

VIRTUAL MEETING OF SAARC MINISTERS OF EDUCATION/
HIGHER EDUCATION ON EDUCATION SECTOR'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19,
8 OCTOBER 2020

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

Hon'ble Mr. Giriraj Mani Pokharel, Minister for Education, Science and Technology of Nepal and Chair of this Meeting,
Hon'ble Ministers,
Distinguished Delegates,

Thank you, Hon'ble Chair, for giving me this opportunity.

I welcome the Hon'ble Ministers and distinguished delegates from the Member States of SAARC to this important meeting.

I also take this opportunity to thank the esteemed Government of Nepal for convening this meeting at this challenging time of the COVID-19 Pandemic. We are confident of a fruitful outcome of this meeting under the able guidance of the Hon'ble Chair.

COVID-19 poses a once-in-a-generation threat to the world's population. It does not respect national boundaries and has affected us as never before and changed the way we live, work and do business.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, we are witnessing the disruption of the education system, rendering a whole generation of children, as victims, and disruption of their learning opportunities.

Moreover, the Pandemic has rendered most of our students out of the classroom and depriving them of learning opportunities for a considerable period of time. It has laid bare the status of the digital divide and poor ICT infrastructure in South Asia which has severely restricted remote learning opportunities for children.

In this context, this Ministerial Meeting devoted to the "Education Sectors response to COVID-19" is very timely.

The Member States of SAARC are committed to regional collaboration and partnership in promoting education in the region. Today's meeting is an opportune occasion to identify the challenges, find viable solutions and follow the right implementation strategies towards promoting inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by the year 2030, as envisaged in the SAARC Framework for Action.

We are facing a very difficult and unprecedented situation for children, parents and educators due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Many schools in the region remain closed with uncertainty about reopening.

The re-opening of schools must be considered as an utmost priority, as soon as it is deemed safe. Decisions about returning to school must be based on an assessment of benefits and risks, at School and Community Levels. Learning loss, due to exclusion from school, could have a drastic impact on children's long term futures. For some children, school also provides other forms of support, including access to services, that address mental health and nutrition.

Apart from the many challenges of delivering education through alternative modes, the children, parents and of course the teachers have to be emotionally supported as they adapt to a "new normal" in these challenging times.

In the wake of the pandemic, each country in the region has come up with innovative steps, on how to deliver education to children, and to refine their responses. Some of these approaches include new and flexible delivery methods such as radio, mobile phone, television, and online options.

It is heartening to see that within a short time, government and local government agencies, private sector, development agencies, media and other partners have come together to devise new ways to reach school children in the region who may lack access to resources such as Wi-Fi and computers.

Higher Education Institutions are also moving towards distance learning, with support from National Research and Education Networks. Given the uncertainty in the short and medium term, we will have to build resilience in our Schools and Higher Education Institutions to cope with imminent closures and re-openings, and for teaching and learning under different scenarios. Throughout these measures, our primary focus should be on health and safety, and maintaining channels of communication and support with students, staff and other stakeholders.

As we are experiencing an evolving situation, sharing of information, experience and best practices, such as through today's meeting, would greatly help to "learn from each other". In doing so, we should also examine global approaches and see how they can be adapted to our region. I hope the discussions today will lead to the identification and sharing of "lessons learnt" that will be beneficial to Member States.

Beyond its immediate impact on the school systems, COVID-19 threatens the progress the region is making towards the SDG4 targets. During the past few decades, our region has made significant strides in the education sector, with countries recognizing the need to invest in this sector for their economic and social development. However, progress has not been uniform across the region and inequalities remain. The majority of the world's adult illiterates and a significant proportion of the world's "out of school children" live in South Asia. Therefore, we must not underestimate, the challenges posed by COVID-19, on top of the significant challenges, we were already facing in the Education Sector.

Excellencies,

The Third Meeting of the SAARC Ministers of Education and Higher Education, held in October 2019 hosted by the Government of the Maldives adopted two key documents regarding

achieving SDG4 targets in South Asia, namely SAARC Framework for Action and the Malé Statement on Education and Higher Education. Given that the Education Sector in the region has been greatly affected by the pandemic, we may also consider the effect on the goals and targets we set in the aforementioned documents and how to get back on track.

COVID-19 has accelerated the application of ICT in the Education Sector. ICT has become an important tool of education delivery with many schools adopting online learning. However, technology, even in its very basic form, currently remains out of reach of many children. Therefore, we have to think very innovatively in addressing the challenges posed by COVID-19 with regard to effective and equitable access of learning opportunities.

Excellencies,

I am confident that Regional Cooperation through SAARC would remain instrumental to tackle the challenges prevailing in the Education Sector, in a forward looking and innovative manner.

In conclusion, I once again thank the esteemed Government of Nepal for taking the timely initiative to organize today's meeting, through virtual mode, the first for a SAARC Education Ministers Meeting.

I wish this meeting great success.

I thank you.
