more or less same geography and demography.

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