Renewable Energy Landscape of South Asia

The recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has yet again issued a warning, stating that the window left for the world to slow down the changing climate and its adverse impacts is very small. As Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions originating from burning fossil fuels have been detected as one of the largest contributions to global warming, a radical shift in the energy sector is urgently required. In order to keep the temperature below 1.5°C, we must support renewable energy solutions and invest in the transition of the energy sector. However, the on ground situation is not very encouraging. Rather than phasing out many countries are locking themselves in a trajectory of coal-based power production in the name of socioeconomic development.

At a time when renewable energy is becoming rapidly cheaper and competitive, clearly being the future of energy production worldwide, the decision-makers in South Asia are opting for a path which will soon be obsolete. Despite having a high potential for renewable energy all around the region, there are almost no incentives for investment in renewable, and policy frameworks for innovative energy solutions are not developed adequately.

South Asia is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, and fossil based economies have serious implications at the social, political, economic and environmental levels. Among South Asian countries India and Pakistan have the largest reserves of coal. India has been extracting coal for energy production for many years now however in Pakistan with the advent of mega investment project CPEC, coal extracting and power plants are becoming a new normal. Other countries such as Nepal and Bhutan have very small reserves. According to the World Bank India's energy consumption is around 63% and is likely to increase in coming years. Likewise in Pakistan a total of seven coal power plants are proposed under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Some are operational and others are in planning phase. The energy sector contributes the highest chunk of emissions in Pakistan i.e., 46 percent followed by the agriculture sector (43 percent) and industries (5 percent).

South Asia has great potential of renewable energy projects and many are also being operational in India and Pakistan. The cost of renewables will be low in the coming years, thus, making coal not only environmentally but economically unviable. South Asia has diverse demographics with some areas with dense, while others with scant and scattered population. For such a population, renewables present sustainable and off grid solutions, especially for rural electrification. There is a need to understand the benefits and costs of fossils at all levels of policymaking, thus, a panel is being proposed to understand the comparative social, economic, environmental and political costs and benefits of renewables vs coal, and find answers to the following questions:

- What are the issues /loopholes pertaining to Renewable Energy (RE) development and governance in South Asia?
- How can we have socioeconomic development, which is sustainable and where costs and benefits are shared equally?

- Is base load a real debate or a myth?
- How can we reduce these impacts at the policy level and regional level?
- What are the lessons learnt in the region regarding coal phase-out and shifting to renewables?

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