

An Advocacy Agenda for Mainstreaming Consumer Interest in South Asian Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation



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Cost of Economic Non-Cooperation to Consumers in South Asia
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Results of the Study

- Trade literature treats reciprocal exchange of import concessions for export opportunities as an absolute necessity for the functioning of trade agreements
- Despite prospects for huge consumer welfare gains, imports are generally viewed disapprovingly under the influence of protectionism tendencies
- Evidence of protectionism as a major obstacle to South Asian intra-regional trade
- Empirical evidence shows huge consumer welfare gains from enhanced intra-regional trade in South Asia

Results of the Study

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- In general, various categories of stakeholders have very low expectations about consumer welfare gains, owing to either ignorance about the issue or negligence (an unimportant factor)
- Lack of reference to consumer welfare gains in academic literature as well as in popular media has heavily influenced the perceptions of all categories of stakeholders
- Despite its stagnant state, a general perception is that intra-regional trade in South Asia is under-performing and its potential is highly under-rated
- Stakeholders believe a turnaround is possible by disentangling trade issues from non-trade issues plaguing the region

Key Messages

Importance of Networking

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- Lack of awareness about consumer welfare gains and lack of involvement of consumer organisations in trade policy-making process and content are important causes behind the oversight of gains from imports in the South Asian context
- Build networks of consumer organisations in the region to discuss and spread awareness about consumer welfare gains from intra-regional trade liberalisation
- Organise workshops for consumer organisations and other relevant civil society organisations

Key Messages

Importance of Research

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- It is crucial to conduct further detailed studies on the subject of loss of consumer welfare and other trade costs owing to tariff and non-tariff barriers plaguing the region in order to generate more informed discussions and subsequently to mainstream the issue of consumer interest in trade policy-making process and content
- Conduct international academic seminars on specific topics with the intent to attract quality research outputs which will then be taken more seriously in policy-making circle

Key Messages

Importance of Balancing Producers' and Consumers' Concerns

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- Two most important concerns of the industry are: a) safeguards for import sensitive sectors and b) non-tariff barriers should be taken into account for balancing producers' and consumers' interests in trade liberalisation
- Increase the involvement of the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry in holding targeted dialogues between and among industry/producers/exporters associations and consumer organisations – identify protagonists and antagonists and according direct advocacy efforts

Key Messages

Importance of Inclusiveness

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- Consumers' interests from increased international trade should be adequately represented at national, regional and international level
- Increase the involvement of the SAARC Secretariat in facilitating balanced representation between consumer and producer interests by using its channels with national trade policy making bodies, chambers of industries and civil society organisations
- Commission a study for mapping inclusiveness in trade policy-making in South Asia with the objective of framing strategies for its improvement

Key Messages

Importance of Media Outreach

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- Publicise consumer welfare impact of increased intra-regional trade through the use of popular media
- Organise media workshops in partnership with media associations
- Regular use of tools such as press release, online discussion forum, poster campaign for reaching out to the masses through media and otherwise

Thank You

