

IFPRI and BIMSTEC host dissemination event on regional trade and agricultural transformation in BIMSTEC countries

Bangkok, October 2024 – The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), in collaboration with the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), hosted a dissemination event marking the culmination of its four-year project titled “Regional Trade and Agricultural Transformation in the Bay of Bengal Countries” on 3-4 October. This initiative, launched in 2020 with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), has focused on enhancing trade linkages and fostering sustainable agricultural transformation across BIMSTEC’s seven member states: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

Established in 1997, BIMSTEC serves as a vital bridge between South and Southeast Asia, representing nearly 1.5 billion people. Although the region holds vast potential for growth and economic integration, it faces significant challenges in areas such as food security, climate change, and regional trade. Intra-regional trade among BIMSTEC countries remains low, at just 5%, compared to 35% among ASEAN nations and 60% within the European Union. The IFPRI project sought to address these gaps by advancing data-driven insights and promoting regional cooperation.

The event provided a platform to share the results of the project and discuss how these findings could help bridge the gap between research and policymaking. The discussions underscored the critical role of agricultural trade in addressing food and nutrition security, poverty reduction, and climate resilience across the region.

Dr. P. K. Joshi, President of the Agricultural Economics Research Association (AERA - India), commended the work undertaken by IFPRI and its partners, noting, “The outcomes of this large study will help to envision and formulate policies to improve food and nutrition security at the country, regional, and global levels.” He emphasized the need for robust policymaking to mitigate the impacts of climate change on food systems, suggesting the establishment of “a policy unit in BIMSTEC to monitor prices, productivity, nutrition, and climate change impacts to enable efficient policy decision making.”

Throughout the project, IFPRI’s integrated approach focused on three main linkages—economic, social, and environmental—while recognizing the importance of domestic and external factors that affect regional cooperation. A flagship achievement was the

development of the BIMSTEC Agricultural Trade Monitor Plus (BATM+), which offers real-time, disaggregated trade data to support informed decision-making on agri-food trade. By improving data access and enhancing research capabilities, the project aimed to contribute to more effective agricultural transformation across the region.

Dr. Rajan Sudesh Ratna, Deputy Head and Senior Economic Affairs Officer at UNESCAP-South and South-West Asia, highlighted the potential of agri-food trade in the BIMSTEC region, stating, “The importance of food systems and agri supply chains is well recognized. However, challenges such as climate change impacts, high tariffs in agri-trade, and non-tariff barriers remain. Efforts to liberalize agriculture and supply chains could greatly benefit communities at the bottom.”

Mr. Robert Simpson, Special Advisor to the Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative at the FAO’s Asia-Pacific Regional Office, lauded IFPRI’s contributions to regional agricultural policies, noting that “IFPRI’s work has fed into FAO’s country-level initiatives and dialogues with governments.” He emphasized the importance of trade for growth and diversification, saying, “Our growing agri-food systems are a tremendous opportunity for rural income, connecting rural and urban communities, improving nutrition outcomes, and contributing to the climate agenda.”

Shri CSR Ram, Joint Secretary (BIMSTEC and SAARC) at India’s Ministry of External Affairs, highlighted India’s ongoing efforts to strengthen regional cooperation, noting the proposed BIMSTEC Centre of Excellence in Agriculture. “The Centre aims to strengthen collective efforts to ensure food security in the region by sharing knowledge and best practices in sustainable and climate-resilient agriculture,” he said. Ram emphasized that forums like this dissemination event play a crucial role in advancing BIMSTEC’s mission.

H.E. Mr. Indra Mani Pandey, Secretary General of BIMSTEC, addressed participants via video message, affirming BIMSTEC’s commitment to agricultural trade and productivity. He pointed out the adoption of a Plan of Action by BIMSTEC Agriculture Ministers in 2022, which includes 17 actions across five areas of cooperation, including the enhancement of agricultural trade and investment. “Through enhancing intra-regional trade in agricultural and other food items, we can ensure food security and boost the production and export of agri and food commodities across BIMSTEC states,” he said.

H.E. Mrs. Wijayanthi Edirisinghe, Ambassador of Sri Lanka to Thailand, reiterated the importance of regional cooperation in addressing the vulnerabilities faced by the BIMSTEC region. “For millions of farmers, agriculture is a way of life. A coordinated approach is crucial

to addressing climate risk and ensuring the resilience of our food systems,” she said. Edirisinghe emphasized that regional integration can help lift populations out of poverty while improving access to nutritious food.

H.E. Mr. Faiyaz Murshid Kazi, Ambassador of Bangladesh to Thailand, echoed these sentiments, expressing hope that the project’s findings would contribute to global initiatives like the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub. He stressed the need for climate-adaptive financing, improved trade facilitation, and engagement with stakeholders from the private sector and civil society to address pressing food security challenges.

The event highlighted the importance of sustained regional collaboration in addressing the shared challenges of food security, poverty, and climate change. The insights and recommendations shared during the discussions provide a roadmap for future efforts aimed at improving agricultural trade and fostering inclusive, sustainable growth across the BIMSTEC region.

For more information please visit the [the project website](#).

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The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) provides research-based policy solutions to sustainably reduce poverty and end hunger and malnutrition. IFPRI’s strategic research aims to identify and analyze alternative international and country-led strategies and policies for meeting food and nutrition needs in low- and middle-income countries, with particular emphasis on poor and vulnerable groups in those countries, gender equity, and sustainability. It is a research center of CGIAR, a worldwide partnership engaged in agricultural research for development. Visit the global website at www.ifpri.org and the regional website <http://southasia.ifpri.info/> for more information.