

SACOSANs:

Past, Present and Future



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



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SUMMARY

This report summarizes the findings of the South Asia Conference on Sanitation (SACOSAN) review carried out between August and November 2015. The authors interviewed a large number of stakeholders and gathered their views, concerns and opinions. In the process of reporting the findings, the authors have tried to retain the true spirit of neutrality and made an attempt to identify common patterns and dominant issues.

The respondents were vocal in their opinion that the SACOSANs had raised the profile and importance of sanitation in the region, although all country-specific sanitation programs did not necessarily derive inspiration from the SACOSAN process. The SACOSANs were ‘owned’ and ‘driven’ by the respective national governments. The setting up of the Inter Country Working Group (ICWG) was seen as a decisive step in this regard. There is evidence to indicate that the SACOSANs have increasingly become more inclusive with wider representation by non-government actors, although more could be done to encourage dissemination and participation at sub-national levels and connect grass roots voices and initiatives to national endeavors. The fin-

dings clearly point out that both “structural” and “non-structural” issues need attention to enhance the effectiveness of the SACOSANs.

The political declarations underline the importance of political commitment to sanitation at the core of structural aspect. However, on the flip side, lack of follow up at the country level reduces the value of the declarations. The way accountability is measured at the SACOSANs is a “non-structural” issue that needs closer attention. Various accountability mechanisms in between SACOSANs and between SACOSAN and other forums need harmonization. The new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the dedicated goals on water and sanitation make SACOSANs more relevant and place emphasis on better accountability. It is also necessary to make representation at SACOSANs more broad based. The recommendations detailed out in the report are based on the assumption that the way forward is less to do with making the case for sanitation and more to do with the ‘how to’ based on the exchange of ideas and experiences that are country-specific and situation-focused.

PURPOSE



The process of regional conferences on sanitation in South Asia (SACOSANs) started in 2003 in Bangladesh and since then four such events have subsequently been held in Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and Nepal. The sixth SACOSAN is due to be held in Bangladesh from 11-13 January 2016. In a sense the wheel will then come full circle. This might therefore be an appropriate moment to assess the progress, learning and impact of the SACOSANs held so far, and suggests ways in which the process can be taken forward in ways that are beneficial to the people of the eight countries in the South Asia region.

BANGLADESH ● 2003

PAKISTAN ● 2006

INDIA ● 2008

SRI LANKA ● 2011

NEPAL ● 2013

BANGLADESH ● 2016

BACKGROUND

The South Asia region is the most populous both in terms of numbers and density and the most diverse, geographically, ethnically, socially and culturally of any region in the world. It comprises eight countries with significant differences in size, location, political complexity and historical experience. All these factors make any kind of collective effort a real challenge. Despite this, the decision of the countries of the region to come together to organize and participate in the SACOSAN process is an indication of the common recognition of the importance of sanitation and its impact on the health and well being of the people of the region. The fact that this process has endured since 2003 makes it clear that it is considered useful and relevant by national governments as well as numerous other participants active in contributing to sanitation solutions in the region. In taking this discourse further, it must be recognized that although South Asia as a region has scored badly in terms of the standard indicators of people with access to safe sanitation, there are huge variations not only across countries but across states and provinces within countries in the region in terms not only of

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the measure of the sanitation status but also of what the focus of effort should be. Nevertheless, if the SACOSAN process has to have value to all the countries in the region, it is important to review the progress of SACOSANs across these variations and suggest recommendations that may find resonance across all these different national and sub-national situations. One of the objectives set out by the member Governments for the SACOSAN VI is to “develop the strategic direction for future SACOSANs” through review of past processes and gathering new insights. This provides a contextual reference to the exercise carried out by the review team.

METHOD AND LIMITATIONS

The draft review is
based on:

a) Responses both in telephone interviews and written comments to a series of questions about the SACOSAN process as it has happened so far and suggestions for the future. These responses have been received from respondents from five countries (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). Most of the respondents have been from Governments (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka), NGOs Civil Society Organizations and from international organizations, some with offices outside the region. Not all the respondents have accompanied the SACOSAN journey since its inception in 2003.

b) Consultation meetings with Governments and CSOs: Two Members from the review team visited Maldives, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan to share the draft findings of the review and seek feedback and gather additional inputs from the senior officials of respective Governments. The suggestions thus received have been incorporated in this final paper. Similarly, feedback was solicited from a group of CSOs representatives of all eight member countries of South Asia. In addition, national level CSOs consultation workshops were organized in Bangladesh and Afghanistan. The key issues emerged during these meetings were also integrated into this final report, in a seamless manner.

c) Synthesis of assessments of the regional sanitation conferences and reflections of SACOSAN V.

FINDINGS

The findings of the review are largely based on the responses to questions that were organized in seven somewhat overlapping groups (apart from the initial ones asking about details of the respondents and their familiarity with the SACOSAN process) as listed below, during face to face discussions and telephonic interviews:

1. Footprints of SACOSANs.
2. Relevance and importance of the SACOSAN process.
3. Lessons from the SACOSANs.
4. Areas for strengthening SACOSANs.
5. Harmonization with other national/global processes.
6. Futuristic orientation of SACOSAN.
7. Open ended thoughts and suggestions.

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Of the seven groups of questions the first three deals with the 'looking back' part of the exercise while the last four look to the future and so are best dealt with as recommendations.

The comments made in the (relatively few) reviews of previous SACOSANs were also considered.

Very few of the respondents were familiar or associated with the SACOSAN process since the beginning in 2003. So, their responses were inevitably based on

their perceptions of the particular events they attended. There were a wide range of views depending on the countries the participants came from and their particular interests. Some of the responses were based on the proceedings of particular SACOSANs. So it is difficult to produce a consensual view on each of the above group of questions. With all these caveats, what seemed to emerge from the responses to the above set of questions as trends and trajectories were as follows:

Footprint of SACOSANs:

One of the areas where there was wide agreement was that the SACOSANs had raised the profile and importance of the sanitation issue in the region. They were the only forums where the focus was solely on sanitation. But the extent to which all the various national sanitation programmes had their origin or were driven solely by the SACOSANs is not clear. Responses varied by country and some of the larger countries had their own domestic political drivers. What could safely be stated was that SACOSANs contributed to keeping the issue of sanitation live and increased the political will even if all the national governments' actions could not be attributed to these conferences.

It was also clear and widely appreciated that the SACOSANs were 'owned' and seen as initiative proactively driven by the National Governments of the region with required support from the regional partners. The setting up of the ICWG was seen as a decisive step in this direction.

While not diluting the government ownership it was seen that the SACOSANs

have increasingly become more inclusive with wider participation by organizations outside the governments. It was hoped that this trend would continue.

Many respondents felt that SACOSANs could be further mainstreamed in the political processes in South Asia such as in SAARCs.

Relevance and importance of the SACOSAN process:

When the SACOSAN process began its journey the focus was clearly on rural sanitation and within that on reducing open defecation. Both the discourse and the indicators that were presented

For several countries the emerging challenges (safe treatment and disposal of solid waste, sanitation in disaster affected areas, sustainable urban sanitation, etc.) will have to be addressed if the SACOSANs are to stay relevant to the wide range of sanitation problems in the different countries of the region

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at the SACOSANs concentrated on this issue. Over the past few SACOSANs more themes such as menstrual hygiene management, water, sanitation and hygiene in schools, special needs of the aged and people with disability and equitable and inclusive sanitation progress are receiving more attention. There has also been some movement towards opening the scope of the discussions to issues related to more holistic and sustainable sanitation such as safe treatment and disposal of solid waste, sanitation in disaster affected areas, challenges of urban sanitation and convergence with health, education and finance ministries. But this has not yet become a firm trend. For several countries these are the emerging challenges which will have to be addressed if the SACOSANs are to stay relevant to the wide range of sanitation problems in different countries of the region.

These will lead to greater complexity in the design of SACOSANs, and to a less 'one size fits all' discussion. Issues such as governance including clarity about the role, responsibilities and accountabilities of the different layers of government and non-government organizations will

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need debate and discussions as will the role of technology, public communications and the need for innovative and contextual solutions.

Lessons from SACOSANs:

Some of the lessons have been described above. There are several others worth noting, but five are presented here for possible action, two of which are structural in nature while the others reflect the organizational aspects on SACOSANs and the scope of their deliberations. These are presented below not as judgmental statements but as a reflection of the situation, which might need change and movement, none of which will be easy.

The *first structural* issue is that while political declarations that are issued at each SACOSAN underline the importance of political commitment to sanitation as the well springs of action, lack of consistent and systematic follow up at the country level reduce their value so that there is much repetition of issues in each declaration with little sense of movement.

The *second structural* issue somewhat related to the first has two aspects that call for change.

a) While the ICWGs indicate the commitment of national governments, they are event based gatherings which spring into action before each SACOSAN but do not ensure continuity of effort required for delivering on the commitments and the kind of engagement needed to make the SACOSAN process dynamic and sensitive to changing circumstances and opportunities in the region.

b) Unsurprisingly, and given the delicacy of inter-governmental dialogue, the tendency is to try and steer a safe course so that the arrangements and agenda for each SACOSAN tread familiar ground in seeking a safe consensus when the

problems and issues of sanitation are so widely different in their manifestation in the different countries of the region.

Of the *non-structural* issues, the first is the way accountability is sought to be measured and reported at the SACOSANs. There are currently three ways in which progress in sanitation is tracked. The first is made up of official government reports on progress. The second is the information presented by organizations in the UN system and other international organizations. The third is the traffic lights paper, which is the initiative of those civil society organizations, which have been associated with SACOSANs so far. Such a disjointed system can lead to defensive responses rather than helping improve performance. There is need for harmonization so that discussions are based on common areas of understanding. The advent of SDGs with the inclusion of dedicated goals on water and sanitation, with their targets and indicators (currently under discussion) makes this process more relevant. Added to this, given the complexity and diversity of the sanitation challenges in South Asian countries, is the need to go beyond statistical measures of pro-

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gress to more comprehensive measures which track changes to the underlying causes of the sanitation challenge in different parts of the region.

The second is the attention that needs to be paid to non-government representation at SACOSANs since many newer type of organizations, academic, the private sector and newer civil society organizations are now playing a part in developing and applying sanitation solutions and could bring new perspectives to the table.

The tendency is to try and steer a safe course so that the arrangements and agenda for each SACOSAN tread familiar ground in seeking a safe consensus when the problems and issues of sanitation are so widely different.

Given the complexity and diversity of the sanitation challenges in South Asian countries, there is need to go beyond statistical measures of progress to more comprehensive measures which track changes to the underlying causes of the sanitation challenge.



RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Recommendations suggest certitude whereas what might be needed are some limited suggestions, which can be discussed, adapted or used in ways that are seen to be practical. Presented below are five suggestions. Two are structural and three are more to do with the design of the SACOSANs themselves. All these are based on the assumption that the way forward is less to do with making the case for sanitation and more to do with the 'how to' based on the exchange of ideas and experiences that can lead to specific advances in specific countries and situations.

A SACOSAN Secretariat: A small permanent establishment might be needed to note the outcomes of each SACOSAN and try to provide a bridge to subsequent SACOSAN by following up commitments made, agreements reached and, if possible, attempt concurrent monitoring of progress against mutually agreed regional indicators. This could be hosted by one of the governments of the region or at the SAARC headquarters. Some funding will be needed for this initiative, which should ideally come from one or more governments of the region rather than dominant funding, by international organizations.

Off Grid Sanitation Events:

Given that the sanitation problems of the South Asian countries are varied and at different stages, encouragement should be given to ensure that countries or states within countries who have similar problems are able to meet to discuss and learn from each other at meetings, workshops or training opportunities which can be organized by different countries (at government level) or by the regional partners or nongovernmental organizations. Such events are already happening in the region. Some form of open information platform can keep everyone informed. In this context it is noted that the SACOSAN V endorsed the offer of Government of Sri Lanka to host the Regional Resource Center to facilitate coordination and collaboration on regional and cross regional exchange. One of the agreed key mandates of the Regional Resource Centre (RRC) is to contribute to research and promote capacity development in South Asia. A bold decision at SACOSAN VI to support this initiative would help to confirm an unequivocal regional endorsement to the RRC.

SACOSAN Design: To continue to build a stronger political commitment, it is necessary to keep the political representation part of SACOSAN as an ongoing process; but the conference can be divided into a political part and a thematic, interactive, learning part where problems of the complete sanitation cycle such as behavior change, hygiene promotion, fecal sludge management, recycling and reuse and importantly the protection of groundwater from fecal pollution (a possible unintended consequence of the drive against open defecation) can be discussed as a market place of ideas and experience. The move to discuss issues of people with disability, older people, victims of disasters and conflicts and others in precarious situations should always form part of the discourse while ensuring that their voices retain primacy of input.

The engagement for the political and national leadership should focus on developing strategic insights that could drive policy development and execution at national level.

Thematic sessions should focus on building knowledge and solutions to address the second generation sanitation cha-

The conference can be divided into a political part and a thematic, interactive, learning part where problems of the complete sanitation cycle can be discussed as a market place of ideas and experience.

Forming stable and dedicated SACOSAN task teams at national, sub-national levels and possibly local levels, as appropriate to each country, will help ensure institutional memory and progress on SACOSAN commitments.

To track the progress on sanitation and hygiene, a set of indicators common to all countries in the region, linked or harmonized with the SDG indicators on sanitation and hygiene, should be developed.

SACOSANs should form a regular part of the agenda of SAARC meetings so that the highest political attention could be paid to this fundamental issue of development.

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allenges and positioning sanitation progress to be more integrated with other development agenda and sustainable. Sharing and learning process should focus on replication and up scaling of successful solutions and the interactive processes should contribute to improved networking and collaboration among different actors.

Attention needs to be paid to the quality of the discussion at individual sessions so that whenever a project or a programme experience is presented, there is an analysis of the context and causes for success and failure so that there is a move away from presenting them as universal solutions, which is too often the case.

A key concern is the national level dissemination process. Many sanitation related ministries and sub-national parts of the governance system at state/provincial and village and town levels are kept out of the SACOSAN loop and not organically connected to the commitments signed at SACOSANs.

Added to this is the loss of institutional memory caused by administrative transfers of key officials, resulting in inconsistent follow up of previous SACOSAN's commitments.

Both these can be corrected by forming stable and dedicated SACOSAN task teams at national, sub-national and possibly local levels, as appropriate to each country.

SACOSAN Representation:

Since SACOSANs are restricted events led by government delegations and there are limited numbers at each conference, these delegations could try and balance the non-government members to include a wider representation particularly from the new groups and organizations playing a variety of roles in the sanitation sector. This includes but not limited to newer NGOs, academia, data management experts, private sector representatives, technologists and scientists who have previously not participated in SACOSANs. Particular attention should be paid to fair gender representation, since this is an issue of particular concern in South Asia.

SDGs, SACOSANs and Future Orientation:

The UN General Assembly has approved SDGs in September 2015 and all the countries of the South Asia region have endorsed the same. SDG 6 is aspiring to achieve universal WASH coverage, integrated water

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resource management, address trans-boundary water issues and strengthen community participation. In view of the above and in line with the stakeholder affirmations, there is a need to certainly address the issue of open defecation, but also to move beyond the focus on fixed point defecation to issues of septage management, piped sewerage, management of public toilets, sludge collection, transportation, treatment and disposal services, research & development of new toilet technologies and the link between water availability and sanitation and hygiene.

Monitoring and Measurement:

Governments do track progress of their sanitation programmes. This should continue and be presented in the way they measure progress. But new ways of measuring progress on different steps of the sanitation ladder and in different contexts need discussion and development, rather than just a matrix of numbers and percentages. The primary responsibility and accountability for developing these indicators in their contexts and then measuring progress against them lies with national governments as a key measure of democratic

responsibility for the welfare of their citizens. SACOSANs provide a collaborative platform for learning, for sharing and for mutual support in the achievement of this primary responsibility. Consideration could therefore be given to the development of a set of indicators common to all countries in the region, linked or harmonized with the SDG indicators on sanitation and hygiene, against which they could track progress. This is best done in a collaborative manner. SACOSANs could then be a platform to discuss issues related to the drivers and impediments of progress.

These are some suggestions for SACOSANs as they are currently implemented. Every event needs renewal and the incremental value addition of each SACOSAN must be assessed through a frank reflection process. It must be recognized that no process lasts forever. Each country could review its own SACOSAN journey as a basis for frank discussions on how long the current system of SACOSANs should continue and in particular if the three countries that have not hosted SACOSANs feel that they derive a real benefit from these conferences. Similarly, the need for learning and

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sharing between different regional conferences and the method and format for doing so should be discussed and agreed upon between members.

Mainstreaming Sanitation in Regional Political Processes:

SACOSANs are one of the few processes that bring the governments and people of South Asia together. This could be taken to a new level if sanitation and SACOSANs form a regular part of the agenda of SAARC meetings so that the highest political attention could be paid to this fundamental issue of development, and one which has the potential to set a new direction for the people of the South Asia region.



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About FANSA

The Freshwater Action Network South Asia (FANSA) aims to improve governance in WASH sector by strengthening the role of civil society in decision-making. It considers both environmental and developmental aspects as crucial for the realization of the right to water and sanitation for present and future generations. FANSA was established in 2008 based on the felt need of the civil societies to ensure that their local experiences and voices are represented at the policy-making discussion and fora. The South Asian network is a member of Freshwater Action Network (FAN), a global consortium of civil society networks engaged in implementing and influencing water and sanitation policy and practice.

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