

# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

DAUNTING CHALLENGES, LITTLE PROGRESS



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## **INTRODUCTION**

South Asia houses around quarter of the global population and more than one-third of the world's poor. The per capita income remains lowest. Except for Maldives, where the major industry is tourism and fishing, South Asian economy remains largely agricultural. Industries like textiles and IT have made significant gains recently. The region has the greatest development needs as four LDCs (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal) lie in the region. Economy being largely dependent on agriculture is highly vulnerable to climate change. Most of the countries also suffer huge trade deficits. Sustaining economic growth, reducing poverty and inequality, creating empowering jobs, fighting climate change and disasters, ensuring food security and nutrition, health of oceans and loss of biodiversity, besides violence and grave situation of human rights, governance and corruption remains big challenges. The sub region with the multiple challenges, low resilience and scarce means of implementation will have to work harder to achieve Sustainable Development Goals.

## **PROGRESS ON THE SDGS IN THE SOUTH AND SOUTH WEST ASIA**

According to the Asia and the Pacific SDG progress Report 2017, the region is on the track to fully achieve only SDG 4 (lifelong education and learning). The region as a whole is regressing on SDG 10 and SDG 16.

As regards the sub region of South and South west Asia, the report warns that the sub region will miss 14 goals with the current rate of progress. The region has registered sufficient progress on SDG 7 (Access to sustainable energy) and SDG 10 (reducing inequalities) but the momentum needs to be maintained. There has been very little progress on SDG 2 (Sustainable Agriculture and food), SDG 5 (gender), SDG 14 (Life below water) and SDG 16 (peace, justice, inclusive society and transparent institutions). The sub region has also registered regression on SDG 8 (decent work and sustained economic growth), SDG 11 (sustainable cities) and SDG 13 (climate action). The sub region has been a leader in SDG 10 but below regional average in SDG 5 (women empowerment) and SDG 6 (water and sanitation).

As far as specific targets are concerned the South and South West Asia may miss 3 quarters of the targets. 16/60 targets are going in the reverse direction. Most of the targets likely to be achieved are in the SDG 3 and SDG 4. More than half of the targets seen regressing is in SDG 8 and SDG 9. The largest efforts for acceleration of progress needed by the sub region are on Ocean's health (SDG 14), Loss of forest area (SDG 15), safely managed drinking water (SDG 6) and the perception of corruption (SDG 16). The situation has worsened most markedly in the areas of GHG emission (SDG 13) and prevalence of malnutrition (SDG 2).

In the light of the ESCAP reports, let's have a brief survey of progress on other social, economic and environmental SDGs.<sup>1</sup>

## **POVERTY REDUCTION AND OTHER SOCIAL SDGs**

In the recent past, the sub region has been competing with South East Asia to be the fastest growing region in the world. In mid 2018, South Asia has regained its lead as the fastest growing

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1 SDG 1 to SDG7 are considered social goals, while SDGs 8, SDG, 9 and SDG 10 are considered economic goals, SDG, 11 to SDG15 are considered climate related or environmental goals, SDG 16 seeks to promote good governance and human rights.

region in the world.<sup>2</sup> However, the economic growth in the region has been misleading as it is not being accompanied by improving social, human and environmental indicators. Despite the fact that Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bhutan have lower poverty incidence, India and Bangladesh have significant poverty ratios approx. 22% and 18.5% respectively. India comprises 74% of Sub regions population and higher incidences of poverty in India means that a substantial proportion of population remains in the poverty trap.

As far as SDG 2, sustainable agriculture and food security is concerned, as a region South Asia is the lowest on the index.<sup>3</sup> India was ranked 100 among 121 countries listed in the index; it slipped 3 positions from 97 in the previous year. Nepal is best in the region at 72, Sri Lanka (84) and Bangladesh (88) are above India, which is trailed by Pakistan (106) and Afghanistan (107).

In the context of SDG 3 and SDG 4, health and education, public spending on these sectors remain lowest in the countries in the sub region. Malnutrition in the region has become legendary. Stunting levels in the under five children in South Asia (35%) are the highest in the world. And the region bears 40% (59 million) of the global burden of the stunted children. The regional average also masks the wide disparity in the national stunting levels-stunting in Pakistan is twice as prevalent as the global average. Between 2000 and 2017, the number of children in South Asia declined by about 30 million from 89.2 million to 59.4 million, however between last three years the reduction has been around 7-8 million, which shows that the progress has slackened.<sup>4</sup>

The region also remains critical in gender equality and according the World Economic Forum Global Gender

2 Lifted by India, South Asia Regains Growth lead, Still lags on jobs, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/04/15/south-asia-focus-growth-lead-jobless-growth-create-more-jobs>, World Bank Press Release, last accessed 19th Sept, 2018

3 Global Hunger Index, 2017, IFPRI, Washington DC.

4 Four out of ten of the world's stunted children live in south Asia, UNICEF, <http://www.unicef.org/progressreport/stopstunting.html>, last accessed 19th Sept, 2018

Gap Report. The report says that recent years have seen dramatic slowdown in progress towards workplace gender equality. At the current rate of progress economic parity between the sexes could take another 1000 years.

The progress in the region has been negligible and the region has the second lowest score on the index after North America, which has registered a regression. Western Europe is expected to be the first to close the gap in 47 years.<sup>5</sup>

In water and sanitation (SDG 6), only 45% of the population in the sub region had adequate sanitation in 2015, with about 960 million practicing open defecation.<sup>6</sup>

## **ECONOMIC GOALS, SDG 7, SDG8 AND SDG9;**

ESCAP report notes good progress on SDG. However, it seems that data on access to electricity in the region is misleading. Bhutan and Maldives have 100% access to electricity, Pakistan and Sri Lanka around 90%, Nepal 85% and India around 80%. Despite this fact power shortage in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and India make up famous stories. Despite progress on SDG 7, 27% of the sub regions population lacked access to electricity, compared with just 2% in East and North East Asia.

Economic growth in the sub region has hardly created employment opportunities, which is major concern for the SDG 8 (decent work and sustained economic growth). 1.8 million people reach working age in South Asia every month, but employment rates have been falling rather than increasing. The fall in employment rates have been particularly strong in India, Bhutan and Sri Lanka. Accompanied with the fact that more and more women are falling off working population across the sub region except Nepal; raises a serious concern. Presence of large scale informal sector has been impeding the progress on SDG 8. Informal sector work

5 Why it could take 1000 years for men and women to be equal in South Asia, 26th Oct, 2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/10/1000-years-till-gender-equality-south-asia/>, last accessed on 19th Sept, 2018

6 Achieving the Sustainable Development goals in South Asia, UN ESCAP, 2017



in characterized by long working hours, low or no benefits, poor social security etc. among the five countries having high proportion of workers in the informal sector, four lie in the sub region.<sup>7</sup> South Asian countries will have to create 11.7 million jobs every year to arrest further decline in the employment rates.<sup>8</sup>

As for SDG 9, a recent study (UNESCAP 2017), “Asia Pacific countries with Special Needs Development Report 2017,” shows that calculated infrastructural indices of all south Asian countries, except Maldives, are much lower than even average developing countries in the region. As for the industrialization target under SDG 9, while the LDCs are supposed to double their share of manufacturing to the GDP by 2030, all south Asian LDCs, except Bangladesh, are off track as they are experiencing premature deindustrialization.<sup>9</sup>

Reducing inequality (SDG 10), though the sub region has registered better progress than other sub regions; it’s yet a formidable challenge. Despite reduction in poverty, it remains one of the most unequal regions in the world. Countries like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have registered sizeable rise in income inequality during 1980-2015. Most of the south Asia countries end up in the bottom 20 in terms of Commitment to Reduce Inequality Index (CRI).<sup>10</sup> India ranks 132 out of 152 and most of other south Asian countries except Nepal and Maldives fare even worse.<sup>11</sup>

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7 Are South Asian countries ready to meet the targets of the SDGs by 2030, Selim Raihan, 2nd July, 2017, the daily star, at <https://www.thedailystar.net/op-ed/economics/are-south-asian-countries-ready-meet-the-targets-sdgs-2030-1426864>, last accessed 25th Sept, 2018

8 Achieving the Sustainable Development goals in South Asia, UN ESCAP, 2017

9 Are South Asian countries ready to meet the targets of the SDGs by 2030, Selim Raihan, 2nd July, 2017, the daily star, at <https://www.thedailystar.net/op-ed/economics/are-south-asian-countries-ready-meet-the-targets-sdgs-2030-1426864>, last accessed 25th Sept, 2018

10 The CRI Index has been prepared by Oxfam and Development Finance International and ranks countries on three indicators of government spending on education, health and social protection, tax structures and labour.

11 South Asia Losing War Against Inequality, Bharat Dogra, 16th Aug, 2017, <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/south-asia-inequality>, last accessed on 19th Sept, 2017

## ENVIRONMENTAL GOALS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISASTER

South Asia is particularly vulnerable to climate change with half of the population living in areas that are projected to become moderate to severe climate hotspots by 2050. Despite this fact, there is not much emphasis on moving towards low carbon resilient development pathways. The ESCAP report notes regression on SDG 11 and SDG 13 in the region, while largest efforts are required in health of oceans (SDG 14 ) and loss of forests (SDG 15).

There are major implications of climate change impacts on agricultural yield, increasing stress on water, greater frequency of droughts, floods and cyclones. The countries need to align adequate resources on research and development of climate resilient crops, climate proofing of infrastructure and flood control, better protection to farmers in the form of crop insurance and social protection to rural households. Urban poor also need equal attention due to the fact that many of the cities in the region including Karachi, Dhaka, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata have huge urban informal settlements housing millions without much safety against natural or climate related hazards.

Currently floods account for half of all disasters in the region. From 1970-2010, floods affected about 82% individuals hit by disasters and were responsible for 80% of total economic losses.<sup>12</sup>

More than 400 people died in the recent Kerala floods in India alone which affected more than 4.10 million people. The economic losses have been pegged at US \$ 3 billion. More than 1000 people died in floods across South Asia in 2017 which affected more than 41 million.<sup>13</sup> In Bihar, an eastern state of India alone, more than 400 people have believed to have died. In Bangladesh which suffered worst flooding in 40 years 140 lost their lives, 8

12 World Bank and Global Facility for Disaster Reduction & Recovery and Bloomberg.

13 More than 1000 Died in South Asia Floods This Summer, Jeffrey Gettleman, Aug.29, 2017, New York Times, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/29/world/asia/floods-south-asia-india-bangladesh-nepal-houston.html>, last accessed 19th Sept, 2018

million were affected and nearly 700,000 homes were damaged. Estimated value of GDP affected every year by inland flooding in four countries of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nepal is about US \$ 22.15 Billion.<sup>14</sup> It is estimated that floods may cost South Asia more than US \$ 215 billion a year by 2030.<sup>15</sup>

Migration has been an important adaptation and survival strategy. In Bangladesh alone, 15 million people are expected to be displaced due to environmental degradation of the country's coastal zone. The major migration corridor in South Asia are between Bangladesh-India, Afghanistan-Pakistan, India-Pakistan and Nepal-India. There are currently about 32.30 Million and 0.81 Million migrants from Bangladesh and Nepal respectively in India. Pakistan is home to 23.26 million Afghan migrants.<sup>16</sup> However, these migrants are being increasingly seen as security threat resulting in violent attacks on migrant communities. South Asia is already considered second most violent place to live on earth after Iraq. In 2016 about 20% of all conflicts in the world took place in this region and resulted in about 22% of all conflict related deaths. Climate induced migration will worsen these existing tensions. Large destination countries like India and Pakistan are moving towards sending these migrants back. The large-scale trafficking of women and children across borders in the region is another matter of grave concern. Barring Afghanistan, no other South Asian country has signed the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

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14 Total GDP based on 1020 data compiled by BS Research Bureau, Source World Resources Institute, Business Standard

15 Floods may cost South Asia \$ 215 billion a year by 2030, 15th Sept, 2017, Business Standard, at [https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/graphic-floods-may-cost-215-billion-a-year-for-south-asia-by-2030-117091400031\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/graphic-floods-may-cost-215-billion-a-year-for-south-asia-by-2030-117091400031_1.html)

16 A storm of climate change migration is brewing in South Asia, Simritkaur and Harpreetkaur, University of Delhi, 17th June 2018, EASTASIAFORUM at <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/06/17/a-storm-of-climate-change-migration-is-brewing-in-south-asia/>, last accessed 19th Sept, 2018

## **GOOD GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

South Asia is also witnessing a worrying trend of violations of human rights and increasing assault over human rights defenders, environmental defenders and journalists. Press freedom is declining according to a report by UNESCO and International Federation of Journalists (IFJ).<sup>17</sup> The report documented 35 killings of journalists and media reporters including ten journalists killed in the deadly attack in Afghanistan on 30th April, 2018. The report highlighted near zero conviction in killings. In a positive development last week, the IFJ noted a significant impunity breakthrough with the sentencing of nine people in India, including the mastermind, who were found guilty for their role in the brutal murder of Indian journalist Jyotirmoy Dey seven years ago. The IFJ again noted the increasing impact of internet shutdowns on press freedom in South Asia, with 97 incidents documented in IFJ monitoring during the period. India is leading the charge with 82 shutdowns, followed by Pakistan with 12. Old colonial laws and new draconian laws are routinely invoked in the region to curb freedom of NGOs, and discriminated groups face violence from both state and non state actors.

## **CONCLUSION**

Growth alone does not create inclusivity and environmental protection and at times militates against social inclusion that environmental sustainability. South Asia is a very good case in point. The experience of last two decades emphasizes that special efforts should be made towards inclusion, job creation and protecting environment. Current trajectory of growth has to be curated to create jobs, make growth inclusive, make infrastructure resilient and reduce inequality including gender inequality. Special emphasis on agriculture (as the sub region is largely agrarian) and non farm opportunities, targeted interventions in

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17 Clampdowns and courage, Launch of the South Asia press Freedom Report 2017-18, UNICEF at [http://www.unesco.org/new/en/newdelhi/about-this-office/single-view/news/launch\\_of\\_the\\_south\\_asia\\_press\\_freedom\\_report\\_201718/](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/newdelhi/about-this-office/single-view/news/launch_of_the_south_asia_press_freedom_report_201718/), last accessed 19th Sept, 2018

job creation and providing social security in pockets of poverty, and focused efforts on particular disadvantaged communities, as well as creating a balance between economic imperatives and environmental considerations will take the sub region closer to achieving the SDGs. These imperatives demand greater role for the state in providing basic services (health and education, water and sanitation, electricity and clean cooking fuel), and closer regulation of economic and industrial activities having potential of damaging environment. These cannot be left to market forces alone.

The sub region has huge financing gaps. It is estimated that the sub region will need US \$ 2.5 Trillion by 2020 and US \$ 4-5 trillion by 2030 to close their infrastructure gap.<sup>18</sup> Providing social services (health, education and energy for all, employment, income security for the elderly and the disabled etc.) may amount to the need for investment up to 10% of the GDP in case of India to 20% of the GDP, in case of Bangladesh.<sup>19</sup> There are other costs to move along low carbon development pathways. India alone would require US \$ 2.5 trillion over 15 years for implementing its NDCs. Countries in the region are constrained by low tax GDP ratio, nascent south south cooperation, low technological capacity, and almost nonexistent regional trade cooperation besides poor data. Manifestly, these resources will have to be supplemented by sustained international public finances, where ODA and Green Climate Fund have critical role.

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18 Achieving the Sustainable Development goals in South Asia, UN ESCAP, 2017

19 ibid

## NOTES

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### Public Advocacy Initiatives for Rights and Values in India

PAIRVI was formed in 1998. PAIRVI works at the intersection of development and rights in a rights based approach. It provides advocacy and capacity building support to grassroots organizations and community based organizations, who otherwise have very limited opportunities for capacity building. Main thrust areas of Pairvi's work is a policy analysis, capacity building, protection of human rights and promotion of rights based approach to development, human rights advocacy and monitoring. Thematic areas include sustainable agriculture and food security, climate change and sustainable development, livelihoods, affirmative actions, human rights training and capacity building. Pairvi engages with a variety of stakeholders including policymakers, farmers, women, children and youth, media and judiciary at all levels from local to global.

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