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OPINION IN LEAD

Trade and climate change agenda for South Asia

The relationship between trade and climate change has come under increasing attention as the urgency of national, regional and global actions intensifies with predictions of climate change impacts getting ever grimmer. The relationship has several dimensions: for example, physical impacts of trade on climate change and vice versa; linkages between climate and trade rules and policies at national, regional and global levels; and the impact of measures to combat climate change on competitiveness.

Given the interlinkages, the need to make trade and climate rules mutually supportive has been recognized at multilateral levels, for example, at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and at the World Trade Organization (WTO). While negotiations on the liberalization of trade in environmental goods and services are taking place in the Doha Round of WTO negotiations, the UNFCCC process also involves negotiations on the role of trade in addressing climate change impacts.

South Asia is a region that is especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, mainly due to geography coupled with high levels of poverty and population density. All eight countries in the region are parties to the UNFCCC, six are WTO members and two are WTO observers, and four are least-developed countries (LDCs). At the regional level, under the auspices of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), they are pursuing economic integration through the Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). With a coverage limited to goods trade, SAFTA came into implementation in July 2006. At the 16th SAARC Summit in Thimpu, the South Asian Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS) was signed with the aim of liberalization intra-regional trade in services. Member States are yet to schedule their specific liberalization commitments under SATIS.

Despite over two decades of efforts at regional economic integration, South Asia is one of the least-integrated regions in the world, with intra-regional merchandise trade hovering at 5 percent of its total merchandise trade.

Responding to climate change presents opportunities and challenges for, *inter alia*, intra-regional trade. A clear mapping of the opportunities and challenges within and outside the region is essential to make trade and climate policies mutually supportive.

The theme of the 16th SAARC Summit was climate change. The Thimpu Statement on Climate Change, *inter alia*, expresses determination to make South Asia "a world leader in low-carbon technologies and renewable energy". The activities/actions that Member States agreed to undertake and that are related to the interface between trade and climate change are "advocacy and awareness programs on climate change, among others, to promote the use of green technology and best practices to promote low-carbon sustainable and inclusive development of the region"; and "a study to explore the feasibility of establishing a SAARC mechanism which would provide capital for projects that promote low-carbon technology and renewable energy; and a Low-carbon Research and Development Institute in South Asian University".

However, there are a host of issues at the intersection of trade and climate change where is plenty of scope for regional cooperation and initiatives, some of which are enumerated below as recommendations for the 17th SAARC Summit. These are outcomes of the past and ongoing research and advocacy activities of the Trade, Climate Change and Food Security Programme of SAWTEE.

There should be an assessment of the potential of the liberalization of trade in environmental goods under the Agreement on SAFTA, and a study on the potential of incorporating environmental services liberalization under the SATIS. Concurrently, South Asian countries

should develop common understandings and positions on the liberalization of trade in environmental goods and services at the WTO.

Regional and sub-regional projects on value addition, product diversification and market promotion of environmental goods, including organic agricultural products and bioproducts, should be identified, developed and implemented.

A timeline for pruning sensitive lists under SAFTA with an emphasis on bioproducts and environmental goods should be put in place. In addition, non- and para-tariff barriers have to be removed speedily to boost intra-regional trade. Mutual recognition, followed by harmonization, of standards, including sanitary and phytosanitary measures, on these goods will be critical to addressing non-tariff barriers that stifle intra-regional trade.

A regional study should be conducted on the impact of climate change on high-value agricultural crops with high potential to contribute to livelihood enhancement and export within and outside the region. Likewise, a regional study should be conducted on the nature and extent of shifting comparative advantage in agricultural production resulting from the dynamic impacts of climate change within and across SAARC countries, and assess possible changes in competitiveness and complementarities in regional trade.

Also required is a regional study on the role of intellectual property rights in technology transfer, and the launch of a South Asian Climate Change Technology Initiative to document and promote the sharing of local and indigenous climate-friendly technologies; identify regional technology needs; and develop measures to promote the development, sharing and transfer of climate-friendly technologies from within and outside the region.

South Asian countries should assess the implications for, among others, adaptation in agriculture and technology transfer from the implementation of intellectual property rights at national, regional and global levels, and develop common understandings and positions for the ongoing review process of the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) of the WTO as well as UNFCCC negotiations.

South Asia should continue to exercise vigilance against the introduction of protectionist measures (e.g., border adjustment measures) especially in developed countries in the name of combating climate change, and make a proactive engagement in WTO negotiations to clarify/revise WTO rules such that they are complementary to a global climate regime.

ANALYSIS

Truth about the global demand for food

Ever since the global food crisis of 2007-08, a perception has persisted in many parts of the world that one of the main underlying reasons for the price spikes in major food items—especially food grain—is the increased demand from countries such as China and India. If anything, this perception has become even more widespread since prices started rising again, especially since early 2010.

On the face of it, such a perception seems quite reasonable. After all, China and India both have huge populations, accounting for nearly 40 percent of the total world population between them. Their economies have both been expanding very rapidly, much faster than most of the rest of the world, so per capita incomes have been rising from relatively low bases. It is well known that as incomes rise from low levels, people tend to consume more food grain—not necessarily directly, but indirectly through the consumption of livestock products that require more grain in the form of food.

So it is only to be expected that the increased incomes in China and India would translate into more demand for food grain, and this could certainly affect the global supply-demand balance in ways that would cause food prices to rise. Expected, yes: but did this actually happen?

It turns out that there has been barely any change, and if anything a slowdown, in the rate of grain consumption in these two large countries. And the global consumption of grain for all food purposes has actually decelerated in recent years compared with previous periods.

This is very evident from an important new report from the high-level panel of experts set up by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to study commodity price volatility and its relationship with food security. The report contains a careful assessment of both the actual trends and the various attempts to explain the price changes. In the process, it blows the myth about increased consumption from developing countries leading to higher global demand and, therefore, higher grain prices.

In fact, the report notes that even the apparent acceleration of feed use in the last decade was essentially because of the recovery of feed use in the former Soviet Union after the 1990s. So despite all the booming demand for meat in fast-growing Asia, the growth of feed consumption in the rest of the world outside the former Soviet Union was not accelerating. Rather, it has actually been slowing down.

The relevant point is that it is not increased demand from China and India that is driving up grain prices. This does not mean that there are no other demand forces at work, however. Financial speculation in commodity markets is clearly significant, but it is also true that even such speculation must be based on some assessments of changing global balances. What could that be based on?

The report from the FAO has a convincing response to that as well: it notes that the biofuel boom has had a major impact on the evolution of world food demand for cereals and vegetable oils. According to page 32 of the report, "there is a real acceleration of non-feed uses boosted by biofuel development. Excluding use for biofuel, the growth rate for non-feed use is stable compared with the 1990s and markedly inferior to its historical performance. Without biofuel, the growth rate of world cereal consumption is equal to 1.3% compared with 1.8% for biofuel".

The surprising conclusion from all this is that, leaving out the impact of the biofuel boom of the 2000s, global consumption of both cereals and edible oils is actually slowing down. All the more tragic, then, that speculative forces are still allowed to run amok in global commodity markets and global food prices are kept so high as to increase the deprivation of the millions of hungry people in the world.

(Adapted from Jayati Ghosh, "The truth about the global demand for food", The Guardian, 02.08.11, <http://www.guardian.co.uk>)

NEWS

Afghanistan braces for food shortages

Afghanistan is likely to face a significant food shortage in the coming months, following poor rains which have affected this season's wheat crop. Wheat is the primary food staple for most families.

"There have been problems with rainfall, so there will be a significant shortfall in the harvest," Challiss McDonough, spokesperson for the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), said. "The Ministry of Agriculture is conducting an assessment to determine the numbers of those affected, but there are also concerns about livestock, especially in the northern and highland areas."

The harvest season runs from May to late August, but according to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)'s Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET), most of Afghanistan received inadequate or ill-timed rain and snow this year, which will lead to heavy losses as almost all wheat production is rain-fed. Pasture will also be affected. Livestock in the northeast and northwest have already begun to deteriorate, forcing families to sell at 30-50 percent below market prices.

Estimates by the Afghan Ministry of Agriculture and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), it added, show that this year's production would be about 3.256 million tons of wheat, 28 percent less than the bumper 2010 harvest. In the central highlands and Badakshan in the northeast, spring rain-fed wheat has not been cultivated because of abnormally dry conditions.

"In a year with a normal harvest, most households in the northern rain-fed and irrigated wheat growing areas can produce enough wheat to sell in the market while still meeting their food needs throughout the year," FEWSNET said in a 20 June statement. "However, due to the shortfalls in production this year, the reliance on purchases will increase and income from wheat sales and on-farm labor will decrease."

Source: IRIN News, 23.06.11, www.irinnews.org

Nepal turns food surplus on good monsoon

Nepal's Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MoAC) has said that the country would be in a food surplus position in Fiscal Year 2010/11 (that ended in mid-July 2011) with reserves of 110,000 tonnes. The country had a food deficit of 330,000 tonnes and 132,000 tonnes in Fiscal Years 2009/10 and 2008/09 respectively.

Nepal has regained the status of a food surplus country after two years due to an increase in food production resulting from an early monsoon and good rains.

According to MoAC, 38 out of the country's 75 districts are still short of food. However, the number of food deficit districts has declined from the earlier 43.

Among the districts suffering food shortages are six districts in the Tarai, the country's grain basket. As per the MoAC report, 11 districts in the mountains and 21 in hills still have a food deficit. MoAC's statistics show that 8.615 million tonnes of food were produced in 2010/11. Of the total output, 367,000 tonnes are used as livestock feed while 2.735 million tonnes are used as seeds and lost to damage during the post-harvest season. According to the MoAC, the country's annual food requirement is 5.4 million tonnes. The calculation is based on the consumption rate of 191 kg per person per year by 28.376 million Nepalis.

"The major reason for the rise in food production is the early monsoon and good rains during the plantation period," said Hari Dahal, spokesperson for MoAC. He added that extension of agro technology, improved seeds and increased area under cultivation, among other advantageous factors, had boosted production. According to MoAC, the overall food grain (rice, maize, wheat, millet, barley and buckwheat) output grew 11 percent in the current fiscal year.

Nepal has been importing food since 2005. MoAC said Nepal imported around 227,000 tonnes of food annually during the period 2005-10. It imported 290,000 tonnes of food in 2010/11.

Source: The Kathmandu Post, 16.07.11, www.ekantipur.com

Pakistan's exports may touch US\$25bn by year-end

Pakistan's dependence on the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) for its exports is reducing, with the share of the two destinations dropping from 60 percent to 40 percent.

stated this in a media briefing. The TDAP Director-General, Mohammad Irfan Tarar, DG (SRO) Chaudhry Mohammad Ali, Director Yasmeen Qureshi were also present.

Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP) Chief Executive Tariq Iqbal Puri said that Pakistani export products are fast taking a niche in the markets of Egypt, the Middle East, China, Japan, South East Asia, Far East and Africa. He said that the export target for Fiscal Year 2010/11 has been revised from US\$20 billion to \$24 billion, and the export figure by mid-June was recorded at US\$22.5 billion. Though there was a value factor behind the higher exports, the non-traditional exports volume increased quantitatively, he added.

Source: Dawn, 18.06.11, www.dawn.com

13 million Bangladeshis lifted out of poverty in five years

Bangladesh lifted 13 million people out of poverty in the five years to 2010, pushing the poverty rate in the South Asian country down to 31.5 percent, according to the Bangladeshi government.

A nationwide survey, sponsored by the World Bank, found some 46.8 million people were classified as "poor" at the end of 2010, down from more than 60 million in 2005, said senior Planning Ministry official Shamsul Alam.

"It's one of fastest paces of poverty decline in the country's history and has been driven by a boom in remittances, welfare spending, exports and the huge growth of non-farm sectors in the rural areas," he said.

"This is an impressive achievement by any standard," said Sanjay Kathuria, World Bank Country Office acting head.

In the survey, "poor" was classified as someone unable to buy food that provides 2,122 kilocalories of nutrition per day.

Remittances shot up to US\$11 billion in 2010 from US\$4.8 billion in 2005 while exports nearly doubled in the same period, Alam said, adding the government had boosted social welfare spending by 53 percent to US\$2.5bn. "Remittances played the single biggest role because most money sent by our millions of migrant workers went to poor villages. Garment factories, the mainstay of exports, also created jobs for three million poor girls," he said.

According to the survey, rural poverty declined to 35.2 percent in 2010 from 43.8 percent in 2005, while urban poverty fell to 21.3 percent from 28.4 percent in the same period.

Rural areas are home to some 70 percent of Bangladesh's 150 million population. According to official statistics, some 60 percent of Bangladeshis lived below the poverty line in 1990. Impressive economic growth—averaging 5 percent annually through the 1990s and 6 percent in the 2000s—saw the number drop to 49 percent in 2000 and 40 percent in 2005.

Source: IPS, 17.03.11, <http://www.ipsnews.net/>

Sea levels rising at fastest rate in 2,100 years: Study

Sea level has been rising significantly over the past century of global warming, according to a study that offers the most detailed look yet at the changes in ocean levels during the last 2,100 years.

The researchers found that since the late 19th century—as the world became industrialized—sea level has risen more than 2 millimeters per year, on average. That is a bit less than one tenth of an inch, but it adds up over time.

It will lead to land loss, more flooding and saltwater invading bodies of fresh water, said lead researcher Benjamin Horton whose team examined sediment from North Carolina's Outer Banks. He directs the Sea Level Research Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania.

The predicted effects he cites are not new and are predicted by many climate scientists. But outside experts say the research verifies increasing sea-level rise compared to previous centuries.

Kenneth Miller, chairman of the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences at Rutgers University, called the new report significant. "This is a very important contribution because it firmly establishes that the rise in sea level in the 20th century is unprecedented for the recent geologic past," said Miller, who was not part of the research team.

Horton said rising temperatures are the reason behind the higher sea level. Looking back in history, the researchers found that sea level was relatively stable from 100 B.C. to A.D. 950. Then, during a warm climate period beginning in the 11th century, sea level rose by about half a millimeter per year for 400 years. That was followed by a second period of stable sea level associated with a cooler period, known as the Little Ice Age, which persisted until the late 19th century.

Rising sea levels are among the hazards that concern environmentalists and governments with increasing global temperatures caused by "greenhouse" gases like carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels like coal and oil over the last century or so.

Source: AP, 20.06.11, www.ap.org

SAARC members agree on gas trade cooperation

The eight member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have agreed cooperate on gas trade.

The agreement came at a two-day conference of the expert committee of SAARC on gas and oil resources that ended on 24 July in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh energy secretary Mohammad Mesbahuddin told a press briefing after the meet that the committee also decided to conduct a feasibility study for laying pipelines to facilitate gas import.

SAARC Energy Centre director Hiller A Raja said they discussed the possibility of two distribution pipelines. The potential exporting countries are Iran, Turkmenistan and Myanmar.

Experts at the conference finalized a work-plan and a draft terms of reference ahead of a SAARC minister-level meeting in September.

The conference was arranged by the foreign and energy ministries for the first time after the third minister-level meeting in 2009 acknowledged a comprehensive concept paper and formed four committees.

The other decisions made at the conference include a study for an oil distribution pipeline, establishing an LNG (liquefied natural gas) terminal solely for SAARC countries, and feasibility study for setting up an oil refinery.

Source: Bdnnews24, 26.07.11, www.bdnnews24.com

Donors team up with Indian industry to facilitate trade in South Asia

The International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group, and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) are supporting the Confederation of Indian Industry by facilitating dialogue between the public and private sectors in eastern and north eastern India to improve trade in South Asia.

The initiative will help implement measures to reduce costs and promote trade by simplifying procedures, and introducing electronic processing and risk-management approaches for border inspections and clearances.

To support the initiative, the Confederation of Indian Industry and IFC hosted a workshop, titled Public-Private Dialogue for Enhancing Trade Facilitation in South Asia, which brought together senior officials of the ministries of agriculture, commerce, health, and finance and Indian state governments. Private sector representatives from transportation companies, freight forwarders, logistics companies, and clearing-house agents also joined the discussions to enhance trade and investment in South Asia.

"We have developed new port facilities and taken steps to reduce uncertainties in the Kolkata and Haldia municipalities to improve trade. We are seeking IFC's support to help us strengthen and promote trade," said M.L. Meena, Chairman of Kolkata Port Trust and senior government official.

The workshop is part of a series of IFC-led initiatives in South Asia to build effective partnerships with public and private sector stakeholders in eastern and northeastern India and in Bangladesh and Nepal. IFC held a similar workshop in Nepal earlier this week. The programme assists the government in reforms to create a business-enabling environment.

Source: The Financial, 2011-07-21, www.finchannel.com

South Asia can benefit from India's growth: Indian PM

Addressing the Fifth Conference of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians in India, Indian Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh pointed to the common challenges of mass poverty, unemployment, lack of adequate health care, illiteracy and environmental degradation in South Asia and impressed upon the need to learn from each other's experience.

"We have declared 2010-2020 as the 'Decade of Intra-regional Connectivity' in SAARC. The SAARC Development Fund is now well-established. The SAARC Regional Food Bank has been set up to meet food emergencies in the region", Singh said while giving a warm welcome to all delegates.

"One of the lessons history has taught us is that no country can prosper in isolation. We live in an inter-connected world, and this is especially so in South Asia", he said. "Regional cooperation is vital for improving the quality of governance in managing our natural resources, in preventing land and water degradation and in strengthening our food, water and energy security", he said.

Source: Deccan Herald, 09.07.11, www.deccanherald.com

SAARC to seek legally binding emission cuts

The 17th Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), scheduled to be held in the Maldives later this year, will seek a framework for "legally binding" emissions target to tackle global warming.

The matter was discussed when Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed met with Foreign and Commonwealth Representative for Climate Change John Ashton and British Deputy High Commissioner Mark Gooding, the President's Office said.

Nasheed noted that the issue of climate change is "acute" and called for immediate action, during talks.

The Maldives' 1,194 chain of islands sit 1.5 meters above mean sea level, making it one of the first casualties of global warming in the world, and the most vulnerable country to climate change within SAARC.

With a UN climate panel forecasting global sea levels are likely to rise as much as 59 cm by 2100, it would mean the entire Maldives would be totally inundated then.

Despite its vulnerability, the Maldives has pledged to go carbon neutral by 2020. If the pledge is fulfilled, it would be the first in the world to do so.

The Maldives will be hosting the 17th SAARC Summit on 10-11 November in the Addu atoll.

Source: Asian Tribune, 14.07.11, www.asiantribune.com

Inflation a key risk to South Asian growth: World Bank

The World Bank said inflation is a "key downside risk" to economic growth in South Asia and called upon India, Pakistan and other nations in the region to tighten their monetary and fiscal policies.

"Failure to bring public finances and monetary policy into line could undermine growth projections," it said in its Global Economic Prospects report.

South Asia may expand 7.5 percent in 2011, slower than the 9.3 percent gain in the previous 12 months, the World Bank said. India has raised interest rates nine times since mid-March 2010 and pledged to cut the budget deficit to ease price gains.

The World Bank estimates India's economy will expand 8.1 percent in 2011 after growing 10.3 percent in 2010. Inflation in India eased to 8.66 percent in April from 9 percent in March, and the central bank says the level may stay "elevated" until September.

Growth in "South Asian economies will be impacted by one to two percentage points if oil prices and inflation continue to stay high next year," Asian Development Bank Director General Sultan Hafeez Rahman said in an interview yesterday in Dhaka. "Inflation is a serious risk for growth and there is no question about it."

India's Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee plans to narrow the budget deficit to 4.6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in the year ending 31 March from 4.7 percent in the previous year.

Pakistan's Finance Minister Abdul Hafeez Shaikh last week pledged to reduce the budget gap to 4 percent of GDP, the lowest in seven years. Consumer prices in Pakistan rose 13.23 percent in May from a year earlier, the fastest pace in Asia after Vietnam.

While India's central bank last month lifted its benchmark repurchase rate by half a percentage point to 7.25 percent, the State Bank of Pakistan extended a six-month pause in rate increases to support consumer demand.

In Sri Lanka, Governor Ajith Nivard Cabraal hasn't raised rates since 2007, saying the spurt in prices is because of "supply-side" issues like shortage of food products. Inflation in the nation slowed to 8.8 percent in May, easing for the first time in four months.

"If inflation remains elevated, unless offset by exchange rate depreciation, it is likely to begin eating into the region's international competitiveness and discourage foreign investment," the World Bank said.

Source: Bloomberg, 08.06.11, www.bloomberg.com

ACTIVITIES

Expert Committee meeting on revising Nepal's agricultural biodiversity policy

SAWTEE, together with the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives/Government of Nepal, USC Canada Asia and Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development, organized a meeting of the Expert Committee formed by the Ministry to revise Nepal's Agricultural Biodiversity Policy 2007 on 6-7 June 2011 in Dhulikhel, Nepal. In connection to an earlier meeting of this committee held in 2010, this meeting finalized a number of issues that need to be incorporated into a New Agricultural Biodiversity Policy of Nepal. Among others, the meeting strongly incorporated guiding provisions for the implementation of farmers' rights to genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge. In the interest of Nepal, the revised policy has also been designed to deal with the country's crucial obligations under the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Similarly, on 8 June 2011, a meeting of another Expert Committee, constituted by and held together with Seed Quality Control Center/Government of Nepal, finalized the revision of Nepal's Seed Policy. While revising a new Seed Policy, this meeting addressed various concerns regarding farmers' rights and the national implementation of international instruments. The New Seed Policy will be implemented to, among others, regulate and promote seed business, marketing, trade, as well as variety conservation and development initiatives in Nepal. These committees formed a group of representatives from concerned government agencies, National Agriculture Research Council, civil society, community-based organizations and private sector.

SAWTEE participates in an international meeting on access and benefit sharing

SAWTEE participated in the workshop on Access to Genetic Resources and Benefit Sharing on 16-17 June 2011 in Wageningen, the Netherlands. The meeting was organized by Centre for Genetic Resources of the Wageningen University and the International Development Research Centre, Canada. Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development (LI-BIRD) and SAWTEE shared the findings of their policy and grassroots work on access to genetic resources, benefit sharing and farmers' rights.

Workshops on South Asian cooperation

CUTS International, India, SAWTEE's network partner, organized "Project Learning Sharing and Dissemination Workshop on Climate Change and Food Security in South Asia" on 27 June 2011 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in association with Practical Action, Bangladesh. CUTS is implementing the multi-country collaborative research project entitled "Scoping Study on Climate Change and Food Security in South Asia".

Similarly, CUTS International, in partnership with Institute for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance (I-PAG), Bangladesh, organized a workshop on "Cost of Economic Non-Cooperation to Consumers in South Asia" on 28 June 2011 in Dhaka.

Researchers, academics, trade experts, journalists and civil society activists, among others, from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka attended the meetings.

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