SAARC in the Field of Social Inclusion

Background

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), founded in 1985, is dedicated to improving the welfare of the people of South Asia through economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region. SAARC’s seven founding members are Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Afghanistan joined the organisation in 2007. Australia, China, European Union, Iran, Japan, Mauritius, Myanmar, the Republic of Korea and United States are the Observers to SAARC. SAARC's approach to achieve the six regional objectives stated in its charter is through the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, national independence, non-use of force and non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and peaceful settlement of all the disputes. Two significant consequences of observing these principles means that decisions at all levels are taken on the basis of unanimity and contentious issues are excluded from formal deliberations.

Structure of SAARC

The key mechanisms that oversee and guide regional cooperation under SAARC are the Charter Bodies. They are as follows:

The annual Meetings of the Heads of State or Government (Summit) of Member States is the highest decision making authority under SAARC. The bi-annual Council of Ministers consists of Foreign Ministers, who meet to formulate policies, review progress, decide on new areas of cooperation, establish additional mechanism for cooperation and decide on matters of general interests.

The Standing Committee consists of Foreign Secretaries reporting to the Council of Ministers. The Standing Committee monitors, coordinates, and approves projects and programmes; determines inter-sectoral priorities; mobilises regional and external resources and identifies new areas of cooperation based on appropriate studies. The Standing Committee may meet as often as deemed necessary. However, the Standing Committee meets prior to the meetings of the Council of Ministers during a Summit and during the Inter-Summit Session of the Council of Ministers. It also holds Special Sessions to deliberate on important issues. The Standing Committee may set up Action Committees comprising Member States concerned with implementation of projects involving more than two but not all Member States. The Programming Committee consists of senior officials from Foreign Ministries who meet preceding the sessions of the Standing Committee.

Technical Committees comprising representatives of Member States are responsible for implementation, coordination and monitoring of programmes in their respective areas of cooperation. In addition, Working Groups take forward collaboration in new and emerging areas. Furthermore, since 1986, ministerial-level meetings have taken place on various areas such as economic issues, child and maternal health, children,
women, environment, youth, poverty alleviation, agriculture, trade, information, communication, culture, tourism, finance and on other emergent issues.

The Secretariat was established in 1987 in Kathmandu, Nepal. The main role of the SAARC Secretariat is to coordinate and monitor the implementation of SAARC activities and service the meetings of the association. The Secretariat also develops projects and programs and identifies the sources of funding. In carrying out its mandate, the Secretariat works closely with the Charter Bodies, Ministerial processes, National Focal Points, Sectoral Focal Points, Regional Centres, other SAARC institutions, Observers and International Organizations. Among others, it services meetings of the Association; prepares the documentation and reports of SAARC meetings; coordinates and monitors the implementation of SAARC activities; provides clarification and guidance on directives and decisions taken by SAARC bodies, rules, regulations, procedures and serves as the institutional bank for the entire SAARC process. It also engages with Observers to SAARC and UN and other International Organizations with regard to implementation of agreed activities/projects.

Social Inclusion related Initiatives

The signing of the SAARC Social Charter by the Heads of States or Governments at the Twelfth Summit (Islamabad, January 2004) marked the high point in the Association's effort in the social sector which also reflects the unshakable commitment of all Member States to tackle the social issues confronting the region. It seeks to promote the welfare of the people of South Asia, to improve their quality of life, accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development, as well as to provide the opportunity to live in dignity and realize full potential of all the individuals. The Charter was formulated to chart the directions of the social policy and set the goals to be attained by countries which had special relevance for the
region such as poverty alleviation, population stabilization, empowerment of women, youth mobilization, human resource development, promotion of health and nutrition and protection of children. It was perceived as the logical outcome of the ongoing process – a process in which the Member States have attempted to define and set many of the goals and objectives of social development. The figure below captures the established regional mechanisms to implement the SAARC Social Charter.
The provisions laid down in the Social Charter are being implemented across the region through National Coordination Committees (NCCs) in all Member States, mandated to monitor and devise programmes to implement the goals of the Charter.

**Poverty Alleviation**

Poverty Alleviation has remained the most important goal of the Social Charter. SAARC designated the decade of 2006-2015 as the SAARC Decade of Poverty Alleviation. The Plan of Action on Poverty Alleviation emphasized, inter alia, on good governance, macro-economic management, promotion of employment, expansion of social safety nets, investment in human capital, mobilization of resources, empowerment of local communities, strengthening intra-regional trade and capital flows, exchange of best practices and others to mention.

SAARC has a two-tier mechanism for focused and comprehensive examination of poverty related issues, comprising the Ministers and the Secretaries dealing with poverty alleviation at the national level. During the period of SAARC Poverty Alleviation Decade (2006-2015), the Member States exchanged information on poverty reduction programmes, policies and strategies adopted by countries to improve the condition of the poor. This included best practices and success stories of various poverty alleviation programmes implemented in the SAARC Member States, with special reference to innovative ideas for bringing about equality in the distribution of social benefits for reaching the unreached. Currently a Poverty Alleviation Specialist works at the Poverty Alleviation Cell at the Secretariat on matters related to poverty issues.

**SAARC Development Goals**

The Independent South Asian Commission for Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA) developed a comprehensive set of twenty two SAARC Development Goals (SDGs), under four clusters: Livelihood, Health, Education and Environment, in 2006. As directed by the Leaders, SAARC is making sustained progress to mainstream SDGs in the national process and develop and implement regional and sub-regional projects towards the attainment of SAARC Development Goals. Furthermore, Country Teams with support from a core group of experts are working on preparation of Regional Poverty Profile under.

**Health and Population Activities**

The Meetings of the SAARC Health Ministers provide policy guidance to the Technical Committee on Health and Population to carry out number of regional initiatives to

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1 The Thirteenth Summit (Dhaka, November 12-13, 2005)  
2 Prepared by the SAARC Finance/Planning Ministers (Islamabad, 2002) and approved by the Twelfth Summit (Islamabad, 4-6 January 2004)  
3 The Fifteenth SAARC Summit (Colombo, 2-3 August 2008), The Sixteenth Summit (28-29 April 2010, Thimphu)
promote and protect the health of the population in the region. SAARC’s health-related initiatives have mostly focused on HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, communicable diseases, pandemic preparedness. A particular emphasis has been placed on HIV/AIDS. In this context, number of regional consultations, training programmes and research activities have been undertaken to combat trans-boundary epidemics and fight major diseases in the region. SAARC has identified different Centres to act as focal points on selected diseases in the region and has developed regional strategies to deal with public health emergencies in a consistent and systematic manner and reduce the incidence and impact of outbreak of epidemics in the region. At present the SAARC Secretariat is developing regional guidelines on addressing malnutrition and the Regional Framework on Sanitation.

SAARC Regional Strategy on Communicable Diseases

SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre (STC)
The STC established in 1992 plays an important role in the prevention and control of tuberculosis in the region by coordinating efforts of national programmes. The Centre renamed as SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre in 2005, now takes added responsibility of coordinating and implementing regional activities related HIV/AIDS. One important outcome of this process is the SAARC Regional Strategy on HIV and AIDS along with a regional workplan for implementation of the Strategy. Regional Expert Group Meeting on HIV/AIDS meets annually to review progress of implementation of the SAARC Strategy on HIV/AIDS and the STAC support Member States in implementing the strategy. Under Policy and Advocacy component of the Strategy, the SAARC Goodwill Ambassadors Programme for HIV/AIDS plays a crucial role to bring the issue of HIV and AIDS to the political and public forefront taking advantage of their celebrity status and through their public and media appeal reaching the widest possible audiences with the message of avoiding risky behaviour and eliminating stigma and discrimination against People Living with HIV and AIDS.

Communicable Disease and Pandemic Preparedness
Since 2010, SAARC has been coordinating the Highly Pathogenic Emerging Diseases (HPED) Programme in the South Asian region funded by the European Union through FAO, OIE and WHO. The objective of the HPED programme is to improve epidemic and pandemic preparedness in the region. Key activities include enhancing capacities and capabilities of the SAARC Secretariat and member countries to prevent, control and eradicate HPED, and strengthening public health and veterinary services in SAARC countries. The development of SAARC Regional Strategy on Communicable Diseases, in 2012, ensures that there is a collective, systematic and coordinated approach towards pandemic preparedness in the region and also to combat deadly communicable diseases on the population of South Asia.

Regional Project on Strengthening Maternal and Child Health
SAARC Development Fund is implementing a regional project on 'Strengthening Maternal and Child Health Including Immunization (June 2009 - Dec 2013)', with a total budget of US$ 15 million. This project is targeted at mothers and newborns in seven countries, doctors and nurses and Infrastructure Development/up-gradation of Maternal and Newborn Care Facilities in seven countries in 52 district hospitals, 242 sub-district hospitals or FRUs and 1,180 health post centres/community health centres.

Education, Human Resource Development and Youth Mobilization

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4 Pursuant to the directive of the Twelfth SAARC Summit
5 The Twelfth SAARC Summit held in Islamabad in January 2004 and the subsequent Health Ministers meetings held since 2005, the Leaders and the Ministers for Health reiterated the importance of taking necessary steps.
The South Asian Leaders, from the very inception of the SAARC process, have emphasized the role of education as a vital means for nurturing its economic development and social cohesion. Toward this end, they recognized that Human Resource Development (HRD) is one of the means of realizing the SAARC objectives and, in 1998, agreed\(^6\) to establish the SAARC Human Resource Development Centre (SHRDC).

Similarly, realizing the importance of higher education, SAARC Meetings of the Committee of Heads of University Grants Commissions/Equivalent Bodies meets regularly to consider matters related to achieving the goals of higher education such as mutual recognition of educational degrees, implementation of revised SAARC Chairs, Fellowships and Scholarships Schemes, and cooperation among Universities of Member Countries. Establishment of the South Asian University in 2011 paved the way to attract talented and high-caliber students with exceptional merit from the region and provide them with world-class education. In October 2011, the first batch of students graduated from the University.

**Promotion of the Status of Women**

Ever since the inception of SAARC, issues related to women have figured prominently on the SAARC agenda for regional cooperation and our leaders at their successive Summits have reiterated the importance of women empowerment and ensuring greater equality for women in the region. With highest political commitment from the Leaders of SAARC, as apparent from the SAARC Declarations, the Ministerial Conferences on Women has been instrumental in charting the course of women’s empowerment efforts in SAARC.

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\(^6\) the Fourth SAARC Summit on 29-31 December 1988
The Technical Committee on Women, Youth and Children, comprises of policy level officials and technical experts in subject area, meets annually. The Committee has been instrumental in providing technical inputs on new initiatives in addition to assessing and monitoring various ongoing initiatives and programmes and making
recommendations and advising SAARC higher bodies on matters relating women’s empowerment.

Concerned over the trafficking of women and children within and between countries in the region, in January 2002, SAARC adopted a Regional Convention on Combating the Crime of Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution. The Convention calls for cooperation amongst the Member States in dealing with various aspects of prevention, interdiction and suppression of trafficking in women and children for prostitution, and repatriation and rehabilitation of victims of trafficking. It also calls for prevention of use of women and children in international prostitution networks, particularly where countries of the region are the countries of origin, transit and destination.

A Regional Task Force meets regularly to monitor and assess the implementation of various provisions of the Convention. The Special Session of Regional Task Force held at the SAARC Secretariat in April 2010 prepared the draft outline for the establishment of two regional Toll-free help lines dedicated for women and children survivors or victims of violence or discrimination. The project is expected to start early 2013.

**Regional Project on Women’s Empowerment and Skills Development**

A regional project on 'strengthening the livelihood initiative for home based workers in SAARC Region (August 2008-December 2013’, with a total budget of US $ 13.6 million was concluded. This project targeted to poor/marginal home-based women workers from informal sectors in the SAARC Members States.

**Youth**

Issues related to youth in the region have also been given due priority. Ministerial Conference on Youth in South Asia was held in Maldives on May 1994 to address the problem of the youth and focus on the broad theme of youth and development. The Year 1994 was designated as the 'SAARC Year of Youth'. In 1995, the SAARC Youth Resolution was adopted to advance the overall development of the youth in the region. As one of the components of the SAARC Agenda for Culture, SAARC Youth Camps are being held annually on a designated theme with a view to promote cultural interaction among the youth.

The SAARC Youth Awards Scheme instituted in 1996 provides recognition to extraordinary young talents and encourage the overall development of youth in the region. The Scheme is also aimed at encouraging the South Asian youth to excel in

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7 the Eleventh Summit in Kathmandu
various fields and to realize their full potential. In order to encourage more young women to come forward, alternate years have been designated for young women.

At present, SAARC Secretariat is developing SAARC Youth Charter and SAARC Youth Action Plan\(^8\) to capture the important role of young people in the region.

**Promotion of the Rights and Well-being of the Child**

The development of children and the promotion of their well-being is a principal area of cooperation identified by SAARC from its very inception. In this regard, the SAARC Convention on Regional Arrangement for the Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia was endorsed during the Eleventh SAARC Summit (Kathmandu, January 2002). Similarly, as recommended by the third Ministerial Conference on the Children of South Asia, the observance of the SAARC Decade of the Rights of the Child (2001-2010) lead to region-wide consensus on social action for achieving the rights of the child. An in-depth assessment of the Decade of the Rights of the Child was launched during the Council of Ministers held in Addu City on November 9, 2011. In 2011, South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC)\(^9\) became a SAARC Apex Body. SAIEVAC is an inter-governmental body with a vision that all children, girls and boys, throughout South Asia enjoy their right to an environment free from all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and discrimination.

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\(^8\) directed by Leaders during the Sixteenth SAARC Summit
\(^9\) The Thirty Ninth Session of the Standing Committee