

# Environment, population and development of SAARC region

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**T**HE concept of "environment" has evolved since it started to become a global issue in the early 1970s. At first, it was a kind of global admission that the Earth's ecosystems are in fact fragile, and that human beings have been contributing much to its degeneration.

When countries started to join efforts to strike a balance between improving the quality of human life and protecting the environment for the sake of future generations, a new awareness materialized. The social and economic welfare of human beings is closely linked to their environment. Any change in the social economic fields will have an impact on the earth's environment and vice versa, whether positively or negatively, immediately or eventually. And in many cases, negative results are irreversible.

The Earth Summit in Rio, in 1992 concluded that the economic, social and environmental concerns are inescapably inter-linked to world development. Hence the pledges to eradicate environmental problems, reduce poverty, and foster sustainable development as an integrated global cooperation. One cannot be separated from the others. How far has the world progressed in the last few decades? The statistics are not encouraging.

According to one recent report, by virtually every broad measure, our world is in a state of pervasive ecological decline. Primary tropical forests - - the most diverse ecosystem on the planet - - are disappearing at a rate probably exceeding 140, 000 square kilometres per year. About 30 percent of surviving forest is seriously fragmented or otherwise degraded.

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Another statistic shows that the world is in profound geochemical flux. Certain forms of pollution are altering the global chemical cycles that "regulate" key ecosystem processes, contributing among other things to the rapid climate changes that hamper crop harvests in many countries, abnormally inundates other countries, and provoke desertification in still other parts of the globe.

Our world is also increasingly burdened by the long-term risks associated with toxic chemicals. By a very conservative estimate, global production of hazardous wastes has reached 300 million to 500 million tons per year. The ensuing chemical damage inflicted on the natural world and human bodies is hard to calculate. But evidence is turning up on the pollution of aquifers, the underground water deposits. Aquifers contribute to more than half the volume of lakes and rivers, and are also major sources of irrigation and drinking water.

Furthermore, increasing numbers of people in our world lack the means to live a decent life. The global population now exceeds 6.2 billion, more than double of what it was in 1950s, and it is projected to rise to between 7.9 billion and 10.9 billion by 2050. Most of this increase will occur in the developing world, where nearly 1.2 billion people are surviving on less than the equivalent of \$1 a day, much less than the amount of daily subsidies provided for cattle in the rich countries of Europe and North America.

How do we protect earth's fragile ecosystems without denying billions of people the chance of a better life? How do we improve the human condition without wrecking the delicate balance that sustains all life on this planet? These questions remain unanswered as yet? As clearly put forward in the latest edition Vital Signs 2003, published by The Worldwatch Institute in cooperation with United Nations Environment Program, the twin goals cannot be achieved as long as humanity remains divided into the extremes of rich and poor. Two different types of environmental destruction result: The wealthy

impose the heaviest toll on the planet by their materials-intensive, pollution-laden lifestyles, whereas the poor generally live with some of the worst local environmental conditions, trekking out a meagre living only by taxing their croplands, forests, and water resources to the limits. Globalization has deepened these disparities. The disparities are widening not only among rich and poor countries, they are found as well within individual countries.

SAARC region has a wealth of natural resources and ecological and biological diversity. Yet population growth and economic development are threatening the region's rich heritage through the expansion and intensification of agriculture, the uncontrolled growth of industrialization, the destruction of natural habitats, and urban sprawl.

The interplay between population growth, resource depletion, and environmental degradation has been a matter of debate for decades. For the most part, the argument has been between those who view population numbers per se as the main culprit in increasing pressure on the environment and those who place more blame on economic development, nonsustainable agricultural and industrial practices, and excessive or wasteful consumption. In fact, both population growth and nonsustainable development are cause for concern in the SAARC region.

SAARC region includes some 23 percent of the earth's population, depending on only 14 percent of the planet's arable land. Although fertility is declining everywhere in the region, SAARC countries populations will continue to grow for many decades to come, increasing pressure on the region's natural resources. Between 2000-2050 populations

will double or nearly double in Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Growth rates will also be particularly high in India.

Much of the population growth projected for the next few decades will occur in countries that are least capable of coping with additional stress on land, water, and other natural resources. According to a study by Prescott-Allan in 2001, it has been found that the countries where population is projected to grow fastest have some of the lowest income levels in the world. These countries already rank high in terms of environmental stress.

Demographic factors are evoked by several SAARC countries in connection with their environmental problems. For Pakistan, "accelerating economic and demographic pressures" are one of three factors identified as responsible for the emergence of environmental problems. Bhutan notes that the population "is growing rapidly" [...]. This increase of population cannot be easily absorbed by the existing rural or urban communities". For Bangladesh, a "link exists between population, poverty and the environment. High population growth rates lead to more intense use of resources, exacerbating existing scarcities and over-exploitation". The Maldives also cite population growth as one of the factors of environmental problems.

Issues arising from growing human numbers in the face of fixed water resources are indirectly but strongly linked with population growth at the national and urban levels. Such problems are noted by several countries. One may also observe that population pressure under fixed or slowly changing technology is a factor in such phenomena as the extension of agriculture, with encroachment on forests or on marginal lands,

which accelerates degradation (in case of India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka), the overexploitation of the wood cover for domestic uses (same countries) and increased pollution by domestic wastes.

Most of the SAARC countries mentioned population policies as a general means to alleviate problems or more exactly to make them more tractable. India considers that "population-related issues, which are inextricably linked to the total development of India, a priority. Development should lead to a decrease in population growth rates".

In Nepal, "a range of strategies have been put forward including expansion of family planning, and child health services, integration of population programmes in other sectoral projects, and expansion of adult education programmes for women." Bhutan states: "the future socio-economic balance depends on a strictly enforced family planning policy and / or new means of livelihood not directly dependent on the land".

For Bangladesh, the recommendations of the "environmental strategy for sustainable development" include a series of measures under the heading on population stabilization and poverty alleviation. Maldives emphasize the need to develop "an environmentally sound national population management policy".

Many of the countries state their reliance on environmental education as one of the instruments to halt in the long run environmental degradation. These programmes deserve attention from the population IEC viewpoint, since they provide opportunities to introduce considerations on the linkages between dynamics and environmental change.

In Pakistan, the Environment and Urban Affairs Division leads information efforts, while the Pakistan Institute for Labour Education and Research conducts workers' training. In India, the national Policy on Education includes a Master Plan for the universal provision of facilities for environmental education, for "there is an urgent need to create widespread awareness".

In Nepal, the Government "accord priority to improving awareness in conservation of natural resources and sustainable development at all levels through formal and non-formal education". Bangladesh emphasizes "targeting women through environmental awareness, literacy and birth control campaigns" to "help break the vicious circle" of rapid population growth, poverty and environmental degradation. Sri Lanka also states its commitment to "strengthening environmental education".

The SAARC Member Countries should assert that 'it shall be a fundamental responsibility of the state to attain, through planned economic growth, a constant increase of productive forces and a steady improvement in the material and cultural standard of living of the people. In pursuit of this goal of prosperity of the people through planned development, the individual, the society or the group need to come to interact with the environment and have to take care of it, lest not to speak of global warming, excessive use of natural resources like land, water and forest turn this region into a 'dust bowl' with 'individuals scratching a living like a scrawny hen'.

Environment includes water, air, land and physical properties and the inter-relationships which exist among and between them and human beings, other living creatures, plants and micro-organisms. The environment is thus the sum total of all social, physical, biological and ecological factors. Social environment is centered round human beings. It is their institutions, group behavior, habitation and interaction in production and consumption of their wealth. The human activities entail using natural resources and interfering with natural environment, increasingly with the increase in growth. Environment concerns have, therefore, assumed vital importance. It is now widely accepted that there must be an integrated approach between environment and development. As such, there is a need for integration of environment into

development planning and activities. Environment is where we live and development is what we all do in attempting to improve our standard of living. SAARC region has many environmental problems, natural or man-made, such as frequent natural disasters, industrial pollution, poor health and sanitation, deforestation, desertification, changes in climatic conditions, salinity, deteriorating habitat of flora and fauna, etc. which we have to face, solve or compensate for.

In this backdrop, the SAARC Human Resource Development Centre (SHRDC), a regional institution of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) at Islamabad organized a two weeks training course on Environment, Population and Development from 29 March 11 April 2004. The general objective of the training Programme was to harmonize and enhance the mutual relationship among population dynamics, the environment and social and economic development, while specific objectives are to broaden the consideration of

trends in demographic variables in sectoral and regional policies, the coherent integration of population and environmental policies into economic and social development strategies.

This training course was primarily designed for the mid level functionaries, trainers/professionals from the Government, Semi Government organizations, working under the Ministries of Environment, Population, Planning and Development and other related organizations and NGOs of SAARC Member States. Participants from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka took part in the training course.

SHRDC's this regional training course was a step towards achieving the sustainable development in the SAARC Region which called for tackling poverty, development and environment as one, by focusing on people resources and productivity.

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