



Impact of COVID-19 on progress towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in South Asia: Challenges and Way Forward for Regional Cooperation

Date: 8 December 2021

(3:00 PM – 5:00 PM, Pakistan Standard Time)

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic which began as a health crisis, has become a monumental human and socio-economic crisis. The ongoing pandemic has devastated South Asian economies, exposing the systemic weaknesses and common challenges faced by the subregion. Inadequate public health infrastructure, widespread informality, existing gender and digital divide and lack of comprehensive social protection systems affected South Asia's preparedness to tackle the pandemic. Countries in South Asia have suffered economic growth contraction with severe impacts on micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), international trade, supply chains and international tourism, leading to loss of jobs and livelihoods and pushing millions of people into poverty in the subregion. Through impacts on economic growth, employment, poverty, hunger, inequalities and other deprivations and planetary health, the COVID-19 pandemic poses serious perils for the achievement of the SDGs in the subregion. Financing of large relief and stimulus packages to address the adverse socio-economic impacts of the pandemic constrains the fiscal space further to undertake investments necessary to achieve the SDGs by 2030. While the crisis threatens to hold back progress towards the SDGs, it also makes their achievement more urgent and necessary for a sustainable and resilient recovery

Recovery from COVID-19 and accelerating efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs must go together. Recognizing the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has impeded progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, **ESCAP resolution 77/1** of 29 April 2021 highlighted that recovery from the COVID-19 crisis provides an opportunity for greater regional cooperation to build back better in the region through inclusive, resilient and sustainable recovery strategies and investments aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹ The intergovernmental platform provided by the eighth *Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development* reaffirmed that existing mechanisms for regional cooperation, including subregional intergovernmental organizations, can play a crucial role in reinforcing national commitments to achieve the SDGs, aligned with overarching principle of leaving no country behind.² Recently, the Secretary-General of the United Nations presented a

¹ESCAP/RES/77/1. See https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/ESCAP_RES_77_1_E.pdf

² ESCAP/RFSD/2021/1. See https://unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/APFSD8_1E_0.pdf

report on “Our Common Agenda” to the General Assembly in September 2021 before the end of the 75th session. The report looks ahead to the next 25 years and represents the Secretary-General’s vision on the future of global cooperation and reinvigorating inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism³. He opined that UN should enhance cooperation with regional organizations, development actors, international financial institutions and other relevant multilateral institutions. The report highlights that multilateralism that is more networked draws together existing institutional capacities, overcoming fragmentation to ensure all are working together towards a common goal.

Greater subregional cooperation among South Asian countries is critical to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic and for resilient and sustainable recovery through effective partnerships and subregional mechanisms, facilitating technology transfer, promoting digital economy, capacity building, information sharing and accountable monitoring and reporting.⁴ Accelerating SDGs implementation also provides an important framework for South Asian cooperation. In cognizance of the need highlighted for enhancing the role of think-tanks in promoting regional cooperation for fulfilling the 2030 Agenda and achieving the SDGs, UNESCAP launched the [South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals \(SANS\)](#) portal at the [South Asia Forum on SDGs](#) in December 2020 - the subregional preparatory for the APFSD- as a knowledge platform for multi-stakeholder meetings for sharing of best practices and thereby accelerating SDGs implementation by South Asian countries.

Against this background, this panel will bring together experts from South Asia, including heads from prominent think-tanks, in an interactive session, to share their perspectives on the implications of COVID-19 pandemic for achieving the SDGs and the potential of regional cooperation for accelerating SDGs progress and in building back better from the crisis. In this regard, the panel will attempt to examine and explore the following broad questions:

- What are the key impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic, social and environmental dimensions of SDGs progress at national level?
- How effective have national strategies and policies been for tackling the COVID-19 crisis and what are the opportunities for aligning COVID-19 policy responses with the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement?
- What are some key policy recommendations for accelerating economic recovery, investing in inclusive social protection systems and applying climate- and environment-responsive approaches to building back better from the COVID-19 pandemic and being on track for achieving the SDGs by 2030?
- In view of UNSG’s report “Our Common Agenda”, what are the ways in which existing means/instruments for regional cooperation can provide multilateral frameworks for complementing national efforts through regional cooperation strategies in COVID-19 recovery and SDGs implementation?

³ https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf

⁴ <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/Report-Fourth%20South%20Asia%20Forum%20on%20SDGs.pdf>

- What are the opportunities for South Asian countries to leverage regional platforms and subregional mechanisms to facilitate South-South and triangular cooperation initiatives, including by promoting exchanges of good practices, information, knowledge, experiences, innovation, sustainable financing policies and capacity building?
- What are some of the actionable and feasible areas for stronger regional cooperation to address the challenges posed by the pandemic and for ensuring inclusive, sustainable and resilient development in the subregion?
- What role multilateral institutions like UNESCAP or South Asia Network on SDGs (SANS) platform created collectively by UNESCAP and South Asian Think Tanks can play in assisting countries in building back better and accelerate the progress for achieving the SDGs?

Tentative Programme

Impact of COVID-19 on progress towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in South Asia: Challenges and Way Forward for Regional Cooperation

Chair:

- **Mr Riaz Fatyana**, Member National Assembly (MNA); Convener Parliamentary Taskforce on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Pakistan

Opening Remarks:

- **Mr. Adnan Aliani**, Director, UNESCAP-SSWA, New Delhi
- **Dr. Abid Suleri**, Executive Director, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Pakistan

Moderator : **Dr. Rajan Sudesh Ratna**, UNESCAP-SSWA, New Delhi

Panelists: *(5 minutes each for panel members)*

- **Dr. Lutfi Rahimi**, Biruni Institute, Afghanistan
- **Dr. Fahmida Khatun**, Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue, Bangladesh
- **Mr. Wangchuk Namgay**, Chief Program Coordinator, Development Cooperation Division, Gross National Happiness Commission, Bhutan
- **Dr. Nagesh Kumar**, Director, ISID, India
- **Dr Sabyasachi Saha**, Associate Professor, RIS, India
- **Ms. Athifa Ibrahim**, Managing Partner, EPIC Consulting, Maldives
- **Dr. Posh Raj Pandey**, Chairman, SAWTEE, Nepal
- **Dr. Abid Suleri**, Executive Director, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Pakistan
- **Dr. Dushni Weerakoon**, Executive Director, Institute of Policy Studies, Sri Lanka

Open Discussion

Closing remarks by Chair

