Fifteenth South Asia Economic Summit (SAES XV)

Unleashing an equitable green transformation in South Asia

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Parallel session: Climate-resilient agri system for food security

Date: 13 December 2024 Time: 11:15-13:00

Building a climate-resilient agricultural system is essential for ensuring food security in South Asia, a region increasingly vulnerable to climate-induced disruptions. As climate change intensifies, with frequent droughts, floods, and rising temperatures, millions of people face heightened risks to their food supply and livelihoods. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that integrates climate adaptation, sustainable agriculture, and regional cooperation to stabilize food systems and ensure access to affordable food across borders.

Food security in South Asia is under severe threat, exacerbated by climate change, economic pressures, and complex regional trade dynamics. Home to over a quarter of the world's population, the region is witnessing a rise in food insecurity, with recent data from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) revealing that 72.2% of the population, approximately 1.4 billion people, cannot afford two meals a day. Across individual countries, food insecurity levels are alarmingly high: 74.1% in India, 82.8% in Pakistan, 76.4% in Nepal, 66.1% in Bangladesh, and 55.5% in Sri Lanka. The 2023 Global Hunger Index (GHI) underscores these concerns, with poor rankings for Pakistan (102nd), India (111th), Bangladesh (81st), Nepal (69th), and Sri Lanka (60th) out of 125 countries. These figures highlight the urgency of addressing food security to support regional stability and economic resilience.

Climate change poses a critical risk to food production in South Asia, intensifying existing vulnerabilities in agricultural systems. Rising temperatures, unpredictable weather patterns, and extreme events like floods and droughts disrupt crop yields and threaten the livelihoods of millions who rely on agriculture. For instance, studies indicate that rising temperatures could reduce wheat yields in India by up to 20% by 2050, jeopardizing both local food supplies and income for rural populations. These climate-induced challenges directly impact food availability, accessibility, and affordability, amplifying the region's struggle with food security. The interplay between food security and trade policy is complex in South Asia, where countries often impose import and export restrictions to protect domestic food supplies. Export bans on staples like rice, wheat, and sugar imposed by India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, aim to stabilize local markets but also disrupt global food trade. For example, India's 2023 ban on non-basmati rice exports raised global concerns, given India's role as one of the largest rice exporters. Such measures can inflate prices and reduce food availability for importing nations reliant on South Asian exports.

High tariffs and non-tariff barriers limit food trade within South Asia, despite the aim of the Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) to encourage regional trade. Restrictive policies, while offering short-term relief, can disrupt trade and worsen food insecurity. A coordinated, climate-resilient agri-system that fosters cooperation, promotes sustainable agriculture, and balances trade and food policies is essential to enhance food security and regional stability in South Asia.

This session will explore the links between food security, trade, and climate resilience in South Asia, focusing on how regional cooperation, policy alignment, and innovation can build a climate-resilient agri-system and ensure food security. The following questions will guide the discussion:

- What are the most effective climate-resilient agricultural practices that South Asian countries can adopt to secure food production against climate-related risks?
- How can South Asian countries balance national food security goals with the need for open trade policies to ensure regional food stability?
- What role can technology and digital innovations play in making South Asia's agricultural systems more resilient to climate impacts?
- How can regional cooperation be strengthened to address food security challenges posed by climate change, given the political and economic diversity of South Asian countries?
- What financial mechanisms or policy instruments are needed to support farmers in adopting climate-resilient practices, and how can these be made accessible across the region?
- In light of trade restrictions on staple foods, what steps can South Asia take to ensure stable food prices and availability for its population?
- How can the SAARC Food Bank and the SAARC Seed Bank be reinvigorated to contribute to the food security goals of South Asian countries?
- What long-term strategies should South Asian countries prioritize to sustainably address food security, beyond short-term climate adaptations?