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From Threat to Shared Opportunity: Rebuilding Geopolitical Trust for Harmonious Climate Action in South Asia

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Abstract:

Climate change has transitioned from a distant threat to an urgent reality in South Asia. Due to geo-physical conditions and socio-economic-demographic backwardness South Asia is projected as one of the worst affected regions from global warming and climate change. The region is the home of about 1.5 billion of the world's population and a chunk of the global poor. South Asia's heavy reliance on rain-fed agriculture makes its population highly sensitive to extreme climatic events, including erratic monsoons, droughts, and rising sea levels.

In short, there is a need for assessment of climate change issues through the socioeconomic lens of one of the world's poorest and most populous regions. Although climate change is a global issue, localized solutions have become increasingly necessary to address political, economic, and cultural factors. The sustainability of current practices will be evaluated, and a responsible innovative alternative. Recent findings highlighted at the **CCPI 2026 Press Conference** (presented at COP 30 in Belém) underscore these regional disparities: while countries like Pakistan score well in per-capita emissions and energy metrics, major regional players like India fell to 23rd place (medium category) due to rising total emissions, expanding coal infrastructure, and the absence of a time-bound coal exit roadmap.

South Asia is under serious threat from sea-level rising and increasing incidences of extreme events such as floods, droughts, cyclones, storms and irregularity of monsoon. Rapid urbanization has only fuelled the situation which may turn pathetic due to large-scale influx of 'climate refugees' to the ill-equipped cities in near future. It is not yet too late to be pessimistic, rather quick and effective actions across areas where South Asia is vulnerable can make a significant difference. There is a need for global, regional and local level mitigation and adaptive strategies to face the reality of climate change.

"This paper examines the regional policy landscape to highlight the necessity of a nuanced, equity-based climate governance framework. The analysis evaluates existing regional policies and advocates for collaborative, South-South cooperation to transition from climate threats to shared socio-economic opportunities."

Keyword: Climate Change, South Asia, Climate Governance, Environment.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change represents the primary development challenge of the twenty-first century, going beyond environmental boundaries to fundamentally reshape the global socio-economic landscape. While climate change is global in its origins and atmospheric reach, its impacts are significantly localized, unevenly affecting regions characterized by geographical fragility and demographic density. In this context, South Asia emerges as a critical focal point of climate vulnerability. Home to over 1.5 billion people and a significant portion of the global population living in poverty, the region is particularly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of human-induced climatic shifts. The reliance on rain-fed agriculture and the widespread nature of socio-economic marginalization intensify the risks posed by unpredictable monsoons, rising sea levels, and the increasing frequency of extreme weather events.

The vulnerability of South Asian economies is worsened by a complex interaction of environmental vulnerability and institutional limitations. Coastal megacities face existential threats from storm surges and saline intrusion, while inland regions grapple with hydrological instability that threatens food and water security. These environmental pressures do not exist in isolation; they intersect with existing developmental lacks, including inadequate infrastructure and deteriorating air quality, to create a compounding crisis. Furthermore, the transboundary nature of these threats makes unilateral national responses insufficient, highlighting the limitations of current governance frameworks that often remain constrained by historical geopolitical tensions and a lack of regional trust.

This paper argues that the path toward climate resilience in South Asia requires a paradigm shift from viewing climate change solely as a threat, and to recognizing it as a shared opportunity for regional integration. By rebuilding geopolitical trust and fostering South-South cooperation, the region can transition toward a harmonious climate action framework. Central to this argument is the development of localized,

equity-based governance models that align with the specific cultural and socio-economic realities of South Asian societies. The following analysis evaluates the historical trajectory of international climate agreements and examines existing regional policies to advocate for a collaborative framework that transforms existential vulnerabilities into shared socio-economic opportunities for the region's populous youth and diverse communities. A historical overview of the international policy landscape is provided below:

1979- The first World Climate Conference (WCC)

1987- The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone layer 1988- The Intergovernmental Panel on climate change is set up.

1990- IPCC First assessment report released

1992- The INC adopts UNFCCC Text. At the Earth Summit in Rio, the UNFCCC is opened for signature along with its sister Rio conventions, UNCBD and UNCCD.

1994- UNFCCC enters into force. An introduction to the United Nations framework Convention on Climate Change.

1995- The first Conference of Parties (COP1) takes place in Berlin.

1996- The UNFCCC Secretariat is set up to support action under the Convention. 1997- Kyoto Protocol formally adopted in December at COP 3.

2005- Entry into force of the Kyoto protocol. The first meeting of the parties to the Kyoto protocol (MOP1) takes place in Montreal.

2010- Cancun Agreement to the Kyoto Protocol is adopted by the CMP at CMP8.

2013 - Key decisions adopted at COP 19/CMP 9 include decisions on further advancing the Durban Platform, the Green Climate Fund and Long-term Finance, the Warsaw Framework for REDD Plus and the Warsaw International Mechanism for loss and Damage. Under the Durban Platform Parties agreed to submit "intended nationally determined contribution", known as INDCs, well before the Paris Conference.

2014- At COP 20 in Lima in 2014, Parties adopted the Lima call for Action', which elaborated key elements of the forthcoming agreement in Paris.

2015- Intensive negotiations took place under the Ad Hoc Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action (ADP) throughout 2012 - 2015 and culminated in the adoption of the Paris Agreement by the COP on 12 December 2015.

2018- COP 24 - Katowice RuleBook

2021- COP 26- Glasgow Pact

2022- COP 27- Sharm El- Sheikh Loss/Dam.

2023- COP 28- Dubai Global Stocktake

2024- COP 29- Baku Finance Goal

2025/26- COP 30- CCPI 2026 Press conference Belem

Basic Information for Analysis According to the recommendations of the United Nations, the plans must be preceded by damage, exposure, hazard, risk and vulnerability assessments. These analyses can be developed quickly only if previously processed information is available to the country or people. Countries must carry out occasional assessments as and when required.

REGIONAL VULNERABILITY OF SOUTH ASIA DUE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

South Asia has a distinct geographical identity, and the region is indigenous to a variety of geographical features, such as mountains, glaciers, rain forests, valleys, deserts, rivers, lowlands, plateau, and alluvial fans. It is surrounded by three water-bodies—the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea.

South Asia is being crowned by the mighty Himalayas to the north, which blocks the north-Asian bitter cold winds from blowing to the south, thereby keeping the temperatures considerably moderate in the plains down south. The monsoon that brings rain to South Asia keeps the region humid during summer and dry during winter. The climate favors the cultivation of jute, rice, tea, cereals, and vegetables. During the summer monsoon, wind blows from southwest to most parts of the region, accounting for 70%–90% of the annual precipitation. The Indian Ocean provides the principal connection between the Pacific, Atlantic, and Antarctic Ocean basins and between the upper and lower layers of the global ocean circulation. Therefore, it is appropriate to say that changes in the waters of the South Asian nations (i.e., northern Indian Ocean) will have a global impact.

However, the region's heavy reliance on rain-fed agriculture is a critical vulnerability point; research indicates that shifting to climate-smart agricultural (CSA) interventions is essential to counter the projected decline in crop yields and stabilize rural livelihoods (Aryal et al., 2020).

Moreover, accurately assessing the multifaceted consequences of climate change for human communities remains a significant challenge. The same is more important for a region like South Asia, which holds about 1.749 billion people (23% of world population) in an area of about 5.1 million km² (11.51% of Asia and 3.4% of the world's land surface area). Extreme poverty, inadequate health facilities, inadequate

infrastructure, and economic, social, and educational backwardness exacerbate the condition of South Asia. In fact, approximately 40% of the world's poor live in rural regions of South Asia. Therefore, a significant gain in the global poverty reduction target can be achieved if focus is made on South Asia (Thapa, 2004). Considering these factors, it would be reasonable to assess the impact of global warming and climate change on South Asia. It is essential to assess how cataclysmic events - including heatwaves, droughts, floods, hurricanes, and rising sea levels- affects South Asia's health, education, agriculture, water security and infrastructure.

SOUTH ASIA VULNERABILITY MATRIX

Category	Key Drivers & Vulnerabilities
Ecological Drivers	• Rising sea levels & coastal salinity intrusion • Glacial melt in the Himalayan range • Increasing frequency of heatwaves, droughts, & floods
Socio-Economic Drivers	• ~40% of the world's rural poor living in the region • Heavy economic reliance on rain-fed agriculture • Large-scale climate-induced rural-to-urban migration • Overburdened infrastructure in urban megacities

Furthermore, it is critical to examine how regional governments address these existential challenges and the urgency of developing public policies grounded in scientific analysis. A rigorous assessment of innovative adaptive measures—specifically those that align with regional ethical and cultural norms while fostering sustainable, grassroots development (not greed based development)—is imperative.

EXISTING POLICIES AND STRATEGIES IN EACH COUNTRY

While most South Asian nations established environment-related policies during the 1990s, many of these frameworks remain outdated. Despite the growing consensus on the necessity of sustainable development and the evolving nature of climate threats, these national policies have not been systematically revised to align with contemporary scientific data and regional needs.

Member State	Key National Climate Policies
Afghanistan	National Capacity Needs Self-Assessment (NCSA, 2009); National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA, 2009)

Bangladesh	National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA, 2005); Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP, 2009); National Environmental Policy (2013)
Bhutan	National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA, 2006)
India	National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC, 2008)
Maldives	National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA, 2006); Strategic National Action Plan (SNAP, 2011)
Nepal	National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA, 2010); National Climate Change Policy (2011)
Pakistan	National Climate Change Policy (2013)
Sri Lanka	National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (2010); National Climate Change Policy (2011)

BANGLADESH

The coast of Bangladesh is highly susceptible to natural disasters like cyclones, storm surges, and floods, a vulnerability shared by other coastal nations in the South Asian region. The combination of natural and human-made hazards, such as erosion, high arsenic content in groundwater, water logging, earthquakes, water and soil salinity, and various forms of pollution, has adversely affected lives and livelihoods in the coastal zones across the region, slowing down the pace of social and economic development. Climate change impacts are already adding significant stress to our physical and environmental resources, our human ability, and economic activities.

IPCC in its AR4 described with high confidence climatic anomalies and their impacts on Bangladesh. Climate risks for Bangladesh are as follows: **Environmental Impacts** - Changes in rainfall patterns, Increased frequency and severity of, Floods, Droughts, Storms, Heat waves, Changes in growing seasons and regions, Changes in water quality and quantity Sea level rise, Glacial melt.

Socio-economic Resources & Sectors affected - Water resources, Agriculture and forestry, Food security, Human health, Infrastructure (e.g. transport), Settlements: displacement of, inhabitants and loss of livelihood, Coastal management, Industry and energy, Disaster response & recovery plans.

FINDINGS

Across South Asia, the reliance on agriculturally based economies and traditional methods significantly increases the region's vulnerability to climate change. Adopting green development models and acquiring

the advanced technology needed to cope with these issues is a massive challenge for these nations to tackle individually.

"Climate-induced shocks to food crop productivity do not remain contained within the agricultural sector; they ripple outward, leading to increased food prices and systemic trade deficits that threaten regional food security (Bandara & Cai, 2014)."

Furthermore, there is a marked disparity in adaptive capacity within the region. While several South Asian nations are low-lying or geographically vulnerable, they differ in their financial, scientific, and technological capacity to implement major infrastructure solutions. Bangladesh, for instance, faces significant constraints in financial resources to support required scientific research and large-scale adaptation projects. Such limitations are a common thread across the region, highlighting that climate change response policies—both adaptation and mitigation—are most effective when they are fully integrated within an overall sustainable development strategy.

The elements and prerequisites of integration in South Asia include strengthening government coordination within and among countries and a regional framework to accelerate actions related to climate change.

REGIONAL COOPERATION

All South Asian countries have adopted adaptation measures to reduce the impact of climate change, but there is a serious shortage of strategies at the national level. Through the **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)**, countries have committed to a shared set of priorities in addressing climate change including ambitious targets for clean energy and low-carbon technology development, as well as commitments to improve resilience of communities and economies. Aside from this, SAARC also aims to promote better dialogue, higher cooperation, and identification of mutually beneficial investment options; and to support

Despite the clear benefits, intra-regional trade and investment in South Asia remain historically low compared to other regions, highlighting a significant governance gap that prevents the development of effective production-sharing networks (Athukorala, 2013).

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) remains insufficient to bridge the region's climate-finance gap, often due to fragmented policy environments and regional volatility that deter large-scale capital inflows (Gould & Tan, 2013).

Strengthening the institutional capacity of member states is crucial, requiring a shift toward trust-based regional cooperation that moves beyond rhetorical commitments to enhance the tangible effectiveness of joint climate action.

Developing a regional framework for climate change through knowledge sharing, fostering structured and regular dialogue at all levels, and ensuring synergies and coordination of current and future actions would not only enhance regional problem solving but also increase the effectiveness of national and subnational actions dealing with trans - boundary issues related to climate change.

SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change

The Fourteenth SAARC Summit (New Delhi, 3-4 April 2007) expressed "deep concern" over global climate change. As a follow up action, the New Delhi Declaration called for pursuing a climate resilient development in South Asia.

Objectives of the SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change

The action plan would seek to achieve the following objectives:

- To identify and create opportunities for activities achievable through regional cooperation and south-south support in terms of technology and knowledge transfer.
- To provide impetus for a regional level action plan on climate change through national level activities.
- To support the global negotiation process of the UNFCCC such as the Bali Action Plan, through a common understanding or elaboration of the various negotiating issues to effectively reflect the concerns of SAARC Member States.

Thematic area: Adaptation to Climate Change

- Adaptation to climate change impacts and risks in vulnerable communities, locations and ecosystems,
- Adaptation in sectors (e.g. water, agriculture, fisheries, health and biodiversity)
- Adaptation to extreme climate events (e.g. flood, cyclone, glacial lake outburst, droughts and heat and cold waves)
- Adaptation to climate change impact (e.g. sea level rise, salinity intrusion, glacial melt and coastal and soil erosion,)
- Adaptation suited to urban settlements, coastal structures and mountain terrain.

Thematic area two: Policies and Actions for Climate Change Mitigation

- Sharing of best practices on nationally appropriate mitigation actions (e.g. energy, waste management and transport)
 - Capacity building for developing CDM projects including DNA and stakeholders.
 - Sharing of best practices on sustainable forest management based on experiences.
- ### **Thematic Area Three: Policies and Actions for Technology Transfer**
- Technology needs assessment including R&D and capacity development
 - Assessing barriers to technology development for adaptation and mitigation options.
- ### **Thematic Area: Finance and Investment**
- Methods for assessing financing needs to deal with climate change in the short, medium and long term,
 - Climate change projects should be given priority and be financed as per SAARC norms.

- Determine the quantum of additional funding required to implement the action
- Plans as identified under various thematic areas.

Thematic Area Five: Education and Awareness – New Delhi Work Program • Development of a tool kit on mass awareness raising on climate change

- Incorporating climate change awareness in educational curricula
 - Involvement of the mass media on climate change issues with adequate information
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Regional cooperation could effectively address some climate change mitigation challenges, for example, by promoting clean energy and technology transfer, and doing regional benchmarking of clean energy practices and performance.

• Capacity Development

To undertake climate actions successfully, South Asian countries will need a highly selective and transformation-driven capacity building program

• Research and Knowledge Sharing

South Asia has been strengthening its efforts in clean energy technologies and effectively promoting the overall development of the energy sector, but needs to do more.

• Funding and Technology Transfer

Climate financing and technology transfer are fundamental to the realization of adaptation and mitigation efforts in South Asia.

Implementation Responsibility

While primary responsibility for implementing the Action Plan on Climate Change rests with the national governments. With regard to regional cooperation, a mechanism should be agreed upon to effectively use the existing institutional arrangements of SAARC by giving clear directions and guidance. As for national level implementation, each government has to undertake its regulatory measures, technological interventions, stakeholder participation and institutional arrangements.

However, a significant implementation gap remains, as the regional action plan endorsed in 2011 has not yielded the anticipated outcomes. In many instances, national-level initiatives predated regional frameworks, highlighting a disconnect in policy synchronization. Bangladesh serves as a salient example: the nation established "Climate Change Cells" within relevant state bodies as early as 2004, effectively embedding climate considerations into development initiatives. This was followed by the National Adaptation Programs of Action (2005, 2009) and the 2008 Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, which prioritized

disaster management, low-carbon development, and institutional strengthening. Furthermore, the government's establishment of a Multi-Donor Trust Fund—over which it maintains oversight—demonstrates a proactive, albeit unilateral, approach to financing these critical transitions.

Learning from Regional Cooperation Models: The Southeast Asian Experience

Regional cooperation remains a vital strategy for addressing climate change, as demonstrated by frameworks in other geographically similar regions. The Southeast Asia Network of Climate Change Offices, for instance, provides a valuable model for South Asia by supporting government commitments through technical capacity building, knowledge exchange, and an informal, open-network approach. Similarly, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has piloted a Climate Technology Network and Finance Center in the Asia-Pacific region to accelerate the adoption of environmentally sound technologies. By responding to the climate challenges of developing member countries, the ADB emphasizes the importance of climate and disaster risk screening. For South Asia, the lessons from these partnerships are clear: effective climate action requires integrating climate resilience into national development strategies, as guided by key priorities such as:

- Expanding the use of clean and renewable energy;
- Encouraging sustainable transport and urban development;
- Promoting climate-resilient development in agriculture and water-dependent sectors;
- Strengthening regional policies, governance, and institutional capacities; and
- Managing land use and forests for carbon sequestration.

Reason for not achieving the climate change reduction level

- In this regard, inadequate infrastructure, staggering illiteracy, extreme poverty, and lack of hygiene in this region could make things worse.
 - Additionally, lack of trust among the nations and increasing menace of fanatic fundamentalism would make any global action to repair the situation in South Asia difficult and at times, counterproductive.
 - The growing aspiration of more than one billion youth of South Asia with no commensurate employment opportunity could become a problem not only for this region alone but for the entire world. While identifying success, gaps, and shortcomings in existing policies and regional laws relating to climate change is required.
- Politics of all these countries having in mind historical conflict among all.

Requirements for Regional Integration

Achieving climate resilience in South Asia necessitates a shift from viewing climate change primarily as an existential threat to recognizing it as a catalyst for regional economic integration. Fostering mutual trust & rational education, cooperation, and integration of markets and economies could bring about a harmonious

society and environment. Climate change need not always be a threat. It can be viewed as an opportunity. The concept of transforming climate change threats to opportunities, including job creation, has recently started emerging in South Asia.

The task is difficult, daunting and likely to be time-consuming. But if the region succeeds in overcoming its internal divisions to do so, it will almost certainly become a more thriving area, a zone of peace rather than violent conflict, and more influential on the global stage. A more united and integrated South Asia will in turn affect changes in the world's geopolitical landscape in ways that are still unknown but certainly positive for the south Asian people and the world community (Pattanaik, 2011).

Considering the diversity of the sectors, and an uneven distribution burden of the climate change impacts across sectors and the population as well as fiscal constraints, it will be a tremendous challenge for South Asia to meet the needed investment and enable a shift to low-carbon, climate-resilient development of their economies without considerable international assistance, private investment and domestic resource mobilization, and technology transfers through south-south and north-south cooperation.

Furthermore, South Asian countries 'as a bloc' can make better negotiations with the international communities & global climate forum and enable the design of collaborative joint coping mechanisms. For that there is need for more regional understandings, collaborations and cooperation for minimizing the negative effects of climate change on South Asian countries.

CONCLUSION

While climate change is a global issue, its impact in South Asia is intensely localized. This paper has argued that localized solutions have become increasingly necessary to address political, economic, and cultural factors in a region like South Asia. In this regard, there is a need for a deeper, multi-level understanding of the relationship between climate change and governance—defined here not merely by state action, but by the collaborative interaction between government, markets, and civil society. Given South Asia's vulnerability to climate impacts, such responsive and inclusive governance is crucial.

Mitigating climate risks in South Asia requires a proactive approach to regional knowledge sharing and the harmonization of best practices. Beyond policy alignment, it is essential to strengthen institutional capacity—particularly for Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) projects—and empower designated national authorities. Expert consensus underscores that "assessing barriers to technology development for adaptation and mitigation" is a prerequisite for progress (SAARC, 2008b, p. 2). To be effective, this strategy must translate into rigorous national frameworks that prioritize technological intervention, sustained institutional investment, and meaningful, multi-stakeholder participation.

Climate resilience must be mainstreamed into national and sub-national development plans. This requires translating complex scientific data into actionable insights tailored to the specific needs and timelines of policymakers. Supporting in-country research is essential for generating context-specific evidence that can be integrated into ongoing frameworks. Crucially, as environmental threats transcend national boundaries, unilateral action remains insufficient; fostering regional cooperation is the only viable pathway to effective, sustainable adaptation. By prioritizing this collaborative framework, South Asia can transcend its historic divisions, transforming the existential threat of climate change into the cornerstone of a more resilient, integrated, and prosperous regional future.

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