

# Food security issues

Food insecurity is a major developmental challenge for all South Asian countries. A majority of South Asian governments have made international commitments to ensure the right to food of their people, and have also enshrined that right in their constitutions and/or other national documents.

Since the inception of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), food security has remained an agenda of the SAARC summits and has received some space in the summit declarations. SAARC countries' international and national commitments to guaranteeing the realization of the right to food of their people, in particular of the poor, received a collective reaffirmation in 1995 during the Eighth SAARC Summit.

SAARC countries have also initiated some measures at the regional level to overcome the challenges of food insecurity. Some of those measures include the establishment of the SAARC Food Bank, and the endorsement of the SAARC Development Goals, seven of which relate to food security.

Despite the commitments and the measures undertaken, more than one third of the South Asian population goes to bed hungry every night. And now, climate

change has emerged as another serious threat that is going to add to the severity of food insecurity in South Asia.

According to the International Food Policy Research Institute, South Asia is the region that is going to face the greatest yield decline in almost all crops due to climate change. It has predicted, based on two models—the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) model and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) model—that there will be a 14 percent decline in rice production, 44–49 percent in wheat production and 9–19 percent in maize production by 2050 in a climate change scenario relative to the no climate change scenario.

In that context, South Asian governments should strengthen their food security efforts at the national level. They should also strengthen their collective efforts at the regional level. The upcoming 16th SAARC Summit is an opportunity for them to reassess their commitments and efforts in that regard, and to take up the issue with added urgency. This Special Brief puts forward some recommendations for SAARC governments and the Summit.

## Recommendations

- SAARC countries should focus more on increasing agricultural production and productivity in the region. To enhance agricultural production and productivity, they should:
  - Increase investment in agriculture. Agricultural development in South Asia is dependent on sufficient investment in agricultural infrastructure, and research and extension services. Therefore, SAARC governments should identify and launch regional projects—which would complement the national projects—under the infrastructure window of the SAARC Development Fund (SDF).
  - Develop regional projects for human resource development, and for the coordination of agricultural extension services, particularly in bordering areas of Member States. The geography of the region permits such coordination, which is essential to share knowledge and good practices among relevant stakeholders.

- Promote the exchange of germplasms within the region. Due to growing concerns relating to Access and Benefit Sharing and Intellectual Property Right Regimes, such exchange has been restricted in South Asia. SAARC countries can overcome such restrictions through regional contracts and agreements.
- Build a regional mechanism to control illegal trade of low quality agricultural inputs such as seed and fertilizer. As a recent case of Nepal has shown, illegal trade of such inputs has caused serious damages to agricultural production. Therefore, formalizing all informal trade taking place within the region should be a priority.
- Establish regional guidelines on biofuels since some of the countries in the region have already initiated their production. In India, for example, the government is planning to plant *jatropha* in 7–11.2 million hectares of land by 2011/12 for the production of biodiesel. There are possibilities that other countries in the region might also follow suit. The use of agricultural lands for such purpose, and also the possibilities of using major food crops like maize for biodiesel production, will have severe implications for food production. Therefore, South Asian countries should have regional guidelines that deal with, among others, the type and maximum area of land that can be used, and the type of crop that can be permitted for plantation for the production of biofuels.
- Some countries in South Asia are food-deficit; but the region, as a group, is close to food self-sufficiency. Therefore, regional agricultural trade has a huge potential in ensuring regional food security. However, SAARC countries have not promoted regional agricultural trade. They should:
  - Commit to enhance regional agricultural trade with developing-country Member States' committing to prune their sensitive lists under the Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area by gradually removing agricultural products from the lists.
  - Eliminate existing non-tariff barriers (NTBs) to agricultural goods trade and commit not to make use of such barriers in the future. This is because even if agricultural products are removed from the sensitive lists, the existing practices show that there will remain possibilities of using NTBs to agricultural goods trade.
  - Never resort to restraining exports of agricultural and food products within the region in any circumstance. During the food crisis of 2007/08, India imposed export restraints on some food grains, and Pakistan and Nepal also restricted/banned exports of some food items even within the region. This move severely affected food importing South Asian countries such as Bangladesh that has the highest proportion of undernourished people in the region.
- SAARC countries should effectively operationalize the SAARC Food Bank. For that purpose, they should:
  - Make an institutional arrangement to periodically monitor and estimate food demands and minimum stock requirements, and undertake measures to increase their storage capacity. Such arrangement could be made by setting up a Central Information System and forming a SAARC Food Security Monitoring Committee. The Committee should also be entrusted with the task of making arrangements for regional mapping of vulnerable regions and populations, as well as preparing a vulnerability calendar for the effective distribution of food in the region.
  - Work out detailed procurement modalities in addition to ensuring timely, localized and transparent procurement as well as rationalization of procurement prices. They should also recognize and promote public-private partnership as an integral part of the procurement modality.
  - Utilize the SDF to facilitate the procurement process.
  - Make food distribution systems responsive to regional as well as seasonal food insecurity. ■