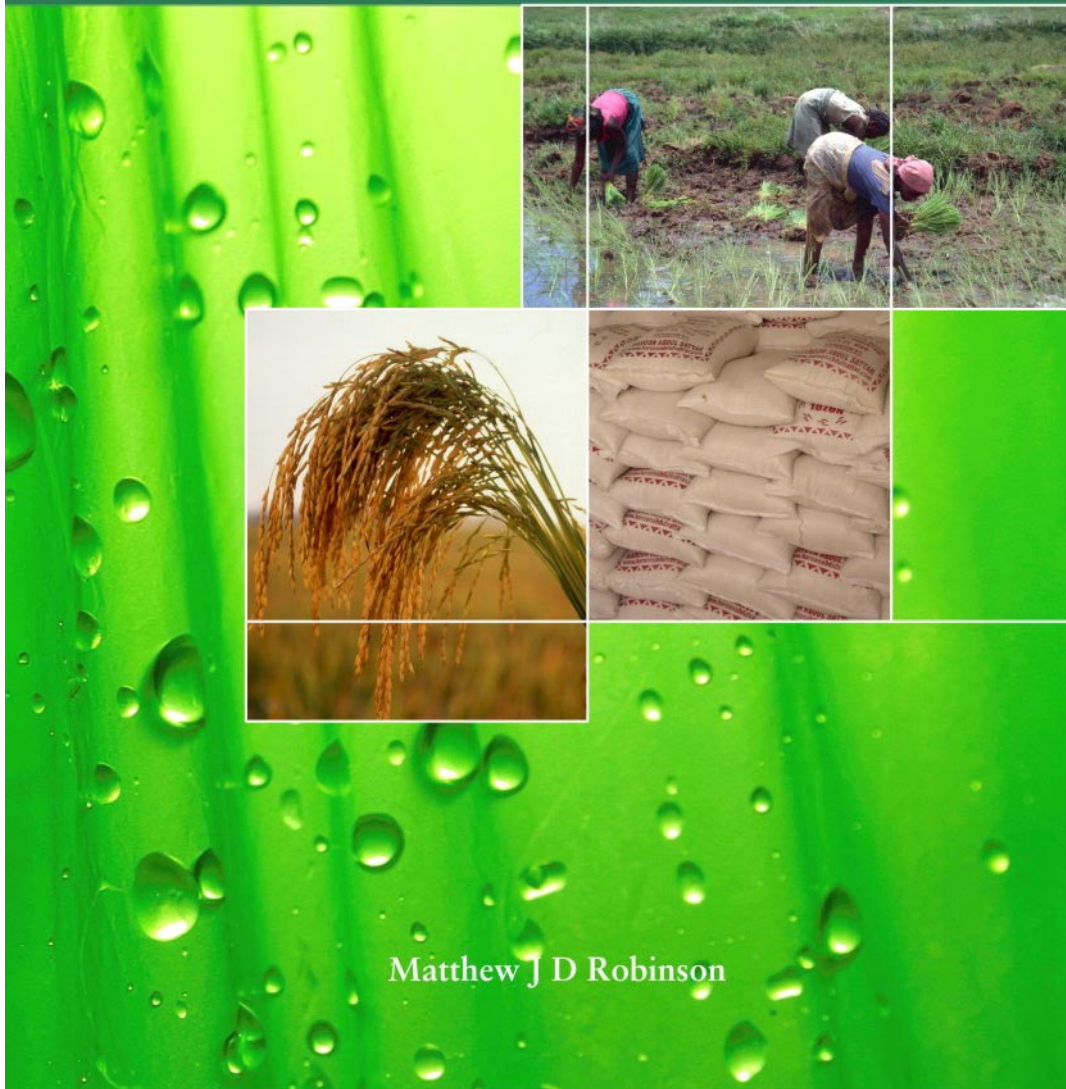


# Regional Grain Banking for Food Security

*Past and Present Realities  
from SAARC Initiatives*



Matthew J D Robinson



**Regional Grain  
Banking for Food Security**



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# *Preface*

Given the impact of climate change on agriculture in general and food production in particular (and the resultant increase in food prices in recent years), the creation and effective functioning of the SAARC Food Bank is expected to address many challenges of food security in South Asia. Due to its geographical location and high incidence of poverty, many South Asian countries are disproportionately suffering from climate change.

Increase in average temperature has not only affected cropping seasons but is also melting the Himalayan glaciers at an alarming rate. These changes have surged up flooding and raised sea levels, severely impacting rural livelihoods in the region. Furthermore, with decreased precipitation, crop yields have fallen considerably. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, four South Asian countries (viz. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Nepal) are among the top ten countries in the world in respect to extreme vulnerability to climate change.

During climate-induced crises such as severe drought or flood, millions of poor South Asians get disproportionately affected as they heavily rely on natural vegetation for their livelihoods. As a short-term measure to counter the impact of climate-induced natural disasters (the second of three Rs of the management of natural disaster – rescue, relief, rehabilitation), an institution like the SAARC Food Bank

should act as a humanitarian aid organisation to help the affected people to have better access to their food entitlements.

However, the situation is different. Even after 25 years of its establishment the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is yet to implement an initiative to address food security challenges in the region. In the recent past, this challenge has got aggravated as a result of climate change and its impact on South Asian agriculture. SAARC Food Bank is there on paper and no serious attempts have been made toward its institutionalisation and implementation. Had the SAARC Food Bank been materialised within a stipulated time frame, South Asian countries need not have to rely on foreign food assistance during natural calamities.

This monograph has made an attempt to advocate for the institutionalisation and implementation of the SAARC Food Bank initiative. This is produced as part of CUTS International's work on climate change and food security in South Asia with support from Oxfam Novib, The Netherlands.

I thank my colleagues at the CUTS Centre for International Trade, Economics & Environment for their work on this subject and Oxfam Novib for its support. CUTS will take the necessary steps to popularise the imperative of institutionalising and implementing the SAARC Food Bank initiative among the policy-makers and the wider polity of South Asian countries so there is a better political will to address climate-induced food security concerns in the region.

**Jaipur**  
**June 2011**

**Bipul Chatterjee**  
**Deputy Executive Director**

# 1

## *Introduction*

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Food insecurity is widespread in South Asia, with vulnerable populations likely to face further food shortages as a result of the impacts of climate change on agricultural processes in the climate-sensitive region. Given this reality, the South Asian Region (SAR) will have to implement various adaptive practices to cope with adverse climate change. This could include incorporating new technologies, expanding irrigation infrastructure or growing saline or heat resistant varieties. However, the reality is that food shortages are likely to occur in SAR and safeguards will be an important part of adaptation.

This paper will discuss the potential for a regional food bank in South Asia, which could mitigate the risk of national shortages by collective storage of food by South Asian countries so that each country can meet its distribution needs in times of crisis. In particular, it critically examines *South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation* (SAARC) initiatives in this area, highlighting its shortcomings with the positive goal of ultimately improving the initiative for the socioeconomic benefit of member nations, especially their respective vulnerable populations. Its findings would be beneficial as guidelines for future policy research and advocacy.

## 2

# *Food Banks in a Food (In) Security Context*

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Food bank has been successfully operated in many parts of the world. St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance in Arizona is the first food bank established by John van Hengel in 1965. The bank receives deposit of food and funds as donations from individuals and companies. Social service agencies withdraw food from the bank at no cost and distribute it to the needy population within a community. Since its inception, St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance has been successful in feeding the hungry population of Arizona. Given the success of St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance, its model has been replicated throughout the US. Furthermore, van Hengel's Food Banking Inc. has helped establish food banks in Africa, Eastern Europe, Asia, South America, Canada and Australia.

In Canada, Food Banks Canada has been working towards eliminating hunger by providing food to the hungry population. In Europe, the European Federation of Food Banks has been operating to better serve the poor and hungry population. Very recently, European countries like Switzerland, Denmark and Estonia joined the network of the European Federation of Food Banks. These banks focus on alleviating hunger by effectively mobilising food from

distributors to agencies, which, in turn, provide food to the needy individuals.

Thus, food banks have traditionally been a means by which groups of individuals and organisations have attempted to prevent hunger in their communities. Through these banks, food is collected, stored and then dispersed to those who need it most. At present, food banks across the globe feed millions every year<sup>1</sup> and can be used as a platform for advocacy and awareness surrounding food security issues. However, many variants of this basic concept have been put to practical use to fulfil different types of needs at various levels.

The smallest scale on which food banks operate is at the community level. In this context, food is collected by the community and given to those who need it on an ongoing basis. In this respect, food is not necessarily being stored to mitigate the impact of a possible future crisis, but rather it is being collected for the purposes of *ongoing* distribution to the poor. In this form, food banks rely on the good will, or charity, of more affluent *donors* to meet the needs of less food secure recipients.

Community-based social capital, good will and charity are less involved in the operation of a national, international or regional food bank. At this level, food banks are more about national responsibilities of ensuring the rights of citizens to consume basic staples.<sup>2</sup> Food is *bought* by nations and stored for *future use* in the case of a food crisis. Thus, food banks are used as a part of governmental and/or intergovernmental strategy for facilitating future food security during shortages.

Food banks are thus a possible means of addressing food insecurity issues. However, food banks at the community level

address the challenge of providing food security to the poor, while those at national, international and regional levels work to mitigate the risk of food insecurity facing all sections of the population. Given that the needs of the poor in a community with regards to food vary much less than national food supplies, the operation of a food bank at the national, international or regional levels is much more nuanced than that at the community level. In other words, the use of the former type of food bank as a source of food varies much more over time than that of the latter type, necessitating greater emphasis on the building of buffers in the first case.

Moreover, given larger geographical coverage of the former type of food bank, issues such as effective decentralisation, transport of food grains and associated leakages assume much more importance. Given the anticipated irreversible impact of climate change on food supply and, therefore, security, an operational SAR food bank has immense potential as a measure of adapting to such impact.

# 3

## *Regional Cooperation: SAARC's Food Reserve and Food Bank*

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### **3.1 Importance of a South Asian Regional Food Bank**

Geographical diversity, dense population and high incidence of poverty have made South Asia extremely vulnerable to climate change. With global warming, snow-capped mountains have retreated since 1800s. And, such occurrences have threatened millions of livelihoods with flash-floods and severe droughts (World Bank, 2009). Most alarmingly, subsistence agriculture still remains a key livelihood of millions of poor South Asians. Vast majority of people subsist on less than US\$1.25 a day (World Bank, 2009). Significant percentage of children and women suffer from malnutrition and anaemia, respectively, due to inaccessibility to food and insufficient calorie intake. Under such circumstances, slight climate change can devastate lives of millions of poor South Asians (World Bank, 2009). Furthermore, the increased sea-level rise will severely affect subsistence farming along coastal regions. Flash-floods will not only lead to disease outbreak but also destroy physical infrastructure, leading to decreased food supply and subsequently increased food prices. These phenomena disproportionately affect the poor, who directly

rely on natural vegetation such as coastal areas for sustenance.

Hence, given the reality that South Asia suffers extremely from climate change, the establishment of a regional food bank can greatly enhance food security in the region. The South Asian Food Reserve system can be institutionalised as a non-profit humanitarian aid organisation. Based on member country's agricultural productivity, size and population, SAARC countries should donate food grains to regional food reserve system. And, in times of food crises, the affected member country should be able to access food from the SAARC Food Bank without any bureaucratic and procedural hassles. Such a regional theme, if implemented successfully, will not only ease the food supply deficit but also make the region self-sufficient by zeroing its reliance on foreign food assistance during climatic and economic crises.

### **3.2 From Cooperative Collaboration to a Regional Reserve**

An effective SAR food bank will inherently require regional cooperation and collaborative action. There are a number of obstacles involved in securing positive, ongoing, regional cooperation and collaborative action. However, the potential benefit to the region and each individual nation state makes addressing these hurdles worthwhile. In this paper, a number of steps that could be taken in this regard, with direct or peripheral implications for the effective and efficient functioning of a SAR food bank, are discussed along with potential challenges and hurdles.

The Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) has outlined a number of collaborative measures, with immense potential for increasing food security, which could/should be taken:<sup>3</sup>



- Instituting early warning systems and facing natural calamities with coordinated action;
- Conservation and proper utilisation of natural resources, especially water;
- Mutual learning and collaborative action in agricultural research;
- Sharing experiences on poverty alleviation and food security;
- Establishing common reserves for emergency relief; and
- Taking a common stand in international forums.<sup>4</sup>

These steps promote cooperation and strengthen the region's ability to collaboratively respond to crisis situations. Taking further collaborative steps in the region will develop greater collaborative capacity, which is beneficial for operationalising a SAR food bank.

As the FAO insightfully notes, risk shared is risk reduced.<sup>5</sup> Based on this principle, it follows that establishing global food reserves would be the greatest method to reduce risks associated with food security. However, a global food bank is neither likely nor practical. Yet, the same benefits from shared risk can also accrue at the regional level which a SAR food bank can try to leverage. A regional base of support is better suited to respond to a national level food emergency than any single nation, because of an extended resource base.

Also, a SAARC Food Bank encourages South Asian nations, to an extent, to further specialise in wheat or rice. Risk is shared, as member nations contribute wheat or rice, in a ratio according to what they are best suited to produce, to the regional food bank. Productivity is increased through specialisation, grounded in regional cooperation. In the course of time, the SAR food bank can emerge as a vital means of

adapting to the adverse impact of climate change on food supply and security in the region through cooperation of South Asian countries.

### **3.3 Formation of a South Asian Food Security Reserve**

The founding SAARC member states, consisting of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka, formed SAARC and commenced its operations with the first SAARC summit. The first SAARC summit was held in Dhaka in 1985, after years of framework negotiations.<sup>6</sup> Shortly thereafter, one of SAARC's earliest joint regional efforts was the creation of a regional food reserve<sup>7</sup> with the signing of the 'Agreement on Establishing the SAARC Food Security Reserve'<sup>8</sup> in 1988.

The 1988 Agreement stipulated that SAARC members were to contribute wheat or rice to the reserve by earmarking it. Total amounts were predetermined for each country, which was expected to contribute its fair share of quality grains and provide adequate facilities for their storage. This explicitly implies that the South Asian Food Security Reserve (SAFSR) is not notional. Grains are actually to be collected and stored, not simply promised.

The explicit purpose of the reserve was that member countries would be entitled to withdraw the needed grains in the event of natural or man-made emergencies during which national reserves or trade proved inadequate as means for eradicating food deficits. Food grains are released in these circumstances only after negotiations among the concerned member countries (requesting and releasing) have taken place regarding the price of grain.

The Fourth SAARC Summit held in Islamabad hailed the SAFSR as ‘a tangible manifestation of the spirit of cooperation in the region.’<sup>9</sup> However, SAFSR never managed to live up to the political praise it was receiving at its inception. SAARC noted that, ‘due to various procedural and other difficulties, no Member State ... utilised the food stock available under the Reserve.’<sup>10</sup> However, mere reference to ‘procedural and other difficulties’ is inadequate explanation for the complete non-functioning of the reserve. As academia has underscored, this SAARC initiative only ever truly existed on paper, as ‘the much talked about SAARC Food Security Reserve could not be utilised to meet the needs of Bangladesh during its worst natural disaster in 1991.’<sup>11</sup>

SAFSR essentially failed to accomplish its end purpose, because it was never actually put in place beyond the signing of an agreement. The reserve system ultimately failed, because members neglected to fulfil their respective obligations to contribute grains. It was noted that this is related to the fact that most members were not surplus producers and simply could not meet their obligations.<sup>12</sup> Such explanations posit the failure of the food reserve to a drastic oversight in the creation of the agreement; no country actually had available food to store. However, discussion of the South Asian surplus is more nuanced than simply saying it does not exist. In fact, a very conservative estimate suggests that SAR produces 1.4 times the total amount of food it needs in basic staples alone, indicating a grain surplus of approximately 40 percent.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, a more accurate description of the South Asian surplus is that it *de jure* exists, but *de facto* does not tangibly materialise on the ground. Some baseline explanations for this startling phenomenon point to leakages, hoarding and

waste. More sympathetic explanations for the failure of SAFSR point to “complicated processes, harsh conditions and the balance of payments crisis in the region.”<sup>14</sup>

Regardless of the reasons behind the immense failure of SAFSR, it is overwhelmingly evident that the initiative was entirely inadequate for ensuring, or even contributing to, food security. Nevertheless, SAFSR failures were taken as lessons learned. In 2007, SAARC re-inaugurated the initiative<sup>15</sup> under a new name, with policy revisions in light of previous failures.

### **3.4 Reformation: Creating a Food Bank**

The Agreement on Establishing a SAARC Food Security Reserve was revised and signed under a new name at the SAARC Fourteenth Summit in New Delhi in 2007. The re-inauguration of the food reserve, aptly named the Agreement on Establishing the SAARC Food Bank,<sup>16</sup> when closely examined, is really just a new name for the old system. However, a few noteworthy changes have been made to the existing agreement. The most significant are:

- Negotiation of reserve food grain prices among members during a withdrawal are now based on existing guidelines which, *inter alia*, include humanitarian considerations, where appropriate, as well as an explicit stipulation that prices offered to members will be at a discount, compared to food grain prices offered to non-members.
- Expansion of the terms of use of the food reserves to include regular food shortages, apart from disasters.
- Specific instructions for proper storage and quality maintenance of reserve food grains.
- Specific details regarding quality standards and characteristics of wheat and rice contributions.
- Induction of Afghanistan as a member.

- Specification of exact contributions from members with the exception of Afghanistan.

The reimplementation of the SAARC Food Security Reserve as the SAARC food bank can only be considered significant for its intended benefactors to the extent that the new agreement addresses reasons for the failure of the former agreement. However, the new agreement, while implementing important changes and clarifications, has done very little to solve previous problems. This is because the previous problems were not related to a lack of detail in the agreement, but rather to its active implementation, i.e. a lack of necessary storage infrastructure and the failure of member nations to produce accessible agricultural surpluses.

## 4

# *Notable Inadequacies of the SAARC Food Bank*

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The SAARC food bank has had the best of intentions in the past few decades. However, it is clear that it is not achieving its aim of being a food shortage safety net in the region. The South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS) clearly noted that “food Reserve has never been utilised despite pressing food demands in the region, including the wheat crisis in Pakistan, cyclone hit situation in Orissa, floods and cyclone in Bangladesh, and the impact of tsunami in Sri Lanka.”<sup>17</sup> Failure to actually store food in the food bank<sup>18</sup> by member countries is at the root of the food bank’s problems. Beyond that, operational issues hampering success are related to: i) timely and effective distribution of grains; ii) inadequate storage facilities and lack of efforts to expand these; and iii) price negotiations in violation of the agreement.

### **4.1 Bangladesh: Mini-Case Study on SAARC Food Bank Effectiveness**

On November 15, 2007, Bangladesh was hit by cyclone Sidr. The 1000 km diameter cyclone sustained 240 km/hour winds and water surges of up to six metres.<sup>19</sup> This devastated the Bangladeshi coastline, creating massive flooding, salination of crop lands and fresh water sources and vast infrastructural

damage (including the destruction of housing and productive infrastructure). Approximately 4000 people died during the incident, however even more were left without food, safe water or viable livelihoods.

The catastrophic damage to the Bangladeshi coastline is still felt today. In the immediate aftermath of the cyclone, food security was negatively affected. The UN reported massive losses of the rice crop in the affected area and noted that communities identified 'food' as a top priority with the vast majority of families reporting no access to it at all, or no access beyond two weeks.<sup>20</sup> Farming, one of the most important sources of livelihood in the region, was widely reported as the worst affected with direct implications for food security.

In light of the disaster, the UN called for immediate food aid: 'Relief food aid is justified for an extended period, i.e. from June till August ... A caseload of 608,000 for extended relief in the five districts has been estimated based on the proportion of the total affected population (1.5 million in nine severely affected districts) to the total population of the five districts.'<sup>21</sup> The situation – a natural catastrophe having extreme negative impacts on food security – placed Bangladesh in the perfect contractual position to access much needed wheat and rice from the SAARC Food Bank. However, the SAARC Food Bank failed to fulfil its primary function as a food security safety net in the Bangladeshi case.

While the SAARC food bank failed to deliver, US food aid did, promoting food security in the post-Sidr crisis. The following explanation by the World Bank provides insights into areas that need attention for the effective operation of SAARC food bank:

*Even in the recent cyclone (Sidr) disaster in Bangladesh in November 2007, despite the unprecedented food insecurity in the affected areas, the SAARC Food Reserve was never invoked and utilised. There is no existence of a clear-cut transportation mechanism, border formalities, institutional mechanisms and appropriate delivery method of the food grains to the recipient countries.<sup>22</sup>*

In light of this, SAARC members should focus on the implementation of the food bank through direct action; storage facilities should be built, and stocked, and transport arrangements put in place. Essentially, the Bangladeshi case reinforces decades of observations that the food bank needs to become operational.

#### **4.2 From Warehouse to House: Public Distribution Systems in South Asia**

If the regional food bank became operational, its effectiveness in promoting food security in the region would have to be evaluated in terms of member countries' individual capacities to distribute the food within their borders to the poor, whose food security is always fragile and more so in a situation of food scarcity. Simply put, if food does not reach those who need it, the system has failed to meet its objective. India's Public Distribution System (PDS) will be briefly discussed with this in mind.

According to the Department of Food and Public Distribution (DFPD), the intention of the PDS is simply to 'supply food grains at reasonable prices to the consumers.'<sup>23</sup> This statement is, however, slightly misleading as PDS does not simply target 'consumers', but rather those below poverty line (BPL). This focus was defined in 1997 under the name 'Targeted Public Distribution System', where previously the system had



essentially targeted poor areas instead of poor households. This shift significantly improved access of the poor to subsidised food grains.<sup>24</sup> DFPD has noted that TPDS has a target population of 330 million poor within India.

TPDS operates by procuring grain, typically nationally, to serve the purpose of stabilising food prices and markets for farmers, thereby avoiding a situation of distress sales.<sup>25</sup> Distribution takes place by transporting grains to regional centres and subsequently to an extensive network of more than 499,000 fair price shops (FPS). At FPS, BPL households can purchase allocated amounts of grain at highly subsidised prices. In this sense, the TPDS in India is extremely impressive. It is targeted to assist massive numbers of families to meet their basic food requirements. However, a number of areas for improvement have been identified for its effective operation.

It was no secret that the original PDS had several inefficiencies. Several studies note the major criticisms leveraged against the original PDS:

- urban bias;
- substantial leakages;
- poor grain quality resulting from poor inventory management and low procurement standards;
- lack of transparent and accountable delivery systems; and
- poor coverage in states with high concentrations of poor due to stock shortages.<sup>26</sup>

While shifting to TPDS has significantly improved the overall benefits of the system to the poor, it has been found that the distribution system still leaves a major section of the ‘poorest of the poor’ uncovered.<sup>27</sup> Essentially, TPDS has improved many of these aforementioned inefficiencies, though many persist.

An Asian Development Bank report specified that ‘the main flaw in the system is that non-eligibles are in the approved list of BPL families (targeted beneficiaries) whereas eligible beneficiaries have been left out.’<sup>28</sup> This observation has been made by other critics as well. However, the large targeted coverage of the TPDS implies that such problems are to be expected. Nevertheless, the problem is widespread and needs to be sufficiently remedied for the TPDS to truly serve its purpose.

The method by which household entitlements to grain are determined for BPL families is significantly flawed. Currently, BPL households are entitled to 35 kg per month. However, this allotment is independent of actual household size. 35 kgs per month would exceed what is needed for smaller households, yet remain insufficient for larger households.<sup>29</sup>

Beyond issues of entitlement, there are serious problems arising from leakages as well as corruption. Much of the grain is diverted from the system<sup>30</sup> and ends up being sold on the open market. It is estimated that around one-third of the food leaks out of the system and into the hands of profiteers.<sup>31</sup> Anand offers a reasonable explanation for this troublesome phenomenon, ‘The commission they get is quite low and the dealers seem to have shifted the burden of increased transportation, handling, and holding costs to the poor in the form of lower quality and improper billing.’<sup>32</sup> Such high levels of leakage imply that much of the government-subsidised grain does not reach the poor. This has, *inter alia*, created an extremely cost-ineffective system, with only one-fifth of the money invested actually reaching the poor.<sup>33</sup>

An article by Pradeep S Mehta noted that fair price shop owners currently distributing the food are political actors

making ‘access to food more of a subject of local political calculus, which it should not be.’<sup>34</sup> Instead, consumer cooperatives, demonstrably more efficient in running the public distribution system, given the built in accountability structure, should be given the task of running the distribution centres.<sup>35</sup>

The above discussion highlights two important points. First, that the current TPDS has made significant improvements and is one of India’s (and perhaps the world’s) greatest assets for providing for the needs of the poor. Second, the system is significantly flawed, which could hamper the overall effectiveness of the SAARC Food Bank. Thus, beyond the current shortcomings of the food bank itself, there exist significant flaws in the national/district/local level distribution systems which actually deliver the food to the poor. These systems deserve a certain level of praise for their ongoing operation. However, improvements are necessary for both national and regional efforts for food security to fully function.

Distribution may be a limiting factor in South Asian countries, other than India. SAARC Food Bank distribution efforts are likely to be severely hampered in Afghanistan because of war-related security issues. Pakistan’s current rural infrastructure may be insufficient to get food where it is needed on an ongoing basis and Bangladesh might face similar inefficiencies. Efforts to make good on the regional food bank agreement will be in vain, if national-level issues related to distributional capacities are not addressed.

These efforts are, however, more than warranted, given the impacts of climate change on SAR food security. A SAARC Food Bank, if fully operational both regionally and nationally with active and effective support from national public

distribution systems, could serve to help SAR countries adapt to climate change, ultimately benefiting each of them socially and economically in the long run.

## 5

# *Summary, Policy Recommendations and the Way Forward*

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The above discussion is useful as a reference point for further research and policy development, which is at this time critical in this area. Climate change is a felt phenomenon in South Asia, directly affecting farmers and their livelihoods. Global warming is likely to have a large impact on food security in the region, which already faces high levels of food insecurity. A functioning regional food bank based on active cooperation and collaboration has the potential to make an immense impact in reducing food insecurity and resulting vulnerability in the short term.

Further pragmatic research would, therefore, be pertinent. Research should focus on refining and developing food bank policies, as well as methods of implementation. The regional food bank needs a solid policy framework and it needs to be operationalised. SAARC member nations stand to gain immense socioeconomic benefits if the hurdles associated with the food bank are addressed and overcome.

In light of the above discussion, certain general recommendations can be made. They are offered here as areas of possible policy research, not as a comprehensive solution

for the regional food bank. They are drawn out of the above discussion with the hopes of promoting more detailed and complete research into each of them; ultimately more detailed research into these areas will lead to more detailed policy revisions and a more complete framework for action.

## **5.1 Storage and Access**

### ***5.1.1 New Storage Facilities Need to Be Built***

It has been noted that grain storage facilities in SAR are currently inadequate to store the required buffer stock of grains. New storage facilities need to be built with grain quality and preservation in mind. The new storage facilities in member countries, when combined with existing facilities, should have the capacity to meet each respective country's promised contribution. Also, the new facilities should be of the necessary standard to prevent food rotting.

### ***5.1.2 Existing Facilities Should Be Updated***

Existing grain storage facilities that remain inadequate for quality storage should be updated. They should be maintained at necessary standards for the long-term storage of grains without rotting.

### ***5.1.3 Storage Facilities Should Be Decentralised***

Centralised storage facilities may be associated with high time and pecuniary costs for reaching those in need. Storage facilities could be kept decentralised across each nation to promote more efficient access in emergency situations.

### ***5.1.4 Security Measures at Each Facility***

If storage facilities are not equipped with sufficient security measures, they are susceptible to theft, which will reduce food bank effectiveness. With new and updated storage facilities, proper security measures should be put into place. The godowns should be fitted with appropriate lighting,

fencing and security personnel.<sup>36</sup> Proper security will ensure against theft, including during emergency situations.

## 5.2 Transportation

### *5.2.1 Streamline Border Protocols*

If food grains are held up in lengthy border processes, then they are not reaching those who need them most in an efficient manner. Currently, border protocols with respect to food bank grains are said to be fuzzy. Complicated bureaucratic processes cause long delays in the cross-border delivery of grains. However, given that the food bank is a regional initiative, a single set of border protocols for grain transportation in regard to the SAARC food bank is recommended. The protocols should be effective, yet simple, and needed food aid should cross borders and get to the recipients in a timely manner.

### *5.2.2 Ensure National Level Distribution Mechanisms*

If national level distribution systems are incapable of delivering grain quickly to affected areas during emergencies, then the regional food bank will be ineffective. National level distribution mechanisms should receive some attention from respective SAR governments. Governments with existing extensive networks, such as India, should focus on plugging leakages, enhancing cost/benefit efficiency and increasing reach. Governments without a functioning distribution network at present should focus on developing one with emergency situations in mind, focusing particularly on mapping and bringing into operation efficient and timely delivery routes from storage facilities to key areas.

### *5.2.3 Quality Checks and Rot Prevention*

Grains that rot in transit will not meet the demands of the food insecure during emergencies. Current transportation protocols should be closely examined, revised and subsequently enforced. Food grains should be regularly

inspected before, during and after transport to ensure against rotting and transportation containers should be adequate in this regard as well.

### **5.3 Timelines**

#### ***5.3.1 Reduce Time between Request and Delivery of Food Grains***

If the actual release of food during an emergency takes too long due to lengthy negotiations, the regional food bank's utility in terms of enhancement of food security in the region will be reduced. The time between the request of and actual commencement of food grain delivery could be significantly reduced.<sup>37</sup> SACEPS recommends a three-month gestation period.<sup>38</sup> However, during a catastrophic situation, even three months may be too long to meet the needs of the food insecure in an affected area in an adequate and timely manner. A firm policy framework should be developed in the region that guarantees the speedy release of grains during emergencies.

#### ***5.3.2 Set Firm Timelines for Facility Construction and Grain Procurement***

Delays in facility construction and grain procurement have proven to be major limiting factors for the operation of the regional food bank. Without storage facilities in place, and without grain being stored, the food bank *de facto* does not exist, regardless of any signed policy frameworks. Well-defined timelines should be put in place for facility construction and grain procurement amongst member countries. These timelines should be realistic and firmly enforced so that the food bank will become operational.



## 5.4 Transparency

Greater transparency will promote greater accountability and ultimately a more efficiently working food banking system.

### *5.4.1 Formation of an Independent Monitoring Body*

Without any monitoring body in place, the SAARC food bank is subject to apathy. An independent monitoring body could periodically evaluate member countries' progress in contributing to, and maintaining, their share of the buffer stock. This body could also periodically monitor and establish current food demands in the region and update and modify minimum stock requirements. Putting in place this independent monitoring committee would promote transparency and ultimately accountability; their findings and reports would be public.

### *5.4.2 Greater Information-sharing, with Public Access*

Greater access to information regarding the current state of the food bank should be promoted to create a public accountability structure. A website could be used to publish information about the food bank, the current state of storage facilities and the buffer stock. The amount of grains currently held by each country should, for example, be published publicly.<sup>39</sup> Civil society publications and newspapers could also be used to publish the information, promoting information access to those without computer and internet access.

### *5.4.3 Dispute Settlement Mechanism*

It might also be beneficial to set up a formal dispute settlement mechanism for the timely and efficient resolution of disputes, which might otherwise delay the dispersing and delivery of much-needed grains. Any delay in the ultimate delivery of the grains will hamper the possible impact the food bank could have on reducing food insecurity, especially in the context of rapid climate change. Given ongoing regional disputes and

tensions, it is recommended that this formal mechanism for dispute settlement be put into place in order to avoid other regional debates manifesting within SAARC Food Bank negotiations and delaying grain delivery.

### **5.5 Getting Grain and Working Together**

All of the above suggestions for action are conditional upon two fundamental obstacles. Ultimately, securing grain for a food bank and delivering it to those who need it is not possible if there is no grain to secure in the first place. As noted above, while SAR produces an agricultural surplus, it does not realise that surplus in actual terms. In order to secure the grain needed for the food bank, more extensive research in the areas of grain trade, distribution and productivity is needed to formulate strategies specifically aimed at harnessing food production and plugging leakages in the distribution system in an economically viable, yet timely, manner. Better governance is certainly needed in the agricultural sector of SAR in order to harness the potentially massive surplus which, startlingly, is currently being wasted.

Furthermore, regional disputes will likely hamper the process of cooperation and collaboration, which is fundamental to the smooth operations of the food bank. More work and more effort are needed in the area of regional cooperation in the SAR to lay the foundations for a fully operational SAR food bank.

## 6

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## Endnotes

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- 1 For example food banks feed almost 800,000 people a month in Canada alone. See: *Food Banks Canada* on the World Wide web at: <http://www.cafb-acba.ca/main.cfm>
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