

SAARC Food Bank: Should not be a mere distance reality

The origin

The agreement on SAARC food bank has been signed on 4th April 2007 during 14th summit held in Delhi, by the foreign ministers of the countries, notably Iftakhar Ahmed Chowdhury of Bangladesh, Pranab Mukherjee of India, Sahana Prodhan of Nepal, Khurshid Kasuri of Pakistan, Rangin D Spanta of Afghanistan, Ugyen Tshering of Bhutan, Ahmed Shaheed of Maldives and Rohita Bogollagama of Srilanka. According to the SAARC charter, any agreement will only come in force upon being ratified by all member countries. So far except Afghanistan all other countries have ratified the agreement. Meanwhile in a supplementary declaration from 15th SAARC summit titled "Colombo statement on food security" has stated that "We direct that the SAARC Food Bank be urgently operationalized". The first board of the Food Bank has met in Colombo Sri Lanka during 15 and 16th October 2008. All the nodal points from the countries will participate in the meeting, meantime each country has selected their nodal points, and usually it is from food ministry. SAARC secretariat supposed to assist and coordinate the work of the board as it has stated in the agreement.



Major features

There are 13 pages of the main agreement, which contains 15 articles, two schedules and one annex basically on share of grains and its quality. Major feature of the Food Bank are as follows;

- (i) **Basic premise of realization:** In preamble the agreement has reaffirmed commitment to the charter, recognized the importance to collective self reliance with respect to food security as a means to combating the adverse effect of natural and man made calamities.
- (ii) **Objectives:** In the objectives it has stated that the SAARC Food Bank to act as a regional food security reserve for the SAARC member countries during normal time food shortages and emergencies. And in the objectives it has also mentioned to solve regional food shortage through collective action.
- (iii) **Reserve Share:** The reserve will be marinated with wheat or rice or combination of both. Reserve shall remain the property of member country in addition to any national reserve. In schedule 1, reserve share are (all in metric tons) for Bangladesh 40,000, Bhutan 180, India 1, 53, 200, Maldives 200, Nepal 4,000, Pakistan 40,000, and for Sri Lanka it is 4,000. All together it is the reserve of 2, 41,580 metric tons.
- (iv) **Quality:** Quality specifications of the reserve have been mentioned in the schedule II, member country will maintain those while board will monitor and they also has the right to amend that quality standard.
- (v) **Definition of emergency and food shortage:** There are definition of food emergency and food shortage in article v of the agreement. Food shortage shall mean a state or condition in which a member country, having suffered a severe and unexpected natural or man made calamity, is unable to cope with such a state of condition by using its national reserve. A food shortage shall mean a state or condition in which a member country has suffered a production short fall and / or storage shortfall, and finds it difficult to cope with such a state or condition by using its natural reserve, provided that the production of food grains in the current year is lower than the average of the production of the previous three years by 8 percent.
- (vi) **Reserve release:** Nodal point of the country shall notify through designated nodal point for release if above situation arises; other member country will arrange immediate and speedy release. Member country will replace the reserve within maximum time of one calendar year. Member country can also withdraw the reserve if there are situation of emergencies with intimation to member countries in giving at least one month advance notice, and which shall have to be replacing by not later by two years.
- (vii) **Price fixation:** Price, terms and conditions of payment is a subject of direct negotiations between member countries concern based on the guidelines to be approved in the board, which can be reviewed periodically. It is written

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that “the humanitarian aspects would be given due importance while determining prices.” Three principles have set in this regard, these are (a) price quoted should be lower than the general prices, (b) price should be representative of market both domestic and international, and (c) for other relevant cost like storage, internal freights, interests, overhead charge, margin and losses as per as possible with national treatment.

(viii) Board: Board will be comprising of nodal point from each country, will meet at least once in a year, rules of procedures will be like as other SAARC meetings, basis of decision is unanimity. Chairperson will rotate, one for one year i.e., up to next annual meeting.

(ix) Private sector involvement: Member country will prepare guideline for involvement of private sector importer; they can apply through the country nodal points for transactions.

(x) Periodic review: Board will also undertake periodic review and assessment of the food situation and prospects in the region, including factor, such as production, consumption, trade, prices, quality and stocks of food grains.

(xi) Headquarter: Establishment of permanent headquarters of the Food Bank may be considered by the council of ministers, which has also authority to amend the agreement.

Our concern

Within SAAPE and in its food sovereignty group we keenly observe the process, there are very little space for civil society participation in the SAARC process, even there are very little recognition of the involvement of civil society in SAARC although 15th SAARC summit declaration declared to grow through a process of people centered. Government or country owned process most of the time end with mere bureaucrats lead process, SAARC leaders must uphold the principles of democratic ownership process, where different groups of people, especially poor and marginalized portion of population and civil society organization will be able to participate. In view of this premise, we have following concern in this regard.

(i) Declare a long term plan in view of a principle that “SAARC Food Bank must meet the need of all hungry people of South Asia.” We appreciate the establishment of SAARC Food Bank; we also appreciate the commitment from SAARC leaders while they have announced separate declaration and declare the immediate operationalization of SAARC Food Bank. In view of the objectives and in view of a principles that SAARC food bank should meet the demand of all hungry people of SAARC region, we also urge SAARC leaders for a long term plan in this region.

(ii) Enhance reserve share, bigger contribution from SAARC middle income countries. The share of reserve that has outlined in the base agreement, seems mere a peanut in view of the demand, especially which is very little to the annual food deficit of SAARC LDCs (least developed country). We urge that the first board meeting of SAARC food bank will propose an enhancement in this regard, especially a big chunk of share from the SAARC middle income countries, and this should be endorsed in next 16th SAARC summit, would be held in Maldives.

(iii) Price should be fix in half to the international price taking the principles of humanitarian collectivism. Now the price fixation policy is somehow vague, it seems that some how the price fixation will be commensurate to both domestic and international price. We feel there should be humanitarian ground in price fixing, so there should be clear cut policy in this regard, at least the first board meeting should propose it to be half, compare to the international price.

(iv) Promote the concept of Global Food Bank and International Court of Justice on Food Rights. We support the 15th SAARC summit declaration that “SAARC region should forge greater cooperation with the international community to ensure food availability and nutrition security in South Asia.” Some of the SAARC state leader has already proposed to have such a Global Food Bank. We acknowledge that this is a timely proposal to global bodies. We urge SAARC leaders to pursue this global food bank within the frame of UN and also propose an international court of justice on food right, which will study manipulation and monopoly over food market and bring the companies in justice who does manipulation for price hike at the cost of human suffering. This is a moral obligation of the international and UN bodies as in several international declaration and covenants food has pronounced as basic human rights.

(v) SAARC agriculture perspective 2020, the six project principles must within the frame of food sovereignty, declares a methodological roadmap for its preparation. We also fully support the statement from 15th summit that “...to evolve and implement a people centered short and medium term regional strategy ...”. 15th summit directed the ministers to prepare an early drawing of the SAARC Agriculture Perspective 2020. We appreciate six guidelines of projects in this regard which has stated in the declaration. These are (i) Increase food production, (ii) Investment in agriculture and agro based production, (iii) Agriculture research and prevention of soil health degradation, (iv) development and sharing of agricultural technologies, (v) Sharing of best practices in procurement and distribution and (vi) Management of the climatic and disease related risks and agriculture.

We apprehend that if those principles are not looked within the frame work of “Food Sovereignty” which also tailor the food security within the frame of production without undermining the regeneration of nature (where human should also be considered as a part) and farmers right (rights over control on means of production including seeds, water and land), all those good intensions might fall with blanket commercialization / industrialization of agriculture, which will jeopardize the life and livelihood of the small and landless farmers who constitute around 40 to 50 % population in South Asia. Prior to the preparation of the document we urge the SAARC leaders to declare a participatory methodological road map toward the preparation of the document.

In conclusion we urge our civil society to engage with our government with critical views originated from the dialogue with poor and marginalized section of people, we also urged our civil society members to assist our government where it is possible. In fact we do like to see our state is strong, exercises its sovereignty over decision free from any influences, especially we want to raise our voices so that our state and policy leader will have strong footing over our sovereign premise..

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