

## **SAARC after Three Decades: An Assessment of Progress in Regional Cooperation in Functional Areas (1985–2015)**

Manzoor Ahmad Naazer\* Sumbal Hussan†

### **Abstract**

*The paper explores the progress of regional cooperation in various functional areas as identified by South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) since its inception in 1985. It also examines whether and to what extent SAARC has been successful in accomplishing the goals enshrined in its charter. SAARC was formed: to promote peace, amity, stability and progress in the region; to promote the welfare and quality of life of people; to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development, and; to attain collective and national self-reliance through joint efforts. SAARC made significant progress in several areas, such as: agriculture and rural development; environment; science and technology; human resource development including education, arts, culture and sports; transport; telecommunications, and information and communication technology; tourism, and energy. It has concluded several agreements and conventions besides setting up a few regional centres to realize its objectives. Generally, SAARC has not been successful in implementing its programs and projects due to various reasons. It has been short of achieving several of its goals which makes its performance dismal.*

**Key Words:** SAARC, South Asia, Regional Cooperation, IPA, Performance.

### **Introduction**

The history of South Asia marked a new beginning when the leaders of seven South Asian Countries (SACs) met for the first time in Dhaka, Bangladesh on December 7–8, 1985, and they decided to pool energies and resources together in order to address their common problems. They officially launched South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) with stated aims to promote “peace, stability, amity and progress in the region,” and to address their common problems as well as to attain “national and collective self-reliance” through working collectively in different fields. They declared to achieve several objectives that included: to advance the wellbeing and quality of life of their

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\* Assistant Professor, Department of Politics & International Relations, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: [manzoor.ahmad@iiu.edu.pk](mailto:manzoor.ahmad@iiu.edu.pk)

† Junior Research Fellow at HRC, Islamabad, Pakistan.

people; to speed up economic development, social growth and cultural expansion; to enhance and fortify member's collective self-sufficiency; to construct mutual understanding, confidence, and appreciation of each other's problems; advance regional cooperation in cultural, social, economic, scientific and technical areas; help espouse common stance in global forums and international bodies on issues of mutual interests and; to advance collaboration with other transnational organizations with alike objectives. SAARC has completed 30 years of its existence which is a sufficient time for an organization to realize its goals. It leads one to ask: has and to what extent SAARC been able to achieve its objectives enshrined so eloquently in its charter?

In the context of complex nature of relationship among SACs and the intricate regional history, survival of SAARC in itself is a significant achievement. Besides, it has made notable progress in several areas which need a detailed and systematic investigation. This paper aims to survey the performance of SAARC since its inception. The paper has been divided into five sections: the first being introduction, second section elucidates a brief overview of the origin and evolution of South Asian regionalism, third section surveys the progress on regional cooperation in various fields as identified and agreed upon by SAARC members, the fourth section involves an analysis of SAARC performance and, the fifth section is the conclusion.

## **Origin and Evolution of South Asian Regionalism**

Several regional and extra-regional developments stimulated creation of SAARC. Former President of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rehman, produced its idea. Motivated by achievements of cooperative arrangements in other regions of the world, he primarily discussed the idea with leadership of Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka in his visits to these states (1977–1980). It helped elucidate their views and perspectives on regional cooperation. In November 1980, Bangladesh disseminated a working paper outlining the objectives, principles, and possible areas of regional cooperation (ARC) besides the constitution of the proposed organization that included nearly a whole design of South Asian regionalism (Government of Bangladesh 1980; Inayat 2007, pp.17-18). The rest of SACs welcomed the move but India and Pakistan responded apprehensively and cautiously. Keeping in view the South Asian history, SACs decided to move gradually.

The process of institutionalizing South Asian regionalism passed through three separate stages. First stage (1981 – 1983) included four rounds of foreign secretaries' meetings which finalized the "basic framework" of regional cooperation. It prepared the ground for foreign ministers' level meetings and raised the process to political level. Foreign secretaries agreed to make decisions

“on the basis of unanimity” and to exclude “bilateral and contentious issues” in the deliberations. They outlined the principles, objectives, and aims, of regional cooperation and they were, afterward, incorporated in SAARC charter. They also explored and identified the possible ARC and prepared an “Integrated Programme of Action” (IPA) (SAARC Secretariat 1988).

Second stage (1983 – 85) included four meetings at the foreign ministers’ level who initiated “South Asian Regional Cooperation” (SARC) after signing SARC declaration on 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 1983. They approved the institutional and financial arrangements prepared by foreign secretaries and also finalized the preparatory work for the first ever South Asian summit to be convened in Dhaka in the first week of December 1985. Thus, the process entered into third phase (SAARC Secretariat 1988).

The leaders of SACs met in Dhaka and formerly launched SAARC on December 08, 1985 after signing its charter that contains 10 articles which describe its aim and objectives, principles, general provisions, organizational structure and financial arrangements etc. SAARC summits constitute the highest forum of the organization that involves meetings of members’ heads of the states or governments. As per an amendment made in the charter in 2014, the heads of states or government must meet once in “every two years or earlier, if necessary.” The Council of Ministers (COM), encompassing members’ foreign ministers, is the second top body and main decision making forum of SAARC which must meet “once a year.” The SAARC Standing Committee (SSC) consisting of members’ foreign secretaries also meets once a year. It mainly devises policies and programs and submits reports to COM. The SAARC Programming Committee (SPC) includes members’ senior officials and it must meet “at least twice a year.” SAARC also have several technical committees (TCs) and Working Groups (WGs), both comprising of the members’ representatives. Their responsibilities include monitoring, coordinating and implementing of the projects and programmes.

### **Progress of Regional Cooperation in Agreed Areas**

SAARC identified ARC and made significant progress to realize its objectives in various fields. It gradually expanded its programs and activities and sometimes reconsidered many of them. Bangladeshi Working Paper (BWP) had suggested possible ARC which included; a) telecommunications, b) meteorology, c) transport, d) shipping, e) tourism, f) joint ventures, g) agricultural / rural sector, h) technological and scientific cooperation, i) market expansion in chosen items, j) cultural cooperation and k) education and technical cooperation (Government of Bangladesh 1980).

Foreign secretaries in their earliest meeting, convened in Colombo on April 21–23, 1981, took note of the proposed ARC as contained in BWP and set up, as an initial step, five Study Groups (SGs) related to these areas: agriculture; meteorology; telecommunications; rural development, and; health and population activities. In their second meeting (Katmandu, Nepal on November 02 – 04, 1981), the foreign secretaries converted the existing five SGs into the WGs and set up three more SGs in the following fields: transport; postal services, and; science and technology (S&T). Foreign secretaries in their third meeting (Islamabad on August 07–09, 1982), converted above three SGs into WGs and decided to set up a SG on Sports, Arts and Culture. They also established a Committee of the Whole (CW), chair by Sri Lanka, to prepare an IPA based on the recommendations of the WGs. On recommendations of CW, the foreign secretaries in their fourth meeting, convened in Dhaka on March 28 – 30, 1983, agreed to re-designate WGs as TCs and decided to recommend their foreign ministers to adopt IPA (SAARC Secretariat 1988).

The Foreign Ministers in their first gathering (New Delhi on August 01–02, 1983), launched IPA in the following nine areas: agriculture; health and population activities; rural development; meteorology; scientific and technological cooperation; postal services; telecommunication; transport, and; arts, sports, and culture. Thus, at the time of its launching in 1985, SAARC had nine TCs to accomplish tasks in the above stated areas (SAARC Secretariat 1988). Subsequently, it created a few more TCs as and when new ARC were identified, which included: women development (1986); prevention of drug abuse and drug trafficking (1987); education (1989); tourism (1991); environment (1992), and; energy (2000). Meanwhile, SAARC transferred the matters of forestry to TC–agriculture, amalgamated two distinct TCs on telecommunications and postal services into a single one, i.e. TC–communications; in 1993, combined TC–education with TC–sports, arts and culture to create a single TC–education and culture, and; fused TCs on environment and meteorology together. SACs reconstituted IPA first as “SAARC Integrated Programme of Action” (SIPA) in 1999 and then as “Regional Integrated Programme of Action” (RIPA) effectual from January 2004 (SAARC Secretariat 1995; 2004-b). Thus, several TCs were combined together and their number was brought down to seven from eleven and they covered these areas: 1) agriculture and rural development; 2) science and technology (also deals meteorology); 3) women, youth and children; 4) health and population activities; 5) environment (also deals forestry); 6) transport, and; 7) human resource development (included arts, culture and sports and education and skill development), (TC-HRD). In 2007, SAARC shifted the mandate of TC–HRD to SAARC Human Resource Development Centre (SHRDC), Islamabad. Thus, now it has six TCs (SHRDC 2015). Under RIPA, SAARC had created the following

five Working Groups (WGs) in order to promote regional cooperation in their respective areas: 1) telecommunications, and information and communication technology (ICT); 2) energy; 3) tourism; 4) biotechnology, and; 5) intellectual property rights (IPR) (SAARC Secretariat 2004-a). WG–IPR is no more in the list. WGs prepare, oversee, evaluate, coordinate and monitor SAARC programs and activities and also suggest sources and means to finance their implementation. They meet regularly to give their inputs on their respective areas and to carry out instructions of higher bodies of SAARC).

### **Agriculture and Rural Development**

Agriculture and rural development warranted extraordinary interest of SACs owing to enormous significance of these sectors for their economies. Agriculture contributes considerably to their GDP and provides employment opportunities to millions of their people predominantly those living in rural areas. Recognizing this very fact, agriculture and rural development were included in the list of possible ARC suggested in BWP. In 1981, foreign secretaries of SACs included these sectors in identified ARC and formed two separate SGs which were later on converted as WGs and then re-designated as TCs. Since, both sectors are interconnected because of which two distinct TCs on them were amalgamated to create a single one, i.e. TC on agriculture and rural development (TC-ARD) in July 2000.

SACs took various measures to promote regional cooperation in agriculture and rural development. Initially, they agreed to boost regional cooperation in agricultural research. In 1989, they founded the “SAARC Agricultural Information Center” (SAIC) to interlock agriculture related information and research in South Asia. In 2006, they upgraded SAIC and renamed it as “SAARC Agricultural Center” (SAC) empowered to treat all sub-sectors of agriculture. SACs also decided to share with each other their agricultural research and best practices. TC-ARD prepared “the SAARC Agricultural Perspective / Vision 2000” that concentrated on enduring priorities and challenges. SACs decided to carry out definite projects in their partnership to develop regional agriculture. They set up “SAARC Quadrangle Milk Grid” between India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh (SAARC Secretariat, 2004-a; Sixteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2010). In order to ensure nutritional and food security in South Asia, SACs agreed to advance research and development, enhance investment, ease technical collaboration, and to use appropriate, dependable and modern technology to increase productivity in agricultural sector (Eighteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2014).

## **Conservation and management of water**

SACs also focused on conservation and management of water which is as important for their economies as blood for human body. They explored the prospect of mutual collaboration in preservation and management of hydro-resources for agriculture and communicated their worries over the threatening world water crises. They avowed to give foremost attention to preservation of water resources and decided to kick off research and capacity building for rain water preservation and river basin management. SACs also underlined the need of devising regional projects and to sharing with each other the technology, practices and knowledge, for preservation and management of water resources (Fifteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2008; Sixteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2010).

## **Regional Food Security**

Being troubled over the recurring challenges of food insecurity and malnutrition, SACs signed an agreement to create the “SAARC Food Security Reserve” (SFSR) in 1987 (became effective in 1988). SACs decided to cooperate in the field of bio-technology to attain the goal of long-term food security and to share with each other their knowledge on genetic preservation, conservation of germplasm banks and to catalogue the genetic resources stockpiled in SACs. They looked into the likelihood of creating the “SAARC Seed security Reserve” and to safeguard the related “Intellectual Property Rights” (IPRs). In 2007, in order to make SFSR more efficient and help meet crisis during natural catastrophes and food scarcities in usual time, SACs concluded an agreement to create “the SAARC Food Bank” (SFB). In October 2008, they established a SFP Board and approved “the SAARC Regional Strategy” (SRS) besides the “Regional Programme for Food Security” (RPFS) (SAARC Secretariat 1990; 1996; 2004-a). SACs agreed to ensure effective functioning of SBF through addressing its operational issues. In November 2011, they signed a “SAARC Seed Bank” (SSB) agreement (Seventeenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2011). In order to make SFB capable of catering the needs of SACs in normal food difficulties and emergencies, members agreed to abolish “threshold criteria” from SFB agreement. They also decided to constitute SSB board on priority basis and to early establish “Regional Livestock Gene Bank and Regional Vaccine Bank” (Eighteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2014).

## **Communication and Transport**

Regional Cooperation in the areas of communication and transport constituted among the priorities of SACs from the onset. In 1981, they established three SGs on telecommunications, postal services, and transport which were later on converted into WGs and then re-designated as TCs. In 1993, SAARC united TC–postal services and TC–telecommunications together to create a single one, i.e. TC–Communication that was substituted with a WG–Telecommunications and ICT in 2004. However, TC–Transport created in 1983 was retained under RIPA and it deals with all matters associated to transports including land, railway, water, and civil-aviation.

### **Communication**

Being conscious of the fact that absence of apt communications services among SACs was a chief obstacle to economic cooperation in South Asia, SAARC agreed to take measures for the development of communication infrastructure, simplification of transactional software and documentary procedures in order to facilitate economic linkages and to enhance telecommunication and air links in the region. In May 1998, SAARC Communication Ministers met for the first time in Colombo and approved an action plan. Meanwhile, SACs decided to squeeze the “digital divide” and to construct “knowledge-based societies” so that entire South Asian people could benefit of advancement in ICT (SAARC Secretariat 1988; 1998; 2004-a). Thirteenth summit underlined the need of devising a “SAARC action plan on ICT.” SACs also agreed to upgrade regional and national telecom infrastructure and reduce telecom charges on reciprocal basis. Realizing the magnitude of regional cooperation in the sector, SAARC established “a collaborative health care project” through linking regional “telemedicine-networks” and agreed to extend such facilities in other fields such as education etc. (Thirteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2005; Fourteenth SAARC Summits Declaration, 2007; Fifteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2008). Eighteenth summit called for “rationalization of the tariff structures” and directed to engage relevant bodies both in private and public sectors of SACs to reduce rates of telephone tariffs to help facilitate increased contacts among the people in South Asia (Eighteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2014).

### **Transport**

SACs underscored the need to “improve intra-regional connectivity” visualizing a “South Asian community” that can provide for free mobility of money, goods, services, knowledge, ideas, culture and people. SAARC completed a “Regional Multimodal Transport Study” (RMTS) and tasked the “Inter-Governmental Group on Transport” (IGGT) to plan regional and sub-regional projects, and also considered conclusion of regional agreements on transport. SAARC Transport Ministers also hold several meetings to promote regional cooperation in this field. SAARC considered several regional agreements including: the draft “Motor Vehicle Agreement” (MVA); “Regional Transport and Transit Agreement” (RTTA), and; “Regional Railway Agreement” (RRA). It declared 2010–2020 as the “Decade of Intra-regional Connectivity in SAARC” (Fourteenth SAARC Summits Declaration 2007; Fifteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2008; Sixteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2010). Seventeenth summit underlined the need of early conclusion of RRA and MVA and also to conduct a “demonstration run of a container train” between Nepal, India and Bangladesh. SAARC also initiated a feasibility study to launch “Indian Ocean Cargo and Passenger Ferry Service” (IOCPFS) that would initially involve the Maldives, Sri Lanka and India (Seventeenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2011).

SACs vowed to significantly improve “regional connectivity in a seamless manner” and to build and upgrade regional roads, railways and waterways infrastructure as well as air and communication links in the region. They underscored the need to connect South Asia with nearby regions including Central Asia and beyond through all means. They also directed the concerned bodies to start necessary measures and arrangements at national, sub-regional and regional level (Eighteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2014). SACs made significant progress towards conclusion of the MVA and RRA which they were expected to sign at the eve of eighteenth summit. However, they had to delay the process as Pakistan needed more time to complete the necessary work at home. Fourteenth summit directed SAARC Transport Ministers to finalize the agreements within three months. Later on, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh concluded a sub-regional MVA in June 2015 (“Indian signs motor vehicle.” 2015).

### **Environment, Forestry and Meteorology**

Environment, forestry and meteorology are highly interrelated fields which attracted attention of SACs from the very onset. However, they bewildered how to deal with these areas. For instance, they had created a SG on meteorology in April 1981 and then converted it into WG, (later on re-designated as TC). They assigned the subject of forestry to TC–agriculture. In 1992, they created TC–environment. In 1993, SAARC amalgamated TC-Environment with TC–



Meteorology to form a single one, i.e. TC–Environment and Meteorology. In 2004, under RIPA, meteorology was alienated from TC-Environment and fused with TC–S&T while TC–Environment and TC–Forestry were combined together to form a single one, i.e. TC–Environment and Forestry (now only TC–environment). In 2014, SACs realized that these subjects were closely interrelated and must be dealt as such.

SAARC noted with deep sorrow and concerns over the destructive effects of environmental degradation and climatic changes on their people’s lives as well as on the process of their socio-economic development. These effects cropped up in the form of persistent droughts or floods, landslides, tidal waves, cyclones, global warming and sea level rise etc. Thus, SACs agreed to fortify their “disaster management” capacity. SAARC undertook a “study on protection and preservation of the environment and on the causes and consequences of natural disasters.” It also completed a regional study on the greenhouse effect. The recommendations of the studies, both completed by 1992, were reflected on by a “Committee on Environment,” which later on became TC–Environment. SACs declared the year 1992 as the “SAARC Year of Environment” (SAARC Secretariat 1990; 1995; 1996).

SACs adopted common stance on different global forums and conferences on environment related matters. They called for transnational cooperation to boost national competencies, as well as technology transfer, augmentation of research activities and the initiation of multiparty projects to lessen natural disasters. They noted that the industrialized countries were chiefly responsible for environmental degradation whom they demanded to compensate and provide with essential resources to adequately meet the challenges. They emphasized that developmental and environmental goals must be harmonized and one-sided and arbitrary conditions be avoided. SAARC mulled over the prospects of a “Regional Treaty on Environment.” It stressed the need of sharing among SACS the information, technologies and strategies needed to tackle the air and water pollution and to adopt the similar minimum standards. SACs agreed to promote regional cooperation in order to safeguard and conserve bio-diversity, and also to create “contiguous protected areas” along their common boundaries, and to stop unlawful “trafficking in flora and fauna.” SAARC organized regional Environment Ministers meetings on regular basis. In October 1997, the ministers, in their first meeting (Male) prepared the “SAARC Environment Action Plan.” SACs also finalized their “national action plans on environment” and prepared the reports on situation of the environment in the respective countries (SAARC Secretariat 1996; 1998). In order to pursue their agenda, SACs established the “Coastal Zone Management Centre” (CZMC) in the Maldives (2004) and the “SAARC Forestry Centre” (SFC) in Bhutan (2007). Later on, they decided to boost the capacity of CZMC. SAARC also decided to commence regional

projects and programmes for early warning, alertness and management of natural catastrophes and to deal with the dilemma of arsenic contagion of ground water. It observed 2007 as the “Year of Green South Asia” and concentrated on the reforestation campaign. In December 2007, COM in its twenty-ninth session approved the “SAARC Declaration on Climate Change for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).” In July 2008, SAARC Environment Ministers approved the SAARC Action Plan and “Dhaka Declaration on Climate Change.” SACs agreed to cooperate for conservation of aquatic ecosystem, trans-border bio-diversity areas, regular and systematic sharing of scientific information and the networking of the weather stations. SAARC also set up a “Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism” (NDRRM) under the “SAARC Disaster Management Centre” (SDMC), created in New Delhi, India in October 2006. The “Climate Change” was the main premise of the sixteenth summit during which SACs signed the “SAARC Convention on Cooperation on Environment” (SCCE) (SAARC Secretariat 2004-a; Thirteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2005; Fifteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2008; Sixteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2010). In November 2011, SACs signed “SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters” (SARRND). Eighteenth summit noted that environmental changes posed “existential threats” to some of SACs and directed the concerned bodies to effectively implement Thimphu statement on climatic change, SCCE and SARRND. The summit also called upon the international community to early conclude a protocol or any other legal instrument / mechanism on the basis of “the principles of Common but Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR), Respective Capabilities and Equity under the UNFCCC” (Seventeenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2011; Eighteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2014).

## **Meteorology**

Recognizing its significance from the onset, foreign secretaries of SACs in their first meeting in 1981 had incorporated meteorology in the five agreed ARC and later on established a TC on it. Subsequently, TC–meteorology was merged with TC–environment and then subject was transferred to TC–S&T under RIPA. In 1995, SACs set up the “SAARC Meteorological Research Center (SMRC)” in Bangladesh in order to fortify regional cooperation chiefly in the area of information collection and research related to meteorology. Later on, the capacity of SMRC was enhanced (Thirteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2005).

By 2014, SACs realized that the fields of environment, forestry, meteorology, and natural disaster management were greatly interconnected and needed a unified response and strategy to deal with. Thus, they decided to merge SFC, SDMC, SCZMC, and SMRC together to form a single “SAARC

Environment and Disaster Management Centre” (SEDMC). The venue of SEDMC is yet to be decided (Haidar and Jayshi, 2014).

## **Science and Technology**

SACs being conscious of the magnitude of regional cooperation in S&T set up, in 1981, a SG–S&T (which was later on converted into a WG and then re-designated under IPA as TC–S&T). TC–S&T survived under SIPA and RIPA. SACs also focused on cooperation in the area of biotechnology and set up under RIPA the WG–Biotechnology.

Being cognizant of the fact that advances in S&T offered enormous potential to contribute to wellbeing of their masses, SACs viewed regional cooperation in this field as essential to realize organizational objectives. They underlined the need of sharing information, facilitating research, and setting up the linkages among the research and development (R&D) centres in the region mainly in the areas of energy modeling techniques, biotechnology, genetic engineering, low-cost housing and building technologies etc. SACs expressed its concerns over the impediments on the transfer of technology from the industrialized countries. It, thus, called for enhancing regional cooperation in R&D to attain collective self-reliance especially in developing inexpensive and easily replicable technologies appropriate to regional conditions, principally for ensuring accessibility of fresh drinking water, cleanliness and sanitation and enhancing people’s living standard in the rural areas (SAARC Secretariat 1996; 1998).

An extraordinary meeting of regional S&T ministers mulled over the “SAARC Technology Initiative” aimed at identifying and implementing particular projects associated with drinking water, cleanliness, telecommunications, and lifting the people’s living standards. SACs called for sharing the expertise, knowledge, joint R&D, and commercial use of advanced technology, to foster socio-economic progress. Thirteenth summit directed to prepare a SAARC action plan on S&T (SAARC Secretariat 1998; 2004-a; Thirteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2005). In September 2008, SAARC Ministers of S&T in their first regular meeting (New Delhi) prepared a five year (2008–2013) SAARC action plan on S&T that identified several areas of cooperation. Eighteenth summit agreed to build and expand SACs’ capacity to apply space technology through sharing their experiences to pace up their socio-economic development and to raise the welfare of their people. Meanwhile, India offered to build and launch a satellite dedicated to SACs for this purpose (Eighteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2014).

## **Tourism**

SACs were conscious of the vast potential and significance of regional cooperation in the area of tourism that can boost people-to-people contacts, help create regional identity, magnetize regional and international visitors and contribute immensely to their socio-economic development. Probably due to the same reason, tourism was listed in possible ARC suggested in BWP. In 1991, SAARC established TC-tourism which in its first meeting prepared an Action Plan. In 1999, SAARC assigned the task of tourism development to the “Tourism Council of SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industries” (SCCI) but sooner decided to compliment SCCI efforts at government level and established a WG-Tourism under RIPA (SAARC Secretariat 1990).

SACs decided to commence a system in order to promote Organized Tourism and to engage “civil aviation authorities” besides arranging meetings of their national airlines’ chiefs. In 1997, in their first ever meeting in Colombo, SAARC Tourist Ministers decided: to promote private sector involvement in international and regional tourism; to enhance collaboration between regional tour operatives; to enhance air and other travel related linkages; to organize regional fares, and; to make simpler the visa procedures for pilgrims and tourists. SAARC also stressed the need to develop the regional infrastructure, simplify and synchronize regional administrative measures, to enhance training and joint marketing in order to market the region as a common tourist destination. SAARC observed 2006 as “South Asia Tourism Year.” In 2006, the second Tourist Ministers meeting approved a comprehensive “SAARC Action Plan on Tourism” (SAPT) (SAARC Secretariat 1990; 1996; 2004-a; Thirteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2005; Fifteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2008). SACs also organized SAARC Travel and Tourism Fairs on regular basis. They agreed to project the region as “Destination South Asia” at global level through private sector participation. Eighteenth summit directed the concerned bodies to initiate public-private collaboration for effective and full implementation of SAPT (Seventeenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2011; Eighteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2014).

## **Economic Cooperation**

SACs realized the importance of regional cooperation in vital economic sector. BWP had elucidated the value of economic cooperation by market integration, harvesting the gains from economies of scale, technology transfer and magnetizing foreign investment. It suggested that joint ventures were the “most potent field for reaping all these advantages” (SAARC Secretariat 1988).

SACs agreed on taking steps for instituting joint projects in cottage industries and handicrafts. They observed that protection and expansion of

investment, creation of economic complementarities, and induction of joint projects could promote economic cooperation and help increase intra-regional trade. SACs believed that growth in “trade-creating joint ventures” could ensure far more extensive and balanced benefits of economic liberalization. SACs noted that joint ventures under public and private sectors presented immense prospects for SAARC project cooperation (SPC). They decided to cooperate for creating “dynamic complementarities” in HRD and to launch SPC economic and social fields including HRD and poverty alleviation consistent with SAARC charter (SAARC Secretariat 1996; 1998; 2004-a; Thirteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2005).

### **Trade Liberalization**

As early as in 1982, SAARC Foreign Secretaries agreed to convene meeting of heads of national planning organizations of SACs. The earliest meeting of planners took place in 1983 and next one in 1987. Their four more (annual) meetings were held till 1991 during which they explored the magnitude of regional cooperation in “trade, manufactures and services (TMS).” In the meantime, SACs finished regional and national studies on TMS by 1991 and created a “Committee for Economic Cooperation” (CEC). They decided to liberalize trade gradually and in phases so that all SACs could obtain equitable benefits. SACs set up an “Inter Governmental Group” (IGG) to finalize agreement on trade cooperation. In April 1993, they concluded the agreement on “SAARC Preferential Trade Arrangement” (SAPTA) that became effectual on December 7, 1995. SACs launched deliberations on giving each other trade concessions under SAPTA and concluded four rounds of negotiations that covered around 5000 items by 2004. SAARC Trade Ministers met for the first time in New Delhi in 1996 and agreed to convene their meetings on annual basis (SAARC Secretariat 1995; 1990; 1996; 1998; 2004-a).

SACs had agreed to conclude agreement on “South Asian Free Trade Area” (SAFTA) by 2001 and established a Committee of Experts to draft the treaty. SACs also agreed to conclude regional investment framework to meet their investment requirements. In January 2004, they concluded the “Framework Agreement on SAFTA” that became effectual on Jan. 1, 2006. Fifteenth summit approved revision of the sensitive lists under SAFTA and to grant particular attention to LDCs in the process. During the summit, SACs also signed the agreement on Afghanistan’s accession to SAFTA (SAARC Secretariat 1998; 2004-a; Fifteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2008).

SACs decided to make simpler custom procedures, synchronize standards and start cooperation among their central banks. In 2005, they concluded agreements on: “Establishment of SAARC Arbitration Council”;

“Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters,” and; “The Limited Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation and Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters.” Arbitration Council started functioning in Islamabad. SACs also established the “SAARC Standards Coordination Board” (SSCB), a precursor to the “South Asian Regional Standards Organization” (SARSO) that was created in 2008 (SAARC Secretariat 1998; 2004-a; Thirteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2005; Fourteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2007; Fifteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2008).

SAARC stressed the need of enhancing private sector involvement in fields of trade, finance and investment to fortify economic cooperation. It agreed to advance trade-creating investment and to expand the scale of SAFTA to embrace trade in services. In the meantime, SAARC Finance Ministers concluded the agenda of regional cooperation on financial matters. In April 2010, SACs concluded the “SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services” (SATIS) which became effective on November 29, 2012. SACs stressed the need of downsizing the sensitive lists, enhancing trade facilitation measures and to eliminate all barriers to trade including para-tariff, non-tariff barriers for full execution of SAFTA (SAARC Secretariat 1998; Thirteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2005; Fourteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2007; Sixteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2010). In 2011, SACs signed the “SAARC Agreement on Implementation of Regional Standards” and the “SAARC Agreement on Multilateral Arrangement on Recognition of Conformity Assessment.” SACs also directed their Finance Ministers to finalize a proposal providing for increased mobility of capital and investment in the region. They stressed the need of early finalization of the schedule of commitments in order to operationalise SATIS. In order to promote regional trade in South Asia, SACs also organized “SAARC Trade Fairs” on regular basis. They have agreed on draft agreement on “Investment Promotion and Protection” but have not yet signed it.

SACs also agreed to pace up efforts: to effectively and fully implement SAFTA; to reduce Sensitive Lists; early resolve issues related to removal of non-tariff and para-tariff barriers; to accelerate the process of streamlining, harmonization and simplification of customs procedures; to harmonize standards correlated with technical barriers to trade; to implement trade facilitation measures; to operationalise transparent and simplified rules of origin, and; to prepare for efficient and smooth transport and transit facilities (Seventeenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2011; Eighteenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2014).

## **Energy**

Being aware of the significance of regional cooperation in the field of energy, SAARC created a TC–Energy in 2000, and replaced it with a WG–Energy in 2004. SACs noted that there existed an enormous magnitude of regional cooperation in the fields of integrated development of energy resources, technology transfer, capacity building and energy trade etc. SAARC set off a “study on prospects of regional cooperation in energy sector” and explored the prospects of creating an Energy Ring. In October 2005, the SAARC Energy Ministers convened their first ever meeting in Islamabad. In 2006, SACs established SAARC Energy Centre (SEC) in Islamabad with its stated objectives; to develop energy resources that include hydropower, alternative and renewable energy resources, and; to facilitate energy trade and to upgrade energy efficiency and preservation. In March 2007, SACs started “the South Asian Energy Dialogue” (SAED) which involved academics, experts, officials, environmentalists and NGOs to give input to WG–Energy (SAARC Secretariat 2004-a; Thirteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2005; Fourteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2007; Fifteenth SAARC Summit, Declaration, 2008). Fifteenth summit stressed the need of developing hydro-power resources as well as conventional and renewable energy potential, gas pipelines and grid connectivity. It also called for facilitating energy trade and exploring the potential of regional energy projects. SAARC stressed the need of regional cooperation for protection and development of “standardization of appliances,” their classification, sharing of practices, knowledge and technologies and building “web portal” on energy preservation. SAARC tasked the SEC to work out an “action plan” on energy preservation. In the meantime, India offered to chart out a roadmap for establishment of a “SAARC Market for Electricity” (Fifteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2008; Sixteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2010).

Seventeenth summit directed the relevant bodies to early conclude “SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation” (SFAEC) and to complete “Study on the Regional Power Exchange Concept” as well as preparation on SAARC Market for Electricity. SACs also agreed to allocate an appropriate percentage of their national income for investment on renewable energy. Eighteenth summit directed the related mechanisms and bodies to make out the projects on power generation, trade and transmission including those related to hydropower, bio fuel, wind, natural gas, and solar energy etc. aimed at meeting the mounting energy needs of SACs. On the occasion, SACs also signed SFAEC (Seventeenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2011; Eighteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2014).

## **Cooperation in Security and Political Matters**

SAARC acknowledged the significance of fostering political cooperation among its members and noted that informal discussions and consultations could help them to understand each other perceptions and problems and to reach decisions in agreed areas of cooperation. SACs believed that summit meetings could be quite supportive in devising the strategies needed to attain shared objectives. They reiterated their perseverance to the international peace, stability, amity, freedom, economic development and social justice through developing among them the friendly ties, building trust and understanding, allaying suspicions and tensions, and amicably resolving mutual disputes and differences by means of talks and other peaceful ways (SAARC Secretariat 1998; 2004-a).

### **Terrorism and Drug Trafficking**

SACs recognized from the very beginning that terrorism and drug trafficking were grave perils to regional stability and their national security with far reaching adverse consequences for the socio-economic development process. In December 1985, COM directed the SSC to summon an expert level meeting to examine the problems of international terrorism and drug-trafficking in South Asia. SACs realized the need of joint efforts to address these problems and established two study groups, i.e. SG–Terrorism and SG–Drug Trafficking. In 1987, both of them converted into TCs. SACs celebrated 1989 as the “SAARC Year for Combating Drug Abuse and Drug Trafficking.” They were quite concerned over the mounting connections between drug trafficking, arms trade and international terrorism. In 1990, SACs signed “SAARC Convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances” which became effective in September 1993 (SAARC Secretariat 1988; 1990; 1996).

In 1987, SACs concluded the “SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism” (SRCST) which became effective in August 1988. They called for an early approval of “1996 UN Declaration on Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism,” and “Convention on Prevention of the Abuse of Refugees” and also for denying terrorists the access to funds in South Asia. In order to exchange information related to these matters, SACs set up the “SAARC Drug Offences Monitoring Desk” (SDOMD) and the “SAARC Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk” (STOMD) and in Colombo. In 1996, the First “SAARC Conference on cooperation in police matters” (Colombo) stressed the need of enhanced regional cooperation for investigation of organized crimes. SAARC expressed its support for the “UNSC Resolution no. 1373” passed on Sep. 28, 2001 on war against terrorism. In 2004, SACs concluded the “Additional Protocol” on combating terrorism, i.e. SRCST and consequently ratified it. SACs decided to convene meetings of their ministers and secretaries of interior on annual basis and also to fortify cooperation among their security agencies. They



also concluded the “SAARC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters” (SCMLACM) (SAARC Secretariat 1990; 1998; 2004-a; Thirteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2005; Fifteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2008). Seventeenth summit called upon the members to early ratify the SCMLACM, as well as to start preparation for a mechanism to combat maritime piracy in South Asia. SAARC reiterated its call for an early finalization of the proposed “UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism.” Eighteenth summit condemned violent extremism and terrorism in its all forms and manifestations and directed the concerned bodies to make necessary legislation to effectively and fully execute the SAARC regional convention and additional protocol on terrorism. SACs agreed to take steps to deal with arms smuggling, counterfeit currency, money laundering, illicit trafficking of narcotics and psychotropic substances, and other international crimes. SAARC also decided to set up a cybercrime monitoring desk (Seventeenth SAARC Summit Declaration, 2011; Eighteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2014).

### **SAARC Performance: An Analysis**

SAARC was established with grand fervor and lofty hopes. It declared that progress towards the people’s welfare and advancement in their quality of lives was its top most priority. An objective assessment of the existing regional socio-economic conditions indicates that SAARC could not achieve most, if any, of its objectives. Its performance has been unsatisfactory in several respects. SAARC has not been successful in achieving many of its targets such as universal literacy, vaccination, poverty alleviation, and eradication of child labour, malnutrition, and the gender discrimination etc.

SAARC itself acknowledged its failures to implement its programmes and projects and hence, to achieve its objectives. It pronounced to do too many things but could accomplish too little. Several of SAARC declarations suggest its confession of own failure. For instance, time and again, SAARC announced that time had come to launch “well-defined, target-oriented and time-bound” projects and programs that could guarantee true benefits for the masses. Yet nothing substantial and tangible has so far been gained. In December 1995, COM in its commemorative session in New Delhi on the completion of first decade of SAARC, themed as “SAARC – Vision for the Second Decade,” had noted that the organization had “matured as an institution” though it was far from achieving its stated objectives. Ninth summit established a “Group of Eminent Persons” (GEP) with the task to fully evaluate the SAARC performance and also to propose means to enhance its efficacy. GEP proposed a “SAARC Agenda for 2000 and Beyond” that was presented before the tenth summit (SAARC Secretariat 1996; 1998). SAARC approved a shared vision of a “South Asian

Economic Union” (SAEU) in a planned but gradual and phased manner. However, it noted, realization of this destination would necessitate a “suitable political and economic environment.” After SAARC completed two decades of its existence, SACs conducted a detailed study in order to recommend reforms of “all SAARC institutions and mechanisms.” Practically, SAARC has generally been failed to execute its programmes and plans and to accomplish its goals. Being aware of this failure, thirteenth summit “directed all SAARC institutions and mechanisms to work collectively towards a decade dedicated to implementation.” Sixteenth summit that commemorated the completion of 25 years of the organization’s existence, ended after issuance of Silver Jubilee Declaration titled “Towards a Green and Happy South Asia.” It noted that “SAARC had achieved a number of important milestones” and contributed significantly towards “providing a platform for regional cooperation to accomplish the Charter objectives.” Nonetheless, it also recognized that despite growth in “scope and substance” of regional cooperation, its “meaningful and tangible benefits” could not reach to the South Asian people. Thus, the summit stressed the need of initiating “more efficient, focused, time-bound and people-centric activities.” Meanwhile, SACs reiterated their determination to work together and cooperate in order to make “SAARC truly action oriented by fulfilling commitments, implementing declarations and decisions and operationalizing instruments and living up to the hopes and aspirations of one fifth of humanity” (SAARC Secretariat 2004-a; Thirteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2005; Sixteenth SAARC Summit Declaration 2010). Notwithstanding, such oratory statements and declarations which were merely repetition of numerous of their kinds made in the past, no visible change could be observed in SAARC course of action. SAARC has taken several steps to liberalize trade in the region but no significant increase in regional trade could be gained due to various reasons. In fact, SAARC could not accomplish its objectives and aims so eloquently enshrined in its charter and reiterated repeatedly in declarations of summit meetings.

SAARC also confronts challenge to its very existence. It is evidenced from the recent postponement of nineteenth summit scheduled in Islamabad in November 2016 and India’s drive to isolate Pakistan and divide the organization for the sake of electoral and political gains in increasingly communalized Indian domestic politics. India was not enthusiastic towards idea of SAARC in the beginning and it always stalled the efforts of other members to make the organization more relevant and effective by providing it to deal with political problems, bilateral disputes and contentious issues that bedevil ties of SACs and impede implementation of programmes and projects agreed upon by the organization. India’s coercive diplomacy and stubborn attitude, persistence of bilateral disputes and political problems and lack of commitment on the part of regional countries

has mainly prevented SAARC from implementation of its programmes and projects.

## **Conclusion**

SACs had formed SAARC to promote peace, amity and stability and foster economic development and social progress in South Asia, and to address shared problems and accomplish regional self-sufficiency by means of regional cooperation in different areas. Its declared objectives included: to further the wellbeing of masses and to raise their quality of life; to speed up economic development and socio-cultural progress; to advance and fortify joint self-sufficiency; to promote mutual understanding, confidence, and appreciation of each other's troubles; advance cooperation in economic, cultural, social, scientific and technical areas; help evolve common stance at international level and global forum on issues of collective interests and; to further collaboration with international bodies and organizations having analogous aims. SACs identified several areas of cooperation and established TCs and WGs to carry out this task. Their activities focused in these fields: agriculture and rural development; environment; science and technology; telecommunications, and ICT; transport; HRD covering education, skill development, culture, arts, and sports; energy; biotechnology; tourism, and; intellectual property rights. SACs concluded several regional agreements and conventions, such as those on: "prevention of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances;" "suppression of terrorism;" "mutual legal assistance in criminal matters," and; "cooperation on environment." In order to meet food shortages and ensure food security, SAARC established a regional food reserve and then a regional food bank. SAARC also conducted regional studies, such as those on: prospects of regional cooperation in TMS; regional multimodal transport; "protection and preservation of the environment" and also to "the causes and consequences of natural disasters," and; greenhouse effect. SACs made advancement towards fostering economic cooperation and concluded treaties on trade liberalization and market integration such as SAPTA (1993) and SAFTA (2004). In order to expand the scope of economic cooperation and facilitate regional trade, they also concluded agreements on: trade in services; establishment of "SAARC arbitration council;" "the limited agreement on avoidance of double taxation and mutual administrative assistance in tax matters;" "mutual administrative assistance in customs matters," and; energy cooperation. SAARC also established a regional standards organization and made progress towards concluding agreements on: investment promotion and protection; transport and transit; railways; and rapid response to natural disasters. However, several of SAARC programmes and

projects generally remained on papers and nothing could be practically done to implement them due to several reasons. SAARC could not achieve most of its stated objectives which suggest that its performance has been highly unsatisfactory. Nonetheless, in the perspective of conflict-ridden history of South Asia, the survival of SAARC for three decades in itself is great success. Now SAARC needs to focus more on its performance, particularly to initiate and implement result oriented projects which could bring concrete benefits and hence real change and improvement in the lives of people in South Asia.

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