**Poverty Alleviation**

Recognizing the imperative to address poverty related issues and to suggest strategies and measures to alleviate poverty in the region, the SAARC Leaders at their Sixth Summit (Colombo, 1991) established an Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA). The Commission provided a conceptual framework for poverty alleviation through social mobilization and empowerment in South Asia.

The Seventh Summit (Dhaka, 1993) welcomed the report and expressed its commitment to eradicate poverty from South Asia through an agenda of action which would, inter-alia, include a strategy of social mobilization, and a policy of decentralized agricultural development, village reawakening, small-scale labour-intensive industrialization and human development.

Three-tier Mechanism

The Eighth SAARC Summit (New Delhi, 1995) approved the establishment of a Three-tier mechanism for dealing with poverty issues. The first-tier comprised the Secretaries to the governments concerned with poverty eradication and social development in SAARC countries. The second-tier comprised Finance/Planning Secretaries and the third-tier comprised Finance/Planning Ministers.

The Tenth SAARC Summit (Colombo, July 1998) noted that human resources development is a key element in any poverty eradication programme. The Summit thus directed the SAARC Human Resources Development Centre in Islamabad to look into the possibility of its contributing to the strengthening of the human resources development component of regional poverty eradication programmes.

At the Eleventh Summit (Kathmandu, January 2002), the Leaders recognized poverty alleviation as the over-arching goal of SAARC for which a concerted, sustained and collective action was required. The Leaders expressed their firm resolve to combat the problem of poverty with a new sense of urgency by actively promoting the synergetic partnership among national governments, international agencies, the private sector and the civil society. They agreed to take immediate steps for the effective implementation of the programs for social mobilization and decentralization, and for strengthening institution building and support mechanisms to ensure participation of the poor, both as stake-holders and beneficiaries, in governance and the development process.

The Summit reconstituted the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA) with Nepal as its Convener and Bangladesh as Co-Convener. It decided that a meeting at the ministerial level on poverty alleviation should undertake a comprehensive review of existing poverty alleviation policies and programmes by activating three-tier mechanism for poverty alleviation. Accordingly, the SAARC Finance/Planning Ministers, in their Meeting held in Islamabad on 8-9 April 2002 prepared a “[Plan of Action on Poverty Alleviation](http://www.saarc-sec.org/data/agenda/pov2/plan%20of%20action.doc)”. Some of the key points and emphasis in the Plan of Action are as follows:

* Good governance through improved public sector management and delivery system, particularly in areas that affects the poor;
* Sound macro-economic management policies through focus on quality and pattern of growth;
* Enriching the concept of Human Development through adoption of Bhutan's philosophy of promoting 'Gross National Happiness' through equitable socio-economic development;
* Combating poverty through promotion of employment in small and medium enterprises, micro-finance institutions and tourism sector;
* Promoting multi-culturalism, pluralism and mass education through gender equality and empowerment of women, vocational and technical training and skill up-gradation;
* Expanding social safety nets through schemes targeting the poorest and the most vulnerable by introducing old age benefits, disability benefits and benefits on the death of the primary bread earner;
* Investing in human capital and social sectors through encouragement of private sector investment in education and health;
* Exercising prudence in allocating public resources and strengthen domestic resource mobilization through prioritisation of public expenditure and increased domestic revenue to reduce the dependence on ODA;
* Empowering local communities and governments through decentralization, financial devolution and community participation;
* Strengthening poverty alleviation programmes through building up the physical assets of the poor, including grant assistance to the indigent for purchase of small capital assets;
* Expanding intra-regional trade and capital flows and faster movement towards SAFTA;
* Learning from each other's experience through exchange of best practices;
* Working with developed countries to increase ODA to 0.7 % of GNP through formulating common positions at relevant international fora; and
* Seeking increased market access in developed countries through joint positions to address the biases against developing countries in WTO related issues.

The Twelfth Summit (Islamabad, January 2004) endorsed the Plan of Action on Poverty Alleviation. The Leaders reiterated their commitment to undertake effective and sustained poverty reduction programmes through pro-poor growth strategies and other policy interventions with specific sectoral targets. The Leaders declared poverty alleviation as the overarching goal of all SAARC activities.

**Two-tier mechanism**

At the Thirteenth SAARC Summit (Dhaka, November 2005), the Leaders declared the decade of 2006-2015 as the [SAARC Decade of Poverty Alleviation](http://www.saarc-sec.org/main.php?t=2.12#decade). They further decided that during the Decade, endeavours, both at the national and regional levels, would continue to be made with a sense of commitment and urgency to free South Asia from poverty.

The Heads of State / Government underlined the need for an exclusive forum for focused and comprehensive examination of poverty related issues. They decided to replace the three-tier mechanism on poverty alleviation by a two-tier one, comprising the Ministers and the Secretaries dealing with poverty alleviation at the national level.

Pursuant to the decision, and at the invitation of the Government of Sri Lanka, the First Meeting of Secretaries dealing with the Poverty Alleviation was held in Colombo on 6-7 August 2006. This was followed by a Ministerial Meeting on Poverty Alleviation on 8 August 2006.

The Meetings took note of the important regional initiatives and directives of the Leaders at their recent Summits. The Ministerial Meeting agreed that the Member States would incorporate the SAARC Development targets and goals in their respective planning process. It was further agreed to initiate national level consultations to obtain views of the stakeholders and practitioners to formulate specific targets and indicators for the SAARC Development Goals.

The Meetings agreed activities and programmes to be undertaken for effective observance of the SAARC Decade on Poverty Alleviation (2006-2015). It also agreed to develop pilot project(s), at least one per country, in the area of poverty alleviation. Identification and implementation of regional and sub-regional projects on poverty alleviation would remain a high priority during the Decade.

**SAARC Decade on Poverty Alleviation (2006-2015)**

The First Meeting of the Secretaries dealing with Poverty Alleviation (Colombo, 6-7 August 2006) underscored the need for policy prioritization for better utilization of the budgetary resources so as to have the desired impact on poverty reduction in this important decade. It agreed that sustained efforts were needed, inter alia, to: (a) deepen pro-poor orientation of growth process; (b) enhance investment in human capital; (c) increase investment in infrastructure; and (d) improve service delivery mechanism. It further recommended that the Member States would try to ensure higher public sector investment in education, health, agriculture and rural development in terms of GDP. Resource mobilization of achieving SDGs would remain a high priority. The Meeting agreed that policy attention should be given to better involve local governments in the poverty alleviation projects. The Meeting inter alia recommended to:

1. Hold annual national workshop on agreed theme(s), involving stakeholders and practitioners. A regional workshop would then synthesise the national inputs and make appropriate recommendations to the Ministerial process on Poverty Alleviation.
2. Develop pilot project(s), at least one per country, in the area of poverty alleviation. Identification and implementation of regional and sub-regional projects on poverty alleviation would remain a high priority. In this context, the meeting recommended to develop a network of nationally determined entities among SAARC countries, during 2007, to combat the menace of trafficking of women and children, particularly for prostitution.
3. Prepare Best-practices database early and update it on a regular basis.
4. Recognise outstanding contribution of individual(s) or organizations in the area of poverty alleviation.

At the Fourteenth Summit (New Delhi, April 2007), the Leaders appreciated the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA) for its elaboration of the SAARC Development Goals (SDGs). They agreed that the national plans for poverty alleviation should appropriately mirror the regional consensus reached in the form of the SDGs and the Plan of Action on Poverty Alleviation.

Deciding that resource mobilization for achieving the SAARC Development Goals would remain a high priority in the Decade of Poverty Alleviation, the Leaders directed translation of the highest regional level political commitment into action for creating opportunities for productive employment and greater access to resources for the poor that are essential for them to enhance their livelihood and realize their potentials. They entrusted the Two-tier Mechanism on Poverty Alleviation to monitor the progress and fine-tune the approaches towards pro-poor growth process.

The Second Meeting of Secretaries dealing with Poverty Alleviation (Male’, 26 May 2008) agreed that there should be a Mid-Term Review on the attainment of the SAARC Development Goals by an inter-governmental mechanism in 2009. The meeting appreciated UNDP for its continued financial support to implement the SAARC activities since 1995. They took satisfaction over the collaboration between the SAARC and UNDP and recommended that the Secretariat may consult the UNDP to obtain its support, among other things on the (1) Identification of the regional and sub-regional projects and initiating feasibility studies of them and (ii) Preparation of the RPP – 2009. The Ministers reiterated stronger commitment and determination to implement the SAARC Action Plan on Poverty Alleviation through mobilizing human as well as financial resources.

At the Fifteenth Summit (Colombo, August 2008), the Leaders while acknowledging the significant steps taken to alleviate poverty in the region, resolved to continue to combat poverty through all available means, including especially through people's empowerment. They committed themselves to continuing to share each other's experiences and success stories of pro-poor poverty reduction strategies such as micro-credit systems, community-driven initiatives and the raising of the consciousness of the poor on their right to resources and development. In this respect, they emphasized on undertaking sustained efforts, including developing and implementing regional and sub-regional projects towards the attainment of SAARC Development Goals.

The Leaders at the Sixteenth SAARC Summit (Thimphu, April 2010) emphasized on deepening regional efforts on poverty alleviation, the overarching objective of SAARC. They called for the expeditious mainstreaming of the SAARC Development Goals in the national processes and completion of the Mid-term Review of the SAARC Development Goals as scheduled. They further noted the useful finding and recommendations made by successive regional studies through the Regional Poverty Profiles (RPPs) and directed the relevant SAARC mechanisms to act on them.

Third Meeting of Secretaries on Poverty Alleviation was held in New Delhi on 19-21 March 2009. The Meeting recognized that the Member States have made significant progress despite facing formidable challenges posed by poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment, illiteracy, population growth, environmental degradation compounded by fluctuation in the fuel price and recent financial crisis. The meetings emphasized that the Member States should re-dedicate their commitments and double their endeavours to improve the living standards of the people through adopting poverty reduction programmes and projects specially targeted to uplift the poor. The Meeting also agreed to take special policy measures to minimize the impact of the financial downturn in the region.

The Meeting agreed that Member States should pursue people-centred growth and development strategies, and earmark substantial budget to invest in the development of human resource, rural infrastructure, education and health.

The Fourth Meeting of Secretaries of Poverty Alleviation was held in Islamabad, Pakistan on 28-29 March 2011.  The Meeting discussed the progress made so far in SAARC Member States in implementing the SAARC ‘Poverty Plan of Action on Poverty Alleviation’ and exchanged information on poverty reduction programmes, policies and strategies adopted by the Member States to improve the lot of the poor.  It was decided that the SAARC Secretariat would prepare and circulate a compendium of best practices and success stories of various poverty alleviation programmes implemented in the recent past in the SAARC Member States, with special reference to innovative ideas for bringing about equality in the distribution of social benefits for reaching the un-reached.  The Meeting also recommended that during the remaining period of SAARC Poverty Alleviation Decade (2006-2015) the Member States should undertake; (a) Result-based evaluation study of the outcomes of poverty alleviation programmes through independent agencies (b) organize workshops for having consultations on measuring multi-dimensional poverty; and (c) prepare a country document on success stories of local level initiatives towards poverty issues.

The Meeting also underscored the need to prepare country reports on Mid-term Review of the SAARC Development Goals.  A Meeting of Inter-Governmental Mechanism for Mid-Term Review on the Achievements of the SAARC Development Goals and Plan of Action on Poverty Alleviation was held at the SAARC Secretariat on 28-29 September 2010. The SAARC Secretariat prepared and published Regional Poverty Profile-2009-10 (the last in its series) on the theme ‘Food Security Challenges for the Poor and Social Inclusion’ after receiving country reports from SAARC Member States. Regional Poverty Profiles have been published with assistance of UNDP under SAARC-UNDP Partnership Programme.