



South Asia Can Unlock Millions of Jobs and Billions in Investments Through Food Systems Transformation: World Bank Group at SAPLING High-Level Policy Dialogue

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South Asia stands at a critical moment in its development journey. With millions of young people entering the workforce every year, creating sustainable jobs has become one of the region's most pressing priorities. The World Bank Group highlighted that transforming food systems beyond the farm can unlock significant opportunities for employment, investment, economic growth, and poverty reduction.

The region's agriculture sector is valued at over \$700 billion annually and employs nearly 43 percent of the workforce. However, despite its scale, agriculture contributes only around 16 percent of the region's GDP. More than 30 percent of food produced in South Asia is lost or wasted every year—enough to feed nearly 300 million people.

Experts emphasized that the next phase of agricultural transformation lies not merely in increasing production but in expanding food processing, storage, logistics, marketing, and value addition. These activities can create millions of productive jobs while reducing food losses and increasing farmers' incomes.

In India, food grain production has increased from 51 million tonnes in 1950-51 to more than 330 million tonnes today. Processed food exports have also more than doubled over the past decade, rising from approximately \$4.9 billion to over \$10 billion. The food processing sector currently contributes around 9 percent of manufacturing value added and nearly 13 percent of India's exports.

India's experience demonstrates how strategic policy interventions can transform agricultural value chains. Key initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Sampada Yojana, the Pradhan Mantri Formalization of Micro Food Processing Enterprises (PMFME) Scheme, and the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme for Food Processing Industries have strengthened infrastructure, modernized enterprises, attracted investments, and improved competitiveness.

Despite this progress, significant opportunities remain. Food processing currently accounts for only a small share of total employment and a large proportion of agricultural produce still remains unprocessed. Strengthening cold chains, storage facilities, logistics networks, and market linkages can substantially increase value creation across the sector.

South Asia possesses strong fundamentals to emerge as a global leader in food systems. Rapid urbanization, a growing middle class, rich agro-biodiversity, and rising demand for safe and high-quality processed food are creating new opportunities for investment and innovation.

To accelerate this transformation, the World Bank Group is advancing a combined approach through AgriConnect and SAPLING.

AgriConnect, a global platform, aims to connect 300 million farmers to markets by 2030 through investments in infrastructure, policy reforms, and private capital mobilization. The initiative is already supporting projects and reforms across countries including India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

The South Asian Policy Leadership for Improved Nutrition and Growth (SAPLING) serves as a regional platform that brings together governments, investors, development partners, and innovators to promote policy reforms, develop investment pipelines, and scale successful solutions across the region.

Participants at the SAPLING High-Level Policy Dialogue highlighted the importance of coordinated action by governments, businesses, investors, and development institutions.

Investors were encouraged to support cold chains, warehousing, logistics hubs, processing clusters, agro-industrial parks, and emerging agri-enterprises. Companies were urged to build integrated value chains, adopt digital technologies for traceability and quality assurance, and invest in workforce skills and capacity building.

Policymakers can accelerate progress by promoting food processing zones, improving logistics infrastructure, simplifying food safety and certification systems, strengthening public-private partnerships, and creating a more investment-friendly business environment.

International financial institutions can play a catalytic role by expanding blended finance mechanisms, supporting policy reforms linked to investment opportunities, and reducing risks associated with private sector investments in food systems.

The dialogue underscored that the future of South Asia's food economy lies beyond production alone. By transforming food systems from farm to market, the region can generate millions of jobs, reduce food loss, improve nutrition, attract investment, strengthen exports, and drive inclusive economic growth for decades to come.

The Ministry of Food Processing Industries (MoFPI), Government of India, in collaboration with the World Bank Group-led SAPLING initiative, inaugurated the Regional High-Level Policy Dialogue titled "Unlocking Value: Advancing Food Processing for Employment Generation and Sustainable Growth in South Asia" in Ahmedabad, Gujarat on 9th June 2026.

The two-day regional dialogue brings together around 200 participants including policymakers, industry leaders, development partners, innovators, researchers, startups, and representatives from South Asian countries to deliberate on strengthening food processing ecosystems and building resilient, inclusive, and sustainable food systems in the region.

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