

ESCAP NINTH ASIA-PACIFIC FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Bangkok and online, 28-31 March 2022

Day 03: 30 March 2022: 10:40 am to 12 noon, Bangkok Time

Session2: Subregional Approaches for Accelerating the SDGs
Agenda Item 2: Building back better from COVID-19 while advancing the full implementation
of the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific

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

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,

I am pleased to address this Session on Subregional Approaches for Accelerating the SDGs, under Agenda Item No. 2: Building back better from COVID-19, while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific.

I thank the distinguished Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of ESCAP, Her Excellency Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, for convening the Ninth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development.

I congratulate Her Excellency for leadership to ESCAP and for her vision in advancing its mandate.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,

We are meeting at a time when we are beginning to raise our heads from the debilitating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has caused severe adverse socio-economic impacts, demanding concerted action for building back better. Hard earned gains in poverty reduction have been reversed and education of children has been disrupted. The pandemic has strained healthcare systems, disrupted economic activities, and widened inequality. The pandemic has triggered disproportionately larger socio-economic impacts in the developing world, particularly South Asia, with less than adequate levels of preparedness, variable health infrastructure and services, and limited fiscal space for economic stimulus measures. It has exposed critical development gaps and vulnerabilities of the subregion, exerting adverse impacts across most of the SDG indicators.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,

Regional cooperation is fundamental for achieving the SDGs and for attempting building back better from the COVID-19 pandemic. South Asia urgently needs an accelerated SDG implementation pathway, given that the South and South-West Asia subregions may miss several SDG targets by 2030. Though progress has been made on some goals, the pace seems below par.

Reasonable progress has been made towards life on land (Goal 15), no poverty (Goal 1) and good health and well-being (Goal 3).

Meanwhile, the subregion is regressing on sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11), responsible consumption and production (Goal 12) and climate action (Goal 13). Limited progress, coupled with the unprecedented effects of COVID-19, will require urgent strategic and concentrated efforts to accelerate progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda across the subregion.

In this regard, I recall the Fifth South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals, organized by the ESCAP South and South-West Asia Office and the Government of Sri Lanka in November 2021. I also compliment the ESCAP Sub Regional Office in New Delhi, for launching the special Report on “*Achieving the SDGs in South Asia*”.

The key policy proposals emerging from the Report, such as sustained growth through economic diversification, enhanced investments in the core social sectors of health and education, expansion of social protection measures, and investing in clean energy and environmental sustainability are highly relevant for South Asia.

Excellencies,

South Asia offers important avenues at its disposal to take advantage of the potential of regional cooperation for achieving SDGs. A key area is that of regional economic integration.

South Asia can gain substantially by fostering intra-regional trade in goods and services and investment flows to create immense economic opportunities for poverty reduction and development.

The South Asia Network on SDGs (SANS) created by ESCAP is another very useful initiative. We look forward to a constructive engagement with ESCAP and SANS in achieving SDGs through sharing of knowledge, best practices and lessons learnt.

Excellencies,

As you are aware, the South Asian countries responded proactively to the COVID-19 crisis, renewing their commitment to work together. The virtual meeting of the SAARC Leaders on 15 March 2020, as an immediate, emergency response measure, set up the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund, through voluntary contributions of the Member States.

Other initiatives include allocations by the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) for COVID-19 related projects, setting up of an electronic platform called ‘SAARC COVID-19 Information Exchange Platform (COINEX)’ to exchange COVID-19-related health information and training, a dedicated COVID-19 website by the SAARC Disaster Management Centre and cross-border distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.

These developments provide a much-needed impetus for greater regional cooperation under the auspices of SAARC. We hope to build on the momentum in the coming times.

I take this opportunity to reaffirm the commitment of SAARC towards promoting regional cooperation and collaboration for achieving SDGs. We would be happy to collaborate with ESCAP in this regard.

I once again compliment ESCAP for organizing this Forum to further the agenda of regional cooperation.

Thank you!
