



## **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**

### **Report**

#### **Background and context**

The Fourth [South Asia Forum 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) was 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 the Government of Maldives on 2-3 December 2020.<sup>1</sup> More than 600 participants including representatives of governments, academia, think tanks, civil society organizations, and other key stakeholders from South Asian countries participated in the Forum. The recording of the Forum is available on the [website](#).

The 4<sup>th</sup> Forum took place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic which began as a health crisis has become an unprecedented human and socio-economic crisis. Hence, the Forum focused on *Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 in South Asia*, aligned with the APFSD and HLPF themes for 2021. It focused 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). It drew upon the [COVID-19 and South Asia: National Strategies and Subregional Cooperation for Accelerating Inclusive, Sustainable and Resilient Recovery \(UNESCAP 2020\)](#), and reports of the [High-Level Policy Dialogue](#) on COVID-19 and South Asia held on 9 July 2020, and the [Policy Dialogue on South Asian Cooperation for Accelerating Recovery from COVID-19 and Building Back Better](#) held on 9 September 2020.

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 UNESCAP launched the [South Asia Network of Think Tanks for SDGs \(SANS\)](#) portal 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.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> See

[https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Policy%20Dialogue%20on%20Regional%20Cooperation%2010%20December%202019%20Dhaka\\_%20final.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Policy%20Dialogue%20on%20Regional%20Cooperation%2010%20December%202019%20Dhaka_%20final.pdf);

## Key Highlights

- **The COVID-19 pandemic, which is a major socio-economic crisis faced by South Asia has a slowing down effect on the achievement of SDGs.** The COVID-19 crisis has endangered developmental gains in poverty reduction and other aspects of development achieved in last many years, thwarting the SDG progress significantly in South Asia having overwhelmed health systems, increased gender inequalities, disrupted education delivery, adversely affected GDP growth, and caused economic uncertainties in all countries in South Asia. In the face of large-scale informality in labour markets, business closures and slowdown in economic activities, the pandemic has caused significant income and livelihood losses, and widened the SDG resource gap, reducing the fiscal space considerably.
- **In the context of the pandemic, several policy measures for South Asia have to be reprioritized and realigned.** South Asia will have to realign and reprioritize its COVID-19 recovery strategies with SDG implementation focusing on strengthened social protection and financing economic recovery through innovative financing strategies, accelerating digital transformation and greening recovery by using clean technology. To build back better the future policy priorities recommended were: (i) economic diversification and industry-focused structural transformation (particularly MSMEs which are the backbone of South Asian economy and severely affected in the pandemic), (ii) raising investments in the core social sectors of health and education, (iii) expanding social protection, closing gender gaps and improving basic infrastructure for addressing inequalities, (iv) ensuring food security, agriculture and rural development, and (v) enhancing environmental sustainability through green recovery packages, greater investments in renewables and low-carbon technologies. Three-pronged approach for strengthening means of implementation for recovery in the post-COVID-19 period were identified, namely, systemic (institutional mechanism and framework), financing (both domestic resources via private-public partnership and external funding from international organizations), and cooperation (international assistance and development cooperation, trade, capacity building and statistical capacities).
- **All South Asian countries have undertaken measures to tackle the pandemic and ensure recovery, yet more to be done.** South Asian member states have undertaken and implemented policy measures to ensure recovery from the current crisis. The pandemic has renewed focus to increase domestic production, which meets the consumption needs and reorient towards the export economy (*Sri Lanka*). Government stimulus packages focusing on employment creation, financial assistance and social security are being implemented (*Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan*). To ensure that development financing is aligned with SDG investments, countries have undertaken financing needs assessment that establishes estimated cost of SDG implementation (*India, Bhutan, Pakistan*). Countries are developing strategies for economic security of migrant workers, who were severely affected by the pandemic (*Bangladesh, India*). For successful implementation of the SDGs and to exploit the opportunities created by the pandemic, emphasis is being placed on reinforcing digital technologies and ensuring easier access to public and various socio-economic services through ICT and online platforms (*Maldives*). Fiscal incentives are being provided to induce household and business transition towards improved waste management practices and renewable energy usage (*Sri Lanka*).
- **A Subregional Action Plan for Social Protection is needed to enhance resilience to crises.** To mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and to protect the lives and livelihoods of people, countries must focus on system-wide measures, economic security, and vulnerable groups like women, older persons, mobile population and children. To ensure "Leaving No One Behind,"

countries ought to have inclusive political and administrative systems and integrate social protection and targeted programs at national and subnational levels. A comprehensive action plan for social protection should ensure that social protection systems go beyond shock responsiveness, are gender sensitive and relevant to the needs of vulnerable populations. The Regional Action Plan adopted by UNESCAP member states can be a good benchmark for a subregional Action Plan for South Asia.

- **Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) provide an important means to enhance SDGs implementation through a consultative and whole-of-government approach.** Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) are important follow up and review of the progress to achieve 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. VNR process acts as a means to accelerate SDG implementation and achieve the 2030 Agenda at the country level. Engagement of all stakeholders in the process and having a platform for sharing best practices and exchanging knowledge are critical.
- **Poverty reduction efforts must emphasize the multidimensional aspects of poverty.** In 2020, 530 million people are multidimensionally poor in South Asia, of which 44.8% are children (237 million). Before the pandemic, South Asia witnessed the fastest annualized absolute reduction in multidimensional poverty globally. India, Nepal, Bangladesh were on track to halve MPI between 2015-2030. However, the overlapping dimensions of poverty have worsened due to the pandemic, with poverty reduction trends being set back by 3 to 10 years. Mainstreaming MPI in policy responses can help South Asia to identify newly vulnerable groups and to plan and orient policy solutions from a multidimensional approach, integrating health, social and economic priorities.
- **Addressing inequalities and gender disparities, through promotion of women's entrepreneurship in economic empowerment of women.** To tackle the widening gender inequalities and support women entrepreneurs in South Asia, targeted measures from governments are necessary, especially, through providing credit and market support and capacity-building to harness new technologies. Broadly, the areas for the future growth of women entrepreneurship are: (i) leveraging digital marketing; (ii) diversification of business activities; (iii) developing business resilience; (iv) financial management; (v) risk planning and technical skills.
- **Need to invest more for structural transformation, employment creation and environmental sustainability.** New and effective strategies to ensure decent work and productive employment are relevant. Investments in education and skill development with national and international efforts should be reinvigorated to design, finance and implement innovative policies that support progress towards decent employment. For ensuring structural economic transformation in South Asia, greater investments in agriculture is needed along with scaling up technology-enabled services to improve productivity and efficiency, while creating high value-added employment through greater investments in technology. South Asian countries must invest to encourage structural transformation in job-creating and environmentally sustainable sectors, integrating ecosystem services and circular economy approaches.
- **Mobilizing finance to achieve the SDGs.** Substantial gaps exist in terms of projected investment requirements for the implementation of SDGs and expected resource availability. While estimated SDG investment needs in most of the subregional countries exceed 15% of GDP, their average projected financial inflows under optimistic scenarios is only about 5% of

GDP. Improving the fiscal space through multiple policy measures such as phasing out of untargeted subsidies, lowering defence spending, widening tax bases, improving tax administration and increasing tax progressivity, relaxing fiscal rules and consider innovative financial instruments like SDG-bonds, improving public debt management and reducing illicit financial flows become necessary. Improved policy frameworks for facilitating private investments and exploring public private partnerships could be fruitful. The forum of South Asian central banks under the SAARC framework, namely SAARCFINANCE, should work together for improving banking systems, establishment of the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund etc. that are important regional initiatives to further the goal of regional financial cooperation.

- **Harnessing emerging technologies and digital transformation.** Responding to the onset of 4th industrial revolution, technological advancements, digitization and emerging market trends characterized by reorientation of global supply chains, South Asia needs to invest in skill development and corresponding production capabilities. Adaptive policy reform requirements in this context include measures for modernization of industrial technology and innovation policies, improving awareness and business ecosystems, and development of human resources.
- **Increasing intra-regional trade and strengthening of value chains.** Building regional value chains and exploiting intra-regional trade potential, which is estimated to be at least three times the current levels, would help faster economic recovery in a robust, inclusive and sustainable manner, especially in the context of collapse of the global trade. Removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers, improvements in trade facilitation to reduce trade costs and investments in connectivity infrastructure, are needed among other reforms to harness this potential.
- **Building statistical capacities.** Subregional countries should mobilize resources for building statistical capacities for bridging data gaps and for ensuring availability of timely, high quality, reliable and disaggregated data. In doing so subregional countries should prioritize development of data systems for tier 2 and tier 3 indicators, also ensuring that data series for key indicators are made available with sufficient quality and frequency for the benefit of informed policy making. It is important to strengthen data ecosystems by cooperating with private sector and civic society organizations for improving statistical standards, and also by adopting new data collection methods and alternate data sources to fill the data gaps. Regular meetings between heads of statistical agencies under SAARC initiatives (SAARCSTAT) should be revived in collaboration with UNESCAP.
- **Civil society and private sector engagements form critical pillars in multi-stakeholder partnerships.** It is critical to ensure thriving CSOs and private sector participation for linkages and alliances across institutions and to foster just and inclusive regulatory mechanisms and inclusive markets. Forward-looking dialogues and engagements on partnership and collaboration between governments, CSOs, industry players are needed for building back a more sustainable and just recovery that is peaceful and ensures acceleration across interrelated SDGs.
- **Regional cooperation critical for fostering sustainable and resilient recovery from Covid-19 in South Asia.** COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique opportunity to think and act differently to build back better for which regional cooperation and collaboration is a necessity for South Asia to tide over the adverse impacts of COVID-19. In this context new partnerships and mechanisms towards mutual agreements/policy instruments such as trade agreements, regional supply chains, transport corridors, emergency funds, technology transfer, capacity

building, information access etc. would be fruitful. Along with national responses to the COVID-19 and further improvements in the SDG implementation frameworks, it is critical that South Asian countries deepen regional cooperation for the benefit of common development goals. A regional monitoring mechanism with regional SDG progress indicators would be helpful to reprioritize SDG action programmes in this regard, especially in the context of COVID-19 impacts. This should be followed by adoption of an integrated approach to reporting progress in the priority areas to improve policy coherence at the subregional level.

- **UNESCAP has an important role in fostering subregional and regional cooperation and in facilitating sharing of good practices in South Asia.** The stakeholders appreciated UNESCAP's role in providing a subregional platform to discuss shared challenges such as achieving inclusive, resilience and sustainable development in South Asia in the aftermath of COVID-19 and the role it is playing in fostering regional cooperation in South Asia, besides SAARC and BIMSTEC and in collaboration with them. They also lauded the South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals (SANS) established by UNESCAP in collaboration with the prominent think-tanks of South Asian countries to foster greater subregional cooperation by sharing good practices towards achieving the SDGs and greater knowledge sharing among all South Asian stakeholders, including policy makers, subnational and local government representatives, think-tanks, development practitioners, civil society organizations and other stakeholders to build back better. It was hoped that the newly launched web-portal of SANS would become a rich repository of the SDG good practices and would facilitate their cross-learning and replication.

## Summary of proceedings

### **Session 1: Opening Session- Setting the tone**

This session was addressed by Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, United Nations Under Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ESCAP; Ms. Catherine Haswell, UN Resident Coordinator in Maldives; H.E. Mr. Esala Ruwan Weerakoon, Secretary-General of SAARC; H.E. Mr. Tenzin Lekphell, Secretary-General of BIMSTEC and H.E. Mr. Mohamed Aslam, Minister of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Maldives. Dr. Nagesh Kumar, Director, UNESCAP South and South West Asia Office (UNESCAP-SSWA) moderated the session.

**Dr. Nagesh Kumar** welcomed the participants to the Fourth South Asia Forum on Sustainable Development Goals co-hosted jointly by UNESCAP and the Government of Maldives, and highlighted the unprecedented challenges that South Asia is facing due to COVID-19 pandemic which brings now major implications for countries in subregion to achieving the SDGs. He further stated that the Forum serves as the subregional preparatory meeting of stakeholders in South Asia to inform and feed subregional perspectives to regional and global process, such as the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) to be held in March 2021 which itself is one of the regional consultations towards the High Level Political Forum (HLPF), held annually in July 2021 in New York. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic causing massive disruptions to the sustainable development prospects of South Asian countries, with threats to reverse the developmental gains of many years, the theme of the 2020 Forum focused on sustainable recovery and resilience from COVID-19 to build back better.

**Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana** in her opening remarks, acknowledged the efforts of the Government of Maldives as the co-hosts of the Forum. She stated that the COVID-19 pandemic started as a health emergency unfolded into a massive socio-economic crisis and with nearly 1.8 billion people



(25% share in world population), the subregion is grappling with the costs of the pandemic in terms of loss of human lives and livelihoods with profound effects on economies and sustainable development prospects. The COVID-19 crisis has endangered the developmental gains achieved in poverty reduction and other aspects of development, by setting the subregion back by years, if not decades. Due to the rising uncertainties and mounting vulnerabilities induced by the pandemic, SDG progress has been thwarted significantly in South Asia. She highlighted four key areas which the subregion must focus on: (i) strengthening social protection system, (ii) financing of economic recovery, (iii) accelerating digital transformation, and (iv) focusing on green recovery. While recognizing the various policy measures undertaken by South Asian member states to ensure faster recovery from the crisis and to protect the progress made in SDGs, she emphasized that with strong focus on social protection, economy, connectivity and environment, South Asian governments are well-positioned for finding sustainable pathways out of the crisis.

**Ms. Catherine Haswell** provided the Maldivian perspective in following through on the commitments made under the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, through the National Strategic Action Plan 2019-2023 and various institutional mechanisms. She elaborated how the United Nations provided support for the National Planning Act of Maldives for policy coherence in national and local development planning and ensuring localization of the SDGs. An integrated National Financing framework has been launched to help develop a coalition of investors and ensure diversification of financial resources aligned with SDG needs. Regular engagement mechanisms with civil society actors has been institutionalized. Building upon these engagements, the next step would be to prepare a Cooperation Framework for the UN for the next five years as part of a collective response of the UN development system to address gaps for achieving the SDGs and provide practical and tangible action points, to foster a sustainable and resilient Maldives.

**H.E. Mr. Esala Weerakoon** acknowledged the relevance of the Forum being held in quick succession to the first meeting of SAARC Planning Ministers held virtually on 25 November, 2020, which deliberated on the measures required to successfully achieve the SDGs in the context of the severe socio-economic fallout due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the region. The pandemic has caused unprecedented socio-economic challenges, threatening progress achieved in the subregion over the past several years and causing uncertainties in achieving many of the SDGs as immediate response has shifted towards health and social protection assistance. To mount a regional strategy to combat the pandemic, the SAARC Leaders have undertaken various initiatives such as through a video conference on 15 March 2020, culminating in the establishment of the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund. The SAARC Health Ministers met virtually in April 2020, followed by the SAARC Planning Ministers meeting, which emphasized the need to reorient responses for attaining the SDGs in the face of the pandemic. The way forward is regional cooperation and collaboration through new partnerships and mechanisms, facilitating technology transfer, capacity building, information access and accountable monitoring and reporting. South Asia must pursue collective response for a structured transformation, to mitigate the adverse impacts of the pandemic, promote inclusive socio-economic growth and alleviate poverty and inequality. Acknowledging the evidence-based policy recommendations made by UNESCAP's South and South-West Asia Office reports, he further underlined the potential of the South Asia Network on SDGs (SANS) in sharing good practices on implementing SDGs for South Asia.

**H.E. Mr. Tenzin Lekphell** expressed his gratitude in being invited to the Forum, which he is attending for the first time and highlighted areas of cooperation in BIMSTEC. To achieve the SDGs by 2030, it is important to leverage strong partnerships, and cooperation amongst all stakeholders from governments, private sector, civil society, academia, and international development organizations. Further, regional cooperation mechanisms provide a complementing framework for governments to

address emerging challenges, such as from the pandemic. BIMSTEC member states have made commitments to further the SDGs and share good practices in combatting the pandemic, such as the “whole-of-community” approach of ASEAN. Various regional initiatives under the umbrella of BIMSTEC can foster the implementation of the SDGs, for instance, the BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility, BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance on Criminal Matters, synergies between public health sector and traditional medicine, BIMSTEC Agriculture Cooperation, BIMSTEC 2030 Tourism Strategy, BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity and BIMSTEC Grid Interconnectivity Master Plan Study. He suggested to focus on spurring economic activities through greater intra-regional trade; keeping regional markets open for expanding investments; ensuring food security and strengthening the resilience and sustainability of regional supply chains (especially for essentials); and formulation of SOP’s for public health emergencies and micro, small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The pandemic has highlighted the need for greater collaboration and engagement with international development partners in the region such as UNESCAP, ADB, IMF and World Bank.

**H.E. Mr. Mohamed Aslam** expressed his gratitude to co-host the Fourth South Asia Forum on Sustainable Development Goals along with UNESCAP. Maldives being a small island developing state (SIDs) depends heavily on tourism, with significant impacts visible due to border closures and travel restrictions. The GDP of Maldives is expected to contract by (-)12 to 30% in 2020. Over 22,000 people (representing 5.5.% of the total population) have lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Government of Maldives has undertaken various initiatives, including on strengthening the existing social security mechanism and flagship healthcare programme. An Emergency and Recovery Relief Programme has been rolled out to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, through income support allowances, launch of new online and technology-based platforms for service delivery, financial assistance to SMEs, tax cuts, moratoria on student and housing loans both for individuals and business firms. To ensure unhindered continuation of development projects and services, for ensuring economic revival, efforts are underway on the National Maritime Transport Network project. He stated that in line with national priorities, Maldives remains on track to further the provision of all basic necessities and services by the end of 2023, while learning from the COVID-19 pandemic to harness opportunities to reorient and realign development goals in a more sustainable and resilient manner. In this context, extensive regional collaboration and cooperation with other South Asian countries; and harnessing partnerships and synergies among all stakeholders as civil society, private sector, state agencies and local governments provided the way forward.

### **Launch of the South Asia Network of the SDGs (SANS) web portal**

At the opening session of the Fourth South Asia Forum on the SDGs the dignitaries were invited to launch the web portal of South Asia Network on the SDGs (SANS) (<https://unescap.org/projects/sans>). It was highlighted that the South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals (SANS) has been established to foster greater subregional cooperation by sharing good practices towards achieving the SDGs and greater knowledge sharing among all South Asian stakeholders, including policy makers, subnational and local government representatives, think-tanks, development practitioners, civil society organizations and other stakeholders to build back better. The web portal launch was followed by video messages from the heads of think-tanks and South Asian CSOs under the Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism (AP-RCEM). The heads of think tanks and CSO representative reiterated their support for this initiative and highlighted the relevance and significance of the platform in providing an opportunity to share experiences, good practices and improve awareness on accelerating SDG implementation efforts in the subregion. They lauded this initiative undertaken by UNESCAP-SSWA and stated that this comes at a crucial time when South Asian countries are looking to build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerate SDGs implementation efforts. This network shall help in fostering meaningful partnerships and regional cooperation among South Asian countries to explore common solutions and undertake concerted

policy actions for furthering SDGs achievement in the subregion through providing a comprehensive compendium of knowledge resources, policy lessons and learnings from each other.

**Session 2: Taking stock of subregional and national progress on SDGs in the context of the COVID-19 – Towards Sustainable and Resilient Recovery (with a focus on SDGs 1,2,3,8,10,12,13,16, and 17)**

The session provided reflections on the current prospects for SDGs progress in the face of challenges compounded by the COVID-19 crisis. The session included presentations from government representatives of South Asian countries and civil society, with sharing of national experiences and perspectives in SDG progress and lessons for countries in the subregion for their Voluntary National Review (VNR) presentations. While discussing measures to facilitate recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, focus was placed on assessing progress on the SDGs under review at the 2021 HLPF (SDGs 1,2,3,8,10,12,13,16, and 17).

This session was moderated by **Ambassador Gyan Acharya**, Chairman, SAWTEE SDG Centre, Kathmandu, and former USG, UN-OHRLS, and had presentations made by representatives of the seven South Asian countries, following the introductory presentations by the UNESCAP secretariat on the VNRs process and the overview of SDG progress in South Asia. **Ambassador Gyan Acharya** in his introductory remarks underlined the importance of re-orienting multilevel efforts and strategies that ensure the achievement of the SDGs remain on track despite the unprecedented situation arisen because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Mr. Riccardo Mesiano** of Environment and Development Division of UNESCAP, emphasized that the VNR process provides a means to accelerate SDG implementation and achieve the 2030 Agenda at the country level and that the engagement of all stakeholders, including a “whole-of-government” approach in the process is critical. UNESCAP would continue to support countries preparing their VNR reports and provide a platform for sharing best practices, exchanging knowledge and facilitating peer learning.

Concerning SDG's progress in South Asia, **Mr. Rajan Sudesh Ratna** of UNESCAP-SSWA, highlighted that South Asia is critical for SDGs' global achievement. Sharing the findings of UNESCAP-SSWA forthcoming South Asia SDG progress report, he stated that COVID-19 has had mixed impacts on SDG progress, and the subregion has regressed on environmental goals, that is, Goals 13 (Climate action) and 14 (Life below water). COVID-19 related restrictions have resulted in slowdown in economic activities, growth contraction, rise in poverty and inequality, job losses, disruptions in education, increased gender gap and disparities. The key policy priorities for South Asian governments include: sustaining growth through economic diversification and sustainable industrial transformation, with focus on supporting MSMEs; investing in the core social sectors of health, education and social protection; closing gender gaps and improving basic infrastructure for addressing inequalities; ensuring food security through sustainable agriculture systems and boosting rural incomes; and enhancing environmental sustainability through green recovery programmes to accelerate transition to clean energy, low carbon pathways. Three-pronged approach for strengthening means of implementation for recovery in the post-COVID-19 period were identified, namely, systemic (institutional mechanism and framework), financing (both domestic resources via private-public partnership and external funding from international organizations), and cooperation (international assistance and development cooperation, trade, capacity building and statistical capacities). Highlighting the increasing relevance of regional cooperation in the aftermath of COVID 19 for maximizing synergies between the SDGs, 8 pillars for regional cooperation for SDGs in South Asia were identified along with exploring existing regional instruments under SAARC, BIMSTEC, BBIN etc. and broader South-South cooperation.



### Country presentations:

**Afghanistan** stated that even before COVID-19, Afghanistan was grappling with a number of socioeconomic and political issues including a sluggish economic growth, a poverty rate above 54% with an unemployment rate of 24%. COVID-19 further worsened poverty, hunger, and access to basic services, such as health and education and limited the fiscal options for recovery and stimulating economic growth due to low revenue collections. Despite efforts taken by Government of Afghanistan, conflict has been another trigger for the rising levels of poverty, hunger, displacement and lack of access to basic health services. Investment in any infrastructures is important in order to stimulate the private sector investment. Afghanistan has identified priorities and critical areas of interventions, taking fully into account the interlinkages that exist among the three different dimensions of SDGs. Some of the obstacles are dependency on foreign aid and development cooperation for financing short- and long-term development objectives. Mobilizing innovative and alternative finance to fund development and economic growth is a major challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic has limited foreign aid commitments and thus working with partners to attract private investment and finance through communicating investment and business opportunities is priority. Strengthening public and private partnerships in Afghanistan to finance infrastructure projects and identifying sources and instruments of finance that can make achieve SDGs is still a big challenge.

**Bangladesh** presented its first VNR in 2017, took critical steps including preparing an SDG action plan, launching an SDG tracker, preparing an SDG financing strategy, formation of National Data Coordination Committee and including SDGs in the school curriculum. Bangladesh presented its second VNR virtually at HLPF 2020 after coordinating consultations on all 17 SDGs involving key ministries and relevant stakeholders at all levels. Bangladesh has achieved positive progress on multiple SDGs, particularly SDG 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10. In addressing SDG 10, Bangladesh succeeded in increasing Social Safety Net Programmes spending (2.2% of GDP in 2017/18 to 3.01% in 2020/21). Bangladesh has made good progress in increasing the share of manufacturing value added in GDP (SDG 9) from 20% in 2015/16 to 24% in 2019/20. However, COVID-19 has created a strong pushback in multiple areas, particularly in growth and employment, health, and industrialization. National measures to tackle COVID-19 aimed to provide stimulus to the economy by increasing government expenditure and creating employment, providing assistance package and liquidity, and ensuring social security. Some specific measures to tackle COVID-19 included providing health insurance and life insurance for frontline fighters and cash incentive to frontline fighters, recruiting more doctors and nurses and providing cash aid to 5 million household to enhance agriculture production and curb supply chain disruption. Through a five-point proposal to combat the pandemic, Bangladesh's priorities include tackling inequality, supporting the poor, and getting back pre-COVID-19 levels of economic growth; leveraging global and regional leaderships; innovative sectoral solutions; global strategy for migrant workers; and appropriate and feasible strategies.

**Bhutan** will present its second VNR at HLPF 2021, has fully aligned SDGs with its national plans as the SDGs are similar to the development philosophy of Gross National Happiness. Bhutan is on-track to achieving all SDGs except Goal 14 (life below water) and the Goal is deemed irrelevant to it. Despite positive trends in SDGs performance, COVID-19 has overwhelmed health systems and added stress to limited human and financial resources. With contraction in GDP growth in 2020, key sectors like tourism, construction, manufacturing and transport have been disrupted, giving rise to higher unemployment, particularly youth unemployment. Bhutan institutionalized the COVID-19 surveillance system, declared quarantine mandatory, adopted the test-trace-treat strategy, set up clinics to detect the virus, organized specific training for health workers, and recruited new health workers. On education, Bhutan adopted an online teaching method, provided self-instructional material, trained teachers to adapt the curricula to the new teaching method, reallocated students who could not attend

online classes, and provided psychological support. To minimize the pandemic's impact on the economy, the government has introduced tax and loan deferral, relief measures through the national Relief Programme, specific plans on tourism, agriculture, construction (Economic Contingency Plan I), and new strategies for innovation, export, and employment. To accelerate SDGs, Bhutan is finalizing its SDG tracking and monitoring dashboard and developing a 21st Century Economic Roadmap with a timeframe of 10 years underpinned by innovation and technology to achieve high income category socio-economic goals. Bhutan will undertake a needs assessment for financing and costing investment needs for the SDGs and seek additional international support for economic recovery in critical sectors such as tourism, manufacturing, construction, health, education and agriculture.

**India** presented its second VNR in 2020 and made a paradigm shift by adopting a “whole of society” approach, engaging with CSOs, local communities, and people in vulnerable situations and the private sector. It has effectively localized the SDGs and established a framework covering both the national (NITI Aayog) and subnational levels. At the subnational and local levels, there are planning departments that map and sets targets to develop the SDG vision roadmaps. Based on the SDG Index measuring SDG performance at the subnational level, there has been mixed progress on the SDGs, as categorized into achiever, front runner, performer and aspirant, given the current level of achievement. The overall composite score for India improved from 57 in 2018 to 60 in 2019. India has identified 13 population groups and one regional group, while documenting challenges, aspirations and commitments in consultation with the CSO network where over 1000 CSOs participated in national and local consultations. In cooperation with the IMF and Ministry of Finance, conducted an SDG costing exercise in five sectors: education, health, electricity, roads and water and sanitation to estimate the cost and identify funding sources and annual spending in GDP percentage terms. To mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and to protect lives and livelihoods, India has focused on system-wide measures, economic security, and vulnerable groups like women and children. A recovery plan will also be implemented to strengthen agriculture, health and education, and the industry sector. India has also identified six action points to take the SDG agenda forward: 1) Monitoring SDGs in cities, 2) Improving SDG India Index, 3) Monitor SDG progress at State and District Level, 4) Measure progress on private sector contribution to SDGs, 5) improve the statistical system to allow more frequent data update and collect more data in a broader set of indicators, and 6) continue to build capacity by training on modern data collection tools like tablets, and smartphones.

**Maldives** has recorded rapid progress in SDGs performance and based on the global SDG index, it is classified among the fast risers, recording an index score of 67.6, slightly higher than the regional average of 67.2, and positioned at 91 out of the global SDG ranking of 166 countries. The Maldives has so far achieved SDG 7 and is on track in achieving SDGs 1, 3, 6, 7, 11, 13 & 17. More work is required for all remaining goals, particularly on Goal 15, where a decreasing trend is reported due to preservation and biodiversity protection issues and significant data gaps remain in SDGs 10, 12 & 16. Challenges in food security and nutrition are also noticeable in SDG 2 (Zero hunger). Regression is found in SDG 5 (Gender equality) due to decreased labour force participation and seats held by women in parliament as well as SDG 14 (Life below water). The impact of COVID-19 on the Maldives has resulted in deepening of pre-existing disparities amongst the vulnerable and marginalized groups and disproportionate burdens on women and led to emergence of new kinds of vulnerabilities and disparities. Economic growth declined by (-)11.3% with high income losses, particularly in the tourism sector. More than 45,000 employees, including 22,000 local employees in the tourism sector have been directly affected. With Maldives' heavy reliance on food imports (well over 90%), food security has been a critical issue during the pandemic. Rising instances of domestic violence and abuse, restricted access to maternal and reproductive health services, increased domestic burden by women, and disruptions to non-COVID-19 healthcare services were observed. The pandemic has created opportunities in digital learning, though barriers remain in the form of high cost of internet and digital

divide. Maldives would need to mainstream SDGs priorities into development planning processes at all levels; implement the National Resilient and Recovery Plan focusing on economic diversification, job creation and reintegration of workforce, supporting MSMEs, strengthening social protection and universal health care, and accelerating digital initiatives and technology based platforms. Decentralized systems and empowering local governments, better data management, and SDG reporting while exploiting alternative means of financing remain urgent priorities. Fostering transformational partnerships with national stakeholders and deepening regional cooperation through greater south-south and triangular cooperation can bolster SDGs achievement in the “new normal”.

**Nepal** shared its key lessons from presenting the second VNR at the 2020 HLPF. It has aligned SDGs with national plans and the Constitution capturing the aspiration of the SDGs. The high-level committees and parliamentary committees are involved in implementing, monitoring, and overseeing the SDG progress. The institutional mechanism comprises three parts – the national steering committee, the implementation coordination & monitoring committee, and the thematic working committees. SDGs have been incorporated and mainstreamed into policy planning, with a series of reports, guidelines, and strategies related to SDGs published. Indicators have also been developed for each SDG. SDGs are mostly financed by the public sector (54.7%), with the private sector participation accounting for more than a third of the total financing (36.6%). It has also taken steps towards the "Leaving No One Behind" goal by ensuring an inclusive political and administrative system and integrated social protection and targeted programs. It has made progress on multiple SDGs and shared good practices in sustainable energy, community forestry, social protection, and the cooperative movement. COVID-19 has dramatically hampered economic growth, as well as adversely impacted the socio-economic conditions. Vulnerable groups, such as women, the old, and children, are the most affected groups in society. Economic growth has contracted (2.3% in FY 2019'20), supply chains have also been severely disrupted. These may adversely affect the achievement of the 15<sup>th</sup> Plan, LDC Graduation and SDGs targets. To recover from the effect of COVID-19, a recovery strategy and mid-term review of the periodic plan is necessary. An integrated approach will be needed to accelerate implementation of SDG. Strong global partnership and cooperation, innovative resource mobilization and strengthening institutions, good governance and statistical systems would be essential to building back better.

**Pakistan** which will present its VNR at the HLPF in 2021 for the second time, shared some key messages. Pakistan's Parliament unanimously adopted SDGs through resolution in 2016, established Parliamentary task forces, including supporting units at the federal, provinces, and federally administered areas to oversee SDGs' implementation. Currently, all SDGs have been mainstreamed into government plans, policies, and growth strategies. Poverty alleviation plans have been put in place, leading to poverty reduction by 12.5% from 2010 to 2015. During the 2012-2017 period, skilled birth attendants' rates have improved from 60.5% to 69.5%, and basic vaccination rates improved from 53.8% to 65.6%. Neonatal mortality, malnutrition, and stunting rates have all seen a noticeable reduction. Following a data reporting gap analysis, Pakistan has improved its M&E framework by enlarging its questionnaire and creating an SDG dashboard for better governance. Efforts have been made to increase voters (women), decrease domestic violence, ensure gender inclusiveness in financing, and other gender-related aspects. COVID-19 has caused employment losses due to business closures and slowed economic growth, significantly affecting the macroeconomic forecast and impacting the agricultural and service sectors, including prolonged unemployment. Pakistan's other challenges caused by the pandemic include reduced demand for oil, reduction in remittances, and a widening fiscal deficit. Pakistan will also have the impact of COVID-19 included in its report on VNR in 2021.

**Sri Lanka** has set its development targets, driven by the global development agenda and tailored to meet the national context, priorities and circumstances. Lack of data on many SDGs indicators pose challenges to SDGs monitoring. The Sustainable Development Council and the Department of Census and Statistics are involved in strengthening the statistical capacities of the national institutions, and among key data innovations is the SDG Data Portal launched by the Council – an integrated reporting mechanism promoting a whole of government approach to data collection, management and sharing. COVID-19 has posed challenges for Sri Lanka in achieving the SDGs. The funding gap for SDGs (currently estimated by the UN to be between 2-4 billion US \$ per year) is expected to widen further due to economic contraction and slowdown. Sri Lanka has made remarkable progress in controlling the health implications of the pandemic. However, the pandemic's impact is likely to reverse some of the essential gains on SDGs, particularly on poverty reduction and employment with impacts on key sectors such as SMEs, apparels, tourism and overseas markets. Among national measures taken to tackle the pandemic, over 6 million vulnerable families have been granted several financial and material benefits. A home gardening programme (*Saubhagya Home Gardening Programme*) was launched to promote organic cultivation and ensure uninterrupted food supply for about 4 million persons. The 2021 national budget has made allocations for low-income and vulnerable families: with provisions for tax concessions for affected sectors like agriculture, fisheries, livestock, manufacturing and construction. The greatest challenge for Sri Lanka is how to revitalize the economic and generate employment opportunities whilst maintaining ecological balances. The pandemic has renewed focus to increase domestic production and promote exports-led growth to generate investible resources. In a major boost to sustainability enhancing measures, the government has undertaken initiatives to induce household and business transition towards improved waste management practices and renewable energy usage through fiscal incentives promoting business integration of recycling practices and tax exemptions for renewable energy usage. For COVID-19 recovery and mitigation efforts, domestic resources were mobilized from public and private sources, including through crowd sourcing for the COVID-19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund. Sri Lanka has sought development assistance from bilateral and multilateral partners such as the government of China, India, the UN, the World bank and ADB. Achieving the SDGs in the context of the pandemic, requires mutual cooperation and partnerships, including among regional partners to increase investment, trade, technology, and knowledge transfers.

**South Asian CSO representative:** On behalf of CSOs of South Asia, Ms. **Pratima Gurung**, National Indigenous Disabled Women Association, Nepal, commended the South Asian governments for their commitments for the VNR process. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted efforts to achieve the implementation of SDGs at the regional, national, and local levels, led to increase in inequalities and exposed gaps in reaching the furthest and leaving no one behind at the grass-root level. In the current crisis, timely implementation and achieving the SDGs 1,2,3,8,10,12,13,16, and 17 remains challenging. There is an urgent need for targeted action on several fronts: (i) dedicating targeted spending on health (encompassing mental health), social, economic, and locally sustainable measures; (ii) prioritizing gender-based interventions and prevention strategies in national and local response plans, recovery packages and resource budgeting; (iii) ensuring transparent and fair people-centered response measures with multistakeholder engagement and partnership approach; (iv) effective localization of the SDGs and investing in intersectional and disaggregated, people-centered data for effective solutions; (v) strengthening public and private institutions for forging new social contract and building more inclusive societies; and (vi) integrated, holistic approaches with fiscal accountability and transparency to build back better.

**Session 3: Roundtable on Job-creating Economic Growth and Social Protection for Addressing Multidimensional Poverty in South Asia in the aftermath of COVID-19.**



This session highlighted the multidimensional aspects of poverty risks in South Asia, discussed several transformational approaches to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19 through strengthening social protection systems, addressing disparities in income, education and health, bridging gender gaps and supporting women entrepreneurs in recovery efforts, investing in green technologies, environmentally sustainable sectors and developing ecosystem services to accelerate SDGs achievement and build back better.

This session was moderated by **H.E. Dr. Shamsul Alam**, Member (GED), Planning Commission, Bangladesh, highlighted that the recent meeting of the SAARC Planning Ministers in November 2020 was an encouraging initiative to discuss ways to reduce poverty and develop strategies to re-vitalize economies in South Asia. South Asian countries face common challenges in SDGs achievement, in terms of composition of multidimensional poverty and intersecting deprivations; lack of data on social protection; high informality in job markets, lack of adequate investments in human resources, building infrastructure and public health; managing environmental and climate risks related issues and disproportionate pandemic-related impacts on women and children. Highlighting the need for better social security programmes to address immediate poverty resurgence in the aftermath of the crisis; promotion of market-oriented economies with due accounting for women's work; and forward looking, integrated planning for climate action, such as the Bangladesh Delta Plan (BDP) 2100 - a techno-economic plan for environmental sustainability and mitigating climate risks; greater South Asian cooperation holds the key to building back better.

The discussions began with the key presentation by **Dr. Sabina Alkire**, Director, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), Oxford University, on the theme of *COVID-19 and Multidimensional Poverty in South Asia*. The presentation focused on trends in multidimensional poverty in South Asia prior to COVID-19, attempted to assess the impacts of COVID-19 outbreak on multidimensional poverty in South Asia and discussed how multidimensional approaches can be useful for South Asia in formulating an effective response to this global crisis. Based on the global MPI data in 2020, among 8 countries of South Asia representing 1.8 billion people, about 530 million people are multidimensionally poor, with 45% being children and 88% people living in rural areas. In South Asia, Afghanistan, followed by Pakistan had the highest incidence of multidimensional poverty with Maldives and Sri Lanka having the lowest levels. Sri Lanka, India and Nepal have similar composition of poverty with high nutritional deprivations. India has shown tremendous success in lifting 270 million people from multidimensional poverty between 2005/06-2015/16 while Bangladesh had 19 million people moving out of multidimensional poverty between 2014-2019 as poverty fell by 13.5% in five years. Among all regions globally, South Asia had the largest reduction in multidimensional poverty. Among the South Asian countries, India, Nepal, Bangladesh were 'on track' to halve global MPI between 2015-30, while Pakistan was off-track. With the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty reduction trends have been estimated to be set back by 3 to 10 years. Among the major South Asian countries in India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh, poor people face high deprivation risks in handwashing and overcrowding followed by slightly higher deprivations in lack of internet and deprivation risks in domestic violence vis-à-vis non-poor people. In the context of COVID-19, many South Asian countries are using the national or global MPI as a policy tool to guide COVID-19 responses. With Bhutan being the first country in South Asia to launch official national MPI, every South Asian Country has or is designing national MPI with Maldives and Sri Lanka being part of this exercise since 2020. National MPIs are being extended to Multidimensional Vulnerability Indices (MVIs) using existing survey data, for instance, in Pakistan for the Ehsaas strategy, microsimulations of vulnerability in employment and food security in Afghanistan and Bhutan in tourism and allied sectors to analyse vulnerabilities of people living in or at risk of falling in poverty for rapid emergency crisis response. MPI can supplement national strategies for COVID-19 response through adapting differentiated policy responses to different national contexts; for better coordination, planning and monitoring; better targeting of people

and places; and to plan and orient policy solutions from a multidimensional approach, integrating health, social and economic priorities; and in designing interventions for addressing clusters of cases and risks for community transmissions.

Among the panelists, **Dr. Srinivas Tata** recommended the contextualization of the Regional Action Plan for implementing social protection adopted by UNESCAP member states in the South Asian context. The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated the pivotal role that social protection plays in building resilience and mitigating risks for individuals, households and society at large. The pandemic has brought to the fore the challenges faced by South Asia due to fragmented social protection coverage, where countries which did not have structured social protection systems struggled to extend effective measures to tackle the crisis. In Asia Pacific, the coverage of social protection stands approximately 50% having access to at least one kind of social protection coverage with investment in social protection to be only 7% of the GDP and for South Asia the percentage drops down to 25% with investment in social protection to be only 2.5% of the GDP. As a result, only 2 out of 10 jobless people receive unemployment benefits. These low levels of social protection coverage leave approximately 75 % of the subregion's population without coverage and therefore vulnerable to external negative shocks and income losses. The COVID 19 pandemic has also highlighted the delayed response the subregion has displayed in extending social protection benefits due to the absent and weakly designed nature of the social safety programmes. There have been instances of good practices in South Asian countries, such as allocating extra funds and attention to MGNREGA in India, Ehsaas in Pakistan, public infrastructure work scheme in Nepal, payments to daily wage and vulnerable worker in Sri Lanka. These measures were effective but incomplete, given the exceptionally high levels of informal employment in South Asia, making it challenging to provide adequate safeguards to people being severely affected by the crisis. The pandemic provides as opportunity to focus on a comprehensive and inclusive social protection agenda to go beyond shock responsiveness and build resilience and buffers via strengthening regional cooperation, setting benchmark levels of social protection, achievable intermediate and national targets. An action plan for South Asia can promote partnerships, peer learning, knowledge exchange, capacity building and consolidate good practices.

**Mr. Nomaan Majid** identified the broad contours of an economic growth and employment-stimulating decent work policy agenda for South Asia. An urgent acceleration of efforts was required even prior to the pandemic. Despite various immediate responses by Governments, the recovery in South Asia will take time; much longer compared to the East Asian counterparts. Even prior to the pandemic the growth was on a downturn in every country of the subregion except for Bangladesh. This distinction of decreasing growth rate both pre- and post-crisis versus increasing growth rate in pre- and decreasing in post-crisis has important implications for setting up policy measures for recovery. The subregion faces serious data issues in terms of coverage of informality and there is severe paucity of reliable and timely labour market data. The key reason for sensitivity of income poverty and unemployment to income growth collapse is because employment structures have been very slow to change with respect to change in growth. Due to absence to guarantee of protection and safety nets against economic shocks, the decline in per capita income creates massive increases in poverty as millions of people living just above the national poverty lines are pushed into poverty. With economic growth in South Asia projected to decelerate in 2020 and further in 2021, economies are set to recover in 2022. While the recovery process over the next couple of years will be challenging, it provides an opportunity to identify and re-evaluate the caveats in the previous systems and build back better more inclusively. Investments in education and skill development with national and international efforts should be reinvigorated to design, finance and implement innovative policies that support progress towards SDG 8.

**H.E. Dr. Shabnum Sarfraz** highlighted the crucial role of government interventions in offsetting the snowballing tendencies of greater wealth as well as income, education, health and access inequalities. The spending disparities between high and low-income countries show that people in middle and low-income countries spend three times more out of pockets expenses, despite having one-tenth the critical health workforce and one-sixtieth per capita expenditure on health. Given the similar challenges faced by all South Asian countries as in Pakistan, the pandemic has magnified pre-existing gender inequalities, deteriorated access to work opportunities, thrusting more houses into multidimensional poverty and food insecurity, and caused further marginalization of the most vulnerable segments. These include poorer households and those dependent on informal employment, including casual day labor, seasonal migrants and mobile population; small-scale producers; those without savings and with little recourse to insurance or alternative sources of income. These mutual contexts and challenges call for stronger regional cooperation, partnership and renewed attention to deal with widened inequalities and deeper development issues. As a case study in country response, the government of Pakistan reacted to the pandemic by mobilizing funds through repurposing existing projects. While the immediate focus was on strengthening health infrastructure and emergency health response, there were simultaneous efforts to counter the socioeconomic fallout effect of the pandemic – For example, towards SDG 4, tele-channels were launched with online education using internet/mobile learning modalities to reach off-grid children, supported by provision of scholarships and internet support to marginalized populations.

**Dr. Fahmida Khatun** highlighted the multifaceted aspects of human wellbeing which encompasses economic progress along with improvement of quality of life and environmental sustainability. The COVID-19 pandemic while posing unprecedented challenges for human wellbeing, also presents an opportunity to redesign development efforts. Some of the disproportionate social consequences of the crisis stems from the benefits of growth having not been distributed equally among different sections of the society in the past as the growth failed to create enough productive employment opportunities. For ensuring structural economic transformation in South Asia, greater investments in agriculture is needed along with scaling up technology-enabled services to improve productivity and efficiency, while creating high value-added employment through greater investments and enhanced access to technology. Bridging the huge digital divide is also required. In the post-COVID-19 recovery phase, investments have to be made in environmentally sustainable and green technologies. South Asian countries must invest to encourage structural transformation in job-creating and environmentally sustainable sectors. Given the limited resources available for financing, regional and multilateral partnerships, including through South-South cooperation, can provide avenues for generating investible resources. While tapping into new sources of finance at the regional and global levels, South Asian economies must substantially increase domestic resource mobilization efforts along with undertaking key economic and regulatory reforms for productive efficiency.

**Dr. Uchita de Zoysa** advocated the growing importance of ecosystem services and circular economy approaches and the critical need to promote inclusive transformation for all to leave no one behind. To look at the fresh challenges posed by the pandemic, solutions can be sought through enhancing resource governance, re-aligning resource relationships and prospects of resource re-generation. Making the transformation more inclusive can be done through the reimagining of domestic resource mobilization, the reorganization of people-centered resource flows and investments in transformational pathways. Their recent work on localizing the transformation in the new normal proposes the recalibration of the transformation context in terms of policy, localizing, financing and transformation, to achieve the SDGs.

**Ms. Pramila Acharya Rijal** highlighted the findings of Global Gender Gap 2020 report which finds that gender parity will not be achieved in the next 99 years. The pandemic has aggravated the pre-

existing gender inequalities and highlighted the gendered impacts of the crisis on women in South Asia. 47 million more girls and women will be pushed below the poverty line due to the COVID-19 crisis. An online Survey conducted by SAWDF in 10 countries, including in South Asia, China and Myanmar found that women entrepreneurs faced challenges from the COVID-19 crisis related to business losses and economic instability; labour shortages; transport and logistics; and health concerns and mental health issues. In terms of government support for women-led businesses and areas of future growth of women entrepreneurship, a number of priorities were identified which include: (i) leveraging digital marketing; (ii) diversification of business activities; (iii) developing business resilience; (iv) financial management; (v) risk planning and technical skills.

**Ms. Dolon Ganguly** highlighted the gaps for SDGs achievement and pitched for the governments to put in place multi-dimensional and inclusive mechanisms. Non-equitable growth process has resulted in massive job losses, declining work force participation of women, lack of social security and inequalities in wages. As countries reactivate their economies, governments and other stakeholders have to come up with special mechanisms to re-skill their workforce with investments in digital literacy and skilling towards future growth sectors, creation of decent livelihood opportunities, and gender-sensitive investments to reduce the gender gap in digital access, greater sharing of unpaid care work, and better work access. Inclusive and gender-sensitive allocations for infrastructure, quality public services and social protection systems can lead to broader growth base and create higher synergies between interrelated SDGs (SDG 1, SDG 4, SDG 5, SDG 8, SDG 9 and SDG 10). **Ahmed Shafeeu** discussed the disruptive direct impacts of the pandemic on social services. Among the many challenges, the issues of access to health services, mental health issues along with reproductive health needs need special attention. Investments in human capital, vulnerable population groups and comprehensive social protection are needed. The measures taken by the governments should include community-based organizations for a more participatory recovery process. The impacts of the pandemic on children needs to be addressed, particularly with respect to disruptions in education, nutrition and increase in violence. Overall, it is fundamental to work together and collectively for human well-being.

#### **Session 4: Roundtable on Harnessing Global, Regional and Sub-Regional Partnerships and Means of implementation for Accelerating SDGs Achievement in South Asia: Finance, Technology, Data and Statistics (SDG 17)**

The session discussed various policy options available to build capacities and develop partnerships as well as ways for enhancing the means of implementation identified under SDG 17 – which include finance, technology, trade and statistical capacities – particularly through multi-stakeholder engagements and regional cooperation. With more than one-third (62 targets) of the SDG targets pertaining to means of implementation (MoI), Goal 17 is critical for successful implementation of the SDGs.

Moderating the Session, **Dr. Abid Suleri** highlighted the urgent need for channelizing more investments into core social sectors such as education, health, food, energy, water and sanitation. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed existing inequalities and access gaps, underscoring the importance of social sector development for ending deprivations. To a large extent, the resource redistribution effects of enhanced expenditure in social sectors at the national level will help to offset the negative effects of contraction in GDP due to the pandemic. He suggested that South Asian countries need to improve and leverage technological capabilities available at their disposal, particularly digital and ICT technologies, to improve the coverage and quality of delivery of services.



**Dr. Hamza Ali Malik** pointed out that there exist substantial gaps in terms of projected investment requirements for the implementation of SDGs and expected financial resource outlays. The estimated SDG investment needs in most of the subregional countries exceeds 15% of GDP, with the corresponding figures for Afghanistan, Bangladesh and India found to be above 25%, and the average projected financial inflows under optimistic scenarios is only about 5% of GDP for these countries. While this implies that greater efforts are needed to mobilise financial resources, fiscal space is being constrained by COVID-19. Compared to an average size of fiscal stimulus packages of about 7% of their respective GDPs for Asia-Pacific countries, in South Asia, the average size so far has been at around 3.3%, indicating that the financial requirements to achieve the SDGs have become more difficult to be met with currently available resource pool. It is critical that the countries improve their fiscal space, while reprioritizing spending related to SDGs in lines with the demands of economic recovery. There are many viable ways to enhance the fiscal space by exploring multiple policy measures such as phasing out of untargeted subsidy, lowering defence spending, widening tax bases, improving tax administration and increasing tax progressivity, relaxing fiscal rules and consider innovative financial instruments like SDG-bonds, improving public debt management and reducing illicit financial flows.

**Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi** stressed on the importance of collective responses to multi-dimensional poverty in the region though Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India have made impressive progress in reducing income poverty. He highlighted efforts in the financial cooperation in the subregion, particularly in the banking sector, where regional central banks are working together under the SAARC framework to improve overall financial integration. Important measures are being taken to improve banking systems, with the RBI playing a lead role, in making credit more accessible to SMEs. Enhancing intra-regional trade can help in a major way in boosting employment generation and economic growth, but it has to be complemented by improvements in financing and infrastructure. It is vital to establish a strong regional manufacturing value chain through an effective and functional trading systems under SAFTA, as in the case of initiatives for a continental free trade agreement in Africa. A wide range of initiatives addressing different sectors are already available and the region should seize such opportunities. The SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund established to combat the socio-economic fallouts of the pandemic is a welcome step. One of the key areas which needs urgent attention is with respect to bridging the data gaps, and subregional countries should prioritize data systems for tier 2 and tier 3 indicators while undertaking measures to build statistical capacities. Initiatives coordinated by UNESCAP such as the SANS network can provide useful platforms for regional institutions to collaborate in bridging data and capacity gaps and that collective efforts needed for procurement and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.

**Dr. René Van Berkel** highlighted the significance of new economic models, technological advancements and emerging market trends. Market systems are undergoing transformation, also responding to challenges posed by COVID-19, and it is difficult to foresee the “new normal” in the post-pandemic era. Among the key drivers that lead transformation of the global manufacturing sector are responses which shape up resilience of supply chains. Predominant players in the global value chains such as East and Southeast Asia may face increasing competition in the near future, resulting in new market expansion opportunities for subregions such as South Asia. New global value chains might shift to more integrated manufacturing and innovation hubs. It is important to develop a circular and green economy, by using more renewable energy and resources. There is also a need to improve partnerships and development of international best practices to create favourable conditions for attracting private investments. Capitalizing on its vibrant innovation and technology capabilities, South Asia should promote intellectual property safeguarding and contractual security. Another important driver of transformative changes in the global manufacturing value chain is digitalization. The arrival of the era of 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution and digitization is also characterised by rapid growth

in isolated and localised development hubs, which may exacerbate geographical disparities. Responding to the needs of development in the digital age, South Asia needs to invest in skill development and corresponding production capabilities. Policy reform requirements in this context include measures for modernization of industrial technology and innovation policies, improving awareness and business ecosystems, and development of human resources.

**Dr. Omar Joya** discussed the ever-growing financing requirements for achieving SDGs in South Asia, due to which subregional countries should adopt measures to diversify financing sources, especially in the post-COVID-19 era. In LDCs of South Asia, foreign aid is often the largest source of development financing including for Afghanistan. The pandemic has provided an opportunity to revisit the structure and effectiveness of the international aid regime, which is undergoing changes in terms of volumes of aid flows and conditionalities. To increase sources of development finance, South Asian countries should explore the potential of private capital and investment, and the pandemic has enhanced awareness with respect to the need for ease of doing business reform. Capital account are also needed to ease international capital flow restrictions in the subregion, which would require coordination at the global and regional levels. It is important that the huge untapped potential for intra-regional trade is utilized, as studies show that a 10% reduction in trade cost in South Asia can lead upto 4% increase in GDP for countries such as Afghanistan. Such growth can be an important conduit for acceleration of the SDGs through employment generation and improvement of livelihoods. Investment policies of the subregional countries should be revisited to provide incentives for investors and governments should examine the potential of public private partnerships and develop facilitative legal frameworks for the same.

**Dr. Selim Raihan** pointed out that the pathways for South Asian countries to make progress towards the SDGs are faced with immense challenges following the COVID-19 outbreak, especially for the graduating LDCs of the subregion with mounting fiscal pressures. South Asia has not been successful in utilizing the full potential of regional economic integration due to various reasons and the subregion should revitalize the instruments and policies for greater regional economic integration. With shrinking fiscal space, it is also importance to streamline domestic policies to maximize effectiveness and efficiency of development reforms. It is important that large financial stimulus packages in the subregional countries, being launched as a response to the current crisis, are properly targeted. The fiscal stimulus packages need to be sustainable and sufficient, and they also need to be properly administrated and implemented. Vulnerable population and sections of the subregional economies such as informal sector workers and SMEs should be ensured beneficiaries. It is also important that the data gaps are bridged to improve delivery and targeting of public welfare programmes.

**Dr. Poshraj Pandey** noted that, following the contraction in global economy due to the pandemic, protectionist tendencies are once again on the rise. Austerity and inward-looking policies should not be the policy focus under the current conditions, instead South Asian countries should adopt steps to deepen regional cooperation and build regional value chains, which would help faster recovery in a robust, inclusive and sustainable manner. It has been observed that the South Asia subregion has only been utilizing around one third of the potential in intra-regional trade. Policy measures required to enhance intra-regional trade include; 1) avoiding import and export restrictive measures, 2) sustaining measures for ease of access to medical, food and essentials, 3) addressing key regulatory barriers and reduce trade facilitation gaps, 4) strengthening inter- and intra-agency coordination and collaboration, 5) strengthening and expanding connectivity by investing in trade infrastructure, both soft and hard infrastructures, to enable more sustainable and resilient recovery in the post-COVID era, 6) revisiting the SAARC agreements to transform transport corridors into economic corridors, 7) liberating trade in services, financial cooperation and coordination for ease of international payments, 8) accelerating energy cooperation among South Asian countries by providing cross-border energy transmission and

trade infrastructure, and creating regional energy market with necessary legal and regulatory frameworks as well as a power system database, and 9) enhancing private investment participation to help achieving the SDGs. Regional cooperation can complement national efforts for ensuring resilient economic recovery and acceleration of the SDGs in the subregion.

**Dr. Dushni Weerakoon** observed that at the national level South Asian countries have made progress in terms of integration of the SDGs into national development policy frameworks. National development plans have been updated, along with institutional reforms for sustainable development policy coordination, reporting and monitoring. Though there are improvements in data availability, more work is needed to close the remaining data gaps. The COVID-19 crisis calls for certain policy priorities, starting with a stocktaking of the socio-economic impacts caused by the pandemic. South Asian countries would need to increase public investment in infrastructures to revive growth and also to tap the spillover effects of such investments across various SDGs. It is also important to sustain social sector investments for reducing inequalities. Along with national responses to the COVID-19 and further improvements in the SDG implementation frameworks, it is critical that South Asian countries deepen regional cooperation for the benefit of common development goals. A regional monitoring mechanism with regional SDG progress indicators would be helpful to reprioritize SDG action programmes in this regard, especially in the context of COVID-19 impacts. This should be followed by a adoption of an integrated approach to reporting progress in the priority areas to improve policy coherence at the regional level. It is also important to utilize capacity building opportunities and awareness generation, communicating various aspects of the SDG agenda to wider stakeholder groups, at the regional level.

**Ms. Aishath Shahuda** identified difficulties faced in data collection for monitoring SDG progress. Most of the persisting data gaps are on environmental indicators. COVID-19 outbreak has impacted traditional data collection methods, and statistical departments and agencies have stepped up to adopt new data collection methods, turning to alternate data sources such as big data to fill the data gaps. It is important to strengthen data ecosystems by cooperating with private sector and civic society organizations for improving statistical standards and narrowing the data gaps. With the current challenges, new skills are needed to increase statistical capacities such as in identifying data needs and in developing data visualization tools. Effective utilization of available data in policy formulation also needs improvement in the South Asia region. Subregional countries should mobilize resources for building capacities of statistical agencies, as under SDG 17 on establishing and strengthening the capacity of the statistical officers for timely, high quality, reliable and disaggregated data so that SDGs can be localized. Regular meetings between statistical agencies in South Asian countries under SAARC initiatives should be revived for sharing best practices, creating useful regional data repositories and for fostering collaboration for capacity-building of national statistical institutions and systems. National initiatives for development of statistical capacities should also pursue prioritization of indicators. While investments in data collection technology, data management system are needed, statistical agencies should also explore new data sources.

**Ms. Mamta Saikia** discussed the complementary role of CSR funds in achieving the SDGs. CSR constitutes an important component of participation of the private sector in development financing. The CSR space has evolved in South Asia, in terms of its structure, instruments, nature of projects and scale of participation. Such a transformation is particularly visible in India since the implementation of the CSR Act. About 10,000-12,000 companies are reported to be taking part in developmental projects through direct and indirect CSR activities and projects in India, which are estimated to be worth around US\$ 3-4 billion. CSR projects often initiated with specific sectoral and locational focus, which is beneficial in terms of greater stakeholder engagement and ease of management and monitoring. CSR is also playing a proactive role in crisis response in the aftermath of COVID-19. CSR

funds utilized for improving health, education, local industries, women empowerment and other key social sectors would help in advancing various SDGs in the subregion. Enhancing the role of CSR activities will also help in fostering innovation, improving livelihoods and localization of the SDGs.

**Ms. Aishath Adnan and Mr. Maruf Barkat**, stressed on the importance of enhancing participation of wider stakeholder groups in planning and implementation of the SDGs. CSOs can play a complementary role to governments and the private sector by facilitating interventions at the grassroots level. It will help in developing and implementing localized solutions and generating community level data and information systems, efficient targeting of policies and better monitoring practices. With accelerated digital transformation induced by the pandemic, innovative approaches are needed to bridge the digital divide and enable localized communities to adapt to the ‘new normal’. Broader partnerships between governments, international development organizations, private sector and CSOs should be established in order to address regulatory and resource mobilization challenges. Such partnerships will also enable CSOs to access global and regional resources, overcome their capacity constraints and improve the effectiveness of their participation in inclusive and sustainable development.

### Summing up and Way Forward

In his valedictory address, **Mr. Mohamed Imad** called for transformational changes to accelerate the progress towards achieving the SDGs in South Asia, against the backdrop of devastations caused by COVID-19 pandemic. It is critical to increase social sector investments and improve social protection coverage to assist the marginalized and vulnerable groups severely impacted by the crisis. In the emerging context, urgent measures are required to improve financial resource mobilization for meeting the growing requirements of development financing, to bridge the digital divide for adapting to the new normal, and to improve statistical capacities and data availability for facilitating informed policy decisions. Responding to the employment crisis, governments should adopt targeted and comprehensive labour market interventions. South Asian countries should also adopt an integrated approach to economic recovery and acceleration of the SDGs, embracing technological advancements and innovation, investments in productive sectors and capacity-building. Partnerships and collaborations between diverse actors and stakeholders including governments, international organizations, private sector, academia, think-tanks and CSOs are essential for implementation of the SDGs in South Asia.

**Dr. Nagesh Kumar** concluded the Forum by expressing gratitude to the Government of Maldives for co-organizing the Forum and to all participants including the panelists and speakers, representatives of governments, private sector, think-tanks and CSOs for their valuable contributions to the Forum. Subregional countries presented the policy highlights from their respective VNRs, while regional think-tanks, CSOs and private sector representatives also enriched the discussions. The Forum thus provided truly multi-stakeholder perspectives, with viewpoints from think tanks, governments, civic societies and the private sector, following the tradition set by the previous ones. Policy lessons emerging from the Forum will be presented at the forthcoming APFSD to be hosted by UNESCAP, and subsequently to the global HLPF to be organised by United Nations. Recommendations for enhanced regional cooperation will also be factored into the programming of UNESCAP in the coming years for South Asia. He also invited the participants to the Special High Level Event of South Asia SDG Forum on Disaster and Climate Resilience in South Asia scheduled for 4 December 2020 at which ministers of Climate and Disasters of 5 South Asian countries have agreed to address besides the heads of regional institutions dealing with disasters and climate resilience in South Asia.



## Programme

Day 1: 2 December 2020	
14.00-14.45	<p><b>Session 1: Opening Session</b>  <b>Moderator: Dr. Nagesh Kumar</b>, Director, UNESCAP SSWA</p> <p><b>Opening remarks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>H.E. Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana</b>, United Nations Under Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ESCAP</li> <li>• <b>H.E. Ms. Catherine Haswell</b>, UN Resident Coordinator in Maldives</li> <li>• <b>H.E. Mr. Esala Ruwan Weerakoon</b>, Secretary-General of SAARC</li> <li>• <b>H.E. Mr. Tenzin Lekphell</b>, Secretary-General of BIMSTEC</li> <li>• <b>H.E. Mr. Mohamed Aslam</b>, Minister of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Maldives</li> </ul> <p><b>Web-launch of <i>South Asia Network on SDGs (SANS) portal</i></b>  Brief interventions by Heads of the key SANS partners namely the <i>Biruni Institute-Afghanistan, CPD-Bangladesh, RIS-India, SAWTEE-Nepal, SDPI-Pakistan, IPS-Sri Lanka and CSO-APRCEM.</i></p>
14.45-17.00	<p><b>Session 2: Taking stock of subregional and national progress on SDGs in the context of the COVID-19 – Towards Sustainable and Resilient Recovery</b> (with a focus on SDGs 1,2,3,8,10,12,13,16, and 17)</p> <p><b>Moderator: Amb. Gyan Acharya</b>, Chairman, SAWTEE SDG Centre, Kathmandu &amp; former USG, UN-OHRLLS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Introduction to the VNRs process: Mr. Riccardo Mesiano</b>, Sustainable Development Officer, Environment and Development Division, UNESCAP</li> <li>• <b>South Asia SDG Progress Overview: Mr. Rajan Sudesh Ratna</b>, Economic Affairs Officer, UNESCAP SSWA</li> </ul> <p><b>Presentations by Country SDG Focal Points (7 minutes each):</b></p> <p><i>Countries presenting VNR at HLPF 2021</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bhutan: <b>Mr. Phurba</b>, Senior Planning Officer, Perspective Planning Division, Gross National Happiness Commission Secretariat, Bhutan</li> <li>• Pakistan: <b>Mr. Shahid Naeem</b>, Chief, SDGs, Ministry of Planning Development &amp; Reform, Pakistan</li> </ul> <p><i>Countries that presented VNR at HLPF 2020</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bangladesh: <b>Mr. Mohd. Monirul Islam</b>, Joint Secretary, SDG Coordinator's Office, PMO</li> <li>• India: <b>Mr. Alen John Samuel</b>, SDG Officer, NITI Aayog, Government of India</li> <li>• Nepal: <b>Mr. Khomraj Koirala</b>, Joint Secretary, National Planning Commission</li> </ul> <p><i>Other Member countries</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Afghanistan: <b>Mr. Muqadar Hashimi</b>, Director General for Economic Policy, Ministry of Economy, Afghanistan</li> <li>• Maldives: <b>Ms. Aishath Saadh</b>, Deputy Director General, National Planning and SDGs Coordination Division, Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Maldives</li> <li>• Sri Lanka: <b>Ms. Chamindry Saparamadu</b>, Director-General, Sustainable Development Council of Sri Lanka</li> </ul> <p><b>CSO representative</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ms. Pratima Gurung</b>, President, National Indigenous Disabled Women Association, Nepal</li> </ul> <p><b>Open Discussion</b></p>
DAY 2: 3 December 2020	

14.00- 15.15	<p><b>Session 3: Roundtable on Job-creating Economic Growth and Social Protection for Addressing Multidimensional Poverty in South Asia in the aftermath of COVID-19</b> (SDGs 1, 8, 10)</p> <p><b>Moderator: H.E. Dr. Shamsul Alam</b>, Member (GED), Planning Commission, Bangladesh</p> <p><b>Key presentation:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COVID-19 and Multidimensional Poverty in South Asia by <b>Dr. Sabina Alkire</b>, Director, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), Oxford University</li> </ul> <p><b>Panellists</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Dr. Srinivas Tata</b>, Director, Social Development Division, UNESCAP</li> <li>• <b>H.E. Dr. Shabnum Sarfraz</b>, Member (Social Sector), Planning Commission, Pakistan</li> <li>• <b>Mr. Nomaan Majid</b>, Senior Employment Specialist, ILO Decent Work Technical Support Team for South Asia, New Delhi</li> <li>• <b>Dr. Selim Raihan</b>, Executive Director, SANEM, Bangladesh</li> <li>• <b>Dr. Uchita de Zoysa</b>, Chairman - Global Sustainability Solutions (GLOSS) and Executive Director - Centre for Environment &amp; Development (CED), Sri Lanka</li> <li>• <b>Ms. Pramila Acharya Rijal</b>, President, South Asian Women Development Forum (SAWDF), Nepal</li> </ul> <p><b>Civil Society representative</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ms. Dolan Ganguly</b>, Program Director, Azad Foundation</li> <li>• <b>Mr. Ahmed Shafeeu</b>, CEO, Society for Health Education (SHE)</li> </ul> <p><b>Open Discussion</b></p>
15.15 – 16.30	<p><b>Session 4: Roundtable on Harnessing Global, Regional and Sub-Regional Partnerships and Means of implementation for Accelerating SDGs Achievement in South Asia: Finance, Technology, Data and Statistics</b> (SDG 17)</p> <p><b>Moderator: Dr. Abid Suleri</b>, Executive Director, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, and Member, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister of Pakistan</p> <p><b>Panellists:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Dr. Hamza Ali Malik</b>, Director, MPFD, UNESCAP</li> <li>• <b>Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi</b>, Director-General, RIS, India</li> <li>• <b>Dr. René Van Berkel</b>, Head of UNIDO Regional Office in India (coordinating Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka)</li> <li>• <b>Dr. Omar Joya</b>, Founding Member and Head of Research, Biruni Institute, Afghanistan</li> <li>• <b>Dr. Fahmida Khatun</b>, Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue, Bangladesh</li> <li>• <b>Ms. Mamta Saikia</b>, Chief Executive Officer, Bharti Foundation, India</li> <li>• <b>Dr. Poshraj Pandey</b>, Chairman, SAWTEE, Nepal</li> <li>• <b>Ms. Aishath Shahuda</b>, Chief Statistician, National Bureau of Statistics, Maldives</li> <li>• <b>Dr. Dushni Weerakoon</b>, Executive Director, Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka</li> </ul> <p><b>Civil Society representative</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Mr. Barkat Ullah Maruf</b>, Joint Director, Coast Trust Bangladesh</li> <li>• <b>Ms. Aishath Adnan</b>, Co-Founder, Women in Tech Maldives</li> </ul> <p><b>Open Discussion</b></p>
16.30 –17.00	<p><b>Session 5: Summing up and Way Forward</b></p> <p><b>Concluding remarks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Mr. Mohamed Imad</b>, Chief Project Executive, Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Government of Maldives</li> <li>• <b>Dr. Nagesh Kumar</b>, Director, UNESCAP SSWA</li> </ul>