

## **Nordic research network for environmental challenges in South Asia**

The aims of a **Nordic Network for the Study of Environmental Challenges in South Asia** are:

- To encourage Nordic research on environmental issues in South Asia
- To facilitate sharing of knowledge and experience among Nordic scholars interested in the study of environment in South Asia,
- To initiate and facilitate fruitful discussions about appropriate strategies and actions in the face of the environmental challenges in South Asia,
- To serve as a springboard for developing new collaborative research projects between different institutions and disciplines both within and between the Nordic countries, and between Nordic and South Asian institutions.

Natural activities towards these ends will entail regular workshops or conferences organized by the Network, once it is established.

Seed funding has been given from the LEVE interfaculty research area at the University of Oslo for the establishment of the network ([www.leve.uio.no](http://www.leve.uio.no)). The establishment of a *Nordic Network for the Study of Environmental Challenges in South Asia* within LEVE will emphasise the *livelihood* aspect of environmental issues and how environmental changes and global warming will change the patterns of risk in South Asia. This is important, as the environmental challenges of South Asia can neither be understood nor solved without adequate attention to the issues of poverty and equity and the social and political conditions and processes of the region.

We already know that there is potential for and interest in a Network of scholars and students focusing on the environmental challenges of South Asia, but nobody has so far had the resources to devote time to the formalization of such a network. The working group for establishing the network consists of professor Pamela Price from the Department of History, professor Arild Engelsen Ruud from IKOS, and Guro Aandahl from SUM, all from the University of Oslo. Guro Aandahl is the co-ordinator, with the responsibility for the following tasks:

- 1) Contacting and collecting names, contact addresses, and research interests of potential members of the network;
- 2) Making a website for the network which presents existing and potential research activities in the field; and
- 3) Identifying fruitful collaborative and interdisciplinary research projects related to South Asia's environmental challenges.

### **Why a network on *environmental challenges in South Asia*?**

South Asia as a region comprises the countries Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Afghanistan, a country that straddles the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia, is also often included in academic South Asia programmes. The region is the home for more than 1.5 billion people, or more than one fifth of humanity. Despite the diversity within the region, its countries share important historical experiences (like the British colonial rule) and

cultural characteristics (for example a highly hierarchical social structure) which have repercussions on contemporary society and politics. India is emerging geopolitically as one of the new global power poles, and is already an economical and technological driving force in the world.

The region faces many environmental challenges, ranging from the recurring problems of managing agriculture and livelihoods within an unpredictable monsoon climate to the deterioration of urban living conditions due to the rapid and uncontrolled growth of private cars as a consequence of economic growth. The global 'food stress' is presently on the rise, and is felt acutely in South Asia with its large concentration of poor people. Climate change is predicted to add to the stress in the near future. A recent study estimates that India may experience a 30% decrease in its agricultural production by 2080, and other countries which receive a large part of their irrigation water from Himalayan glaciers are not going to fare much better. A vital question to ask is how flexible South Asian farming systems are in terms of adapting to changing conditions of production, whatever those changes may be. In India, for example, 80 per cent of the farmers have holdings of fewer than 5 acres of land; these holdings constitute more than 50 per cent of cultivable land.

The flexibility of local communities and economies must be addressed with reference to the flexibility and political capacity of the *state and bureaucracy* in adjusting its focus toward vulnerable populations and environmental challenges in South Asian nations. There is also a need for focused attention to the capacities of the *political system* to address the challenges of climate change, food systems, and poverty.

#### **Why an *inter-disciplinary Nordic network*?**

As the capacities to meet the environmental and developmental challenges of South Asia relates to a wide range of topics (like labour, gender, caste, land entitlement, environmental conditions, pricing policy, and new technology), there is a need for interdisciplinary and collaborative research and knowledge sharing among scholars focussing on environmental issues in South Asia. A strictly national focus does not at this point provide the optimum number of researchers for a supportive and dynamic milieu. The already existing informal contacts and networks between environmentally interested scholars in the Nordic region are mainly within the social and humanistic sciences. However, we think that the establishment of this network may also be useful for technical, natural, and medical scientists working in and on South Asia, and we hope to attract members also from these sciences.

Two workshops dealing with the environment in South Asia were organized in 2008. At Uppsala University was a conference organised by SASNET, "Nature, Knowledge and Power", and at the University of Oslo was the workshop, "Politics of Adaptation to Environmental Challenges in 21st Century South Asia". At both workshops, scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds presented highly topical research on the challenges of environmental change, environmental risks, livelihoods and politics in South Asia. It was clear from the Oslo-workshop that many of the participants were interested in being part of such a network. An Indo-Swedish workshop on "Livelihoods and the Environment: Debating Inter-disciplinary perspectives" was recently organised at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, and drew participants also from Norway. A Nordic Summer University workshop titled "Environmental Challenges, Politics and Food Production in South Asia" is coming up on 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2010, and would be a good starting point for the work of formalizing the network.