

Your Excellency Mr. Mathath Niaz Rana, Secretary, Ministry of Planning Development and Special Initiatives of the Government of Pakistan and Chair of the Meeting,
Excellencies the Planning Secretaries and Heads of Delegation,
Distinguished Delegates,

It is a great honour for me to address the First Meeting of the SAARC Planning Secretaries dedicated to the theme, '*Shaping the SAARC Vision 2030*'.

We express profound appreciation to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan for organizing this important meeting despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are confident that the lead taken by the esteemed Government of Pakistan and the outcome of this initiative will pave the way for initiating an inter-governmental process to contextualize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the region, as directed by the SAARC leaders at the Eighteenth SAARC Summit.

We are grateful to the respected Planning Secretaries and Heads of Delegation for their participation in this virtual meeting.

Distinguished Delegates,

The COVID-19 pandemic which is also described as a “once in a century pandemic” has impacted lives, livelihoods and economies in an unprecedented manner in South Asia. As a result of the ongoing public health crisis, GDP is shrinking, growth is slowing, unemployment is rising and the most worrying factor is that the development gains achieved over the years are being reversed. Key sectors such as small and medium enterprises, tourism and exports, such as readymade garments, have been adversely impacted, slowing down economic growth and leading to loss of jobs. The threat of rising incidence of poverty, hunger and inequality looms large.

The road ahead is not smooth. With the shrinking of economic activities and depletion of traditional sources of financing, there is an urgent need to reorient resources to contain the pandemic and build a resilient public health system. We have to think of what can be done to make prudent use of scarce resources and how these can be used for optimal results. We have to rethink how regional efforts and mechanisms can be best utilized to pool resources, enhance efficiency, share best practices, learn from each other and create synergies for building back better.

Distinguished Delegates,

SDGs provide us with a framework of action for development in economic, social and environmental fields, among others. Our efforts cannot be truly beneficial if these are not resilient, sustainable and sensitive to nature. Therefore, the time has come for us to work together - collectively and diligently - for a shared future, while warding off the threat of the pandemic which is an unique and existential challenge.

It is now opportune to develop a shared understanding of our key policy priorities and challenges in the implementation of SDGs, based on national experiences gained in the past five years. In this

context, the convening of this meeting under the theme, “Shaping the SAARC Vision 2030” is timely.

Distinguished Delegates,

Our future and our progress will largely depend on the choices we make today in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the traditional methods and efforts for development may need to be refined, redefined and revamped to cope with the changing realities. In these challenging times, our Governments have to play a vital role to protect the health of our citizens as well as to create a conducive environment for their livelihood. Equally important is the role of the private sector, civil society, and other stakeholders in strengthening capacities and institutions, and facilitating transfer of technology and innovation for enhanced productivity and competitiveness for inclusive growth and sustainable development.

For now, we need structured and detailed contents of the periodic review report on the implementation of SDGs in the SAARC region that would analyze trends in regional and sub-regional economic performance, including trends in social development. This will help us share our experiences and take collective action, where required, in the attainment of the 2030 Agenda.

Distinguished Delegates,

As you are aware, the impact of the global pandemic is disproportionate in the region. Our action in every field hinges on our capacity to fight against the pandemic and making available, affordable vaccines, to the affected population. Therefore, we should redouble our efforts to contain the further spread of the deadly virus as well as to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic.

This Meeting is a welcome occasion to devise immediate effective measures to protect the poor and vulnerable sectors of our society from the negative impacts caused by the pandemic as well as to speed up the process of recovery through development financing, while identifying our financing gaps and needs for achieving SDGs in the SAARC Region. This Meeting is also useful in making policy recommendations for inclusive sustainable development in the region through identification of regionally agreed goals, targets and indicators, along with a framework for periodic monitoring and reporting.

This Meeting is also expected to recommend a study on contextualization of SDGs for the SAARC Region with the help of relevant external partners. The study would provide a framework for a periodic review of the status of implementation of the regionally agreed SDGs and targets for consideration of the First Meeting of the SAARC Planning Ministers to be held in virtual mode on 25 November 2020.

I wish this Meeting every success in exploring new vistas in building a more resilient and sustainable future for all South Asians.

Thank you!