

SEVENTY-EIGHTH SESSION OF ESCAP

Subregional perspectives on  
“A common agenda to advance sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific”

10:00-12:00 (GMT+7), 25 May 2022

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

Excellencies,  
Distinguished Delegates,

I thank Her Excellency the Executive Secretary of ESCAP for inviting me to this High-level Panel to share my perspectives on a common agenda to advance sustainable development through regional cooperation.

SAARC embodies the collective aspirations of 1.8 billion people in South Asia for greater prosperity and it has been our goal the past 35 years to build a secure foundation through stronger regional cooperation.

Excellencies,

In view of the renewed development setback thrust upon us by the COVID-19 Pandemic, South Asia urgently needs an accelerated SDG implementation pathway. A recent assessment revealed that the South and South-West Asia subregion is not on track to reach any of the 17 SDGs by 2030. Though there is progress on some goals, the pace is slow.

The fastest 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).

The already slow progress coupled with the shocks from COVID-19 require urgent strategic and concentrated efforts to expedite progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Distinguished Delegates,

Over the past two decades, SAARC Member States have done well in general on economic and social fronts, having notably reduced absolute poverty. However, the COVID-19 Pandemic has stalled progress by accentuating pre-existing and new socio-economic challenges. The member countries of SAARC, comprising mostly low or lower middle-income countries, have been severely affected by the Pandemic, threatening lives, employment and livelihoods of millions of people for an extended period of time.

The SAARC Leaders realised early the importance of regional cooperation and solidarity to mitigate the threat posed by the Pandemic. The Hon'ble Prime Minister of India convened a Virtual Conference of the SAARC Leaders to map out a regional strategy to address and mitigate the threats posed by the Pandemic. The Conference saw the establishment of the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund.

Other initiatives include an allocation by the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) for COVID-19 related projects; setting up of an electronic platform called 'SAARC COVID-19 Information Exchange Platform to exchange COVID-19 related health information and training; and a dedicated COVID-19 website by the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC). Action is also being taken for cross-border distribution of vaccines at affordable rates.

However, there are challenges that the region continues to face as a result of a mutating virus. Countries are still grappling with the socio-economic after-effects of the Pandemic.

Excellencies,

On having a common agenda to advance SDGs, we need to cluster various goals into broad themes with cross-cutting implications. This includes economic diversification, augmented investment, learning, health and nutrition, fortified social protection measures and clean energy. We have deepened our collaboration with ESCAP's South and South-West Asia office in New Delhi to work on some of these issues.

For a common agenda, it is also important that we share our knowledge, build capacity and share best practices with each other rather than trying to reinvent the wheel. I am happy to state that the South Asia Network on SDGs (SANS) created by ESCAP is another useful initiative to assist countries to achieve SDGs.

I am certain that the distinguished panellists will agree with me that these are issues that are equally important for their subregions too. I believe ESCAP can play a role in forging links across subregions as well. Its knowledge products, policy advisory support and technical assistance will help many of our members to move on to a faster path of recovery and resilience.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In these challenging times, no country can go it alone and there is no substitute for regional cooperation. I am hopeful that if we all collaborate amongst us as regional and subregional organisations, the entire region will prosper. I am sure Madam Executive Secretary would take a lead in establishing a regional architecture for deeper and wider regional collaboration.

I wish this Session great success.

I thank you.

\*\*\*