

SEVENTY-SEVENTH SESSION OF ESCAP

Subregional Dialogue on
Building Back Better from Crises through Regional Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific
Virtual, 10:00-11:00 (Bangkok time, GMT+7), 28 April 2021

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

Excellency Dr. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of ESCAP,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Panelists,

Good morning!

I thank ESCAP for inviting me to speak at this panel discussion on the sidelines of its Seventy-seventh Session. The theme for this session, "*Building Back Better from Crises through Regional Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific*" is timely.

I convey sincere gratitude to Her Excellency Dr. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of ESCAP, for her insightful opening remarks, setting the tone of deliberations of this panel discussion.

I convey warm greetings to the distinguished Heads of regional organizations present. Your presence in this Session not only signifies its importance but it also augurs well for its success. We look forward to benefitting from your insights.

Distinguished Panelists,

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is currently undergoing an unprecedented health and socio-economic crises. The member countries of SAARC have been severely affected, threatening lives and livelihoods of millions of people. As a result, the social and economic gains achieved by the countries in the region over the past few decades have begun to recede, while challenges to recovery are becoming ever daunting.

This unprecedented challenge requires collective action at national, sub-regional and regional levels. It is in this context that we greatly value the convening of this Sub-regional Dialogue bringing together the Heads of Sub-regional organizations from Asia and the Pacific. The global fight against COVID-19 will not succeed unless vaccines become available to everyone. No one is safe until everyone is safe. This is only possible with collaborative measures to build back better.

Excellencies,

As with other regional organizations in Asia and the Pacific, SAARC's efforts were geared towards protecting the health of our people from the deadly virus. In this connection, I wish to recall the initiative taken by the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India to convene the SAARC

Leaders' Video Conference in March last year, which saw the establishment of an Emergency Fund of US\$ 21 million through voluntary contributions from the Member States.

As a follow-up to the SAARC Leaders' Video Conference, the esteemed Government of Pakistan took another important initiative to convene the Meeting of the SAARC Health Ministers in April last year. In September, the SAARC Finance Ministers met virtually to discuss the pandemic's impact on the South Asian Economies. In October, the SAARC Education Ministers met virtually to discuss the education sector's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In November, the SAARC Planning Ministers met in virtual mode to discuss measures to realign efforts and strategies towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals in the face of the unprecedented threats posed by the pandemic. In addition, several other expert-level meetings have been held to tackle the pandemic's adverse impacts on public health, trade and finance. Moreover, the SAARC Development Fund has allocated US\$ 7.7 million to finance COVID-19 related social projects in the region.

During the course of the Pandemic, we have participated in the virtual meetings organized by ESCAP and other development partners to learn from the best practices followed by other sub-regions in tackling the threats triggered by the pandemic. We thank ESCAP for convening the High-Level Policy Dialogue and the South Asia Forum on SDGs, respectively in July and December last year. We also applaud the initiative taken by ESCAP to create a South Asia Network on SDGs a couple of months ago.

Excellencies,

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only brought unprecedented socio-economic challenges to nations in the region, but it has also regressed progress towards SDGs. Despite being on a dynamic and resilient growth path over the past decade, South Asia became one of the worst-hit sub-regions in terms of lost output in 2020. Despite several estimates on faster recovery, we are not sure how far these predictions are going to be correct in view of the recent spurt in cases surpassing the previous waves. We are convinced that a "business as usual" approach will not help us attain SDGs. This unprecedented pandemic requires an unprecedented counter approach from all of us.

Another challenge that the countries in South Asia are facing relates to their sustainable graduation out of the status of LDC. Three out of our four LDC members are graduating soon. However, their national aspirations have been shaken by the likely lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has complicated their process of transition. Extending the window of transition in trade and aid agreements, ensuring preferential market access, enabling them to be eligible for LDC specific funds and mechanisms for an extended period will help make graduation smoother. Increasingly, they will also need to become active participants in the international market place, especially global and regional value chains. These countries will

not only need to bring many policy changes within themselves, but they also require support from development partners for a successful transition.

I am convinced that the distinguished panellists will agree with me that these issues are equally important for their subregions as well. Sharing of best practices and experiences will benefit all of us. It is in this regard that we believe that ESCAP can play the role of a bridging link and facilitator amongst us. For SAARC, ESCAP has been an active partner and we look forward to working closely with ESCAP in these endeavours.

As we attempt to build back better, it is essential for us to focus on areas of economic diversification and industry-focused structural transformation; raise investments in the core social sectors of health and education; expand social protection; close gender gaps and improve basic infrastructure for addressing inequalities; ensure food security, agriculture and rural development; and enhance environmental sustainability through green recovery packages, greater investments in renewables and low-carbon technologies.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasise that regional cooperation is not only desirable but indispensable to overcome the challenges posed to the Asia-Pacific sub-regions. This is indeed one of the main lessons distilled from all our diverse responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The cost of non-cooperation during these times will certainly be higher.

I thank Madam Executive Secretary of ESCAP for her leadership and her team led by Dr. Nagesh Kumar for bringing together the Heads of Sub-regional Organizations from Asia and the Pacific to this virtual platform.

I thank you.
