

BOOK REVIEW

Sadiq Ahmad, Saman Kelegama and Ejaz Ghani (Eds.) *Promoting Economic Cooperation in South Asia – Beyond SAFTA*. Sage Publications, 2010.

Although known as the poorest region and faced with many internal conflicts, South Asia has much potential to be one of the leading regions in the world. As addressed by the many topics in this paper, South Asia has many economic advantages such as trade, tourism, transportation and employment. Hence, economic cooperation among the countries in the region has to be established and strengthened. The theme of this book is current, relevant and shows the importance of establishing economic cooperation in South Asia not only to benefit the South Asian countries but the world too. The arrangement of the book with thematic segment dealing with very specific topics provided easy understanding on the importance and directions of economic cooperation in South Asia. The strength of this book is the extensive information each author provided on the topics. The main weakness is the failure of the many authors to provide critical views and rigorous analysis on the addressed topics especially on why the countries failed to achieve economic integration in the region with regards to the specific issues addressed.

The first theme in Part One, 'The Imperative for Cooperation' provided readers with general background on two important issues in the region, which are peace and poverty. Hussain was successful in taking readers to think about the potentials of India to lead the world after China and in doing so, India needs to overcome many internal socio economic issues, including peace problem with Pakistan. This article served as a basis to the many discussions on the conflicts between the regions in South Asia as one would discover after reading the book. While Hussain concentrated on India and Pakistan, Ahmed and Ghani included and compared other South Asian poor countries such as Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Nepal in addressing the issues of poverty. I found the two articles complementing each other, and while the policy recommendations are relevant, enforcement is needed by relevant governmental agencies for economic cooperation to become a reality.

Papers presented in Part Two, 'SAFTA and Beyond: Selected Cooperation Issues' is the most comprehensive and informative section in the book explaining the many issues South Asian countries could take advantage from a strong economic cooperation in the region. Among others,

issues addressed included tourism, labour migration, transportation, trade and food crisis. Nevertheless, there were many redundancies and repetitions in regard to the issues presented. For example, Rahmahtullah, De, Chaturvedi and Khan all discussed similar issues on problems and barriers of transportation, although Rahmahtullah focused more on transportation while De, Chaturvedi and Khan linked the problems and barriers transportation with trade. Papers by Weerakoon and Mel also discussed similar trade issues that are pertinent to SAFTA. There was nothing really significant about the two articles, apart from informative description on the role of SAFTA and the trade activities of the countries in the region. Readers would definitely benefit from critical discussions and arguments of the authors in regard to the current policies, which were hardly addressed in both articles.

However, paper by De, Chaturvedi and Khan is one of the most distinguished papers in the book. It included some analysis from field surveys on the trade facilities at the border and some economics modelling and interpretation on the border's corridors efficiency. As an economist, I found this part very appealing, although the explanation on the results was short and limited.

The next four issues in Part Two were independent important issues for South Asian countries. In my opinion, the one article that stands out was by Khatri, who discussed about labour migration, a definitely current, ongoing and problematic issues faced by the South Asian countries. South Asian is an important source of migrant workers to Europe, Australia, North America, Gulf States and Southeast Asia. The remittance income could be a main source to reducing poverty in the home countries. However, the welfare and future of these migrant workers are not well taken care of. As noted by the author, although each country has its own rules and regulations, more thoughts on comprehensive regulations need to be carried out cooperatively by all the South Asian countries to boost the well-being of the migrant workers.

The investment agenda discussed by Dutz was relatively important in the context of international trade and economic cooperation. Nevertheless, the information was very brief and restricted to Foreign Direct Investment, constraints of doing business and some policy options. The other two papers, on food crisis and tourism were very informative, organised in almost the same format, with introduction of the issues and conclusion on recommendations for regional cooperation. Similar to the article by Dutz and many of the other articles in the book, readers were not exposed to rigorous analysis in terms of comparison or comparative advantage of the addressed issues among the countries in the region and the world.

Papers presented under in Part Three, 'Private Sector Perspectives on Cooperation' provided different perspectives on regional cooperation from four different countries views: Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, the perspectives were more drawn from the country and authors instead of from the view of the private sectors in those countries. In outlining the perspectives of the individual countries on regional cooperation in South Asia, Yussuf Harun was able to do express this issue from Bangladesh effectively. Sonu Jain tried to relate private sector perspectives by using the example from the Confederation of Indian Industry. Nevertheless, the perspective areas were not from India but members of the region. Chandra Jayaratne failed to address the point of view of Sri Lanka on the South Asia cooperation. Although she made many relevant points, her points were more of a general view of the whole issue instead of focusing on how Sri Lanka's private sectors address the issues of regional cooperation.

The final theme of the paper, in Part Four, 'The Political Economy of Cooperation' is excellent in wrapping up the whole discussions of the book. The two authors were able to address the roles and importance of SAFTA and SAARC programs for the region. Razzaque was able to demonstrate that from past studies those weaker countries in SAFTA have no advantage. It would be good to know the author's own assessment on the matter. Nevertheless, Razzaque did provide some suggestions in the last section on how South Asian countries can benefit from SAFTA. Lama addressed important issue on the non implementation and inaction of the agenda outlined by SAARC on two major issues facing the South Asia region, which are poverty and terrorism. I agree with the author that stern actions are needed not only by the secretariat but also by each country in addressing the issue.

This book has addressed many important and relevant issues on economic cooperation in South Asia. Readers who do not have any background in South Asia will definitely benefit from reading this book as the book provided basic background information not only on policy paradigms on economic integration among the countries in the region but specific country information on trade, transportation, poverty, tourism and employment. With the extensive information, readers would be able to deduce and construct their own critical evaluation on the need of economic integration in the region.

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