

South Asia's Extreme Weather Challenges: Need for Collective Efforts

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Summary

In recent times, the South Asian countries have been badly affected by extreme weather events, which are largely due to climate change. Such events are most certain to be frequent and intense in the future. While the South Asian countries have been making efforts to address this challenge, their individual actions will not be enough. Regional cooperation under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation should be revived and strengthened, at least to fight this serious problem of our time.

While India was gripped by the election frenzy in April and May 2024, many parts of the country were reeling under intense, record-breaking heatwaves. The extremity was observed on 29 May 2024 when New Delhi recorded a temperature [above 49°C](#). The other South Asian countries, particularly [Bangladesh and Pakistan](#), also experienced prolonged heatwaves during this pre-monsoon season. The extremely hot weather conditions resulted in [dozens of deaths](#) in South Asia in the past couple of months.

At the same time, South Asia, including Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, also experienced other extreme weather-related events. [Pakistan](#) had to deal with heavy rainfall and flash floods for several days in April 2024 that resulted in 124 deaths and damage to 6,000 houses, besides potentially exposing 1.5 million people to flooded areas. Heavy rainfall, floods and landslides battered different parts of [Sri Lanka](#) from mid-May to early June 2024, killing dozens of people and destroying several infrastructure.

In [Nepal](#), the 2023-2024 winter was the warmest and driest of all winters in the past decade. A consequence of the warmer and drier winter was massive forest fires in different parts of the country that had debilitating effects on people, wildlife and air quality. The other [South Asian countries](#) have also been experiencing more unprecedented weather-related devastations in recent years.

[Studies](#) have found that extreme heatwaves and other weather events are likely to become more frequent, widespread and intense in South Asia. [Climate change](#) is a major contributing factor to the extreme heatwaves and other extreme weather events in the region.

The South Asian countries are also experiencing other environmental problems that have been largely due to local factors such as mismanagement and haphazard use of natural resources and illicit activities. For example, Nepal's southern plains have been experiencing acute water crisis, which has been aggravated in recent years, due to deforestation and illegal mining of sand and stones in the upper *Chure* region. People suffering from the water crisis have [walked to Kathmandu](#) to press for *Chure's* conservation.

The extreme weather events such as heatwaves, floods and landslides, and deteriorating environmental conditions such as water stress, have a huge adverse impact on the people's livelihoods and the economy. The agriculture sector, in particular, is hit hard by these extreme conditions. Hence, the future outlook for the South Asian countries looks gloomy since the agriculture sector is a major part of their economies, and a large section of their population is employed in the agriculture sector. It also worsens food security.

An adverse impact on the agriculture sector will also have a negative impact on South Asian industries. Moreover, a fall in labour productivity due to rising heat stress will hugely impact the competitiveness of the different economic sectors. According to a [report](#) published by the International Labour Organization in 2019, South Asia will be the most affected region in terms of reduced labour productivity due to rising temperatures. It states that under the scenario of global temperature rising by 1.5°C by the end of the century, South Asia will see a loss of 5.3 per cent of working hours in 2030, which corresponds to around 43 million full-time jobs.

A substantially large proportion of the employed people in South Asia work in sectors such as agriculture and construction that require mostly outdoor work, thus directly exposing people to heat and other adverse weather conditions. Since the relatively poor are mostly engaged in outdoor activities in these sectors, they face the brunt of the adverse weather conditions. The potential increase in frequency and intensity of extreme weather conditions over the years is poised to exacerbate the socio-economic challenges faced by the poorer populations.

The disproportionate impact of extreme weather events on the less developed countries such as those in South Asia and the more advanced ones will further widen the inequality between countries. Similarly, within countries, it will further worsen the inequality between the rich and the poor. Hence, the need to take appropriate mitigation and adaptation measures has become more urgent.

Globally, the key responsibility of mitigation lies with countries that have historically contributed, and those currently contributing the most to climate change. The relatively big greenhouse gas emitters in South Asia should also take responsibility for contributing to mitigation. The smaller states in the region have a negligible share in emissions, and they are faced with the [challenge of balancing](#) their economies with the environment.

On adaptation, the South Asian countries have prepared individual action plans at the local and national levels, and they have been implementing these plans to varying degrees. Taking individual measures in such a crucial area is necessary but they are not sufficient. Addressing one of the most serious problems of our time requires meaningful regional cooperation.

Climate change experiences and their impacts are similar across countries in South Asia. This should make regional cooperation among them to address the challenges a priority. Broad frameworks and mechanisms under the auspices of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have been put in place but it is unfortunate that SAARC has become the epitome of a failed regional cooperation endeavour.

While geopolitics has generally trumped regional cooperation under SAARC, it is difficult to understand why geopolitics should trump regional cooperation in crucial areas such as climate change and natural disasters. Progress in all the various identified areas of cooperation under SAARC might be wishful thinking at this time, but effective South Asian regional cooperation on climate change, extreme weather events and disaster issues should not be wishful thinking. SAARC should turn it into a reality.

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