

His Excellency Mohamed Aslam, Minister of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure of the Republic of Maldives,
Her Excellency Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, United Nations Under Secretary General and Executive Secretary of UNESCAP,
His Excellency Tenzin Lekphell, Secretary General of BIMSTEC,
Her Excellency Catherine Haswell, UN Resident Coordinator in the Republic of Maldives,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,

I am pleased to address the Fourth South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals on the theme, *Fostering Sustainable and Resilient Recovery from COVID-19 in South Asia*.

We convey heartfelt condolences to the people and the governments of the countries in the region over the loss of life in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We thank UNESCAP for taking the timely initiative for convening this Forum amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We commend the able leadership of Her Excellency the Executive Secretary of UNESCAP to guide this important Forum.

I am particularly glad that this Meeting convenes in quick succession to the First Meeting of the SAARC Planning Ministers held virtually on 25 November 2020, which deliberated extensively on measures to successfully attain the Sustainable Development Goals in the context of the unprecedented socio economic challenges posed to the region by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Excellencies,

The SAARC Charter aims to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life through accelerated socio-economic growth. With the declaration of poverty alleviation as the “over-arching” goal of SAARC at the Twelfth Summit in 2004, several measures have been initiated in this direction.

As a result of these initiatives, the region has been making steady progress to substantially reduce extreme poverty and to improve other socio-economic indicators. I am pleased to state that the achievements made by the South Asian countries in poverty reduction have immensely contributed to the attainment of MDGs and these would continue to contribute to the attainment of SDGs as well.

This Meeting convenes at a critical time of implementing SDGs, which are already in the sixth year of their implementation. While the countries in the region are striving to achieve SDGs the COVID-19 pandemic has brought severe socio-economic challenges as well as adversely impacted progress achieved over the past several years and caused uncertainties in the attainment of the SDGs.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the SAARC Leaders held a Video Conference on 15 March 2020 to chalk out a regional strategy to combat the pandemic. As an immediate, emergency response, the SAARC Leaders set up the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund. The SAARC Health Ministers met virtually in April 2020 to carry forward the aspirations of the SAARC

Leaders in containing the further spread of the Coronavirus and addressing the adverse impacts of the pandemic.

Excellencies,

In the wake of the pandemic, countries in the region have slowed down in their progress towards attaining many of the SDGs since the entire focus has shifted towards health and social protection-related responses. As a result, the hard-earned development gains of the countries in the region have begun to reverse.

In this backdrop, the SAARC Planning Ministers, in their meeting last week, emphasized the need to reorient approaches to the attainment of SDGs in the face of the pandemic. Among other issues, the SAARC Planning Ministers agreed to bolster regional cooperation in pursuing the SDGs through evolving new partnerships and mechanisms; facilitating technology transfer, capacity building, information access; and monitoring and reporting for accountability.

Excellencies,

As SDGs provide a framework to work decisively against the pandemic, it is imperative to tackle it and other developmental challenges through effective regional initiatives. In doing so, it is important to put SDGs at the centre of all policymaking and recovery planning. Our short-term collective actions should be geared to control the spread of the virus in every country in the region. We also need to work in unison to mitigate the adverse impacts of the pandemic on achieving SDGs. We should be looking at a structured transformation, which addresses the crisis and causes of poverty and inequality. We should aim at effecting a realistic change, which is sustainable and which spurs inclusive socio-economic growth in the region.

This Meeting is a welcome opportunity to take stock of good practices on responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the region. We are confident that the countries in the region can accelerate achieving SDGs and building back better through effective regional collaboration to which all of us are committed.

In conclusion, I wish to appreciate the work done by UNESCAP under the Socio-Economic Framework of the United Nations. The reports by the South and South-West Asia Office of UNESCAP are very relevant in the present context and I compliment UNESCAP for very useful and timely policy recommendations.

I also compliment UNESCAP for creating a South Asia Network on SDGs. I am certain that this Network will play an important role not only in South Asia but also in all the countries in the Asia-Pacific to benefit from good practices on implementing SDGs.

I wish Your Excellencies and the distinguished delegates fruitful deliberations.

I thank you.
