



Strengthening Freight Transport Corridors of South Asia in the aftermath of COVID-19

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Exposure of Freight Transport Sector to the COVID-19 Outbreak

Transport sector has been at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19, and perhaps is the most severely, directly and immediately impacted sector following its outbreak. One of the first reaction to COVID-19 across regions has been to impose restrictions on international transport through all modes – land, air and maritime – to contain the spread of the deadly pandemic. Such restrictions were predominantly aimed at limiting passenger movement, both domestic and international.

Most countries took steps to maintain the status quo of freight transport, in an effort to keep the trade channels alive and to ensure uninterrupted distribution of at least essential goods and medical supplies. Nevertheless, global freight transport sector finds itself in the middle of an unprecedented crisis, the full extent of which is yet to unravel at the time of writing of this brief.

By mid-March 2020, when imposition of restrictive transport measures world-wide was still in the early stages, world services trade index declined by 3.2 percentage points.¹ Among its sub-components, container shipping recorded the sharpest decline (-5.7 percentage points) after passenger air travel (-6.5 percentage points).

Contraction in maritime transport, the mode of carriage of more than 80 percent of world merchandize trade volume, is also indicative of ripple effects the crisis would inflict along the inland transport chains (road and rail) as well, which provide the first and last mile links.

The sharp drop in global freight traffic is an immediate result of the slump in trade supply and demand triggered by the pandemic. The supply-side logjams started from East Asia, the initial epicenter of the outbreak, as some of the key manufacturing hubs of the region were forced into domestic lockdown. China's industrial output declined by 13.5 percent in the first two months of 2020 and exports dropped to 2008 global financial crisis levels,² followed by similar

and sudden contraction in industrial outputs in Japan and South Korea, the 3rd and 5th largest manufacturers in the world respectively, as indicated by sharp dips in respective purchasing managers' indices (PMI).³

Meanwhile, on the demand side, cancellation of export orders served by East Asia further halted productive activities, adversely affecting the shipping business along its busiest Asia-Europe and Transpacific routes. Subsequent manufacturing lockdowns in Europe and North America is having a further crippling effect on global maritime cargo transport sector, as the biggest trading nations of the world are being forced to cut down on both exports and imports, except for a limited basket of emergency goods and supplies.

Despite steep decline in carriage loads and volumes of freight movement, many ports and inland transshipment hubs across the world are also found to be facing severe traffic congestion. General lockdown measures have had a crippling effect on the operating capacity of transport systems and logistic services. Shortage of manpower, additional quarantine measures, resultant delays in loading, inspection and clearance, cut down of onward rail/road services from ports and inland container depots (ICDs)/dry ports/warehouses etc. disrupt regular operations through multimodal transport networks around the world.⁴ Globally, freight carriage by road is found to have reduced by at least 30-40 percent,⁵ with implications for carriage efficiency of backward and forward links along international transport corridors.

Disruptions of this nature to transport systems are more severe in countries and subregions with weak logistic performance and trade/transport facilitation. South Asian countries generally fall under this group, having among the highest trade costs in the world predominantly owing to inefficiencies in the transport sector.⁶ Manual transshipments at border crossings,

lack of digital processing and exchange of documents, and absence of automated inspection systems and modernized customs clearance prevent subregional countries from keeping up with the demands of facilitating movement of even essential

supplies with reduced capacities. Issues arising out of exposure to COVID-19 outbreak therefore brings forth the urgent need for correcting systemic weakness in the cross-border freight transport systems of the subregion.

Risks to South Asia's Freight Transport Sector

Following the forced lockdown of key manufacturing and services, South Asia is also expecting drastic economic fallouts in the immediate future. Some early projections accounting for potential COVID-19 impacts put growth of the subregion's economy to be between 1.8 - 2.8 percent in 2020, down from the original 6.3 percent projection made before the onset of the pandemic.⁷

Severity of the impact would vary across countries, with some of the countries expected to enter a recessionary phase. This would potentially result in commensurate slowdown in the international trading activities of the subregion. India, the 6th largest manufacturing country in the world, has recorded a steep drop in PMI by March 2020 over a slowdown in new export orders.⁸

Expected contraction in external demand is also expected to adversely affect the subregion's exports.

Heavy impact of the outbreak in Europe, North America and East Asia, which together constitute more than 60 percent of South Asia's exports may put excessive pressure on the subregion's trade-oriented sectors. A direct result would be worsening business environment for the freight transport sector, as traffic volumes shrink.

India's exports for March 2020 are reported to have contracted by 34.5 percent (and imports fell by 28.7 percent), the steepest monthly fall in about 25 years, as trade demand takes a sharp downward turn due to the pandemic.⁹ Similarly, trade outlook of other South Asian countries also appears bleak, such as in the case of heavily export dependent textile and garments industry of Bangladesh which is project to lose potentially 15 percent or more of its market.¹⁰ This will have a commensurate and severe dampening impact on transport and logistics sectors.

Policy Responses and Systemic Weaknesses of Subregional Cargo Transport Systems

In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, South Asia joined other regions in placing partial to full-fledged lockdown of passenger transport, both domestic and international, albeit with efforts to sustain international cargo operations. Toward this, governmental notifications were issued in several regional countries to bring freight transport under the ambit of essential services, such as in India (Table 1). Most of the subregional countries adopted special measures to

ensure that movement of at least essential goods could be facilitated amid lockdowns (Table 2).¹¹ These measures have been accompanied by exemption of taxes and duties imposed on essential goods. However, despite best efforts, international freight movement in the subregion across all modes of transport has been severely affected due to various reasons.

Table 1. COVID-19 measures for cross-border freight transport in South Asian countries

Country	General Transport Measures			Cargo facilitation by mode of transport			
	Exception for freight transport	Additional quarantine checks	Special facilitation measures	Air	Maritime	Road	Rail
<i>Afghanistan</i>	EG Only	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	Yes	Yes
<i>Bangladesh</i>	All freight	Yes	Yes	Yes	EG only	Yes	Yes
<i>Bhutan</i>	EG only	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	Yes	Yes
<i>India</i>	All freight	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Nepal</i>	All freight*	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes
<i>Maldives</i>	EG only	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A
<i>Pakistan</i>	All freight*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Sri Lanka</i>	EG only	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A

Source: UNESCAP, 04 May 2020, compiled from various sources for the repository of COVID-19 transport measures. For details, see UNESCAP (2020) [Monitoring the Transport Policy Response to COVID-19 along the Regional Transport Network in Asia and the Pacific](#).

* All freight allowed select mode(s) of transport only. N/A – Not Available/Applicable; EG - essential goods

South Asia entered the lockdown with poor transport and logistics systems. Subregional countries rank poorly in global transport facilitation and logistics performance indicators, facing multiple technical, infrastructural, operational, and policy challenges.¹² Persisting systemic issues of South Asia's freight transport network permeate inefficiencies of the clearance process by border control agencies, quality of sea/land port infrastructure and facilities, and competence of logistic services. As a result, trade costs of subregional countries are among the highest in the world, with intra-regional trade costs well more than double that of neighboring East and Southeast Asia regions.¹³ South Asian countries are placed in the lower rungs of rankings based on UNESCAP Connectivity Index.¹⁴ Pre-existing shortcomings of

transport systems have diminished the effectiveness of emergency measures to maintain normal freight traffic.

Reduced operating capacities affected regular freight movements at ports and border-crossing stations. Reduction in operating hours and shortage of staff have limited the handling capacity of ports.¹⁵ Major sea ports of the region – JNPT Mumbai, Mundra, Colombo, Chittagong – report piling up of containers as import containers are not being cleared by the importers and custom house agents.¹⁶ Similarly, in land customs stations of the subregion, services have been affected by newly imposed quarantine requirements, and reduced staff strength and processing time restrictions.

Table 2. Select freight transport facilitation measures in South Asia against COVID-19 challenges

Country	Special facilitation measures
<i>Afghanistan</i>	Coordinated with Pakistan and Iran for clearance of essential goods and medical supplies through select border crossing points, following temporary closures of critical border stations.
<i>Bangladesh</i>	Medical equipment are exempted from duties and taxes. Essential goods are given priority in Custom clearance. Goods import from China are allowed to submit soft copy documents; other countries are under consideration to apply the same measure. Transit facilities for goods to Bhutan remain operational.
<i>Bhutan</i>	Special counter opened to facilitate custom documentation for imports of essential goods from India.
<i>India</i>	Emergency facilitation measures for uninterrupted freight movement including 24/7 customs clearance services at designated ports. Coronavirus Help Desk has been opened to quickly resolve issues hampering trade and clearance of import/export cargo. Freight trains, especially for food grains to deficit areas, are running at a more than double freight load and at lower transit times. Indian Railways permitted free movement of empty containers and empty flat wagons from 24th March 2020 till 8th May 2020. Demurrage and other charges are encouraged to be waived at ports to the extent possible. Special measures to expedite Customs clearance through paperless documentary processes and dispensation of different types of Customs bonds.
<i>Nepal</i>	Quick response team is formed at the customs headquarter to coordinate all custom offices and clearance, expediting regular customs clearance process and essential goods are cleared within 2 hours. Submission of original documents is not mandatory at ports and allowing online submission at the time being.
<i>Maldives</i>	All physical examinations of goods are done based on risk assessment, only necessary items are examined at the moment. Import of medical equipment is coordinated with hospitals and clinics beforehand and exempted from duty.
<i>Pakistan</i>	24/7 clearance of cargo at ports/airports and land border station. Essential medicines and equipment to combat COVID-19 pandemic are exempted for duties and taxes.
<i>Sri Lanka</i>	Hard copies of custom declaration are not required, and electronic customs declaration is accepted. Essential goods are given priority.

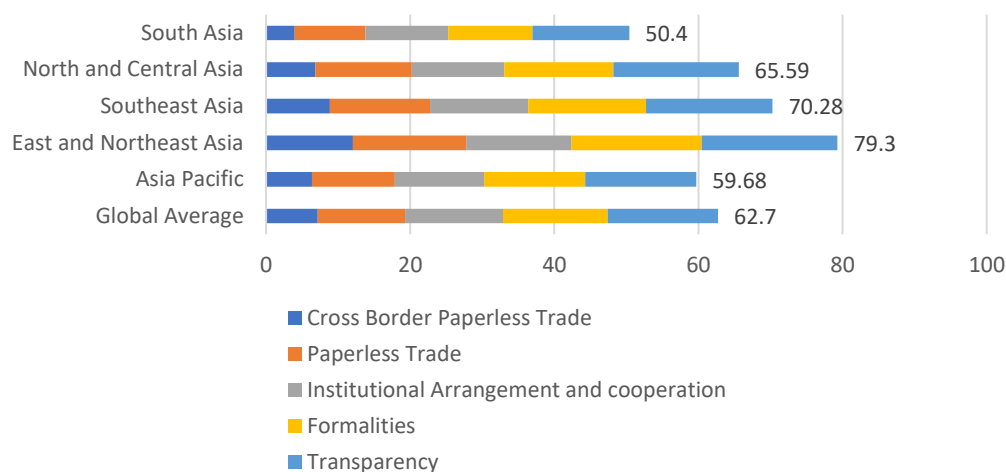
Source: UNESCAP, 04 May 2020, compiled from various sources for the repository of COVID-19 transport measures. For details, see UNESCAP (2020) [Monitoring the Transport Policy Response to COVID-19 along the Regional Transport Network in Asia and the Pacific](#).

Lack of digital trade/transport documentation processes affected effectiveness of emergency transport measures. Among Asia-Pacific regions, South Asia lags behind in terms of implementation of national and cross-border paperless trade systems (Figure 1). While subregional countries are at varying stages of progress, prevailing asymmetries between them prevents effective interlinkages, and digital connectedness and coordination. Absence of electronic processing systems is perhaps the single

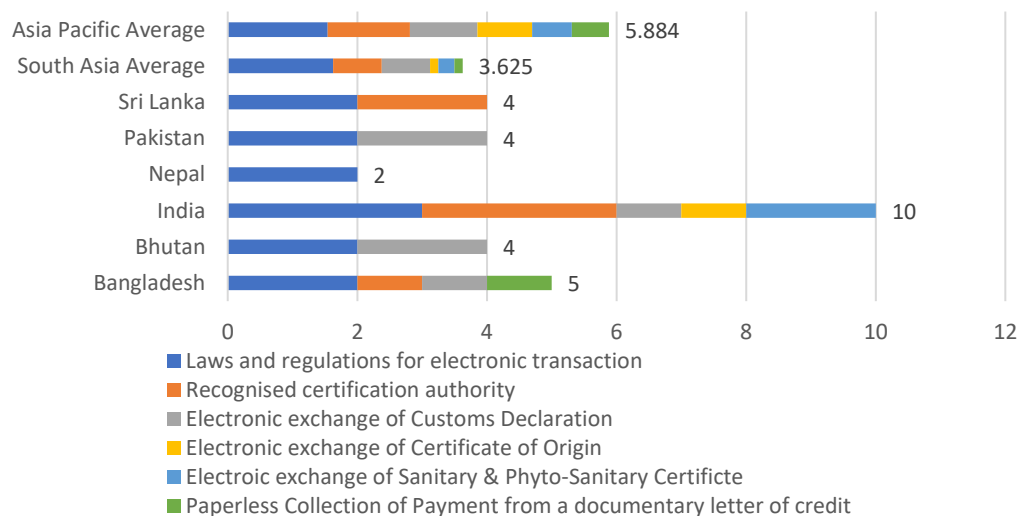
most critical constraint currently faced in facilitating cargo movement against reduced manpower at ports, border stations and in logistic operations in the aftermath of COVID-19. In recognition of this facilitation gap, some countries have started measures to expedite the shift to digital platforms. For instance, inter-ministerial coordination for acceptance of electronic documentation has been kickstarted in India.¹⁷

Figure 1. Implementation of digital trade facilitation measures in South Asia

Comparative implementation rates among Asia-Pacific subregions (in percentages)



Implementation rate of cross-border paperless trade in South Asia (in scores)



Source: [UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation 2019](#)

Heavy reliance on road transport for inland cross-border traffic denies advantages of inter-modal shifts of freight traffic. Almost the whole of South Asia's intra-regional merchandise trade is carried out through road. The advantage of far greater haulage capacity through rail, with minimal human exposure to the pandemic, could not be utilized by subregion due to inadequate rail freight services arrangements between countries, except perhaps for services between India and Nepal. While India has increased rail freight services domestically during the ongoing lockdown (Table 2), its critical rail connectivity with Bangladesh and Pakistan could not be mobilized optimally in the short term to meet any emergency demand for transport services, preventing opportunities of optimal intermodal distribution between road and rail transport. Commencement of transport of essential goods by rail from India to Bangladesh by the first week of May 2020 gives a positive message, emphasizing the urgency for scaling up regional rail transport.¹⁸

Infrastructural bottlenecks affect faster cargo inspection and clearance. Cargo traffic across cross-border road routes of South Asia are facilitated by Land Customs Stations (LCSs) some of which have been upgraded to Integrated Check Posts (ICPs). Trade through LCSs is suffering from several infrastructural and procedural bottlenecks, including

lack of efficient and effective custom administration, lack of storage and transit facilities, absence of scanners, undue delays in inspection and clearance etc. are commonly reported from LCSs.¹⁹ These shortcomings have affected the timely clearance of cargo amid COVID-19 measures.

Manual transshipment practices at border-crossings causes delivery delays. The requirement of transshipment at borders and limits placed on cross-border movement of carrier vehicles continues to impose cost and time barriers to trade. Transshipment is noted to cause average cargo clearance times between 10 to 20 days even in some of the subregion's major and better equipped LCSs. The system has therefore been extremely ill-suited for facilitation of cross border emergency supplies.

Better transit arrangements for LLDCs of the subregion needed to ensure uninterrupted supply lines for essential goods. For landlocked countries of the subregion (Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal), transit arrangements have been allowed to continue by key transit providers to these countries, India and Pakistan. However, reduced capacities and operating hours at the major border-crossings relied on for transit traffic by these countries effectively allows only a priority list of essential goods for clearance.

Policy priorities for post-COVID-19 resilience in the cargo transport sector

Fallouts from exposure to COVID-19 should be converted to an opportunity for the transport sector to reassess and devise an appropriate revival strategy. As mentioned earlier, while transport sector has been at the receiving end of the devastations caused by the pandemic from the very beginning, it will have a crucial role to play in the recovery process, as the medium for rebuilding broken supply chains or for reconfiguring them. Perhaps the most important learning from the current experience is the importance

of a holistic approach to transport facilitation. As is often said, the overall functional efficiency of a transport corridor is only as good as its weakest links. South Asia's transport reform measures must encompass both vertical (infrastructure and services improvement at each transshipment nodes at ports, LCSs and ICDs) and horizontal (ease of transshipment between nodes with or without modal interchanges) aspects of freight transport connectivity.

(a) Rapid responses to restore regular freight transport operations post-COVID-19 lockdown

As the subregional countries gradually emerge out of forced lockdowns, one of the immediate priorities is to clear the blockages in transport logistics for providing the much-needed respite to trade oriented sectors. It is important that such sectors are given a chance to bounce back as quickly as possible and maintain competencies in an external economic environment which is likely to remain volatile and unpredictable for times to come. This may involve relief packages to the transport and logistics industries which themselves are reeling from losses, by way of easy credit and financial measures.

More importantly, operating rules and restrictions should be lifted in a timely manner along with procedural ease and relaxations on operating terms as much as possible.

Return to normalcy of international transport corridors operations also requires international cooperation and coordination. UNESCAP has initiated special programmes to track transport related COVID-19 measures in the Asia-Pacific region, and is also a contributory participant in initiatives such as the Observatory on Border Crossings Status due to COVID-19 led by UNECE, along with other Regional Commissions and specialized transport organizations.²⁰ These updates will be helpful to support countries in making quick and informed decisions on withdrawal of restrictions and provision of assistance to the sector. They will also help to benchmark and provide policy examples through best practices on post-pandemic freight transport measures and reforms.

(b) Modal shift to be made possible with optimal usage of cross-border rail links

Existing cross-border rail links for cargo movement are grossly underutilized in South Asia. Studies on South Asian corridors along the Trans-Asian Rail network shows significant advantages, with certain subregional segments allowing cost savings up to 80 percent.²¹ Besides acting as a complementary mode of transport to road, thus sharing some of the increasing load volume and thereby easing congestions, railways can also facilitate a greater shift

to containerized cargo movement. A first trial run of container train between India (Kolkata) and Bangladesh (Dhaka) in 2018 leads the way for more measures in the future for greater multimodal transport options. Further steps should be taken for regular run of container trains between India and Bangladesh. Emergency measures taken to transport onions from India to Bangladesh through rail during the COVID-19 lockdown underscores the readiness for and possibilities of greater rail connectivity between both countries.²² This may eventually be extended to establish rail connectivity with ASEAN through the North Eastern Region (NER) of India and Myanmar.

In addition, to implement India's Look East- Act East Policy, early completion of missing links between India and Myanmar should be taken up on priority. This would connect India with ASEAN countries through railway.

UNESCAP has engaged its member railways for many years to strengthen international rail transport. Its effort in this direction led to entry into force in 2009, an [intergovernmental agreement on Trans-Asian Railway Network](#), that serves as a coordinated platform for development of railways in the region. To facilitate railway transport along the network, in 2015, [Resolution 71/7 Regional Cooperation Framework on Facilitation of International Railway Transport](#) was adopted by the member countries that identified key areas for cooperation among railways of the region to facilitate international railway transport.

More recently, at the [Sixth Meeting of the Working Group on the Trans-Asian Railway Network](#), the importance of reducing the border crossing delays along the long-distance railway corridors was emphasized by taking action on four key issues. These include (a) electronic information exchange between railways and among railways and control agencies; (b) harmonizing customs formalities for transit by rail; (c) dealing efficiently with break-of-gauge; and (d) developing comprehensive indicators and methodology to measure the performance of railway border crossing. UNESCAP is also supporting initiatives to commercialize railway corridors involving landlocked countries by developing corridor management mechanism(s) to increase coordination among the railways and other stakeholders along the corridor for efficient operations.

Based on the request from the countries a special task force to boost railway transport in South Asia could be set up to identify short and medium term measures to guide the railways in the countries to (a) strengthen cross border railway transport and its efficient linkages to other corridors on the Trans-Asian Railway Network; (b) enhancing sustainability of railway transport; and (c) share experience in range of areas such as railway safety, regulation, use of new

technologies in railway maintenance and operations and public private partnerships in railway. UNESCAP can provide necessary technical support in this regard.

With minimal carbon footprints, greater utilization of rail transport will also guide the subregion towards sustainable transport and logistics practices.²³

Fast tracking of freight clearance: Examples from Asia-Pacific

Facilitating smooth movement of goods has never been as important as now, at the time of pandemic, when countries are under lockdowns and have closed their borders. Asia-Pacific countries have implemented different measures according to their available resources to ensure that supply chains remain intact to minimize the impact on livelihoods and ensure uninterrupted access to essentials.

- Moving non-essential goods to other ports and warehouses to avoid port congestion for essential goods. (Malaysia)
- Simplifying and accelerating custom procedures by enabling online submission of custom documents, extending custom clearance hours and issue permits and notifications to traders to keep them up to date. (Indonesia, Nepal and Pakistan, Singapore, Philippines, China)
- Subsidizing the outbound flights for local exports and have the return flights transporting essential goods. (Australia)
- Setting up special counters and green lanes to provide custom clearance at critical ports and land border points. (Bhutan, China)
- Delaying, reducing or waiving duties and taxes on selected goods. (China, Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Malaysia, Philippines)

Source: UNESCAP, compiled from Singapore Business Federation, US-ASEAN, UNTCAD and WCO

(c) Infrastructure for modernized cargo tracking, inspection and clearance

South Asian ports and LCSs are yet to be fully equipped to replace inefficient manual transshipment, inspection and clearance, with automated systems. Requirements range from efficient cargo handling equipment and scanners to upgradation of ICT infrastructure. Even incremental changes can bring substantial efficiency gains to the operations of ports and can benefit all value partners in the transport chain alike, including port operators, customs, shippers, freight forwarders, and clearing agents.²⁴

Infrastructure development is also essential to keep up with improving global standards in terms of

containerized cargo movement enabled with e-sealing, electronic cargo tracking system (ECTS) and automated clearance. To assist member countries in modernizing freight transport systems and services, UNESCAP provides resource pools and expertise consisting of transport facilitation models,²⁵ best practices and regional frameworks for operationalization of regional road (Asian Highways), rail (Trans-Asian Railways) and dry ports networks.²⁶ These frameworks cover wider application of new technologies, harmonized standards, infrastructural requirements, and legal, institutional and regulatory reform measures.

(d) Develop subregional electronic cargo tracking system for South Asia

COVID-19 outbreak has brought to fore the need for efficient flow of information among border agencies to quickly execute procedures. It requires reduced (a) human interface; (b) paper documentation; (c) time spent and (d) congestion at the border crossings. To avoid multiple physical inspections at the border crossings due to lack of visibility of goods/vehicles en-route, effective implementation of ECTS require a coordinated approach to mutual recognition of inspection results, share information among border agencies along key corridors spanning the subregion.

Cooperation among border agencies to implement ECTS system at the subregional level would significantly enhance the capacity of countries to deal with unexpected constraints such as those forced upon by COVID-19, without causing large scale economic and social disruptions. Such system could also provide a solid foundation for the introduction of “green lines”, i.e. corridors with uninterrupted freight flows, similar to the best practices piloted during the COVID-19 crisis. It can also contribute to monitoring the conditions of vehicles and cargoes, as well as health condition of drivers, so that these could be informed in advance through information technology.

(e) Improved transit terms for Landlocked LDCs

Since the introduction of through transit facilities for Nepal bound external trade containers to and from Kolkata and Vishakhapatnam ports (India) since 2018, with the aid of ECTS, procedural ease of transit trade for Nepal has improved significantly.²⁷ The new arrangement has obviated the need for Customs supervision and multiple inspections at transshipment points inside the territory of the transit provider. While improvements such as these should be replicated and extended to all key transit routes depended upon by the three South Asian LLDCs, further improvements are required in terms of better connectivity options

and service supports in the light of the special vulnerabilities of the trade dependent sectors of the LLDCs. These reformatory processes should be guided by the terms of freedom of transit enshrined in the Vienna Programme of Action (VPoA) and relevant international conventions on transit rights.²⁸

(f) Regional cooperation for collective approach to transport corridor development

Building regional transport network formed by shared infrastructure in turn has to be necessarily a collective endeavor by its very nature. Widespread and indiscriminate setbacks perpetrated by COVID-19 across the regional transport systems call for even more resolute approach to regional cooperation. The pandemic has already motivated South Asian governments to join under SAARC for mitigative measures, including the establishment of a SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund.²⁹

Several overlapping transport development initiatives are underway in the South Asia which need to be synergized for optimal outcomes. UNESCAP has been offering support to South Asian countries in terms of design and operationalization of subregional transport corridors of critical importance, linking together key segments of the AH and TAR networks, as well as transport networks being developed under subregional organizations including BIMSTEC, ECO and SAARC.³⁰

The Regional Road Map for Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific, promoted by UNESCAP, recognizes transport as one of the main areas for regionally coordinated actions.³¹ This mandate is further extended by the ongoing phase of the Regional Action Programme for Sustainable Transport Connectivity (2017-2021). It beckons South Asia to come together in building integrated multimodal transport networks, facilitative technical standards and operational frameworks.

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