

CIVIL SOCIETY STATEMENT ON FOOD SECURITY

Adopted by the South Asian Civil Society Forum on Responding to Food Insecurity in South Asia

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We, the participants of the South Asian Civil Society Forum on Food Security, view that the Triple 'F' Global Crises—Fuel, Food and Financial—have been affecting the global economy as well as posing a range of complex challenges for South Asian countries in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including the goal of halving the number of poor and hunger, and the "SAARC Development Goals".

We note that the global fuel prices have fallen significantly of late but there is no assurance that prices will stabilize, and will not adversely affect the food security situation in South Asia. We believe that while the rise in food prices will continue to adversely affect the region and to create further challenges in the form of widespread poverty and food insecurity, the worsening global financial crisis threatens to perpetuate food insecurity, by, *inter alia*, diverting the attention of international donor agencies and governments from the agenda of food security.

We recognize that South Asian governments have taken the food security issue seriously but it is high time for them to initiate effective collaborative actions for addressing the food security concerns from the human rights perspective, both nationally and regionally, and redesign their policies on agriculture, food security and trade.

We welcome the outcome of the 15th SAARC Summit that was concluded this August in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The main Declaration of the Summit and a separate "Colombo Statement on Food Security" indicate that SAARC Member States are willing to make concerted efforts for addressing the food insecurity challenges facing the region.

Taking note of these developments and supporting the willingness of the Member States to devise and implement "people-centered short- to medium-term Regional Strategy and Collaborative Projects" for ensuring food security in the region, as well as the decisions made for the operationalization of the SAARC Food Bank, and the drawing up of SAARC Agriculture Perspective 2020, we met to discuss various food security issues ahead of the Meeting of the SAARC Agriculture Ministers to be held in New Delhi on 5–6 November 2008.

Based on the deliberations and discussions made at the forum, we came up with the following recommendations (some of which are cross-cutting) on different thematic areas, which we consider to be important for SAARC Member States to integrate into their regional strategies, collaborative actions and projects, and Agriculture Perspective 2020.

SAARC Food Bank

In order to effectively and efficiently operationalize the Food Bank:

- Make an institutional arrangement for periodic estimations of food demand; and undertake measures to increase the storage capacity of the Member States.
- Relax the withdrawal conditions and the replenishment requirements of the bank by taking into account the national capacity of the Member States.
- Set up a Central Information System (e.g., websites for real time data sharing); and form a SAARC Food Security Monitoring Committee, including civil society representatives, and also task this committee with the role of: making arrangements for a regional mapping of vulnerable regions and populations, as well as preparing a vulnerability calendar for the effective distribution of food and response systems. Such regional food mapping can also guide the concerned authorities to establish community food centres which are needed mainly to enhance access to food in remote and inaccessible areas.
- Set up a Negotiation Committee for price determination and a Dispute Settlement Mechanism to resolve disputes concerned with the bank's operationalization.
- Agree to authorize Parliamentary Committees of the Member States to look into its operational issues for wider political support and cooperation, as well as contribute ideas for the effective operationalization of the bank.
- Work out detailed procurement modalities in addition to ensuring timely, localized and transparent procurement as well as rationalization of procurement prices. Ensure that public-private partnership be an integral part of the procurement modality.
- Utilize the SAARC Development Fund to facilitate the procurement process.
- Make distribution systems responsive to regional and seasonal food insecurity, as well as non-political and non-partisan.

Production and Productivity

- Promote the exchange and testing of varieties/seeds within the region keeping in consideration the similarities and diversities of agro-ecological zones. Bilateral and regional contracts and agreements between and among the Member States should be implemented to facilitate the access to and exchange of varieties/seeds, which is currently being restricted in the region in view of the emerging concerns relating to Access and Benefit Sharing and Intellectual Property Right (IPR) Regimes.
- In this regard, establish a "SAARC Seed Bank", linking it with "national seed banks" (the creation of which is also important) as well as "community seed banks" (which are already under implementation in several countries of the region) so that it ensures an

effective long-term mechanism of production, exchange and use of community- and environment-friendly quality seeds that are in the domain of public and private sector organizations as well as farmers. The bank will also contribute to agriculture research (breeding) and promote the sharing of seeds and technologies that are critical for developing new varieties/seeds and promoting the conservation of agricultural biodiversity.

- Promote the cost-effective intensification of agriculture and invest sufficiently in agriculture research, extension and infrastructure for, among others, strengthening crop diversification and management techniques; arresting soil degradation (e.g., salination); and strengthening effective post-harvest loss management.
- Implement collaborative projects to encourage farmer-to-farmer exchange as well as partnership activities with scientists, breeders and other private sector groups (such as through participatory plant breeding projects).

Bioenergy and climate change

- Establish a Technical Working Group to:
 - undertake a stocktaking exercise of bioenergy technologies and research capacities with a focus on technologies that are not competing with the use of food production.
 - prioritize and adapt available technologies for pilot projects on bioenergy, building on experiences and strengths of the SAARC Member States.
 - develop short- and long-term research priorities for regional collaboration on the development and dissemination of bioenergy technologies, with a possibility of adding liquid biofuels in the long-term perspective.
- Invest in research and development projects to identify and adopt cost-effective technologies needed for mitigation of climate change effects on food security and agriculture, and develop regulatory policy frameworks that can help mitigate and adapt to climate change, including an early warning system.
- Establish a South Asian Climate Change Fund to also support activities in response to intensifying climate change impacts on food security and agriculture.
- Develop a regional agenda to advocate the reduction of subsidies, tariffs and other distortive trade measures on liquid biofuels in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries through the World Trade Organization (WTO).
- Lobby for time-bound commitments and actions from developed countries for transferring energy-efficient, low-carbon technologies to South Asian countries through the Clean Development Mechanism.

Trade and Biotechnology

- Make time-bound commitments and actions in the area of transit and trade facilitation, and harmonize customs rules and regulations as well as product standards and quality (such as sanitary and phytosanitary, and technical standards) with adequate institutional arrangements for facilitating food procurement and trade.

- Promote intra-regional trade in farm products by de-listing some of the farm products from the negative list under the Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area in a phase-wise manner or on a trial basis, and remove para-tariff and non-tariff barriers to agriculture trade. This is also essential to strengthen the procurement mechanism required for the effective operationalization of the SAARC Food Bank.
- Protect small and marginal farmers from cheap subsidized imports but at the same time, also develop strategies to boost farm exports from the region.
- Agree not to apply food export restraints to the Member States.
- Make commitments to institutionalize the process of the involvement and participation of non-state actors in trade negotiations at the national, regional and international levels, and while signing trade agreements, including trans-regional bilateral trade agreements, do not agree to conditions that adversely affect the food security interest of the region.
- Develop Regional Framework/Guidelines on the application of biotechnology as well as biosafety measures so as to ensure that the outcomes are community- and environment-friendly.
- Develop Regional Framework/Guidelines on Genetically Modified Organisms, keeping in consideration the interests of both consumers and producers, as well as the implications for the environment and the natural resource base.
- Work in unison to ensure that global negotiations in agriculture and related issues such as intellectual property rights (IPRs) are made supportive of the agricultural development thrust of SAARC countries and demand that they be allowed to exercise the right to protect their agricultural sector through, for example, the Special Safeguard Mechanism being negotiated at the WTO.

Agricultural Biodiversity and Intellectual Property Rights

- Promote community-based biodiversity management (CBM) systems and practices for the protection of farmers' rights to seeds, genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge, and for the strengthening of tripartite partnership among the public, private and community actors and agencies.
- Recognize and implement programmes and projects such as Participatory Plant Breeding, Community Seed Banks, Community Biodiversity Registers, Home-gardens, and Value Addition and Marketing, including of neglected and underutilized species.
- Create a Regional Network of community seed banks so as to facilitate the exchange and use of seeds in the region.
- Form a Regional Intellectual Property Expert Committee to look into the IPR affairs and issues, and develop a Regional IPR Policy, taking into account the national capacity of developing and least-developed Member countries.
- Develop common positions on IPR issues for negotiations at the international forums such as at the level of the WTO and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), taking into account the interest of both developing and least-developed Member countries.
- Develop Regional Framework/Guidelines on "Plant Variety Protection" and "Access and Benefit Sharing" Regimes to ensure an effective implementation of farmers' rights over farmers' varieties as well as IPR-protected varieties so as to bring into implementation effective domestic (*sui generis*) regimes to safeguard farmers from the onslaught of IPRs.

Such regional framework must take into account the provisions of relevant international instruments—such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture—and importantly, the special and differential treatment of the least-developed countries (LDCs) at the WTO.

- Make institutional arrangements and implement collaborative projects to assess the potential of benefiting from the geographical indication (GI) registration of agriculture products, for example, by undertaking economic and export feasibility research and studies on potential products of the region.

Role of SAARC Observers, and International Actors and Agencies

- Observer nations should develop strategic community-centered action plans to support regional strategies and collaborative projects of SAARC, as well as the drawing up and implementation of Agriculture Perspective 2020, and also to provide concrete support to the effective operationalization of the Food Bank and the early warning system.
- More coordinated efforts should be made by developed countries, the United Nations High Level Task Force on Global Food Crisis, and institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the World Bank and the WTO for financial, logistical and technical support, and technology transfer.
- Support for trade-related infrastructure, particularly to deal with sanitary and phytosanitary and technical barriers to trade, for increased farm exports from SAARC, as well as for favourable market access opportunities, including meaningful and beneficial duty-free and quota-free facilities for the LDCs, must be an integral part of their programmes and packages.
- The global financial crisis should not be used as an excuse for bilateral and multilateral donors and developed countries to withdraw commitments on the assistance required for food security.