

Chapter 47

Exploring Landscapes in Regional Convergence: Environment and Sustainable Development in South Asia

Srinivasan Rajamanickam
Pondicherry University, India

ABSTRACT

The South Asian region is a key economic zone, as seen from the global perspective. In the past two decades, it has witnessed a healthy growth in GDP terms. Globalization has propelled the countries in the region towards regional cooperation as a means to address common growth concerns. Along with geo-political compulsions that have fostered this convergence, we find that there are also socio-cultural and historical factors present that could serve as binding stones. However environment and climate change pose a huge challenge to the economic integration and growth in this region. While a number of institutional and policy regional cooperative measures have been put in place, there are certain bottlenecks in the region, which are again a product of its history, that need to be addressed. We feel that reassessment of national interests and priorities through strong political will are essential to mitigate these bottlenecks to realize the true potential of convergence in this region.

This is not just a technical issue. Everybody's actions are motivated by their inner life, their moral, spiritual and ethical values. Global agreements will be effective when they are rooted in the individual commitment of people, which arises from their own inner life. -Maurice Strong, Chair, Rio Earth Summit, 1992

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development has emerged as a core theme of government policies, international cooperation, aid agency norms and civil society concern. Developing countries of the world have increasingly attuned their policies striving to balance developmental programs with conservation of natural resources that

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3817-2.ch047

sustain large rural populations depending on agriculture, forestry and related vocations. South Asian countries in particular have unique circumstances influencing their programs in this regard. The Himalayas, from where the major rivers of the region originate, straddle across five of the region's countries viz., Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Barring Sri Lanka, all the countries share waters of these rivers and exploit the ecological resources that the Himalayas and river systems offer. The seas surrounding the region are a major source of livelihood and the forests in the region are home to nearly a fourth of the region's population. The statistics published by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) indicate that the region has about 23% of the world's population and 15% of the world's arable land, but receives less than 1% of global foreign investment and tourism revenues, only 2% of global GDP, and 1.2% of world trade. Furthermore, South Asia is still home to about 410 million of the 720 million poor living in the Asia-Pacific region despite the rapid economic growth in India and, to a lesser extent, other countries. Of the 1.4 billion people in South Asia, 42% or 488 million live on less than a dollar a day (World Bank, 2008). In addition, key indicators suggest that social development still remains relatively low when compared to other Asian regions (ADB, 2006). Occupying about 5 per cent of the world's land mass, its population is expected to rise to about 25 per cent of world's population by 2025. Three-quarters of South Asia's population lives in rural areas. UNEP concludes that South Asia is very vulnerable to climate change. Impacts of climate change have been observed in the form of glacier retreat in the Himalayan region, where the approximately 15,000 glaciers will likely shrink from the present total area of 500,000 km² to 100,000 km² by 2035. These glaciers form a unique reservoir, which support perennial rivers such as the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra, which, in turn, are the lifeline of millions of people in South Asian countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Pakistan). This will exacerbate the challenges of poverty reduction and improving access to safe drinking waters, two of the Millennium Development Goals (UNEP, 2009). The region is considered to be the least economically developed as a geographical sub-region and their biggest as yet challenge seems to emanate from environment. Bindu Lohani (2014), ADB Vice-President for Knowledge Management and Sustainable Development says, "South Asia's economy is under serious threat and the lives and livelihoods of millions of South Asians inhabiting the region's many mountains, deltas, and atolls are on a knife edge. Countries must respond individually and collectively to cope with rising sea levels, disrupted water, food, and energy supply and increased disease".

While it is so, the region suffers from overt to subtle political imbalances that prevent convergence of energies towards addressing the issue of sustainable development. External conflicts and internal security challenges, partly from inherited colonial legacies and partly from perceived assertion for regional supremacy, have ridden the region through the past seven decades. These have created stalemates in regional dialogues towards convergence. It is evident that these obstacles can only be surmounted through constructive political will which is prepared to set aside narrowly defined 'national interests' for achieving common regional good. While the question of settling boundaries and defining maritime limits may take prolonged timeline, the issue of convergence on environmental challenges merits immediate attention as it has the potential to add to economic growth agenda and directly contribute to improving the livelihoods of millions in the region. Their economic stability, in turn, may perceptibly contribute to mitigating the security challenges in the region leading to a more viable environment for resolving other major issues. The hypothesis therefore is that the environmental challenge to the economic prosperity of South Asia enjoins an urgent note to the indispensability of regional cooperation.

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