

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
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Item 2 (b) -Theme topic, “Accelerating Climate Action in Asia and the Pacific for Sustainable Development”: Strengthening Subregional Cooperation

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

Madam Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana,
Executive Secretary of ESCAP and Under Secretary General of the United Nations,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,

I thank ESCAP for inviting me to address this Session devoted to the theme, *Accelerating Climate Action in Asia and the Pacific for Sustainable Development* - a topic which is very relevant to SAARC.

I welcome the opportunity to share my thoughts on such an important topic of Climate Action and how subregional cooperation can be used as a tool for fast-tracking achievement of SDGs.

As we are aware, the issue of Climate Change is not new. However, the challenges have become more pronounced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is time now to take concrete action rather than keep debating over this issue any further, especially in the context of South Asia, which is most vulnerable to frequent climate-induced natural disasters and loss of lives, regressing the development of countries in the region.

It may be noted that South and South-West Asia is lagging behind in all 17 goals and has regressed on Goal 13 relating to Climate Action. For the subregion, the multi-stakeholder consultations have identified problems faced due to increasing water stress, declining share of renewable energy, industrialization, infrastructure development and innovation, and rapid and unplanned urbanization. The solution to all these is “Climate Action”.

Excellencies,

One of the objectives of SAARC is to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life; to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region; and to provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realize their full potentials – all essential for achieving SDGs.

ESCAP has identified the urgent need for strengthening disaster risk management; accelerating energy transition and improved access to renewable energy; enhancing the sustainability of transport systems; promoting climate-resilient agriculture; and strengthening capacities to mobilize finance for inclusive and green economic transition – all important and which align with the broader mandate of SAARC.

Another challenge that SAARC currently faces relates to the fact that four out of eight SAARC Member States are Least Developed Countries (LDCs). We are all aware how the COVID-19 pandemic created economic and social instability in the South Asia region and the biggest sufferer were LDCs. They suffered severely on the economic front, witnessing millions of job losses and sharp rise in new poor and poverty, and are most vulnerable to Climate Change.

The graduation poses serious challenges to them on their path to economic development, meet financial needs to take climate actions and also meeting various targets of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. As a subregional cooperation initiative, the SAARC Secretariat and ESCAP will work together to see how a consensus can emerge to continue giving preferential access and technical assistance even after graduation.

Environment, Natural Disasters and Biotechnology are primary areas of cooperation of SAARC. Accordingly, SAARC has adopted the Action Plan on Climate Change. The preservation and protection of the environment, including disaster risk reduction and management remains a high priority on the agenda of cooperation being pursued by the Member States of SAARC. The SAARC Disaster Management Centre was established with the aim of promoting regional cooperation for preparedness and mitigation of natural disasters.

Regional and subregional cooperation between and among countries should also focus on research, knowledge-sharing and capacity-building. I am happy to state that the ESCAP-driven South and South-West Asia Network on the SDGs is acting as a bridge in exchange of knowledge, and sharing of best practices on SDGs. For effective cooperation, such exchanges are essential, not only for South Asia, but entire Asia and the Pacific. I am sure that deeper engagements among policy makers, researchers, and civil society organisations will happen in the coming months.

Excellencies,

In the present challenging time, there is no substitute for regional cooperation. SAARC has initiated many activities which have benefitted its members. I am sure if we all collaborate amongst us as subregional and regional organisations, the entire region will prosper. Currently, there is no such institutional arrangement which binds us all together.

I am confident that Madam Executive Secretary of ESCAP would take a lead in establishing a regional framework on this. We will be happy to collaborate.

I wish this Session every success.

Thank you!
