

REPORT

International Conference on Development and Environmental Economics: SANDEE@25

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The South Asian Network for Development and Environmental Economics Conference in 2025¹ was a defining milestone for the regional capacity development network that has fundamentally shaped how development and environmental economics are practised across South Asia. Organized on December 12–14, 2025, the three-day international conference brought together researchers, practitioners, and policy actors to discuss the theme “Development, Environment, and the Mountains”.

In the Hindu Kush Himalayas (HKH) and across South Asia, ecological change is accelerating, socioeconomic risks are becoming more complex, and institutions are increasingly being stretched beyond their capacity. These realities demand policy responses that are locally grounded, empirically rigorous, and transparent about their constraints. Over three days, the conference repeatedly returned to three core questions:

1. How should sustainable development be understood when natural capital is being rapidly depleted?
2. Which institutions and incentives shape effective environmental policy?

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¹ For more, please visit the SANDEE@25 website:

<https://www.icimod.org/initiative/sandee25/>.

3. How should research respond when climate change is no longer a future risk but a lived reality?

Figure 1. SANDEE@25 conference participants at Kathmandu, Nepal, from December 12 to 14, 2025.



Source: SANDEE Secretariat

The conference convened over 280 participants from South Asia, the HKH, and beyond. Around 65 papers were presented across 20 parallel sessions, complemented by four keynote addresses and seven special panels. The potent mix of researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and institutional leaders ensured that discussions remained anchored in implementation realities rather than confined to technical debates.

The founder's keynote by Partha Dasgupta, Emeritus Professor at the University of Cambridge and co-founder of SANDEE, set the analytical tone. He argued that development should be evaluated in terms of changes in inclusive wealth, not by income or output alone. Gross domestic product (GDP) measures flow but ignores asset depreciation and the contribution of natural capital, which underpins long-term development. When nature is underpriced or treated as free, economies make systematically poor and distorted decisions about production, consumption, and investment. Dasgupta emphasized that technological progress does not automatically offset the loss of natural capital and highlighted that population dynamics were a persistent yet often neglected driver of environmental pressures. His message was clear: sustainable development requires managing a portfolio

of assets—produced, human, and natural capital—not just maximizing short-term flows.

Figure 2. SANDEE@25 *Reflections* booklet launched on the first day of the conference



Source: SANDEE Secretariat

A reflection panel marking SANDEE's 25-year journey examined what sustained capacity development has achieved. Speakers highlighted SANDEE's distinctive model of long-term engagement, combining research grants with close mentorship, repeated interactions, and durable networks. This approach has empowered early-career researchers across the region to sharpen their research questions, strengthen methods, and build confidence. Its impact has extended well beyond publications, influencing teaching, institutional practices, and policy engagement. At the same time, panellists were candid about future needs, calling for deeper engagement with decision-making processes, more substantial evidence-to-policy uptake, and sustained attention to climate risk, disasters, and distributional impacts.

The first day concluded with findings from SANDEE's tracer survey of past grantees, offering rare systematic evidence on long-term capacity outcomes.² The study showed that most alumni remain actively engaged in

² Day one video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJlnguUvrrU>

research—in universities, public agencies, and policy-oriented institutions. Collaboration emerged as a key outcome, with around half of respondents reporting sustained research partnerships rooted in SANDEE-supported networks. The research influence extends beyond direct policy uptake to teaching, advisory roles, and contributions to policy processes. Importantly, many alumni now hold leadership positions at their institutions, underscoring the importance of enabling environments. The session demonstrated how systematic tracking can clarify where capacity development has lasting effects and where future investments should focus.

On the second day,³ Ruth Meinzen-Dick, senior research fellow at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), delivered a keynote on the governance of commons. Drawing on extensive empirical work, she challenged the assumption that commons are inherently inefficient or prone to degradation. Evidence shows that commons can generate significant economic and social benefits when institutions function well. Key determinants include tenure security, governance arrangements, and equity in decision-making and benefit sharing. She emphasized that property rights are often plural and overlapping, shaped by customary practices, existing laws, and development interventions, and that they require coordination across levels rather than standardized solutions. Behaviour, she noted, is shaped by norms, incentives, and mental models, especially under conditions of climate stress.

Another keynote speaker, Biswo Nath Poudel, governor of Nepal Rastra Bank (the Central Bank of Nepal), spoke on the role of the financial system in agricultural and rural development. He highlighted lending patterns, constraints faced by banks and borrowers, and the importance of credit for productivity, income stability, and structural transformation. At the same time, he pointed to misalignments between financial incentives and long-term environmental objectives. Risk, information gaps, and regulatory requirements shape lending decisions in ways that often undermine sustainability. Finance, he emphasized, is not neutral—it is a powerful institutional force shaping development pathways.

The final keynote by Adil Najam, professor at Boston University and president of the World Wildlife Fund, framed the conference as part of what he termed the “Age of Adaptation”. Delayed mitigation has made adaptation unavoidable. Climate change is now experienced daily through water stress, floods, heatwaves, food insecurity, and mobility constraints. Adaptation, he argued, is not optional or secondary—it is a core

³ Day two video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYirZ1VyP4M>

development challenge. Climate impacts are deeply unequal, and research must pay greater attention to justice, distribution, and lived experience. Najam challenged researchers to link rigorous analysis more directly to real-world decision-making under conditions of heightened uncertainty.

Three policy-focused panels on the second day translated these ideas into practice. A panel on knowledge networks emphasized regional collaboration as an institutional infrastructure that supports learning, reduces duplication, and enables the sharing of evidence across borders. A panel on electric cooking in Nepal highlighted constraints related to adoption, affordability, reliability, and infrastructure, and recognized fuel stacking as a rational response to uncertainty. A third panel on financing mountain ecosystem services treated payment for ecosystem services as an institutional and political economy challenge, in which design, valuation, and accountability determine outcomes.

The final day⁴ returned participants' attention to the mountains and the HKH. Panels examined springshed restoration, digital technologies and big data, and landscape-level conservation, emphasizing that governance, coordination, and incentives are as critical as ecological or technical solutions.

Across the 20 parallel paper sessions, research clustered around climate risk and adaptation, natural resource governance, energy transitions, environmental health, agriculture, and empirical methods. Together, they reflected the growing maturity of regionally grounded research that complements conceptual advances.

Several lessons emerged from the conference. Institutions and incentives matter everywhere, from the commons and finance to energy transitions and conservation. Evidence is necessary but insufficient without systems that connect research to decisions. Finally, in the Age of Adaptation, rigorous, context-specific, and distributionally aware research is not optional—it is a responsibility. This highlights the increased need for well-trained human capital who can shoulder this responsibility, and SANDEE is well-placed to build a pool of well-trained human capital who can generate a locally grounded, rigorous evidence base for informing development and climate policies in the region.

Ethics Statement: This study complies with requirements of ethical approvals from the institutional ethics committee for the conduct of this research.

⁴ Day three video link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTtZ_4vyeRA

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