



Fourth South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals *Fostering Sustainable and resilient recovery from COVID-19 in South Asia* **Virtual Meeting, 2-3 December 2020**

Report

Background and context

The Fourth [South Asia Forum on the SDGs](#) (SASF), conceived as the subregional preparatory for the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) and the High-Level Policy Forum (HLPF) was organized by the South and South-West Asia Office of United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) in collaboration with the Government of Maldives on 2-3 December 2020.¹ More than 600 participants including representatives of governments, academia, think tanks, civil society organizations, and other key stakeholders from South Asian countries participated in the Forum. The recording of the Forum is available on the [website](#).

The 4th Forum took place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic which began as a health crisis has become an unprecedented human and socio-economic crisis. Hence, the Forum focused on *Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 in South Asia*, aligned with the APFSD and HLPF themes for 2021. It focused on the cluster of SDGs to be reviewed at the 2021 HLPF, viz., SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 2 (Zero hunger), SDG 3 (Good health and wellbeing), SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities), SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production), SDG 13 (Climate action), SDG 16 (Peace, justice, and strong institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals). It drew upon the [COVID-19 and South Asia: National Strategies and Subregional Cooperation for Accelerating Inclusive, Sustainable and Resilient Recovery \(UNESCAP 2020\)](#), and reports of the [High-Level Policy Dialogue](#) on COVID-19 and South Asia held on 9 July 2020, and the [Policy Dialogue on South Asian Cooperation for Accelerating Recovery from COVID-19 and Building Back Better](#) held on 9 September 2020.

In cognizance of the need identified for enhancing the role of think-tanks in promoting regional cooperation for fulfilling the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, the UNESCAP launched the [South Asia Network of Think Tanks for SDGs \(SANS\)](#) portal which can act as a knowledge platform for multi-stakeholder meetings for sharing of best practices and thereby accelerating SDGs implementation by South Asian countries.²

¹ The First SASF was held in 2017 in Kathmandu in collaboration with the National Planning Commission, Nepal. The Second SASF was organized by UNESCAP in partnership with the NITI Aayog, India and the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), on 4-5 October 2018 in New Delhi. The Third SASF was jointly organized by UNESCAP and the Government of Bangladesh on 8-9 December 2019 in Dhaka.

² See

https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Policy%20Dialogue%20on%20Regional%20Cooperation%2010%20December%202019%20Dhaka_%20final.pdf;

Key Highlights

- **The COVID-19 pandemic, which is a major socio-economic crisis faced by South Asia has a slowing down effect on the achievement of SDGs.** The COVID-19 crisis has endangered developmental gains in poverty reduction and other aspects of development achieved in last many years, thwarting the SDG progress significantly in South Asia having overwhelmed health systems, increased gender inequalities, disrupted education delivery, adversely affected GDP growth, and caused economic uncertainties in all countries in South Asia. In the face of large-scale informality in labour markets, business closures and slowdown in economic activities, the pandemic has caused significant income and livelihood losses, and widened the SDG resource gap, reducing the fiscal space considerably.
- **In the context of the pandemic, several policy measures for South Asia have to be reprioritized and realigned.** South Asia will have to realign and reprioritize its COVID-19 recovery strategies with SDG implementation focusing on strengthened social protection and financing economic recovery through innovative financing strategies, accelerating digital transformation and greening recovery by using clean technology. To build back better the future policy priorities recommended were: (i) economic diversification and industry-focused structural transformation (particularly MSMEs which are the backbone of South Asian economy and severely affected in the pandemic), (ii) raising investments in the core social sectors of health and education, (iii) expanding social protection, closing gender gaps and improving basic infrastructure for addressing inequalities, (iv) ensuring food security, agriculture and rural development, and (v) enhancing environmental sustainability through green recovery packages, greater investments in renewables and low-carbon technologies. Three-pronged approach for strengthening means of implementation for recovery in the post-COVID-19 period were identified, namely, systemic (institutional mechanism and framework), financing (both domestic resources via private-public partnership and external funding from international organizations), and cooperation (international assistance and development cooperation, trade, capacity building and statistical capacities).
- **All South Asian countries have undertaken measures to tackle the pandemic and ensure recovery, yet more to be done.** South Asian member states have undertaken and implemented policy measures to ensure recovery from the current crisis. The pandemic has renewed focus to increase domestic production, which meets the consumption needs and reorient towards the export economy (*Sri Lanka*). Government stimulus packages focusing on employment creation, financial assistance and social security are being implemented (*Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan*). To ensure that development financing is aligned with SDG investments, countries have undertaken financing needs assessment that establishes estimated cost of SDG implementation (*India, Bhutan, Pakistan*). Countries are developing strategies for economic security of migrant workers, who were severely affected by the pandemic (*Bangladesh, India*). For successful implementation of the SDGs and to exploit the opportunities created by the pandemic, emphasis is being placed on reinforcing digital technologies and ensuring easier access to public and various socio-economic services through ICT and online platforms (*Maldives*). Fiscal incentives are being provided to induce household and business transition towards improved waste management practices and renewable energy usage (*Sri Lanka*).
- **A Subregional Action Plan for Social Protection is needed to enhance resilience to crises.** To mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and to protect the lives and livelihoods of people, countries must focus on system-wide measures, economic security, and vulnerable groups like women, older persons, mobile population and children. To ensure "Leaving No One Behind,"

countries ought to have inclusive political and administrative systems and integrate social protection and targeted programs at national and subnational levels. A comprehensive action plan for social protection should ensure that social protection systems go beyond shock responsiveness, are gender sensitive and relevant to the needs of vulnerable populations. The Regional Action Plan adopted by UNESCAP member states can be a good benchmark for a subregional Action Plan for South Asia.

- **Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) provide an important means to enhance SDGs implementation through a consultative and whole-of-government approach.** Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) are important follow up and review of the progress to achieve 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. VNR process acts as a means to accelerate SDG implementation and achieve the 2030 Agenda at the country level. Engagement of all stakeholders in the process and having a platform for sharing best practices and exchanging knowledge are critical.
- **Poverty reduction efforts must emphasize the multidimensional aspects of poverty.** In 2020, 530 million people are multidimensionally poor in South Asia, of which 44.8% are children (237 million). Before the pandemic, South Asia witnessed the fastest annualized absolute reduction in multidimensional poverty globally. India, Nepal, Bangladesh were on track to halve MPI between 2015-2030. However, the overlapping dimensions of poverty have worsened due to the pandemic, with poverty reduction trends being set back by 3 to 10 years. Mainstreaming MPI in policy responses can help South Asia to identify newly vulnerable groups and to plan and orient policy solutions from a multidimensional approach, integrating health, social and economic priorities.
- **Addressing inequalities and gender disparities, through promotion of women's entrepreneurship in economic empowerment of women.** To tackle the widening gender inequalities and support women entrepreneurs in South Asia, targeted measures from governments are necessary, especially, through providing credit and market support and capacity-building to harness new technologies. Broadly, the areas for the future growth of women entrepreneurship are: (i) leveraging digital marketing; (ii) diversification of business activities; (iii) developing business resilience; (iv) financial management; (v) risk planning and technical skills.
- **Need to invest more for structural transformation, employment creation and environmental sustainability.** New and effective strategies to ensure decent work and productive employment are relevant. Investments in education and skill development with national and international efforts should be reinvigorated to design, finance and implement innovative policies that support progress towards decent employment. For ensuring structural economic transformation in South Asia, greater investments in agriculture is needed along with scaling up technology-enabled services to improve productivity and efficiency, while creating high value-added employment through greater investments in technology. South Asian countries must invest to encourage structural transformation in job-creating and environmentally sustainable sectors, integrating ecosystem services and circular economy approaches.
- **Mobilizing finance to achieve the SDGs.** Substantial gaps exist in terms of projected investment requirements for the implementation of SDGs and expected resource availability. While estimated SDG investment needs in most of the subregional countries exceed 15% of GDP, their average projected financial inflows under optimistic scenarios is only about 5% of

GDP. Improving the fiscal space through multiple policy measures such as phasing out of untargeted subsidies, lowering defence spending, widening tax bases, improving tax administration and increasing tax progressivity, relaxing fiscal rules and consider innovative financial instruments like SDG-bonds, improving public debt management and reducing illicit financial flows become necessary. Improved policy frameworks for facilitating private investments and exploring public private partnerships could be fruitful. The forum of South Asian central banks under the SAARC framework, namely SAARCFINANCE, should work together for improving banking systems, establishment of the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund etc. that are important regional initiatives to further the goal of regional financial cooperation.

- **Harnessing emerging technologies and digital transformation.** Responding to the onset of 4th industrial revolution, technological advancements, digitization and emerging market trends characterized by reorientation of global supply chains, South Asia needs to invest in skill development and corresponding production capabilities. Adaptive policy reform requirements in this context include measures for modernization of industrial technology and innovation policies, improving awareness and business ecosystems, and development of human resources.
- **Increasing intra-regional trade and strengthening of value chains.** Building regional value chains and exploiting intra-regional trade potential, which is estimated to be at least three times the current levels, would help faster economic recovery in a robust, inclusive and sustainable manner, especially in the context of collapse of the global trade. Removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers, improvements in trade facilitation to reduce trade costs and investments in connectivity infrastructure, are needed among other reforms to harness this potential.
- **Building statistical capacities.** Subregional countries should mobilize resources for building statistical capacities for bridging data gaps and for ensuring availability of timely, high quality, reliable and disaggregated data. In doing so subregional countries should prioritize development of data systems for tier 2 and tier 3 indicators, also ensuring that data series for key indicators are made available with sufficient quality and frequency for the benefit of informed policy making. It is important to strengthen data ecosystems by cooperating with private sector and civic society organizations for improving statistical standards, and also by adopting new data collection methods and alternate data sources to fill the data gaps. Regular meetings between heads of statistical agencies under SAARC initiatives (SAARCSTAT) should be revived in collaboration with UNESCAP.
- **Civil society and private sector engagements form critical pillars in multi-stakeholder partnerships.** It is critical to ensure thriving CSOs and private sector participation for linkages and alliances across institutions and to foster just and inclusive regulatory mechanisms and inclusive markets. Forward-looking dialogues and engagements on partnership and collaboration between governments, CSOs, industry players are needed for building back a more sustainable and just recovery that is peaceful and ensures acceleration across interrelated SDGs.
- **Regional cooperation critical for fostering sustainable and resilient recovery from Covid-19 in South Asia.** COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique opportunity to think and act differently to build back better for which regional cooperation and collaboration is a necessity for South Asia to tide over the adverse impacts of COVID-19. In this context new partnerships and mechanisms towards mutual agreements/policy instruments such as trade agreements, regional supply chains, transport corridors, emergency funds, technology transfer, capacity

building, information access etc. would be fruitful. Along with national responses to the COVID-19 and further improvements in the SDG implementation frameworks, it is critical that South Asian countries deepen regional cooperation for the benefit of common development goals. A regional monitoring mechanism with regional SDG progress indicators would be helpful to reprioritize SDG action programmes in this regard, especially in the context of COVID-19 impacts. This should be followed by adoption of an integrated approach to reporting progress in the priority areas to improve policy coherence at the subregional level.

- **UNESCAP has an important role in fostering subregional and regional cooperation and in facilitating sharing of good practices in South Asia.** The stakeholders appreciated UNESCAP's role in providing a subregional platform to discuss shared challenges such as achieving inclusive, resilience and sustainable development in South Asia in the aftermath of COVID-19 and the role it is playing in fostering regional cooperation in South Asia, besides SAARC and BIMSTEC and in collaboration with them. They also lauded the South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals (SANS) established by UNESCAP in collaboration with the prominent think-tanks of South Asian countries to foster greater subregional cooperation by sharing good practices towards achieving the SDGs and greater knowledge sharing among all South Asian stakeholders, including policy makers, subnational and local government representatives, think-tanks, development practitioners, civil society organizations and other stakeholders to build back better. It was hoped that the newly launched web-portal of SANS would become a rich repository of the SDG good practices and would facilitate their cross-learning and replication.

Summary of proceedings

Session 1: Opening Session- Setting the tone

This session was addressed by Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, United Nations Under Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ESCAP; Ms. Catherine Haswell, UN Resident Coordinator in Maldives; H.E. Mr. Esala Ruwan Weerakoon, Secretary-General of SAARC; H.E. Mr. Tenzin Lekphell, Secretary-General of BIMSTEC and H.E. Mr. Mohamed Aslam, Minister of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Maldives. Dr. Nagesh Kumar, Director, UNESCAP South and South West Asia Office (UNESCAP-SSWA) moderated the session.

Dr. Nagesh Kumar welcomed the participants to the Fourth South Asia Forum on Sustainable Development Goals co-hosted jointly by UNESCAP and the Government of Maldives, and highlighted the unprecedented challenges that South Asia is facing due to COVID-19 pandemic which brings now major implications for countries in subregion to achieving the SDGs. He further stated that the Forum serves as the subregional preparatory meeting of stakeholders in South Asia to inform and feed subregional perspectives to regional and global process, such as the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) to be held in March 2021 which itself is one of the regional consultations towards the High Level Political Forum (HLPF), held annually in July 2021 in New York. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic causing massive disruptions to the sustainable development prospects of South Asian countries, with threats to reverse the developmental gains of many years, the theme of the 2020 Forum focused on sustainable recovery and resilience from COVID-19 to build back better.

Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana in her opening remarks, acknowledged the efforts of the Government of Maldives as the co-hosts of the Forum. She stated that the COVID-19 pandemic started as a health emergency unfolded into a massive socio-economic crisis and with nearly 1.8 billion people

(25% share in world population), the subregion is grappling with the costs of the pandemic in terms of loss of human lives and livelihoods with profound effects on economies and sustainable development prospects. The COVID-19 crisis has endangered the developmental gains achieved in poverty reduction and other aspects of development, by setting the subregion back by years, if not decades. Due to the rising uncertainties and mounting vulnerabilities induced by the pandemic, SDG progress has been thwarted significantly in South Asia. She highlighted four key areas which the subregion must focus on: (i) strengthening social protection system, (ii) financing of economic recovery, (iii) accelerating digital transformation, and (iv) focusing on green recovery. While recognizing the various policy measures undertaken by South Asian member states to ensure faster recovery from the crisis and to protect the progress made in SDGs, she emphasized that with strong focus on social protection, economy, connectivity and environment, South Asian governments are well-positioned for finding sustainable pathways out of the crisis.

Ms. Catherine Haswell provided the Maldivian perspective in following through on the commitments made under the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, through the National Strategic Action Plan 2019-2023 and various institutional mechanisms. She elaborated how the United Nations provided support for the National Planning Act of Maldives for policy coherence in national and local development planning and ensuring localization of the SDGs. An integrated National Financing framework has been launched to help develop a coalition of investors and ensure diversification of financial resources aligned with SDG needs. Regular engagement mechanisms with civil society actors has been institutionalized. Building upon these engagements, the next step would be to prepare a Cooperation Framework for the UN for the next five years as part of a collective response of the UN development system to address gaps for achieving the SDGs and provide practical and tangible action points, to foster a sustainable and resilient Maldives.

H.E. Mr. Esala Weerakoon acknowledged the relevance of the Forum being held in quick succession to the first meeting of SAARC Planning Ministers held virtually on 25 November, 2020, which deliberated on the measures required to successfully achieve the SDGs in the context of the severe socio-economic fallout due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the region. The pandemic has caused unprecedented socio-economic challenges, threatening progress achieved in the subregion over the past several years and causing uncertainties in achieving many of the SDGs as immediate response has shifted towards health and social protection assistance. To mount a regional strategy to combat the pandemic, the SAARC Leaders have undertaken various initiatives such as through a video conference on 15 March 2020, culminating in the establishment of the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund. The SAARC Health Ministers met virtually in April 2020, followed by the SAARC Planning Ministers meeting, which emphasized the need to reorient responses for attaining the SDGs in the face of the pandemic. The way forward is regional cooperation and collaboration through new partnerships and mechanisms, facilitating technology transfer, capacity building, information access and accountable monitoring and reporting. South Asia must pursue collective response for a structured transformation, to mitigate the adverse impacts of the pandemic, promote inclusive socio-economic growth and alleviate poverty and inequality. Acknowledging the evidence-based policy recommendations made by UNESCAP's South and South-West Asia Office reports, he further underlined the potential of the South Asia Network on SDGs (SANS) in sharing good practices on implementing SDGs for South Asia.

H.E. Mr. Tenzin Lekphell expressed his gratitude in being invited to the Forum, which he is attending for the first time and highlighted areas of cooperation in BIMSTEC. To achieve the SDGs by 2030, it is important to leverage strong partnerships, and cooperation amongst all stakeholders from governments, private sector, civil society, academia, and international development organizations. Further, regional cooperation mechanisms provide a complementing framework for governments to

address emerging challenges, such as from the pandemic. BIMSTEC member states have made commitments to further the SDGs and share good practices in combatting the pandemic, such as the “whole-of-community” approach of ASEAN. Various regional initiatives under the umbrella of BIMSTEC can foster the implementation of the SDGs, for instance, the BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility, BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance on Criminal Matters, synergies between public health sector and traditional medicine, BIMSTEC Agriculture Cooperation, BIMSTEC 2030 Tourism Strategy, BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity and BIMSTEC Grid Interconnectivity Master Plan Study. He suggested to focus on spurring economic activities through greater intra-regional trade; keeping regional markets open for expanding investments; ensuring food security and strengthening the resilience and sustainability of regional supply chains (especially for essentials); and formulation of SOP’s for public health emergencies and micro, small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The pandemic has highlighted the need for greater collaboration and engagement with international development partners in the region such as UNESCAP, ADB, IMF and World Bank.

H.E. Mr. Mohamed Aslam expressed his gratitude to co-host the Fourth South Asia Forum on Sustainable Development Goals along with UNESCAP. Maldives being a small island developing state (SIDs) depends heavily on tourism, with significant impacts visible due to border closures and travel restrictions. The GDP of Maldives is expected to contract by (-)12 to 30% in 2020. Over 22,000 people (representing 5.5.% of the total population) have lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Government of Maldives has undertaken various initiatives, including on strengthening the existing social security mechanism and flagship healthcare programme. An Emergency and Recovery Relief Programme has been rolled out to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, through income support allowances, launch of new online and technology-based platforms for service delivery, financial assistance to SMEs, tax cuts, moratoria on student and housing loans both for individuals and business firms. To ensure unhindered continuation of development projects and services, for ensuring economic revival, efforts are underway on the National Maritime Transport Network project. He stated that in line with national priorities, Maldives remains on track to further the provision of all basic necessities and services by the end of 2023, while learning from the COVID-19 pandemic to harness opportunities to reorient and realign development goals in a more sustainable and resilient manner. In this context, extensive regional collaboration and cooperation with other South Asian countries; and harnessing partnerships and synergies among all stakeholders as civil society, private sector, state agencies and local governments provided the way forward.

Launch of the South Asia Network of the SDGs (SANS) web portal

At the opening session of the Fourth South Asia Forum on the SDGs the dignitaries were invited to launch the web portal of South Asia Network on the SDGs (SANS) (<https://unescap.org/projects/sans>). It was highlighted that the South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals (SANS) has been established to foster greater subregional cooperation by sharing good practices towards achieving the SDGs and greater knowledge sharing among all South Asian stakeholders, including policy makers, subnational and local government representatives, think-tanks, development practitioners, civil society organizations and other stakeholders to build back better. The web portal launch was followed by video messages from the heads of think-tanks and South Asian CSOs under the Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism (AP-RCEM). The heads of think tanks and CSO representative reiterated their support for this initiative and highlighted the relevance and significance of the platform in providing an opportunity to share experiences, good practices and improve awareness on accelerating SDG implementation efforts in the subregion. They lauded this initiative undertaken by UNESCAP-SSWA and stated that this comes at a crucial time when South Asian countries are looking to build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerate SDGs implementation efforts. This network shall help in fostering meaningful partnerships and regional cooperation among South Asian countries to explore common solutions and undertake concerted

policy actions for furthering SDGs achievement in the subregion through providing a comprehensive compendium of knowledge resources, policy lessons and learnings from each other.

Session 2: Taking stock of subregional and national progress on SDGs in the context of the COVID-19 – Towards Sustainable and Resilient Recovery (with a focus on SDGs 1,2,3,8,10,12,13,16, and 17)

The session provided reflections on the current prospects for SDGs progress in the face of challenges compounded by the COVID-19 crisis. The session included presentations from government representatives of South Asian countries and civil society, with sharing of national experiences and perspectives in SDG progress and lessons for countries in the subregion for their Voluntary National Review (VNR) presentations. While discussing measures to facilitate recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, focus was placed on assessing progress on the SDGs under review at the 2021 HLPF (SDGs 1,2,3,8,10,12,13,16, and 17).

This session was moderated by **Ambassador Gyan Acharya**, Chairman, SAWTEE SDG Centre, Kathmandu, and former USG, UN-OHRLS, and had presentations made by representatives of the seven South Asian countries, following the introductory presentations by the UNESCAP secretariat on the VNRs process and the overview of SDG progress in South Asia. **Ambassador Gyan Acharya** in his introductory remarks underlined the importance of re-orienting multilevel efforts and strategies that ensure the achievement of the SDGs remain on track despite the unprecedented situation arisen because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Riccardo Mesiano of Environment and Development Division of UNESCAP, emphasized that the VNR process provides a means to accelerate SDG implementation and achieve the 2030 Agenda at the country level and that the engagement of all stakeholders, including a “whole-of-government” approach in the process is critical. UNESCAP would continue to support countries preparing their VNR reports and provide a platform for sharing best practices, exchanging knowledge and facilitating peer learning.

Concerning SDG's progress in South Asia, **Mr. Rajan Sudesh Ratna** of UNESCAP-SSWA, highlighted that South Asia is critical for SDGs' global achievement. Sharing the findings of UNESCAP-SSWA forthcoming South Asia SDG progress report, he stated that COVID-19 has had mixed impacts on SDG progress, and the subregion has regressed on environmental goals, that is, Goals 13 (Climate action) and 14 (Life below water). COVID-19 related restrictions have resulted in slowdown in economic activities, growth contraction, rise in poverty and inequality, job losses, disruptions in education, increased gender gap and disparities. The key policy priorities for South Asian governments include: sustaining growth through economic diversification and sustainable industrial transformation, with focus on supporting MSMEs; investing in the core social sectors of

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