

CUTS-IIS JOINT SESSION IN TRADE + SUSTAINABILITY HUB,

ORGANISED BY IISD

**Resilient and Sustainable Supply Chains: Role of Efficient
Connectivity and Trade Facilitation Measures for Food and
Nutrition Security in the BBIN Sub-region**

3rd December, 2021| 3:00 – 4:15 PM IST

*Speaking Note for Mr. Pradeep S Mehta, Secretary General, CUTS
International*

The social and economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are reversing hard won development gains. The pandemic has put a spotlight on our vulnerabilities and is forcing all stakeholders into action. One of the issues at the forefront is that of ensuring food and nutritional security through resilient food supply chains.

The progress made in mitigating global food security was already in retreat when the pandemic struck. The latest Report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World by the FAO has provided a sobering reality check. Not only did the number of people experiencing undernourishment begin to slowly increase from 2014, but in 2020, the world witnessed an unprecedented setback in its hunger eradication efforts. Between 720 and 811 million people in the world faced hunger in 2020, which is around 161 million more than in 2019.

Even as we adjust to these new realities, the discussion is not over. As we speak, scientists are trying to determine if the new Omicron strain of the virus will require a more stringent response. We have already seen a swift restoration of restrictions on international travel. If the impact of the new variant intensifies, it won't be long before national authorities resort to other international and domestic restrictions like lockdowns. These may reintroduce constraints in supply chains including those crucial for unimpeded access to food.

When we talk specifically of the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) sub-region, we note that despite being home to 21 per cent of the world's population, it is one of the least integrated and connected sub-regions in the world. Moreover, the sub-region faces problems of high unemployment, poverty, inequality and is extremely vulnerable to climate related disasters. All the factors combined make the BBIN sub-region very susceptible to food insecurity.

This pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to re-evaluate how we tackle the major drivers of hunger and malnutrition and refocus our efforts to build better. CUTS International has dedicated substantial time and resources into evaluating how the BBIN sub-region can develop seamless intra-regional and inter-regional connectivity to ensure the resiliency of supply chains, particularly those which facilitate security of critical necessities such as food.

In this attempt to build better, we must also ensure that adequate focus is given to sustainable practices such as designing green infrastructure and shifting to green transport. An efficient, environment friendly multi-modal transport system in the BBIN sub-

region will promote both the resilience and the sustainability of supply chains.

Today's session will focus on the best trade facilitation measures to develop a robust system for seamless cross-border movement of goods. Experienced panellists will discuss how measures to boost multi-modal transport, digital connectivity, and easier customs procedures, among others, can be adopted by the four countries to ensure unimpeded access to food supplies.

Moreover, it is not only a question of access alone. Economic slowdowns, downturns and disruptions have resulted in job losses, decreased purchasing power and a steep rise in food price inflation. As per the World Bank, the poorest countries witnessed a sharp increase in food prices in September this year, reaching the highest level since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has forced people to buy cheaper and less nutritious food.

Greater integration in the BBIN sub-region will produce positive externalities beyond easier access to food supplies. Enabling seamless connectivity and intra-regional and inter-regional trade will bring significant welfare gains to the people of the sub-region. It will provide new employment opportunities, better choices for consumers, speedy and reliable deliveries, and low prices – ultimately boosting nutritional security in the sub-region for the most vulnerable.