Promoting Regional Cooperation in South Asia for Achieving SDGs
Panel Discussion

‘With a quarter of the world’s population and 36% of the world’s poor’ and nearly half of undernourished children, ‘South Asia holds the key for global achievement of the SDGs’ (UNESCAP SSWA 2018a: 27). South Asian countries share common challenges in achieving SDGs and the solution lies in developing a framework for sub-regional cooperation for development. Some of the common challenges that have been identified relate to weak stakeholder engagements, especially with the private sector and vulnerable groups; lack of data availability; employment opportunities for youth bulge; absence of robust monitoring mechanisms; technology and financing constraints. Shared social, geographic, economic barriers; ‘absence of cross-border cooperation and lack of participatory community-led approaches’ (UNESCAP SSWA 2018b: 12) must be answered to implement effective measures for achieving the SDGs.

The UNESCAP (2019) report evaluated South and South-West Asia sub-region’s progress on SDGs. It observes that the sub-region leads on good health and wellbeing (Goal 3); and decent work and economic growth (Goal 8). However, it is moving in the wrong direction on clean water and sanitation (Goal 6), responsible consumption and production (Goal 12) and climate action (Goal 13).

UNESCAP has already identified seven broad strategic policy priorities for South Asia in order to address the SDGs and key development challenges: 1) creation of jobs through industry-oriented structural transformation; 2) universal provision of essential basic services and sustainable infrastructure; 3) universal access to health and education and skills to harness the youth bulge; 4) universal social protection and financial inclusion; 5) sustainable agricultural productivity improvements; 6) fostering women’s entrepreneurship; and 7) enhancement of environmental sustainability through low-carbon climate resilient pathways (UNESCAP SSWA 2018a). SDG achievement can be accelerated by focusing on implementing these policy priorities. Sub-regional cooperation, along with the reinvigorated global and regional partnerships and multi-stakeholder engagements, including civil societies, are key to achieving the Goals (Ibid.).

To that end, the main goal of the panel discussion is to brainstorm possible options for creating an inclusive sub-regional cooperation framework which can help the member States in achieving the SDGs. In this regard, the discussion will explore the following questions:

- Given the fact that South Asia is lagging behind on many of the SDG targets, how can regional cooperation among South Asian members help achieve SDGs? What needs to be done in this regard and what role can think tanks and civil society play in bringing governments together?
- While UNESCAP has identified seven broad strategic policy priorities, which of them require regional collaboration in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda?
- South Asia is among the poorest regions in the world. How has trade and investment helped in mitigating the effects of poverty or has trade at times adversely impacted capacities to make difference in the conditions of the poor? Given the very low rate of
intra-regional trade, traditional trade agreements will not be able to integrate the region. Which areas are important given the high cost of trade among South Asian nations and lack of connectivity?

- Is there distinctive movement in building South Asian value chains? What is required of governments to encourage South Asian Production Networks? Is there potential for Made in South Asia, recognising the wage differential and emerging supply chains? Isn’t it desirable to build strong collaborative efforts to keep the impact of protectionism elsewhere, at bay?

- Despite stated intentions, regional connectivity has still not materialised to the extent which will benefit free flow of goods and services. This has severely impacted connectivity with other contiguous regions. How can this drag be overcome? What institutional changes are necessary?

- Technology is the new disruptor. Where is South Asia in all of this? Are there regional collaboration efforts in this area which will pull out the region faster from poverty and underdevelopment?

- Three out of four LDCs of SAARC member states are graduating from LDCs - Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. What challenges they face at a regional or global level and how other SAARC members can help or assist them toward sustainable graduation?

References


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