

# Thimphu Statement on Climate Change

## A mere rhetoric

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Coinciding with the silver jubilee celebrations of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), member countries of SAARC signed the Thimphu Statement on Climate Change at the 16th SAARC Summit. The Summit, titled “Towards a Green and Happy South Asia”, was held in Thimphu

on 28–29 April 2010. Subsequently, the regional resolve on climate change was quickly tested. In July 2010, barely three months after the signing of the Statement, massive floods swept through Pakistan which killed 2,200 people and affected 20 million, destroyed 1.6 million homes, and caused about US\$16 billion worth of damages.<sup>1</sup>



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The Thimphu Statement on Climate Change can radically improve the ways South Asian countries adopted to respond and adapt to climate change challenges.

The following year, the SAARC region witnessed one of the worst years in terms of devastation caused by natural disasters. The region recorded 291 natural disasters, which constituted 97 percent of all disasters in the world that year. As a result, an estimated 2,317 people lost their lives, while some 23 million people were affected, resulting in economic damages of approximately US\$5 billion.<sup>2</sup>

Climate change is a legitimate threat to South Asia, and the Thimphu Statement on Climate Change has the potential to radically improve how the region responded and adapted to the rising challenges of climate change. But, have South Asian leaders delivered on what was promised? Have they made significant progress in addressing the issue of climate change? This paper attempts to answer these questions and proposes some way forward.

## Genesis to the Thimphu Statement

The road to the Thimphu Statement on Climate Change was carved at the 14th SAARC Summit in April 2007. It declared 2007 as the “Year

of Green South Asia” and opened the doors to more systematic regional coordination on climate issues. Then on 3 July 2008, SAARC Environment Ministers adopted the Dhaka Declaration on Climate Change and the SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change.

By adopting the Dhaka Declaration on Climate Change, SAARC members agreed to undertake the following:

- Commit to promoting programmes on advocacy and awareness that could lead towards a low-carbon society within the SAARC region;
- Resolve to cooperate on climate change issues within the SAARC region;
- Agree to initiate and implement programmes and measures on climate within the SAARC region; and
- Adopt the SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change.

Prepared by an inter-governmental expert group, the SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change focused on building the basis for a regional response to climate change. In particular, the Action Plan sought

to identify and create opportunities for regional cooperation, and to provide a framework for regional action through national plans. The Action Plan centred on seven thematic areas: i) adaptation; ii) mitigation; iii) technology transfer; iv) finance and investment; v) education and awareness; vi) management of impacts and risks due to climate change; and vii) capacity building for international negotiations.

In August 2008, the Dhaka Declaration and the Action Plan were endorsed by the Heads of State and Government at the 15th SAARC Summit in Colombo. When it was first adopted, the Action Plan was to be implemented over 2009–2011. Unfortunately, even after five years, the Action Plan and the regional goals on climate change remain an unfinished business.

Aware of the slow progress made towards the implementation of the Action Plan and the achievement of the regional goals on climate change, the Thimphu Statement on Climate Change calls for a “review of the implementation of the Dhaka Declaration and SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change and

ensure its timely implementation”. Additionally, many of the principles, objectives and action items agreed in the Dhaka Declaration and the Action Plan simply percolate down through to the Thimphu Statement.

Yet, the resolve to respond collaboratively on climate change issues continues to be challenged. This may, in part, be due to the institutional charter of SAARC itself, according to which all regional goals and ambitions must be implemented through national programmes and initiatives—an issue which was first realized when implementing the SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change. Regrettably, the issue has not been resolved to this date and thus continues to plague the regional resolve on climate change, notably the Thimphu Statement.

The “regional versus national” tension is best represented by the second objective in the SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change, which reads: “To provide impetus for regional level action plan on climate change through national level activities.” The need to rely on “national level activities” to support “regional level action plan” implies that progress at the regional

level can only occur as fast as the slowest member states. This conflict between the need to address regional problems through national programmes remains a key obstacle in framing a truly meaningful regional response to climate change.

### Thimphu Statement on Climate Change

Although the Thimphu Statement includes sixteen points for action, it centres around four key initiatives that are at the heart of climate vulnerability in South Asia. The four key initiatives include:

- i) **Disasters Initiative:** Commissioning a SAARC Inter-governmental Climate-related Disasters Initiative on the integration of climate change adaptation with disaster risk reduction, to be supported by SAARC Disaster Management Centre.
- ii) **Monsoon Initiative:** Commissioning a SAARC Inter-governmental Monsoon Initiative on the evolving pattern of monsoons to assess vulnerability due to climate change, to be supported by SAARC Meteorological Research Centre.

- iii) **Mountain Initiative:** Commissioning a SAARC Inter-governmental Mountain Initiative on mountain ecosystems, particularly glaciers, and their contribution to sustainable development and livelihoods, to be supported by SAARC Forestry Centre.

- iv) **Marine Initiative:** Commissioning a SAARC Inter-governmental Marine Initiative to strengthen the understanding of shared oceans and water bodies in the region and the critical roles they play in sustainable living, to be supported by the SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre.

The Statement tags each of the initiative on to the scope of an existing regional centre. As a starting point, this was an efficient approach for implementation since it allowed SAARC to pursue these initiatives without having to build the implementation infrastructure from the ground up. In addition, by expanding the scope of the regional centres to incorporate climate change dimensions, SAARC avoided the risk of duplication from having multiple agencies working on the same climate themes. Moreover, at



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Climate change, as with many other environmental aspirations of SAARC, requires a broad coordinated regional planning and response.



the time of the Thimphu Statement, all the four regional centres had already been setup and were functioning (Box).

Although incorporating the key regional climate change initiatives by the Thimphu Statement within the activities of the regional centres could have been an effective method for implementation, the Statement does not provide enough clarity or direction on how these Centres should address the climate objectives defined in the Statement. These Centres were already working in the areas covered by the initiatives. Much of their research and work were already beginning to incorporate climate impacts. Even in the absence of the Thimphu Statement, it would not have been meaningful for these Centres to continue to undertake

their activities without directly incorporating climate-related issues.

The Thimphu Statement is ambiguous on what it specifically wants from the regional centres. Apart from mentioning the principles of the initiatives, it offers no specific vision/goal on what those initiatives are to achieve and how the work of the regional centres should be altered to incorporate the newly identified issues. Furthermore, the Statement provides no guidance on social, economic or political principles that should be considered when building the framework for the initiatives.

Also, although the Statement expands the scope of the regional centres, it provides no assurance of additional funding or other

institutional arrangements to enable implementation of the initiatives.

Hence, the Thimphu Statement on Climate Change correctly pins its regional climate response strategy on the four established and functioning centres, but it offers no clear direction and does not commit additional resources to ensure effective and efficient implementation of the Statement.

### Additional action points

Other than the action points linked with the regional centres, the Thimphu Statement on Climate Change includes a dozen action points calling for specific actions. However, the overall progress towards the action points is mixed. Table 1 (next page) lists the action points in the Thimphu Statement and summarizes the progress to date.

The Thimphu Statement offers a strong foundation to a regional response to climate change. But, as the current progress suggests, implementation is driven through national plans and activities of member states. As a regional organization, SAARC can, at the most, suggest and encourage member states to act, but it cannot enforce.

Climate change, as with many other environmental aspirations of SAARC, requires a broad coordinated regional planning and response. As a result, the Thimphu Statement is constrained by the fact that all programme activities must be conducted at the national level.

The SAARC Charter is specifically built around the need for collective agreement from all member states. It will be difficult to readjust the spirit of that charter simply because climate change requires a broader regional effort. Perhaps one way to help overcome this constraint is to

### Box SAARC Regional Centres

**SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC)** was established in 2006 in New Delhi, India, in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean Tsunami in December 2004. Its charter includes a regional focus of establishing and strengthening the regional disaster management system. It also intends to use the regional centre to identify and develop priorities for action for member countries.

**SAARC Meteorological Research Centre (SMRC)**, located in Dhaka, Bangladesh, was inaugurated in 2005 to provide a regional basis for weather forecasting and monitoring. A key goal of the Centre is to evolve a network located in member states that can support data collection and help build forecasts.

**SAARC Forestry Centre (SFC)**, situated in Thimphu, Bhutan, began operations in 2008. It has been conducting research into mountain ecology and developing new methods to manage forest resources. It has a clear regional focus as well, gathering data from member states and serving as the nodal point for member states on inputs related to forests and mountains.

**SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre (SCZMC)**, located in Male, Maldives, was established in 2005. Since its establishment, it has been serving as the focal institution of SAARC to promote regional cooperation in planning, management and sustainable development of coastal zones, including research, training and promotion of awareness in the region.

Source: Author's compilation.

**Table 1 Progress Report on the Thimphu Statement on Climate Change**

Action points adopted in the Thimphu Statement	Summary of current progress
Review the implementation of the Dhaka Declaration and SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change and ensure its timely implementation.	Difficult to review on a regional basis. This goal must be reviewed at the national level based on national goals and plans.
Agree to establish an Inter-governmental Expert Group on Climate Change to develop clear policy direction and guidance for regional cooperation as envisaged in the SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change.	The inter-governmental expert group has been established. It has already met three times. The expert group reviews progress on implementation of the Thimphu Statement and provides direction for future action.
Direct the SAARC Secretary General to commission a study for presentation to the 17th SAARC Summit on “Climate Risks in the Region: Ways to comprehensively address the related social, economic and environmental challenges”.	Asian Development Bank is conducting this study under the terms of reference prepared by the United Nations Environment Programme. The first draft of the study has already been submitted to the member states. But feedbacks have not been received from member states.
Undertake advocacy and awareness programmes 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.	Depends on national activities and programmes implemented by member states. Difficult to assess progress at the regional level. However, across member states, there appears to be considerable political space and support to undertake advocacy and awareness programmes on climate change.
Commission 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 (SAU).	The inter-governmental group has requested SAU to take the lead. SAU will formulate options for an appropriate mechanism and to establish a research centre.
Incorporate science-based materials in educational curricula to promote better understanding of the science and adverse effects of climate change.	Being implemented at national levels by member states. However, SAARC regional centres are also playing key roles in preparing materials for education and awareness.
Plant ten million trees over five years (2010–2015) as part of a regional afforestation and reforestation campaign, in accordance with national priorities and programmes of member states.	Not all member states have provided information, though activities are ongoing at national levels. The SAARC Secretariat has urged member states to provide information. So far, only Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Bangladesh have provided information for 2010/11. According to the information submitted, less than 200,000 trees were planted that year.
Evolve national plans, and where appropriate regional projects, on protecting and safeguarding the archeological and historical infrastructure of South Asia from the adverse effects of Climate Change.	Member states are yet to provide the SAARC Secretariat on planned activities and progress made in this regard.
Establish institutional linkages among national institutions in the region to, among others, facilitate sharing of knowledge, information and capacity building programmes in climate change-related areas.	Regional centres are playing key roles in this aspect. In addition to the four centres, there are four other regional centres which are yet to be formally incorporated into the climate agenda, but they are already playing a key role. The regional centres also regularly host capacity building and training activities across the region, which helps the growth of formal and informal networks across the member states.

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Action points adopted in the Thimphu Statement	Summary of current progress
Commission a SAARC Inter-governmental Marine Initiative to strengthen the understanding of shared oceans and water bodies in the region and the critical roles they play in sustainable living, to be supported by the SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre (SCZMC).	The marine initiative is being led by the SCZMC. Initial work on formulating a climate-specific work plan has begun but is yet to be formally endorsed by the SAARC Environment Ministers. A number of workshops have been held, and education and training materials have been prepared.
Stress the imperative of conservation of biodiversity and natural resources and monitoring of mountain ecology covering the mountains in the region.	Depends on activities and programmes implemented by member states.
Commission a SAARC Inter-governmental Mountain Initiative on mountain ecosystems, particularly glaciers, and their contribution to sustainable development and livelihoods, to be supported by SAARC Forestry Centre (SFC).	The mountain initiative is being led by the SFC. No specific work plan on this initiative has been publicly disclosed.
Commission a SAARC Inter-governmental Monsoon Initiative on the evolving pattern of monsoons to assess vulnerability due to climate change, to be supported by SAARC Meteorological Research Center (SMRC).	The monsoon initiative is being led by the SMRC. A working group on monsoon has been established and has met several times. The group is scheduled to meet at least twice a year. An integrated operational system has been set up for the next five years (2014–2018) to monitor and forecast the monsoon weather systems in the SAARC region. It includes short-range to medium-range forecasts, seasonal prediction and vulnerability due to climate change.
Commission a SAARC Inter-governmental Climate related Disasters Initiative on the integration of Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) with Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), to be supported by SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC).	The disaster initiative is being led by the SDMC. The Centre is working with national disaster management authorities of member states. The Centre hosted several workshops on “Integration of Climate Change Adaptation with Disaster Risk Reduction in the context of South Asia.” In 2011, the Maldives became the first member state to develop a Strategic National Action Plan that integrates DRR and CCA.
Complete the ratification process for the SAARC Convention on Cooperation on Environment at an early date to enable its entry into force.	All but one member state have ratified the Convention. The remaining member state also needs to ratify it in order for it to come into effect. In addition, to date, five member states have also ratified the Convention on the Rapid Response to Disaster.
The Inter-governmental Expert Group on Climate Change shall meet at least twice a year to periodically monitor and review the implementation of this Statement and make recommendations to facilitate its implementation and submit its report through the Senior Officials of SAARC to the SAARC Environment Ministers.	The Expert Group has already met three times. Reports of the second and third meetings are yet to be reviewed by the SAARC Environment Ministers. There is no agreement on when the meeting of Environment Ministers will be held. As a result, the meeting of the Expert Group has been deferred until the Environment Ministers first meet to review the pending reports.

*Note: SAARC Secretariat provided information on some components of the progress report but declined request for a comprehensive progress report. It recommended additional information might be available with the SAARC regional centres. Across the board, information on progress was scant. This progress report is compiled based on interviews with officials, review of public information on websites, media reports and publicly available studies.*

build better institutional linkages between SAARC and implementing line agencies of members states so

that national laws clearly articulate the vision embodied in SAARC statements; and implementation of

national programmes and activities incorporate the need for regional coordination and collaboration.

## Convergence for regional cooperation

Although all SAARC member states have instituted national policies on climate change (Table 2), depth and maturity of the policies vary considerably across the member states. For instance, the Maldives and Sri Lanka are already into the second iteration of their national policies. In fact, the Maldives is the first member state to explicitly incorporate disaster risk reduction within its climate strategy.

Similarly, although the 2008 policy document guides India's climate policy, several of its programmes are very mature and quite groundbreaking in their own regard. These countries have not only produced a climate vision that developed broad consensus within their political process on this issue, but have also begun to develop and mature the institutional capacity to deliver on their objectives.

On the other hand, Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan are still at a relatively early stage of evolving a comprehensive policy framework. They remain highly dependent on international financial support and capacity building in framing national policy vision.

Meanwhile, international aspirations also differ significantly across the member states. As a key member of the BASIC bloc (representing Brazil, South Africa, India and China), India is under pressure to accept greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets, while no other SAARC country faces such a pressure. India has also begun to distance itself from the agenda of the least-developed countries (LDCs), including the G77 block.<sup>3</sup> As the international negotiations evolve, it will be increasingly difficult for all SAARC member states to speak with one voice in multilateral negotiations.

**Table 2 SAARC countries' national climate policies**

Member State	National Climate Policy
Afghanistan	National Capacity Needs Self-Assessment for Global Environmental Management, 2009 National Adaptation Programme of Action for Climate Change, 2009
Bangladesh	National Adaptation Programme of Action for Climate Change, 2005 Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, 2009
Bhutan	National Adaptation Programme of Action for Climate Change, 2006
India	National Action Plan on Climate Change, 2008
Maldives	National Adaptation Programme of Action for Climate Change, 2006 Strategic National Action Plan that integrates Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation, 2011
Nepal	National Adaptation Programme of Action for Climate Change, 2010 National Climate Change Policy, 2011
Pakistan	National Climate Change Policy, 2013
Sri Lanka	National Climate Change Adaptation strategy for Sri Lanka 2011–2016, 2010 National Climate Change Policy of Sri Lanka, 2011

Source: Author's compilation.

In addition to a regional response, SAARC member states have attempted to draft a common negotiating position for the Conference of the Parties (COP) meeting under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). During the Thimphu Summit, member states signed a "Common SAARC Position" for the 16th Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC. In the subsequent COP in Durban, SAARC member states hurriedly agreed to a common position at the sidelines of the COP meeting. There was no common position at the next COP in Doha.

Variations in national response, capacity and global aspirations across the member states significantly constrain SAARC's ability to frame a common regional approach. To a large extent, the challenge in SAARC is not limited

only to climate change. Divisions across member states and "regional versus national" tension also plague almost every aspect of the association. But rather than be daunted, it is important to continue to build on the work of SAARC on climate change. As one of the most climate vulnerable regions in the world, South Asia requires a dedicated regional response to address climate change issues, and SAARC is likely the region's only hope.

## Conclusion

To effectively coordinate and lead South Asia's climate response, SAARC must challenge its current framework and structure, as well as modernize its approach if it is to effectively address climate change issues. The SAARC Secretariat must become more transparent and evolve a more proactive





communication strategy. It must be willing to engage with civil society more openly and actively solicit civil society engagement. There is a large pool of non-governmental agencies that support the premise of a regional response and SAARC must leverage such support.

Additionally, the SAARC Secretariat must also be able to make its member states more accountable to their commitments. There must be routine progress reports on the commitments made in regional agreements like the Thimphu Statement. Such progress reports must be made publicly available and civil societies within the member

states must be encouraged to push their governments to fulfil their promises.

Moreover, SAARC should consider altering its approach in framing a regional response. Rather than bring all member states into a common playing field, it must recognize the existence of intra-regional differences. Thus, SAARC should establish the base standard and ensure that all member states at least meet that standard. Importantly, SAARC must back its commitments on its regional response to climate change with adequate financial support. Unfunded mandates, such as the Thimphu Statement,

do not contribute to securing a meaningful and desired outcome. Member states should, therefore, commit to fund all agreed climate mandates, either through their own contributions or through support from the international community. ■

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> SDMC. 2010. "South Asia Disaster Report 2010". New Delhi: SAARC Disaster Management Centre.
- <sup>2</sup> SDMC. 2011. "South Asia Disaster Report 2011". New Delhi: SAARC Disaster Management Centre.
- <sup>3</sup> All South Asian countries belong to the G77 bloc.