

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

13 and 14 August 2013  
New Delhi, India (or Kathmandu, Nepal)

**South Asia policy dialogue on regional cooperation for strengthening national  
food security strategies**

**Aide Mémoire**

**Background and Context**

ESCAP is a partner in the United Nations Development Account project entitled “Strengthening regional knowledge networks to promote the effective implementation of the United Nations development agenda (UNDA) and to assess progress”. The project’s objective is to strengthen national and regional expertise to review and assess national development strategies, and support the sharing of such expertise at the national and regional levels, including for the preparation of national voluntary presentations and engagement with ECOSOC.<sup>1</sup>

Its Asian and Pacific component, which is being implemented by ESCAP, is focusing on strengthening regional knowledge networks through regional cooperation for national food security strategies. Food Security is fundamental for the achievement of the Secretary-General’s “Zero Hunger Challenge”, which encourages all partners to scale up their efforts and turn the vision of an end to hunger into a reality. Zero hunger and food security are also Internationally Agreed Development Goals and are the subject of the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG 1) on the eradication of hunger and malnutrition. In addition it is a cross-cutting priority in the United Nations development agenda and is a determinant for the achievement of all MDGs.

**Overview of Issues**

**Food Security and the Zero Hunger Challenge**

The Secretary-General initiated the “Zero Hunger Challenge” in February 2013 with 23 United Nations and Bretton Woods institutions after a commitment by the United Nations system High-level Task Force on Global Food Security. The task force and the challenge were triggered by the impacts of the global food price crisis in 2007-2008.

South and South-West Asia epitomizes the food security problem in the Asia-Pacific both in terms of the present gaps and future challenges for its population. In many cases countries are emerging

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<sup>1</sup> As of 2013, the Asia-Pacific countries that have made NVPs include Australia (2010), Bangladesh (2007, 2011), Cambodia (2007), China (2009), Kazakhstan (2008), Lao PDR (2008), Mongolia (2010), Republic of Korea (2010), Pakistan (2011), Russian Federation (2012), Sri Lanka (2009) and Turkey (2011).

from low-income status but food insecurity and hunger are enormously prevalent in the populations. Even more worrisome is that the progress in achieving food security has stalled, in contrast to healthy gains in other dimensions of economic prosperity.

Food security encompasses numerous dimensions related to the supply and demand for food. The concept was defined at the World Food Summit in 1996: “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. The food security concepts have been encapsulated in the work of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). FAO considers food security to consist of four main elements: food availability through sufficient supply; food access for acquiring and consuming food, in particular food necessary for a nutritious diet; utilization of food through adequate diet, water, sanitation and health practices; and stability to ensure that food access is not at risk. Governments reaffirmed their commitments to the right of all people to food at the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in June 2012. They also acknowledged the global challenge of food security and the need to address food access and availability, especially in terms of agricultural productivity and research and development. Governments also stressed the need to resolve the underlying causes of excessive food price volatility.

The ability of the countries to implement policies that increase effective long-term food security will be pivotal in determining if the subregion can maintain strong long-run growth and inclusive development. Countries have pursued various avenues at the subregional level not only to increase regional cooperation for the realization of food security now, but also to improve mechanisms to increase food production, reduce excess demand and insulate against food price shocks. At the same time, cooperation would help accelerate development gains in complementary areas, for example energy security, related to the food demand-supply nexus and market management.

### **Regional Knowledge Networks for Food Security**

The potential of knowledge sharing and capacity development for policy analysis on regional cooperation for food security has been recognized by several regional platforms, including the Strategy and Programme for Food Security (SPFS), developed by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) with technical assistance of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).<sup>2</sup> However, progress to date has been poor leaving the subregion with few effective regional policy mechanisms that are often underutilized. Regional cooperation policies for food security must be designed to address real regional barriers to food security and forge closer regional linkages to deliver relevant practical knowledge and implement concrete actions that match UNDA and national priorities including; provide methods for assessing regional gaps in food availability and food access on seasonal and year-on-year basis, particularly during disasters; and knowledge, capacity and a network of experts to advise informally on the coordination of regional policies to make them more responsive to South Asia’s food security needs and to meet future food security challenges.

This project aims to meet this need by building upon existing networks to create a regional knowledge network of food security experts and policymakers. It also aims to provide a virtual platform and internet-based content and tools that will be available to all to facilitate the sharing of ideas and good practices. In addition, the platform will have the goal of providing a forum where members of the network can directly contribute to continued knowledge on regional cooperation policy mechanisms and contributing practices at the national and regional levels, update regional social capital for food security through networks and information sharing, and

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<sup>2</sup> SAARC, 2008, Regional strategies and programme for food security in the SAARC member states, final report, August 2008, SPFP/RAS/6702, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Bangkok, Thailand.

share intelligence on food production situations and assessments of the global and regional food security situation to foment further regional cooperation initiatives for food availability or access.

### **Objective of the policy dialogue**

Participants will develop a common understanding of the opportunities and challenges for developing regional cooperation policy mechanisms for food security through fostering regional knowledge networks and identify specific regional priorities for strengthening the implementation of national food security strategies. The workshop will:

- Compare and contrast national initiatives and instruments to mainstream food security agenda into national development strategies and sectoral policies
- Identify tangible processes, tools and methods that would help existing regional knowledge networks to collaborate for better food security
- Identify opportunities for greater regional cooperation for food security in South Asia
- Assess where national and regional knowledge sharing on food security works and where it does not work

### **Profile of the participants**

The workshop will provide a setting for food security policy experts from government, research organizations, international organizations and civil society from five countries of South Asia, namely Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to interact, learn from each other, identify common and targeted solutions, and establish a regional knowledge network for food security. The United Nations will provide travel and daily subsistence allowance to selected participants from each country.

Other participants from governments, inter-governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, academia and United Nations agencies, funds and programmes are welcome to attend the workshop at their own expense.

### **Organization**

The workshop will be organized by ESCAP South and South-West Asia Office in partnership with ESCAP headquarters Bangkok and ESCAP Centre for Poverty Alleviation through Sustainable Agriculture (CAPSA).

The workshop will be held on Tuesday 13 August and Wednesday 14 August 2013. The workshop will be conducted in English. Presentations by government representatives and experts will create the framework for discussions in each session.

Information on regional cooperation policy mechanisms for food security and national food security policies and interventions will largely be made available through documents, slides and links. The workshop itself will focus on sharing of tacit knowledge, informal dialogue among participants, and identification of options for regional knowledge collaboration.

### **Expected outcome**

A report will be prepared containing the summary of discussions, conclusions and recommendations. The recommendations from this workshop will be incorporated into the work of the project in terms of the preparation of country studies on strengthening regional knowledge

networks for national food security strategies that will be finalized at the end of 2013. The recommendations will also inform the work of the project in terms of the creation of an internet-based regional knowledge-sharing tool to be constructed and launched at the end of 2013.

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