

**Sub-regional Workshop on Aligning Policies and Strategies to Achieve
the Millennium Development Goals in South Asia
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Opening Remarks by
H.E. Dr. Sheel Kant Sharma
Secretary General
South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

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Distinguished Speakers,
Delegates from SAARC Member States,
Representatives from UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to address the inaugural session of the South Asian Regional Workshop to review the implementation progress of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

At the outset, I would like to quote from a very recent statement of the Hon. Prime Minister of India, and I quote, "The threats thrown up by the global economic crisis, regional volatility and the rise of terrorism are nowhere compared to the problems the World's largest democracy faces at home. If we can get our house in order, if we can liberate each and every citizen from the tyranny of poverty, ignorance and disease, there is no external challenge we cannot overcome... committed to annual growth rates of between 9 % to 10%... no agenda for building a new India can any longer be imposed from New Delhi .. What is true for India is also true for all other South Asian countries."

It has been almost a decade that the UNGA adopted the MDGs. When the world first spoke of such goals at the Millennium Summit, the world leaders affirmed to address the identified eight Goals as central to expending social and economic Development.

As we meet today to take stock of our progress made against MDGs, its clear that in South Asia, in case of some MDGs, we are far away from the set benchmarks. In terms of absolute number, South Asia has about 420 million people still living in abject poverty, with limited access to basic health care, shelter, education and critical natural resources. Most of our people, especially in rural areas, suffer from protein-energy deficiency. Notwithstanding some progress reported by in this region, overall score-card in attaining the MDGs has been a rather mixed one.

We ought to be more committed to listening and learning where things went wrong: and, how to take corrective measures. That's to be, I understand, the essence of all discussion at the plenary as well as sectoral sessions of this Workshop over the three days.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While you remain dedicated in your work at the national levels to implementing and monitoring the MDGs, SAARC primarily is focused on regional level on the inter-governmental plane. Ever since the MDGs were adopted, SAARC's efforts at the regional level had been to facilitate and expedite the national actions - in terms of policies, strategies, programmes.

When SAARC began its journey two and half decades back, "poverty alleviation" was set as the Association's over-arching goal. To articulate regional measures in poverty alleviation, in 1993, the first "The Independent South Asia Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA)", drawing eminent experts from the region, was commissioned to articulate the collective actions on poverty alleviation, particularly suited to regional situation. The recommendations of that Commission remained the driving parameters for regional cooperation in poverty alleviation and most of actions cutting across cooperation in other sectors. A decade since then, a second Commission i.e. ISACPA - II was set in to take stock of the progress made; and suggest further measures. One of Commission's primary focus was to suggest how best to advance national-level implementation of the MDGs/SDGs.

In course of their work, the Commissioners demonstrated that while the poverty dynamics have been under change, unlike many other regions of the World, the Region also offers numerous solutions, characterized as "best practices". Indeed, these are essentially products of local motivation, initiatives and resources. Most of these further share unique potential of region-wide replication, adaptability – thanks to the Region's commonalities.

In an attempt to deepen regional endeavour in poverty alleviation, in 2005, the SAARC Heads of State/Government fully adopted the ISACPA Report "Our Future, Our Responsibility", launched the 22 SAARC Development Goals (SDGs), declared the Decade of 2006-2015 as one of Poverty Alleviation and brought in a two-tier regional mechanism. Around the same time, a cross-cutting SAARC Social Charter (2004) was launched. Implementation of the Charter is coordinated by senior officials – at Secretary Level – from Governments who nationally are in charge of coordinating implementation of the MDGs.

As most of you are aware, the SDGs, clustered in four areas - Education, Health, Environment and Livelihood - are to contextualise the MDGs in South Asia and speed up implementation of the MDGs. They are set out with a five year timeframe (2005-2010), essentially to contribute faster realization of the MDGs. Since 2005, ISACPA has further developed a set of benchmarks and implementation modalities which the national authorities - in different sectors – were to build in within respective planning processes to ensure timely implementation of the SDGs, and thereby attain the MDGs. But, in our interactions within SAARC processes, we often noted a lack of due awareness of the SDGs and appreciation that the SDGs are to add value in realization of the MDGs. ISACPA has drawn an elaborate Action Plan as also Operational Recommendations. Though our Governments have made some progress in realization of those nationally, much of those remain unrealized still. This is one aspect the Workshop needs to look into.

Let me refer to another aspect, to illustrate my point. Since 2002, with support of UNDP, the SAARC has been bringing out the "Regional Poverty Profiles". These are intended to promote greater sharing of the best practices and experiences among the Member States. The Profiles, coming through cross-sectoral consultation, especially at country-level, are envisaged to serve as policy tools for promoting regional cooperation on poverty alleviation

as also to act as advocacy tool. RPP 2007 is on "Poverty Reduction through Infrastructure (Rural) Development"; and the next one is to be on "Food Security – Poverty Alleviation". However, in spite of considerable amount of best practices and replicable country experiences identified, we noted, these remain largely untapped by countries. The Workshop needs to take this aspect into account in deliberations.

At the same time, here could be much greater interaction at Government – Civil Society plane to draw upon those. This is especially because large part of such innovative solutions and best practices came out in course of their work at the grassroots.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Within SAARC, at the turn of the Association's completion of two decades, in 2005 the Leaders announces its Third Decade as one of implementation. Within each sector, a greater focus is now on implementation of the agreed Plans, Strategies, Programmes. This is manifest in sectors key to live and livelihoods of majority of poor and marginal population in South Asia – Agriculture, Energy, Environment – to name a few. To that end, increasing focus is also on undertaking focused Projects on regional or, sub-regional basis. A 300 million dollar regional Funding Mechanism "SAARC Development Fund (SDF)" is in operation to support such Projects. SDF has already put into ground two social sector Projects, with over US\$ 26 million; and few more are in the process. These Projects may be small compared to much larger national endeavours, but these are conceived of designed essentially to fill gaps in critical areas, mobilizing resources from the Region itself!

Here, it would be pertinent to mention of the second SDF – financed Project related to Maternal & Child Health Care. We all recognize, in MDG 3 and also 4, our countries are mostly lagging behind. Now, this Project aims to provide minimal facilities – by way of training of paramedics and nurses; upgrade physical infrastructure; and providing basic core set of equipments – at grassroots levels in countries to check neonatal mortality i.e. within first four weeks and indeed maternal mortality. Our entire objective is to create a replicable model for Region, which the Governments can upscale later.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our experience, within SDF and other regional processes tell, this Review could not be more timely. My appreciation to the UN Agencies and all other institutions for organizing this Workshop; and bringing all the key policy-related officials from the eight Governments, face to face. I am confident, they would all return to their capitals with enriching experience, and with the difference needed to realize timely implementation of the MDGs.

Let that be our pledge to the millions of South Asians waiting to see a difference happen, in their own life-time! As ISACPA Report concluded, "...Notwithstanding the despair of poverty statistics, a poverty free South Asia is not an impossible dream...Realising it is our individual and collective responsibility."

Thank you.