

## **Social Development in South Asian Regionalism: A Study of People Centered Activities and Programs in SAARC**

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### **Abstract**

*South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was set up with its utmost objective to advance the welfare of people and enhance their quality of life. The paper explores as to what measures SAARC took and the milestones passed in these two areas. SAARC paid adequate attention to foster social development through formulating programs and activities to help improve the status of generally neglected and disadvantaged strata of society. It endeavored to promote welfare of children, women, youth, poor, disabled, homeless and elderly persons, and overseas workers etc. It also formulated and adopted the SAARC Social Charter. SAARC activities covered the education, skill development, health and population issues, sports and culture. SAARC endeavored to eradicate poverty, illiteracy, malnourishment, gender discrimination and inequalities. However, most of its programs and projects remained on paper with tangible results seem less convincing.*

**Key Words:** South Asia, SAARC, Women Development, Child Welfare, Social Progress, Poverty Alleviation.

### **Introduction**

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was created mainly to advance the wellbeing of regional people and to enhance their “quality of life.” The other objectives of SAARC included to speed up economic progress and socio-cultural development; to develop and fortify members’ collective self-sufficiency; to create mutual understanding, confidence, and appreciation of their problems; advance regional cooperation in scientific, technical, social, cultural and economic fields; help evolve similar stance at global forums and international bodies on matters of collective interests and; to develop collaboration with other transnational organizations having identical goals. Most of these objectives were aimed to compliment the main goal. The leaders of South Asian countries (SACs) in SAARC summits, time and again reiterated that wellbeing of their people was the ultimate goal of South Asian regionalism.

In order to realize its goals, SAARC charted out various activities, programs and projects in several agreed areas of cooperation (ARC), including: agriculture and rural development; environment; science and

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technology; transport; human resource development (HRD) including education, skill development, sports, arts, and culture; telecommunications, and information and communication technology (ICT); tourism, and; energy etc. SAARC made progress in these areas with varying degrees of success. However, the leaders of SACs acknowledged that it was vital for success of SAARC to “relate regional co-operation to the actual needs of the people.” They enunciated that regional cooperation process “must be truly people-centered” so that SAARC could thrive “as a robust partnership for growth” for South Asian people. The leaders underlined the need to explore “further areas of cooperation where people-centric partnership projects could be initiated.”<sup>1</sup> They stressed to have “a greater focus to pursue people-centric development with due emphasis on socio-cultural progress and upholding traditions and values.”<sup>2</sup> Hence, SAARC strived to coordinate members’ efforts and promote regional cooperation for socio-economic development of the masses of South Asia.

Though all SAARC activities, programs and projects are ultimately bound to foster the welfare and improve the quality of lives of South Asian people, but some of them are openly, immediately and more concretely directed to ensure the wellbeing of common man particularly the disadvantaged strata of society. SAARC gave special emphasis on the wellbeing of several underprivileged and deprived segments as well as other important strata of society such as labor, homeless, poor, elderly, disabled, women, children, and youth etc. The paper evaluates the SAARC activities in the above said areas. The paper is divided into three sections. After this introduction, the next section surveys programs and activities undertaken by SAARC for fostering social development in South Asia. Last section concludes the paper.

### **People in SAARC Activities and Programs**

SAARC members from the onset focused on the plight of regional people and strived to promote their welfare. For instance, Bangladeshi Working Paper (BWP) had listed the fields such as education and technical cooperation and cultural cooperation, among the possible areas of regional cooperation (ARC). In 1981, foreign secretaries of SACs their first meeting held in Sri Lanka formed a study group (SG) on health and population activities (HPA) which was subsequently converted into working group (WG) and then re-designated as a technical committee (TC). Since 2004, TC-

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<sup>1</sup>SAARC Secretariat Official Website (SSOW), Fifteenth Summit, “Colombo Declaration,” accessed October 15, 2016, [http://saarc-sec.org/uploads/digital\\_library\\_document/15\\_-\\_Colombo,\\_15th\\_Summit\\_2-3\\_August\\_2008\\_-\\_for\\_printing.pdf](http://saarc-sec.org/uploads/digital_library_document/15_-_Colombo,_15th_Summit_2-3_August_2008_-_for_printing.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> SSOW, Sixteenth Summit, “Thimphu Declaration,” Accessed October 15, 2016, [http://saarc-sec.org/uploads/digital\\_library\\_document/16thSummit-Declaration29April10.pdf](http://saarc-sec.org/uploads/digital_library_document/16thSummit-Declaration29April10.pdf)

HPA also deals with nutrition and drug related issues. In 1986, SAARC established TC–Women Development (WD) and also decided to focus on problems of the girl child. In January 2000, TC–WD was merged into TC–Social Development (SD) under reconstituted IPA, renamed as “SAARC Integrated Program of Action (SIPA).” In January 2004, SIPA was reconstituted as “Regional Integrated Program of Action (RIPA)” under which TC–SD ceased to exist and new TC on Women, Youth and Children (WYC) was established with widened scope to deal with related areas.<sup>3</sup>

### **SAARC and Social Development**

SAARC declared that social development was one of its main goals and took measures intended to pursue: women development; health and population activities; wellbeing of youth and disabled persons; protection and development of children, and; adoption of “the SAARC Social Charter” etc. It decided to strive to attain the goals of: universal vaccination by the year 1990; access to clean drinking water and shelter, child and maternal nutrition; and; general primary education, by the year 2000. Fourth SAARC summit kicked off the “SAARC–2000–A Basic Needs Perspective” and pledged to accomplish the set goals related to provision of nutrition, basic education, primary health, clothing, shelter, and population welfare etc. by the end of the century.<sup>4</sup> SAARC activities and programs related to social development are discussed below.

### **Health and Population Activities**

SACs realized the importance of health and population related activities for their socio–economic development and included it in ARC and IPA from the very beginning. They took different measures to promote regional cooperation in health sector. SACs noted that they possessed a “rich heritage” of “Traditional Systems of Medicine (TSM)” and transnational cooperation in this area was crucial to help provide primary health facilities to their people. They underlined increased cooperation among their pharmaceutical industries and approved a “regional action plan” for increasing cooperation in the fields related to: pharmaceuticals; medical expertise; manufacture of low-priced medicines and guaranteeing their accessibility in all SACs; conventional medicines, and; synchronization of “standards and certification procedures” etc. In 1992, SACs created “the

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<sup>3</sup>SAARC Secretariat, “SAARC in Brief,” *South Asian Survey* 2, no.1 (1995): 125; SSOW, “Areas of Cooperation,” accessed November 10, 2016, [http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/detail.php?activity\\_id=10](http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/detail.php?activity_id=10)

<sup>4</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits: 1985–1988*, (Kathmandu: author 1990), 95, 211 and 214;. SSOW, “Areas of Cooperation.”

SAARC Tuberculosis Center (STC),” in Katmandu and in 2005, renamed it as “SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Center (STAC).”<sup>5</sup>

SACs realized the need of fighting TB, HIV/ AIDS and additional fatal diseases, through cooperative moves. They called for developing an inexpensive “treatment regime,” adopting culturally suitable precautionary measures, and to concentrate on “more vulnerable groups.” They emphasized that SAARC should team up with civil society groups and global organizations on health issues for which STC must coordinate. SAARC prepared a plan to jointly avert the expansion of HIV / AIDS. It called for devising regional plans to thwart and treat transmittable diseases such as malaria and dengue etc. and decided to promote conventional medicines and safeguard regional “intellectual property rights” (IPRs). It also called for increasing regional collaboration in order to enhance alertness for and to manage health disasters, put off and “control pandemics” such as avian influenza etc.<sup>6</sup> In April 2003, SAARC health ministers in their emergency meeting held in Male’ considered troubles related to SARS plague. The ministers in another session held in New Delhi recommended, and the twelfth SAARC summit endorsed, the creation of “the SAARC Health Surveillance Center (SHSC)” and “the Rapid Deployment Health Response System (RDHRS)” and also to link together the “regional health institutions” functioning against malaria and other contagious diseases. SACs emphasized the need of documenting the conventional knowledge to preserve IPRs. SACs observed 2004 as “SAARC Awareness Year for TB and HIV/AIDS.” They approved to start a “regional health initiative” in order to make available essential healthcare and hygiene services in rural areas and to share their knowledge, practices and experiences.<sup>7</sup> SAARC health ministers in their fourth meeting held in Male adopted a resolution on Regional Health Issues. Eighteenth summit endorsed the resolution and underscored the need of improving health regulatory system, attaining universal health coverage, upgrade readiness for emerging and reemerging as well as non-communicable and anti-microbial resistance diseases. It noted that SACs had made notable advancement in the previous decade with regard to combating AIDS and reaffirmed members’ commitment to continue their efforts to eliminate this

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<sup>5</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents: Milestones in the Evolution of Regional Cooperation in South Asia (March 1999 – January 2004)*, vol.VII, (Kathmandu: author, 2004), 383 and 392–3; SSOW, Thirteenth SAARC Summit, “Dhaka Declaration” accessed October 15, 2016, [http://saarc-sec.org/digital\\_library/detail\\_menu/thirteenth-saarc-summit-dhaka-2005](http://saarc-sec.org/digital_library/detail_menu/thirteenth-saarc-summit-dhaka-2005)

<sup>6</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents: Milestones in the Evolution of Regional Cooperation in South Asia (August 1995 – July 1998)*, vol.VI, (Kathmandu: SAARC Secretariat, 1998), 387.

<sup>7</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VII, 392–3; Thirteenth SAARC Summit, “Dhaka Declaration.”

menace from South Asia by 2030. It decided to raise the status of “SAARC TB Reference Laboratory,” located at STAC, Kathmandu, to a “Supranational Reference Laboratory” to be funded by SAARC Development Fund.<sup>8</sup>

Comprehending the negative consequences of rapid population growth on the process of national development, SACs decided to deal this matter through regional cooperation. However, they acknowledged the need of accepting each others’ sovereignty to practice their national population welfare policies autonomously and harmonious to their national traditions, values, and cultures. Meanwhile, they underlined the need of integrating their “demographic objectives and population strategies” to prepare their development plans and to exchange their knowledge and practices related to population control.<sup>9</sup> TC–HPA in its various meetings chalked out programs and guidelines related to population stabilization and control, and reproductive health etc.<sup>10</sup> Some of the issues related to population activities, however, were linked with welfare of girl child and women development.

### **Child Welfare**

Realizing that welfare and development of children could significantly contribute to socio-economic progress in the region, SACs decided to focus on this area from the onset. They noted that children ought to be accorded the maximum consideration in their “national planning,” and decided to center their activities for the welfare and advancement of children’s rights. SAARC set the target of achieving “universal immunization” by 1990, and to ensure “universal primary education” and make certain child and maternal nutrition prior to the end of the twentieth century. SACs declared to enhance regional cooperation to guarantee by the year 2000 that “no child need die or be denied development, for reasons of material poverty in the family.” They announced to start monitoring programmers, share each other’s knowledge and practices, and to prepare national annual reports on the position of children in each country. Annual reports for the years from 1993 to 1996 showed a considerable decline in child death rate and substantial development in vaccination of children. In order to fortify these successes, SACs decided to observe “December 7, 1997” and “January 18, 1998” as “SAARC Polio Immunization Days.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> SSOW, Eighteenth SAARC Summit, “Kathmandu Declaration,” accessed October 15, 2016, [http://saarc-sec.org/digital\\_library/detail\\_menu/eighteenth-saarc-summit-kathmandu-2014](http://saarc-sec.org/digital_library/detail_menu/eighteenth-saarc-summit-kathmandu-2014)

<sup>9</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits: (1990–1995)*, vol. II, (Kathmandu: author, 1996), 126.

<sup>10</sup> SSOW, “Areas of Cooperation.”

<sup>11</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, 95; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, vol. II, 163; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VI, 370.

SAARC re-emphasized the need of according precedence to the child wellbeing, especially through provision of basic education and primary health facilities while devising national development and HRD schemes. SACs underlined the value of child survival, security and progress, and to this end adopted a “Plan of Action on Children for South Asia” with the provision of preparing annual review reports on its execution. They developed “National Plans of Action on Children” and convened a number of ministerial meetings to prepare recommendations for welfare of children which were subsequently approved in the summit meetings. Third ministerial meeting approved the “Rawalpindi declaration” that promised to abolish “child-labour” by the year 2010. Ninth SAARC summit endorsed the “Rawalpindi declaration” and created a “study group” to scrutinize the “social compulsions” that lead to child abuse. In May 2001, “The South Asian High-level Meeting on Children,” convened in Katmandu, too focused on the matters related to child wellbeing.<sup>12</sup>

SACs strived to shield children from all types of brutality, discrimination, exploitation and neglect, and to accelerate their efforts to accomplish “mid-decade goals of the World Summit for Children.” They became party to “the Convention on the Rights of the Child” and observed the years 2001–2010 as “the SAARC Decade of the Rights of the Child.” They launched “an Initiative on Nutrition” with the goal of ensuring the “availability of food of essential nutritional value to individual household,” mainly children and the women. In 2002, SACs concluded and afterwards ratified “the SAARC Convention on Regional Arrangements for the Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia.” They emphasized for greater “investment in children” because it was very essential for poverty alleviation on the long run basis. SACs promised to work in concert for attaining the child welfare related targets such as polio obliteration by 2005, protection of children against spread of “HIV/AIDS” from mother and giving them access to quality education within a given timeframe. In 2006, SACs completed “a mid-term review of the progress” and then on completion of the decade, “an in-depth” appraisal of attainments of targets of “the SAARC Decade on the Rights of the Child (2001–2010).”<sup>13</sup> In 2009, the SAARC ministerial conference held in Sri Lanka adopted “the Colombo Statement on Children in South Asia,” in which SACs reiterated to strive for the protection and

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<sup>12</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, 210; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, vol. II, 90–1 and 126–7; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VI, 370; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VII, 384.

<sup>13</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, vol. II, 127 and 163; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VI, 370; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VII, 383–4; Thirteenth SAARC Summit, “Dhaka Declaration;” SOW, Sixteenth SAARC Summit, “Thimphu Declaration,” accessed October 25, 2016, [http://saarc-sec.org/digital\\_library/detail\\_menu/sixteenth-saarc-summit-thimphu-2010](http://saarc-sec.org/digital_library/detail_menu/sixteenth-saarc-summit-thimphu-2010)

wellbeing of children as well as to enhance early childhood care and eradicate child labor from South Asia.<sup>14</sup>

### **Welfare of Girl Child and Women Development**

SAARC gave special attention to the welfare of the girl child. It observed 1990 as the “SAARC Year of the Girl Child” and the years 1991–2000 as the “SAARC Decade of the Girl Child.” SACs also prepared an action plan to observe the Decade.<sup>15</sup> SACs formulated “national action plans” to enhance the position of girl child through various actions in order to ensure her survival, protection and development. SAARC conducted a “study on the situation of girl children” believing that some segments of girl children principally the “girls in difficult circumstances” (GDCs) such as exploited disabled, and orphaned confronted severe threats. SAARC noted that exploitation of girl children was a demonstration of the women’s position in a society, thus, all means must be used to remove all sorts of biases against them. SAARC agreed to build improved socio-economic atmosphere in South Asia by means of providing equivalent chances to girl child in all spheres of life in order to enhance the conditions of GDCs.<sup>16</sup> Ninth SAARC summit considered the report on “the mid-decade review of the SAARC Plan of Action on the Girl-Child,” and reiterated members’ resolve to speed up their endeavors for the wellbeing of girl child by taking measures for: enhancing literacy and education among them; discouraging their early marriages; to delay the “age of their first pregnancy;” dropping the population growth rate, and; controlling malnutrition and mortality rates. SACs decided to introduce required legislation to put off all kinds of prejudices against girl child and women and to empower them by means of giving them identical chances in nutrition, health and education. SACs articulated their concerns over the troubles confronted by women and girl child especially in “conflict situations” and stressed the need of creating “a gender disaggregated data-base” to help formulate regional and national policies for the enhancement of the situation of women and girl child. They also decided to take initiatives to make sure that women and girl child could attain complete gains from their inbuilt capabilities.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> SSOW, “Colombo Declaration on Children of South Asia,” accessed October 25, 2016, [http://www.saarc-sec.org/uploads/cmsfiles/file/Colombo%20Statement%20on%20Children%20of%20South%20Asia\\_20100415124637.pdf](http://www.saarc-sec.org/uploads/cmsfiles/file/Colombo%20Statement%20on%20Children%20of%20South%20Asia_20100415124637.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, 210–1; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, vol. II, 51.

<sup>16</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, vol. II, 127 and 163; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VI, 370.

<sup>17</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VI, 370 and 386–7; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VII, 383–4.

Women Development was one of the utmost priorities of SAARC. First SAARC summit, held in 1985, directed to convene a ministerial conference to suggest ways for increasing women participation in regional development process. SAARC convened a number of ministerial conferences on women development which adopted different resolutions that were subsequently endorsed in SAARC summits. For instance, fifth summit approved the recommendations submitted by the second ministerial conference convened in Islamabad in June 1990. Eighth summit endorsed the “Kathmandu Resolution on Women and Family Health” adopted in November 1993. Ninth summit approved the recommendations of “Dhaka Resolution on Women” adopted in a ministerial conference. The summit also underlined the need to bring the women into the process of “socio-economic development.”<sup>18</sup>

SACs agreed to curtail the “trafficking of women” through collective and organized acts, mainly by strict enforcement of municipal laws and making simpler the repatriation procedures for the victims. They concluded and subsequently ratified the “SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating the Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution” and created a “voluntary fund for rehabilitation of the victims.” They also decided to engage NGOs and media to create awareness about the problem and to enhance cooperation among their law enforcement agencies.<sup>19</sup>

Women empowerment and protection of their rights got special attention. SACs formed a “SAARC Autonomous Advocacy Group of Prominent Women Personalities (SAW AG)” and assigned it the responsibility of preparing proposals on “gender-related issues” and to promote the role of businesswomen in the process of socio-economic development. They reiterated their resolve to work collectively for empowering women economically, through training and developing among them skills, providing them better healthcare, safeguarding them from violence of all forms and to make sure their rights, especially those of widows enabling them to live with venerable social status. Sixteenth summit expressed its gratitude over nomination by the Maldives of a female as the tenth SAARC secretary general believing that it was an indication of women empowerment in South Asia.<sup>20</sup> SAARC strived to protect the rights of widows and to promote the welfare of disabled women. Seventeenth summit approved “the SAARC Gender Equality and Empowerment Program

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<sup>18</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, 49, 95, and 210–1; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, vol. II, 51 and 163; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VI, 369–70.

<sup>19</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VI, 370; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VII, 383; Thirteenth SAARC Summit, “Dhaka Declaration.”

<sup>20</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VII, 383 and 392; Fifteenth SAARC Summit, “Colombo Declaration;” Sixteenth SAARC Summit, “Thimphu Declaration.”



(SAGEEP).” Meanwhile, on the recommendation of an expert group on the subject, SACs decided to establish a regional mechanism, “the SAARC Policy Advocacy Group (SAARC–GPAG)” to ensure women empowerment and gender equality. SAARC also established a “Gender Info Base” to keep record of all information and data on women empowerment and gender related issues.<sup>21</sup> Eighteenth summit directed the related bodies and authorities to take measures to effectively prevent “trafficking in women and children” and various sorts of their exploitation.<sup>22</sup>

### **Welfare of Youth**

SACs recognized that the youth was “a vital resource” whose effective mobilization and utilization could considerably throw in to process of their national development, and thus, expressed their resolve to give “special attention on the needs of the Youth.” They declared 1994 as the “SAARC Year of the Youth.” In May 1994, a ministerial conference held in Male, the Maldives, adopted a resolution containing recommendations for the welfare of Youth which the eighth summit endorsed. SACs initiated “the SAARC Youth Awards Scheme” and underlined the need of devising “national and regional programs” to present youth the full chances to take part in their “national development” process. In 2007, Bangladesh convened the first “SAARC Youth Camp.” Sixteenth SAARC summit directed to devise a “SAARC Youth Action Plan” consistent with “the SAARC Youth Charter” and also called for convening a “SAARC Youth Summit” to formulate the charter.<sup>23</sup> SACs underscored the need of formulating appropriate programs and policies to effectively utilize the talent, skills and energy of youth force for their socio-economic development and to provide them self-employment opportunities. They welcomed the decision of “the 69th Session of the UN General Assembly” to declare July 15 as “the World Youth Skills Day” and decided to commemorate the event.<sup>24</sup> In July 2015, TC–WYC in its meeting held in Islamabad finalized the SAARC Youth Charter which is expected to be signed soon.<sup>25</sup>

### **Protection and Development of Disabled Persons**

SACs expressed their worries over the dilemma of the millions of South Asian disabled people and agreed to increase regional cooperation for

<sup>21</sup> SSOW, “Areas of Cooperation.”

<sup>22</sup> Eighteenth SAARC Summit, “Kathmandu Declaration.”

<sup>23</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, vol. II, 127 and 164; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VI, 386; Fourteenth SAARC Summit, “New Delhi Declaration;” Sixteenth SAARC Summit, “Thimphu Declaration.”

<sup>24</sup> Eighteenth SAARC Summit, “Kathmandu Declaration.”

<sup>25</sup> SSOW, “Areas of Cooperation.”

their welfare. They declared 1993 as the “SAARC Year of Disabled Persons.” In April 1993, they adopted “the Regional Plan of Action for the Disabled Persons” and decided to take measures for its effective implementation. In 1993, Pakistan hosted a “Ministerial Conference on Disabled Persons” whose recommendations were approved by the eighth summit. The summit also hailed the members’ activities, efforts, and programs for development and guard of disabled persons. SACs decided to adopt “a very definite humanistic approach” in order to make sure the welfare of disabled persons. They also accepted a proposal from Bangladeshi to create a “SAARC Voluntary Fund for Disabled Persons.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Shelter for All**

SAARC noted with grave distress the existence of hundreds of thousands of homeless persons in South Asia and considered it as a challenge to present them better living conditions. SACs observed 1991 as the “SAARC Year of Shelter” and decided to share their knowledge and practices and cooperate in order to attain the global target of “Shelter for All by the Year 2000.” SAARC acknowledged that governments of SACs could considerably play their role in supporting and facilitating the private sector actions, by giving appropriate places, house building finance services, up-gradation of essential “infrastructure,” providing inexpensive construction materials, engaging the masses in decision-making and integrating shelter related programs with poverty eradication policies. They decided to share with each other their experiences, information, knowledge, practices, research and personnel etc. and also founded the “SHELTERNET,” i.e. a “shelter information network.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Poverty Alleviation**

SACs acknowledged from the beginning that “the sheer magnitude and complexity of South Asian poverty constituted a major political and economic challenge.” They agreed to work together to address this menace and put it into their priorities to alleviate poverty from the region “in the shortest possible time.” They incorporated the “theme of ‘Poverty Alleviation’ in their regional plan “SAARC 2000 – A Basic Needs Perspective” and decided to adopt a ““Daal–Bhaat” (assured nutritional standards approach) to meet essential wants of the poor. In 1991, SAARC established an “Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA),” consisting of the distinguished persons from SACs, to carry out a “study on members’ experiences on poverty alleviation.” SACs decided to

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<sup>26</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, vol. II, 127 and 164; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VI, 387.

<sup>27</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, vol. II, 54, 56, 90 and 126.

devise the “pro-poor national plans” consistent with “structural adjustment programs” and principles of free economy and also to practice “pro-poor development strategies” both at macro and micro levels. SAARC undertook to pursue an “agenda of action to eradicate poverty” by the year 2002. In 1995, SAARC created a “three-tier institutional structure” with the task to act as an instrument for exchange of information related to strategies, policies, research studies, and technologies useful for poverty reduction programs. The “first-tier of the structure” comprised of the central government’s secretaries dealing with poverty elimination and social development. The second and third layer of the structure comprised of the central government’s finance or planning secretaries and ministers, respectively. SACs declared 1995 as the “SAARC Year of Poverty Eradication” and 1997 as the “SAARC Year of Participatory Governance.” They acknowledged the worth of larger “social mobilization and participation” of target groups in the process of formulating and implementing poverty reduction programs. SAARC agreed to enlarge the scale of “micro-credit schemes” and to fortify HRD programs by means of vocational training, skills development, and enhancing collaboration in agricultural research and “indigenous skills” besides small and cottage industries.<sup>28</sup>

At the dawn of the new century, SAARC had to reconsider its targets and review programs and activities related to poverty reduction in the wake of new global and regional commitments including the “UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)” agreed upon in the year 2000 that set the goal of poverty alleviation by one-half by the year 2015. It agreed to prepare, renew and present regular “regional poverty profile.” Twelfth SAARC summit approved “the Action Plan on Poverty Alleviation” formulated by Finance or Planning Ministers of SACs in their session convened in Islamabad in 2002. It also established a “Poverty Alleviation Cell (PAC)” at the “SAARC Secretariat” to pursue its pronouncements on the subject. The summits reorganized ISACPA with the directive to “continue its advocacy role” and formulate “the SAARC Development Goals (SDGs)” on education, health, environment and poverty alleviation. Thirteenth SAARC summit approved the SDGs and announced to observe the years 2006–2015 as “the SAARC Decade of Poverty Alleviation.” The summit substituted the “three-tier” poverty alleviation mechanism (PAM) with a “two-tier” PAM that included the national Secretaries and Minister of the departments concerned with poverty alleviation, and it was tasked with monitoring of the progress on poverty alleviation and to help evolve “pro-poor growth approaches.” SACs created a “SAARC Poverty Alleviation Fund (SPAF)” and decided to declare

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 55–6, 89, 124–5 and 161–2; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VI, 368 and 384; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VII, 382; SSOW, [http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/cat-detail.php?cat\\_id=51](http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/cat-detail.php?cat_id=51)

one “rural community” in each member, as a “SAARC Village,” to serve as “development model.” SAARC underlined the need of launching sub-regional and regional schemes to attain SDGs.<sup>29</sup> Eighteenth summit directed the two-tier PAM to evaluate the progress on the “SAARC Plan of Action” and to reconsider it as well as to consider “the Post-2015 Development Agenda” which after its adoption by the UN would provide SACs the opportunities to compliment regional and national efforts on sustainable development. It also decided to start a process to “appropriately contextualize” the sustainable development goals at the regional level.<sup>30</sup>

### **Education and Human Resource Development**

SACs were well aware of the fact the focus on education and HRD was vital for their socio-economic development and they decided to promote regional cooperation in this field. They decided to fortify “HRD programs” by means of skills development, augmentation of vocational training and local skills in diverse areas especially those linked with poverty alleviation. They underlined the need of investing more in HRD for members’ “socio-economic development” and to create linkages among institutions of training, skill development and higher education. In 1988, SACs established SHRD in Islamabad to accelerate HRD related activities in the region.<sup>31</sup>

SAARC acknowledged from the start that educational sector needed their instant attention and, thus, incorporated it in ARC in 1989. SACs agreed to increase regional cooperation, share their knowledge, practices and expertise to get the target of providing primary education to all children in the age group of 6 to 14 years “by the year 2000.” They declared to observe 1996 as the “SAARC Year of Literacy.” Nevertheless, they had to review and reset their educational goals mainly those associated with “universal primary education.” Eleventh SAARC summit directed to prepare “an action plans” in order: to make sure that all children particularly girls can get primary education by the year 2015; to enhance “adult literacy” by fifty percent, and; to abolish gender discrimination in giving opportunities to education. In

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<sup>29</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VII, 382 and 392–4; Thirteenth SAARC Summit, “Dhaka Declaration;” Fourteenth SAARC Summit, “New Delhi Declaration;” Sixteenth SAARC Summit, “Thimphu Declaration;” SSOW, [http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/cat-detail.php?cat\\_id=51](http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/cat-detail.php?cat_id=51)

<sup>30</sup> Eighteenth SAARC Summit, “Kathmandu Declaration.”

<sup>31</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VI, 384; *SAARC Documents*, vol. VII, 382; SSOW, [http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/cat-detail.php?cat\\_id=53](http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/cat-detail.php?cat_id=53)

2005, SACs avowed that abolition of illiteracy was their principal target in the “third decade of SAARC.”<sup>32</sup>

SACs agreed to utilize their national educational institutions for spreading education at the regional level and to introduce modern and “cost-effective” methods such as “Open Learning and Distance Education” to cater the needs of higher education and vocational training. They created a “SAARC Forum of Vice Chancellors of Open Universities” and decided to make use of progress in IT sector for advancement of distance education. SACs also decided to develop strategies to upgrade their educational standards by means of sharing information, knowledge and experiences among their universities and espousing the “uniform methods of instruction and teaching aids,” and also to incorporate the topic on SAARC in national syllabi. They decided to introduce an “enlarged SAARC Scholarship Scheme” in ICT and interrelated fields, and to promote coordination in educational sector by exchanges of experts, academics, policymakers, teachers and students as well as through inter-institutional partnerships and cooperation etc. In 2010, SAARC established a South Asian University (SAU) in India and decided to establish its “regional campuses” in other countries.<sup>33</sup> Eighteenth summit reiterated members’ resolve to strive together for eliminating illiteracy and achieving the global goal of universal education. SACs enunciated to provide quality education in their educational institutions through provision of appropriate technical, physical and other necessary facilities, improving teaching skills and evaluation methods, and reforming curricula etc. They agreed to promote regional cooperation in areas of vocational training and education. In order to raise the educational standards of regional education institutions, SACs agreed to chart out a “Regional Strategy for Enhancing the Quality of Education.”<sup>34</sup>

### **SAARC Social Charter**

Tenth SAARC summit while considering the advancements in the social sector tasked Council of Minister to formulate a “SAARC Social Charter.” SACs signed the charter during the twelfth summit held in Islamabad in 2004. The charter contained the provisions aimed at promoting the wellbeing of all important groups of people, and it focused on important social areas such as HRD, population control and stabilization, elimination of

<sup>32</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, 209; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, vol. II, 89; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol.VI, 371; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol.VII, 384; Thirteenth SAARC Summit, “Dhaka Declaration.”

<sup>33</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VI, 371 and 384; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol.VII, 384; Fourteenth SAARC Summit, “New Delhi Declaration;” Sixteenth SAARC Summit, “Thimphu Declaration.”

<sup>34</sup> Eighteenth SAARC Summit, “Kathmandu Declaration.”

poverty, promotion of health and nutritional resources, women empowerment, youth mobilization, and defense and development of children etc. Fifteenth SAARC summit emphasized the need of formulating projects and programs both at regional and national levels to realize these objectives. SAARC created “National Coordination Committees (NCCs)” and decided to annually hold their heads’ meetings. SAARC tasked NCCs to devise projects and programs to muster the support of “civil society organizations” for effectual execution of social charter besides formulating efficient and effective assessment and supervisory system to appraise the progress on its execution. SAARC also underlined the need of for engaging people while launching strategies, preparing and implementation of programs and projects to make sure people’s responsibility and ownership. SAARC also underlined the need of devising an action plan for wellbeing and safeguarding the rights of the senior citizens.<sup>35</sup> SACs reaffirmed that children, women, elderly, disabled and unemployed person and those working at “hazardous” places had the special needs and their social protection must be ensured. They also agreed to share their experiences and practices in the field. Recently, SACs agreed to work together and support each other in their efforts to ensure responsible, organized and safe management of regional workers and labor working in other parts of the world.<sup>36</sup>

## **Conclusion**

SAARC identified several areas of cooperation and established TCs and WGs to promote social development. Its activities focused particularly in these fields: health and population; women, youth and children; HRD including education, and skill development. SACs signed various regional conventions, such as: “regional arrangements for the promotion of child welfare;” and “preventing and combating the trafficking in women and children for prostitution.” SAARC also founded a university in New Delhi whose regional campuses are expected to be established in other countries. It also conducted a regional study on: members’ experiences on poverty alleviation. SACs adopted “the SAARC social charter” and strived to take steps, initiate programs and activities for women empowerment, child development, protection of disabled, wellbeing of senior citizens and youth welfare. SAARC repeatedly expressed members’ resolve to work jointly for the sake of providing their people the essential amenities of life such as basic education, primary healthcare and shelter etc. and also for poverty alleviation and enhancing the people’s living standards in South Asia. Despite, these

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<sup>35</sup> SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VI, 384–5; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents*, vol. VII, 392; Thirteenth SAARC Summit, “Dhaka Declaration.” Fourteenth SAARC Summit, “New Delhi Declaration;” Fifteenth SAARC Summit, “Colombo Declaration.”

<sup>36</sup> Eighteenth SAARC Summit, “Kathmandu Declaration.”

towering claims, fancy commitments and rosy promises, SAARC did too little to change the fate of regional people.

SACs failed miserably to put into practice their promises and execute their decisions. They could not attain most of their targets, if any, including those set for general immunization of children, “universal primary education,” access to clean drinking water, basic healthcare, child and mother nutrition, poverty alleviation and provision of shelter to masses. They were short of achieving MDGs and SDGs while almost half of the “world’s poor” still lived in South Asia. The region is also home to the largest number of illiterates and most “malnourished people” in the world. It suggests that SAARC has so far not been successful to achieve most, if any, of its objectives. Most of SAARC programs and projects related to social development generally remained on paper without effective implementation and with less convincing tangible results.

Persistence of outstanding political problems, bilateral disputes and contentious issues continue to instigate tension, increase arms buildup, sharpen divisions and drain resources available resources away from socio-economic development of the region. Without resolving outstanding political problems and bilateral disputes, SACs cannot be expected to put their full energies and devote their all resources with complete commitment to pursue the goals of regional integration. Meanwhile, SACs cannot afford to waste more time, energies and recourses and to work half-heartedly in the process of regional cooperation as it would leave them far behind then other nations and groupings of the world. In order to lay South Asian regionalism on the strong foundation, SACs need to address the root causes that bedevil the process of cooperation and prevent them from moving forward. The outstanding political problems and bilateral disputes of SAARC members mainly prevent SACs from progress on various aspects of South Asian regionalism which they need to amicably resolve in order to make regional cooperation process successful and catch the World in its journey towards peace, progress and prosperity.