



LEVERAGING REGIONAL COOPERATION FOR ACHIEVING THE SDGs IN SOUTH ASIA

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September 2021



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Foreword

The Development Papers Series of the UNESCAP South and South-West Asia Office (UNESCAP SSWA) promotes and disseminates policy-relevant research on the development challenges facing South and South-West Asia. It features policy research conducted at UNESCAP SSWA as well as by outside experts from within the subregion and beyond. The objective is to foster an informed debate on development policy challenges facing the subregion and sharing of development experiences and best practices.

This paper by Nagesh Kumar and Joseph George is prepared as a part of the research and policy initiative titled ‘Interpreting SDGs for South Asia: In Search of a Regional Framework’, undertaken by the UNESCAP SSWA Office in collaboration with the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh. It explores the potential of regional cooperation in accelerated implementation of the SDGs in South Asia. The paper is prepared in the context of the increasing urgency for collective actions by South Asian countries, given that the subregion is found to be not on track for meeting any of the SDGs by 2030 at the current pace of progress. The adverse socio-economic impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing risks and vulnerabilities. At this juncture, harnessing the power of regional cooperation is critical for the subregion to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of SDG interventions at the national level.

The paper finds immense potential for greater cooperation among South Asian countries for mutual benefits across several development policy areas, beginning with intra-regional trade and economic integration. Regional approaches in a structured and organized manner can facilitate policy planning through knowledge sharing, capacity-building and technical cooperation. The subregional countries will have opportunities for consolidation and strengthening of various means of implementation of the SDGs, by pooling together their asymmetric endowments of resources and capacities. By complementing and supporting each other in this manner, they would have better chances of resolving common issues of multidimensional poverty, inequalities, food insecurity, gaps in access to education, health, transport infrastructure, energy, digital connectivity, and development financing. Cooperation is essential for effectively addressing the transboundary issues of climate change and environmental risks.

The paper further traces various ways and means for enhancing regional cooperation in South Asia. It is observed that the subregion can make progress by strengthening some of the existing mechanisms for collaboration and partnerships - such as under SAARC and BIMSTEC and several bilateral and plurilateral development cooperation frameworks - and by utilizing support measures offered by multilateral development partners such as UNESCAP in this regard.

We hope that the policy lessons offered by this paper will add value to the current discourse on the importance of and modalities for greater cooperation between South Asian countries for the achievement of the SDGs in the subregion.

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Leveraging Regional Cooperation for Achieving the SDGs in South Asia

Nagesh Kumar and Joseph George¹

Abstract

Greater regional development cooperation is critical for South Asia to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of SDG interventions. The subregion has been lagging in terms of its overall progress towards the SDGs. Sharing similar structural constraints and challenges including disproportionate dependency on agriculture, industrial stagnation, huge infrastructural gaps, inadequate access to public services, increasing inequalities and marginalization of the poor and vulnerable sections of the population, South Asian countries collectively reveal characteristics that calls for enhanced regional cooperation. Moreover, bound together by geography, shared natural resources, riverine systems, agro-climatic zones and consequent common environmental vulnerabilities, the subregional countries also exhibits transboundary linkages that make regional cooperation an absolute necessity. The need for greater policy coordination and collaboration is also accentuated by the socio-economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 outbreak, which has endangered developmental gains achieved by the subregion over many years. This paper examines how regional cooperation could be utilized as a powerful tool to support and complement the national level SDG implementation efforts. It appraises the main areas of sustainable development that can benefit from enhanced regional cooperation and explores various ways and means to achieve it. The paper finds potential beneficial outcomes of cooperation in a wide range of policy areas including elimination of poverty and hunger, improved access to health, education and universal social protection, trade, connectivity, energy, technology, development financing and environmental sustainability. The paper further presents ways and means to strengthen and build on existing institutional, legal and regulatory frameworks for enhanced cooperation for achievement of the SDGs in South Asia.

JEL Codes(s): O11, O20, F55, Q01, Q56

Key words: South Asia, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Regional Cooperation

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1. Introduction: Rationale of Regional Cooperation for SDGs in South Asia

International cooperation and partnerships for development have a critical role in the implementation of the SDGs. Formation of such partnerships is recognized as one of the foundational principles of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, embodied in Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) as a mainstream implementation strategy, and also embedded in various means of implementation targets under each and every SDG.² International cooperation, particularly between a regional group of countries, promises to deliver faster results with greater efficiency. Countries belonging to specific geographic regions are often found to have similar development trajectories, owing to a mix of historical, cultural and locational factors, and hence have many common sustainable development policy challenges. Moreover, due to proximity, they are also often bound by transboundary issues such as climate change and natural disasters, energy security, transport and ICT connectivity, which needs collectively developed and owned policy solutions and transboundary infrastructure networks.

It is well recognized in the conceptualization of the SDGs that collaborative actions between governments can spearhead broader multi-stakeholder alliances,³ particularly between regional group of countries with common and shared development challenges. In fact, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages all member states to engage in regional forums in various stages of its implementation.⁴

The need for collective regional actions is immense in the South Asia subregion to enhance effectiveness and efficiency of SDG interventions. South Asia's progress towards the SDGs has been uneven, marked by some improvements in certain targets related to poverty reduction, food security and health, but is lagging behind in terms of overall progress.⁵ At the current pace of progress, the subregion is observed to be not on track for meeting any of the SDGs by 2030, barring certain sub targets such as elimination of extreme poverty, and requires accelerated efforts to stay on stay on course. Alarming, South Asia is found to be regressing on key goals related to environmental sustainability (Goals 13 on Climate Action and Goal 14 on Life Below Water) which may in turn have negative impacts on policy programmes for other goals.⁶ The subregion needs to utilize the full potential of regional cooperation in this regard, especially as the COVID-

² See United Nations (2015a). Multi-stakeholder partnerships and international cooperation are recognized as essential underpinnings of the post-2015 sustainable development agenda as it is essentially global in nature and universally applicable to all countries, and also as the implementation of the component Goals of the agenda require such partnerships and cooperation.

³ Along with the significance of broader alliance groups involving governments, the private sector, civil society, the scientific community, academia, philanthropy and foundations, parliaments, local authorities, volunteers and other stakeholders (United Nations, 2015a), the resolution on SDGs envisaged establishment of multi-stakeholder forums and networks under the leadership of governments (United Nations, 2015b).

⁴ United Nations (2015b).

⁵ While the subregion has made progress toward select sub-targets across various SDGs, most notably Goals 1, 2 and 3, stagnation or regression on other sub-targets/indicators imply that the overall progress across all goals are falling short of expected achievements as of 2020 (UNESCAP, 2021). Also see [Asia-Pacific SDG Gateway](#) database.

⁶ Ibid. South Asia is also regressing on certain key targets related to environmental sustainability such as proportion of renewables in total energy consumption under Goal 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy).

19 outbreak has caused unexpected socio-economic disruptions across the subregional countries. As the negative impacts of the crisis threatens to exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities across South Asian countries, they must work together to hasten recovery and get back on track for meeting the SDGs by 2030.

Sharing similar structural constraints and challenges including disproportionate dependency on agriculture, industrial stagnation, huge infrastructural gaps, inadequate access to public services, increasing inequalities and marginalization of the poor and vulnerable sections of the population, South Asian countries collectively reveal characteristics that calls for enhanced regional cooperation. Moreover, bound together by geography, shared natural resources, riverine systems, agro-climatic zones and consequent common environmental vulnerabilities, the subregional countries also exhibits transboundary linkages that make regional cooperation an absolute necessity.

In order to reverse the regressive trends in some of the SDGs, particularly goals related to environmental sustainability, and enhance the pace of progress in other goals, South Asian countries require a rethink on conventionally followed policy responses. Future course of actions should be founded on innovative solutions capable of addressing the new challenges, and the chances of finding such solutions are much higher when they are collectively sought.

The potential of regional cooperation in South Asia can transcend beyond ease and efficiency of resource mobilization and sharing of knowledge and expertise, spanning diverse and powerful ways through which collective efforts can strengthen achievement of the SDGs. Regional cooperation can support and complement national policy initiatives and build regional commons by way of regional institutions, knowledge networks, pooled development financing streams and shared infrastructure. Harnessing the power of cooperative actions can open important avenues for enhanced trade in goods and services, economic diversification and structural transformation, building public and private sector capacities, and infrastructural and technological upgradation.

Imperatives for regional cooperation for the SDGs in South Asia goes well beyond the ambit of economic gains in the context of emerging and commonly faced threats to sustainable development in the subregion. The foremost concern in this regard is that of environmental vulnerabilities, growing incidence of natural disasters and climate change induced hazards. The need for policy coordination and collaboration is also accentuated by the COVID-19 outbreak. The crisis has endangered developmental gains achieved by the subregion over many years, thwarting SDG progress significantly. The subregion is faced with an urgent necessity to scale-up cooperation on health policy actions and expand it to other areas of sustainable development policy to ensure a concerted and resilient recovery from socio-economic devastations caused by the pandemic.

Regional cooperation and the SDGs are intrinsically synergetic and mutually reinforcing. While a direct outcome of cooperation and integration between countries is creation of economic opportunities with spillover effects across various Goals, the global sustainable development

agenda can play a vital role in guiding cooperation.⁷ South Asia has, at its disposal, important avenues to take advantage of this synergetic relationship. Often referred to as one of the least integrated regions of the world, South Asia can gain substantially by fostering intra-regional trade in goods and services and investment flows which will create immense economic opportunities for poverty reduction and development. Initiatives for economic integration would necessarily involve creation of intra-regional transport connectivity infrastructure, communication networks and trade policy coordination, which would in turn lay out the blueprint for broader regional economic integration. The existence of institutional arrangements and instruments with overlapping domains in many of these areas, such as various initiatives under SAARC and BIMSTEC and under several bilateral agreements between South Asian countries, provide a firm basis for enhanced development cooperation in the subregion. The SDGs gives a collective vision to further affirm a regional cooperation framework for sustainable development.⁸

This paper examines how regional/subregional cooperation and coordination could be utilized as a powerful tool to support and complement the effectiveness of national mechanisms for achieving the SDGs in South Asia. Following sections appraise the main areas of sustainable development that can benefit from enhanced regional cooperation and explores various ways and means to achieve it.

2. Critical Areas for Regional Cooperation in the Context of the SDGs

The scope of regional cooperation spans a wide range of development policy areas. Scenarios of international collaboration have been recognized as viable channels that enhance policy choices and inform decision making at various levels. The approach allows a comprehensive vantage point against complex interactions and interrelations between various SDGs. Regional approaches in a structured and organized manner can facilitate policy planning through knowledge sharing, support capacity-building and technical cooperation. It also permits consolidation and strengthening of various means of implementation for the SDGs, such as finance, technology, and trade, through integration of asymmetrically available endowments of resources and capacities among the regional group of countries. South Asia has immense potential for greater cooperation to promote trade and economic integration, and address common issues of multidimensional poverty, inequalities, food insecurity, gaps in access to education, health, transport infrastructure and services, energy, digital connectivity, combat climate change, disaster risks and meet development financing deficits.

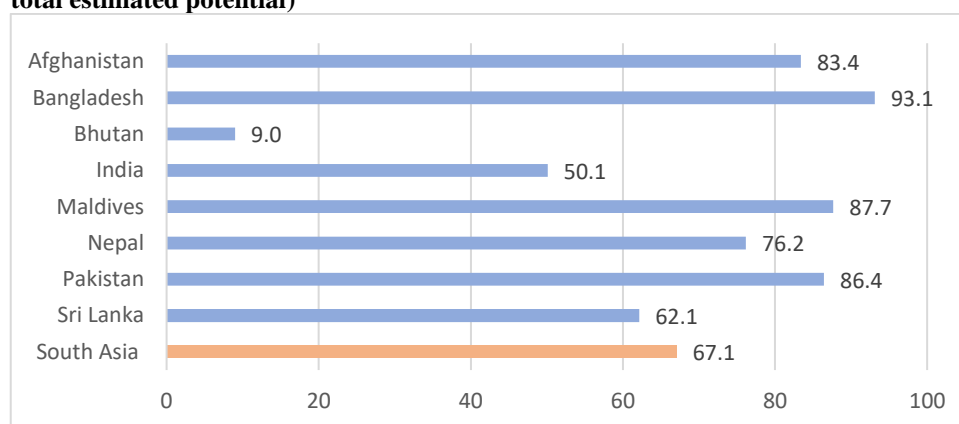
⁷ For an exposition of interlinked and mutually supportive relationship exists between regional economic cooperation and the SDGs, see UNESCAP (2017b). In the spirit of promoting regional cooperation as a steppingstone towards global partnerships, countries in the Asia-Pacific have adopted resolutions under the aegis of UNESCAP to foster development cooperation in alignment with the SDGs (UNESCAP 2018). The Bangkok Declaration of 2013 on *Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Asia and the Pacific* was instrumental in securing subsequent commitments for broad-based international alliances UNESCAP (2013). The *Regional Road Map for Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific*, adopted by UNESCAP member states in 2017, further consolidates commitments and lays out an action agenda for regional cooperation UNESCAP (2017a).

⁸ UNESCAP SSWA (2018a).

2.1 Gains from regional trade and economic integration

Market integration is a fundamental component of regional cooperation, opening vistas for expanding production and consumption space. Rapid growth in trade of goods and services has contributed to substantial economic progress in South Asia during past few decades. However, while the subregion's trade with rest of the world grew at rapid pace, intra-regional trade has persistently remained suboptimal at around 5% total trade of the subregion during the last two decades.⁹ The subregional countries have immense scope for further enhancing trade led development by harnessing the unutilized potential of trade with each other. In terms of intra-regional trade in goods alone, UNESCAP estimates that its current levels at around US\$ 26 billion could potentially be at least three times the actual figure, which is validated by other similar studies.¹⁰ This implies that about 67% of the estimated potential for trade between the subregional countries remains unexploited (Figure 1). Enhanced trade as a key enabler can have numerous direct and indirect contributory effects towards the achievement of multiple SDGs, particularly for goals and targets on elimination of poverty and hunger (Goals 1 and 2), ensuring decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), promoting industry and infrastructure (Goal 9), reduced inequalities (Goal 9) and responsible production and consumption (Goal 12).¹¹

Figure 1 Unexploited intra-regional export potential of South Asian countries (% of total estimated potential)



Source: UNESCAP SSWA (2018c)

Note: Express as % of estimated intra-regional export potential.

Intra-regional trade is hampered by many physical and non-physical barriers that lead to excessive delays, high costs and uncertainties, preventing the subregional countries from tapping the potential for forming cross-border production networks and value chains. The average ad valorem cost of doing trade between South Asian countries is found to be more than double that of East Asia and about 40 percentage points higher than that of South-East Asia (Figure 2).¹² Even though

⁹ UNESCAP SSWA (2018c).

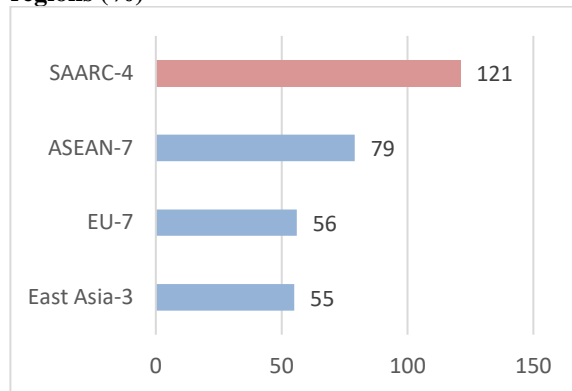
¹⁰ See UNESCAP SSWA (2018c). Also see World Bank (2018) for similar observations.

¹¹ For potential impacts of regional trade liberalization for SDGs, see UNESCAP SSWA (2018c).

¹² Ibid.

the subregion is steadily improving on trade facilitation implementation rate, in terms of overall implementation rate South Asia falls below other subregions of the Asia-Pacific region (Figure 3). Research in the context of SAFTA finds that the gains for all participating countries are substantially improved when trade facilitation and non-tariff reforms complements tariff liberalization, with well more than 60% of overall gains accruing from trade facilitation measures.¹³

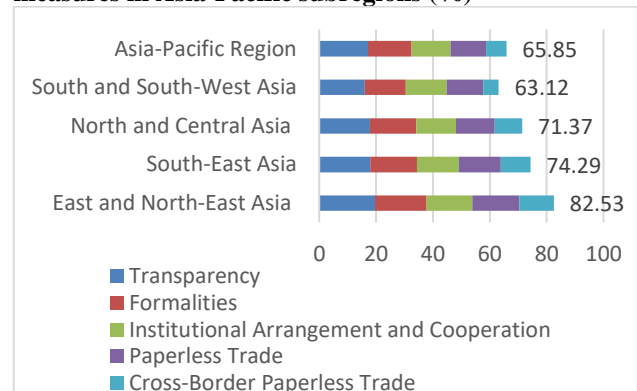
Figure 2 Intra-regional Trade Costs of Select regions (%)



Source: Calculated using UNESCAP-World Bank Trade Cost Database

Note: Figures for latest available years. SAARC-4: Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka; ASEAN-7: Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam; EU-7: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, United Kingdom; East Asia-3: China, Japan, Republic of Korea

Figure 3 Implementation rate of trade facilitation measures in Asia-Pacific subregions (%)



Source: UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation 2021

Trade facilitation agenda of the sub region should be built around modern and effective customs administration, streamlined and transparent trade processes/procedures, and improved services and information for private sector traders and investors. Perhaps the most important trade facilitation requirement concerning South Asia is synchronization of trade procedures and adoption of electronic platforms. Assessments by UNESCAP reveal that of cross-border paperless trade has significant potential to reduce trade costs and boost trade¹⁴ While South Asian countries have been taking unilateral trade facilitation measures, better structured trade facilitation programme at the regional level can take shape by aligning with broader regional programmes such as the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific which is being implement in the Asia-Pacific region under the aegis of UESCAP.

¹³ Simulations conducted within the framework of the UNESCAP-SANEM South Asia Model suggest that a 40% reduction in trade costs (to make it comparable to ASEAN levels) would yield an increase of up to nearly 11% in exports and a nearly 3% increase in GDP (UNESCAP 2018c).

¹⁴ It is estimated that partial implementation of paperless trade systems in the Asia-Pacific region would lead to export increase of US\$ 36 billion and a more ambitious scenario of full region-wide implementation would lead to export gain of US\$ 257 billion annually. The time required to export would fall by 24% to 44%, and the cost by 17% to 31%, depending on the reform scenario considered. See UNESCAP (2014).

Besides issues of trade facilitation, South Asia's intra-regional trade prospects are also hampered by numerous non-tariff barriers, including burdensome standards and rules, with inadequate mechanisms to address them. The subregion needs to accelerate the ongoing policy programmes for trade integration under SAFTA and deepen the scope of the legal frameworks towards forming trade-plus alliances covering a host of topics including trade related investments, labour mobility, product standards, property rights, knowledge transfer, government procurement etc. Efforts are underway on some of these key issues at the regional level, under the regular work programmes of designated SAARC institutions such as the South Asian Regional Standards Organization (SARSO) which is mandated with harmonization of standards applied on traded products. Similar work streams on easing trade barriers through regional platforms continue to make progress, honoring the broad commitments on removal of on-tariff barriers.¹⁵

Provided intra-regional trade costs are brought down, South Asia also holds immense potential for formation of regional production networks and value chains. Breakthroughs in the formation of textiles value chains in South Asia show how the subregion can take advantage of sectors with strong regional complementarities such as parts and components.¹⁶ Given that GVCs are powered and greased by services, a variety of which are found to hold together manufacturing value chains by serving trade of intermediate goods and services, emerging competency in services sectors is one of the strong bases in this regard.¹⁷ In fact, benefits from liberalized trade in goods would constitute only a portion of potential gains emerging from deeper economic integration comprising of free movement of services, labor and financial capital. There are immense mutual gains on offer for all countries from an integrated labor market, opening a whole a range of key services to be traded. Certain key tradable services sectors such as ICT, transport, travel and tourism, construction, and health which have huge potential for greater intra-regional trade. Extending the ambit of trade agreements to cover trade in services and cross-border trade related investment flows must be key priorities for the regional trade liberalization and economic integration agenda.

2.2 Regional connectivity as a catalyst for sustainable development

The SDGs have specifically highlighted the importance of infrastructure through the call to develop *quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, including regional and transborder infrastructure, to support economic development and human well-being* (Goal 9). Cross-border infrastructure for transport, energy and ICT connectivity are central to several other goals including affordable and clean energy (Goal 7) and decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), industry, innovation and infrastructure (Goal 9), as well as key means of implementation targets

¹⁵ There are many different streams of regional trade and economic integration being undertaken, drawing from broad commitments and various provisions of SAFTA as well as directives from various SAARC ministerial declarations. They can collectively form an effective regional economic integration, unhindered by political conflicts. See UNESCAP's proposal of a South Asia Comprehensive Economic Partnership (SACEP) in the later part of this paper.

¹⁶ UNESCAP SSWA (2018c).

¹⁷ Services create a significant proportion of the value in the process of manufacturing, distribution and marketing process of goods in GVCs. For a detailed exposition of role of services in GVCs, see UNESCAP (2015).

such as digital and physical connectivity spread across the SDGs. South Asian countries are faced with comparatively wider infrastructure gaps in the Asia-Pacific region with lower scores in terms of rankings based on UNESCAP's infrastructure index.¹⁸ Even though infrastructural investment requirements are proportionately higher in the subregion,¹⁹ such investments are assessed to yield directly proportional increase in per capita incomes and consequent socio-economic benefits.²⁰

Regional cooperation is inevitable for developing cross-border infrastructure, particularly for transport and energy connectivity. A major source of the high trade costs in the subregion is inefficiencies in the transport sector. The subregional countries must work together to promote multimodal connectivity, utilizing the complementarities of alternative modes of transport that are available along the major regional corridors.²¹ Towards this common objective, they should collaborate to facilitate contributory factors including (a) synergies between the overlapping national and international transport projects and programmes, (b) formulation of conducive legal and regulatory regimes through comprehensive transport agreements, (c) utilization of technical support from multilateral/intergovernmental organizations, and (d) resource mobilization involving public/private, national/international investment partners.

Operationalization of the subregional transport corridors and its sub-links requires an integrated approach to regional transport reforms, including facilitation measures for speedy cargo clearance mechanisms, intermodal transfer terminals, usage of ICT and modern cargo security/inspection systems etc. It also calls for institutional cooperation, sharing of responsibilities for infrastructure development/upgradation, and transport policy alignment between the host countries of South Asia. The subregional countries have opportunities to collaborate in this regard by proactively participating in regional transport development initiatives taking place under the aegis of subregional organizations such as ECO, BIMSTEC and SAARC. Opportunities are also available by way of regional corridor development projects and programmes such as SASEC, BCIM, BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement, IMT Trilateral highway etc.

South Asian countries must also take advantage of technical and capacity-building support offered by intergovernmental bodies supporting regional connectivity projects. Integrating important rail and road segments of cross-border transport corridors of South Asia, UNESCAP has developed layouts of 'hub and spoke' corridor proposals linking inland industrial clusters to form an effective network. The main proposals, namely the TIP_BM road corridor and ITI-DKD-Y container rail corridors, together forms the blueprint of an extended multimodal land transport system for South

¹⁸ UNESCAP (2020d).

¹⁹ UNESCAP SSWA (2018c). It is estimated that South Asia will have to spend about 11% of the GDP on average for national infrastructure projects

²⁰ UNESCAP SSWA (2018b)

²¹ Along with major long-term projects such as bridging the gaps in rail connectivity, in the interim, alternative transport through segments of rail corridors that are available can be utilized along with the options of road transport where there are missing links Gupta *et al* (2019).

Asia.²² The broader Asian Highway (AH) and Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) networks promoted by UNESCAP offers firm basis for this sub regional network. For addressing operational issues, UNESCAP also offers policy tools for transport facilitation, frameworks for modernization and application of advanced technologies, transport facilitation models such as the Secure Cross Border Transport Model (SCBM) and the Efficient Cross-Border Transport Models (ECBTM), and model regional transport facilitation agreements.²³ Besides utilising such technical support, given the highly capital-intensive nature of transport corridor development, the subregion must also collectively find sources of financing with greater involvement of the private sector and multinational donor agencies.

2.3 Building regional infrastructure for energy and digital connectivity

South Asia will also have to rely on collective ability to mobilize investments in modern energy sources and energy trading infrastructure at a scale that is required to meet their ever-increasing energy requirements. They must meet the investment deficit in energy-generation capacity, building transmission and distribution infrastructure that is critical for diversifying energy supply, reducing losses, increasing reliability and improving access. A critical opportunity available in this regard is in terms of domestic energy endowments, including large unexploited hydroelectric potential, dispersed across the subregion. Intraregional differences in resource endowments, along with variations in the load curves across South Asia, offer advantageous opportunities for regional-level coordination and cooperation in electricity generation and its efficient use.

To realize the multidimensional goals of building regional energy infrastructure, South Asia must navigate through a host of policy choices, including joint investments for power generation and joint management of power distribution through cross-border electricity transmission lines and regional power grid. Progress in bilateral interconnections, particularly between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal forms the basis of cross-border electricity trade (CBET) in the subregion. The subregional countries must collaborate for eventual expansion to the western grid (Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia) and the southern grid (India-Sri Lanka) to form the regional power grid and a comprehensive regional power trading system.²⁴ The SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation (Electricity) signed in 2014 is an important framework to deeper regulatory alignment and infrastructural investments in this regard.

Another important area for development of regional infrastructural is that of digital connectivity. COVID-19 has brought forth the importance of bridging the digital divide by imposing increasing

²² For details of the TIPI-BM and ITI-DKD-Y corridors, see UNESCAP SSWA (2018c). These trunk routes have direct inland sub-links at various points to most of the industrial hubs located across the geographical spread of South Asia. With several completed and operational segments, facilitation of uninterrupted container traffic along these corridors is faced with issues of transport facilitation rather than investments.

²³ UNESCAP SSWA (2018c).

²⁴ UNESCAP SSWA (2018d).

reliance on virtual interfaces, digital payments, virtual learning and a host of services delivered through ICT platforms and networks. By participating in initiatives such as the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS) promoted by UNESCAP,²⁵ that aims to increase the availability and affordability of broadband technologies by strengthening the underlying infrastructure, South Asia can adopt collective actions at the regional level. There are also avenues for broadening regional ICT networks through co-deployment of fiberoptic cables along other passive infrastructure networks such as highways, roads, railways. By doing so, South Asia can build more internet exchange points resulting in better intra-regional data exchange, and efficient delivery of and access to digital services.

2.4 Climbing the learning curve together for addressing poverty and inequalities

Eliminating poverty (Goal 1) continues to be a fundamental sustainable development policy challenge for South Asia. Though rapid economic growth helped reduced extreme poverty, the subregion still accounts for about one-third of the world's poor. In 2020, 530 million people were found to be multidimensionally poor in South Asia, of which 44.8% are children (237 million).²⁶ Before the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak, South Asia witnessed high rates of annualized absolute reduction in multidimensional poverty. Subregional countries, notably India, Nepal, Bangladesh were on track to halve MPI between 2015-2030. However, the overlapping dimensions of poverty have worsened due to the pandemic, with poverty reduction trends being set back by 3 to 10 years. Reversing this regressive trend requires accelerated economic growth and job creation with accompanying policy measures to ensure that the benefits of growth are equitable shared. Mainstreaming MPI in policy responses can help South Asia to identify newly vulnerable groups and to plan and orient policy solutions from a multidimensional approach, integrating health, social and economic priorities. This would help to improve targeted social protection programmes, including universal access to education and health, and ensure access of vulnerable groups to opportunities created by rapid economic growth. As a common priority, subregional countries can gain substantially by working together, learning from each other's successful policy and practice changes and coordinating planning in this regard.

All south Asian countries have wide portfolio of welfare programmes aimed at reducing inequalities bolster equal economic opportunities. A variety of social safety nets including direct cash transfers, employment guarantee programmes, PDSs are being implemented in the subregional countries. Other national level other policy measures include rural development programmes, expanded credit availability, input subsidies and other financial incentives. A key determinant for the success of such programmes, besides efficient delivery, is the choice of the policy mix. Experimental evidence shows the cost-benefit calculus varies across programmers and

²⁵ UNESCAP SSWA (2018c). The UNESCAP-led initiative for the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS) aims to increase the availability and affordability of broadband internet across the region by strengthening the underlying internet infrastructure in the region.

²⁶ UNESCAP SSWA (2020a).

countries varies with size and scope, and on variables such as literacy gaps, level of financial inclusion, coverage of civil registration etc. Efficiency and accountability in programme delivery are necessary conditions for successful projects.

Given that the delivery of redistributive policies needs improvement, sharing experiences and good practices could provide valuable lessons for better beneficiary targeting, outreach, and depth and efficiency of coverage of public welfare programmes. Cross-learning can have a substantial impact on future design and efficiency in implementation. Enhanced stakeholder participation is another key area of synergies between South Asian countries. This can complement greater decentralized planning and implementation, enabling local actors and stakeholders to participate in policy making practices. However, this requires, (a) appropriate delegation of authority and functions to local governments, (b) enhancing their capacity to deliver on duties and responsibilities, and (c) facilitation of active involvement of non-governmental stakeholders for ensuring transparency. A participatory approach to policy planning is helpful in improving accountability and ensuring effective delivery. Seemingly small measures such as proper information dissemination about entitlements can have notable impacts by way of empowering recipients to demand full entitlements, reducing leakages and increasing efficiency.

2.5 Cooperation for ensuring food security

South Asia has the highest hunger burden in the world based on headcount of undernourished people, signifying that the subregion has a long way ahead for meeting the zero-hunger target (Goal 2). food security targets. At 14.7% in 2018, prevalence of undernourishment in South Asia is markedly higher than the world average.²⁷ As South Asia's rate of reduction in undernourishment is observed to be slowing down in recent years, the subregion faces a daunting task ahead on its way to the SDG target of zero hunger.²⁸ Food insecurity in South Asia is observed to be the result of a complex mix of factors - acting through one or more of all the four pillars of food security, viz. availability, access, utilization and stability – are common to subregional countries, especially as they share similar agrarian structures, development stages, climatic zones, market orientation and cultural practices which shape up how food is produced and consumed. Regional cooperation can help to raise the likelihood of success of nationally followed responses through exploiting the synergies. However, despite strong economic rationale, cooperative approach in the subregion remains suboptimal and suffers from institutional weaknesses.

While some of the targets of Goal 2 of the SDGs, such as correcting trade distortions in world agricultural markets, cannot be achieved without international cooperation, fulfilling others can be found to be often better through cooperation than otherwise. The subregion has existing

²⁷ FAO Food Security Indicators, accessed in November 2020.

²⁸ South Asia requires a much higher rate of decline of food deprivation than the past decades, without which the subregion would have as many as 252 million undernourished people by 2030, adjusting for population growth, with hardly any improvement from the baseline of hunger headcount.

foundational initiatives to foster regional cooperation in this area, given that sustainable agriculture and food security were among the most important priorities in the early years of SAARC.²⁹ The 15th SAARC Summit adopted what is referred to as the Colombo Statement on Food Security, identifying six thematic areas, including food production, investments in agro-industries, agricultural technologies, market interventions, and management of risk. Successive rounds of SAARC Summits have provided mandate for cooperation in wide range of topics related to food security, including, among others, the of SAARC Food Bank. The directives promised cooperation in areas ranging from agricultural productivity to technology, trade, food safety, price control, biodiversity, climate change and natural resource management. However, regionally coordinated policy responses in each of these areas are yet to take definitive shape.

Substantial increase in budgetary commitments are required to fulfil the new and reconfigured public policy targets of food security. Besides the obvious advantages of resource mobilization, the single most important benefit of regional cooperation would be that of greater allocative efficiency. UNESCAP's work on this topic highlights ten critical areas of cooperation for achieving SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) including cooperation for combatting climate change, regional trade liberalization, operationalization of regional food reserves, leveraging technology, sharing of good practices, regional institution building, coordinated positions in multilateral trade negotiations, addressing trans-boundary outbreak of livestock diseases, strengthening food safety standards, and the management of shared natural resources.³⁰ Multilateral development partners and specialised institutions are offering assistance at a regional level for making progress in each of these areas. Assistance is being for addressing operational issues of the SAARC Food Bank by UNESCAP, and FAO, IFAD and WFP.³¹ Similar institutional collaboration are underway to expand the work programmes of the SAARC Agriculture Centre. Opportunities for building institutional capacity through regional cooperation in a range of areas relevant for food security including agricultural technology, productivity, agro-business development and trade are provided by specialised regional institutions such as the Centre for Sustainable Agricultural Mechanization (CSAM) promoted by UNESCAP.³²

2.6 Enhancing access to social services – health and education

Good health and well-being (SDG 3) and quality education (SDG 4) are foundational for human resource development, economic growth and social stability. For South Asia, progress in terms of these two goals are critical for reaping the rich demographic dividend offered by its youthful population. Health and education of the labor force are vital for productivity, income growth and

²⁹ The Agreement Establishing South Asia Food Security Reserves was signed as early as 1987.

³⁰ Kumar and George (2020a).

³¹ For example, UNESCAP prepared a technical paper for the SAARC Food Bank Board (SFB) on resolving operational issues of the regional food reserve (Rahman *et al.*, 2020).

³² The Centre for Sustainable Agricultural Mechanization (CSAM) is a regional institution created by UNESCAP for facilitating technical cooperation in the area of sustainable agricultural mechanization and technology transfer, also covering agro-business development and regional trade.

structural transition of the economy into one with higher value additions.³³ The rights-based approaches to public health and education programmes followed by subregional countries have succeeded in reducing gaps in access to basic education and primary health services. However, closing the gaps in higher and vocational education and universal health coverage remains as daunting challenges in the way of utilizing human resource capital to its full potential.³⁴

National level actions are important for enhancing access to affordable and quality health and education services, with focus on universalizing coverage and reach of public programmes, creating skilling opportunities with the participation of private sector, gender-sensitive investments to reduce the gender gaps in access, better monitoring improved and empowered regulatory authorities, and sustainable financing. As most of these reform areas are common priorities for South Asian countries collaborative actions can help to improve their implementation and effectiveness. In the education sector, subregional countries can leverage their resources toward greater knowledge sharing, curriculum development, research collaborations, technology-sharing, collaboration between universities and institutions of higher education and strategic financing. Promoting greater mobility labor within the subregion can improve flexibility of labor markets, while reducing wage disparities and skill gaps.

Liberalized intra-regional trade in services and greater market integration can deliver efficiency gains to both health and education sectors. Health tourism already has exhibited high potential in South Asia. Subregional countries can benefit immensely through easier cross-border access to health care facilities, and trade in health care equipment and pharmaceuticals.³⁵ The scope for FDI cooperation in pharmaceuticals and health care equipment is also immense. While the SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services has been a promising instrument for making progress in this direction, several impediments continue to prevent its utilization. Prevention of cross-border transmission of diseases, to which South Asia is highly vulnerable, is another key area for regional cooperation. Lack of cross-border monitoring mechanisms exacerbate such vulnerabilities. Cooperation among subregional countries for containing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic can lead to greater engagements for systematically designed, implemented, and evaluated regional health policies and joint investments.

³³ It is estimated that between 1981 and 2010, human capital, as defined by the quantity and quality of education and skills development contributed to about 22% of annual GDP per worker growth in India, 21% in Bangladesh and 16% in Sri Lanka (ADB 2017).

³⁴ South Asian countries have succeeded in improving primary and secondary school enrolment rate gaps vis-à-vis other developing regions, while continuing to underperform in terms of enrollment in and quality of tertiary education and gender inequality in education (Asadullah *et al*, 2020).

³⁵ For a comprehensive exploration of barriers to trade in health services in South Asia, economic costs of such barriers, potential benefits of open trade and policy recourses thereof, see Banik (2020).

2.7 Joint natural resource management and combating environmental vulnerabilities

Enhancing preparedness to combat the disruptive impacts of disasters on development is critical to the implementation of the SDGs, and therefore is embedded across key goals and targets, especially in the environment related goals of climate action (Goal 13), life below water (Goal 14) and life on land (15). Regional cooperation is essential to address shared vulnerabilities given the transboundary nature of such vulnerabilities. South Asian countries can collaborate for pooling financial resources to buffer economies from negative growth impacts, for improving data and information sharing disaster occurrence and disaster statistics, and for creating regional assets including institutional mechanisms for disaster response. Information sharing on transboundary river basin floods, locust infestations, and slow-onset disasters such as droughts are especially useful for response planning. Growing intensity of air pollution, experienced by all subregional countries, is a critical transboundary environmental issue which can benefit from joint development and application of technologies, containment measures and changes in practices such as crop burning.

The need for regional cooperation in natural resource management is accentuated by the complex ways of interaction between various resource bases, demanding an integrated and holistic approach to resource management which permeates national borders. One of the ways the water-energy-food-nexus³⁶ is manifested in South Asia is by way of mounting pressure on water and energy resources from the ever-growing agrarian sectors including fisheries, livestock, forestry and numerous other primary sectors, with unpredictable environmental impacts. Areas of potential competition and conflict in natural resource management can be turned into opportunities under regional cooperation frameworks. Successful bilateral accords such as the Indus Water Treaty (1960) signed between India and Pakistan for sharing in Indus river system and Treaty (1996) signed between Bangladesh and India for sharing the waters of the Ganges are significant leads to be followed-up in this regard.

South Asia is facing a fast-changing disaster risk landscape with intersecting natural disasters, climate and biological hazards, and the compounding effects of a multitude of such risks demands new approaches to building resilience. Perhaps the most important priority in this regard is that of strengthening shared early warning systems. Subregional cooperation in this area can benefit from broad multilateral initiatives such the Regional Integrated Multi-hazard Early Warning System (RIMES), supported by the UNESCAP Multi-Donor Trust Fund for Tsunami, Disaster and Climate Preparedness.³⁷ Furthermore, the Asia-Pacific Disaster Resilience Network (APDRN) has been established by UNESCAP to support cooperation for early warning systems, functioning as a network of networks.³⁸ Along with institutional frameworks created under SAARC and

³⁶ The concept of “water-energy-food-nexus” is founded on the recognition that any action relevant for one of the three – water security, energy security and food security – would essentially have implications for the other two. See FAO (2014).

³⁷ UNESCAP SSWA (2018c)

³⁸ The APDRN, which serves to mobilize expertise and resources to establish multi-hazard early warning systems, is built around four work streams which all support establishing multi-hazard early warning systems.

BIMSTEC, regional institutions such as the Asian and Pacific Centre for the Development of Disaster Information Management (APDIM) can assist deepening data sharing mechanisms between the subregional countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has evolved from a health emergency into a development crisis, has exposed ways in which biological and natural hazard can converge, and thereby underscores the need for systematic integration of health considerations into disaster risk reduction strategies. UNESCAP collaborated with SAARC and BIMSTEC Secretariats and other partners in organizing discussions on ways to build resilience to cascading disasters in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak. The discussions emphasized the need for developing a comprehensive ‘South Asia disaster resilience framework’ comprising of various elements such as regional risk assessment tools, data sharing mechanisms, post-recovery action plans, disaster risk reduction funds and specially empowered tasks forces for rapid actions.³⁹ Subregional countries must also join together to build capacities based on technological innovations in remote sensing, modeling and GIS-based applications for better assessment and management of disasters risks. Creation of parametric insurance has enabled Innovations in financing disaster risk reduction and there are successful examples of deployment of such tools in South Asia.⁴⁰ These models need to be scaled up for strengthening resilience of communities at risk.

3. Regional Cooperation for Strengthening Means of Implementation

South Asia’s SDG prospects hinges on the subregion’s ability to develop institutional and financial capacities that constitute the means of implementation (MoI) targets. MoI targets represent a set of modalities and instruments build into the SDGs to improve chances of their successful implementation. As instruments, they can be broadly classified into financial and non-financial (institutions, technology, data, trade, international cooperation, aid and partnerships etc.), together denoting capacity-building for the 2030 Agenda in general.⁴¹ They are embedded in each Goal (24 MoI targets spread across SDGs 1-16), with the entire 19 targets of SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) considered as MoI. All subregional countries need to work together for enhancing key means of implementation targets for the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda in terms of regulatory and institutional frameworks, science, technology and innovation capabilities, statistical capacities and monitoring mechanisms and mobilization of financial resources.

³⁹ UNESCAP (2020b).

⁴⁰ A successful example of deploying parametric insurance for cascading disasters is from Nagaland, a landlocked state in north-eastern India, where index-based parametric insurance plans for drought, hailstorms, humidity, and floods were deployed (UNESCAP 2020c).

⁴¹ MOI targets are defined as an interdependent mix of financial resources, technology development and transfer, capacity-building, inclusive and equitable globalization and trade, regional integration, as well as the creation of a national enabling environment required to implement the new sustainable development agenda (UN/TST, 2013). For a concise discussion of the genesis, nature and content of MoI targets, see Bhattacharya and Ali (2014).

3.1 Building science, technology and innovation (STI) capabilities

South Asia lags behind in terms of science and technology capacities and innovation capabilities, a key enabler for most of the SDGs. Besides being a critical Goals (SDG 9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), Science, technology and innovation (STI) has been identified as one of means of implementation, finding its reference in many targets. Investment in research and development (R&D) has been comparatively lower in South Asia among developing regions of the world. Though India is an exception with demonstrated leadership in several STI fields and driving the South Asian average in R&D investment rates, India's figure is also lower than the average for developing countries. Reflecting the lower priority given to R&D expenditure, South Asian countries rank poorly in global innovation rankings.

Cooperation between R&D institutions can help to enhance the ability of all participating countries, particularly LDCs of the subregion, to absorb new and advanced technologies. Besides financing, success in acquiring STI strengths needs broad-based collaborations and long-term institutional build-up. Countries in the region with stronger capacities than others such as India can take lead in promoting STI capacity development, training, and R&D activities including through common facilities, incentives and support. Industrial cooperation through FDI flows can also promote acquisition and absorption of green technologies through joint ventures. Frugal and “green” engineering capabilities of the subregion can be instrumental for developing low carbon pathways. India possesses strengths in ‘frugal engineering and innovation’ (such as in affordable generic medicines, low cost automobile production, and space program). Reviving the Expert Group on Technology/Knowledge Sharing formed under SAARC with a firm and broader terms of reference can be helpful for regional cooperation for STI.⁴²

Digital technologies can be a critical lever for accelerating the 2030 Agenda and leaving no one behind. Deep-rooted ‘digital divide’ in the subregion, and its crippling effects, was exposed during the COVID-19 outbreak. From technologies such as fintech driving financial inclusion and rapid growth of access to financial services, access to internet for online learning, e-commerce platforms to frontier technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), digital technologies can promote delivery of a wide array of services, improve efficiency, and be an enabler for resilient growth, decarbonization, and resource and energy efficiency. For instance, the government of Bangladesh has established the a2i Programme which includes one-stop information and service delivery outlets for decentralized delivery of public services.⁴³ However, access to digital technologies remains very uneven with wide gender and income gaps.

⁴² The Expert Group on Technology, Knowledge Sharing (including energy efficiency, coal etc.) finalized its Terms of Reference and Work Plan in 2012.

⁴³ a2i (‘Access to Information’, also referred to as ‘Aspire to Innovate’) was introduced as the flagship programme of the Digital Bangladesh agenda.

3.2 Improving statistical systems and data availability

Complex interrelations between various SDGs also imply that integrated and disaggregated data systems are required to support development planning and monitoring. In order to meet demands of data requirements and for facilitating evidence-based policy making, national statistical capacities to provide high-quality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data to users must be strengthened. A regional approach to national statistical capacity building will help to develop common statistical standards, methodological processes, data reporting systems and comparable indicators that would help monitoring progress at the broader regional levels.

The COVID-19 outbreak has impacted traditional data collection methods, and statistical departments and agencies have stepped up to adopt new data collection methods, turning to alternate data sources such as big data to fill the data gaps. With the current challenges, new skills are needed to increase statistical capacities of all subregional countries such as in identifying data needs and in developing data visualization tools. In this regard, the South Asia SDG Forum of 2020 proposed that regular meetings between statistical agencies in South Asian countries under SAARC initiatives (SAARCSTAT) should be revived for sharing best practices, creating useful regional data repositories and for fostering collaboration for capacity-building of national statistical institutions and systems.⁴⁴

3.3 Cooperation for sustainable development financing

Diversifying and deepening of development financing is another common challenge for South Asian countries which can be addressed to a large extent through regional cooperation. There are substantial gaps in the subregional countries in terms of projected investment requirements for the implementation of SDGs and expected financial resource outlays. The estimated SDG investment needs in most of the subregional countries exceeds 15% of GDP, with the corresponding figures for Afghanistan, Bangladesh and India found to be above 25%, while the average projected financial inflows under optimistic scenarios is only about 5% of GDP for these countries.⁴⁵ Moreover, the fiscal space is being severely constrained due to the COVID-19 outbreak, imposing more spending commitments while shrinking revenue receipts. Following the outbreak of the pandemic, Asia-Pacific countries have implemented financial stimulus packages with an average size about 7% of their respective GDPs. In South Asia, the average size of stimulus packages so far has been at around 3.3%, varying among countries, indicating that the financial requirements to achieve the SDGs have become more difficult to be met with currently available resource pool.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ UNESCAP SSWA (2020a).

⁴⁵ Even before the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, domestic and external financing levels were found inadequate to meet the estimated investment requirements to achieve the SDGs in South Asia by 2030 in South Asia. UNESCAP (2019) highlighted that Asia-Pacific developing countries would need an additional annual investment of \$1.5 trillion to deliver on the SDGs agenda. Investment gap varied significantly across the region, rising to more than 16% of GDP in LDCs and more than 10% in South Asia- roughly translating to \$2 to \$3 per person a day.

⁴⁶ UNESCAP SSWA (2020b)

It is critical that the countries improve their fiscal space, while reprioritizing spending related to SDGs in lines with the demands of economic recovery. There are many viable ways to enhance the fiscal space by exploring multiple policy options such as phasing out of untargeted subsidy, lowering defence spending, widening tax bases, improving tax administration and increasing tax progressivity, relaxing fiscal rules and consider innovative financial instruments like SDG-bonds, improving public debt management and reducing illicit financial flows. In the current context, South Asia must utilise available instruments for regional financial cooperation to the extent possible, to sustain and improve development financing in the subregion.

A number of ongoing reform initiatives in the area of finance and trade payments have been taken up by various regional forums constituted under SAARC, along with policy proposals for greater flow of financial capital and intra-regional long-term investments (Box 1). Among these, cooperation in the area of banking under the regional body of central banks (SAARC Finance), holds immense promise because of the vital role of banking reforms. Member States could expedite the liberalization of banking and financial linkages by providing national treatment to designated banks originating in the subregion on a reciprocal basis. The ongoing work of the Inter-Governmental Expert Group (IGEG) on Financial Issues may give special focus to facilitation of cross-border operations of native banking institutions. To overcome limited access to international capital markets, especially in the LDCs of the subregion, UNESCAP suggests permission of enterprises from South Asian LDCs to list and raise capital in more developed capital markets in the subregion such as in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The cross-listing of securities in the subregion's stock exchanges can also be beneficial in this regard.

Box 1
Key Elements of Regional Financial Integration in South Asia

The mandates of SAARC Finance, the Inter-Governmental Expert Group (IGEG) on financial issues and the SAARC Public Debt Managers' Forum cover implementation of regional currency swap arrangements⁴⁷ and strengthening of the Asian Clearing Union (ACU) mechanism,⁴⁸ besides areas such as public debt management, cooperation in financing for infrastructural development, combating money laundering and illegal financial transactions, harmonization of fiscal and trade indicators and sharing of experience and best practices in the financial sector etc.⁴⁹ Implementation of the proposed SAARC

⁴⁷ The Regional Currency Swap Arrangement of \$2 billion operated by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to address temporary liquidity problems affecting South Asian countries members has been drawn upon in the context of COVID-19 by Maldives and Sri Lanka. RBI could consider enhancing the corpus of the facility to \$5 billion in view of the growing requirements of South Asian countries (UNESCAP SSWA 2020a and 2020b).

⁴⁸ Seven countries of the region are members of the Asian Clearing Union (ACU) (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). ACU provides a useful mechanism for promoting intraregional trade by reducing the need to transfer hard currencies for mutual trade. The ACU also provides a swap facility enabling members with a deficit to draw upon the reserves of other members for taking care of the short-term liquidity problems and is an important mechanism for regional cooperation. See UNESCAP SSWA (2012).

⁴⁹ A study commissioned by UNESCAP points towards the possibilities of using advanced technologies that are revolutionizing financial sector, which enables innovations, saving time and costs. Concerns about security, sources and types of flows can be addressed because electronic systems can discriminate between types of flows and provide detailed information without procedural delays. In modern payment systems finer restrictions can be imposed, as required, without raising transaction costs.

Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investments will be a huge advancement towards enhanced intra-regional flow of FDI. The SAARC Sub-Group on Investment and Arbitration can facilitate this process, while The SAARC Limited Multilateral Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation and Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters, which has already been signed, can further incentivize and strengthen regional investment flows.

Source: UNESCAP SSWA (2018b and 2020a)

4. Unpacking Modes of Regional Cooperation for SDGs in South Asia

South Asian countries have existing alliances through several subregional organizations, forums and legal instruments which together provide an institutional architecture for development cooperation. There are many ways alliances for development cooperation can be formed between a regional group of countries, ranging from formal commitments under established legal frameworks and agreements to collaboration in principle between groups of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders across countries. South Asia has the advantage of having a rubric of several overlapping subregional organizations and cooperation frameworks, the principal of them being the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), but also including the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal (BBIN) initiative, and the South Asian Sub-regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) etc., besides a number of bilateral agreements on various topics.

These groupings provide instruments for cooperation in several areas including trade, transport, and energy connectivity. Together they constitute an overarching cooperation framework which can go long way in strengthening a regional compact for the SDGs. Apart from cooperative frameworks at the intergovernmental level there are also platforms for fostering greater engagements on sustainable development between CSOs, think tanks, educational institutions and other non-governmental stakeholders. Multi-country programmes led by the United Nations system, multilateral organizations and development banks, aid donors and partners also offer opportunities for advancing regional cooperation. In the post COVID-19 period, with the amplified urgency for combining efforts for accelerating the SDGs, the subregional countries must employ these various forms of modes and instruments of cooperation available at their disposal.

4.1 Building on regional sustainable development resolutions: SAARC Development Goals

The Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA) appointed by the directives of the Twelfth SAARC Summit of (2014) was mandated with framing of the SAARC Development Goals, consisting of 22 priority goals and 67 indicators to be implemented initially over a 5-year term (2007-12).⁵⁰ One of the main objectives driving this effort was the collective

See Goyal (2014) and UNESCAP SSWA (2018b).

⁵⁰ Of the 22 priority goals 8 Goals pertain to livelihood, 4 to health, 4 to education and 6 to environment (MOSPI 2017). Also see ISACPA Report *Our Future, Our Responsibility* (2003).

resolve to achieve the MDGs in the subregion by 2015 and therefore the broad coverage of the Goals were intended for targeting poverty alleviation, health, education and environment. Together they expressed the regional will for a comprehensive and strategic response to the problems of social development. While their coverage was limited compared to the global sustainable agenda represented much more comprehensively by the SDGs, the resolutions and commitments adopted by the regional community for the SAARC Development Goals and the steps taken for their implementation played an important role as a preparatory to the call for regional commitments for the SDGs. The principally orientation of the regional Goals on addressing economic, social and environmental vulnerabilities is attune with the foundational development aspirations underpinning the SDGs, which provide a broader implementation framework, larger suit of indicators and greater scope for international cooperation through partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17). South Asian countries have opportunities to build upon the unique vantage points provided by the SAARC Development Goals, in terms of contextual clarity and institutional readiness, for meeting the requirements of regional policy coordination demanded by the SDGs.

4.2 Leveraging existing cooperation frameworks for a comprehensive regional partnership

Institutional capacities, legal and regulatory frameworks and numerous sectoral initiatives built sequentially at the subregional level can be leveraged for broader development partnerships. As far as economic integration is concerned, principally beginning with trade in goods and services and investment flows, the subregion is well positioned to take the agenda forward, also aided by major plurilateral trade agreements besides SAFTA, including the Framework Agreement on BIMSTEC Free Trade Area, ECOTA and APTA. However, as the pressure for expanding the scope and increasing the speed of regional economic integration is rising, the existing regional agreements and arrangements would need to find ways to deepen themselves and at the same time complement each other so as to enable participating countries to integrate and execute cross-border reform initiatives more efficiently. Since all bilateral and regional economic integration initiatives are moving in the same direction of expanding coverage, and because they share overlapping memberships, it is increasingly becoming possible for the main subregional groupings to reach common grounds.

Woven together, various elements under the SAARC framework provide the fragments for a comprehensive trade-plus economic alliance in the subregion. Framework for economic integration in the subregion is constituted by a string of legal instruments for harmonization of trade standards, customs cooperation, transit, energy cooperation, transport connectivity which are either already adopted or being negotiated. Creation of a specialized regional institutions in the form of the South Asian Regional Standards Organization (SARSO) is a prime example.⁵¹ Together with the SAARC Agreement on Multilateral Arrangement on Recognition of Conformity

⁵¹ The South Asian Regional Standards Organization (SARSO), established in Dhaka in 2011, works towards developing regional standards and has the potential to play an important role in establishing uniform product standards throughout the subregion. Nevertheless, a multilateral arrangement for conformity assessment, or product compliance with technical standards, should be adopted within the SAARC framework to alleviate phytosanitary barriers to trade while reducing risks.

Assessment and the SAARC Agreement on Implementation of the Regional Standards, as two key contributory policy instruments under negotiations, intra-regional trade can benefit immensely from strengthened standards-related capacities, establishment of accreditation bodies, MRAs, and easier and transparent application of trade standards.

Equally contributory are various instruments and initiatives for trade facilitation measures and intra-regional financial flows, and the potential role that SATIS can play for liberalizing services trade. In fact, it is possible for South Asia to consolidate current arrangements under a new framework to exploit synergies that permits deep trade liberalization at the regional level and thereby foster the growth of regional value chains and strengthen South Asian participation in global trade. UNESCAP proposed the creation of a South Asia Comprehensive Economic Partnership (SACEP) as such a unifying framework for different elements of regional trade reforms and building on them (Box 2).

Box 2
Blueprint for a South Asia Comprehensive Economic Partnership (SACEP)

The SACEP framework proposed by UNESCAP calls for consolidation of various elements of regional reforms for liberalization of trade in goods and services and cross-border investment flows, along with allied facilitative measures for trade and transport facilitation. The framework shall cover seven key policy priorities, namely a) advancing the liberalization of trade in goods, b) strengthening facilitation of transport and trade at the land borders, c) effective liberalization of regional trade in services, d) investment promotion to foster regional value chains, e) harmonizing product standards and conformity assessment procedures, f) cumulative rules of origin and industrial cooperation, g) coordination of international payment arrangements and banking cooperation.

Some of the most promising developments in this regard are taking place in the areas of trade facilitation. Article 8 (Additional Measures) of SAFTA provides for a broad range of measures to complement the Tariff Liberalization Programme (TLP, Article 7) to address non-tariff barriers of diverse forms and characters. As per the mandate given by Article 8, the SAFTA Ministerial Council has directed the SAARC Secretariat to form various sub-groups to address each of the major trade impediments. Some of the main such activities and bodies include the Sub-Group on Customs Cooperation, Sectoral Technical Committees under SARSO, Expert Group on Accreditation, Inter-Governmental Expert Group (IGEG) on Financial Issues, SAARC Finance, and SAARC Sub-Group on Investment and Arbitration.

Alongside these developments on the front of trade in goods, framework for trade in services and for intra-regional FDI is also in progress. Under the SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS), which entered into force in 2012, ten meetings of the Expert Group on SATIS have been held, closing in towards Schedules of Specific Commitments by member states. The implementation of the proposed SAARC Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investments will be a huge advancement towards enhanced regional flow of foreign direct investment (FDI). The SAARC Limited Multilateral Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation and Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters, which has already been signed, will also incentivize and strengthen regional investment flows.

In addition, regional cooperation in the fields of sustainable agriculture, food security, education and human resource development etc. are being overseen by specialized institutions such as the SAARC Energy Centre (SEC), SAARC Agricultural Centre (SAC), SAARC Disaster Management Centre

(SDMC) and SAARC Human Resources Development Centre (SHRDC). These institutions can help to advance a sectoral approach to regional economic cooperation.⁵² Along with the specialized institutions dealing with various sectoral issues, the SAARC Secretariat's approach of commissioning issue based working groups can facilitate an effective regional administrative framework. The essential ingredients for realizing the proposal for SACEP are thus well in place.

Source: UNESCAP SSWA (2018c), and Kumar and George (2020b).

4.3 Fostering participation of stakeholder groups

Effective implementation of the SDGs requires broad multi-stakeholder partnerships for fostering a participatory process from policy planning to monitoring and evaluation. Such partnerships are critical to ensure that varying capacity endowments of different stakeholder groups becomes complementary to each other. For instance, building data and statistical capacities will be more effective when national statistical agencies join hands with the private sector, CSOs, think-tanks and the academia to strengthen data ecosystems, improve statistical standards, widen data coverage and narrow gaps.

Most of the subregional countries have adopted ways to improve stakeholder participation by adopting it as one of the main areas of institutional reforms with respect to SDG implementation. India made a paradigm shift by adopting a “whole of society” approach, engaging with CSOs, local communities, and people in vulnerable situations and the private sector.⁵³ Other South Asian countries have also generally followed similar initiatives to localize the SDGs and established a framework covering both the national and subnational levels. Wider stakeholder participation also helps to undertake joint costing exercises and identify new funding sources. Besides promoting cross-learning on effective modes of broader stakeholder participation, cooperation at the regional level can also facilitate cooperation between non-governmental stakeholder groups from different countries. With the aim of supporting inclusive approaches in the subregion UNESCAP, along with partner organizations, has initiated a unique virtual platform under an initiative called the South Asia Network on the SDGs (SANS). The Network hosts a dedicated and contributory web portal as a space for different stakeholder groups to learn from and partake in sustainable development practices (Box 3).

⁵² For instance, the SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation (Electricity) of 2014, and oversight by the SAARC Energy Centre, enables legal frameworks for cross-border electricity trade, pricing, harmonization of regulatory arrangements, national and regional institutional architecture, investment cooperation, modalities of private sector involvement, ownership and management of common energy infrastructure, development of codes for coordinated grid operations numerous other issues. See Wijayatunga and Fernando (2013) for an exposition on the evolution of formal institutional arrangement in South Asia building upon several bilateral power trading projects. There has been steady and incremental progress in terms of legal and institutional frameworks, starting from bilateral cross-border arrangements to shared generation capacities, and to formation of apex institutions for a comprehensive approach to governance of regional energy cooperation.

⁵³ At the subnational and local levels, there are planning departments that map and sets targets to develop the SDG vision roadmaps. India has also identified 13 population groups and one regional group, while documenting challenges, aspirations and commitments in consultation with the CSO network where over 1000 CSOs participated in national and local consultations (NITI Aayog 2020).

Box 3

South Asia Network on the SDGs (SANS)

The South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals (SANS) was established by UNESCAP South and South-West Asia Office in partnership with prominent think-tanks from subregional countries. The Network was set up to foster greater subregional cooperation by sharing good practices for achieving the SDGs and facilitate knowledge sharing among all regional stakeholder groups including policy makers, subnational and local government representatives, think-tanks, development practitioners, civil society organizations. The Network serves the objective of providing a platform for various stakeholders to contribute together in various aspects of sustainable development planning and thereby allowing a participatory approach to implementation of the SDGs in the subregion. The Network hosts a dedicated web portal which serves as a repository of good practices on all SDGs from across South Asia. It also aims to function as an intermediary for forming partnerships between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. The Network also gives thrust to knowledge products and policy lessons for resilient recovery from the COVID-19 outbreak, with specific resources that cater to the twin objectives of build back better from the adverse socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and acceleration of SDG implementation in South Asia.

4.4 Utilizing opportunities provided by multilateral development partners

Alongside the activities coordinated by regional organization, multi-country development projects and programmes also offer avenues to promote cooperation for the SDGs. Multilateral development banks (MDBs) have been an important source of financing for a variety of development projects in South Asia, particularly on physical infrastructure. Along with traditional investors including the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), newly established institutions such as the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are emerging as new sources financing. As founding members of the AIIB, South Asian countries are emerging as its prominent borrowers, together accounting for around 46% of approvals in numbers or magnitudes of loans portfolio issued over 2016- 2019, in many critical areas such as sustainable energy generation and distribution that overlaps with SDG implementation. Many of regional initiatives spearheaded by MDBs, such as the SASEC projects on infrastructure by ADB, also thrive on co-financing and resource pooling and hence can galvanize political support for sustainable development priorities at the regional level.

Another notable emerging trend is that of growing collaborative ventures between MDBs as well as with other stakeholders including the private sector, drawing upon their collective experiences and fostering synergies, in order to be able to respond to development priorities in a better way. Partnerships for development financing often spills over to technical cooperation and this can incrementally larger to larger group initiatives by integrating project-based commitments for such cooperation. There are also examples of this from growing intensification of South–South and

triangular cooperation which are expanding the development finance landscape of South Asia. The size of fund flows broadly categorized under South-South cooperation is estimated to have exceeded US\$ 20 billion by 2018, with visible impact on both financing and technical assistance, assuming a variety of roles cutting across infrastructural investments, knowledge sharing, training and capacity building and technology transfer. Growing presence of India in South-South cooperation landscape provides an opportunity to structure and streamline such cooperation streams in South Asia, channelize such streams to activities that are most relevant for the implementation of the SDGs.

Many international development organizations, particularly the United Nations and its various arms including UNESCAP, give specific thrust to SDGs related capacity building and technical assistance. As the regional apex body in the Asia-Pacific region, and with its convening power, multisectoral agenda of work and strategic presence at the subregional levels, UNESCAP is uniquely placed to not only promote the ideal of deeper cooperation in South Asia but also provide a forum to come together for fostering broader regional integration. The expertise of the organization in thrust areas such as trade, transport, social development, energy, environment, ICT and disaster risk reduction, and statistics are being utilized for measures supporting SDGs through a Regional Roadmap for the implementation of the 2030 Development Agenda. UNESCAP can form partnerships with MDBs to combine technical know-how, policy advisory and knowledge resources, networking with regulatory authorities and funding opportunities. There are several areas, such as energy and transport connectivity, in which such partnerships are productively employed. Joint activities on the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) programme led by ADB to promote connectivity in the subregion is an example.⁵⁴ The annual South Asia SDG Forums organized by UNESCAP presents a unique platform for countries and stakeholders from the subregion join together to share subregional perspectives on SDGs, monitor progress, identify priorities, share good practices, highlight critical outcomes and frame recommendations.⁵⁵ This process has emerged as an important catalyst for regional cooperation for the SDGs in South Asia.

5 Mainstreaming Regional Cooperation in COVID-19 Crisis Response

Response to the devastations caused by the pandemic demands collective actions by South Asian countries for greater impact and effectiveness. Several initiatives have already been adopted for subregional cooperation for resilient recovery, particularly for addressing the health emergency. Besides the COVID-19 SAARC Emergency Fund, the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) has allocated \$5 million for COVID-19 related projects. Other major efforts include an electronic platform called 'SAARC COVID-19 Information Exchange Platform (COINEX)' for exchange of COVID-19 related health information and training, and a dedicated COVID-19 website by the

⁵⁴ For example, a trial run of the Secure Cross-border Transport Model developed by UNESCAP was conducted along Bhutan-India Transit Corridor with the support of ADB in 2014.

⁵⁵ UNESCAP SSWA (2018a and 2020a).

SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC). Further actions have been taken for cross-border distribution of COVID-19 vaccines at affordable rates in recent times, and these resource redeployment actions triggered by the pandemic promises a positive momentum and impetus for greater regional cooperation.⁵⁶

For meeting the increasing needs of development financing in the post-COVID-19 era, UNESCAP has proposed that South Asian countries could consider transforming the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) into a South Asian Development Bank, enabling it to raise capital from the markets and catalyzing much larger infrastructure projects through co-financing arrangements with other multilateral development finance institutions such as the ADB or AIIB.⁵⁷ Effort should to build back better by turning the crisis into an opportunity, to create more equal, sustainable and resilient societies in South Asia, helping the subregion to also close the SDG gaps expeditiously.

6. Concluding Remarks

Enhanced regional cooperation is critical for meeting the SDGs in South Asia as finding collective solutions to development challenges would be more effective, efficient and faster, especially given that many of the challenges to sustainable development are common for the subregional countries and their complex interactions are intensifying and increasingly tend to transcend borders. While economic cooperation and integration at the regional level has produced results as a powerful tool in empowering neighborhoods of nation states in many parts of the world, the South Asia subregion has lagged behind in harnessing its full potential, and still remains as an underperformer in terms of poverty reduction and other indicators of sustainable development. In the context of the development disruptions being caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the worrying trend of deceleration in SDG progress even prior to the onset of the pandemic, the relevance of and urgency for regional cooperation is now more than ever before in the subregion.

South Asia stands to gain substantially from trade and economic integration, as the potential for intra-regional trade in goods alone is found to be at least three times the current levels. By exploring the synergic relationships between intra-regional trade in goods and services, cross-border investments, and by building linkages through cross-border connectivity infrastructure for transport and energy, the subregion can usher in a transformative era of economic diversification and growth oriented on environmental sustainability. The scope of regional cooperation for SDGs in South Asia extends well beyond trade and economic integration, and include joint actions to

⁵⁶ UNESCAP SSWA (2020a). Besides urgent measures to enhance the capacity of health sector to deal with the pandemic, this study report recommends a comprehensive approach spanning many areas of the SDGs. The report recommends greater collaborate in digital technologies to improve public health infrastructure and efficiency, developing international helplines, health portals, online disease surveillance systems and telemedicine, and affordable test kits, vaccines and treatments for COVID-19. The study was prepared as a part of the UNESCAP Framework on Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19.

⁵⁷ Ibid. Also See UNESCAP SSWA (2018b). Currently, the Fund has three windows for financing: a social window for poverty alleviation and social development projects; an infrastructure window for projects in the energy, power, transportation, environment, telecommunications, tourism and other infrastructure areas; and an economic window devoted to non-infrastructure economic projects.

address pervasive and cross-cutting issues of multidimensional poverty, inequalities, food insecurity, gaps in access to education, health, transport infrastructure and services, energy, digital connectivity, climate change, disaster risks and development financing deficits.

South Asia has a wide portfolio of policy tools, institutional capacities, legal and regulatory frameworks to leverage regional cooperation, principally constituted by initiatives under SAARC, but also provided by overlapping memberships other regional organizations and groupings such as BIMSTEC, the BBIN and SASEC initiatives. These platforms together provide South Asian countries a multitude of channels and alternative options to pursue regional economic integration in a comprehensive way. Existing policy tools and instruments available under SAFTA alone has steadily expanded over the years to cater to various demands of deeper trade and economic integration, and the subregion has prospects for consolidating them into a South Asia Comprehensive Economic Partnership (SACEP).

The subregional countries must also make SDG programming more inclusive and participatory with wider stakeholder engagements at the regional level, utilizing their complementary resource and capacity endowments. Initiatives such as SANS and the annual South Asia SDG Forums led by UNESCAP provides platforms for carrying forward a ‘whole of society’ approach to SDG implementation. Multi-country programmes for sustainable development in the subregion led by multilateral organizations and development banks, aid donors and partners also are important avenues for advancing the regional cooperation agenda, as such programmes often spills over from development financing to technical cooperation, capacity-building opportunities and consensus building on development policy built around such financing streams.

Prolonged global economic slowdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and resultant disruptions to SDG implementation, potentially implies a paradigm shift in the conventionally followed rationales of regional cooperation. The crisis imposes an urgent need for integrating SDG implementation with strategies for resilient recovery from the crisis, enforcing pledges for ‘build back better’. The synergies between these two priorities are broad and robust, permitting possibilities for a cohesive approach to SDG programming and crisis response, provided resource allocation is more prudently made against rising development financing commitments and constrained funding sources. However, the resurgence in regional cooperation triggered by the crisis in South Asia in the aftermath of the crisis - demonstrated by emergency measures in health, deployment of a regional COVID-19 relief fund, information sharing mechanisms, and cooperation for vaccine distribution – promises the advent of a new era for the subregional countries, setting course on united path to the achievement of the SDGs by 2030.

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