

struction. Due to the small number of participants from other South Asian countries, the scientific and practical exchange on the subcontinental level was, unfortunately, quite limited. Nor did the topic of improving the quality of life receive much attention. Very few presentations made specific recommendations and were based on the activities and experiences of practical development projects.

This conference, which was supported by the German Scientific Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, DAAD) and the Austrian non-governmental organization Eco-Himal did, however, provide a platform for the intensive discussion of the broad and complex issues that comprise the concept of sustainable development. Unfortunately, specific recommendations for development activities and more applied research were scarcely made. There still remains a strong need to increase the dialogue and exchange between science, politics and development practitioners in order to improve the quality of life in South Asia.

Jürgen Clemens

Regional Cooperation in South Asia: Interfacing New Dimensions and Perspectives

Dhaka, 22nd – 24th October 2000

The South Asian Cooperation for Regional Development (SAARC), comprising India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives, was initiated by Bangladesh's Zia ur Rahman, a hero of the war of independence ("liberation" in Bangladesh), a general, dictator ("martial law administrator") and later president. Assassinated in a failed coup d'état in 1981 he did not live long enough to see SAARC come into being in 1985. Bangladeshis are rightly proud of their initiative for a regional cooperation, which explains why the Bangladesh Institute of Strategic Studies (BISS), an army outfit and leading government think-tank for national and foreign relations questions, organized this conference, despite the fact that Zia's widow, a former prime minister, is the leader of the opposition and engaged in a disturbingly obstructive attempt to prevent the government, led by the daughter of the "Father of the Nation" Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, from completing its term. Whereas Sheikh Hasina Wajid is blamed by Khalida Zia for being too close to India, Khalida's nationalist policy at the expense of the country's traditional good relations with India (without which Bangladesh would hardly have gained independence) brings her too close to Pakistan,

from which Bangladesh broke away in 1971. India and Pakistan both being members of SAARC and being more known for their strained relations, Bangladesh has the greatest interest in better relations throughout the sub-continent, given the obvious trend of the Indo-Pak hostilities to spill over to the other countries of the region. There is no lack of conspiracy theories: After Sri Lanka, now even Nepal and Bhutan (and at times the Maldives) have seen unprecedented violence. The "border skirmishes" of April 2001 (when 16 Indian and three Bangladeshi border troops were killed) are a reminder that bilateral relations have always been difficult: there is an ongoing dispute over the distribution of the Ganges waters (Farakka), access to border enclaves (Tin Bigha), possession of sand banks in the Gulf of Bengal (South Talpatty), migrants (Bangladeshi in Assam and elsewhere), transit rights (to Assam and beyond) and energy exports (natural gas), not to speak of religious minority rights (Muslims in India and Hindus in Bangladesh).

The conference was jointly organized by the Bangladesh Institute of International Strategic Studies (BIISS) and the German Embassy in Dhaka, which is nothing unusual in a country where almost all such activities (have to) rely on foreign sponsors. Active participants, i.e. those who presented papers, were almost all from the region. There were five sessions: "Regional Cooperation at SAARC level" was chaired by Rehman Sobhan of the Centre of Policy Dialogue, Dhaka, with papers by Iftekharruzaman of the Freedom Foundation, Dhaka, Siegfried Herzog of the Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung, New Delhi, and Dushni Weekaron of the Institute of Policy Studies, Colombo. "Regional-extra-regional interface" was chaired by M. Rahmatullah of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, Dhaka, with presentations by M. de Wargny of the French Embassy, Dhaka, Wolfgang-Peter Zingel of the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University, Germany, Dewi Fortuna Anwar of the Center for Political and Regional Studies, Jakarta, Ambassador Antonio de Souza Menezes, Delegation of the European Commission, Dhaka, and Manfred Haack of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, New Delhi. "Security cooperation, conflict prevention and management" was chaired by Ibrahim Hussain Zaki, Minister for Planning and National Development, Maldives, and former Secretary General, SAARC. With Uday Bhaskar of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Analysis (IDSA), New Delhi, Shireen M. Mazari of the Institute for Strategic Studies, and S.M. Rahman of the Foundation for Research on International Environment, National Development and Security (FRIENDS), both Islamabad, the two major South Asian powers were represented by well known proponents. There were also A.K.M. Abdus Sabur of the BIISS, Dhaka, and David Fouquet of the European Institute of Asian Studies, Brussels. "Sub-regional cooperation in South Asia", was chaired by Ambassador Abul Ahsan, former foreign secretary of Bangla-

desh and former Secretary General, SAARC, with presentations by Mahendra P. Lama of the Jawaharlal University, New Delhi, Abul Kalam of the University of Dhaka, and Mohammad Humayun Kabir of the BISS. "Regional cooperation and track II", finally, was chaired by Ashis Nandy of the Center for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, with presentations by Navnita Chadha Behera of the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Colombo, Amara Saeed of the Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad, Dipak Gyawali from Pragma, Royal Nepal Academy of Science and Technology, Kathmandu, and Imtiaz Ahmed of Dhaka University. Among the audience were also representatives of the Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung. Hopefully, this is an indication that Bangladesh is at long last getting its due attention from the German political foundations.

Despite the fact that high hopes have been set on SAARC not only in the field of politics but also of economics, there were few economists among the active participants and hardly more among the audience. Some of the speakers were well in line with their governments' official policy, but all expressed the necessity of closer relations and better understanding among the countries of South Asia and beyond.

The seminar was very well organized and went smoothly. Manuscripts of all contributions and a summary of the proceedings were available in time. The rapporteur has just been informed by the organizers of the conference that they have received the revised versions and that the publication should be out by the end of this year. This is to be expected after the hard-bound volume of the 1999 conference was published within less than a year (A.K.M. Abdus Sabur: *Development co-operation at the dawn of the twenty-first century: Bangladesh-German partnership in perspective*. Dhaka: BISS. 2000).

Informal interaction was possible on an unforgettable boat trip around Dhaka, which gave the event a local touch. Before leaving this very hospitable country, the reviewer, however, had another unforgettable local touch of harsh realities, which might have happened elsewhere in South Asia: A former student and now university teacher was under police protection after receiving hate calls and death threats for presenting his research findings on a topic that seems to have upset almost all "elites" at one stroke: land grabbers, politicians, bureaucrats, religious zealots etc. (Abul Barkat et al. (eds.): *An inquiry into causes and consequences of deprivation of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh through the Vested Property Act*. Dhaka: PRIP Trust. 2000).

Wolfgang-Peter Zingel