



Conflict, Cooperation, and Sustainable Rural Development in South Asia: Assessing the Role of Diplomacy, Regional Politics, and Development Policy

Muhammad Irfan Magray¹, Shahbaz Ahmed Shahzad², Allah Ditta³, Dr. Nadia Shaheen⁴

¹ IR Department, Alhamd Islamic University, Quetta Campus

Email: magray06@gmail.com

² PhD, NUST Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (NIPCONS), National University of Sciences & Technology (NUST), Islamabad, Pakistan

Email: shahbazahmed614@yahoo.com

³ M.Phil Political Science Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan

Email: allahditta539@gmail.com

⁴ Assistant Professor, Alhamd Islamic university Islamabad campus

Email: snadia@ir.qau.edu

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Corresponding author:

Muhammad Irfan Magray

Email: magray06@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In South Asia sustainable rural development is influenced by agricultural productivity and economic condition however the political stability, diplomacy, cooperation among South Asian countries, institutions, and environmental risk have an influence as well. The dynamics of conflict and cooperation, regional dynamics, development policies and sustainable rural development are discussed with focus on Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This research design is a documentary design as it is an interpretative and exploratory research in the qualitative research. Evidence is gathered from peer reviewed scholarship and from publicly available documents of international and regional development organisations, the UN, governments and regional institutions. The analysis technique used here is interpretative documentary analysis and reflexive thematic analysis, which aims to find out the common meaning, connection, conflict and implications about the process of the implementation in the set of evidence. The five identified themes that were meshed were: (1) conflict and political instability as vulnerability factors in the rural areas; (2) diplomacy and regional cooperation as factors of enabling cooperation; (3) regional politics and regional geopolitical competition as factors of hindering cooperation; (4) development policy, institutional capacity and conflict sensitivity; and (5) integrated regional strategies for sustainable rural development. The analysis indicates that rural vulnerability has many facets, and is context specific. Conflict can have an impact on livelihoods, markets, infrastructure, food systems and institutional delivery and can make climate and economic shocks more critical. It is also clear that, in many ways, the opportunities for working together to strengthen resilience are real – but only with political will, institutional continuity, and context-specific implementation in the water, food systems, climate change adaptation, disaster preparedness and connectedness, and more. The conceptual framework of peace and diplomacy, cultural cooperation, institutional capacity, environmental resilience and inclusive rural development is being enriched with this study, but in a complementary way.

Introduction

Sustainable rural development is a multidimensional process, involves more than agriculture production and income. It includes livelihood security, food and nutrition systems, infrastructure, environmental sustainability and climate resilience, institutional capacity, social inclusion and public services. Within a wider development framework, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the goals on alleviation of poverty, food security, gender equality, infrastructure development, climate action and peaceful and inclusive institutions (United Nations, 2023), these two dimensions are part of a larger SDG framework. The regional evidence also

indicates that the food systems, climate risks, economic shocks and inequities in access to resources are interlinked issues and not discrete policy issues (FAO et al., 2023; UNESCAP, 2024).

These processes take place within the framework of politics. Governments' and development organizations' ability to sustain services and support to rural livelihoods can be impacted by conflict, political instability, institutional fragmentation, weak governance, and market or productive assets access constraints. Exclusion, inequality, resource competition and institutional weakness can also provide vulnerabilities and conflicts and are not a direct poverty cause. The study 'Pathways for Peace' by the United Nations – World Bank takes an interest in the development-inclusion-conflict prevention nexus and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) focuses on the concept of human security in a broader security matrix that includes the economic, social, political and environmental dimensions of insecurity (United Nations & World Bank, 2018; UNDP, 2022).

The relationships can be examined in terms of South Asia, which has a varied political system and an economic structure, as well as conflict experiences, and histories of ecological/environmental contexts and capacities of institutions. Transboundary issues of food systems, climate change, water resources, migration and disaster risk and connectivity are relevant for all eight countries of this study, but in their own country-specific context (World Bank, 2022a). This is particularly true for climate induced hazards. According to the World Bank (2022a), over the last two decades 752 million people in the eight South Asian countries have experienced at least one of a range of climate-related disasters.

Many of the systems involved in rural livelihoods are transnational in nature and a regional dimension should be introduced. The features of the rivers and ecological systems, transport corridors, markets, energy networks and climate risk can not be controlled in the context of the National policy. By tackling common constraints through regional cooperation, common challenges can be addressed in areas like trade, transport, adaptation to climate change, human development and water resource management (World Bank, 2022b). But regional interdependence does not necessarily lead to cooperation. When there is shared interest, it may be challenging to coordinate given political mistrust, sovereignty issues, institutional constraints, or unequal bargaining power.

There is much literature on conflict and agriculture, climate vulnerability and poverty in the context of regional integration and institutional governance in the development context. Typically, these strands are analyzed separately, however. The present study is an attempt to alleviate this disintegration as both these are taken as interrelated components of sustainable rural development. It is not about establishing statistical causal links, but rather an account of the political processes and institutional surroundings, the environmental risks and development policies in the South Asian contexts.

Research Problem

The use of the central research question is the lack of relationships among the political, diplomatic, institutional, environmental and rural development lens in a qualitative manner. While it is important to appreciate the importance of country-based or sectoral studies, they can be tricky to "translate" into the regional political process and to the extent to which it has been cooperated or not. The research questions focus on meanings, policy frames, institutional relations, documented experiences and patterns of interaction, rather than measurable variables, making a qualitative approach to documentary writing an appropriate research approach.

Research Objective

The overall goal is to build an integrated interpretative framework for understanding the nature of conflict, cooperation, diplomacy, regional politics and how they relate to conditions for sustainable rural development in South Asia and the effects that institutional capacity and development policy can have on these conditions.

Research Questions

- How does conflict and political instability manifest itself as an enabler of sustainable rural development in South Asia in the documentary evidence?
- How are the diplomatic, regional cooperation and rural livelihoods, food security, environmental resilience, water governance, disaster preparedness and connectivity linked?
- What are the opportunities and constraints for the region to cooperate – and what effect does each of the following have on these opportunities and constraints? What are the opportunities and constraints to cooperation in the region and how do each of the following influence opportunities and constraints to cooperation?
- How do development policy, institutional capacity and conflict sensitivity affect the implementation of policies and strategies regarding inclusive and resilient rural-development strategies?

Contribution and Scope

The study is a qualitative synthesis, rather than a new statistical estimate. It has regional reach, and is not intended to be applied on a global level for the South Asia region. Countries are interpreted as a region, e.g., countries in Europe, countries in the Pacific, etc. The analysis also takes official reports as institutional statements that have specific mandates and policy framings and therefore as a documentation of reality to be analysed and compared, rather than as a description of reality.

Literature Review

There is an interlinkage between conflicts, political instabilities and rural development

The policy of developing and of conflict are now more and more perceived as interrelated. Violence can result in decreased agricultural production, destruction of infrastructure, markets and mobility, household displacement and the destruction of public institutions. In the meantime, exclusion, unequal access to resources and fragility of institutions, and continued socio-economic uncertainty can exacerbate the potential for conflict (United Nations & World Bank, 2018; UNDP, 2022). This is especially significant for rural development because rural households are linked to land, water, livestock and local infrastructure and public services, which government and businesses provide to aid agricultural production.

There is also evidence that conflict exposure is not a “typical” area of the region. There are different concepts of conflict and of constraints to development in Afghanistan; different forms of political instability, localized insecurity and exposure to disaster or fragilities of institutions in other countries in South Asia. Vulnerability in rural areas can thus be manifested in several different ways. Insecurity of livelihoods can also occur in the absence of armed conflict, as a result of climate shocks, economic disruptions and a lack of public services. Being conflict sensitive is an integral part of a rural development perspective, and it involves considering the local political economy, local institutional legitimacy, distributional impacts and the ways in which rural development may have unintended consequences on tensions.

Diplomacy, Peacebuilding and Regional Cooperation

Diplomacy's importance for rural development is in establishing conditions for cooperation in the utilization of shared resources and hazards between borders. The issues which cross the borders are many: Water systems, food supply chains, disaster management, climate risks, energy supply, transport, environmental governance, and so on. Connectivity, climate resilience, and human development are identified as areas where regional cooperation can create shared benefits from World Bank's regional integration work (World Bank, 2022b).

It also shows that cooperation can take place other than at the highest political level. functional cooperation can include information sharing about technical matters, early warning information, agricultural research and preparedness for disasters, environmental monitoring and sharing of knowledge. For instance, Jain et al. (2023) link regional integration to environmental sustainability in South Asia and Rasul (2021) stresses the importance of integrated climate change, agriculture, food security and public health approaches. The two studies have helped to shape the notion of cooperation in various institutional forms as a process, but not as a type of regional political integration.

But it's not a matter of nature, though. Interest can hinder implementation due to various issues including national interest, sovereignty conflicts, political volatility, institutional capacity and interest can help coordinate implementation. Cooperation in regions should, therefore, be viewed as facilitative and not as a guarantee of development, unless the political and institutional environments are conducive to it.

Regional Politics, Geopolitical Competition and Economic Connectivity (2011)

In some cases, the interdependency of the region's economy and environment is only achievable through regional cooperation, which is based on regional political relations. World Bank (2022b) notes that intraregional trade in South Asia remains very low compared to its potential and transport, trade policy, investment regime and lack of trust are considered as the major hurdles. The World Bank report on linkages between South Asia and Southeast Asia (2022c) also refers to tariff and non-tariff barriers, service restrictions, connectivity challenges and institutional constraints as challenges to regional integration.

Rural development is indirectly involved but makes a difference. The rural producers rely on transportation, storage, markets, border activities, input suppliers and value chains. The operating context of the livelihoods can then be impacted by regional connectivity constraints. However, the effects differ between countries due to geographical, economic, state capacity and climate and conflict differences. Integration is not only a technical, economic product but it should be a process.

Climate Resilience, Water Governance and Rural Livelihoods

Dealing with climate change has one more interdependence. The Asia region of the IPCC assessment process focuses on exposure to heat, flood, drought, changed precipitation, impacts on ecosystems, agriculture, infrastructure and on human systems (Shaw et al., 2022). The agriculture, food, water, land and energy, and transport sector is also highlighted as a sector vulnerable to climate shocks and World Bank (2022a) has identified climate transitions in the region as a regional vulnerability.

There is a close link between livelihood diversification, institutional support, water governance and access to knowledge and technology and agricultural resilience. Climate stresses, state policies, institutional relations, labour changes and market conditions have a combined effect on rural adaptation in the Himalayan region, as revealed by the study of pastoralism in the region. Likewise, the research studies on climate smart agriculture in South Asia have identified various challenges related to institutional, technological, financial and knowledge aspects in implementing CSA (Ishtiaque et al., 2024). The results emphasize the importance of taking into account the reading resilience of rural communities' political and institutional context.

There is a close interconnection between human security and sustainable rural development. Human security is a close linkage with sustainable rural development.

The literature on sustainable rural development has progressed from the concept of productivity to the concept of livelihoods resilience, food security, environmental sustainability, infrastructure, social inclusion and institutional capacity. This multi-dimensional approach is reflected in the SDG framework where poverty, hunger, infrastructure, inequality, climate action, peace and institutions (United Nations, 2023; UNESCAP, 2024) are interlinked. Human security is a complementary approach of interpretation since it extends the territorial security to a focus on people and communities beyond economic, food, environmental and political insecurity (UNDP, 2022).

These flows of literature suggest that there is a need to understand sustainable rural development in the South Asian region as a continuum of political, economical, social, cultural, environmental, economical and livelihood security, rather than as a series of inter-dependent factors that need to be understood in the context of a specific setting and community. The aim of this study is to contribute to this understanding, by linking the strands in a qualitative documentary analysis.

Theoretical Foundations

Conflict Theory

The primary elements of the conflict theory are competition for resources, unequal power, exclusion and institutions. It plays a role in increasing contestability and vulnerability of land and water, infrastructure, markets, political access.

Liberal Institutionalism

In the liberal institutionalism, the role of institutions, repeated interactions, rules and cooperation in facilitating collective action, where interests are conflicting, is emphasized. It's here it used to give credence to the possibility of regional institutions and functional cooperation and to displace the idea that it is the capacity of institutions to resolve political conflicts.

Discuss about regionalism and regional Integration

Regionalism stresses the interconnectedness of actors, and the political and institutional processes through which issues are dealt with in the border area. It could be applied, for example, to issues that lack a country specific dimension such as trade, connectivity, water, climate, disaster risk...

Human Security

The concept of security has been broadened with the advent of human security to cover the political, economic, environmental, food and livelihood dimension. It serves as a link between the political-security analysis and lived conditions that impact on rural resilience (UNDP, 2022).

To have the ability to engage in sustainable and conflict sensitive development

Sustainable development combines the three concepts of environmental integrity, social inclusion, economic opportunity and institutional capacity. Contextual interventions refer to the complex interplay of interventions with local power dynamics, grievances and resource and political environment as part of a conflict sensitive development (Paudel et al., 2023). The five themes elaborated in the analysis in the interpretation are complemented by these perspectives.

Research Methodology

Students will learn and use design and research philosophies

The study is a research design that is interpretivist, qualitative and exploratory. Appropriateness in this instance is justified because the emphasis is placed on meanings, institutional perspectives, policy and relationship contexts, and documented experiences as opposed to assessing the measurable causal variables. The design is documentary since the empirical material is documents from the scholarly and institutional world. The aim of the representation and linkage across South Asian contexts is to develop an interpretative narrative of political and development processes.

Documentary Evidence Base

Evidence base includes peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly reviews, reports and analytical materials from the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, publications of United Nations agencies, regional materials, government and policy materials and analytical materials on conflict, peacebuilding, climate change and environment. The sources of evidence used were mostly from publications after the year 2020, with publications before the 2020 time slot used selectively as background and to suggest ideas. This is a geographic area that includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Authorities, relevance to research questions, methodological transparency (if applicable), substantive contribution, consistency or disagreement with other sources. Official and institutional document(s) were not assessed as “neutral documents” but rather the mandate and institutional framing of the document(s) was assessed in the interpretation. The study has not set up a systematic review nor attempted to collect all literature available because it was not possible to set up a search protocol according to PRISMA and no count of the databases was set up in the source manuscript.

Analytical Procedure

The interpretive documentary analysis and thematic analysis were employed in analysing the documentary materials. It took place in a way similar to Braun and Clarke (2021a, 2021b) describe for reflexive thematic analysis. It was done in a familiarisation way followed by coding, searching for patterns, reviewing the potential themes, identifying themes and summarising the themes in an interpretative way, following the method of Braun and Clarke (2021a, 2021b) in reflexive thematic analysis. The themes of the coding were similar and had relations with the concepts of conflict, political instability, diplomacy, cooperation, rural livelihoods, food security, climate vulnerability, water governance, institutional capacity, connectivity, and policy-implementation.

There were no frequency counts used in the analysis. A lack of a concept was not considered as statistically significant. However, it was attended to with regard to convergence and divergence, tensions and differences in institutional framing instead of documents being read in abstract. Cross-document comparison then was used to determine whether or not similar issues were described and how in various countries and by various sources. In this analysis this is not an “artificial consensus,” but rather it maintained the disagreement.

Triangulation and Interpretive Credibility

Triangulation of sources was used to enhance the credibility. A synthesis of academic research and documentation or institutional materials and regional materials was carried out. A claim from one source or a source that had a strong institutional mandate (which may have influenced the manner in which the claim was made), was treated with a bit more caution. This can help highlight the evidentiary basis, and minimise or downplay the level of reliance on unsupported regional generalisations that can be a factor in an approach that can lead to interpretive credibility.

Ethics and Positional considerations,

This paper does not report on interviews, surveys, focus groups, observations, experiments or other primary data gathered from human subjects or participants, but rather only documentary evidence. The analysis is not, therefore, directly from rural communities' voices or lived experiences. This is important because institutional/scholarly documents are mediated accounts; and this study is an interpretation of the mediated accounts, not an alternative to community-based research.

Methodological Limitations

1. The extent and quality of documentation is different in different countries and policy areas.
2. Official reports may be mandated by the institution, set by the priorities in policy and/or the political framing.
3. The political, socioeconomic, geographic and conflict exposure condition among the countries of South Asia varies markedly and so is the institutional capacity making it difficult to make symmetrical comparisons.

4. The results of the documentary design can't determine statistical causality or effect sizes.
5. The study should not be interpreted as exhaustive review of literature available on the topic as it is not a systematic review.

Findings and Discussion

The results of the documentary analysis resulted in 5 themes and these themes were inter-related. They are experienced as if they are distinct and in response to the questions, they are presented clearly as distinct and as interconnected processes. Results were not necessarily a cause-effect relationship. Instead, they establish patterns of relationships and conditions that are felt to impact the opportunities and vulnerabilities in the political and institutional arena of rural development.

Theme 1. Here are some examples of content you'll find

Overall, throughout the evidence, conflict and political instability is associated with disruption of rural livelihoods and agricultural activity, infrastructure, markets, public services and food systems. Their impact is not uniform and is determined by the quality and length of conflict, the geographic vulnerability to conflict, and institutions' resilience, as well as the capacities of public and development actors to continue providing critical services. This will help to promote a multi-dimensional view of vulnerability in the rural context, as opposed to security.

In Pakistan, for example, 2022 floods can be seen as a result of environmental shocks on prevailed socio-economic and institutional vulnerabilities. World Bank (2022d) estimated damages to the agricultural and livestock sectors as the most impacted sectors, costing more than US\$15.2 billion in damages to the economy and more than US\$14.9 billion in damages to the physical assets. The monetary value is not relevant here and the relevant factor is the coefficient between the damage suffered and the livelihood, infrastructure and public service and ability to be recovered.

Hence, the documentary seems to be proof of non armed conflict, rural insecurity. Climate hazards, economic shocks and stresses, displacement, poverty, exclusion and poor institutions are all threats to livelihood security. A human-security approach may contribute to bringing them together, considering the connections between household and community insecurity and political conditions.

Theme 2. Diplomacy and regional cooperation are requisites for peace and security in a region

The evidence suggests the following areas where cooperation can play a role in supporting the development of enabling conditions for the resilience of rural populations: Water management, agricultural knowledge, Climate adaptation, Disaster preparedness, Environmental governance, Trade, Transport and connectivity. The regional integration work of the World Bank is about connecting and sharing on connectivity and human development, climate, and going by the number of exposures to the region (World Bank, 2022a; 2022b).

Cooperation is beyond organisations and politics. Various forms of regional cooperation, such as technical exchange, early-warning, research cooperation, data exchange and coordinated disaster prevention etc. are possible. The qualitative information suggests that such mechanisms are more evident in the context of border crossing risks, and that the capacity to respond is predominantly national. However there is an opposite side to this: Cooperation doesn't always result in opportunities. Opportunities for lasting development practices are more likely where there is political, institutional support and the capability to finance and implement these practices.

Theme 3. Regional Politics and Geopolitical Competition as Development Constraints

Meanwhile there is inter-dependence between the regions and at the same time the national interests and national sovereignty. The above examples demonstrate that, contrary to the common assumption, coordinated policy is not necessarily linked with common economic or environmental interest. Political mistrust and geopolitical competition, unequal bargaining power, trade barriers and institutional fragmentation are all possible limitations to regional action. One such trend in South Asia is in relation to intraregional trade, which is currently estimated at US\$23 billion (World Bank, 2022b) though it is estimated to be at least US\$67 billion.

These constraints are linked to market access, transport, agricultural inputs, value chains and trans-border environmental cooperation to the importance of these constraints for rural development. However, the differences in results from one country to another. Due to landlocked nature of countries (e.g. Nepal and Bhutan) connectivity situation is different from that of the island countries (e.g. Maldives and Sri Lanka) and a conflict in Afghanistan brings another connectivity scenario. The results then give a good reason for regional differences and not for a regional consensus on a single model of rural development from South Asia.

Theme 4. Conflict, institutional capacities and Development Policy

A major issue with the documentary evidence is the capacity for its implementation, which is needed to achieve policy objectives and in the longer term, to deliver the outcomes of rural development. Distinct, but interdependent administrative systems can be

implemented for dealing with agriculture, water management and food security, social protection, climate adaptation and infrastructure. Low level of coordination can be a source of incoherence.

A gap exists between the design of policies and the political context, which one instrument can fill is conflict sensitive development. Development interventions can be planned and executed in a differential way with regard to access to land, water, infrastructure, market, employment and public goods. Previous studies on conflict sensitivity have concentrated on the importance of grasping the local political context, and ensuring that activities do not inadvertently lead to feelings of outsiderdom or competition. Conflict sensitivity is thus not only considered as a way of project management, but also as an analytical approach to project management in this study. (Paudel et al., 2023)

Improving agricultural productivity is not the only facet of sustainable rural development which is being illustrated. Elements of food security are food production, food markets, food pricing, nutrition, food infrastructure, environmental conditions and institutions. Financial, knowledge, institutional, technology and policy constraints are also identified as the barriers to the adoption of climate resilient practices by the studies on climate smart agriculture (Ishtiaque et al., 2024).

Theme 5. IRS for Sustainable Rural Development

The 5th theme is a combination of all the above themes. The nexus of peace, development and climate governance is a lens for understanding sustainable rural development in south Asian countries, requiring a balance between peace, regional cooperation, institutional capacity, environmental resilience and livelihood security. There is not much evidence of the benefits of cooperation and of how it detracts from development. Instead, capacities of institutions, the political climate, environmental risks and inclusiveness of the development process determine the outcomes.

Hence, a coherent regional approach should ensure that the accountability of the activities of transboundary and national areas are retained. Shared rivers have relevance for regional policies, for example, in climate information, disaster risks, trade corridors, environmental systems and exchange of knowledge, and social protection, agricultural services, local policies and institutions; and for domestic policies, in social protection, agricultural services, local policies and institutions, and for shared rivers, in climate information, disaster risks and trade corridors, environmental systems and exchange of knowledge. The 'appropriate balance' is not a common policy model for the eight countries, but rather depends on the context.

Table 1. Qualitative synthesis of the five analytical themes

Theme	Recurring conditions	Documentary evidence interpreted	Implication for rural development
1. Conflict and political instability	Displacement, disrupted livelihoods, weak services, insecurity	Conflict and disaster evidence links vulnerability to disruption of agriculture, infrastructure, markets, food systems, and institutions.	Rural resilience requires attention to livelihood and human-security conditions as well as political stability.
2. Diplomacy and regional cooperation	Shared water, climate, trade, disaster and connectivity risks	Regional and scholarly sources identify cooperation, information exchange, and functional coordination as potential enabling mechanisms.	Cooperation can expand development options, but implementation depends on political and institutional continuity.
3. Regional politics and geopolitics	Sovereignty, mistrust, asymmetry, trade and connectivity barriers	Regional integration evidence shows substantial unrealized potential alongside persistent political and institutional constraints.	Rural market access and transboundary risk management are shaped by regional political relations.
4. Development policy and institutions	Fragmentation, uneven capacity, unequal access, implementation gaps	Policy and conflict-sensitivity literature emphasizes institutional legitimacy, coordination, inclusion, and context-sensitive implementation.	Policy coherence and institutional capacity influence whether development interventions strengthen or weaken resilience.
5. Integrated regional strategies	Interaction of peace, climate, institutions, livelihoods and environment	Thematic synthesis shows that rural sustainability is multidimensional and context-dependent.	Sustainable rural development is best interpreted through linked political, institutional, socioeconomic, and environmental processes.

Integrated Conceptual Framework

The four main pathways have been linked in an integrated framework resulting from the findings. First, conflict or political instability can increase the vulnerability of the rural sector and impact on the development processes. Second, the region has the opportunity to be more diplomatic and cooperative to coordinate institutions and provide opportunities to address joint risks. Thirdly, regional

politics have the potential to constrain or enable development in cooperative development opportunities. Third, conflict-sensitive development policy can contribute to build resilience and inclusion if the institutions are appropriate.

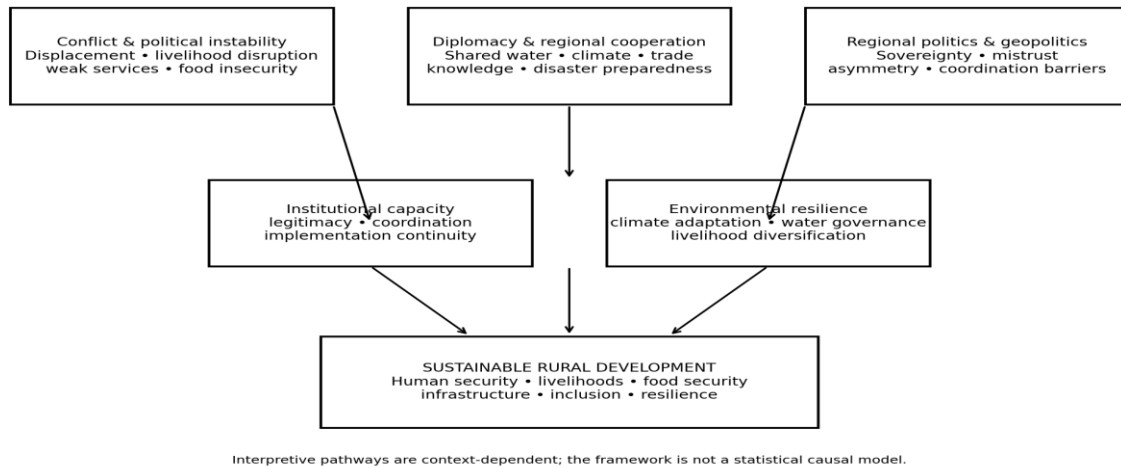


Figure 2. Integrated conceptual framework for conflict, cooperation, and sustainable rural development in South Asia.

This is an interpretive, rather than statistical, model. Does not define independent and dependent variables, test hypotheses or estimate causal effects. It is designed to organize relationships that are identified across documents and to highlight points of intersection in the political, institutional, socioeconomic and environmental processes.

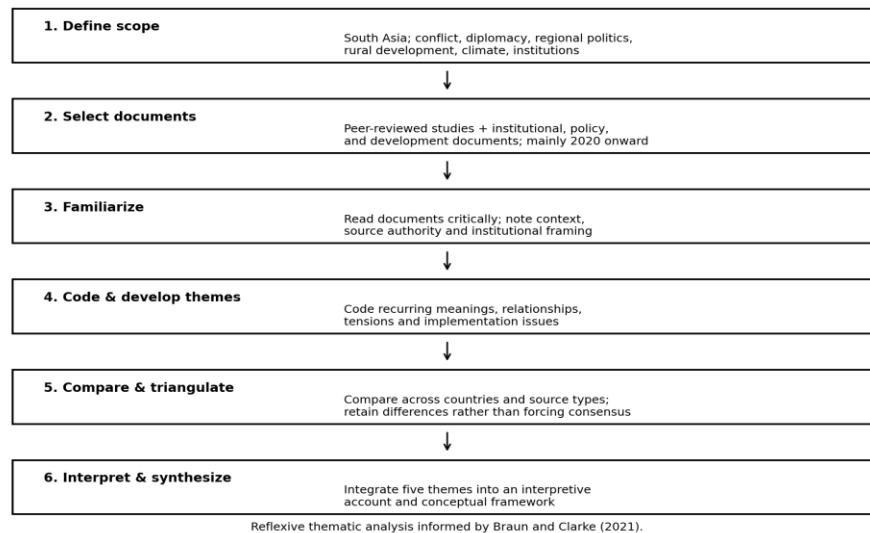


Figure 1. Qualitative documentary research design and thematic analysis process.

Policy and Development Implications

Conflict-Sensitive Rural Development

Local political context, resource availability, threat of displacement, and institutional acceptance should be taken into account in planning rural development. There is no one-size-fits-all model for all countries of conflict sensitivity. When to implement a programme however, it needs to be designed to the contexts where it will be implemented and needs to be conflict sensitive.

This goal is to work together on regional food systems. The aim is to work towards regional cooperation for agriculture and food systems.

The synergy between the regions can be leveraged to agricultural research, exchange of information on food systems, climate-smart production, early-warning systems and knowledge sharing. The best argument is one of commonality of risk, such as climate, food or market. This cooperation should also fit in policy mandates of countries and institutional capacity of the country (FAO et al., 2023; Rasul, 2021).

Ending isolation, markets and rural livelihoods

Transport services, storage, market access, border clearance and value chains are important for the rural producers in terms of connectivity. Policy and infrastructure barriers are impeding SA's trade and connectivity potential (World Bank, 2022b). Thus, connectivity needs to be part of rural development strategies and not considered as an isolated sector of rural infrastructure.

Governance, Climate and Water

The impacts of climate and water risks are not necessarily confined to administrative boundaries. Regional technical cooperation can be used to share information, to prepare for disasters, to monitor the environment and to have ideas about water systems amongst others. Regional cooperation cannot replace local water governance and/or local adaptation capacity (World Bank, 2022a, Bell et al., 2022) and institutional arrangements are relevant at the national and local level.

Inclusion of everyone and Human security in Institutions

The findings of the study show the need for building up the relationship between the agricultural sector with the environmental sector, the social-protection and local-government and rural-development sectors. Along with political stability, the concept of human security also focuses the attention on livelihoods, food situation, environmental conditions and social inclusion (UNDP, 2022). There is also some evidence that institutions cannot be a policy goal in themselves, but are a component of the effectiveness of development.

The Community will be aligned to the SDGs.

The analysis is related to the SDG framework's emphasis on the interdependencies of poverty, hunger, infrastructure, inequality, climate action, peace and institutions. The Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2024 also underscores the inequities in SDG progress and the importance of data, inclusiveness and context-specific development strategies (UNESCAP, 2024). It is not prescriptive, but rather an implication, that there cannot be any rural development without developing these policy domains together and without separating them artificially.

Lastly, restrictions and guidelines for future research were taken into account.

There were a number of limitations in this study. The first is that there is only little good and quality document evidence and the evidence is not geographically spread. Secondly, institutional priorities and/or institutional political framing can be found in the official reports. Third, of course, country comparisons in South Asia are asymmetrical, and comparisons of political, economic, historical, geographical and institutional features of the two regions are warranted. Fourthly, the study lacks of field visits for primary interviews, and the results do not directly capture local experiences of conflict and/or cooperation, and local development policy. Lastly, the documentary design is interpretive in nature, and cannot make statistical causal statements.

Comparative country studies, subregional case studies, studying cooperation mechanisms at the level of the individual, interviews with rural communities and with different stakeholders (including policy makers, development practitioners and regional institutions) would be useful in future qualitative research. Research could be directed towards the interpretation and implementation of the regional policies at subregional level and to the similarities and/or differences of the types of relationships that were documented in the documentary synthesis in different countries.

Conclusion

The study used a qualitative documentary analysis approach, and aimed to provide understanding of the phenomena of conflict-cooperation, diplomacy, regional politics and sustainable rural development in the context of development policy in South Asia. Themes identified were: conflict and political instability as rural vulnerability markers; diplomacy and regional cooperation as enablers; region politics and geopolitical competition as constraints; development policy and institutional capacity as implementation conditions; and region strategies – including region pillars on peace, climate, institutions and livelihoods – as integrated region strategies.

From this it is inferred that there is no just agricultural and economic aspect to the concept of rural development. The climate and environmental risk is trans-border and the development policies are taking place in a political and institutional context. In addition, the

evidence contradicts the 'deterministic' assertions: conflicts do not necessarily produce the same development outcomes in different countries and regional cooperation does not necessarily build resilience. Outcomes are linked to institutional capacity, political context, exposure to the environment, processes of inclusion and implementation.

So, the idea and understanding of the study is the most significant contribution of the study. It creates a platform for peace and diplomacy and regional cooperation studies, environmental resilience, human security, sustainable rural development and integrated approach, and diversity of countries approach. The framework is not intended to be used in place of the country specific evidence and quantitative causal analysis, but rather to complement further qualitative and comparative analyses.

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