

37th SAARC Council of Ministers Meeting: Bangladesh Takes the Lead on Blue Economy

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Date: 7 April 2016

The 37th Session of the SAARC Council of Ministers (COM) Meeting was held at Pokhara in Nepal on 17 March 2016. It carries great significance as this is the highest SAARC level meeting to take place before the 19th SAARC Summit is held in Pakistan on 9-10 November 2016. The members spoke on – regional trade and economic integration; traditional and non-traditional security challenges; terrorism; education and SAARC knowledge network; culture; climate change, natural disasters and disaster management; SAARC satellite; energy; connectivity; motor vehicles agreement; agriculture; poverty alleviation; tourism; science and technology and many other issues of concern to the region.¹ But with regard to Blue Economy, Bangladesh took the lead. It circulated a concept note on Blue Economy and said that once it receives the views of member states, it will host an expert-level meeting in order to shape the Blue Economy discourse within the SAARC region.²

The concept of Blue Economy was first spelt out in 2010.³ Later since 2012, it has been discussed in the United Nations ⁴ and other forums. ⁵ Most of the SAARC countries have discussed Blue Economy as part of their national economic agendas and in the international forums. But, at the regional level in the SAARC platform it is yet to gain the urgency and importance which it deserves though the 18th SAARC Summit Declaration makes a mention about it.

The paper tries to understand this duality. It observes that the limited success of SAARC; the pre-occupation with other SAARC issues; inherent trust deficit in the region; not all member countries having access to sea; the persistence of maritime

disputes among some of the members – has prevented SAARC from actively discussing it to develop a regional approach. The paper argues that these obstacles are surmountable. Since Blue Economy is already part of the national discourse of some of the members, these can be transposed onto the regional SAARC platform and all can benefit from the combined knowledge pool; secondly, since it is Bangladesh and not India which is taking the lead, the veil of suspicion generally associated with India will not be there; third, the landlocked SAARC countries should be convinced that the benefits of Blue Economy will percolate to them too; and lastly, it is seen that at the core of the concept of Blue Economy is ‘sustainable development’ which is inclusive, people centric and has been on the SAARC agenda since a long time. This now needs to be implanted on the template of Blue Economy.

In the above context the paper briefly looks at the concept of Blue Economy; the 37th Session of SAARC Council of Ministers; and mechanisms to make Blue Economy part of the SAARC Agenda.

Blue Economy: The Concept

The Prime Minister of Nepal K P Oli, inaugurating the 37th Session of SAARC Council of Ministers said that, the two ‘enemies’ of South Asia are poverty and backwardness.⁶ Blue economy addresses this very challenge of poverty alleviation through sustainable use of resources of the ocean, including humankind’s common heritage of the high seas. It rests on the belief that oceans and its resources can lead to growth; and in this context coastal regions of countries and island nations should get maximum benefit of their marine resources.

At the core of Blue Economy is that sustainable development and utilisation of the vast ocean resources should be such that there is realisation of greater revenue in a manner which contributes to eradicating poverty, leads to sustained economic growth, enhances social inclusion, improves human welfare, creates opportunities for employment and decent work for all while maintaining healthy functioning of the Oceans eco system.⁷

The Abu Dhabi Declaration of January 2014 on Blue Economy - highlighted the contribution of Fisheries in providing food security and sustainable livelihoods; tourism as a source of decent employment and contribution to poverty alleviation; Ocean as a source of renewable energy from wind, wave, tidal, thermal and biomass sources; Ocean as a source of hydrocarbon and mineral resources and; Ocean as the primary medium of global trade through shipping and port facilities.⁸ Thus Blue Economy brings with it opportunities in the Shipping and Port Facilities; Fisheries; Tourism; Aquaculture; Energy; Biotechnology; and submarine mining.

This paper argues that once the above benefits are tapped by coastal and island member countries of SAARC, the landlocked countries too would benefit from Blue Economy. They too would get access to better port and shipping facilities; the fish resources accessed would avail to them too contributing to their food security ; and new sources of hydrocarbons would contribute to their energy security too. Thus, it would be a win-win situation for all the member countries.

Blue Economy & 37th SAARC COM Meeting

The 37th Session of SAARC COM Meeting was preceded by the 52nd session of the Programming Committee of SAARC at the level of Director General that took place from 14-15 March 2016; and the 42nd Standing Committee of SAARC held at the level of Foreign Secretaries that took place on 16 March 2016. All these meetings held at Pokhara in Nepal took stock of the working of SAARC with regard to decisions arrived at the 18th SAARC Summit and during other SAARC meetings.⁹ Thus, it was termed as SAARC Inter-Summit Session, as the next important SAARC meeting would be in November 2016 when the 19th SAARC Summit would be held in Pakistan.¹⁰

The 18th SAARC Summit Declaration, spelling out the regions view on Blue Economy stated, “They (the member countries) recognized the manifold contributions of ocean-based Blue Economy in the SAARC Region and the need for collaboration and partnership in this area.”¹¹ However, since then no major follow up at the regional level has been reported, though individually member countries have discussed and debated it. In the meetings held in Pokhara in March 2016,

presentations made by various officials spoke of climate change and oceans but did not mention Blue Economy in a prominent manner, with the exception of Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh Foreign Minister, Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali said,

*“The maritime resources hold huge potential for our development. There is much to benefit through collaborative exploration of the living and non-living marine resources in the Indian Ocean. The ocean resources based Blue Economy can play a critical role for poverty alleviation and sustainable development of the SAARC region. We should collaborate on development of capacities, partnerships and research in utilizing our marine resources. Our common undertakings must secure protection, development and exploration of seas and oceans in a sustainable manner. I am glad that Bangladesh has circulated a concept note on ‘Blue Economy’. Once we receive the views of the Member States, we would like to host an expert-level meeting in order to shape the Blue Economy discourse within the SAARC region”.*¹²

Even at the 18th SAARC Summit, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had echoed similar thoughts and urged that the new Global Development Agenda requires the member countries to focus on the fourth frontier – The Indian Ocean.¹³

India’s External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj and India’s Foreign Secretary Jaishankar, in their respective presentations, brought out India’s contribution regarding connectivity with reference to rail and road building, power generation and transmission, waterway usage and shipping through regional, sub-regional, trilateral and bilateral arrangements; integration especially financial integration, the SAARC Annual Disaster Management Exercise (SADMEX), the SAARC Regional Supra-Reference Laboratory for TB and HIV, the Satellite for SAARC; the SAARC Knowledge Network; the SAARC Business travellers Card; need for collaboration on

security and other issues. However, there was no specific mention of Blue Economy.¹⁴

National Debates on Blue Economy

Interestingly, in the last two years discussion on Blue Economy has acquired a prominent place in debates in most SAARC member countries. Bangladesh has actively initiated debates following the resolution of its maritime boundary dispute with India in 2014 and Myanmar in 2012. It now has sovereign authority over 118,000 sq km area in the Bay of Bengal, and refers to it as its third neighbour.¹⁵ Bangladesh hosted a major conference in Dhaka in September 2014 and proposed a 'Bay of Bengal Partnership for Blue Economy' for the sustainable development of the sea-based resources.

India in the past year has spoken of Blue Economy more as part of its vision for the Indian Ocean commonly known by its acronym – SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). On 12 March 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi while speaking in Mauritius for the first time about SAGAR said that the littoral countries of the Indian Ocean need to promote greater collaboration in trade, tourism and investment; infrastructure development; marine science and technology; sustainable fisheries; protection of marine environment; and overall development of ocean or blue economy. He stressed the importance of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in pursuing the goal of blue economy.¹⁶

Most recently, in his public address on 7 February 2016 on the occasion of the International Fleet Review at Visakhapatnam, Prime Minister Modi stated that Blue Economy would be one of the instruments for transforming India and stated that a special programme of skilling India's youth in the coastal areas of the country will be implemented.¹⁷

Maldives¹⁸ and Sri Lanka¹⁹, the two island member countries of SAARC have persistently highlighted the challenges of climate change, the importance of

sustainable development and the role of Blue Economy in their development agendas in both national and international forums.

Conclusion

The paper has highlighted the manner in which Blue Economy addresses the SAARC regions twin challenge of poverty and backwardness. Since most of the member countries have made Blue Economy part of their national discourse, they need to now transpose it in a regional approach in SAARC. At one level Blue Economy is knowledge, skill and capital intensive. The regional approach would facilitate cutting costs since all the member countries need not duplicate efforts. The paper has also highlighted the manner in which Blue Economy can contribute to the economies of landlocked member nations. All the member countries therefore should constructively respond to Bangladesh's concept paper on Blue Economy. These efforts should then be part of the discussions which will take place in the 19th SAARC Summit in November 2016 in Pakistan.

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Notes and References

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⁵The Blue Economy Summit, 19-20 January 2014. Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates .The meeting sought to discuss how to utilise the Blue Economy as a tool to shift development in small island development states (SIDS) and coastal states towards a sustainable development trajectory building on the Rio+20 consensus. For more details refer <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&nr=603&type=13&menu=1634> (last accessed 21 March , 2016); <http://www.sids2014.org/index.php?page=view&type=13&nr=59&menu=1515> (last accessed 21 March 2016)

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