

Summary of Discussion

Webinar: Regional, Sub-regional and Interregional Organizations in the Global South as Actors in Responding to COVID-19

Link to video recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4IVY069CE8&feature=youtu.be>

Background:

Given the role of regional, sub-regional and interregional organizations in supporting and collaborating with international institutions and governments, they offer important lessons to ensuring the global coordination needed to recover from the crisis. These include working across borders to share best practices for mitigating the spread, coordinating fiscal measures and, boosting trade. This webinar, held on 15 July 2020, jointly organized by the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) and UNDP Seoul Policy Centre (USPC), brings together actors from regional, sub-regional and interregional organizations to share their experiences and responses on:

- Support regional, sub-regional and interregional organization are providing to their member States in responding to COVID-19
- Implications of COVID-19 on regional, sub-regional and interregional cooperation and integration
- Role of these organizations in promoting South-South cooperation to respond to COVID-19

The aim of this webinar was to contribute to a global and regional exchange of experiences that could increase understanding of the challenges and solutions, improve the effectiveness of cross-disciplinary responses, and leverage cooperation amongst countries, including through South-South and triangular cooperation.

Speakers:

1. **Ms. Xiaojun Grace Wang**, Deputy Director, UNOSSC (Moderator)
2. **Mr. Jorge Chediek**, Director of UNOSSC & Envoy of the UN Secretary-General on South-South Cooperation New York, United States (Opening Remarks)
3. **Mr. Fadi Abdullah Farasin**, Assistant Director General, Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC), subsidiary organ of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (Panelist)
4. **Mr. Habib Ur Rehman Mayar**, Deputy General Secretary, g7+ Secretariat & Executive Director of g7+ Foundation (Panelist)
5. **Ms. Sara Hamouda**, SDGs and Agenda 2063 Expert, African Peer Review Mechanism, African Union (Panelist)
6. **Dr. Azeema Fareed**, Principle Medical Officer, Commission on Science & Technology for Sustainable Development in the South, (COMSATS) (Panelist)
7. **Prof. Santiago Fiorio Vaesken**, Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Officer, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Paraguay (Panelist)
8. **Mr. Stephan Klingebiel**, Director of USPC, Republic of Korea (Concluding Remarks)

Summary of Discussion:

Ms. Xiaojun Grace Wang welcomed the participants and emphasized the need for international cooperation and solidarity and for fostering collaboration, and the role of regional, sub-regional and interregional mechanisms and strategies in offering important lessons, sharing good practices, and coordinating fiscal measures.

Mr. Jorge Chediek, in his opening remarks, thanked the UNDP Seoul Policy Center the panelists and highlighted the importance of mobilizing thinking around various dimensions and challenges of the current pandemic. The world is now confronting the biggest crisis since World War II and this will be a test for the global infrastructure in terms of institutions, norms, principles and mechanisms to enhance such exchanges. Most countries have confronted the COVID crisis and in many cases, are going back on many agreements regarding free mobility of persons or regarding exchanges of information. The economic and social effects of the pandemic are testing the premise that more and better globalization is needed. The level of economic activity, the volume of trade and industries such as tourism, that generate massive economic activity and employment, have been severely affected. Mr. Chediek also underlined the importance of looking at how different organizations working across countries and regions have confronted the challenge of the pandemic, adapting and planning post-pandemic structures in the new reality. Mr. Chediek raised the question of how to further improve the institutional network of global, regional, sub-regional and thematic institutions to continue building back better and restart the road to the 2030 agenda, given the tragic reality that this is the first year since 1990 that our human development will be reduced globally.

Mr. Fadi Abdullah Farasin introduced SESRIC: a subsidiary organ of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), with 57 member states providing an important platform for cooperation in the global South. Spread over four continents, the OIC countries possess great potential due to their enormous human and natural resources and rich heritage. Since its establishment, SESRIC has played an important role as a facilitator of South-South technical cooperation and a broker for the exchange of knowledge and best practices among its member countries. He elaborated on SESRIC's diverse programs and activities to address the development challenges of OIC member countries by employing South-South cooperation approaches and tools. For instance, SESRIC, in collaboration with its partners such as the Islamic Development Bank and the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TICA) has successfully engaged in five fruitful reverse linkage projects currently being implemented in Gambia, Uganda, Pakistan, Sudan and Bangladesh. These projects aim at providing peer-to-peer support, knowledge exchange among the partnering institutions, and building the capacities of the national institutions in different areas and fields. SESRIC has also been very active in organizing SSC events, noticeably, Global South-South Development Expo, with UNOSSC and the Government of Turkey in 2017.

SESRIC has 40 years of experience in facilitating South-South cooperation within the OIC region and addressing development challenges using SSC & TrC modalities that have also been reflected in UNOSSC's South-South in Action publication series titled "Transforming Potentials into Shared Prosperity". The publication highlights SESRIC initiatives, success stories and best practices. He further emphasized that the unprecedented health and socio-economic challenges caused by COVID-19 underscores the importance of collaboration more than before and prove that bilateral and multilateral efforts are needed to tackle the challenges faced today. He highlighted that OIC has exerted tremendous efforts to intensify solidarity among the member countries in confronting the pandemic. The OIC institutions and financing organs provided a rapid response by mobilizing technical assistance and allocating financial resources to member countries to contain the spread of the virus and to mitigate the economic and social impacts. Its

sister organization, the Islamic Development Bank, announced a support package of US\$2.3 billion for its member countries preparedness and response and launched various initiatives in its mandated areas: i) training and technical cooperation: included providing online training programs by matching the needs and capacities of member countries in 23 different socio-economical fields including agriculture, technical and vocational education, tourism occupational health and safety which benefitted 200 staff of various national institutions; ii) statistics: developing a COVID-19 database that provides data visualization tools, maps and dashboards on the spread of the pandemic in OIC member countries; and. iii) research: undertaken on the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in the OIC member countries, looking into key socio-economic indicators and identifying the various policy responses and evidence-based recommendations at national, regional and international levels for an effective and collective response.

In conclusion, he emphasized that facilitating knowledge and experience exchange is central to SESRIC and solidarity and promoting joint efforts can enable effective mitigation of negative impacts of the pandemic.

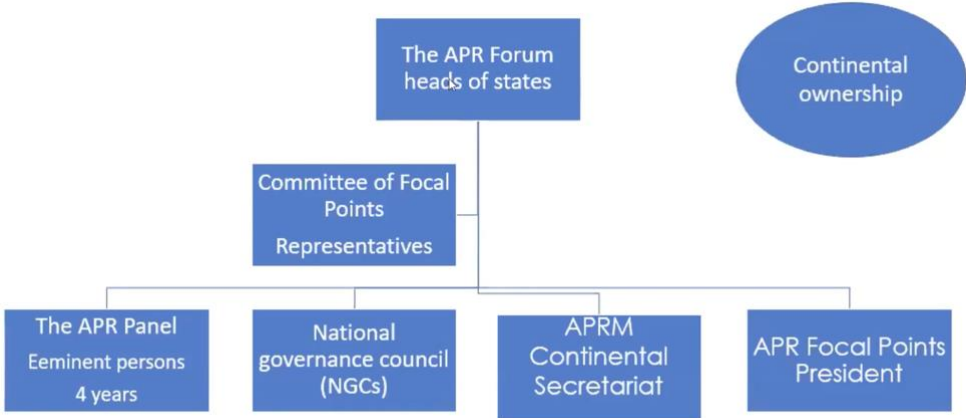
Mr. Habib Ur Rehman Mayar underlined that the pandemic has unique implications for countries that are already fragile due to decades of wars and conflicts. Countermeasures such as lockdowns and closure of borders are threatening peace and stability efforts where citizens are deprived of basic means to earn their livelihoods, while governments have limited capacity to provide emergency assistance. In addition, it has endangered the lives of migrants and refugees. Public health institutions in these fragile states are overwhelmed due to a lack of needed capacity and resources. The economic outlook in these countries doesn't seem quite promising either and those relying on revenue from natural resources have faced losses due to the reduction in prices of commodities. The socio-economic effect will also be far reaching on the aid-dependent fragile countries such as Yemen, Somalia, Central African Republic and Afghanistan which are at an important juncture of their transition. Recognizing these challenges, the g7+ group issued a joint statement as a collective position on how to curb COVID-19 and its impact. The statement makes four asks/commitments: First, a call for immediate ceasefire aligning with the call of the UN Secretary-General so that countries can focus on defeating the common enemy which at this time is COVID- 19. Second, effective support to strengthen the institutions including more peer learning cooperation. Third, it reiterated economic recovery and support such as debt relief so that resources can be invested in curbing COVID-19. Lastly, it emphasizes the dignified treatment of migrants and displaced people which require more cooperation and solidarity at the regional and sub-regional levels. The g7+ is also planning a summit to discuss progress along with these priorities and commitments.

Mr. Habib informed that the g7+ is facilitating the sharing of lessons from the Ebola outbreak among member countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. The g7+a Secretariat acted as a conduit in enhancing or channeling financial assistance from the government of Timor-Leste, a founding member of the g7+ to the countries — undertaken under the auspices of the fragile to fragile cooperation, the term used for peer learning within the group and founded on the principles of solidarity. The g7+ aims to promote the inspiring model of assistance among the members and the communities, guided by human solidarity. The g7+ has signed an MOU with UNOSSC to facilitate knowledge and experience sharing.

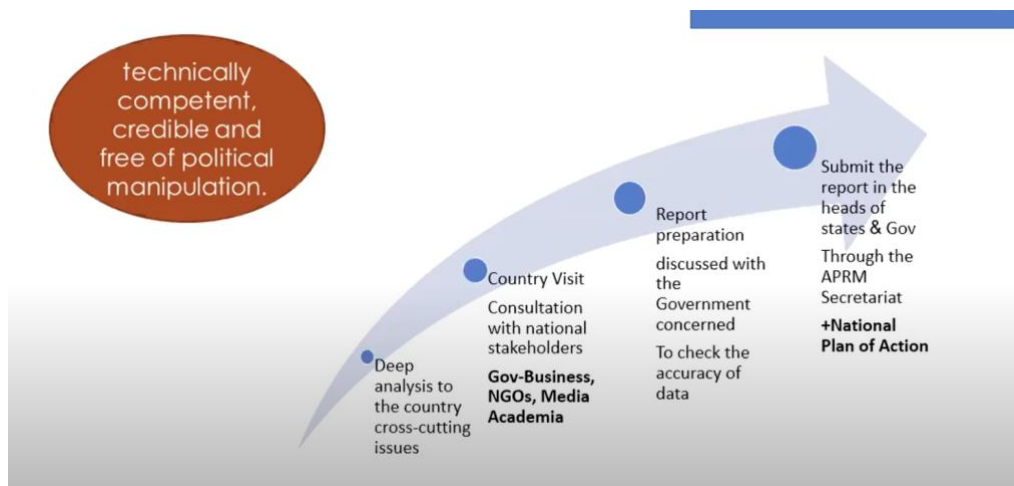
The developing and least developed countries in conflict and the developed nations will have to act together at regional and cross-regional levels to pursue normality, peace and stability under the charter of the UN. The g7+ group has also recently obtained an observer status at the United Nations and commits to working to this end because such cooperation is a key to peace and stability. Most of the member countries are facing a dual challenge of coping with conflict, which is a man-made, and the pandemic at the same time. Addressing these issues will require regional cooperation as a mere closing of borders

further exacerbates the severity of the human suffering as already seen in damage caused in the flow of trade and investment. He reiterated that there is need to apply collective pragmatism to curb the pandemic, based on the human aspiration rather than on competitive and conflicting aspects of international politics, for example, existing support at the regional level on the peace processes in Afghanistan. Actions such as the recently launched collective strategy of the African Union, the convening of regional organizations such as SAARC or ASEAN and others should inspire the world. Such cooperation can become the new norm of international/ regional cooperation. To conclude, Mr. Mayar expressed the keen interest of the g7+Secretariat and its member countries to work with other regional organizations, groups and actors to find solutions and share inspiring examples under the auspices of the partnership with UNOSSC. He further added that the g7+ is looking for partners to promote peace building and pragmatic solutions.

Ms. Sara Hamouda explained the foundation and rationale of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) as one of the African Union organizations focusing on assessing good governance in the continent. It was established based on a decision by the African Union Secretariat and became African Union’s Development Agency, as the implementing arm of several development projects and programs. She further elaborated that the rationale for creating the APRM was to be a tool for sharing experiences and reinforcing the peer review between African countries, especially the implementation of MDGs and then Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and expanded mandate by the AU Assembly to play a role in the monitoring and evaluation of Agenda 2063. APRM membership is now expanded to 40 African countries, who join the mechanism voluntarily. Peer reviews are conducted between African countries on different governance aspects such as economic, corporate and socio-economic governance, with an increasing role of the private sector. It has recently developed a new peer review named APRM target reviews where countries are assessed on a specific topic or a specific theme like gender, environment and health and a recent one completed for Sierra Leone. She further explained review process of APRM, with representatives meeting annually in the African Union summit in Addis Ababa.



She further explained the review process (shown in figure below):



Focusing on the regional perspective of governance, APRM has launched reports in peace development, rule of law and certain cross-cutting issues and provides recommendations to the African countries. In addition, APRM is working with African universities for research and development and launching continental workshops on Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in order to prepare African countries to report on SDGs adequately and share experiences between countries. APRM is closely engaged with the United Nations organizations under AU and UN joint framework on Agenda 2030. It has an observer seat in the Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA). APRM has also recently launched a roadmap for integrating peace and conflict issues into the APRM review, in coordination with the African Commission in Addis.

The region has negative socio-economic, political and cultural impacts due to COVID-19 and Africa Continental Free Trade Area is one of the hard-hit areas which has been a promising agenda to integrate African economies. With a lack of supply chain and restrictive lock down it becomes more and more clear that African countries strengthen interregional cooperation. AU countries are facing economic fallout, less foreign direct investment, an increase in poverty as well as unemployment rates. She also presented the status of COVID-19 proliferation in Africa region with a major challenge of fragility of health care systems as countries and the governments haven't been not spending sufficiently on this sector, which is only 5-6 percent of expenditure. The other major challenge is that the African health care system imports a lot of medical resources from mainly from the European Union and also from Asia which has become challenging with lockdowns.

The African Union has adopted a joint continental strategy to deal with COVID-19, in collaboration with the Center for Disease Control in Africa and funded by the African Union member states, and also launched the EU solidarity fund. The main purpose of the strategy is to curb COVID19 but also to provide accurate information to African countries and provide centralized technical support – for example, at the start of the pandemic only two countries in Africa were able to conduct the laboratory diagnostic tests but today at least more than 50 African countries have been supported to carry out accurate tests. This was enabled by APRM's role in improving the capacity through special regional task forces. A new report on Africa governance response to COVID-19 has also been launched in this regard. APRM has also revised its methodologies to conduct governance reviews and the questionnaire now includes a new section on resilience and disaster frameworks.

APRM has also launched virtual dialogues with youth and member states representatives to offer a platform to share ideas on how to curb the pandemic at the regional level. The target reviews, such as for Sierra Leone, a country with quite extensive history with conflict, links health, peace and governance. The Agenda 2063 Unit also launched webinars with African countries to report how they can prepare their Voluntary National Review for SDGs. Virtual dialogues were also organized with more than 12 African countries as well as regional economic communities. A new study is also being prepared, in partnership with UNDESA and Africa governance architecture on CEPA principles for effective governance to reflect on important aspects like transparency and inclusiveness in a country's response to COVID-19.

In the end, she emphasized the importance of South-South cooperation and the need to provide technical support and ensure capacity building for member states. She also highlighted data gathering and availability as one of the limitations faced. APRM has been very active in convening dialogues supporting South-South cooperation and will be working to institutionalize the framework of collaboration on South-South cooperation in Africa, adopting a holistic approach to mainstream South-South cooperation. APRM expressed its interest and commitment to collaborate with other regional organizations and UNOSSC in areas of capacity building and training needed to achieve the SDGs and Africa Agenda 2063.

Dr. Azeema Fareed introduced COMSATS, established 25 years ago and currently with a membership of 27 countries. Their mandate is to support South-South and North-South cooperation in science and technology for sustainable development. The Commission is represented by heads of member states and the size and scope of programs and projects vary from regional to national and international levels in the areas of information & communication technology, environmental sciences, biotechnology, renewable energy technology, internet services, repair and maintenance of scientific instruments and telemedicine.

Dr. Fareed highlighted that with COVID-19, the importance of science, technology and innovation has become even more relevant. To respond to COVID-19 challenges, the science and technology communities within member states are connected through experience sharing, building capacities and training to collaborate on various initiatives including in the area of telemedicine. Virtual dialogues play an important role in youth engagement in the context of SDGs. The COMSATS Center for Climate and Sustainability (CCCS) is also an initiative that focuses on the nexus between climate change and sustainable development in developing country settings. CCCS will work in the framework of South-South & Triangular Cooperation to promote, coordinate and facilitate South-South & Triangular Cooperation in regard to climate action and attainment of SDGs in line with the policy and practices of developing countries and their international obligations. CCCS has been working to find indigenous solutions in undertaking basic protective and precautionary measures like the distribution and production of sanitizers and masks, and specialized research towards new methods. She further shared the importance of leveraging digital technologies to create and adapt to a new normal in a collective manner. COMSATS has also collaborated with the WHO to train the telehealth service providers on sexual reproduction and telehealth. A meeting of the coordinating council was held on the potential of telemedicine and on joint proposals for its scaling up in the member states.

Prof. Santiago Fiorio Vaesken shared experience in international cooperation from Paraguay and the application of international human rights standards in response to COVID-19. He informed the participants about the SIMORE System which is the monitoring system for recommendations to facilitate the systematization of human rights recommendations that States receive from the international system for the promotion of protection of human rights. This includes treaty bodies to which the state reports on their human rights situations in the respective countries and these reports are studied by expert committees and recommendations given to the country in order to enhance their capacities to

comply with international standards. The tool will be an asset for responding to and developing the state's efforts, national policies and any other working framework to comply with the international human rights standards.

SIMORE is an online reporting system with a focal point Network. The SIMORE plus system is a centralized place where all recommendations are gathered and systematized and the national institutions are the ones to report on how the state is implementing these recommendations. The system is useful for drafting reports to treaty bodies, conducting dialogues with CSOs which makes the system useful for sharing with other countries. Paraguay's technical cooperation program has been drafted in order to share its experience with regards to Human Rights and SDGs.

SIMORE Paraguay is the most replicated South-South cooperation experience in our region in Latin America and now Uruguay, Guatemala Chile, Dominican Republic and Argentina are recipients of this cooperation. Currently, it is developed by Costa Rica and the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights.

Mr. Stephan Klingebiel highlighted three main takeaways to wrap up the discussion. First, there are a number of examples and illustrations for platforms and institutions which exist to facilitate and support knowledge within and among regions. These examples are across regions, continents such African Union, the G7+ and OIC SESRIC. As seen in the case of G7+, intergovernmental cooperation is much needed because the fragile states/ countries need to be strengthened. It is good to transnational examples that go beyond governments as presented by COMSATS jointly with the role played by academic institutions, civil society organizations at various levels.

Second, the discussion shared a number of illustrations of knowledge exchange to address this specific issue related to COVID-19, i.e. the work done by g7+ and SESRIC in dealing with the specific challenges of migrants in this situation and reminds us of the need to continue such activities such as APRM, SIMORE approach on human rights.

Lastly, it was encouraging to see that the showcased regional cooperation organizations/ mechanisms demonstrate ownership and have strong partnerships with the UN Office for South-South Cooperation. Such partnerships are pivotal to help achieve collective results.

The webinar ended with the vote of thanks to co-hosts, panelists and all the participants.