Delivered by Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana
02 December 2020

Opening Remarks

Excellency Mr. Mohamed Aslam, Minister of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Maldives,
Excellency Mr. Esala Ruwan Weerakoon, Secretary-General of SAARC,
Excellency Mr. Tenzin Lekphell, Secretary-General of BIMSTEC
Ms. Catherine Haswell, UN Resident Coordinator in Maldives

Excellencies, Distinguished participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the Fourth South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). ESCAP is very pleased to co-host this event with the Government of the Maldives.

The COVID-19 pandemic started as a health emergency but has quickly unfolded into a socio-economic crisis. With nearly 1.8 billion people (25% share in world population) in South Asia, this subregion is grappling with the costs of the pandemic in terms of people's lives and livelihoods.

The COVID-19 crisis is reversing the gains in poverty reduction and other aspects of development in years, if not, decades. Due to rising uncertainties and vulnerabilities, the progress towards SDGs in South Asia can be significantly thwarted.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,
Member States in South Asia have been undertaking and implementing solutions-oriented policy measures to ensure an effective recovery from the current crisis. I recognise the good work of the South Asian member States to protect the achievements of the SDGs.

With the focus on social protection, economy, connectivity and environment, the governments are well positioned to find a sustainable pathway out of this crisis.

In this context, please allow me to further highlight four focus policy areas for your further reflections and deliberations.

First, let us focus on strengthening the social protection system. The pandemic has caused further marginalisation of vulnerable groups of the society, through disproportionate impacts of the crisis on women, children, informal workers, migrants, young people, older persons and persons with disabilities, leading to widening of inequalities and impacting multidimensional poverty.

At a recently concluded Committee on Social Development, member States endorsed the Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific. This framework, along with various typologies of social protection systems based on their national context, will provide technical advice and capacity-building support to member States which is critical at the national, subregional and regional levels.

Second, we need to finance economic recovery. The governments in South Asia have been pro-active in mitigating the COVID-19 fallout through mix of fiscal and monetary stimulus policies. Recent economic indicators suggest a gradual recovery indicating that economic policy stimulus measures are yielding positive results. Policies should focus on sustainable and inclusive financing strategies, especially in the context of the least developed countries and landlocked developed countries in this subregion.

In this regard, we are also working with stakeholders on innovative financing strategies to support the micro, small and medium sized enterprises (MSMEs) and promote women entrepreneurs’ access to finance. Without these appropriate policy measures, MSMEs and entrepreneurs, especially in informal sectors and vulnerable groups, face a high risk of permanently losing their livelihoods and falling into poverty.

Third, we need to accelerate digital transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic has unveiled the growing significance of the digital technology in addressing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Governments in the subregion are taking concrete initiatives to promote digital technology as well as and digital finance to provide public services to citizens and businesses.
Further policy focus on digital innovations such as artificial intelligence, big data, Internet of Things, digital automation, just to name a few, are vital in this endeavour.

ESCAP has been supporting its member States through the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS) initiative, and implementation of subregional action plans in strengthening Internet traffic management, addressing cross-border infrastructure connectivity gaps and building e-resilience for crisis preparedness.

Fourth, we must focus on greening the recovery. I recognize several new initiatives to ensure policies to support low-carbon development path through usage of contemporary and emerging ‘clean’ technologies. There is a need to accelerate decarbonization and greening of the economy to build back better.

Decarbonizing economies by 2050, ending to fossil fuel subsidies, tackling air pollution, transforming to smart infrastructure and stepping-up ambition for the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) are key policy initiatives for greening the recovery in line with environmental and climate objectives of the Paris Agreement.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to acknowledge a continued support and follow-ups from the High-Level Policy Dialogue on COVID-19 and South Asia: Socio-Economic Impacts, National Strategies and Subregional Cooperation for Building Back Better, which was convened last July 2020. I very much welcome your trust in our engagement.

This Forum’s outcomes and recommendations will feed into the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) in March next year and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in July next year.

ESCAP, along with the UN system, stands ready to work with governments as well as intergovernmental organizations such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, and all stakeholders in advancing SDGs implementation plans in the post-COVID-19 era.

I look forward to listening to your recommendations on the future course of actions towards attainment of the SDGs and count on your commitment to build back better in the South Asia region.

Thank you for your attention.