

Policy Dialogue
on
Regional Cooperation for Sustainable Development in South Asia
17 November 2021
Colombo, Sri Lanka

Hybrid mode

Venue: Hilton Hotel, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Concept Note

Regional cooperation is a critical factor in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Its value transcends ease and efficiency of resource mobilization, spanning diverse and powerful ways through which collective efforts can strengthen achievement of the SDGs. Cooperative approaches promise to deliver faster results with greater efficiency. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages all member states to engage in regional forums in various stages of its implementation. Countries belonging to specific geographic regions are often found to have similar development trajectories, owing to a mix of historical, cultural and locational factors, and hence have many common sustainable development policy challenges. Moreover, due to proximity, they are also often bound by transboundary issues such as climate change and natural disasters, energy security, transport and ICT connectivity, which needs collectively developed and owned policy solutions and transboundary infrastructure networks. Such networks can enhance access to goods and services which are critical for improving living conditions, especially for vulnerable groups.

The need for collective regional actions is immense in the South Asia subregion to enhance effectiveness and efficiency of SDG interventions. South Asia's progress towards the SDGs has been uneven, marked by some notable improvements in certain targets related to poverty reduction, food security and health, but is lagging behind in terms of overall progress. At the current pace of progress, the subregion is not on track for meeting any of the SDGs by 2030 and requires accelerated efforts to stay on stay on course. Alarmingly, South Asia is found to be regressing on key goals related to environmental sustainability (Goals 13 on Climate Action and Goal 14 on Life Below Water), which may in turn have negative impacts on policy programmes for other goals. The subregion needs to utilize the full potential of regional cooperation in this regard, especially as the COVID-19 outbreak is causing unexpected socio-economic disruptions across the subregional countries. As the negative impacts of the crisis threatens to exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities across South Asian countries, they must work together to hasten recovery.

Recognizing the importance of regional cooperation in ensuring resilient recovery from the pandemic, the Resolution adopted by UNESCAP member states at the 77th Commission Session of 2021 (ESCAP/RES/77/1-*Building back better from crises through regional cooperation*) calls for, among other areas, enhanced 'cooperation in closing connectivity gaps, strengthening digital connectivity, and promoting the digital economy, sustainable and disaster resilient infrastructure and investment, and to enhance regional supply chain connectivity and diversification'.

As part of its support programmes for fostering development cooperation within South Asia, UNESCAP has been organizing a series of Policy Dialogues through its Subregional Office for South and South-West Asia (UNESCAP-SSWA) on various of sustainable development topics covering regional trade, transport and energy connectivity, food security etc. These efforts have resulted in the formation of the South Asia Network for SDGs (SANS), a network of think-tanks from South Asian countries mandated to explore the scope of regional cooperation, including through multi-stakeholder partnerships and collaborative research, for achievement of SDGs in the subregion.

In continuation of these initiatives, and following the directives of UNESCAP Resolution 77/1, UNESCAP-SSWA is organizing a Policy Dialogue entitled ‘**Regional Cooperation for Sustainable Development in South Asia**’ on 17 November 2021 at Colombo, Sri Lanka. This Policy Dialogue seeks to deepen the engagement between various stakeholders, focusing on potential areas for further strengthening subregional linkages, and how such linkages can be channeled into inclusive growth and sustainable development outcomes. Focus areas of discussions are:

- Deepening of intra-regional trade and investment relations in the aftermath of disruptions to global commerce caused by COVID-19
- Improving transport and energy connectivity as key enablers of sustainable development
- Promoting regional cooperation mechanisms to address the growing threat of climate change, shared risks and vulnerabilities.
- Framing of future agenda for the South Asia Network for SDGs (SANS), responding to the call made by UNESCAP Resolution 77/1 on *Building back better from crises through regional cooperation*.

Organization and Participation

The Policy Dialogue will be organized by UNESCAP South and South-West Asia Office on 17 November 2021 in Sri Lanka, back to back with the Fifth south Asia Forum on SDGs. It will be attended by regional policy think-tanks, representatives of governments, academia, civil society organizations, media, and other key stakeholders from South Asian countries.

Tentative Programme

09:00-09:15	Registration
9:15–09:45	<p>Inaugural Session</p> <p><i>Welcome address</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. Adnan Aliani, Officer-in-Charge, UNESCAP South and South West Asia Office (UNESCAP-SSWA), New Delhi • Dr. Dushni Weerakoon, Executive Director, IPS, Sri Lanka • Ms. Chamindry Saparamadu, Director General, Sustainable Development Council, Government of Sri Lanka <p><i>Special address:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H.E. Mr. Esala Ruwan Weerakoon, Secretary General, SAARC • H.E. Ms. Fathimath Niuma, Deputy Minister, Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Maldives • <p><i>Inaugural address</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hon Tharaka Balasuriya, State Minister of Regional Cooperation, Sri Lanka
09:45-10:00	Group Photo and Coffee break
10:00 -11:00	<p>Session 1: Enhancing regional economic integration in South Asia in the emerging context</p> <p><i>Rising protectionist tendencies and trade tensions, emerging mega-regional trade agreements and transformative technologies are fast changing the landscape of global trade and investment flows. Global trade and investment flows have experienced unprecedented setbacks in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak. Against growing uncertainties and volatilities in the external economic environment, the impetus for South Asia to look inwards and harness its intra-regional potential is now more than ever. This session will examine the progress and potential of the existing economic cooperation initiatives in South Asia, trends of regional trade and investment flows and implementation of trade facilitation measures. It will discuss ways to modernize regional trading systems and fully utilize the scope of regional production networks.</i></p> <p><i>Moderator:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H.E. Amb. Gyan Chandra Acharya, Chairman, SAWTEE Centre for SDGs, Kathmandu and former UN Undersecretary General <p><i>Presentation:</i></p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Selim Raihan, Executive Director, South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM), Bangladesh <p><i>Panelists:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Abid Suleri, Executive Director, SDPI, Pakistan • Mr. Chanchal Chand Sarkar, Director, Economic, Trade and Finance, SAARC Secretariat • Prof. Shahid Ahmed, Professor, Department of Economics, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi • Dr. Asanka Wijesinghe, Research Economist, Institute of Policy Studies, Sri Lanka <p>Open discussion</p>
11:00–12:15	<p>Session 2: Regional Cooperation for enhancing shift towards sustainable freight transport in South and South-West Asia</p> <p><i>Enhancing shift towards sustainable freight transport has become imperative given the rising negative externalities of freight transport in South and South-West Asia. It also provides an opportunity for the subregion to build back better from the pandemic. This session will elaborate on the United Nations Development Account project on Enhancing Shift towards Sustainable Freight Transport in Asia and the Pacific being implemented by the ESCAP. The Session will also discuss on the experience on Sri Lanka and Bangladesh on the potential to enhance sustainability of freight transport through dedicated national strategies.</i></p> <p><i>Moderator:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. W.A.D.S. Gunasinghe, Director General (Planning), Ministry of Transport, Sri Lanka (tbc) <p><i>Presentation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. Sandeep Raj Jain, Transport Division, UNESCAP <p><i>Panellists:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. B. N. Puri, AITD, India • Mr. Paul Apthrop, Lead Consultant, Sustainable Freight Transport, ESCAP • Mr. Md Anisur Rahman, Joint Secretary, Road Transport and Highways Division (RTHD), Bangladesh • Dr. Thusitha Sugathapala, Senior Lecturer, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka <p>Open discussion</p>
12:15–13:15	Lunch

<p>13.15-14:15</p>	<p>Session 3: Fostering Energy Cooperation</p> <p><i>Exponentially growing demand for energy and saturating traditional sources of energy characterises the ever-widening energy gaps in South Asia. Addressing energy gaps in South Asia is also challenged by the need to improve its energy-mix, relying more on renewable energy sources. In South Asia, the greatest scope for achieving the twin goal of energy sufficiency and improvements in the energy-mix lies in generation and trade of hydro-power. Though bilateral frameworks for such trade, in terms of both infrastructure and power trading agreements, exist in the subregion, a comprehensive regional framework is still lacking. This session will explore ways and means of extending various bilateral framework to form an integrated regional power grid and regional energy market.</i></p> <p><i>Moderator:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Rajan Sudesh Ratna, UNESCAP, New Delhi (tbc) <p><i>Presentation: (15 minutes each)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. Matthew Wittenstein, Chief, Energy Division, ESCAP • Mr. V.K. Kharbanda, Consultant, UNESAP <p><i>Panelists:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Abid Suleri, Executive Director, SDPI, Islamabad • Dr. Nawaz Ahmad, Director, SAARC Energy Centre • Dr. Jyoti Parikh, Executive Director, IRADe • Dr. Vidura Ralapanawa, Executive Vice President, Innovation and Sustainability of Epic Group <p>Open discussion</p>
<p>14:15-15:30</p>	<p>Session 4: Regional Cooperation for addressing Disaster Risks and Building Climate Resilience</p> <p><i>Asia-Pacific disaster report 2021 presents a new riskscape of South and South-West Asia (SSWA). Around 675 million people in SSWA are exposed to natural and biological hazards – 345 million to heatwaves, 205 million to droughts and 126 million to floods and cyclones. In the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin, for example, around one-third of the total population are at risk of exposure to floods. For droughts, the greatest risks are in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan – countries with large agriculture sectors and rural populations with high levels of poverty. Droughts and floods are also responsible for high economic losses. Climate change impacts will exacerbate these vulnerabilities. Priority adaptation measures that yield high and multiple benefits would be building resilient infrastructure and investment in strengthening early warning systems followed by resilient water management systems, improving dryland agriculture and protecting mangroves. The overall GDP of the sub-region is \$4.7 trillion, while annualized average losses both from natural and biological hazards is estimated to be</i></p>

	<p><i>\$161 billion (4 per cent of GDP) and adaptation cost is around \$51 billion (1.1 percent of GDP). The adaptation benefits cover all three social, economic, and environmental pillars of the SDGs.</i></p> <p><i>The session will deliberate on closing the adaptation gaps by utilizing existing regional co-operation mechanisms and building resilience in South and South-West Asia.</i></p> <p><i>Moderator:</i></p> <p>Mr. P.K. Taneja, Director, SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SAARC Disaster Management perspectives and recent priorities) [5 min]</p> <p><i>Presentations:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. Sanjay Srivastava, ESCAP –South Asia Sub-regional Disaster Report 2021 – key messages and recommendations on bridging adaptation and resilience gaps [7 min] • Ms Madhurima Sarkar-Swaisgood, ESCAP’s risk and resilience portal for estimating adaptation costs and risk-informed priorities for South Asia [7 min/Virtual] • Mr Yuji Masutomi, Asia-Pacific Climate Adaptation Platform (AP-PLAT) – products for climate resilience in South Asia [7 min/Virtual] • Mr Tana ji Sen, Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure [7 min/virtual] <p><i>Panelists:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. Ashis Mitra, In-Charge, BIMSTEC Centre on Weather and Climate (BCWC), Noida (UP), New Delhi [5 min] – BCWC products and services for integrated multi-hazard early warning systems (Virtual). • Ms Mandhira Singh Shrestha, ICIMOD, Kathmandu [5 min] -Opportunities for managing cascading hazards with multi-hazard risk management in South Asia (virtual). • Mr. Ramraj Narasimhan, RIMES [5 min], Opportunities to capitalize on climate adaptation and resilience for South Asia (virtual) • Ms. Madhavi Malalgoda Ariyabandu, Duryog Nivaran (Network for Disaster Risk Reduction in South Asia), Colombo (5 min) Opportunities for mainstreaming gender in DRR: Regional co-operation perspectives. <p>Discussion on:</p> <p>New opportunities for strengthening regional co-operation in South Asia</p>
15:30–15:45	Tea/Coffee Break
15:45–16:45	<p>Session 5: Building back better from crises through regional cooperation: Setting the Future Agenda for the South Asia Network on SDGs (SANS)</p> <p><i>SANS was established to facilitate cross-fertilization of ideas, sharing of good practices, policy analyses on specific subregional issues and building capacities for accelerated implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This session will discuss the scope,</i></p>

	<p><i>activities and the way forward for the members and partners of SANS for meeting the twin goals of recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and acceleration of progress towards the SDGs.</i></p> <p><i>Moderator:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prof. Nagesh Kumar, Director, Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID) <p><i>Panelists: Heads/senior representatives of South Asian think-tanks</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Fahmida Khatun, Executive Director, CPD, Bangladesh • Prof. Shahid Ahmed, Professor, Department of Economics, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi • Dr. Posh Raj Pandey, Executive Chairman, SAWTEE, Nepal • Dr. Abid Suleri, Executive Director, SDPI, Islamabad • Dr. Dushni Weerakoon, Executive Director, IPS, Sri Lanka • Dr. Arvind Kumar, President, India Water Foundation <p>Open discussion</p>
16:45-17:00	<p>Wrap up and Closing session</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms. Chamindry Saparamadu, Director General, Sustainable Development Council, Government of Sri Lanka • Dr. Dushni Weerakoon, Executive Director, IPS, Sri Lanka • Mr. Adnan Aliani, Officer-in-Charge, UNESCAP South and South West Asia Office (UNESCAP-SSWA), New Delhi