



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2016; 2(1): 570-575
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 12-11-2015
Accepted: 14-12-2015

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The framing of SAARC development goals: South Asia's response to millennium development goals

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Abstract

In September 2000, at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, world leaders came together to adopt what would become known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The eight goals provide a concrete, time-bound, measurable framework for tackling various dimensions of extreme poverty and environment degradation. They are arguably the most comprehensive, ambitious and broadly supported development goals ever agreed upon by the international community. The South Asian region contains huge diversity and contrasting group of countries. Regions as well as respective countries have made attempts to localize the MDGs. One of such attempts is the preparation of SAARC Development Goals (SDGs). These goals essentially revolve around the MDGs. The SDGs were conceptualized and formulated as a strategic regional response to the urgent imperative of riding South Asia of poverty and achieving the international Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Indeed, in certain aspects, the SDGs seek to go much further and faster than the MDGs targets. The SDGs are also in a sense a road map for the implementation of the SAARC Social Charter. This paper tries to explain the profile of South Asia as a region and its response to the international Millennium Development Goals by framing SAARC Development Goals. The paper tries to explain the precedents leading to the framing of SAARC Development Goals.

Keywords: United Nations, MDGs, South Asia, SAARC, SDGs, ISACPA

1. Introduction

1.1. South Asia as a Region

South Asia or Southern Asia is the Southern region of the Asian Continent, which comprises the Sub-Himalayan countries and, for some authorities, adjoining countries to the west and east. Topographically, it is dominated by the Indian plate, which rises above sea level as northern parts of India south of Himalayas and the Hindu Kush. South Asia is bounded, on the South by the Indian Ocean and on land (clock wise from west) by West Asia, Central Asia, East Asia and South-East Asia.

The core countries of South Asia include Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, however, Afghanistan, the British Indian Ocean Territory, Myanmar and the Tibet Autonomous Region are often included as well. South Asia is home to over one-fifth of the world's population, making it both the most populous and most densely populated geographical region in the world.

The south Asian Association for Regional cooperation (SAARC), a contiguous block of countries, started in 1985 with seven countries- Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka- but was extended to include Afghanistan as an eighth member in 2007. Afghanistan was formally welcomed during the 14th SAARC Summit in 2007. The World Bank grouping includes only original seven members of SAARC and leaves Afghanistan out.

1.2. South Asia: An Introduction of Basic Data

1.2.1. Geography

While South Asia had never been a coherent geopolitical region, it has a distinct geographical identity. The boundaries of South Asia vary based on how the region is defined. South Asia's northern, eastern & western boundaries vary based on definitions used, while the Indian Ocean is the southern periphery. Most of this region rests on the Indian plate and is isolated from the rest of Asia by mountain barriers.

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The region is home to a variety of geographical features, such as glaciers, rainforests, valleys, deserts and grass lands that are typical of much larger continents. It is surrounded by three water bodies- the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. The climate of this vast region varies considerably from area to area- from tropical monsoon in the south to temperate in the north. Southern parts are mostly hot in summers and receive rain during monsoon periods. The northern belt of Indo-Gangetic plains also is hot in summer but cooler in winter. The mountainous north is colder and receives snowfall at higher altitudes of Himalayan ranges.

1.2.2. Territory and Ethnic groups

With the core seven countries, the area covers about 4.48 million Km², which is 10% of the Asian continent or 2.4% of the world's land surface area. They account for about 34% of Asia's population (or over 16.5% of the world's population) and are home to a vast array of peoples.

Table 1: Demographic Parameters of SAARC Countries

Country	Area (Km ²) (2010)	Population (million, 2010)	Density (Per km ²)
Afghanistan	37.50	25.9	37.5
Bangladesh	147,570	148.7	1033
Bhutan	38,394	0.7	18.80
India	31287,240	1210.2	382
Maldives	298	0.3	1053
Nepal	147,181	26.6	180.90
Pakistan	796,095	177.1	222
Sri Lanka	65,610	20.8	318

Source: CBS (2010), SAARC in Figures.

South Asia is ethnically diverse, with more than 2,000 ethnic entities with populations ranging from hundreds of millions to small tribal groups. South Asia has been invaded and settled by many ethnic groups over the centuries- including various Dravidians, Indo-Aryan groups and amalgamation of Dravidian, Indo-Aryan and native societies has produced composite cultures with many common traditions and belief. But, the traditions of different ethnic groups in South Asia have diverged throughout earlier times, sometimes giving rise to strong local traditions such as the distinct south Indian culture.

Other ethnic groups, successively streaming in later mainly from Central Asia, e.g. Sakas, Kushans, Huns etc., influenced Pre-existing South Asian cultures. Among the last of these new arrivals were the Arabs followed by the Turks, the Pashtuns and the Moghuls.

Table 2: Intra- regional trade (Export of major trading blocs)

Groups	1990	1995	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
EU	65.9	62.4	61.6	60.8	60.6	61.12	60.7	65.66	66.2
NAFTA	41.4	46.2	55.7	55.5	56.6	56.1	55.9	55.95	53.8
ASEAN	19	24.6	23	22.4	22.7	22.2	22.2	25.62	24.9
SAARC	3.2	4.4	4.1	4.3	4.8	5.7	5.6	5.42	5.6
BIMSTEC	2.37	3.7	3.45	3.34	3.56	4.46	3.91	4.23	4.56
APEC	68.3	71.8	73.1	72.6	73.4	72.6	72	66.2	69.4
IOR	4.1	6	4.4	5.6	4.3	6.1	4.3	4.6	4.7

Source: COMTRADE Database

Trade potential among SAARC countries is very high, which is evident from its low intra-regional trade at present and on the one hand the inclusion of Afghanistan in to its fold since 2007. Intra-regional trade among SAARC countries is shown in table below. It shows, except for India & Maldives, that

1.2.3. Economy

South Asia is the poorest region in the world after Sub-Saharan Africa. According to the United Nations Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), just over a quarter of the world's MPI poor people live in Africa, while a half lives in South Asia. The study also found that there are more poor people in eight Indian states than in twenty six poorest African countries. According to the poverty data of World Bank, more than 40% of the population in the region lived on less than the International poverty line of \$ 1.25 per day in 2005, compared to 50% of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Sri Lanka has the highest GDP per capita in the region, while Afghanistan has the lowest. India is the largest economy in the region (US \$ 1.97 trillion) and makes up almost 82% of the South Asian economy; it is the world's tenth largest in nominal terms and 3rd largest by purchasing power adjusted exchange rates. Pakistan has the next largest economy and the 5th highest GDP per capital in the region, followed by Bangladesh and then by Sri Lanka which has the 2nd highest per capital and is the 4th largest economy in the region.

1.2.4. Intra- regional Trade

The basic reason of 'regional integration' is the 'economic integration' of 'natural' and 'Unnatural' countries. Economic integration is propelled by the competitive needs of different countries of the world to face the onslaught of globalization after the onset of the WTO on 1st January, 1995. One of the most important developments in the post- WTO sceneries has been the phenomenal growth of regional trading agreements among countries/blocs across the globe as a complement to the multilateral trading system.

Intra-regional trade of major trading blocs has grown tremendously over the last one and half decades as shown in the table below. Intra- regional trade in SAARC has been miniscule compared to other Regional trading blocs in this region. It is still reeling under political paranoia and is yet to emerge as a viable regional trading bloc of the Asian region. Its intra-regional export was 3.2 percent during 1990, which marginally increased to 5.6 percent during 2006. The situation was grim in the case of intra- regional imports, which was 3.8 per cent in 2000, which declined to 1.88 percent in 2006. In absolute terms, SAARC's intra- regional exports was 2,791.4 million dollars during 2000, which increased to 11,273.71 million dollars in 2006. On the imports front, SAARC's total intra- regional import was 2,767.4 million dollars in 2000 which increased to 7,019.06 million dollars in 2006.

Intra- regional trade of all countries increased from 1995 to 2008. Bangladesh's intra-regional trade has increased from 2.68 percent in 1995 to 3.06 percent in 2008. Bhutan's entire trade has been within the SAARC region in general & with India in particular, which means it is entirely integrated with

the region. India's intraregional trade has declined marginally from 5.02 per cent in 1995 to 4.88 per cent in 2008. The Maldives' intraregional trade has declined from 22.63 per cent in 1995 to 8.78 per cent in 2008. Nepal's intraregional trade has increased tremendously over the years which is evident from the fact that its share of regional trade to its total trade has increased from 9.23 per cent in 1995 to 73.89 per cent in

2008. Pakistan, which is yet to be well integrated with the region because of its rigid attitude with the neighboring country, which is supposed to be its largest trading partner due to large market. Though its intraregional trade has improved a lot over the years, it is lowest among all SAARC countries except Bangladesh. Sri Lanka's intraregional trade also increased from 2.66 percent in 1995 to 8.39 percent in 2008.

Table 3: Intraregional trade (exports) of SAARC countries 1995-2008

Year	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Maldives	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
1995	2.68	-	5.02	22.63	9.23	3.15	2.66
1996	1.84	-	5.07	18.53	20.58	2.57	2.67
1997	2.26	-	4.67	16.08	25.37	2.61	2.59
1998	2.69	98.38	4.91	17.35	36.25	4.90	2.36
1999	1.91	99.16	4.06	19.56	29.63	3.56	3.09
2000	1.58	-	4.20	18.14	42.90	3.18	3.47
2001	1.58	-	5.38	22.19	47.78	2.87	3.34
2002	1.33	-	4.98	15.50	60.22	2.31	5.48
2003	1.71	-	6.08	13.92	53.98	2.86	6.82
2004	1.59	-	5.54	12.69	58.48	3.72	8.80
2005	2.16	92.89	5.14	17.38	67.36	4.56	10.24
2006	1.88	-	4.96	13.36	68.57	4.19	8.71
2007	2.34	-	4.92	9.58	7.97	4.47	8.33
2008	3.06	98.8	4.88	8.78	73.89	4.78	8.39

Source: DOTS, IMF.

1.2.5. Inter-state conflict in South Asia

Inter- state conflicts in South Asia probably are highest compared to any other regional bloc. The region is subject to

contentious political tensions which have not allowed an atmosphere of mutual trust to prevail.

Table 4: Types of conflict b/w the member- states of SAARC

Territorial conflicts

SAARC members	Conflict
India- Pakistan	Deadlock on issues of Siachen glacier, Kargil & Sir creek. Kashmir dispute which has resulted in two major wars.
Afghanistan- Pakistan	Durand line issue

Cross – border terrorism

SAARC members	Conflict
India- Pakistan	On several occasions there have been blames from both sides (India & Pakistan) on each other for carrying out terrorist activities or supporting such acts in their country

Conflict over Natural Resources

SAARC members	Conflict
India- Pakistan	Both countries are having dialogue regarding the Baglihar dam being built over River Chenab in Indian administered Kashmir.
India- Bangladesh	Bangladesh wants a fair share of Ganga river by opposing the construction of Farrakha Barrage In India.

Conflict(s) Related to Immigrants and Refugees

SAARC members	Conflict
India- Bangladesh	Illegal Immigration of Bangalis into India.
Afghanistan- Pakistan	Pakistan has decided to shut down refugee camps under increasing pressure to crack down on cross border militancy.
Nepal- Bhutan	Over repatriation of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal

2. The Framing of SAARC Development Goals: A South Asian Response to MDGs

The adoption of the Millennium Development Goals, drawn from the United Nations Millennium Declaration, was a significant event in the history of the United Nations. It constituted an unprecedented promise by the world leaders to address in a single package, peace, security, human rights & fundamental freedoms.

Regions as well as respective countries have made attempts to localize the MDGs. One of such attempts is the preparation of SAARC Development Goals (SDGs). These goals essentially revolve around the MDGs. SAARC, a regional organization was established when its charter was formally adopted on December 8, 1985 by seven founding members. Afghanistan joined the association as its eighth member at the 14th summit held in April, 2007 at New Delhi, India. SAARC provides a

platform for the people of South Asia to work together in a spirit of friendship, trust and understanding. The objectives, as stated in its charter include: Promoting & improving quality of life of peoples in South Asia; accelerating economic growth, social Progress & cultural development; building trust and understanding and appreciation of one another's problems.

Recognizing the imperative to address poverty related issues and measures to alleviate poverty in the region; the SAARC leaders at their Sixth Summit held in Colombo in 1991 established an Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA). The Commission, while reporting to the seventh summit (Dhaka, 1993), provided a conceptual frame work for poverty alleviation through social mobilization and empowerment in South Asia. The seventh Summit welcomed the report and expressed its commitment to eradicate poverty from South Asia through an agenda of action which would inter- allia, include a strategy of social mobilization, and a policy of decentralized agricultural development, village re-awakening, small- scale, labor-intensive industrialization & human development. The summit also stressed that within the conceptual approach of "Dhal-Bhaat"- the basic needs approach, the right to work and primary education should receive priority.

At the eleventh Summit (Kathmandu, 4-6 January 2002), the leaders felt that the widespread and debilitating poverty continues to be the most formidable developmental challenge for the region. The leaders made a review of the SAARC activities aimed at poverty alleviation and decided to reinvigorate them in the context of the regional and global commitments to poverty reduction.

The Twelfth Summit held in Islamabad in January 2004 recommended the reconstitution of ISACPA to prepare a report on "*Our Further our responsibility*". The Summit entrusted the Commission to prepare a comprehensive and realistic blue print, setting out SAARC Development Goals (SDGS) for the next five years in the areas of poverty alleviation, education, health and environment, and submit it in the next summit. This action reflected South Asian leaders' recognition of the regional imperative for galvanizing a popular imagination of poverty free South Asia as well as the international imperative of achieving the MDGs by 2015. Collective wills of the SAARC leaders to go further and faster, beyond the MDG targets inspired the identification of the SDGs.

The mandate given to the Commission had an in- built challenge to identify targets to inspire regional actions that are appropriate in South Asia's own context and add momentum to the national efforts towards achieving MDGs. In view of the mixed performance in the attainment of MDGs in the last few years, the region's own response set out through the SDGs was imbued with deeper commitment and characterized by rapid advancement. The report- "*An Engagement with hope*" on the SDGs was finalized in 2004 & it identified a set of 22 goals. Of these, eight are related to livelihood, four to health, four to education & six to environment.

The ISACPA recommended the goals to the thirteenth SAARC Summit. The leaders endorsed the goals as

recommended by ISACPA, and entrusted the commission to continue its advisory and advocacy role in this regard. As a follow up of these directives, there was a realization of a clear elaboration of SDGs: detailed identification of short- term and medium- term monitorable and doable indicators, bench marking of these indicators, and projecting targets for a five years period; and developing a credible monitoring & evaluation frame work.

Accordingly, at its first meeting held in Dhaka from 1-2 March, 2006, the commission decided to:

- a) Develop workable indicators for each of the 22 SDGs;
- b) Examine the institutional structures & processes of monitoring evaluation with a view to improving the same at national and regional levels;
- c) Suggest measures to create an enabling environment for pursuing poverty alleviation programs and strategies; and
- d) Suggest principles for effective delivery of services for poverty alleviation.

At the second meeting held at Colombo from 25-26 May, 2006, it was recommended "that SAARC Member states should try to achieve the SDGs in the five years starting from 2007, noting that one year has already elapsed in obtaining necessary approval and some more time may be required to complete bench marking of the SDGs". It was recommended that SAARC member states would hold one or two workshops to have focused and professional dialogues with the stakeholders so as to elaborate the SDGs at the national level. Regional level indicators and benchmarks were to be finalized based on the national inputs. The twenty- seventh session of the Council held at Dhaka from 1-2 August, 2006 agreed that SDGs would be achieved in the next five years starting from year 2007; and a mid-term review on the attainment of SDGs would be under taken towards the end of the third year.

The Ministerial meeting on poverty alleviation was held at Colombo on 8 August, 2006, where it was agreed that member states would incorporate the SDG targets & goals in their respective planning process. It was further agreed to initiate national level consultations to obtain views of the stakeholders and practitioners to formulate specific targets and indicators for the SDGs. The Ministerial meeting endorsed the idea of a Regional Brain storm (workshop) on SDGs monitoring and evaluation. The Brain storm was held in Kathmandu from 20-22 January, 2007 that allowed consultations with a wide range of stakeholders and the representatives of the national authorities, responsible for SDGs implementation.

The commission at its third meeting held at the Secretariat on 25 January, 2007 finalized the recommendations and decided to prepare a report titled "*Taking SDGs Forward*". Taking into consideration both the South Asian context and specificity and the relevant linkages with international goals such as the MDGs, the report recommends adoption of 75 indicators for the 22 SDGs to be attained within a period of five years from 2007-12. The third SAARC Ministerial meeting on poverty Alleviation, held in Kathmandu on 5th April 2013, has extended the terminal years of SDGs from 2012 to 2015 to coincide with the Millennium Development Goals.

Table 5: SAARC Development Goals

Livelihood SDGs
Goal 1. Eradication of Hunger Poverty
Goal 2. Halve proportion of people in Poverty by 2010
Goal 3. Ensure adequate nutrition and dietary improvement for the poor
Goal 4. Ensure a robust pro poor growth process
Goal 5. Strengthen connectivity of poorer regions and of poor as social groups
Goal 6. Reduce social and institutional vulnerabilities of the poor, women, and children
Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable justice
Goal 8. Ensure effective participation of poor and of women in anti-poverty Policies and Programmes
Health SDGs
Goal 9. Maternal health
Goal 10. Child health
Goal 11. Affordable health-care
Goal 12. Improved hygiene and Public health
Education SDGs
Goal 13. Access to primary/communal school for all children, boys and girls
Goal 14. Completion of primary education cycle
Goal 15. Universal functional literacy
Goal 16. Quality education at primary, secondary and vocational levels
Environment SDGs
Goal 17. Acceptable level of forest cover
Goal 18. Acceptable level of water and soil quality
Goal 19. Acceptable level of air quality
Goal 20. Conservation of biodiversity
Goal 21. Wetland conservation
Goal 22. Ban on dumping of hazardous waste, including radio-active waste

Source: www.saarc.org

To make an assessment of the progress made towards achieving the SDGs adopted, SAARC countries decided that Finance Ministers should meet within the first quarter after every summit and also on the sidelines of the World Bank & ADB annual meetings, to take stock of macro-economic developments and outlook for South Asia; achievement of SDGs as co-related to MDGs and to assess the investment climate, foreign capital inflows, financial sector reforms and other areas of cooperation.

The SDGs were conceptualized and formulated as a strategic regional response to the urgent imperative of riding South Asia of poverty and achieving the international Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Indeed, in certain aspects, the SDGs seek to go much further and faster than the MDGs targets. The SDGs are also in a sense a road map for the implementation of the SAARC Social Charter.

3. Conclusion: The SAARC Development Goals were regionalized form of Millennium Development Goals, with some additional targets and indicators, for the period of five years, 2007-12. The third SAARC Ministerial Meeting on Poverty Alleviation, held in Kathmandu on 5th April 2013, has extended the terminal year of SDGs from 2012 to 2015 to coincide with the MDGs. South Asia is a conflict prone region in the world. Drawing up of SDGs has reflected the regional determination to shun differences and participate in a broader process of development to free their people from abject poverty and to enhance opportunities for them to live a decent life.

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