Fourth South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals
Fostering Sustainable and resilient recovery from COVID-19 in South Asia

Virtual Meeting
2-3 December 2020
(14.00 – 17.00 Hrs. IST)

CONCEPT NOTE

Background and Context

The South Asia Forums on the SDGs (SASF), conceived as the subregional preparatory for the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) and the High-Level Policy Forum (HLPF) have been organized by the South and South-West Asia office of United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) in collaboration with South Asian member States, stakeholders and partners since 2017. The SASFs provide to stakeholders a unique opportunity to provide subregional perspectives, identify priorities, share good practices, highlight critical outcomes and recommendations, which in turn feed into regional and global processes, in particular the annual APFSD and the HLPF. The virtual 4th SASF is being jointly organised by UNESCAP and the Government of Maldives on 2-3 December 2020 is a part of the preparatory process for the 8th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) to be held in March 2021, which in turn contributes towards the HLPF 2021.

With five years into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, world leaders have now called for a “Decade of Action” to mobilize action at all levels to accelerate sustainable solutions to deliver the SDGs. While South Asia has made good progress on some SDGs, such as SDG 4 (education), and SDG 7 (energy), its progress in other Goals including access to drinking water and basic sanitation (SDG 6), zero hunger (SDG 2), income inequality (SDG 10) and gender equality (SDG 5) has been slow. The subregion has regressed in the area of strengthening governance and building strong institutions (SDG 16). Like much of the Asia-Pacific region, South Asian countries are not on track to achieve the SDGs unless ambitious efforts are undertaken and strong partnerships are mobilized among all stakeholders, including

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1 The First SASF was held in 2017 in Kathmandu in collaboration with the National Planning Commission, Nepal. The Second SASF was organized by UNESCAP in partnership with the NITI Aayog, India and the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), on 4-5 October 2018 in New Delhi. The Third SASF was jointly organized by UNESCAP and the Government of Bangladesh on 8-9 December 2019 in Dhaka.


governments, civil society, private sector, academia, youth, media etc., for the required transformations.

The COVID-19 pandemic which began as a health crisis has become an unprecedented human and socio-economic crisis. South Asia with a population of 1.8 billion has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic due to poor public health infrastructure, pervasive informality, poor coverage of social protection and limited fiscal space to address the manifold challenges of the crisis. If the subregion has achieved more progress with the SDGs before the pandemic, it would have been better prepared to face it. While the crisis threatens to jeopardize progress towards the SDGs, it also makes their achievement all the more urgent and necessary for a sustainable and resilient recovery from the crisis.

UNESCAP SSWA policy paper on COVID-19 and South Asia: National Strategies and Subregional Cooperation for Accelerating Inclusive, Sustainable and Resilient Recovery, prepared as a part of the UNESCAP’s Socio-Economic Framework highlights the unprecedented socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on South Asian countries. Key sectors such as micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), tourism and labour intensive exports such as readymade garments, handicrafts etc. have been most adversely impacted, bringing economic growth to a grinding halt and leading to loss of jobs for the millions of people in the subregion. The threat of rising incidence of poverty, hunger and inequality looms large and the violence against women has seen a rise. The vulnerable sectors of society have been further marginalized. Simulations based on the UNESCAP-SANE CGE model suggest that as many as 132 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty in South Asia due to COVID-19 related measures, reversing the progress made during the whole decade and critically undermining SDG achievement.

In an attempt to provide national and subregional perspectives on the challenges posed by the pandemic, offer lessons and share best practices learned in combating the pandemic and initiate forward looking dialogue on partnership and collaboration for building back better, UNESCAP convened a Virtual High-Level Policy Dialogue on 9 July 2020, bringing together high level representatives of subregional organizations and senior policy makers. This was followed by the Virtual Policy Dialogue on South Asian Cooperation for Accelerating Recovery from COVID-19 and Building Back Better on 9 September 2020, which provided a platform to heads of South Asian think-tanks and other eminent experts from the subregion to discuss the potential of South Asian cooperation to effectively complement the national strategies in building back better. Both these meetings emphasized that regional and subregional cooperation, learnings from each other are the best means of building back better and faster.

Against this background, the “Fourth South Asian SDG Forum” will further focus on strategies and responses to build back better after the pandemic, in line with the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development and identify priorities to accelerate movement towards sustainable and inclusive development pathways. The theme of the 2020 SASF is aligned with the theme of the 2021 HLPF “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, that promotes the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: Building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development” to be addressed at the APFSD in 2021. It will focus in particular on the cluster of SDGs to be reviewed at the 2021 HLPF, viz., SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 2 (Zero hunger), SDG 3 (Good health and wellbeing), SDG 8 (Decent work and economic
growth), SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities), SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production), SDG 13 (Climate action), SDG 16 (Peace, justice, and strong institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals).

All South Asian countries submitted their first Voluntary National Review (VNR) by 2019. Three South Asian countries (Bangladesh, Nepal and India) presented their VNRs a second time in 2020 with Bhutan and Pakistan gearing up for their second VNRs in 2021. In this context, the fourth SASF will focus on national and subregional perspectives, taking stock of processes and progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda so far, but more importantly forward-looking dialogue on recovering from the COVID-19 crisis and accelerating the progress of SDGs. The Forum seeks to bring together stakeholders from the government, academia, international community, civil society and private sector on a common platform to discuss how countries in South Asia can strengthen regional action and partnerships to forge subregional and regional solutions for addressing the gaps in SDG delivery and to assess progress on the thematic SDGs for review by the HLPF 2021. In cognizance of the need identified for enhancing the role of think-tanks in promoting regional cooperation for fulfilling the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, the Forum will launch the South Asia Network of Think Tanks for SDGs (SANS) which can act as a knowledge platform for multi-stakeholder meetings for sharing of best practices and thereby accelerating SDGs implementation by South Asian countries.4

**Objectives**

The main objective of the Forum is to foster inclusive dialogue and strengthen partnerships among multiple stakeholder groups in the subregion on the opportunities for accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the wake of COVID-19 crisis, to exchange lessons learned and experiences, and to reflect on how to best implement subregional priorities and perspectives, including through inputs to relevant regional and global processes.

To achieve this, the South Asia Forum for the SDGs aims to:

1. Provide a platform for an inclusive dialogue among multiple stakeholders to discuss the subregional perspectives and good practices which may accelerate SDG achievement and build back better in the background of current COVID-19 crisis.
2. Share the experiences, best practices and knowledge to create awareness and strengthen subregional cooperation to address the key challenges for building back better and accelerate achievements on SDGs in the context of the current crisis.
3. Support capacity building for countries in the subregion ahead of their Voluntary National Review (VNR) presentations in 2021, building on presentations and experiences of VNR countries at the 2020 HLPF.
4. The launch of the South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals (SANS) portal.
5. Identify needs and opportunities for regional cooperation, including ways to strengthen implementation efforts, stakeholder engagement, follow-up and review, linking national, subregional, regional and global processes.

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4 See [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Policy%20Dialogue%20on%20Regional%20Cooperation%20-%20December%202019-Dhaka_final.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Policy%20Dialogue%20on%20Regional%20Cooperation%20-%20December%202019-Dhaka_final.pdf);
**Intended Participants**

1. Government officials and representatives of institutions in UNESCAP South Asia member States responsible for various aspects of implementing the SDG in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
2. VNR focal points and UNESCAP focal points for sustainable development
3. Representatives of local government organizations
4. Representatives of regional and subregional organizations that support SDG implementation
5. Representatives of civil society organizations and private sector organizations
6. Experts from think tanks and academia; and
7. Other stakeholders involved in SDG implementation at national, regional and global levels.

**Organization**

- The Forum will take place in virtual meeting format.
- The meetings will be conducted in English and all documentation will be in English.
- The meetings will include panel discussions on key topics. Depending on the session focus, presentations may be delivered by resource persons and experts.

**Expected outcome**

The outcome of the meeting will consist of a summary of proceedings of the key topics and issues raised by participants, as well as recommendations and presentations. The summary report, as well as training materials and presentations will contribute to the APFSD in 2021. The Forum would provide a platform for launching the South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals (SANS) portal, to foster regional cooperation through sharing good practices on sustainable development. These documents will be shared with participants and will also be made available on the UNESCAP Website.