

**VIRTUAL HIGH-LEVEL POLICY DIALOGUE ON COVID-19 AND SOUTH ASIA:  
SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS, NATIONAL STRATEGIES AND SUB-REGIONAL COOPERATION  
FOR BUILDING BACK BETTER  
3:30 PM – 5:30 PM (IST), 09 JULY 2020**

**REMARKS BY H. E. MR. ESALA RUWAN WEERAKOON, SECRETARY GENERAL OF SAARC**

**Chair, Her Excellency Armida Alisjahbana, Executive Secretary of UNESCAP,  
Hon'ble Ministers,  
Hon'ble Vice Chairs of the National Planning Commissions,  
Secretary General of BIMSTEC, His Excellency Shahidul Islam,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

**Good Afternoon!**

**It gives me immense pleasure to be able to join this important Policy Dialogue.**

**I thank UNESCAP for convening this Policy Dialogue on COVID-19 and South Asia. This Policy Dialogue is very timely and relevant to all the countries of South Asia.**

**I wish to duly acknowledge the distinguished presence of the Hon'ble Ministers and Hon'ble Vice Chairs of the National Planning Commissions in this Policy Dialogue. We look forward to benefiting from their remarks.**

**Excellencies,**

**The COVID-19 pandemic has left an unprecedented socio-economic impact globally, and South Asia is no exception. The current crisis has triggered a need for immediate regional action to combat the health emergency caused by the pandemic in order to mitigate its adverse socio-economic impacts.**

**As you are aware, all the SAARC Leaders responded to the call of the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India and had a Video Conference to combat the global COVID-19 pandemic as early as on 15 March 2020. As an immediate response in combating the pandemic, the SAARC Leaders created a SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund.**

**As a follow-up to the SAARC Leaders' Video Conference, the SAARC Health Ministers' Video Conference was held on 23 April 2020. Senior health officials from the SAARC countries have also met virtually in March this year. The Interim Unit of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre has set up a COVID-19 portal with daily coronavirus related updates from the South Asian countries. These initiatives augur well for strengthened regional collaboration under the auspices of SAARC.**

**In addition to these initiatives in the health sector, several studies have indicated that the South Asian countries need to take urgent measures to promote deeper regional economic integration in COVID-19 recovery. In order to carry forward this objective, a virtual meeting of SAARC Trade Officials was held in early April.**

**It is apparent that beyond the emergency responses that are in place, there is a need to pursue regional collaboration effectively as a long-term sustainable development strategy in mitigating the after-effects of the pandemic.**

**In conclusion, I wish to once again thank UNESCAP for organizing this Policy Dialogue. UNESCAP has been an active and valuable partner of SAARC since the signing of the MoU in 1994. We look forward to working closely with UNESCAP in our fight against the global pandemic and on other matters of mutual interest.**

**I wish this Policy Dialogue great success.**

**Thank you.**

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