

World Environment Day 2016 and South Asia

The world environment Day 2016 is being commemorated on the 5th of June 2016 and the theme for this year is “*Seven Billion Dreams. One Planet. Consume with Care*”. The increasing population coupled with increased demand for goods and services are increasing pressure on the available marine and terrestrial natural resources. As the current pattern of consumption and production in South Asia is not sustainable, therefore it give way to the pollution of land, water and air resources thereby degrading the overall environment in the region.

Global Environmental Initiatives like the Stockholm Declaration (1972), the World Conservation Strategy (1980), the World Charter for Nature (1982), Brundtland Report (1987), the Rio Declaration (1992), the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) (2002) and the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (2012) have played leading role in highlighting the environment and sustainable development agenda. These developments have not only accelerated the pace of the development of international environmental institutions at various levels but also led to the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), secretariat of various Multilateral Environment Agreements and other global intergovernmental and non-governmental agencies working for environment. The environmental agenda at global, regional and national level has also been strengthened by adopting and ratifying various legally binding instruments such as environment treaties, conventions and protocol and other non-legal instruments such as Stockholm Principles, Rio Principle, Agenda-21, WSSD plan of implementation and the “Future We Want” adopted at UNCSD in 2012.

The recent history of global environmental initiatives could be traced back to the early seventies, when the first ever conference on “Human Environment” was held in Stockholm in 1972. The focus was on general environmental issues that human was facing. The earth summit also called the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992 was more focused in terms of identifying the specific issues besides coining the word sustainable development. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002 gave a road map of sustainable development. The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) also called Rio+20 was held at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 2012. UNCSD was more specific in terms of the thematic focus as it addressed only two areas; A green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication; and The institutional framework for sustainable development. Thus the recent trends in the global environmental initiatives show a temporal shift from environment to the sustainable development that we are currently pursuing.

The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are in fact the outcome of the global negotiations and progressions stemming from the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. SDGs adopted by the community of nations in Sept 2015 are universal in their scope and application but nowhere so many of them are relevant to South Asia. The region uniquely combines opportunities offered by its diverse natural endowment with the enormity of challenges stemming from burgeoning population, low social indicators and limited capacity. A lot of investments are being made by the countries themselves as well as the international community in building the essential capacities but a lot more is needed. In particular, effective capacity for learning and sharing across the South Asian countries represents a major opportunity and need to further strengthen the SDGs implementation.

Over the past decades sustainable development has been capturing ever greater political attention globally. Events such as The Rio Summit (1992), World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002), United Nations Millennium Declaration (2000), The Future We Want - Rio+20, United Nations Summit on Sustainable Development Goals (2015)/2030 agenda, Paris Climate Agreement (2016) have all contributed to the momentum for sustainable development globally. These developments, paralleled by the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) Post-2015 Development Agenda have also lent impetus for a greater focus on sustainable development in South Asia. The Paris Climate Agreement and the advent of SDGs have been particularly influential.

Notwithstanding the countries' actions and resolve, there is no denying the fact that current public sector capacities are outpaced by the enormity of the challenges. A lot more is needed to strengthen the institutions as well as to build the capacity of professionals resourcing them. The civil society is growing, albeit unevenly, across the countries and would also benefit from greater support and capacity. The private sector has been more or less oblivious towards environment. They avoid or evade Corporate Social/Environmental Responsibility (CSR) in view of the inadequate regulations and their enforcement and lacking consumer pressure. The lack of awareness about the gravity of sustainable development challenges among the common people, unable to take long term view of the future in the face of their immediate needs for food and shelter, is a fundamental issue. Equally important, and at the core of the capacity challenge, is the lack of access to reliable information that is consistently gathered and analyzed for objective planning, performance tracking, and course correction. This likely represents the biggest need for a meaningful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in South Asia.

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