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Decoding India's Leadership in South Asia for Accelerating Sustainable Development and Climate Solutions

Perspectives from GEF-SGP

This article composed by **Dr Susmita Mitra** and **Prof. Nitya Nanda** explores India's possible role in advancing SSC in South Asia, focusing on the GEF-SGP as a model for promoting community-driven environmental action and fostering regional collaboration. The authors opine—the SGP offers a viable platform for successful uptake and replication and improvement of the impact and durability of exchanges bringing communities and government officials together to discuss common challenges and to share solutions that have worked, creating networks and establishing a community of practitioners; and using peer-to-peer exchanges to enable participants to learn about a previously applied solution and avoid repeating mistakes.

South-South Cooperation (SSC) has emerged as a vital mechanism for fostering sustainable development among countries in the Global South. By emphasizing mutual benefits, resource sharing, and knowledge exchange, SSC addresses the distinct challenges faced by developing nations. In their recent article *Environment and Sustainable Development in South Asia* in the Routledge Handbook of South Asia, Nanda and Mitra (2024) argue that SSC is indispensable in this region, where countries confront intertwined issues of climate vulnerability, environmental degradation, and poverty. As the largest country in the region, India holds the potential to play a pivotal role as a regional leader. In the current geopolitical scenario, effective regional cooperation in South Asia seems difficult. But in a fast-changing world, it is quite possible that situation will improve soon.

South Asia's progress in SSC in this area is hindered by two significant

challenges: limited financial resources and high exposure to climate risks, which exacerbate poverty and vulnerability. Without external financial support to mitigate climate risks while simultaneously creating co-benefits for development, the pace of cooperation will likely remain constrained. One effective platform addressing these challenges is the Global Environment Facility-Small Grants Programme (GEF-SGP) coordinated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), designed to tackle both climate and development issues.

Established in 1992, coinciding with the Rio Earth Summit, the GEF-SGP embodies the principle of sustainable development by 'thinking globally, acting locally'. By providing financial and technical support, the Programme enables community-driven projects that conserve and restore the environment while improving livelihoods. It demonstrates how grassroots initiatives

can balance human needs with environmental priorities.

This article explores India's possible role in advancing SSC in South Asia, focusing on the GEF-SGP as a model for promoting community-driven environmental action and fostering regional collaboration.

India's Leadership in South-South Cooperation in South Asia

India's leadership in SSC stems from its historical commitment to equitable development and climate justice. Independent India viewed its membership at the UN as an important guarantee for maintaining international peace and security. As a founding member of the Non-aligned Movement and a Global South advocate, India has championed solidarity among



emergence as a force to be reckoned with on the global stage.

The GEF-SGP in South Asia: Possibilities of India’s leadership

In South Asia, GEF-SGP has enabled a number of grassroots organizations to implement innovative solutions for biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, sustainable land management, along with improving livelihoods of vulnerable communities since 1994.

Table 1 reveals that Pakistan and Sri Lanka has been the first countries to receive GEF-SGP assistance. The Programme did not start in Afghanistan and discontinued in Pakistan in 2022 due to various reasons. As the first implementing country, Sri Lanka has the maximum numbers of projects, followed by India. Table 1 shows that apart from providing large amount of grant, GEF-SGP has been able to generate significant amount of co-financing in cash and kind. If we compare the co-financing generated in India and Sri Lanka, there are significant differences. India being a large country with diverse challenges has not only managed the programmes well but also been successful in generating more than double co-financing than the actual GEF financing. India’s knowledge

developing nations. In its 2017 Voluntary National Review at the UN, India emphasized integrating SDGs into national policies while fostering regional and global partnerships, reinforcing its role as a leader in sustainable development and international cooperation.

Spatially, India holds a unique advantage in South Asia, sharing borders with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, while facing geographical challenges with Afghanistan. Pakistan remains a distinct case. Unlike India, other South Asian nations face significant difficulties in deepening regional integration as they do not share

borders, with the possible exceptions of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

India has actively promoted regional cooperation in South Asia through initiatives focused on capacity building, technology transfer, and knowledge exchange. Its support to neighbouring countries during the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters has further strengthened regional ties and garnered global recognition. India’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy prioritizes strong ties with neighbours through enhanced cooperation and development. India’s leadership of the G20, culminating in the grand Summit in New Delhi in 2023, was a declaration of the country’s

Table 1: GEF-FGP in South Asia

Country	Start Year	Projects			GEF Grant Amount (US\$)	Co-financing in cash (US\$)	Co-financing in kind (US\$)
		GEF	Non-GEF	Total			
Afghanistan	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bangladesh	2021	6	-	6	224,108	302,543	-
Bhutan	1999	207	18	225	5,973,880	1,864,701	3,373,494
India	1996	412	61	473	11,894,224	14,770,977	9,030,033
Maldives	2010	104	25	129	2,993,546	1,588,912	1,076,648
Nepal	1998	275	7	282	9,692,821	8,299,048	3,308,744
Pakistan	1994-2022 [#]	302	10	312	9,373,503	9,194,163	4,790,708
Sri Lanka	1994	448	42	490	10,824,320	2,614,702	3,819,428

Source: Compiled from <https://sgp.undp.org/>

Note: [#]GEF-SGP discontinued since 2022



sharing regarding successful co-financing generation will be extremely useful for other South Asian countries for long-term sustainability of these programmes. Thus, India can play a role by documenting what works (*vis-à-vis* what doesn't and why) in co-financing, and how and in which context.

Some countries in South Asia face challenges quite similar to some of the states in India due to spatial reasons. Therefore, there are high possibilities of learning from similar interventions in order to avoid 'what doesn't work' and follow 'what works'. This is particularly true for the newcomers like Bangladesh. On the other hand, India can also learn from particular context-specific challenges and also successful case studies overcoming those challenges, in order to replicate that in similar contexts and help those countries to overcome the continuing challenges

with economies of scale. The Himalayas play a crucial role in South Asia's geopolitics by influencing territorial disputes and strategic alliances, while also being a vital biodiversity hotspot that supports unique ecosystems and regulates climate patterns for the region. The Eastern Himalayas, spanning India, Bhutan, and Nepal, are facing threats from deforestation, climate change, and unsustainable practices. Through the GEF-SGP, India has implemented a project—Securing Livelihoods, Conservation, Sustainable Use, and Restoration of High Range Himalayan Ecosystems (SECURE-Himalayas)—across different regions in Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh. It supported community-led initiatives to protect endangered species like snow leopards and medicinal plants. The challenges being similar to different regions in

Nepal and Bhutan, fostering cross-border collaboration for ecosystem restoration can be a possibility.

Similarly, the Sundarbans region, shared by India and Bangladesh, serve as a critical geopolitical zone for border management between India and Bangladesh, while also being a key biodiversity hub, home to diverse species such as the Bengal Tiger, and playing a significant role in coastal protection and climate regulation. Presently it faces challenges from rising sea levels, frequent cyclones, and energy poverty. Through the GEF-SGP, India has implemented a project in West Bengal—Conservation of Agro-biodiversity by Providing Alternate Livelihood Options to the Forest Dependent Community in Islands of Sundarbans. The project covered vulnerable and backward villages on the fringe of forest, with no alternate livelihoods and dependency



upon mangroves and non-timber forest product (NTFP) and emphasizes on natural farming activities and fuelwood efficient cookstoves for environment protection while reducing carbon emissions. By facilitating knowledge exchange and technical support, India can enable similar interventions in the Sundarbans of Bangladesh.

Tamil Nadu state in India and Sri Lanka face similar coastal challenges like erosion, pollution, sea-level rise, biodiversity loss, overfishing, and extreme weather. The SGP-India project in Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu—Blue is the New Pink: Women Driving Sustainable Seaweed Cultivation and Climate Solutions—addresses environmental degradation, human-marine ecosystem disconnects, women's limited participation by promoting seaweed aquaculture, seagrass restoration (for carbon sequestration and enhanced fishery yields), vocational training, business development among other community-led sustainability initiatives. Knowledge and technology exchange will be useful for addressing similar challenges in Tamil Nadu.

Challenges to Overcome and Strengthening the Possibilities

South Asia, characterized by a blend of cooperation and contention, presents both opportunities and challenges that require innovative and imaginative strategies. Security remains a pressing concern in South Asia, with issues ranging from terrorism to maritime disputes. Creative solutions are required to deal with long-standing issues. A shift from South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (including members from all South Asian countries to Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), consisting five South Asian Countries (India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka) and two Southeast Asian countries (Myanmar and Thailand) indicate the reasons for the shift.

South Asia is highly vulnerable to climate change, particularly in agriculture, which sustains livelihoods and food security of huge masses in the region. Shared agro-climatic conditions,

rivers, and oceanic waters underscore the need for regional cooperation in climate adaptation, water management, and marine pollution. India's scalable, affordable technologies can drive clean energy solutions and address regional challenges.

India's engagement with the GEF-SGP has generated a wealth of experience and best practices that are relevant to other South Asian countries. Indian projects have demonstrated how traditional practices can complement modern technologies for sustainable development. The SGP offers a wonderful platform for successful uptake and replication and for improvement of the impact and durability of exchanges bringing communities and government officials together to discuss common challenges and to share solutions that have worked, creating networks and establishing a community of practitioners; and using peer-to-peer exchanges to enable participants to learn about a previously applied solution and avoid repeating mistakes. ■

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