

UNESCO 2022 SOUTH ASIA REPORT REGIONAL DIALOGUE
SAARC SECRETARIAT, 14 NOVEMBER 2022

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

Her Excellency Himalee Arunatilaka, Ambassador of Sri Lanka;
Mr. Umair Ali, Charge d' Affaires of the Embassy of Pakistan;
Ms. Ishrat Jahan, Deputy Chief of Mission, Bangladesh Embassy;
Mr. Manos Antoninis, Director, Global Education Monitoring Report;
Mr. Michael Croft, UNESCO Representative to Nepal;
Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Distinguished Participants;
Colleagues from UNESCO and SAARC Secretariat;
Ladies and Gentlemen;

A very good morning to all!

It is an honour for me to address the Regional Dialogue on the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, convened by UNESCO.

I join UNESCO in welcoming you all to this event. I thank UNESCO for choosing the SAARC Secretariat as the venue for this very important Regional Dialogue.

UNESCO has been an active partner of SAARC and has been contributing significantly to the universal goal of Educating All in South Asia. In this context, we were indeed honoured to have been represented in the GEM Report's International Advisory Board, providing guidance and insights into critical areas of interest for the region. We are keen to further our collaboration with UNESCO in the days to come.

As South Asia has the highest share of private institutions in total enrolment in the world, I am confident that the latest GEM Regional Report on Non-state Actors in Education, which is the focus of today's Dialogue, will be a valuable tool for policy makers across the region. It is the Government which has the responsibility to fulfil the right to education of good quality for all. How Governments fund and provide education influences the extent of non-state activity.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,

Non-state actors in education in South Asia grew to meet demand and fill the lacunae. The desire for higher quality education, closer to home; the call for English language education; the rise of a market for tutoring to make up for where schooling had failed; and, the need for quick solutions in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has changed our lives and livelihoods – all these play a part in the region's now diverse education systems.

There is a debate in South Asia about the value of private actors in education. The critical question this GEM Report poses at this point is how governments can establish a just and effective oversight of the multiple actors. Whether a school is run by the state, by a religious organization or by the community, the Report reminds us of the need to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all, as enshrined in SDG4.

Well-designed partnerships between state and non-state actors within a facilitative regulatory framework supported by necessary political commitment can help optimize the functions of education as a public good. State and non-state partnerships can be meaningfully fostered through regular dialogue.

Distinguished Participants,

Education systems are like living things, which expand and retract, absorbing innovations, welcoming new actors, responding to labour market trends and community demands over time. Several countries in the region have responded to this change, creating regulatory environments that are more flexible and less restrictive, and that allow innovation to prosper. However, as with any fast-paced developments, there is a risk that change may overtake capacity for control. Regulations, this Report reminds us, lay the basic rules reflecting the core values of the objectives of our Sustainable Development Agenda. When designed and enforced effectively, they keep all actors in check.

We are mindful of the fact that the rise of non-state actors in education has expanded access to education more rapidly in South Asia in the past three decades than the rest of the world.

Distinguished Participants,

This Report provides useful insights for governments to ensure that their choices in the system prioritize and fund solutions that will help those furthest behind. The Report asks Governments in the region to consider who loses when choices of different forms of education are made available and how we can ensure that their right to quality education is not put at risk.

The Report is an important reference document for policy makers to take a reflective view of the status-quo and make sure that both equity and quality do not escape our attention. Today's Regional Dialogue allows representatives from across the region to come together to compare experiences.

We look forward to learning more about the Report from the discussions that will follow this opening session.

I once again thank UNESCO for this timely and important initiative and wish the distinguished participants fruitful discussions.

I wish this Regional Dialogue every success.

Thank you.
