Madam Chairperson, Hon’ble Ministers & Distinguished Participants.

I wish to raise a few political economy issues which the policymakers present in this forum can alone address them.

As we near the completion of the first quarter of the 21st century, we must remind ourselves of an overwhelming fact: today there are six times as many people as there were in 1900. That is, in the 121 years since 1900, world population has increased by 6.2 billion people. And except for perhaps a billion and half of these people, the rest are poor. It is they who must engage our attention regardless of nationality. Human deprivation makes no such distinction.

It is in this context that I wish to raise three broad issues which have a direct bearing on the minimisation of deprivation as also sustainability in terms of available resources. These are land use, accessibility and environment.

Land is scarce and is getting scarcer as the pressure on it from the newly added six billion people increases. The days when it could be regarded as an abundant resource are long gone. Therefore, we have to be extremely prudent in determining land use. This brings out the importance of making rational intermodal choices and development of related infrastructure.

Prosperity also requires accessibility and since the vast majority of the new six billion live in the rural areas, we have to ensure not just highways but also rural roads. Lack of access means isolation and isolation is a key characteristic of poverty. Connectivity is crucial for the reduction of deprivation. I wish to submit that a new perspective based on entitlement, in other words, a right needs to be adopted.
To reiterate, given the direct correlation between the provision of transport and access on the one hand and poverty reduction on the other, it is a matter of concern that due and explicit attention has not been focused on this crucial linkage. This calls for remedial action aimed at making access and transport integral parts of national poverty-reduction strategies and programmes. Indeed, the issue needs to be recognised as one of political economy, and not merely of technocratic debate.

The road transport systems, as they exist, are in many cases socially sub-optimal. They are loaded against the underprivileged, who pay the price in terms of their life and limbs. Most of the victims are pedestrians, cyclists and users of two-wheeler transport.

In many countries, it is not uncommon to see a sad situation where the cars are parked on pavements and the pedestrians have to move on the roads. The roles are thus perversely reversed. In the present polities constituted as they are, this situation will only worsen in the years to come. Public transport is the answer.

The last one relates to change of mindset. Nothing will happen if we continue to work with closed mindset of yester years. Poor people cannot understand the jargon of debates as also of coming up of fancy projects. He only looks for access to his hamlet and projects that aim at poverty removal. Let us work for the betterment of the humanity. The proposed action plan would be an important step in this direction. The Institute has set up a dedicated centre for green transport which we believe would support the activities listed therein. The Secretariat deserves our sincere compliments and support for their hard work.