

Event Report

Regional Workshop on Climate Change and Food Security in South Asia

June 27, 2011

Dhaka, Bangladesh

Executive Summary

Climate change phenomenon has persisted to the present day as one of the great complexities, affecting millions of livelihoods around the world. Such and other realities were echoed during a regional conference on ‘Climate Change and Food Security’ held in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The event was jointly organised by CUTS (Consumer Unity & Trust Society) International and Practical Action, Bangladesh.

The perception study on Climate Change and Food Security in South Asia sheds light upon awareness level of small and marginal farmers on climate change and its impact upon their livelihoods. The study shows that farmers in the region identify climate change as climate variability.

The study recommends for practicing climate change mitigation strategies such as reducing methane emissions from rice cultivation. It suggests for implementing pro-poor policies to alleviate poverty from the region. The study vehemently argues for initiating South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Food Bank and creating basin-wide information system, whereby South Asian countries can share knowledge and transfer technology on mitigating climate change and ensuring food security in the region.

Background

The conference was held to disseminate the findings of the Scoping Study on Climate Change and Food Security and discuss the linkages among Climate Change, Food Security, and Trade in South Asia. CUTS International undertook this perception study with the support from Oxfam Novib. The perception survey was conducted in four select South Asian countries namely, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. The partner organisations namely, Afghan Development Association, Afghanistan; Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Pakistan; Centre for Community Economics and Development Consultants Society, India; and Practical Action, Bangladesh were involved in surveying stakeholders in their respective countries.

The survey primarily focused on small and marginal farmers’ perception on climate change and food security. The study also surveyed perception of agronomists, researchers, and think tanks on climate change and its imminent impact upon rural livelihoods. The second half of the conference focused on proposed regional theme on Climate Change, Food Security, and Trade linkages in South Asia.

Proceedings

Opening Session

Welcome Address: Veena Khaleque, Country Director, Practical Action, Bangladesh

Introductory Remarks:

Rashid S. Kaukab, Associate Director & Research Coordinator, CUTS Geneva Resource Centre

Srikanta K. Panigrahi, Director General, Carbon Minus India

Mahabub Hossain, Executive Director, BRAC

Address by Chief Guest: M. A. Sattar Mandal, Vice Chancellor, Bangladesh Agricultural University

In her welcoming speech, Veena Khaleque, Country Director at Practical Action, Bangladesh said that South Asia is extremely vulnerable to climate change. And despite being highly susceptible to climate change, the region lacks necessary adaptation measures to minimise its effect upon food security.

In his introductory remarks, Rashid S. Kaukab, Associate Director & Research Coordinator at CUTS Geneva Resource Centre thanked research project partners and participants of the meeting. He said that vast majority of population in the region is dependent upon agriculture. Malnutrition exists as a serious threat to humanity in the region. He emphasised the importance of implementing climate change adaptation strategies and formulating appropriate international policies in the face of climate change.

In accordance with Kaukab, Srikanta K. Panigrahi, Director General at Carbon Minus India stressed the importance of climate change adaptation strategies. He said that methane emissions emanating from rice cultivation must be reduced. Other strategies such as sand dune stabilization, crop insurance, and fertilization of dry land can be employed to minimise the effects of climate change on food security in the region.

Mahabub Hossain, Executive Director of BRAC stressed upon food accessibility and utilisation aspects of food security. He said that food accessibility remains as a key issue among poor and marginalised communities. The region therefore needs to shift from food self-sufficiency to self-reliance.

Addressing the opening session as chief guest, M.A. Sattar Mandal, Vice Chancellor at Bangladesh Agricultural University touched upon several aspects ranging from regional food bank to environmental degradation. He said that the region must focus on technology transfer and institutional capacity building to tackle climate change phenomena. He stressed the importance of creating cross-boundary market opportunities to facilitate intraregional trade.

Session 1: Climate Change and Food Security in South Asia

Chair: Azizuddin Ahmadzada, Director, SAARC Secretariat, Kathmandu

Presentation: Manbar Khadka, Research Associate, CUTS International

Discussants

Ghulam Habib, Programme Manager, Afghanistan Development Association

Faruk-Ul-Islam, Head of Organisational Development, Practical Action, Bangladesh

Alka Awasthi, Co-Director, Centre for Community Economics and Development Consultants Society, India

Azizuddin Ahmadzada stressed the importance of capacity building on climate change issues. He emphasized the greater need for collaboration among research organisations and countries in the region to minimise the impact of climate change upon livelihoods.

Manbar Khadka presented findings of the perception study conducted in four select South Asian countries namely, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. The study shows that small and marginal farmers are aware of climate change and its imminent impact upon their livelihoods. Farmers in drought-prone areas have been adapting to climate change by cultivating drought resistant crops. They have been employing water harvesting, and soil and moisture conservation practices among others. But farmers in the region need to implement climate mitigation practices as well. For instance, they need to reduce methane emissions from rice cultivation.

Across the region, farmers have reported changed cropping seasons due to climate change. While rainy season has shortened, summer season has lengthened. And both frequency and intensity of natural hazards have increased over the past several decades.

At the local level, farmers in the region need to intensify climate change adaptation and mitigation practices. At the national level, the country must focus on alleviating poverty. At the regional level, the SAARC Food bank must be initiated. And South Asian countries must collaborate in sharing knowledge and transferring technology on climate change and food security issues.

Session Discussants

Ghulam Habib elaborated on climate change phenomena and their impacts upon rural livelihoods. He mentioned that Afghan farmers have observed shortened rainfall which has adversely affected agriculture. The Afghan government needs to emphasise on low carbon growth and promote thermal energy as climate change mitigation strategies.

Faruk-Ul-Islam mentioned about his experiences on surveying farmers in Bangladesh. He said that autumn season seems to be disappearing from Bangladesh. In coastal areas, salinity has not only affected agricultural produce but also destroyed livestock. Farmers have reported irrigation issues; and in hilly areas, they seek for early warning system to prepare themselves from imminent climate change.

Alka Awasthi said that small and marginal farmers in India identify climate change as climate variability. Farmers have observed recurrent droughts over the years but they hardly understand ongoing global warming.

Comments made on perception study are as follows:

- Sample size was small (just 1200 farmers) and restricted to three agro-ecological zones in the region.
- Since recall/base year varied from households to households, it would be better to group households that report the same recall year. Can we analyse them separately to get a clear picture on climate change and food security?
- Instead of presenting all countries' results in one graph, can we do country specific case studies? This will give a much clearer picture on climate change and food security in a particular country.
- Can we segregate data by gender?
- Can we compare and contrast others' findings on climate change and food security in South Asia with our findings?

Session 2: Climate Change-Food Security-Trade Linkages and Regional Initiatives in South Asia

Chair: A. Atiq Rahaman, Executive Director at Bangladesh Centre for Advance Studies

Presentation: Tirthankar Mandal, Programme Coordinator, Climate Action Network, South Asia

Discussants

Uchita de Zoysa, Executive Director, Centre for Environment & Development, Sri Lanka

Parash Kharel, Senior Programme Officer, South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment, Nepal

Sumit Roy, Project Manager, World Wide Fund for Nature – India Office

Mr. Asaduzzaman, Research Director, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, Bangladesh

A. Atiq Rahaman, on a sarcastic note, mentioned that South Asia is better at formulating policies but slow at implementing them. He further opined that climate change in the region is looked upon as an externality and mentioned that because of geographical variation in South Asia, different adaptation techniques are required for different agro-climatic zones.

Rashid S. Kaukab made presentation on a proposed regional programme on climate change, food security, and trade linkages in South Asia. Mr. Kaukab said that despite two decades of efforts at regional economic integration in south Asia, the region remains the least integrated. While 'trade offers the possibility to stabilize domestic prices, balance food deficiency, and harness comparative advantage, on the other hand, it exposes a country to prices volatility on international markets that can threaten food security.' He further mentioned that this regional programme will expand knowledge base on climate change, food security and trade. It will

not only improve understanding among stakeholders in the region on climate change-food security-trade linkages but also enhance involvement of relevant stakeholders in related policy making and implementation.

Tirthankar Mandal, in his presentation, touched upon vulnerability aspects of food security. He mentioned that ‘vulnerability is increased when one or more components of food security-food availability, food accessibility, food utilisation, and food stability are either uncertain or insecure’. He said that food security can be addressed by formulating income security policies such as minimum income provisioning. He further said that there is a need to innovate and invest in low carbon strategies to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Uchita de Zoysa elucidated the fact that equity remains a big issue in the region. For example, India is a food self-sufficient country. But despite being food self-sufficient country, hundreds of people suffer from hunger and malnutrition. So food accessibility is an issue in India and elsewhere in the region.

Paras Kharel said that due to climate change, there has been a shift in comparative advantage of agricultural products in the region. He further said that South Asian countries must work toward removing both trade and non-trade barriers to boost intraregional trade.

Sumit Roy expressed his views on water foot print area. He said that per capita water consumption is increasing especially due to excessive use of water in sugarcane and cotton cultivation. He stressed for policies that limit carbon emission and lead the region to optimal growth.

Similarly, Mr. Asaduzzaman expressed his views on climate change and its imminent impact upon rural livelihoods in the region. He also shared his experience of international climate change-related negotiations, where food security was often treated superficially and coordination among South Asian countries was minimal.

Concluding Remarks

Summing up the meeting, Faruk-UI-Islam highlighted findings of the study on climate change and food security in the region. He said that knowledge based societies have been emerging over the years. Due to climate change, cropping patterns have shifted and farmers’ market dependence has increased. He said that increased investment on agriculture is necessary to minimise the impact of climate change on food security.

Concluding the closing session, Wahiduzzman Babur of Practical Action, Bangladesh thanked all special guests, SAAARC directors, participants, and the organisers for this successful dissemination meeting on Climate Change and Food Security in South Asia.