

Honourable Asad Umar, Minister for Planning, Development, Reform and Special Initiatives
and Chair of the Meeting,
Hon'ble Ministers,
Hon'ble Vice Chairman,
Hon'ble CEO,
Respected Heads of Delegation,
Excellencies the Planning Secretaries,
Distinguished Delegates,

It is a great honour for me to address the First Meeting of the SAARC Planning Ministers on the theme, '*Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in South Asia: Shaping the SAARC Vision-2030*'.

This Ministerial Meeting assumes considerable significance in the context of the directive of the Eighteenth SAARC Summit to initiate an inter-governmental process in contextualizing SDGs in the region.

We thank the esteemed Government of Pakistan for convening this important Meeting in virtual mode, preceded by the First Meeting of the SAARC Planning Secretaries, which concluded successfully on 23 November 2020. We are glad that these meetings have been possible despite the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are greatly honoured by the august participation in this Meeting of the Hon'ble Ministers, Hon'ble Vice Chairman, Hon'ble CEO and Heads of Delegation from the Member States. This reflects the priority attached by the Member States to the effective implementation of SDGs in the region.

Excellencies,

The SAARC Charter aims to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life through accelerated socio-economic growth. With the declaration of poverty alleviation as the "over-arching" goal of SAARC at the Twelfth Summit in Islamabad, 2004, several measures have been initiated in this direction.

As a result of these initiatives, the region has been making steady progress to substantially reduce extreme poverty and to improve other socio-economic indicators. I am pleased to state that the achievements made by the South Asian countries in poverty reduction have immensely contributed to the attainment of MDGs and these would continue to contribute to the attainment of the 2030 Development Agenda as well.

Excellencies,

This Ministerial Meeting convenes at a difficult time of unprecedented threats posed to the region by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Being cognizant of the Pandemic situation, SAARC Leaders, at the initiative of the Hon. Prime Minister of India, met as early as March 2020 to take regional initiatives to mitigate the adverse impacts of COVID-19.

Similarly, the SAARC Health Ministers' Meeting took place on 23 April 2020 at the initiative of the Government of Pakistan.

In addition, several other Ministerial and expert-level meetings have been held to realign efforts to tackle the pandemic's adverse impacts on public health, trade, finance and education. We also laud the initiatives taken by the Interim Unit of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre and SAARC Development Fund to help the Member States'.

Despite these important regional initiatives, the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to mar forward movement towards the attainment of the 2030 Development Agenda. The pandemic has not only threatened people's lives and livelihoods, but has also battered national economies, further amplifying income inequalities and other forms of inequality within and among countries.

It has also aggravated the adverse impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss as there has been a paradigm shift in the global approach, from pursuing sustainable development to containing the pandemic and its after-effects. As a result, the unprecedented public health

crisis has complicated the development scenario and reversed the hard-earned development gains of the past several years.

There is, therefore, an urgent need to reorient approaches to the 2030 Development Agenda. Regional cooperation has become all the more necessary in the present times than ever before in pursuing the global Development Agenda.

Beyond the most direct impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on poverty (SDG 1), food security (SDG 2), health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4) economy and employment (SDG 8), and multilateralism (SDG 17), it has impacted the attainment of other SDGs as well.

Such a situation calls for urgent reinvigorated collective efforts to recovery for sustainable development. We should devise innovative and transformative means towards the implementation of the 2030 Development Agenda, including, among others, through evolving new partnerships and mechanisms; facilitating/ technology transfer/, capacity building/, information access;/ and monitoring and reporting for accountability.

Excellencies,

As SDGs provide a framework to work decisively against the pandemic, it is imperative to tackle it and other developmental challenges through effective regional initiatives. In doing so, it is important to put SDGs at the heart of policymaking and recovery planning. Our short-term collective actions should be geared to control the spread of the virus in every country in the region.

We also need to work in unison to mitigate the adverse impacts of the pandemic on achieving SDGs. We should be looking at a structured transformation, which addresses the crisis and causes of poverty and inequality. We should aim at effecting a realistic change, which is sustainable and which spurs inclusive socio-economic growth in the region.

Excellencies,

In their meeting on 23 November, the respected SAARC Planning Secretaries deliberated on the key issues for pursuing the 2030 Development Agenda in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Meeting has come up with some important recommendations which await the direction of the Hon'ble Ministers to translate them into concrete doable actions for effective implementation of the 2030 Development Agenda.

The need of the hour is to see through the pandemic and work decisively towards ending extreme poverty in the region in all its forms. To make it possible, our action in every field hinges on our capacity to fight against COVID-19 and making available/ affordable vaccines to the affected population. We are confident that this Ministerial Meeting, the first of its kind, will pave the way for strengthened regional collaboration in attaining these objectives.

I once again thank the esteemed Government of Pakistan for convening this important Meeting in virtual mode.

I wish the Ministerial Meeting success.

Thank You.