

Post-2015 agenda on trade, climate change and food security

A South Asian perspective

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Home to nearly a quarter of the global population, South Asia accounts for only about 3 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP).¹ More importantly, about 42 percent of the world's poor seek shelter in the region,² making South Asia one of the most vulnerable regions in the world to the anticipated negative effects of climate change. Although in the last two decades, South Asia has witnessed high food

consumption rates due to rapid population growth, the region still has the highest concentration of malnourished in the world. In fact, during 2010–2012, 304 million people were undernourished in South Asia, which is around one third of the total number of undernourished people in the world.³ Despite a steady decline in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) of South Asian countries in recent years, indices are still relatively



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high for all countries in the region (Table 1). Moreover, due to haphazard and maximum use of the region's natural resources, South Asia suffers from rapid environmental degradation. Nevertheless, South Asia has made progress in meeting some of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), mainly reducing poverty and ensuring environmental sustainability (Table 2). But poverty is still widespread and inequality is rising in the region. Added to these are emerging challenges of climate change. Therefore, climate change, food insecurity and poverty are entwined challenges for South Asia, and hence need to be addressed simultaneously.

The MDGs have not adequately addressed climate change issues. Goal 7 is about ensuring environmental sustainability, with four targets: i) reverse the loss of environmental resources; ii) reduce biodiversity loss; iii) increase access to safe drinking water and sanitation; and iv) improve the lives of slum dwellers. But, it does not have comprehensive targets with regard to environmental protection.

Additionally, inter-linkages between economic and environmental factors have also not been clearly reflected in MDG 7. Consequently, since environmental sustainability target and goals are not clearly defined, achievements on MDG 7 lag behind other MDGs.

Now, with the deadline to achieve the MDGs fast approaching, discussions on the framework for post-2015 development agenda have intensified. It has been emphasized at various global forums that the new framework for post-2015 agenda should acknowledge the changes that have taken place since the inception of the MDGs in 2000, and the challenges emanating from such changes. One such challenge is the impact of climate change, which has implications

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on poverty reduction and food security.

Climate change effects such as extreme weather events and erratic weather patterns are causing fluctuations in agriculture production, resulting in high and volatile food prices, and frequent food crises. Unfortunately, climate change-related events are likely to increase in the coming years, which will add pressure on agriculture production in South Asia and lead to chronic food insecurity.

One way to make up for domestic food shortages is to rely on food imports. In that respect, trade policies play an important role. For example, trade liberalization policies can facilitate food exports, which can improve the food access capacity of food importing nations. But during periods of food crisis—a likely occurrence in the future due to climate change—countries may adopt restrictive trade policies to reduce food exports which could intensify the magnitude of such crisis and force more people into poverty.

Hence, the post-2015 agenda on trade, climate change and food security should take the following issues into serious consideration.

Sustainable food production and consumption systems

Impacts of climate change get worse due to unsustainable use of natural resources. Higher income, rapid urbanization and increased globalization are changing consumption patterns, which in turn are straining natural resources. On the other hand, while there are severe shortages of food among a large section of the world population, the more affluent global community is wasting huge amount of food and consuming natural resources at an unprecedented scale. Such distorted consumption pattern has left many people undernourished and malnourished. In developing countries, one in every three children under the age of five is stunted due to chronic undernutrition.

In order to preserve the well-being of the future generation and to reduce the adverse impacts of climate change, a sustainable production and consumption system with emphasis on diversifying food production and increasing agriculture productivity has to be adopted. Moreover, due to increased private investment, the market structure of agriculture commodities is changing, and there is diversion of farmland from food to biofuel production. The challenge of ensuring a sustainable food system is, thus, to maintain an appropriate balance between food and cash crops.

Protection of vulnerable groups

Since the poor are vulnerable to economic and financial shocks, food security cannot be ensured without addressing poverty. The economic crisis of 2008–2009 severely

Table 1
Global Hunger Index

Countries	GHI 2012	Rank in GHI
Bangladesh	24	68
Bhutan	-	-
India	22.9	65
Maldives	-	-
Nepal	20.3	60
Pakistan	19.7	57
Sri Lanka	14.4	37

Source: Global Health Index 2012.

Table 2 Poverty and environmental sustainability in South Asian countries

Goal 1: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger		Goal 7: Ensure Environmental Sustainability	
Countries	Reduce extreme poverty by half	Reverse loss of forests	Halve proportion without improved drinking water
Bangladesh	very high poverty	medium coverage	moderate coverage
Bhutan	moderate poverty	high coverage	high coverage
India	very high poverty	medium coverage	high coverage
Maldives	-	low coverage	high coverage
Nepal	high poverty	medium coverage	moderate coverage
Pakistan	high poverty	low coverage	high coverage
Sri Lanka	moderate poverty	medium coverage	high coverage

Source: MDG indicators: <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Host.aspx?Content=Data/snapshots.htm>

affected the food access capacity of poor food buyers, both in rural and urban areas. Hence, providing the poor and vulnerable an opportunity to be engaged in income generating activities is in fact a pre-condition for ensuring access to food. Along with this, social protection and safety net programmes have to be put in place.

The poor need to be supported through various targeted interventions (food and other assistance) if they are to be saved from the tight grip of poverty and malnutrition. Rights based approach should be adopted so that the poor, particularly women, have access to land, forestry, fisheries and natural resources. Additionally, they should be given proper trainings on how to be resilient to the impacts of climate change

and other economic and political shocks.

Holistic approach to food security

The food crisis that emanated from high food prices in 2008 demonstrated the volatility of the food market and the vulnerability of the poor. In view of such experiences, adequate food stock should be maintained to address food insecurity in the future. As global demand for food is rapidly increasing due to higher income in certain countries, food production should keep pace with projected growth in global demand for food. This can be achieved through increased productivity. However, sustainability of resources should also be ensured, that is, production has to be increased by using

fewer resources such as water, fertilizer, pesticides, etc. Given the high pressure on limited land due to increased demand for food, diverting agricultural land for biofuels should be controlled, if not stopped completely.

Trade and climate change linkages

Due to growing population and increased consumption, domestic agriculture production is insufficient to meet domestic demand for agriculture products in South Asian countries. Therefore, imports are necessary to meet the rising domestic demand for agriculture products. Hence, such trade policy that would address this need should be devised. The food crisis of 2008 is an example of how reduced food production can affect



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food availability in poor countries. It also vindicated that in times of crisis, countries adopt protective measures to ensure that domestic food needs are met first.

Additionally, developed countries often threaten to raise border taxes on products that originate from countries which are exempted from complying with the Kyoto Protocol, arguing that the latter have an unfair competitive advantage in exporting their products. Adoption of such protective trade measures by developed countries can have negative effects on South Asia. Therefore, climate change should not be an excuse for developed countries to erect trade barriers, mainly for exports of developing countries and LDCs.

Gender equality

Impacts of climate change are felt disproportionately by various segments of society. The severity of impacts on women, children and other marginalized groups such as indigenous population and the elderly depends on their access to and reliance on natural resources. Notably in South Asia, women are more vulnerable to climate change than men since poor rural women in South Asia earn their livelihood from activities such as food processing, homestead gardening, cattle and chicken rearing, etc. During times of crisis and natural disaster—many of them often induced by climate change—men migrate in search of work, while women take on

the added responsibility of men as breadwinners for their families, not to mention the burden of collecting water and firewood from distant places, particularly in the dry season.

Further, the nutritional status of poor women in South Asian countries is lower than that of men mainly because feeding the family takes priority. Women mainly survive on leftovers, which is often not enough to replenish their bodies, given their immense work load. Hence, to reduce the vulnerability of women to climate change and malnutrition, their access to food has to be ensured and nutritional status improved. Therefore, the post-2015 agenda should aim at improving the capacity of women through education and skill development so that they can engage in higher income generating activities which will enable them to secure enough food for themselves and their families, and ultimately contribute to long-term socio-economic development.

To summarize, the post-2015 agenda on trade, climate change and food security should have the following specific targets:

- promoting sustainable agriculture production and consumption;
- ensuring food security for all, but with greater focus on nutrition;
- achieving universal access to water and sanitation;
- ensuring good management of

natural resources, ecosystem and biodiversity;

- creating jobs and sustainable livelihood opportunities;
- empowering girls and women, and achieving gender equality;
- securing sustainable energy for all;
- adopting favourable trade policies;
- ensuring availability of finance to tackle climate change-related problems; and
- attaining good governance for sustainable development.

Achieving food security through appropriate trade and climate policies depends on political commitments at the highest level. Since trade, climate change and food security-related targets cannot be universal for all countries, South Asian countries must emphasize that concrete goals and targets for post-2015 agenda are identified by their respective governments with adequate engagement of all relevant stakeholders. ■

Notes

- ¹ UNDESA. 2012. World Population Prospects 2012. New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, and IMF. 2013. World Economic Outlook (April). Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund.
- ² World Development Indicators (2010). <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/home/>
- ³ FAO. 2012. Undernourishment Around the World in 2012. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/016/i3027e/i3027e02.pdf>