

6th South Asia Economic Summit CUTS Reporting - Day 2

Food Security and Growth Topmost in South Asia's To-Do List

The second day of the 6th South Asia Economic Summit at Colombo saw passionate debates on 'Managing Water Resources, Food Security and Climate Change' and 'Addressing Intra-Country Growth Disparities', two of the 'big four' themes selected for this year's event.

The debate on future course of actions needed for coping with climate change and ensuring food security was based on the premise that water basins in South Asia are being increasingly overused, polluted, and salinated due to climate change impacts. Consequently, water shortage is likely to decrease crop production in South Asia. Additionally, conflict between different South Asian countries on issues of water sharing makes the scarcity of water more intense.

A theme paper presented by Posh Raj Pandey, Executive Chairman, South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE), prescribed that there is an urgent need to convert the adaptation and mitigation strategies stated at the national level of individual South Asian countries into practical action plans. The key word in this direction is 'coordination', as in most of these countries, climate change adaptation policies have been fragmented and isolated, lacking a link between different sectors and ministries in the country and region.

In the case of water sharing, numerous bilateral treaties exist between different countries in South Asia. However, for the effective management of water resources in South Asia, there is a need to move from bilateral to multilateral dialogue in the region. The SAWTEE paper also noted that South Asian countries currently focus on self-reliance on food production and neglect the fact that trade in food items from surplus to deficit regions act as a solution for climate change induced changes in cropping patterns.

G. K. Chadha, President, South Asian University, cited the Indian experience of necessity induced policy focus on self-reliance on food production. However, sustained 'green revolution' drive for decades has taken its toll on soil fertility and water resources, forcing a rethink on current agricultural policies and practices.

The complex and often contradictory aspects of self-reliance and regional cooperation in food production and consumption was the focal point of the debate. Commentators agreed that climate change is all set to aggravate this food policy conundrum further. However, there are certain areas where collective actions are possible, such as joint projects on climate and agriculture research, forum for sharing best practices etc.

On operational aspects of SAARC Food and Seed Banks, a number of improvements were suggested. More research on need assessment will give better directions to establishment of regional food and seed banks that are accessible in crisis situations. The SAARC leadership should work through the agreements establishing regional food and seed banks so that they address the implementation concerns that are being raised by individual member states and intended beneficiaries.

Growth Debate Reignited

Though climate change and food security discussions were both extensive and intensive, it is the debate on economic growth that stole the limelight today. In a well-researched theme paper prepared by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Islamabad, Pakistan, the topic of growth disparities in South Asia was laid out.

Vaqar Ahmed, Deputy Executive Director, SDPI, presented this paper which identifies demographic trend of youth bulge, rapid urbanization, rising share of services, informal sector surge, disconnect with sustainability, mediocre quality of factors of production, low levels of inclusiveness etc. as the main emerging trends. The overarching mega trends, according to this paper, are individual empowerment on several accounts and emergence of new power centres including civil society, corporate sector and media.

The game changers for South Asia are violent conflicts, both man-made and natural. Analyzing how these game changers will impact the mega trends, the paper also raised issues of rural development and youth engagement.

In the ensuing intense debate moderated by Debapriya Bhattacharya, Distinguished Fellow of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, Bangladesh, among other eminent commentators, Ahsan Iqbal Chaudhary, Federal Minister for Planning, Pakistan, spoke about the lack of inclusiveness in growth. Underlying this argument was the classical position that without access to productive assets, opportunities for upward social mobility to the marginalized are being denied.

Invoking the successful example of AMUL Dairy of India, Rehman Sobhan, Chairman of CPD, Bangladesh, suggested that the best possible way for participation of the under-represented in the growth process is to enhance value addition of their products to the highest level.

The counter argument was again based on another classical position that growth should be seen as it is and should not be tied to adjectives like 'green', 'inclusive' 'equitable' etc. as such qualifications will misdirect the correct understanding of growth and what needs to be done of achieving it. At this juncture South Asia cannot afford a slowdown in growth. Moreover economic disparity and growth should not be twinned for the sake of clarity in growth policies.

The debate ended on the note that the plight of the marginalized will always be a sign of failure of societies and solutions for the same cannot be wrought out of national and regional economic policy making.

Discussing on the complex issues facing rapid urbanisation, another expert panel noted that the trend is irreversible and what remains is finding solutions for unsustainable and unplanned urban growth. South Asian countries should find a way to upscale investments in urban infrastructure following suitable best practices that are observed from the experiences in South East Asia and South America.