

Event Transcript

Climate Diplomacy in South Asia: Transboundary Challenges, Collective Solutions

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Featuring:

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Event Description

South Asian Voices [collaborated with The Third Pole on a series](#) to ignite dialogue and action for a more collaborative approach to combating the consequences of climate change in South Asia.

In this event, the series' authors will reflect on their recent contributions to SAV. From examining transboundary approaches to tackling climate migration, water sharing, and disaster management, the panel will discuss key challenges to effective regional cooperation and identify concrete ways forward.

More information and event video available at: <https://www.stimson.org/event/climate-diplomacy-in-south-asia-transboundary-challenges-collective-solutions/>

Event Transcript

Mahika Khosla:

Welcome to everyone joining us from the United States, South Asia, and beyond. My name is Mahika Khosla, and I am the Deputy Editor of the Stimson Center's online policy platform, South Asian Voices, which features an analysis of the security, politics, and economics of the subcontinent. I am delighted to welcome you today to SAV's webinar featuring expert authors from our latest series on climate diplomacy in South Asia.

Climate change and its devastating impacts have no borders. In 2023 alone, Cyclone Biparjoy ravaged parts of Gujarat in India and Sindh in Pakistan. Bangladesh and Myanmar jointly faced the deadly toll of cyclone Mocha, while the Hindu Kush regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the lower course of the Brahmaputra in India and Bangladesh, and even Southwest China faced drought-like conditions and heat waves. 20 out of 22 glaciers in the high mountain regions of India, China, and Nepal showed continued mass loss, and over 600 people died of floods in India, Pakistan, and Nepal.

As a region with one of the highest vulnerabilities to climate change, South Asia features the least climate cooperation across any region in the world. Governments in the region must recognize that combating climate change is not a zero-sum game. In our conversation today, we will discuss how South Asian governments can coordinate and collaborate to address the shared vulnerabilities posed by climate change. Our panelists will reflect on their recent contributions for a joint series that SAV published with The Third Pole under Dialogue Earth, a U.K.-based NGO focusing on environmental journalism. They will examine the structural barriers that hinder meaningful cooperation and more importantly, they will present innovative ideas and new approaches to overcome these barriers and will map a path forward for the region.

We have an excellent lineup of speakers for you today. I am delighted to be joined by Ambika Vishwanath, who is the Co-founder and Director of the Kubernein Initiative, an India-based geopolitical advisory. Sanya Saroha, who is a Research Analyst also at Kubernein, working on its Urban Resilience, Water, and Climate Programs. Dharam Uprety, with Practical Action South Asia based in Kathmandu and an official delegate for the Government of Nepal to COP26, COP27, and COP28. Omair Ahmad, who is the South Asia Editor at The Third Pole under Dialogue Earth. And finally, Soraya Kishtwari, who is the Asia-Pacific Editor for The Third Pole under Dialogue Earth.

This conversation will be a mix of moderated discussion and audience engagement. I will be interspersing questions from the audience throughout the session; please submit your questions via the Q&A box at the bottom of your Zoom screen. Speakers please do aim to keep your responses short so we can get to as many questions as possible. So, let us start with a broad overview of the state of play in the region. As I mentioned, South Asia has a unique landscape where a combination of geography, population and poverty make it particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. We know and frequently see the climate challenges faced by individual countries in South Asia, but what makes these challenges in the region particularly transboundary in nature? Let us begin with Ambika for this question and then move to Soraya.

Ambika Vishwanath: Thank you, Mahika, and to everybody else as well for, one, the excellent series that we have put together. There were some fantastic pieces there, and then also for following that up with this webinar because not everybody reads long-form articles, this is a great way to put some of those thoughts out there.

On your question, it is a simple question that has a simple answer, but the implementation is not that simple. Why are climate effects regional and not national? Because they are not confined by the borders that we have

created over time. It is really just as simple as that. If you look at heat, for example, and as of the last week or so, the projected summer heat maps for South Asia have been released both by the countries in the region and by international organizations and the World Meteorological Organization.

These are not just heat maps for India, Pakistan, Nepal, or Bangladesh. They are regional maps. If you look at it, you can see the variety of red that is across the region. If you just look at that heat map, I would be really surprised if more than a very small percentage of the population of any of these countries can actually pinpoint where their borders are. Heat is not localized. Certain types of heat, of course, are localized. If you look at rain, the monsoons that come and hit India and Pakistan are the same monsoon patterns, the same monsoon cycles that we experience, which will now begin sometime towards the end of June and then July. If you look at the monsoons that hit later on the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal, again, what is hitting Bangladesh is hitting Eastern India and Nepal.

So, weather and climate are not confined by borders. Temperature is not confined by borders. Glacial melt as you talked about, the cascading effects of that are not confined by borders. If we think about any of the solutions for all of these things confined by borders, we will be where we are right now. There is a lack of cooperation; nobody seems to want to acknowledge that the effects of climate change are the same everywhere, and therefore, there is no cross-border learning and there is no co-learning. We are at this point here now where we know all of this, but somehow, we do not want to acknowledge it.

It is a wonderfully bleak way of beginning this webinar.

Mahika Khosla: Soraya?

Soraya Kishtwari: Thanks very much, Mahika, for the introduction, and thank you to everybody for your contributions. We enjoyed editing those over at The Third Pole, which has since become Dialogue Earth as part of our relaunch.

In terms of your question, what makes the challenges in the region uniquely transboundary? It helps to also look at the similarities. If you look at the rural population in countries like India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, you've got roughly two thirds of those populations in each of those countries that are rural populations. A country like Bangladesh has a really high population density. It is the 10th most population dense country in the world. As Ambika rightly says, a lot of the challenges that are faced do not respect national borders.

If I think of my own personal experiences, I lived in Vietnam for several years in Southeast Asia, and air pollution is a major issue also across South Asia. Air pollution and air quality issues, particularly from industrial emissions and vehicular pollution, again are not confined to national borders.

Within a South Asian context, if you look at smoke and haze problems in Northern India, we have seen how they affect parts of Pakistan and Nepal for instance. Speaking again of my personal experiences in Vietnam, transboundary haze was a huge issue. The phenomena of transboundary haze is something that, even though Vietnam has its own air pollution challenges and some of them are of its own making, it also has to deal with the transboundary haze coming from some of its neighbors.

2015 was a particularly bad year. The meteorological conditions were such that in Indonesia for instance, these combined with forest fires. Those forest fires were manmade through slash-and-burn farming practices, which engulfed the entire country from June to October. Eventually, that spread over to its neighbors, not just its immediate neighbors like Malaysia and Singapore but also Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos from around September onwards.

In that context, there were multilateral frameworks which are a cooperation vehicle, such as ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, that work together to come up with a roadmap to address this. They have since come up with a second roadmap. Pollution is certainly one of the transboundary challenges, but then there is also the region's major river systems, the Indus, Ganges, and the Brahmaputra, which all serve as critical lifelines. Although they originate in one country, they weave their way through multiple countries. Connectivity brings about shared challenges and notably in terms of water scarcity, flooding, pollution, as we have already discussed. So that is a challenge in itself.

Decisions made upstream, and we have seen that again in relation to Southeast Asia, how decisions upstream in the Mekong can then have effects downstream. Whether that is dam constructions or agricultural usage, that can also impact water availability downstream leading to shortages and excessive flooding. All that serves to underscore the need for collaborative regional approaches in terms of water management and air pollution.

Mahika Khosla:

Taking into consideration the various transboundary climate challenges that both Soraya and Ambika have mentioned, the series tries to make sense of why there is so little regional cooperation in South Asia.

Soraya, you mentioned cooperation within ASEAN. In South Asia we have SAARC, we have BIMSTEC, we have the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Initiative. We have the Indian Ocean Rim Association and many more. Many of these multilateral groupings have integrated climate change into their agendas and yet there is little effective cooperation.

Starting with Dharam, could you tell us what are some of the factors at play that limit government cooperation? Can you tell us what your research has revealed about whether there are particular actors holding regional cooperation back? We will start with Dharam and then move on to Omair for this question.

Dharam Uprety:

Thanks, Mahika. This is a wonderful question. Looking into the landscape of South Asian nations, mainly the political landscape, we observe political tension among South Asian countries. That is one of the upsetting factors to hinder more effective climate action in South Asia.

Take the negotiation in UNFCCC, where we engaged in the form of G77 and China in one of the largest groups, but a lot of countries don't have any negotiation groups. We could localize our agenda, we could combine the problems and challenges faced by South Asian countries and bring them into the UNFCCC process, which has not been done effectively. So, we are going toward isolation. Sometimes, we join hands with the least developed countries and sometimes with G77 and China. So, on a large scale, our agendas are not unified, and that is one of the biggest challenges I have observed.

Second, SAARC has drafted a number of strategies, but they are not legally binding. For example, the SAARC Comprehensive Framework on DRRM was drafted around 2007, but it is not clear whether this is under implementation or not. So, we have not seen any level of implementation.

We are relying on the Green Climate Fund, and it is very hard to get funding from the Green Climate Fund for countries, particularly developing countries. We could have a SAARC climate fund that would make sense for South Asian countries, but to my knowledge, that is not even discussed among the SAARC countries.

Those are some of the constants that I see between and among the SAARC countries. There is no SAARC negotiation or expert team formed for the international negotiation process. These are some of the challenges I observed in the SAARC countries. Thanks.

Mahika Khosla:

Thank you, Dharam. Omair, before you go into answering this as well, I want to touch on something that Dharam said, which is that governments are not talking to each other. As you have mentioned in your article, that

creates a very opaque bureaucracy both nationally as well as regionally. Could you talk a little bit about that in terms of the data secrecy aspects that are stymieing cooperation?

Omaisr Ahmad:

I will address that, as well as some of the questions that are coming in, which I am looking at. But, very simply, one of the things with South Asia is the issue of the dog that did not bark. We know about the hostilities between let us say India and Pakistan, India and China in South Asia, in the Himalayan areas, as well as the complicated relations with all of these countries. What we often do not talk about and what is hugely missing is where is the opportunity? Where is the money? Because, money talks, everything else walks.

If you look at a comparative region, let's say the Arctic Circle, which is surrounded by, again, eight countries, some of which have incredibly conflictual relationships, the U.S. and Russia. I have had long chats with the previous Norwegian ambassador here who banged on about how Norway and Russia had really good cooperation on managing marine stocks because it was making them money.

Right now, what you have are decisions that are made for the benefit of defense and security establishments. These establishments do not benefit from better relations, and you are not going to have better relations when these are all your top decision-makers, and you are not going to be able to convince them otherwise. It is not in their self-interest. So, you are going to have to build up a constituency that benefits from better cooperation, and that constituency includes trade and this huge question about what is going to happen in the green transition in this area. That transition is already happening. Dharam's group, I want to talk about, because we did a story on practical action and about insurance; how they are working on threshold insurance levels for farmers in Nepal, and how insurance is actually one of those major issues when it comes to making money.

You have got to look at when positive decision-makers overwhelm that. There is a lot of talk about water wars and hostility between nuclear powers. I take that with a pinch of salt. It is much cheaper and quicker to launch a war with a rocket. You do not need to build a massive dam. It takes years and billions of dollars. There are quicker ways to do a war. The problem is index-based flood insurance. The problem is the talk of war. In 2009 you had Hafiz Saeed of the Lashkar-e-Taiba, banging on that either water will flow or blood will flow. Now, to a certain degree, he's right. And what we cannot tolerate, are bad actors like Hafiz Saeed and non-state actors capturing that conversation.

What we need is water not only flowing, but people seeing it flow. As a consequence of that, in a previous life, me and a couple of other people

and other institutions got experts from India and Pakistan to just talk about water flowing. Both the governments in India and Pakistan realized that this was an issue that we could not just hand off to bad actors.

You need that kind of farsighted vision, but that's still a reactive policy. You need people who are making money on cooperation to drive the agenda. Until you do that, we are going to be stuck saying, these people do not cooperate. There is no money to be made. Why will they cooperate?

Mahika Khosla: Thanks for that Omair. We have a couple of questions from the audience, but before I get to those, I want to bring in Sanya here. Omair, you have talked a lot about the issues of water management and water sharing, particularly between India and Pakistan. Sanya, yours and Ambika's article talks about the Indus Waters Treaty. We see how current water treaties in South Asia are largely bilateral like the IWT, which fails to include China and Afghanistan for instance, which are two riparian countries that share the Indus Basin as well. Can you tell us why this is the case, and a little bit about how regional cooperation can better support climate-proofed water management?

Sanya Saroha: First, thank you for this excellent panel and for organizing this webinar. Like Ambika said, the answer is quite simple. South Asian countries have had a long history of conflict, disputed borders, and rivalry between two nuclear powers, and the complexities driven by the relationships that we share with China just complicate the whole situation. Water has not always been part of these conversations or the ongoing unrest, but water has always indirectly been part of these conflicts. For example, when Doklam's standoff happened, China stopped sharing the data with India, and similarly when the Pulwama attack happened, India claimed that they would divert the flow of the Indus River.

Water has been used as a tool in a lot of instances and mostly as a weapon in conflict. But, also because of these power dynamics that South Asian countries have, and the issues they share bilaterally, it is very difficult to have regional cooperation.

There are existing regional mechanisms that already exist, like track one initiatives, which are government organizations, regional government organizations, for example, CNote. They have scientific data, and they provide the platform where all these multilateral stakeholders can discuss and put in their best practices about all these issues that have been going on and successes and challenges. Also Track II initiatives that are non-organizational, non-government regional organizations. There are some regional organizations that are also there, like South Asian water initiatives. So, there are already existing mechanisms, but we should really put them to better use. Ambika has something to add to it.

Ambika Vishwanath: Thanks. I want to add that maybe we must change the way we ask questions in this region. You've rightly said, how do we climate-proof our water? I would say, how do we waterproof our climate? If we do not solve for the water, then we cannot solve for anything else. That is where we must begin. In many cases in South Asia, whether it is within each country, and I can say this for India, but I also know this for Pakistan and Bangladesh and Nepal, oftentimes we are asking the wrong question. And so, we are not solving the wrong problem because, of course, we must solve all of them, but we are solving the wrong problem at that moment. And that is when you are then continuing this entire loop. I also want to respond to what Dharam and Omair said.

Dharam was very polite when he said little political tension. I would say there are very large political tensions, and this is not new, but as Omair and Soraya alluded to as well, this is not unique. In many cases in South Asia, especially when it comes to India and Pakistan, we are thinking, oh my god, this is a problem that cannot be solved. This is such a unique problem. No, this is not a unique problem, and these are problems that can be solved. Terrorism is not unique to India and Pakistan. It has been occurring all over the world at various stages and in various types. The global community has found a way to work on this subject, on water or on other aspects of climate in different regions.

Take a very contentious region like Western Africa: despite cross-border terrorism over decades, there is still some form of robust water cooperation. There is also cooperation on energy and heat mapping. These problems are not unique to South Asia. The unique part is that we do not want to acknowledge what the problem is in and of itself, ask the right questions, and then work towards it. I think this may be unique to South Asia and somewhat unique to some of our West Asian neighbors that I shall not name, but our audience can infer.

The rest of the world, despite the lack of diplomatic cooperation between several countries, has found a way to work on this issue. Why? Because, as Omair said, there is money to be made, and the risk of not doing it far outweighs the risk of leaving something like that be. We must figure that out. And it is not that we do not know this; we are not willing to take that step.

Mahika Khosla: Ambika, it is fascinating what you said about the framing of questions when it comes to climate in South Asia. On that, we have a question from the audience from Abdul Waris Hamid for all panelists where he says the issues that are highlighted by the speakers have direct impacts on the defense and security establishments of all countries, especially India, China and Pakistan. Do you think that the discourse of climate change

needs to be developed in the context of climate security so that countries can start talking? The issue of climate security, as we know, is very contentious. There are camps that say that it should not be securitized, and there are camps that say that it should, I would be curious to hear from our panelists on this question.

Ambika Vishwanath: Climate change is a change in your climate and weather patterns. It is the effect we are all feeling. So, if there were no risks from that, if there were no extreme heat, or change in monsoon patterns, or glaciers melting, or any of these things, nobody would care about a change in climate or weather pattern. It's because we are feeling the effect of it, whether it is as small as, oh my god, today is a really hot day, to much larger things like the kind of floods that Pakistan had that ran them and the international community into billions of dollars. The minute we understand what the security implication is, we will act the way we need to act. By security I do not only mean human security and environmental security, but also the security of the people of your country, of your region.

For climate change, there is the movement of people, migration, that's a security question that countries must perhaps consider. Climate change, heat, and changes in water patterns affect agriculture and food security; countries must tackle that. It might not be as straight of a line as I am presenting here, but it ultimately comes down to that. The minute the countries over here and anywhere else in the world realize that this is a security concern, and we can solve it if we think about it together, then you will see much more action. And history and experiences from other regions tell us that other countries have thought about it, either in a bilateral, trilateral, or multilateral fashion.

Dharam Uprety: This is a fantastic question on climate security. This has been under discussion. In the past, I attended a high-level security conference that was focused on climate security. This is emerging because climate change supports forced displacement, and large masses of people have migrated from their own regions to others. That is one of the factors impacting climate security.

Second, if you view this from the lens of loss and damage, using the example of avalanches or the bursting of glacial lakes, those will have a severe impact, not only in Nepal but also in India and Bangladesh. Thus, as the previous speakers already highlighted, the hazards have no boundaries, they can enter at anytime, anywhere. However, information sharing has boundaries. If we remove those boundaries to sharing information, that could be instrumental not only in addressing existing climate security issues but also in shaping lives and livelihoods and allowing for a more unified voice for climate action.

Mahika Khosla: Dharam, you mentioned migration, and we have quite a few questions from the audience on this. I want to go to Soraya whose excellent contribution for the series talked about climate migration, particularly between India and Bangladesh. Soraya, a key challenge to tackling climate migration between India and Bangladesh as well as other countries is the ongoing politicization of it, particularly with the nationwide implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Bangladeshi immigrants are consistently politicized in India. In an election year, for many South Asian countries, how might domestic politics impact regional coordination and cooperation to manage the flow of climate migrants effectively?

Soraya Kishtwari: It might be helpful here to explain what the CAA or the Citizenship Amendment Act in India is for our non-Indian or non-South Asian viewers today. This was enacted five years ago in 2019, where India effectively amended the citizenship law to provide a pathway to Indian citizenship for supposedly persecuted minorities. Hence, from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and from Pakistan, but it explicitly excludes Muslims. The legislation has sparked controversy because it is seen as discriminatory and contrary to India's secular principles. Lots of countries in the region have either already gone through the election process or, like India, are in the midst of elections. I am in the U.K. myself. Voters are going to the polls for local elections. You have a conservative government that has been in power for 14 years and is widely expected to lose the general election.

Why am I mentioning that? What tends to happen across any election cycle is that you often have governments aiming to rally its base. You will see during that time, and we are seeing this right now in India, where politicians are rallying their base and contributing to sometimes creating a highly hostile environment for immigrants. There can also be a surge in nationalistic sentiment and political rhetoric, which ends up sharply influencing policymaking. With regards to what is happening in India, we are now in a situation where, from a regional corporation perspective, and certainly in the context of climate migration, you have a country like Bangladesh, a neighbor and an ally, which has often felt the full brunt of this rhetoric.

We have seen what happened in terms of the Sundarbans' rising sea level, and cyclones contributing to displaced people crossing the borders over to India. During an election campaign, pressure and resources are used to intensify and galvanize nationalist support. The problem with these things is they sideline important challenges that need to be addressed like climate change and migration in favor of more immediately rewarding things to drum up the base. Thus, you have effective regional cooperation on climate migration policies that require trust and mutual respect, and such rhetoric essentially just undermines these policies.

Mahika Khosla: A common theme that keeps coming up is short versus long-term incentives for climate change cooperation. Before I get to that, I want to zoom out and bring in the question of China as we have several audience questions on this. As we know, China is not technically considered part of South Asia and rarely participates in South Asian forums. However, China is inherently connected to South Asia through shared water systems. I want to ask Omair this question on how we navigate regional cooperation vis-a-vis China and its data secrecy. With that, we have a question from Matthew Kennedy about efforts China is making to address climate change with South Asia.

Omair Ahmad: In 2016 when Xi Jinping made his first and only visit to Dhaka, he said that we all drink from the same water. This is a lovely statement for a powerful country in the region to make about transboundary and river basin level cooperation. Unfortunately, nothing has come out of that statement.

There has been no clear indication that China wants to look at a larger basin-wide management of water systems in South Asia. The example of Southeast Asia is a little more nuanced. China says that downstream countries must understand upstream countries' constraints and really look at what China wants to do- and everybody else should just follow along. However, if you break it down, there has been an interesting conversation between the ASEAN states and China, and part of it has been based on the joint river. The Mekong River Commission is missing in South Asia. We do not have an institution through which we can invite China in and say, "We talk about this." Technically there is SAARC, but SAARC has been defunct for 10 years in real terms at the higher level. We desperately need such institutions to exist for China to come on board.

A few years ago, I was in Norway for an Arctic conference, and I was having breakfast with a Chinese academic who is close to the party, and somebody from the Norwegian foreign ministry. The Chinese academic turned to me and said anything we do will be looked at with great suspicion and will fail just because we did it.

"Why does not India, do something?" I was like, "I'm a journalist. Nobody listens to journalists." Nonetheless, if India starts something like this, it will also create suspicion from our smaller neighbors. It may not necessarily have the same challenge as China but will fail for the same reasons. The challenge of having third party actors, and powerful actors like the U.S., is that they will be regarded with great suspicion as well. However, we do need an institution where we can talk. This is also the answer to a question asked by a participant in a previous Track 1.5 or Track II. There have been a lot of conversations with China present. I

know that one of the people we reported with at IIT Guwahati had been part of a university-to-university level cooperation.

The other thing you also must realize is that a lot of what we are asking for is often wrong data. We have this interesting article on The Third Pole with Jayanta Bandyopadhyay writing about how the data India is asking for from China is being collected from the wrong areas, because that is not where the Brahmaputra gets its water. That water is largely within Indian territory, but even for the water that flows in from Tibetan territory under Chinese control, the place we are asking for water data from is not where it exists. We need an honest conversation and to broaden that conversation with experts with robust data in the public domain. That is the only way we are going to go ahead with this.

ICIMOD does great work and I value their cooperation. They are one of the few institutions that does that. However, because they have to have government participation, they must be constrained about what they can and cannot say. You need a far more robust and open conversation than that, which is not to undermine ICIMOD. I want ICIMOD in that conversation and I want it to be strengthened, but I also want other actors out there who can say a little more.

Mahika Khosla: When you speak of other actors, let us zoom in a little bit. We have talked a lot about government-to-government cooperation and government interventions, but as several of the panelists have mentioned, the most effective transboundary programs have, in fact, been community led initiatives, particularly in ecologically sensitive border regions like the Sundarbans. I want to ask Sanya this question, what do you attribute to the success of some of these community led programs, and how can they perhaps be institutionalized in other geopolitically and ecologically sensitive regions? Others, please feel free to jump in after Sanya.

Sanya Saroha: Communities on borders have been there for generations. They have shared traditions, languages, livelihoods, and similar ecosystems. They have the capacity to look beyond the borders. They are not truly demarcated by the borderlines and can look at issues, challenges, and successes together. They share an innate friendship and trust between each other, and this has been going on for generations. Examples of this are the border “haats” between India and Bangladesh that bridge economic gaps. Another example is between India and Nepal: community-led warning systems, which we also mentioned in our article. ICIMOD had a program on a community-led flood warning system which was also piloted in Assam. Through these channels and mechanisms, things are working, not in just one particular area, but in other areas as well.

Transboundary collaborations, webinars, and events are the platforms which actually help communities voice out their concerns. They are the best places to share best practices. They have the best stories and platforms for people-to-people connections, which are important to understand the whole issue that we are here for, climate change, water, and their security issues. There have been some very successful examples between Bangladesh and India. There is a regional Sundarbans cooperation initiative involving a field visit where people visited the Sundarbans to enhance their knowledge of the area, the communities there, and to learn how to collaborate in unity. These things need to be brought out from the regional perspective. This is all happening bilaterally. It is not a bad thing, but we need to promote more regional cooperation through these successful and positive stories.

There was also a fun example between India and Pakistan that I found very interesting. It is not just limited to water or land, as this was related to fashion taste. Pakistan and Northern India share a similar fashion taste and that is how we can help each other to bridge the gap of coldness between the two countries. There are a lot of elements such as music, culture, and tradition which South Asian countries share. Bringing out these aspects on these platforms and including communities in decision-making and discussions will help with any research and data that follows up with this.

Mahika Khosla: Sanya, you mentioned several successful community led grassroots initiatives, but Omair, as you mentioned, the problem is that governments have a lot of information and data secrecy. However, it seems clear there must be some bridging between the local, national, and regional responses. Dharam, could you tell us a little bit about how technology, for instance, may be able to bridge some of these responses?

Dharam Uprety: Definitely. I can talk about the climate landscape or early warning landscape of South Asia. Nepal is sandwiched between two big economies, India and China. There are limited resources in getting hazard information. Nepal does not have early warning infrastructure installed in the high mountain areas, and because of that, we do not know the amount of solid precipitation present in the high mountain areas. Because of the shifting of the rainfall from the hills to the mountains, and the mountains to the Himalayas, we witnessed flooding last year in the Mustang area. We had never seen such a flood that hit the infrastructure and settlements of people that hard before. I am thankful for the early warning system that saved lives, but nobody estimated the amount of flooding that hit their infrastructure, settlements, and critical infrastructure. They are destroyed and they are damaged. Therefore, it would be great if we had a system that could monitor the upcoming hazard information.

Last year, the Indian Meteorological Department announced data analysis spanning 122 years, revealing that temperatures are rising more in the northern parts of India than in other parts. That is the real impact of the Himalayas. Even if we see systems that monitor which stations and districts are more impacted, we do not have that infrastructure upstream. Therefore, if we devise early warning technologies, such as automatic weather stations upstream that can be shared with all countries, that could help in devising end to end systems. Science is complex and we need to use this complex science for the use of citizens. This is a gap that we clearly see there.

Lastly, there are several hazards hitting hard this time in Nepal and the South Asian region, such as heat waves and cold waves. This time, nearly 50 percent of India is under a heat wave, and Nepal's plain regions are also under a heat wave. In Assam and Meghalaya, heavy, to very heavy rainfall is forecasted for tomorrow and the day after. For that type of information, we sometimes rely on open sources, and other times we rely on the Indian Meteorological Department. However, if a high amount of rainfall is 3 forecasted in Assam and we want to see the amount of rainfall expected in the Koshi province of Nepal, that is unknown. This is something technology really helps with, that is, in supporting end to end community centric and people-centric actionable early warning systems. That is something missing in this region.

Mahika Khosla: Thank you. In our last couple of minutes, I want to get to some of the several audience questions that we have. We have quite a few questions on India and Pakistan. Ambika, I want to go to you. There is a question that asks, at a time when India is potentially thinking of doing away with the IWT, are there future opportunities for India and Pakistan to continue or begin cooperation on climate change? I want to particularly ask you about the question of subnational cooperation. There is a question in the audience from Kashif Hamid who mentions, let us say, the issue of air pollution affecting the Punjabs on both sides of the border, for instance. If you would like to address those questions, Ambika?

Ambika Vishwanath: Thank you. I do not think we have enough minutes to address two very large questions, I will try and do justice to at least one of them. First, I have to say I liked the fact that Sanya highlighted some of the good stuff that is happening. To add to that, the World Bank in the region brought out an excellent book called "Good Neighbors." It has a whole set of fantastic stories. If anyone has not seen it yet, please go ahead and see it. I know it always looks bleak, but it is not as bad as it looks. For all the time that Sanya has been working with me at Kubernein, I'm glad I have not beaten that optimism out of her. If we can have more of that, perhaps one day Omair and I will then stop being negative.

On the IWT, I'm going to say something that is probably incredibly controversial. The Indus Water Treaty, for its time, made sense in 1961 and 1961. It was the best they could do then, given the state of play, the information, the data, and the knowledge we had of the rivers, and the relationship between the two countries. It is, at its very basis, a divorce settlement. You take three rivers, I will take three rivers, and there is a certain percentage involved. I will manage my children; you manage your children and never the twain shall meet. This is not a reality. In today's day and age, this makes no sense. Nowhere am I saying that we should completely do away with the treaty. However, we really need to rethink, add amendments, and change the treaty to reflect the reality of today, and for 10, 20, 30, and 40 years down the line, not five years ago.

We need to address the population stress on both sides, and what climate projections we are seeing on both sides for heat, water, etc. Then, we need to have a treaty that is realistic for the water system, for the ecosystem, for the environment, and then for the people that are dependent on that. The people here are a reference to the people on the ground and the economic development of both these countries. Neither of these two countries will get to where they would like without this conversation. On the subnational diplomacy side, that really does help, but beyond a point, it does not go too far, because this region, as we have learned, is extremely fractured. At the end of the day, India cannot solve, even within its own states, the problem of pollution.

How are we going to do this? I do not know. Perhaps we will do it better with our neighbors, but I'm not hopeful. In some cases that is possible, but I do not think beyond a point, that subnational diplomacy will really help move the needle in a way that matters on some of the big-ticket issues that we are discussing. These are all hard, but these types of conversations, such as the ones that are happening in public and the ones that are happening behind closed doors, all need to continue. We will get somewhere good. Omair, see, I'm going to leave you with some optimism.

Mahika Khosla: We have a question from Austin Peterson in the audience about food security. He says fish stock is expected to decline dramatically in the next 50 years in South Asian waters. How will this affect South Asia at large and what are the current avenues available in the region to address this issue? Any of the panelists are free to take this question.

Ambika Vishwanath: Sorry, I do not know if I'm qualified to answer this question, but the problem again with South Asia is that we do not care to think 50 years in advance. If we had more data, like Dharam said, we could use the technology to map risks that are a little bit shorter for say, five years, and 10 years, then that action might be a little bit easier to implement. I know that is not a direct answer to that question. However, if I can go back to

what Soraya and Omair were saying about the lower Mekong, one of the successes there is because the four lower Mekong countries one day finally said, "You know what? China is going to do what it needs to do; we need to do what we need to do."

I would love to see a situation where Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and possibly Sri Lanka come together and say, "You know what? We need to work together. These bigger powers over here, the bigger countries, they are going to continue fighting. Let us figure out what we can do together." I have no doubt that at some point India will say "All right, fine, let us get on board." Pakistan will have to get on board, and then perhaps China. However, let us leave that aside. If some of these countries can force the hand of the others to do better, I would say they should give it a go.

Omair Ahmad: One of the other reasons it works in the Mekong is that there are a number of small countries coming together there. One of the challenges, unfortunately, with South Asian cooperation, is that because India is so big and, in the middle, it dominates all the conversations. Today we have China, which is bigger, not population-wise, but certainly economy-wise, and is the biggest single actor in the region. Big powers are not great at cooperation, and even if they want to be, they are also deeply mistrusted. People work better with smaller actors in a lot of ways.

Thus, there is a lot of scope for smaller countries and middle powers to do more than bigger countries. It is a counterintuitive thing. There is also scope for city-to-city cooperation and province-to-province cooperation, which may, in fact, be more fruitful because you have more direct contact with people. As Sanya, in her great optimism was talking about, there are neighboring communities involved who can talk to each other, and have a history of talking to each other, rather than faraway capitals where people simply do not have the time and are sometimes just too arrogant to deal with these issues.

Soraya Kishtwari: Therein lies the challenge. You have this greater need for, on the one hand, greater environmental federalism, but on the other hand, greater cooperation across national and regional levels. However, to pick up on Omair and Ambika's points, there is strength in numbers. I do not just mean with regards to population, but also in terms of coming together as a region to see regional cooperation as a platform that can enhance their global standing and leadership on the international stage, and that has been happening more and more. Certainly, India has been spearheading efforts to represent and speak on behalf of the global South. However, as Omair says, the smaller countries also can, and are, doing that. We have been seeing that to an extent at COP, but we need to be seeing that more with regards to their own needs within the climate context that we face.

Mahika Khosla:

I want to leave our audience on the note that there is immense potential, not only on the regional and the local levels, but as Soraya said, on the international level as well. Unfortunately, we are out of time today for today's webinar, but I want to thank all our wonderful panelists for the insightful discussion and to all of you online for joining us for this important conversation. The video of this event will be posted on the Stimson and South Asian Voices websites. Additionally, please check out the SAV Third Pole joint series on which this discussion is based. It is on the front page of our website and on the page of Dialogue Earth. Thank you once again, and goodbye.