

# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



# Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on **SDGs of SOUTH ASIA**

Edited by: Dr. Nishchal N. Pandey

# **Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on SDGs of South Asia**

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**Dr. Nishchal N. Pandey**

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## Acknowledgement

There is no denying that COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted global efforts towards realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As states grapple with containing the pandemic, there is increasing risk of the focus being diverted to emergency health response while giving less attention to other crucial aspects of human life. Experts are warning of rising poverty, shrinking economy, increasing unemployment leading to a downward spiral of economic, political, social uncertainty. The 17 SDGs agreed by all 193 United Nation member states have major cross-cutting links with each other. Within the Goals, there are quality education and zero hunger but there are also reduced inequalities and responsible consumption and production. The SDGs encapsulates a global vision that was borne out of the collective wisdom of the international community as a viable blueprint for human development. We all share the concerns on the impact that the pandemic has had on the SDGs hence it requires a holistic approach first to study the impact and then try and address this challenge through a joint strategy.

South Asia has the highest number of people living below the poverty line. Even prior to the pandemic, we were out of step with the rest of the world on strengthening cooperation among ourselves on many of the cross-border challenges that we face. The pandemic has reinforced the imperative of sharing our resources with continued commitment on regional cooperation.

It is a special privilege for the Consortium of South Asian Think-Tanks (COSATT) to conduct this important research on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on each of the 17 Goals. What makes this study unique is the fact that erudite researchers from several countries of SAARC have come together to analyze the implications of the pandemic to the region as a whole. They have also outlined some suggestive measures; implementation of which will largely depend on the region's ability to soon return to normalcy, ease the lock-downs, vaccinate the entire population and resurrect the economy.

My sincere thanks to Mr. Christian Echle, Director, Political Dialogue Asia Programme and Ms. Megha Sarmah, Programme Manager 2030 Agenda of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), Singapore for the generous support to conduct this research and for their help to COSATT in continuing our efforts to achieve our objective for a well-connected and a stable, peaceful South Asia. I am also indebted to each of the 17 chapter authors of this publication. Apart from the general readership, UN and government officials, policy makers, academics, mediapersons, and students may find this publication useful.

**Dr. Nishchal N. Pandey**  
Convener, COSATT,  
Kathmandu

## **Foreword**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating for people of all walks of life since its onslaught in early 2020. As of August 2021, total of 4.3 million people have died around the world. In South Asia, the figure stands at a staggering half a million. The economic consequences of the pandemic have been no less destructive. Millions have lost their jobs; there are parallel threats on diverse areas from mental health to food security, social stability to education. The poorest and the under-privileged are the hardest hit. Millions are experiencing inexpressible misery and hardship due to lock-downs, travel bans, night curfews and closures.

The 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by UN member states in 2015, provided a shared outline for peace and prosperity for the people and our planet. A total of 17 SDGs were identified ranging from quality education and economic growth to clean water and sanitation, reduced inequalities and climate action. South Asian nations were at various stages of their SDG commitments and were steadily progressing towards these 17 goals. The COVID-19 pandemic has dreadfully hindered the progress. The full impact is yet to be assessed but as things stand at the moment, the situation looks grim. The 17 chapters in this book by different authors will, I am sure, be useful to a variety of readers – ranging from policy makers in government to UN specialized agencies, academics and students. I hope these papers will enable the readers to understand the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and what the state responses have been thus far in South Asia.

The Consortium of South Asian Think-Tanks (COSATT) has been dedicating itself to the study and research of South Asia on areas of region integration, climate change, refugees and migration, peace-building etc. Last year, a seminal study on ‘Security and Economic Challenges in the Indo-Pacific’ was brought out by COSATT. The Regional Programme Political Dialogue Asia of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) has been supporting COSATT and we hope to continue our cooperation as the region is going through unprecedented political, economic and social transformation requiring constructive dialogue with multiple stakeholders backed by innovative research.

Our programme has also been engaged this year in 'KASpaces', a unique blend of hybrid events primarily devoting to SDG Goals 4 and 11. It is essentially a network to share good practices and advocate evidence based policy recommendations. We have conducted these webinars in several countries of South and Southeast Asia already and we will be bringing out publications at the end of the year.

It hardly needs to be underscored that concerted efforts are needed to translate pledges into concrete actions because achieving these goals require efforts from all sides- UN and multi-lateral organizations, individual governments, INGOs, private sector, civil society and the general public. I would like to thank the individual authors of this publication and congratulate the network members of the COSATT for this publication.

**Christian Echle**  
Director, Political Dialogue with Asia  
Konrad Adenauer Stiftung  
Singapore



# THE IMPACT OF COVID – 19 ON SDG 1 (NO POVERTY) IN SOUTH ASIA

Dr. Jyoti M. Pathania<sup>1</sup>

**"Coronavirus pandemic is 'the worst global crisis since World War II"**

...International Labour Organization, 2020

The unprecedented crisis posed by the coronavirus (COVID-19) means that South Asia, home to about 40 per cent of the world's poor, might experience its worst economic performance in 40 years, with at least half of the region falling into a deep recession, triggering an economic fallout which will drive millions into poverty & inequality. The purview of this paper is to study COVID-19 impact on Sustainable Development Goal<sup>1</sup> SDG 1 (No Poverty) in the South Asian context by investigating, understanding and quantitatively analysing each country separately along with brief case studies and policy recommendations.

According to the latest South Asia Economic Focus World Bank report, growth in the region is projected between 1.8 and 2.8 per cent this year, down from 6.3 per cent projected six months ago and potentially the lowest in four decades.<sup>2</sup> Changes in poverty levels associated with the pandemic arise from two sources; namely, those who were pushed into poverty because of the pandemic (88 million in the baseline scenario and 93 million in the downside scenario) and the poor who would have transited out of poverty in the absence of the pandemic (31 million). Since April 2020, the World Bank has provided about \$8.5 billion in financing to support COVID-19 recovery in South Asia with initial focus on the health emergency response for protecting the most vulnerable.<sup>3</sup> Calling for a virtual meeting of the Heads of the governments and health ministers of the region was the first step initiated by the Indian Prime Minister for deliberating and devising a suitable regional response mechanism for the pandemic. The need was felt to combat this scourge unitedly by pooling resources, but there seemed to be a lack of a workable framework in this regard which led to delays for the combined coordinated efforts.

In 2021, it is estimated that 143 million–163 million people will be pushed into extreme poverty, the first time in the past two decades; a significant increase in global extreme poverty and a major setback for efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals<sup>4</sup> especially SDG 1 (No Poverty). The Global SDGs address poverty in all its forms and dimensions. The first SDG target (1.1) is to end \$1.90/

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Fellow & Chairperson Outreach, Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), India. Author would like to thank DS Murugan Yadav, research intern at CLAWS for collating the data.

day monetary poverty. The second target (1.2): to halve multidimensional poverty Index (MPI). The three- primary dimension of poverty including ten indicators of poverty. It reflects the composition of Multidimensional Poverty as shown in Figure 1 and South Asian Facts on MPI 2020 (data shown in Figure 2).

Figure-1

### Multidimensional Poverty Composition

Source: Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative

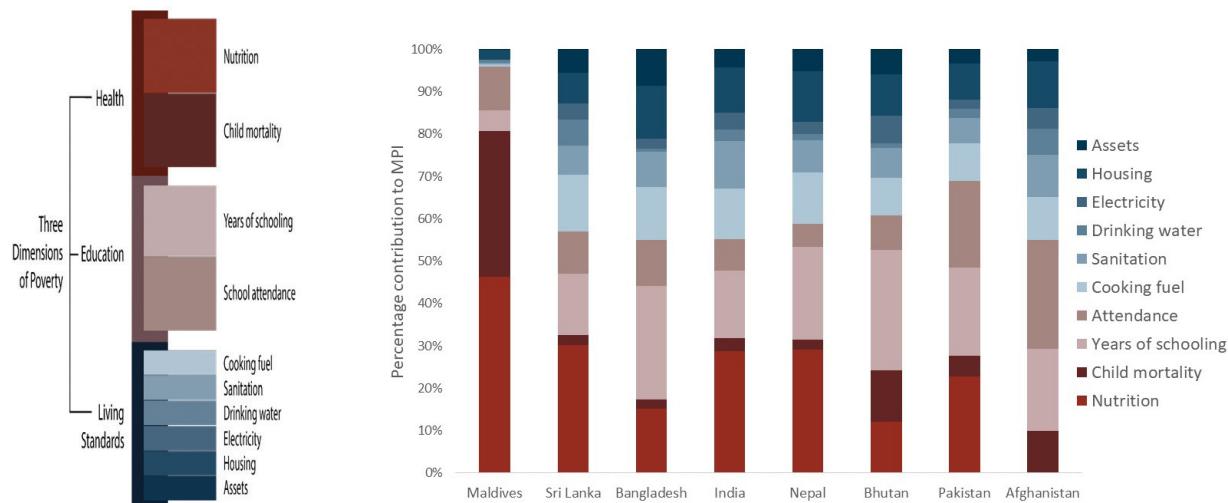


Figure-2

### Fast Facts on global MPI 2020 in South Asia

(8 Countries and 1.8 Billion people)

- 530 million people are multi-dimensionally poor
- 29.2% of people are poor in South Asia
- Average MPI = 0.132 Intensity: 44.7%

#### Of the 530 million people:

- 4.8% are children (237 million)
- 87.7 million live in rural areas (465 million)
- 204 million are destitute

Source: Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative

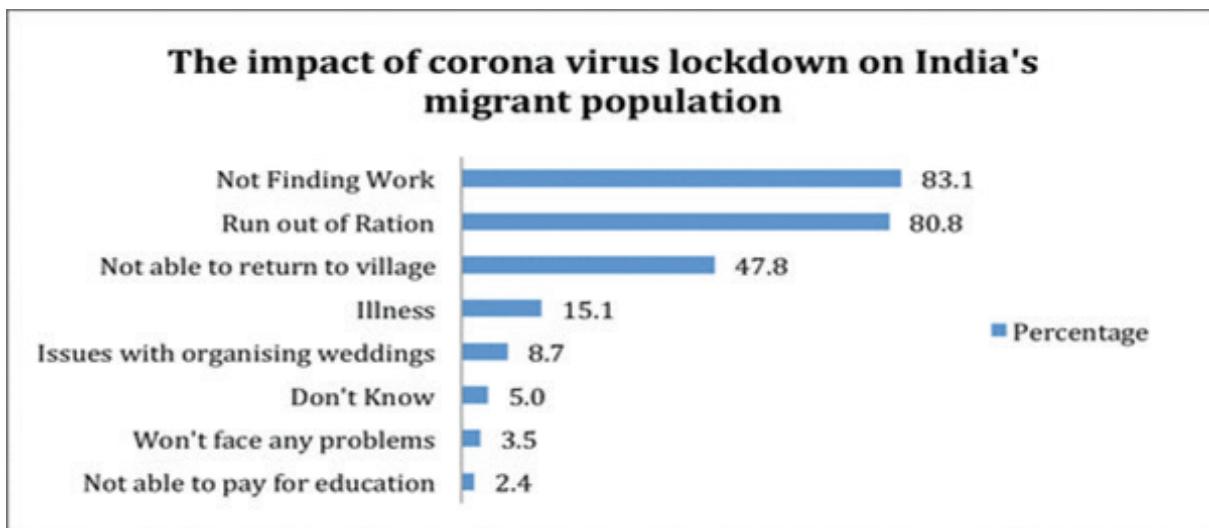
## INDIA

After March 25, 2020, when a national lockdown was implemented, economic activity slowed sharply reversing the course of poverty reduction measures. As a result, output fell by a whopping 25% (year on year) between April and June, the first quarter of the FY21 fiscal year.<sup>5</sup> About 400 million people (76.2% of the total workforce) working in the low-paid, low-skilled jobs, part of the informal economy in India were at risk of falling deeper into poverty due to catastrophic consequences of the virus.<sup>6</sup>

### Case Study of the Migrant Workers

Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are home to some of India's poorest people accounting for 37% of the country's inter-state migrants. These workers are employed in the construction sector (40 million), domestic work (20 million), textile (11 million), brick kiln work (10 million), transportation, mining and agriculture<sup>7</sup>. During lockdown, 92.5 per cent of labourers have lost 1 to 4 weeks of work. A survey conducted by 'Jan Saahas', of 3196 migrant workers across northern and central India, between 27 March and 29 March, reveals that 80 per cent of migrant workers feared that they will run out of food before lockdown ends on 14 April and will not get their job back thereafter.<sup>8</sup>

Figure-3  
Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant Population



Source: Jan Saahas Survey (2020)

The pandemic had brought work to a standstill for children of Ranju (migrant worker in construction site) Rajkishore Ram, Fenkan Raut, Manoj Manjhi, and Roshan Ram - labourers in a shoe factory, Subhash Sah fabricator in a factory, and 15 other Bihari workers with no wages, little food, and no cooking gas. Compounding labour distress was the horrifying mass exodus of floating population of migrants on foot, especially of seasonal migrants who oscillated between their home and the destination states. Pressures from maliks (bosses), the pervasive informalism of new economy jobs that have no recognition for labour work, and the urban middle-class's assertions for exclusion of the urban poor reflect a saga of inequality, poverty and social exclusion of vulnerable population struggling to overcome this sudden crisis.<sup>9</sup>

### PAKISTAN

The COVID-19 pandemic is spreading faster in the poverty-stricken communities, especially amongst women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities and weak health status, impacting the livelihoods of nearly 7.15 million workers. An economic loss of about 10%, i.e., 1.1 trillion PKR, will be observed in the FY 2021 with a negative impact on the GDP growth in Pakistan, i.e., lowering it to 2.2%. Local

disruption of supply chains and national markets, poverty hike, employment layoffs, discontinuity of formal education of 47 million students and increased food prices have forced the government to cut down and stop funding many welfare programs which have drastically affected the poor and increasing poverty.<sup>10</sup>

In urban areas, poverty rates are around 9%, whereas in rural areas it is 55%.<sup>11</sup> Due to the pandemic, 10 million more (five per cent of the total Pakistan population) are added in the fiscal year 2020 and 87 million Pakistani are estimated to be living below the poverty line by 2021.<sup>12</sup> Pakistan introduced the 'Ehsaas Emergency Relief Program' in April 2020, designed to provide 12 million families with a cash equivalent of \$75.

### **Case Study of Innovative Way to Service the Poor**

Women entrepreneur Maliha Khalid launched Medical Hotline Doctory.pk for COVID-19 patients in the rural sector serviced primarily by the poor, which provides free health care services to the 63% of population. Doctory.pk<sup>13</sup> is a triage network, allowing people from any part of Pakistan to call and speak to a primary care physician in just five minutes, reducing the number of trips to the hospital. "Navigating Pakistan's health care system is often frustrating and confusing," said Maliha. "We are creating tools to make high-quality health care accessible to every Pakistani, regardless of their location or income." Today, it is a part of Pakistan's National rapid COVID-19 response system.

## **SRI LANKA**

Most of the poor live predominantly in rural areas, but with the onset of the pandemic, even in the urban areas, job losses are rampant both among private-sector employees and informal workers. The \$3.20 poverty rate is projected to have increased from 9.2 per cent in 2019 to 11.7 per cent in 2020.<sup>14</sup> The tourism sector, which accounts for five per cent of GDP, has come to a complete standstill since March while the apparel sector has seen a decline in demand by 25 per cent. Due to a confluence of factors during the first nine months of 2020, the Sri Lankan economy has contracted by 5.3 per cent. Due to the second wave of COVID-19 cases, Sri Lanka has failed to leverage its early-mover advantage from its initial success in dealing with the pandemic.<sup>15</sup>

### **Case Study of the Plantation Community**

The plantation communities<sup>16</sup> constitutes the poorest in Sri Lanka, and for the children in these communities, school closures have deprived them of not just education but also daily meal on the school premises. Given the disruption, disparities and difficulties created by school closures, those who work directly with children in affected communities told Amnesty International that the government should aim to establish a level playing field for all students. For the children in plantation communities, access to e-learning during the COVID-19 school closures has simply not been viable.<sup>17</sup> A devastating impact or rather a standstill of education for the poor children of the plantation community will retard the growth.

## **NEPAL**

A rapid assessment of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 revealed that the virus will derail the achievement of SDGs if external donor supports are not made available on the scale needed to fight the disease and its impact.<sup>18</sup> The study reveals that the consequences will spill over to multiple SDGs with an immediate threat to two intricately interrelated Goals (Goal 1: no poverty; Goal 2: zero hunger) and negative effects on all pillars of food security (i.e., availability, access, utilization, and stability). Of the four pillars, the profound impact in the short-term is seen in availability and access to food and long term, it will impact all the four pillars of food security.<sup>19</sup> The landlocked terrain and poor condition of the roads delay the supplies adding to the difficulties. A nationwide lockdown was implemented from March to July in 2020, followed by localized lockdowns, including in the Kathmandu Valley up until mid-September. During this time, transportation, education and tourism-related activities were significantly restricted. After contracting for the first time in 40 years in FY20 - by 1.9 per cent - the economy showed signs of moderate recovery in the first half of FY/21 due to resumption of wholesale and retail trade, transport, and financial services, and favourable monsoons adding to robust agricultural growth.<sup>20</sup>

### **Case Study of Women Domestic Workers**

It is estimated that Nepal has at least 200,000 domestic workers<sup>21</sup> and a majority are female. According to a rapid assessment conducted by the Home Workers' Union Nepal of General Federation of Nepalese Trade Union (GEFONT), 85% of the domestic workers lost their jobs because of COVID-19 and are now unemployed<sup>22</sup> and suffering at multiple levels - reduction of employment, working hours in some cases, a loss of jobs resulting from fear and restricted mobility associated with confinement measures of lockdown.<sup>23</sup> With a reduced source of income, economic crisis has unfolded reducing their capacity to manage even the daily food expenses, leave alone accessing education and health services.

## **MALDIVES**

Maldives' GDP<sup>24</sup> is reliant on tourism and related industries, so are a majority of jobs. One-third of adult males and a quarter of women work in the tourism sector. COVID-19 has led to a decrease in household earnings for these families due to job losses. To combat these issues, the government has established a price ceiling for staple foods, beverages and supplies to help families save money. Poverty in the Maldives varies throughout the island nation, southernmost atolls are the most affected with 1 in 5 living in poverty. Public sector jobs often come with more benefits and a higher wage vis-à-vis private-sector job. For these reasons, 40% of total employment is public sector oriented.<sup>25</sup> At the beginning of the tourism shutdown, 90% of resorts sent their workers home without pay or cut their salaries by 15-20 %. Mauroof Zakir,<sup>26</sup> estimated that 11,000 workers would be on no-pay leave, and a few local resorts will pay their workers only the base salary for the next three to six months or until business resumes to normal.<sup>27</sup>

### **Case Study of Tourist Resort Workers**

The International Finance Corporation (IFC) is investing up to \$50 million in Bank of Maldives (BML) to provide financing for companies and small and medium sized businesses in the Maldives' tourism sector, which had been battered by the coronavirus pandemic. It aims to improve infrastructure and sustainability by supporting key affordable housing as well as climate-resilient infrastructure projects by tapping into opportunities in tourism infrastructure, maritime transport, and urban development. As of June 2020, IFC's committed \$22 million.<sup>28</sup> which will help the government's concerted efforts in revamping the tourist resort workers.

### **BANGLADESH**

The world's most densely populated country is one of the high-risk countries of the COVID-19 pandemic, where economic stagnation may push a large number of families back into poverty. The substantial gains in household incomes and poverty reduction achieved over the past two decades have been put at risk, severely impacting jobs and earnings, causing poverty to rise in FY/20. The economically disadvantaged groups such as garment industry workers, day laborers and slum dwellers will be the worst sufferers. More than 1 million garment<sup>29</sup> workers in Bangladesh have already been fired or furloughed (i.e., suspended from work). Connected to this are approximately 900,000 Rohingya refugees<sup>30</sup> who are one of the world's most vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, the worst victims of pandemic with limited access to health services causing a multidimensional crisis.<sup>31</sup>

### **Case Study of an Apparel worker**

Riya Akter, 22, is an apparel worker. Asked if she was afraid of becoming infected with COVID-19, she said work came first and needed to be done, otherwise, there would not be food on the table. She works while maintaining social distance with other workers as readymade garment (RMG) factories reopened amid the pandemic in Dhaka. Women who are poor and marginalized face an even higher risk of transmission and fatalities, loss of livelihood, and increased violence. Globally, 70 per cent of health workers and first responders are women, and yet, they are not treated at par with their male counterparts.<sup>32</sup>

### **BHUTAN**

Bhutan has managed to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic with just 891 total cases<sup>33</sup> and only 1 death as of April 4, 2021. Despite this success, the UNDP report found that the effects of the pandemic were severe and widespread in individuals and businesses in the tourism sector, which incurred a loss of US\$ 4.4 million in both domestic and international tourism.<sup>34</sup> Bhutanese people showed resilience as they were willing to change their occupations when the government presented them with opportunity.<sup>35</sup> As a result, multiple new programs were implemented while protecting those in poverty.

### **Case Study of Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC)**

On June 24, 2020, both the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) of Bhutan and UNDP together launched a program to help those in the tourism industry by converting nearly 3,500 acres of land into a vegetable farm.<sup>36</sup> The program expects to help 18 groups of people in the tourism sector, 17 groups of farmers and an additional 445 individual farmers. This initiative will ensure food security and an income for those whose livelihoods have been hit hard. The vegetable farm program is making Bhutan more self-sufficient. Just over a week later, on July 2, the UNDP Bhutan started a Standard Operating Procedures for Gender-Based Violence,<sup>37</sup> prevention and mitigation for organizations and individuals in all 20 Districts and four Municipalities or Thromdes across the country.<sup>38</sup> Another feat was the COVID-19 recovery project.<sup>39</sup> Hence by taking aggressive preventive actions, Bhutan has become a model example of how to manage a pandemic.

### **AFGHANISTAN**

The pandemic has negatively impacted SDG1 (No Poverty), which deteriorated significantly as the poverty rate rose from its pre-COVID-19 level of just under 55% to 72%. The government would need to allocate resources equivalent to 15% of the current GDP for immediate interventions in the health sector, along with social protection measures, including SDGs attainment.<sup>40</sup> One of the poorest countries in the world, this pandemic is further pushing Afghanistan into poverty, overwhelming basic health care system, exacerbating food insecurity, food-supply disruption due to border closure and increasing unemployment, already impacted by the ongoing conflict and high poverty levels reports SIGAR,<sup>41</sup> which predicts that an additional eight million people will fall into poverty, pushing the poverty rate from 55 per cent to 80 per cent, becoming a humanitarian disaster.<sup>42</sup>

### **Case Study of the Civil Society**

The pandemic has inspired people to show resilience, share responsibilities, sharing the little they have, tapping into a culture of generosity, volunteerism and care. Landlords have waived off rent, tailors have handed out thousands of homemade face masks, youth groups and athletes have delivered food to hospitals and families in destitution. Local television stations have run live fund-raising events, while wedding halls and private schools have volunteered to be turned into hospitals.<sup>43</sup>

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

South Asia needs to respond to the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, by providing a fast and effective response mechanism. A few policy recommendations in this regard are enumerated:

#### **Support for informal sector workers**

As there is a preponderance of the workers in the informal sector in the region, Governments should provide social protection and benefits, cash transfers or unemployment compensation to help ease the financial burden by easing the tax burdens wherever possible.

### **Direct income support to poor, women and other vulnerable groups**

Direct cash transfers like, giving cash directly to the poor who lack income and those struggling to afford day-to-day necessities by giving compensation of income so that a minimum standard of living is maintained without sliding back to poverty.

### **Increase spending on education and health**

As witnessed in other developing regions such as Latin America or East Asia, the state's should effectively deliver to the needy by administering poverty reduction policies by ensuring that these trickle down to the poor.

### **Regional Cooperation a Necessity**

To act collectively as a region by creating favourable conditions for economic recovery with new, innovative strategies and approaches to address the SDG 1 (No Poverty) and also learning from each other's experience.

### **Avoid Complete Shutdowns**

As it takes a toll on poor people's livelihood, the Indian approach of categorization of the country based on the prevalence of the coronavirus cases and accordingly opening the economic activities in areas where the virus is absent or low maybe a good example.

### **Conclusion**

In the short term, addressing the immediate health crisis, ensuring food and nutritional security, transferring incomes to the needy population; medium-term focus should be on boosting economic activities by job creation in areas where poor and lowly skilled workers can participate and get benefits by strengthening the existing poverty alleviation programmes and improve local food self-sufficiency vulnerabilities.<sup>44</sup> The long-term goal should be transformation and bouncing back of the economy.

In a nutshell, by investment in health, education, skills development, innovation, technological upgrading, green infrastructure and natural capital, there will be increase in the productive capacity of the population, providing sustainable returns for future generations. South Asian countries need to seek new opportunities by joining hands, strengthening regional institutions, and pooling resources to fight this deadly pandemic impact on SDG 1(no Poverty) sooner than later in a comprehensive and logical manner.

### **End Notes**

- 
- 1 On 25 Sept 2015, 'all 193 United Nations member countries signed on to 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to "create the future we want in 2030.'
  - 2 <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/economic-impact-covid-19-south-asia-3-visuals>
  - 3 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/coronavirus>
  - 4 <https://unctad.org/programme/covid-19-response/impact-on-trade-and-development-2021#aPoverty>
  - 5 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/india/overview>
  - 6 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0972063420935541>

- 7 Ibid.,
- 8 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0972063420935541>
- 9 <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/documenting-the-story-of-india-s-migrant-distress/story-sVC8sCHFetXYBPKLa1OhZM.html>
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- 22 <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/06/21/out-of-job-domestic-workers-are-struggling-for-survival-even-as-lockdown-is-relaxed>
- 23 <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/06/21/out-of-job-domestic-workers-are-struggling-for-survival-even-as-lockdown-is-relaxed>
- 24 Tourism sector contributes almost two-thirds of the country's GDP.
- 25 <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/covid-19-in-the-maldives/>
- 26 He is secretary-general of the Tourism Employees Association of Maldives
- 27 <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/covid-19-in-the-maldives/>
- 28 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/coronavirus-traps-poor-foreign-workers-in-deserted-maldives/articleshow/75991905.cms>
- 29 The world has already cancelled or put on hold \$3.15 billion worth in orders from the country's garment factories
- 30 Rohingya are an ethnic Muslim minority group are living in Cox's Bazar district in densely crowded conditions
- 31 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342579925\\_Vulnerabilities\\_to\\_COVID-19\\_in\\_Bangladesh\\_and\\_a\\_Reconsideration\\_of\\_Sustainable\\_Development\\_Goals](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342579925_Vulnerabilities_to_COVID-19_in_Bangladesh_and_a_Reconsideration_of_Sustainable_Development_Goals)
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# **Impact of COVID on SDG 2-Zero Hunger in South Asia**

Roshee Lamichhane<sup>1</sup>

## **Summary**

For South Asia, the agenda of mitigating hunger and meeting the SDG Goal 2 of zero hunger by 2030 has been of prime importance much before the COVID pandemic. However, meeting the target has been more challenging and formidable given the COVID pandemic. Even before COVID, food insecurity was on the rise. As per World Bank, 34.27% population in South Asia suffered severe or moderate food insecurity in 2018. Stunting and wasting in children were already likely to worsen. Pandemic is an additional threat to food systems due to climate shocks, conflict, and locust. Most hard hit are the small-scale food producers who are impacted by the crisis comprising of 40-85% in the developing regions. Countries in the South Asian region (Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) were already struggling to meet the SDG Goal 2 of Zero Hunger and had received international cooperation to be able to reach the target. Persistent issues such as poverty, child marriage, and lack of nutritious diet are rampant in the region. COVID resulted in increased poverty, return of migrants, unemployment in these countries. Additionally, the issue of hunger got exacerbated due to disruption in supply chain, lowered agricultural productivity and reduction in farm output due to impediment in movement of labor and logistics related issues. Due to COVID, all measures of the Government was redirected on mitigating the immediate health hazard than focusing on issues regarding hunger, which is considered a medium term problem. Thus, COVID has had debilitating impact on eradicating hunger.

An attempt has been made in this paper to assess the impact of COVID-19 in achieving the SDG Goal 2- Zero Hunger by examining the above countries. Finally, some policy recommendation has been proposed to the Governments so that effective remedial measures can be taken up to ensure food security in the region with the objective of curbing malnutrition and food insecurity and achieving the goal of ending hunger. This paper suggests that countries in the region need to seek international cooperation and increase investment for mitigating the issue of hunger and malnutrition in the region. Earlier strategies adopted such as school meal program are sporadic and hence might have contributed in minimal ways. In this context, devising longer term strategies to incorporate agriculture productivity becomes critical. However, it is important that governments recalibrate their policies considering that COVID is transient and work towards ensuring better food security by maintaining proper supply chain in the region is a continuous process. COVID is likely to push the gains made in fronts like reducing of stunting and wasting in children by decades. Thus, governments need to redouble their efforts to meet the gaps widened by COVID.

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## Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic during last one and half years, has shaken the very existence of human civilization with more than 3.3 million deaths so far and impeded or in many fronts reversed both the achievement and process of socio-economic development. The countries, regions, societies and communities that are vulnerable, poor and marginalized continue to face disproportionate brunt of the pandemic and the rampage more acutely in such perilous economies and settlements. South Asia, habitat to 24.89 percent of world's population is also incidentally the home to 277.2 million or 36 percent of impoverished people and more than half of the undernourished children globally. More than half of the world's children impacted by wasting (26.9 %) live in South Asia (UNICEF, 2018). In addition, a large number of people in the subcontinent who had just escaped poverty but concentrated right above the poverty line are at imminent risk of falling back to poverty trap. Millions have already fallen into it. The Covid-19 pandemic has, therefore, exacerbated the risks and challenges in achieving many socio-economic development targets which looked already formidable. Due to impact of the pandemic, South Asia now faces added difficulty in achieving SDGs.

This paper looks into the potential challenges added by the Covid-19 pandemic in achieving Goal 2 among the 17 SDGs for the South Asia region. Also known as the 'Zero hunger' goal, it aims to end hunger ensuring food security and improved nutrition through promotion of sustainable agriculture. This study discusses the prospect along with added challenges due to Covid-19 in achieving SDG-2 in South Asia. For reasons of ease of analysis and data availability, it covers five major economies of the region -Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka- which in aggregate cover 99 percent of the regional GDP and 98 percent of the population.

According to the United Nations (2020), the world is not on track to achieve Zero Hunger by 2030. If recent trends continue, the number of people affected by hunger would surpass 840 million by 2030. The WFP (2020) predicted that the Covid-19 would have doubled that number by the end of 2020. If we put these figures and trends in South Asian context, the region with pervasive poverty, overdependence on agriculture and low per capita calorie consumption, the situation looks very precarious; particularly after exponentially risen severity of the crisis after second wave of the spread of the new variant of the virus, officially known as B.1.617.

To be focused on the impact of Covid-19 on SDG-2 in particular, this study takes a counterfactual approach; i.e. what were the realistic prospect of achieving this goal for South Asia had there not been the pandemic in contrast to how this has changed due to Covid-19 and its resultant aftermath in productivity, employment and income losses of the most vulnerable among the populace, disruption of regional as well as national supply chains. The pandemic has also compelled the governments to concentrate the public spending on containing the Covid-19 related health emergencies which diverted planned investments away from agriculture productivity, food security and maintenance of agricultural/ food supply chain. Unlike other regions of the world, agriculture is critical for South Asia not only for food security and nutrition, but also in general as gainful employment of almost 43 percent of the population<sup>2</sup>.

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2 Authors compilation of national figures for those 5 countries (decimal rounded)

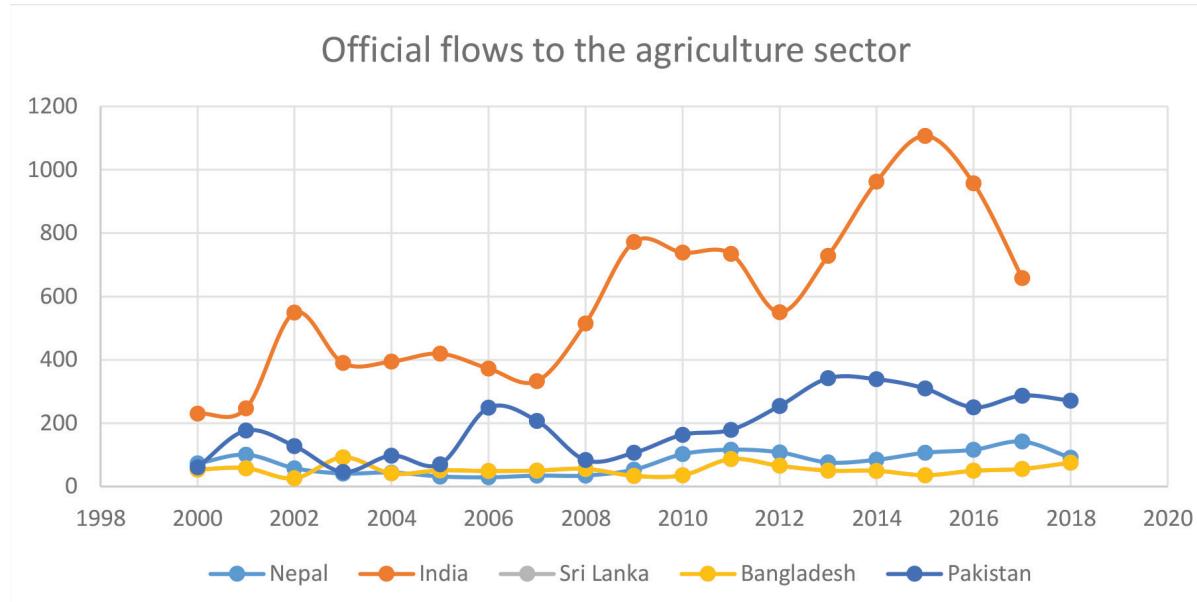
Data is scarce and we may need to wait for long to evaluate the exact impact of the virus. This study reviews both demand and supply side factors that affect food consumption. Demand factors refer to the consumer food choices that hinge on availability and affordability of food while supply side factors refers to the food production and distribution, especially the role of agricultural growth and productivity. Therefore, for comparison, this study presents a comparative pre and post Covid-19 scenario surrounding the indicators defined and used by the UN in tracking the progress of the goal - Zero Hunger. However, it will also look into possible causal SDGs (Goal 1 Poverty), and other cross-cutting variables and issues. The indicators set by the UN for Goal 2 are:

- 2.1 Undernourishment and Food Security
- 2.2 Malnutrition
- 2.3 Small-scale Food Producers
- 2.4 Sustainable Agriculture
- 2.5 Genetic Resources for Agriculture
- 2a Investment in Agriculture
- 2b Agriculture export subsidies
- 2c Food price anomalies

### **Pre- COVID 19 Scenario of South Asia in Achieving Zero Hunger**

South Asian economies, largely agrarian in nature provide employment to almost 50% of its population but contribute merely 20% to the regions' GDP (ADB, 2015). Despite increase in demand for food and agricultural products in the region, agricultural growth has slowed down due to low intraregional trade and investment.

**Figure 1: Official Flows to the Agriculture Sector**



*Source: Country SDG Profiles (2019a). SDG Asia-Pacific Partnership.*

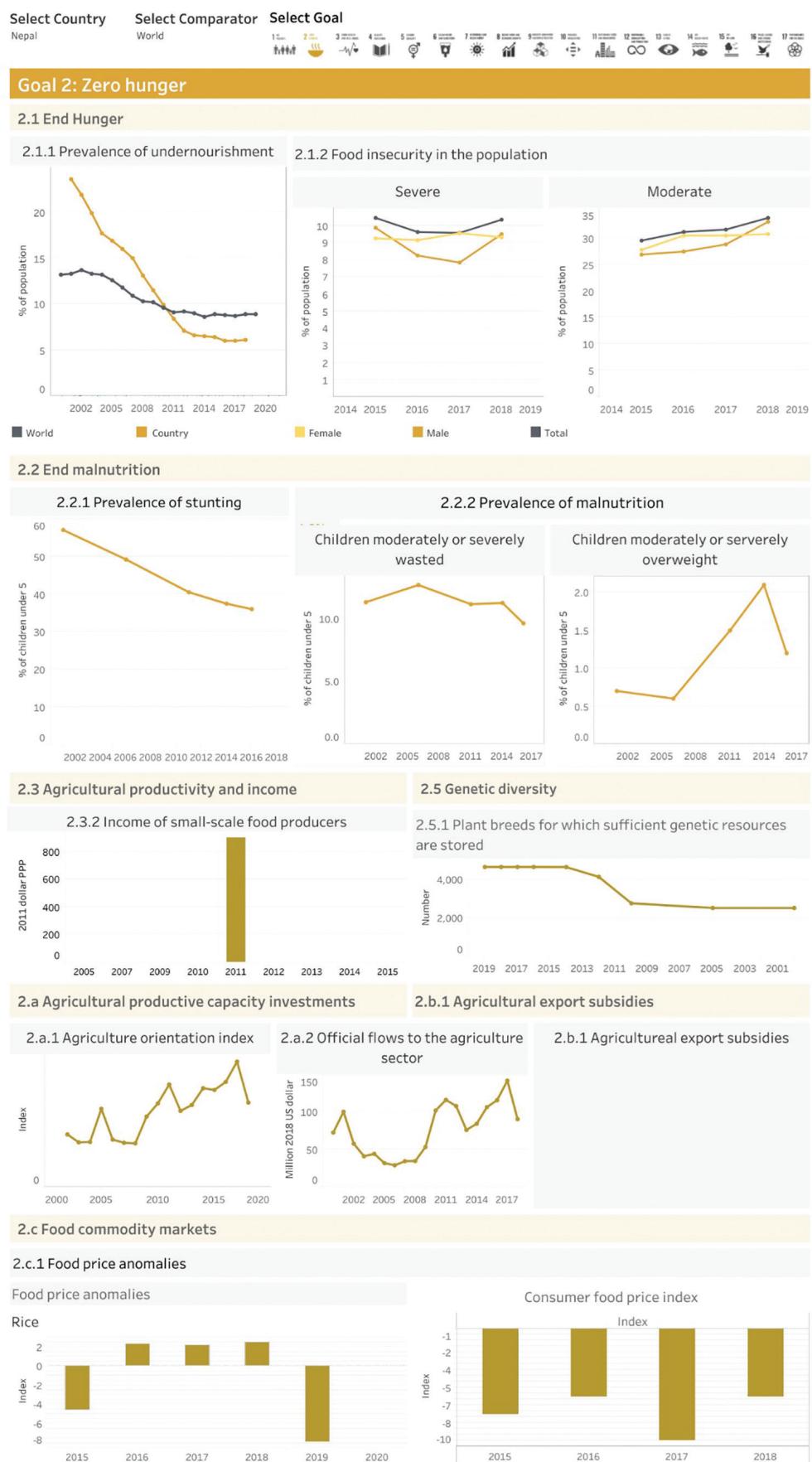
*<https://data.unescap.org/data-analysis/country-sdg-profiles>*

Also, average tariff in agriculture has risen from nearly 12% in 2008 to 15% in 2017 (UNCTAD, 2018). All these result in low agricultural productivity and has direct bearing on food security, hunger and nutrition needs of its population. Mittal and Seti (2009) posited that agriculture in the South Asian Region (SAR) is caught in a low equilibrium trap with low productivity of staples, supply shortfalls, high prices, low returns to farmers and area diversification. This situation has not changed much even after a decade. South Asia, home to one-fifth of the global population, reels under malnutrition. As per latest data from UNICEF (2020), this region still accounts for 31.8 percent of the total number of stunted children below five years, which suggest they are too short for their age and account to 53.8 million of the population. Likewise, 14.7% children totaling to 24.8 million below five years are wasted, or too thin for their weight, an indicator of acute malnutrition. Given these pre-existing vulnerabilities, COVID-19 is likely to reverse hard fought gains to improve nutrition and the overall health of women and children in the region (Fruman & Zhang, 2020). Though SAR is progressing towards achieving Goal 2, it is insufficient as the progress seems to have stalled below the 2020 milestone (UNESCAP, 2021). Same report suggests that achieving zero hunger requires more efforts to be directed towards food insecurity, malnutrition and quality education (Goal 4). Nutrition, hunger, food insecurity, education, marriage and employment are interlinked and act as cross-cutting areas having implications for one another. Also, as per UNICEF, almost 45% of the women aged 20-24 are reported being married before the age of 18 which increases the risk of children stunting and underweight children. Such women are also found to be suffering from anemia. World Bank data for the year 2019 suggests that prevalence of anemia in pregnant women in countries in the region is still high (India: 50, Nepal: 43, Pakistan: 44, Bangladesh: 42, Sri Lanka: 35). These are closely related to the issue of high level of illiteracy in the region. Education is closely related to early childhood care, and better nutrition. Also, it is crucial to increase agricultural production and income of small farmers.

Though the definition of food security has evolved over a period of time, at present, food security entails four dimensions namely;- availability, stability, access and nutritional status (FAO). Availability indicates sufficient year round quantities of quality/ nutritious food available to all individuals in the country. Access involves both physical and economic access. Stability refers to consistent supply of nutritious food at the national, household and individual level, which is directly influenced by the performance of the agriculture sector. Nutritious food is required for healthy and active life.

## Zero Hunger and Nepal

Figure 2: Zero Hunger and Nepal



For Nepal, the Zero Hunger Challenge National Action Plan (2016-2025) has emphasized five strategic pillars, namely i) 100% access to adequate food all year round ii) zero stunted children in less than 2 years, iii) all food systems are sustainable, iv) 100% increase in small holder productivity and income, v) zero loss or waste of food (LWF, 2017). However, these look too ambitious given that the fact that the report does not lay out details as to how to achieve these objectives. Moreover, the same policy statement formulates and spells out an agricultural development strategy enumerating the supporting plans of action to make currently food-deficit Nepal self-sufficient in food grains. Unfortunately, no cross cutting strategies are thought through to address these challenges and achieve a 'zero hunger' state.

Nepal has also enacted the Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Plan-II (2013-2017) with the aim of improving maternal, adolescent and child nutrition intervention to improve the nutritional status of children under five, incidence of lower birth rate, reduce energy deficiency in women (NPC, 2017). It may be noted that these initiatives helped, over a period of time, in lowering the levels of stunting and wasting in children at least to some extent. Sadly, they have not yielded desired results and the overall situation has not changed much. Despite the fact that issues like levels of moderate food insecurity and severe food insecurity as well as undernourishment witnessed a gradual declining trend in the years subsequent to 2015, it is disheartening to note the scenario has worsened again in the year 2018 when compared to that prevailing in 2017. These trends indicate that curbing malnutrition and ensuring food security much before the emergence of COVID phenomenon poses a tough challenge.

Another noteworthy intervention in this regard is South Asia Food and Nutrition Security Initiative (SAFANSI) launched by World Bank primarily to address the issue of chronic malnutrition in the region. It aims to advance the food and nutrition security agenda and promote inter-sectoral action in these five countries. It focuses mainly on enhancing sensitivity to nutrition issues while also aiming to build awareness, advocacy, and stimulate behavioral change to improve food and nutrition security. However, timely review of initiatives such as SAFANSI that were started in the year 2010 is required if the program is to achieve the targets originally set for the region.

### **Post- COVID 19 Scenario of South Asia in Achieving Zero Hunger**

COVID-19 has added to the existing woes of food insecurity in SAR. Prior to COVID, this region reeled under hunger and malnutrition issues. Containing hunger has remained a perennial problem in the region. Heavy rains and localized flooding persistent in the region along with weather induced set-backs act as hindrances in maintaining per capita food production growth (IDA, 2020). Same study suggested that food security issues were exacerbated due to climate, conflict and other economic shocks including the latest one of the outbreak of Locust and other zoonotic diseases.

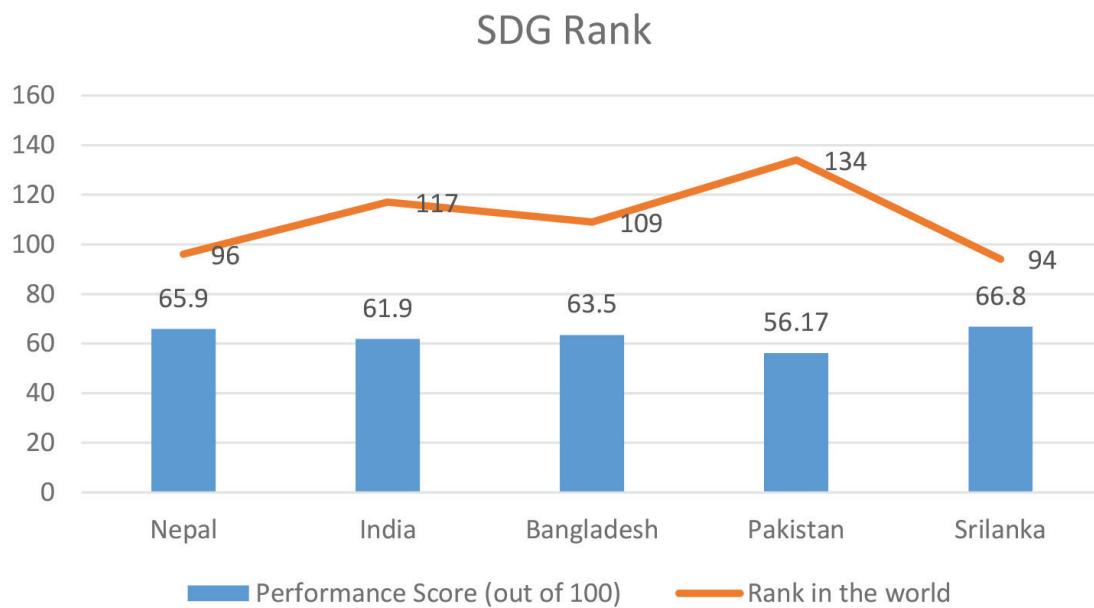
COVID-19 resulted in 18.2 percentage of working hour loss equivalent to (48 hours/week) (millions) in SAR compared to other regions of the world (ILO, 2020). Take an example of India alone, due to lockdown measures imposed for containing virus, labor force dropped by 60 million workers in April 2020 as compared to March 2020 and April 2019 (World Bank, 2021). This loss of employment was paralleled by strong impact on household consumption. During the period of April-July 2020, per capita consumption was estimated to have fallen by 36%. Such income loss will affect household ability to purchase food.

A study by UNESCAP (2021) suggest that SAR is likely to regress on nutrition and food security by 2030 as the region faces challenges in investing in agriculture, securing genetic resources for agriculture, and reducing the prevalence of anemia in women. COVID may further exacerbate this problem by increasing food insecurity and childhood under-nutrition. UNESCAP (2020) suggests that COVID is estimated to push an additional 24 million people into acute food insecurity. The same report suggests that achieving SDG 2 requires an integrated system approach, bringing together food, water and sanitation, health, social protection, and education systems to address the underlying and contributing factors of diets sustainably. Sustainable food systems play a critical role in achieving food and nutrition security for all.

COVID-19 has, among others, impacted the agricultural production and output due to breakage in the supply chains. Besides, as per recent estimates almost 8.4% of the working hours was lost compared in SAR compared to the last quarter of 2019 (ILO, 2021). Majority of the job holders in SAR are informal workers. Additionally, COVID is also exposing middle-skill workers to displacement and low working hours and incomes (ADB, 2020). All these phenomena burden the existing measures taken towards food security in the region. These include agricultural growth in general and growth of food grains in particular, agricultural price policies poverty alleviation programs, and public distribution of food grains (FAO).

SDG 2 target of zero hunger is significant to South Asia as this region is home to 36% of world's impoverished and nearly half of undernourished children. However, data and projections for year 2025 and 2030 suggests that countries in the region are far behind from achieving the SDG 2 targets. Data in the table below suggest the SDG Rank (out of 10) for countries in the region compared to the global standard for the year 2020.

**Figure 3: SDG Rank for South Asian countries**



*Source: Sustainable Development Report, 2020*

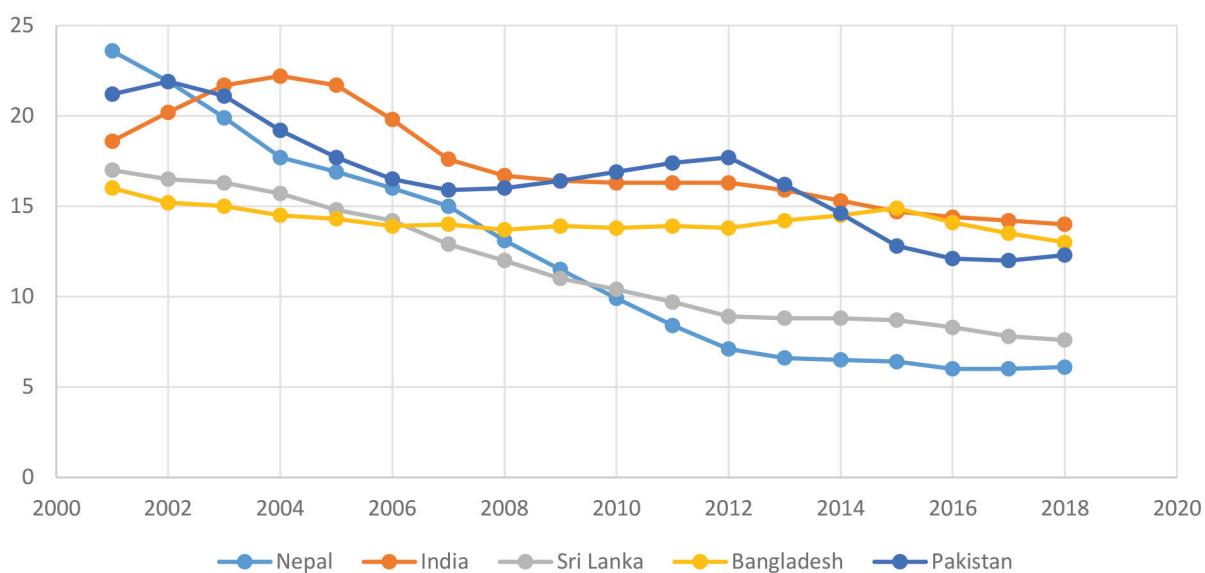
Despite that fact that Asia has shown progress in reducing the number of hungry people in recent years since 2015, it accounts for more than half of the undernourished people in the world-an estimated 381

million people in 2019 (FAO, 2020). Out of these, WFP (2021) data for Asia and the Pacific reveals that about 350.6 million people in the region are estimated to have been undernourished in 2019, about 51 percent of the global total. An estimated 74.5 million children under five years of age were stunted and a total of 31.5 million were wasted. The majority of these children in the region live in South Asia with 55.9 million stunted and 25.2 million wasted children.

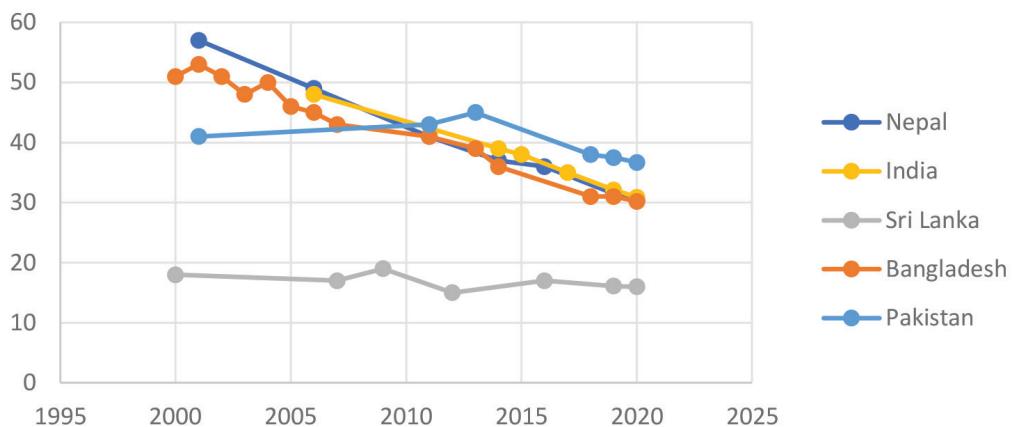
Hunger and malnutrition are inherently intertwined. Though goal of ending hunger in SAR by 2030 has been outlined in 2030 Agenda of achieving SDG across the world, numerous challenges exist. United Nations (2015) estimates that population in Asia is likely to increase by 12% which is likely to pose a challenge in abilities of countries to attain progress in SDG goals such as ending poverty- Goal 1 and hunger -Goal 2. Geographic location, rising population, unequal income distribution, evolving institutions, and inadequate or poor policies compounded by climate change are some major threats to food security affecting developing countries (ADB, 2019). Countries taken under consideration in this study share these characteristics. Poverty headcount ratio of countries in the region is higher compared to other regions. World Bank data suggests Nepal records highest 25.2 (2010), Pakistan 24.3 (2015), India 21.9 (2011), Bangladesh 24.3 (2016), and Sri Lanka 4.1 (2016). These factors accompanied by weather extremes like draught and floods have heightened risk of food insecurity in the region. Comparable data across countries in the region suggest that the prevalence of undernourishment, stunting, wasting among children is highest in the region and the number of children stunted and wasted has increased in the year 2020 (Figure 4, 5 and 6)

**Figure 4: Prevalence of Undernourishment**

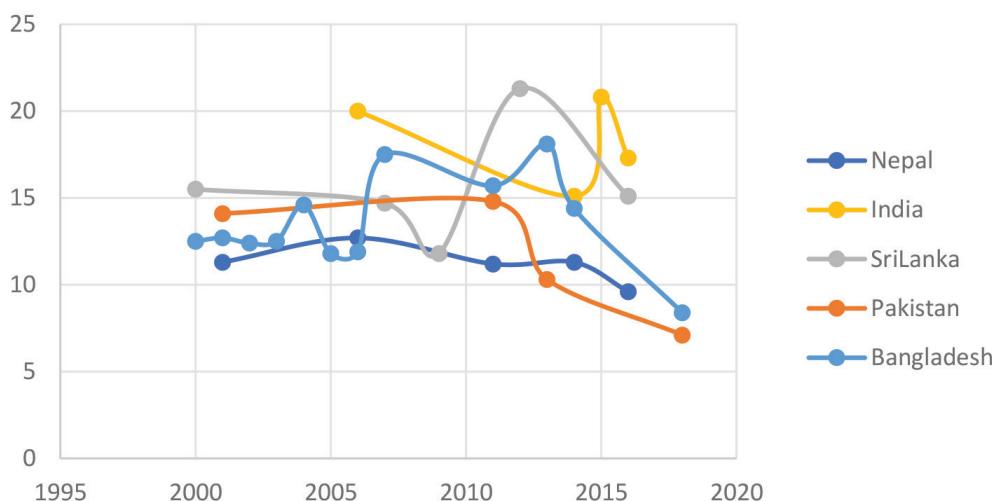
#### 2.1.1. Prevalence of Undernourishment



Source: Country SDG Profiles. (2019a). SDG Asia-Pacific Partnership.  
<https://data.unescap.org/data-analysis/country-sdg-profiles>

**Figure 5: Prevalence of Stunting****2.2.1 Prevalence of Stunting**

Source: <https://data.unescap.org/data-analysis/country-sdg-profiles>

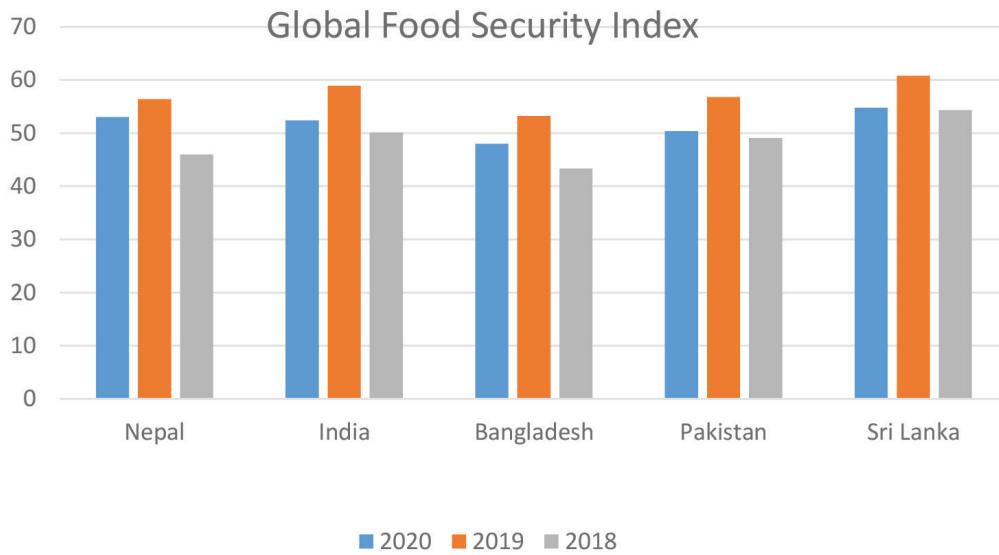
**Figure 6: Children Moderately or Severely Wasted****Children Moderately or severely wasted**

Source: <https://data.unescap.org/data-analysis/country-sdg-profiles>

Ending all forms of malnutrition by 2030, including achieving the 2025 targets on stunting and wasting in children under five years requires addressing the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women as well as older person.

Another important indicator is Global Food Security Index which suggests higher value is better. Compared to 2019, the index has fallen in the year 2020.

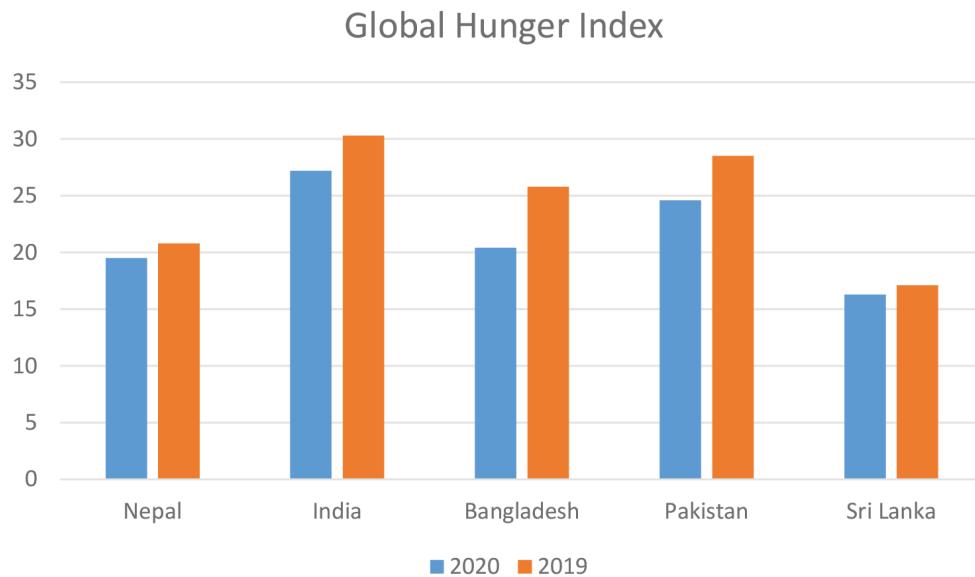
Figure 7: Global Food Security Index



Source: <https://foodsecurityindex.eiu.com/index>

Figure 8: Global Hunger Index

If we look at the Hunger Index, countries in the region have progressed in the last one decade, and also in the year 2020 compared to 2019. For instance- Nepal's hunger index in 2020 is 19.5 which is considered moderate.



Source: <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/nepal.html>

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

Asadullah et. al (2020) projected that South Asian countries may not be able to meet their SDG such as poverty eradication given the size of their population unless public funding on health and education is substantially increased. This is closely related to the issue of zero hunger. Thus, South Asian countries with their inherent frailties such as crippling infrastructure, as well as limited fiscal commitment may not be able to meet the SDG Goal 2 by 2030. For instance, different safety net programs launched in different countries such as Child Development Schemes (ICDS), Mid-day meal scheme (1995), Food for work program in India, and similar programs such as Samurdhi in Sri Lanka, Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) in Pakistan and other similar Public Assistance Programs are major safety nets. However, such programs have been criticized for poor implementation, transfers in insufficient funds to be able to make an impact on poverty, promoting dependency, flawed selection, misuse by the government officials (Ahmad et.al, 2015).

Food crisis is likely to persist if long term agenda are not taken into account. Thus, both short term relief measures and investment to address the longer term drivers of food insecurity should be taken into account. Some of the measures can be:-

1. Promote regionalism: Regional cooperation and regional agricultural/food supply chain is the key for averting food crisis. Reviving food banks, seed bank in the SAARC region can be a short term strategy to help the poor in the countries of the region during pandemic times. But in the longer run, more resilient and sustainable strategies need to be built at the individual and community level. South Asian nations can work together in sharing food production technologies, experiences and agricultural inputs.
2. Private Sector Initiatives: Countries in the region rank poor in terms of dietary diversity. Thus, Governments should introduce policies to enhance the public and private sector cooperation to increase food productivity, access and utilization, improve fair pricing and incentives to encourage more diverse, healthy, and balanced diets by population, especially women, children and the urban poor.
3. Livelihood support and social safety net: Expanding and improving food assistance and social protection programs to ensure access to nutritious food to the poor and the vulnerable, as they have been hardest hit by the pandemic. Economic stimulus packages should be addressed to the unemployed and those with plummeted purchasing power. Subsidization of nutritious food to the poor can ensure affordability of nutritious diets to these vulnerable sections of the society.
4. Inclusion: States must recognize the fact that there are multifaceted exclusions in accessing adequate amount of food, knowledge among consumers to meet minimum calorie and ensuring food security. Such exclusion occurs across geographical regions, gender, communities, age groups and differently abled people. Governments must have targeted policies to bridge these exclusionary gaps.
5. Education and awareness: The need of behavior change in food habits and nutrition intake need not be overemphasized. Rice being a staple diet, consumption patterns of countries in the region such as in Nepal are mostly rice based. But in the process, other nutritious food grains like buckwheat, barley, and wheat are ignored as the concept of food security and nutrition is taken off from the

psyche' of consumers. Managing food security can be ensured only by imparting and enhancing the knowledge of consumers on minimum nutrition management.

6. Modernizing and commercializing agriculture: Digitalization of agriculture can go a long way in supporting small scale farmers resulting in a more sustainable and resilient food system. These initiatives can include mobile access, digital wallet, web-based messaging services, and online meeting platforms to the rural farmers. They not only get real time agricultural information but also protect them from being exploited by middle men. Such initiatives can assure that rural supply chains are not broken even during the pandemic and ensure smooth access to food markets through e-commerce platforms.
7. Narrowing the Nutrition Gap: For addressing the issue of nutritional deficiency, it is critical to shift the consumption patterns towards nutritious diet. This requires alignment of policies formulated for healthier consumption and resource management. Diversity in nutrition supply ensures adequate protein, amino acids, and zinc in the food. This is necessary to reduce malnutrition especially among women and the poor.
8. Provision of logistics: Provision of agri-ambulance during period of lockdown can ensure that agricultural produce is not wasted in the field. Countries in the region can work towards better expansion of electricity supply to households to ensure better food storage. Such uninterrupted supply is also important at the industrial level to maintain cold storage facilities. Such bottlenecks in logistics can be overcome to avoid price hike and ensure food affordability and diversity.
9. Self-sufficiency at national level: It becomes imperative to focus on self-reliance of food grains, vegetable and fruits at the national level. As in the case of Nepal, it can work on creating mechanism for becoming self-sufficient in food grain, vegetable and fruits on a planned and systematically phased manner. Even today, local produce is getting wasted due to lockdown while vegetable and fruits worth record 250 billion were imported in the last fiscal year 2019-2020 from India.
10. Post-harvest management practices: Post harvest loss especially of fruits and vegetable account for almost 50 %. Hence, awareness raising materials need to be designed across a broad range of stakeholders to avoid pilferage and improve shelf-life of fresh produce. This will have significant contribution to food security, nutrition and poverty reduction.
11. Home and School Gardening Programs: Agricultural programs, such as home and school gardening in Nepal, that included poultry raising and nutrition education have proved efficacious in lowering anemia in children and their mothers. Hence, such programs need to be continued in future as well.
12. Direct and Indirect Nutrition specific interventions: Direct nutrition specific intervention such as providing micro-nutrient supplement to adolescents, pregnant women, infant, breast feeding should be continued. It may be redoubled given the current economic woes of poor and vulnerable due to COVID. Similarly, indirect nutrition-sensitive interventions such as cash and in-kind transfers (including child cash grants), nutritious food and diets, school feeding program and parental education need to be given continuity on a sustainable basis.

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# The Covid Pandemic & Challenges to Good Health and Well Being

Salma Malik<sup>1</sup>

Let me focus on Pakistan while discussing about the SDG-3. The government of Prime Minister Imran Khan held health and nutrition as one of its key campaign issues during the 2018 elections. His concern with regards health and nutrition, once elected led to several institutional measures, amongst which was a nationwide health coverage for the under privileged through a *Sehat Sahulat* (Easy Health) scheme, along with reforms in the health sector, a centralized integrated disease surveillance system and strong inter-provincial information sharing mechanism.<sup>2</sup> These steps were in sync with the previous regimes' proactive measures, when it came to incorporating Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the country's *National Development Agenda 2030*, through a unanimous National Assembly Resolution in 2016. This made Pakistan the first country globally to incorporate SDGs as a part of the state's development agenda. A welcomed step indeed but it also put considerable pressure and responsibility on the government to not only fulfill the SDGs, but also the unfinished aspects of the *Millenium Development Goals (MDGs)* which were previously left unaddressed. However, the governments past and present have been faced by several challenges. Firstly, the passage of 18th Amendment to the Constitution in 2010 devolved healthcare policy and rulemaking to the Provincial level, a step undertaken to empower provinces to carry out their needs specific health policies and requirements. However, in reality, the results have not been adequately met. Secondly, despite the establishment of special SDG units, there is a lack of internal interface for policy coordination. Furthermore, there has been a lack of financial transparency, besides poor data reporting analysis and lastly, despite the involvement of grass root leadership, there was not only an absence of administrative and financial empowerment but also lack of awareness with regards the importance of the SDGs.

In the face of a complex security challenge such as the Covid 19 pandemic, such indicators become an additional challenge for any government to handle. Yet despite these baseline challenges, Pakistan's response and handling of the pandemic in the past 17 months has been beyond expectations. This paper will cover Pakistan's response to SDG 03, what measures undertaken, how it has responded to

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2 Government of Pakistan & WHO, *SDG 03 Localization in Pakistan, Ministry of National Health Services Regulations and Coordination*, 2018, <https://phkh.nhsrpk/sites/default/files/2021-04/Implementation%20of%20the%202030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20Pakistan%20WHO%202019.pdf>, p. 10.

health-related goals in general and more specifically during the pandemic. What challenges has the government faced and what measures undertaken to address these impediments.

It will be useful to other South Asian countries as well.

### **SDGs & Pakistan: Comparison to other South Asian Countries**

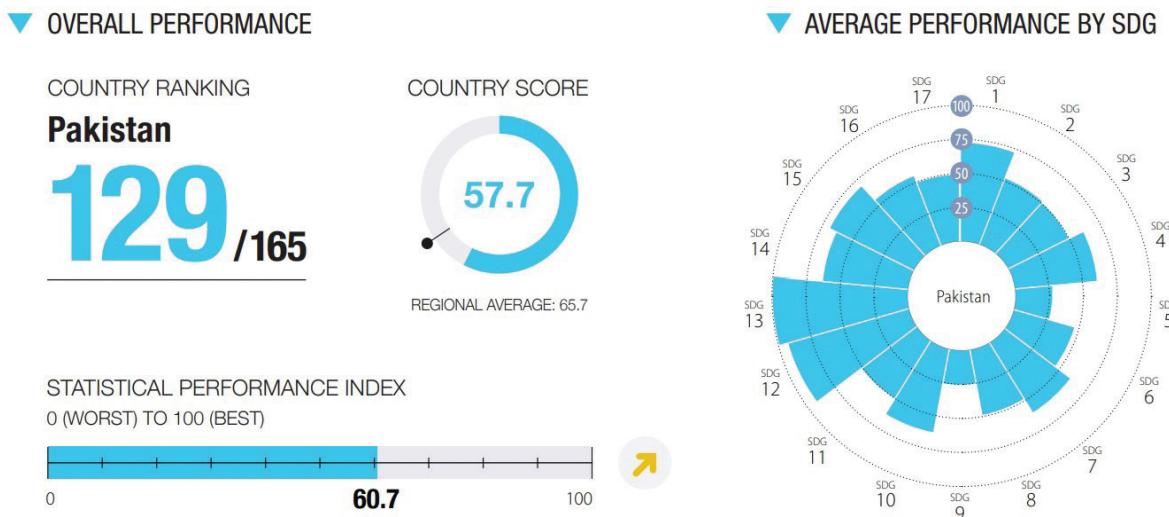
The adoption of SDGs was carried out by Pakistan in February 2016, soon after they officially came into force, as a *national development agenda* through a unanimous parliamentary resolution, placing Pakistan much ahead of other countries and regional actors joining the programme. However, despite this early start, Pakistan's performance can at best be rated between stagnant to moderately increasing. It scored 57.7 under SDGs' global index against a better regional average of 65.7 and stood 129 out of 165 countries in the overall performance ranking for the year 2021. A slightly better performance than the previous years, however, with the exception of Afghanistan, whose score was 53.9, all the other regional countries, showed better performance indicators. With Bhutan at 70, Maldives 69.3, Sri Lanka at 68.1 Nepal 66.5, Bangladesh standing at 63.5, and India at 60.1.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which many considered as a "UN-driven initiative only to be complied with by four-yearly progress reports, ... prepared by consultants, without any implementation mechanism in place to actually deliver," the SDGs were made part of the national development agenda. To ensure speedy implementation, Special SDG units were established at the federal as well as provincial levels. These special SDG units have been tasked to mainstream the objectives as well as create synergies among various federal and provincial organizations and agencies. At the federal level, three SDG units, one at the Prime Minister Office (PMO), one at the parliamentary secretariat and third at the Planning Commission of Pakistan (PCP) have been set up.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Jeffrey D. Sachs, Christian Kroll, Guillaume Lafortune, Grayson Fuller, and Finn Woel, *The Decade of Action for the Sustainable Development Goals: Sustainable Development Report 2021*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

4 Government of Pakistan, *Summary for The National Economic Council Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) National Framework*, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform Planning Commission, March 2018.

**Figure 01: Pakistan's Ranking & Performance on SDGs for year 2020-21**

Source: Sustainable Development Report, 2021, p. 358.

Alongside the establishment of an SDG unit at the PMO, a Support Fund with Pak Rs. 136 billion was launched. Additional subunits or task cells under the PMO unit were set up at the Federal and Provincial levels with the support of UNDP and Planning and Development Departments.<sup>5</sup> With regards the National Assembly, under the aegis of the Speaker, a Parliamentary Secretariat on SDGs was established to monitor the SDGs. Six parliamentary task forces were formed at national, provincial and regional levels comprising elected representatives. The third tier i.e., the PCP not only has its independent SDG unit to run but is also tasked with looking after the two main units run by the PMO as well National Assembly. The rationale behind incorporating the SDGs with the 2025 National Vision document was to create a space for establishing multisectoral linkages and collaboration and sectoral linkages to achieve the 2030 sustainable development agenda in which health-related targets were given top priority.

To have a well-coordinated and realistic implementation, the SDGs were synced in with seven pillars of the 2018 National Vision document 2025,<sup>6</sup> which included, a people first approach, growth, governance, security, entrepreneurship, knowledge economy and connectivity. Furthermore, inclusion and implementation of the SDGs have been made integral in the five-year fiscal plan, provincial growth strategies and development plans at grass root and local bodies' level. *Pakistan Development Alliance* as a consortium of hundred plus organizations spread over national, provincial and district level is engaged in implementing the SDGs at civil society level, in order to bring coherence and coordination. For a more accountable and transparent system, the consortium has also carried out *Citizens' Led Mechanism for the Voluntary National Review of SDGs*<sup>7</sup> in the country. Given a mandate to raise awareness, set the policies

5 Ume Laila Azhar, "Where does Pakistan stand in SDGs," *The News* (Pakistan), May 26, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/567836-pakistan-stand-sdgs>

6 Government of Pakistan, *Pakistan 2025 One Nation One Vision*, Ministry of Planning, Development & Reform, 2018.

7 AwazCDS-Pakistan & Pakistan Development Alliance, *Citizens Voice on Volunteer National Review and Status of SDGs in Pakistan*, March 2019, <https://awazcds.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Citizens-Voices-Report-2019.pdf>

and institutional and financial scope for implementation, identify impediments and challenges as well as evaluate and monitor the progress; this report identified the level of progress, and the challenges faced.

Foremost amongst the challenges, has been data collection and availability. Financial constraints, devolution of administrative and financial power to local governments, which remain dysfunctional and lack training to comprehend as well as implement these goal posts and poor capacity building of legislators are issues that have further been an impediment in better implementation.<sup>8</sup> Lastly, given the pandemic, accessibility to concerned stakeholders, engagement at grass roots level and a lack of capacity at the hands of federal as well as provincial governments to handle such complex and multilayered health challenges remained a major issue.

**Figure 02: Pakistan's Progress on SDGs**



Notes: The full title of Goal 2 "Zero Hunger" is "End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture".

The full title of each SDG is available here: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/sustainabledevelopmentgoals>

Source: Sustainable Development Report, 2021, 358.

The surveys and reviews carried out in different provinces identified different set of problems and performance matrix. If the Punjab province performed better on quality education in comparison to the other three provinces, the other three regions comprising, Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK), Gilgit Baltistan (GB) and Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) had better indicators. The Sindh province completely lacked a provincial priority indicator framework on SDGs, without which neither terms of reference can be established, nor any budgetary allocations made, and as indicated previously, the almost nonfunctional local government officials lacked complete information on SDGs. The other provinces also showed a dismal performance, which is reflective of dismal parliamentary oversight. The onus for effective implementation and awareness with regards the SDGs, lies much with the parliamentarians as members of the task forces need to ensure effective engagements.

8 Ibid, 08-12.

### **SDG 3 & Pakistan**

As mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, Pakistan's performance on the SDGs has been a mix bag. Except for SDG 13 i.e., climate change, there are major challenges in realizing these goals. Whereas all SDGs hold equal importance, good health, and well-being (SDG 03) has been given a central position, by the current government. Imran Khan during his election campaign and after getting elected, gave topmost priority to health care, specially amongst children. He announced a comprehensive roadmap to mitigate the effects of malnutrition and poor-quality food on the mental and physical development of children as well as expectant mothers<sup>9</sup>. At the institutional level, *National Health Vision Pakistan 2016-2025* (NHV) was launched, based on an intensive consultative exercise at the national level. In the post 18th amendment environment, where owing to devolution of crucial areas including health service, the NHV as a central body, enables provincial health departments to contextualize their policy frameworks with a view to achieving universal health coverage. To this end, each of the provinces have introduced supportive provincial legislations. Alongside legislative initiatives, multiple actions have been taken by Pakistan's federal and provincial governments to advance health nationwide.<sup>10</sup>

For this purpose, under the poverty alleviation and social safety division, several welfare schemes were introduced. Those pertaining directly to health care and well-being are - Ehsaas Rashan portal, and Ehsas Nashunuma, commercialization policy for specialized nutrition food, Ehsas Tahafuz, Ehsas Langar, clean cooking stoves, Sehat Sahulat cards, Support to the marginalized (Tahafuz Window integration), and after the breakout of the pandemic, Prime Minister's Covid Fund Portal was created, besides the other measures undertaken.<sup>11</sup> Besides these welfare schemes, more than three dozen, *Ehsaas Development Centers* were set up in nine districts across the country. The government's focus on well being and nutrition is strongly linked to good health care facilities, as this leads to a strong, healthy and productive human resource, necessary for the growth and development of the country.

Besides this, under the Prime Minister's exclusive health care scheme known as the *Sehat Sahulat Program* identifies under-privileged citizens across the country and helps them get access to entitled medical health care in a swift and dignified manner without any financial obligations. So far, as per the program portal from across 90 cities and districts, 78,83,249 families have enrolled, and benefited from free treatment, hospitalization as well as transportation, without any costs.<sup>12</sup>

Despite these measures, the realization of this critical SDG has so far been dismal. Figure 03 shows the priority target areas, along with the targets to be reached by 2030 against what the national baseline performance has been by the mid term i.e.t 2015. Lastly, it also identifies what type of policy support is required to achieve these targets. These proposed National SDGs are tentative targets and will be

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9 Rizwan Shehzad, "PM orders 'comprehensive road map' to prevent stunting," *The Express Tribune*, October 05, 2020. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2267046/pm-orders-comprehensive-road-map-to-prevent-stunting>

10 Government of Pakistan, *Pakistan's Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Voluntary National Review 2019*, SDG Section Ministry of Planning, Development and Reforms

11 Government of Pakistan, *Ehsaas Programs*, Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety Division, <https://www.pass.gov.pk/Detail845ae76f-4161-4d46-8452-ab8805d1f953>

12 See: official website, Sehat Sahulat Program, <https://www.pmhealthprogram.gov.pk/>

implementable only through the interventions and ownership by provincial as well as local governments. Additionally, effective monitoring system needs to be in place for follow up and better implementation.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 03: SDG 03 and National Priority Targets**

Sustainable Development Goals	National Priority Targets	National Priority SDG Indicator	Required Policy Support		
			National Baseline 2014-15	Target 2030	
<b>3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING</b> 	Target 3.1: By 2030, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births.	3.1.1 Maternal mortality ratio	276	179	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Double public allocations for health by 2030;</li> <li>• Broaden the scope of PM health insurance program and provincial healthcare system; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health education program at school level;</li> <li>• Hygiene awareness program at community level;</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Improve health monitoring system at district level;</li> <li>• Training and capacity building of staff on Health Management Information System</li> </ul>
	Target 3.2: By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under-5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births.	3.2.1 Under-five mortality rate	89	40	
		3.2.2 Neonatal mortality rate	55	25	
	Target 3.6: By 2020, halve the number of global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents	3.6.1 Death rate due to road traffic injuries			
	Target 3.7: By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes.	3.7.1 Proportion of women of reproductive age (aged 15-49 years) who have their need for family planning satisfied with modern methods	47%	70.50%	
		3.7.2 Adolescent birth rate (aged 10-14 years; aged 15-19 years) per 1,000 women in that age group	44%	Half the present value	
	Target 3.8: Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all.	3.8.1 Coverage of essential health services (defined as the average coverage of essential services based on tracer interventions that include reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health, infectious diseases, non-communicable diseases and service capacity and access, among the general and the most disadvantaged population)			
		3.8.2 Number of people covered by health insurance or a public health system per 1,000 population			

Source: GoP, Sustainable Development Goals – National Framework, 09. <sup>14</sup>

As per Figure 04, which shows the performance indicators of individual target areas again show a mix picture. On some indicator, such as maternal mortality rate, births attended by skilled health workers, dealing with HIV infections, the progress has shown an upward trend and the progress to achieve the 2030 goal post is very much on track. Whereas mortality rate for children under five years of age, infants' survival due to timely vaccine administration, adolescent fertility ratio are indicators with modest improvement. Whereas, several indicators have not shown any progress, and appear to be stagnated, a dangerous trend, given that the country has less than ten years to deliver. One of the main problems faced by the SDG units and performing teams is the complete lack of data, which not only makes it difficult to provide a realistic result and SDG performance profile, but also negatively impacts the overall rating of the country.

13 Government of Pakistan, *Summary for the National Economic Council – Sustainable Development Goals National Framework*, Planning Commission Ministry Of Planning, Development & Reform, March, 2018.

14 Ibid.

**Figure 04: Performance Indictors of Individual Target Areas of SDG 03**

<b>SDG3 – Good Health and Well-Being</b>			
Maternal mortality rate (per 100,000 live births)	140	2017	●
Neonatal mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	41.2	2019	●
Mortality rate, under-5 (per 1,000 live births)	67.2	2019	●
Incidence of tuberculosis (per 100,000 population)	263.0	2019	●
New HIV infections (per 1,000 uninfected population)	0.1	2019	●
Age-standardized death rate due to cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, or chronic respiratory disease in adults aged 30–70 years (%)	24.7	2016	●
Age-standardized death rate attributable to household air pollution and ambient air pollution (per 100,000 population)	174	2016	●
Traffic deaths (per 100,000 population)	13.0	2019	●
Life expectancy at birth (years)	65.6	2019	●
Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 females aged 15 to 19)	38.2	2018	●
Births attended by skilled health personnel (%)	69.3	2018	●
Surviving infants who received 2 WHO-recommended vaccines (%)	75	2019	●
Universal health coverage (UHC) index of service coverage (worst 0–100 best)	45	2017	●
Subjective well-being (average ladder score, worst 0–10 best)	4.4	2019	●

Source: Sustainable Development Report, 2021,

According to a government led stakeholders' assessment report,

"The overall health situation in Pakistan has improved in the last two decades, but at a slower pace than neighboring countries. For instance, the average life expectancy at birth increased to 66 years by 2015 as compared to 59 years in 1990. The current Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) has reduced to 178 per 100,000 live births from 294 in the year 2000. Skilled birth attendance (SBA) has improved from 23% in the late 1990s to 52% in 2013."<sup>15</sup>

Despite these positive indicators, there remain several challenges. Pakistan with a population of 220 million people, is the sixth most populous country in the world. Although population growth rate declined from 3.5% per annum in 1980s to the present estimated level of 1.9% per annum it is still an alarmingly high figure, which coupled with devolution woes, places additional burden on the country to handle the challenges. Malnutrition indicators and its impact on health and well-being gets adversely affected by an increasing population. Neonatal mortality is the third highest in the world, whereas the under-five mortality is the second highest in South Asia after Afghanistan. The number of maternal deaths during delivery in Pakistan is also highest in South Asia.<sup>16</sup>

15 SDG03 Localization, p. 09.

16 Ibid.

### Covid-19, SDG03 & Pakistan's Response

For countries such as Pakistan, already lagging behind in the implementation of SDGs, the Covid-19 pandemic came as a major health emergency, with multipronged impact. With no plan or preparedness for such complex emergencies, once the virus hit the country, the state authorities scrambled to respond in terms of a centralized response center, infrastructure development, identification, quarantine and isolation facilities, testing and triage facilities as well as medicines, ventilators, personal protection equipment (PPE), and pharmaceutical production of vaccine, as and when developed.

Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, Pakistan's total allocation to healthcare in its GDP was less than 2%. This was not even sufficient to fulfill the Sustainable Development Goals, let alone be able to handle this monumental health crisis. With the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, Pakistan developed a *National Action Plan for COVID-19*, establishing inter-provincial and federal- provincial coordination as "a strategic goal to be achieved for the purposes of containment of the disease.<sup>17</sup> By the end of March 2020, *National Command and Operation Center (NCOCC)*, a specialized pandemic response unit headed by Prime Minister's Special Assistant on Health was established.

Biggest controversy faced by the NCOC as well as the government was the imposition of lockdown, with federal government supporting a Smart lockdown option. Sindh government remains vocal about a complete lockdown, which would adversely impact maritime trade as well as shipping operations. The NCOC has a national helpline to register complaints by healthcare workers. Furthermore, through apps, such as *Pak Naghyban*, real time information on any issue pertaining to the pandemic, availability of hospitals, ventilators etc. has been made readily available to the people. Besides, the NCOC conducts daily briefings and situation reports on the pandemic.

Besides the strain on health sector, the biggest challenge for the government was to sustain the economic well-being of the people. Already faced by inherited debts from the previous governments, and working on an overstretched budget, within the initial few months, the Pakistani government faced a loss of three trillion Pakistani rupees.<sup>18</sup> Despite the challenged fiscal profile, the government announced one time cash transfer to twelve million poor households. A five-year *National Action Plan for Health Security (NAPHS)* published in August 2017, would be terminating by 2022. Given how the Covid has cast a deep impact on health sector, economy as well as the social welfare, concerted and timely efforts must be made to ensure that any subsequent National Health Security policy addresses the shortcomings.

The government not only had to deal with the medical side of the pandemic, but besides the economic challenges, it had to and still is continuously sensitizing people with regards the dangers of the pandemic. People were and still have been reluctant to get themselves tested, despite the fact that government

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17 *Inter-provincial Coordination and Planning on Healthcare in Pakistan – COVID-19 Law and Policy Challenge*, Research Society of International Law, June 2020, <https://rsilpk.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-COVID-19-Law-Policy-Challenge-Inter-Provincial-Coordination-Planning-on-Healthcare-in-Pakistan-RSIL-Pakistan.pdf>

18 Kaleeq Kiani, "Hafeez blames Covid-19 for Rs. 3 trillion GDP loss," *Dawn*, June 12, 2020.

is providing free testing facilities. Many people despite the fourth wave, refuse to mask up or take the basic precautions. This has resulted in repeated surges, which further compounds the problems for the country. Similar attitude is witnessed with regards the Covid vaccine. The governments both federal and provincial have set up vaccination camps both permanent and mobile, ran awareness campaigns, and even tried to force compliance, but the result has been varied. Of the several urban centers where the vaccination culture is better, Islamabad capital territory is one city with more than 50% population being vaccinated.

An important aspect has been the stalling of routine immunization drives such as against polio or measles. Plus, given the surge in pandemic effected patients, hospitals had very little capacity to accommodate any other patients. With already poor access to quality health care, the country has evolved an extensive infrastructure, but with uneven distribution. As per WHO assessment, health care delivery is negatively impacted by key issues such as high population growth, uneven distribution of health professionals, insufficient funding and limited access to quality healthcare.<sup>19</sup> To redress these problems, the government is working with international partner and donor organizations towards a viable and sustainable primary health care system with sustainable health financing in Pakistan.

The key challenges remain: resource allocation, decentralization, lack of political ownership and prioritizing, extremely fragile and corrupt health care system. All these need major reappraisals. Absence of local governments and lack of grass root awareness, participation or ownership, absence of information and data collection are additional issues. Lastly, but most importantly, the role of faith leaders and opinion makers. After facing initial resistance and passionate speeches in which the pandemic was dismissed as a 'global conspiracy against Muslims' and as true Muslims, 'it would never affect us', the government ultimately used these agencies to motivate and convince people to observe pandemic related precautions.

### **Conclusion**

No society can grow, develop or fully function, without a mentally and physically healthy population. It is very important to recognize the connection between health and security and be prepared for compound emergencies and crises such as the corona virus pandemic. However, the first and most fundamental step is to erect a health care system, which has the capacity to not only deliver in ordinary circumstances but also face crises and remain intact. Including in Pakistan and the world over, the fragility of health sector and pledges made by countries worldwide to better implement SDGs have been rendered useless. With less than a decade left to realize these goals, Pakistan can use the current crisis to implement and enforce the SDGs. The resolve and commitment with which the NCOC and various other affiliate institutions are handling the pandemic, the same determination can bring about positive results in the implementation of SDGs.

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19 Introduction, Health Service Delivery in Pakistan, *WHO*, <http://www.emro.who.int/pak/programmes/service-delivery.html>

# The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on SDG 4: Quality Education

## A South Asian Context

Kabi Adhikari<sup>1</sup>

### **Context:**

All of us are aware that the COVID-19 has shaken the world. The crisis has profound negative impact on diverse social sectors including quality education. In order to prevent the spread of the virus and also to mitigate its impact, several countries have halted traditional teaching methods and have adopted e-learning. According to UN's Policy Brief on Education during COVID-19 and beyond, nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents are affected by the pandemic. The outbreak has created the largest disruption of education system in history and also generated digital divide among the learners. The crisis has also exacerbated the existing education discrepancies, widening the gap of opportunities mostly to the vulnerable group of children living in poor or remote areas. The situation has further impacted people with disabilities and forcibly displaced people receding decades of progress in the education sector.

### **Local Analysis:**

Much progress has been made in South Asia and in Nepal in the context of education over the last twenty years according to the report of UNICEF<sup>2</sup>. The net enrolment rate in primary education increased from 66.3% in 1999 to 97% in 2016 growing with the average annual rate of 4.57%. Nepal being a developing country was trying to adopt quality education applying all possible measures while the country was moving towards political stability. Not only the private institutions but also public schools were trying their best to provide quality education to the students. Regardless of adequate infrastructure and resources, several successful stories of community schools got space in news media. As education is a fundamental human right and students can enjoy their right from early childhood, this aspect has now become challenging.

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<sup>1</sup> Researcher based in Kathmandu. She was earlier working in GIZ and SAARC Secretariat.

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF Nepal 2017. *We work to ensure all children in Nepal have access to inclusive and equitable quality education* (<https://www.unicef.org/nepal/education>), accessed 28 April 2021.

COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the education sector for which both the private and public educational institutions were not prepared for. To curb this pandemic, governments have imposed lockdowns in major cities compelling students to go into digital learning. Further, the situation has created a havoc in the existing system of education. Life after the pandemic and the rapid digitisation of human experience has created huge gaps among its citizenry in terms of their socio-economic background. The existing education system is already blamed for the uneven distribution of resources, infrastructures and gaps between rich and poor. Digital divide, uneven access to e-learning and e-resources, inequalities between haves and have-nots and advantaged and disadvantaged students have been further exposed with the advent of COVID-19. Undoubtedly, the long-term impact made by COVID outbreak on the education sector remains to be seen.

Studies show that the trend of South Asian students leaving the region for the prospect of better education and employment opportunities is increasing. It is unfortunate not to offer quality education and fail in creating opportunities for youths within our region itself. However, the COVID pandemic also disturbed and created a vacuum in education sector globally. Consequently, even the international academic institutions had to opt for on-line classes.

### **Global Analysis:**

As the COVID-19 pandemic exploded across the globe, international students studying in the USA, Europe, Australia and other continents were severely affected by COVID-19 closures. It's been already one year that the students around the globe have passed their academic year yet remain uncertain about their further studies. However, the academic institutions adopted the policy of using digital platforms. But the educators themselves were not prepared for it.

Realizing the challenges towards achieving goals in the education sector, an international initiative 'Education for All' (EFA) was set in 2000 with the aim of achieving universal primary education for all children by 2015<sup>3</sup>. United Nations Member States have also agreed to work towards achieving 17 goals with 169 targets by the year 2030 under United Nations Sustainable Development Goals with a vision for a world to combat poverty, hunger, disease and illiteracy. The agendas were set as "no one is left behind" by improving equity to meet the needs of women, children and disadvantaged population in particular. Education is a central theme in SDG 4 which ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. It has four targets measured by 11 indicators. While SDG 4 aims to provide easily accessible quality education along with several other opportunities to children and young people, one of its targets is to achieve universal literacy. Since there needs to be a conducive learning environment for acquiring knowledge and valuable skills, more educational facilities are to be built up. Moreover, it is equally important to upgrade the current educational infrastructure to provide safe, inclusive and effective learning environment for all.

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3 UNESCO.2019. *Education for All 200-2015: Only a third of countries reached global education goals* (<https://en.unesco.org/news/education-all-2000-2015-only-third-countries-reached-global-education-goals>), accessed 14 May 2021

### **Learning Crisis Prior to COVID:**

Easy access to education to poor South Asian children was not available earlier also and they were lagging behind in the previous days too. According to UNICEF 2020, South Asia had a chronic education crisis prior to COVID pandemic. Nepal for instance was in the midst of a learning crisis as an overwhelming number of students were not proficient in reading. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS, 2019) data on education states that there has been no significant changes or progress in reducing the global number of out-of-school children, adolescents and youth even after three years of adoption of Sustainable Development Goal 4 for promising to provide universal primary and secondary education. The figures of UIS depicts that the world is still lagging behind from universal access to primary and secondary education. As reflected in the new out of school data released by the UIS in September 2019, the SDGs emphasize access to early childhood education, care and pre-primary education as an integral part of Children's education.

Mere Schooling does not lead to learning. UNICEF Reports show that over 1 billion children around the world head to school on any given school day. Even though the overwhelming number of children and adolescents have enrolled than ever before, they have been disturbed across the globe with countless seen and unseen forces that impact their psychology negatively like conflicts, poverty and the pandemic. Learning crisis is the greatest global challenge to children and adolescents in their personal and professional. Inadequate learning materials, lack of well trained teachers, poverty, gender discrimination, inaccessible location and many other components remain barriers to receive quality education. Without proper skills of lifelong learning, they face huge hurdles in the future.

### **Circumstances during COVID outbreak:**

UNICEF claims children across the world have the right to go to school and learn regardless of their living standard, social status, circumstances, environment and financial condition. They need quality education or learning at any cost in a safe and conducive environment with well trained, qualified and motivated teachers at any circumstances. In addition to this, they are to be taught or instructed in a simple language so that the learning could be more effective and everlasting. Equally, it is important to monitor the learning outcome in an effective way. However, an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus has exacerbated the learning crisis. It has a severe impact on higher education since schools and universities closed their premises in response to lockdown measures. Lockdowns around the world during COVID -19 outbreak has been a major cause of interruption in students' learning. Jean Gough, Regional Director of UNICEF in South Asia said, "The Coronavirus has turned into a complex emergency that threatens children and young people in many ways – including their right to learn. We need to see urgent action across the region to ensure that children's futures are not compromised." UNICEF South Asia states that schools were completely closed to 168 million children across the world for almost a year because of COVID pandemic lockdowns.

Since conventional teaching practice is the most common teaching behaviour found in schools worldwide, such practice could not be implemented in the midst of pandemic<sup>4</sup>. With the current crisis of COVID outbreak, a large number of children are now in danger of dropping out of the education system being affected by school closures. People around the globe have been facing the risks to a similar extent. It has affected people regardless of their age, caste, gender, nationality, social status, education, or income.

### **Drop out cases during the COVID crisis:**

Drop-out rates across the globe is likely to rise as a result of this disruption. (United Nations 2020). As students are compelled to rely only on their own resources with the efforts to maintain learning continuity, there is high chances of drop out cases. UNESCO report claims that 1.6 billion children across 191 countries have been adversely affected by the closure of the educational institutions though it was temporary<sup>5</sup>. There is also uncertainty on whether classes can run smoothly in the post-pandemic phase. Alternates are not available to engage children in studies except opt for e-learning. Experts claim that updating with technology can ease the remote learning. But this cannot be the ultimate solution to address the problems as the coronavirus pandemic has bolstered the school dropouts.

### **Threats of Digital Divide in South Asia:**

As the situation got dire due to COVID outbreak, universities and schools switched the teaching methods by using the digital platforms. The applied techniques were used as the crisis management strategy amidst the pandemic. Offering the use of technology of online classes as a learning process was to ensure the continuity of education despite the lockdown. However, to maintain learning continuity, each country had to depend on their own resources. Various countries have adopted their own strategies and measures to compensate for the loss in education sector on their available sources during the outbreak. Distance learning is the best method to technologically sound and advanced countries whereas countries without adequate infrastructures are forced to adopt the same conventional technologies like radio and television as a means of teaching - delivering lessons and resources. For instance, digital learning in Nepal, a low-income country in South Asia is creating inequality in access to education.

Nepal being a developing country is gradually experiencing technological transformation. There has been no significant progress made yet in the implementation of Information Communication Technology (ICT) policies in the education sector. Schools, Universities and educational institutions need to develop digital education policies, strategies and action plan for educational purposes in the existing policies. Nepal has big gaps among its citizenry in terms of their socio-economic and literacy background. Digital divide exists not only in remote areas but also in the capital city. Various technologies including radio, mobile phone, television, and online options have become the best choices for remote learning.

4 <https://sites.google.com/site/darakhshaneprofile/artifact-5> accessed 22 April 2020.

5 UNICEF.2020. *Keeping the world's children learning through COVID-19* (<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/keeping-worlds-children-learning-through-covid-19>), accessed 20 April 2020.

UNICEF Bangladesh states that about 42 million children are highly affected by COVID-19 school closures and are bound to rely on remote learning. They find virtual classes problematic having poor access to digital technology. Remote learning is beyond their reach and therefore may not be the long-term solution for learning. Bangladesh is covering all streams of education including radio, television, mobile phones and internet from the onset of the pandemic. But children from rural areas and marginalized groups are lagging behind because of digital divide.

COVID Pandemic has been a threat to educational institutions in India too. Moving from physical classes to online classes is a new experience to the teachers and students of India. Since both teachers and students had to be trained with technology for online teaching and learning, the digital world was a dilemma to them. The current situation is really difficult to cope up as teachers are only familiar with traditional methods of using book, talk, chalk, classroom and others.

The government of Pakistan launched an education television channel and radio program collaborating with civil society and edu-tech companies to support the children from low income families who were deprived with modern technologies. Online education was not given much priority in Sri Lanka also prior to COVID-19 but the closure of schools, colleges and academic institutions promoted the online mode of education as an alternative solution. Nonetheless, like many other South Asian Countries, Sri Lanka also encountered many hurdles and challenges in teaching and learning process in terms of online delivery. Whilst digital technology holds great importance in e-learning, the shift to online learning increased the risk of vulnerable children falling further behind in their studies.

Bhutan cannot be an exception to this disruption to the education system across the world. Bhutan also conducted teaching and learning through online platforms to ensure that learning of students remain uninterrupted. Research studies reveal that majority of the students from Bhutan are facing the problem of unaffordable data charges. Disruption to network and unreliable power supply are other issues.

According to April 2021 World Bank Report, the Maldives is ahead of other South Asian nations in terms of digital connectivity. Internet connectivity issues and technical difficulties affected classes in the Maldives also although the continuation of children's education has been a top priority for UNICEF Maldives. Issues of education divide is not new to Afghanistan as well since the pandemic suddenly propelled Afghanistan into the world of distance and digital education coupled with the fact that there are increasing threats to its fragile peace.

### **Problems of e-learning in South Asia:**

Distance learning programs and open educational platforms have minimized the disruption caused by the outbreak. Still, much needs to be done as these mediums are the best alternatives to combat disruptions made by the pandemic and they have a broader impact on learning. Studies have shown that quality and speed wise, the technological infrastructure mainly the internet is not at the level that can support distance and digital education.

Hence, South Asian countries are struggling with almost similar issues of digital divide. Access of the internet through smartphones, tablets or any available gadgets are not the solution for virtual classes, rather high speed and affordable internet for online education is the most important issue. Moreover, majority of families in South Asia do not have even a basic knowledge of the modern technology. In this situation, parents do not have alternatives than relying on the text books and teachers. To narrow this gap, family, students, teachers and also parents should be familiar with digital tools and new technology.

### **Way Forward:**

While COVID 19 pandemic has impeded the education system, our institutions, universities and schools have responded through digital tools and virtual classes as a crisis management strategy. It was a paradigm shift in delivering quality education and a big challenge to both teachers and students. Despite the challenges posed to both educators and the learners, the crisis however can be a window of opportunity to resurrect and reimagine education sector with a farsighted vision where children could enjoy and learn beyond physical classes. Following are possible measures to successfully mitigate the disruption seen in education sector and also to meet the objective of SDG 4:

- **Closing the Digital Divide:** To minimize digital divide, infrastructure for digital facilities and virtual learning platforms needs to be set-up across the region. An initiative should be taken from both government and private sector to invest in advanced technology so that people from rural areas could also benefit and get access to digitalization.
- **Strong Connectivity:** Connectivity is still a big challenge in several parts of the world and having access to the digital devices is a bottleneck to ensure a digital world for all. The education system in South Asia has not been able to address such issues in a systemic way due to limited connectivity. Accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, life- long learning and educational policy are broadly identified challenges with online learning (Murgatrot, 2020).
- **Resilient Systems:** As the existing facilities are not adequate and unevenly distributed, internet connectivity, intranet connection, Wi-Fi zone development, cloud services need to be strengthened. In addition, creative, innovative, interactive online teaching methods need to be applied with educational tools that can be understood by the children.
- **Parental Guidance:** Unless both instructors and learners are oriented on use of different online educational tools and resources, distance learning is impossible. As parental guidance is crucial for young learners, it is yet another challenge to the parents to be educated and technologically sound.
- **Professional Development of Teachers:** Teachers need to be trained with digitization in the era of technological advancements. To enhance their teaching techniques, it is also necessary to invest in their professional development.
- **Technical Support:** Online classes can be effective and can run smoothly only with the enthusiastic technical staff to provide back-up support to the teachers and learners and they also need to be supported in that role.

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# The Game Changer: SDG 5 on Gender Equality

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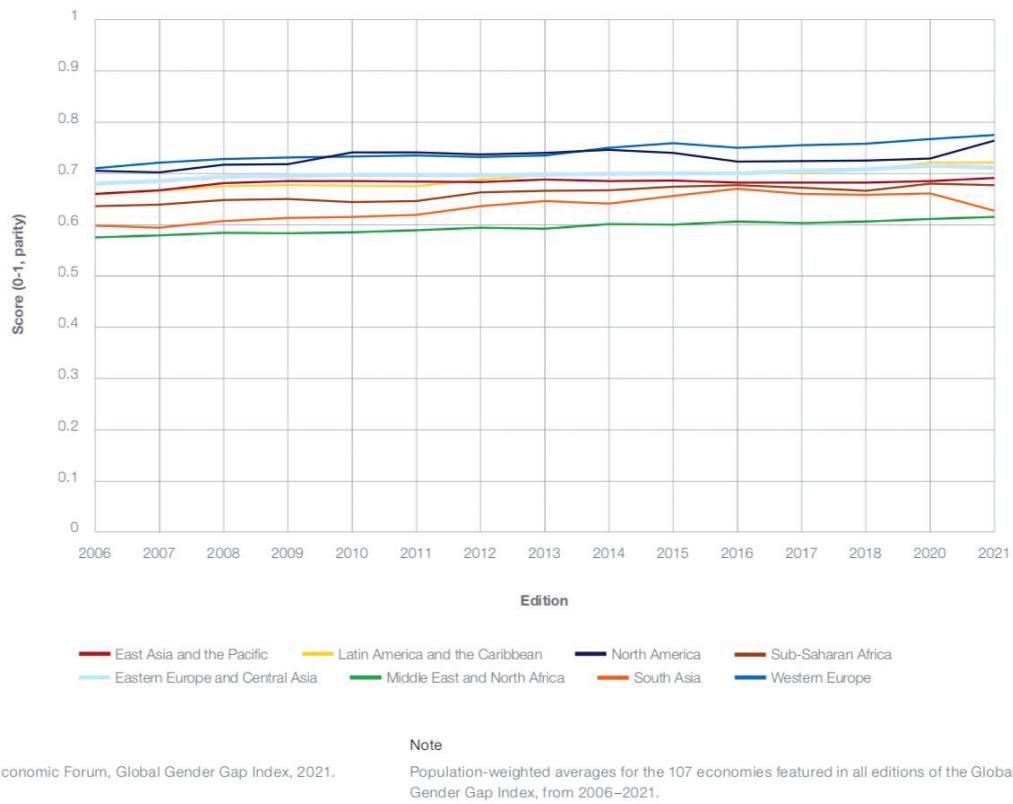
Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on Gender Equality was a meaningful step forward in the global advocacy for women's empowerment. Since the Millennium Development Goals did not have any exclusive gender goal, with a stand-alone goal on gender and a few other gender-specific targets, the SDGs have contributed considerably to the gender agenda. The global framework has also encouraged states to localise the various targets and develop monitoring mechanisms to measure and report progress. A quick review after five years shows that maternal mortality rates have come down. Child marriages have reduced. Gender parity in education has improved. Many governments in the region have actively engaged the private sector, civil society actors, and NGOs to operationalise the various goals at the local level. Civil society reports and analyses continue to provide complementary and alternative narratives on achieving Agenda 2030. The SDGs, therefore, offer an excellent framework for an integrated and holistic approach to realising gender targets in the region. Regardless, the progress is not at a pace that will help the region achieve its goals by 2030.

South Asia is home to 860 million women. With about a third of the world's poor living in South Asia, the region has the world's second-largest gender gap. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report 2021, it would take 195 years to close the gender gap in South Asia. It is the only region to have regressed this past year and shows an overall declining trend the past five years despite minimal progress in some areas.

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## Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on SDGs of South Asia



Even before the pandemic, South Asia was not on track to achieving gender equality by 2030. COVID 19 and the pandemic triggered lockdowns in many countries have exacerbated pre-existing challenges and created new impediments to achieving gender equality in South Asia. The region also witnessed one of the largest movements of people in the world - millions of migrant labourers trekked across India due to an unplanned and draconian lockdown. Equally, huge numbers of migrant labourers working abroad returned home, facing job losses and uncertain futures.

## SOCIAL

On the social front, it has pushed millions of women further into poverty. Before the pandemic, the regional female poverty rate was ten percent. It is now 13 percent, and the estimate for 2030 has been revised higher to 18 percent. That's about 150 million women driven to poverty and 121 poor women for every 100 men.

Globally, there has been a substantial escalation in violence against women during the pandemic and its subsequent lockdowns and restrictions. While the lockdowns increased stress factors like loss of livelihoods, restricted mobility, general uncertainty and health emergencies, it also trapped women and children inside restricted spaces with their abusers. State and societal systems to address gender-based violence were severely hampered in their functioning, making access to their services nearly impossible. Judicial, police and health services that are the first responders for women were overwhelmed with pandemic duties and hence unable to help. Civil society groups that could have helped were equally restrained due to the lockdown with reallocation of resources. In India, even at the beginning of the pandemic, the Indian National Commission for Women registered twice the number of domestic violence

cases. In eleven days during the first lockdown, 92,000 child abuse cases in the family and communities were reported. Bangladesh witnessed a four-fold increase in the number of calls to women helplines.

Child marriages, which have been declining globally, are rampant in the region. Except for Sri Lanka and the Maldives, the other countries in South Asia have a high incidence of child marriages. For instance, in Bangladesh, the rate is as high as 22.4 percent and 58.6 percent for girls before 15 and 18. In Nepal, the figure stands at 7 percent for girls under 15 and 39.5 percent for girls under 18. In India, during the lockdown, there has been a substantial increase in child marriages. The Indian state of Telangana saw a 27 percent jump in child marriages during the pandemic. A few months into the lockdown in 2020, a children helpline registered a 17 percent increase in distress calls related to child marriages.

The consequence of violence against women and girls goes beyond the social sphere. Women who experience violence earn 35 percent less than women who do not, as continuous exposure to violence increases their irregularity and unpredictability, forcing them to settle for informal employment.

An emerging challenge specific to the pandemic is the rising number of COVID 19 orphans in the region. In India, as of June this year, 30,000 children have been orphaned, lost one of their parents, or abandoned due to the pandemic. Furthermore, with most deaths occurring among men in the age group of 40-60 in India, most of them the sole breadwinner of the family, vulnerabilities of women in these households are set to increase manifold.

## **ECONOMIC**

In South Asia, gender inequality is more pronounced in the economic sector. Like other regions of the world, women draw lesser salaries than their male colleagues. In Pakistan, men get paid 71 percent more than women. In urban India, the gender wage gap is 22 percent among regular employees and 39 percent among temporary and casual workers. In rural India, the wage gap is considerably higher. The unemployment rate is steep among women than men. For instance, in Nepal, 13 percent of women are unemployed compared to 10 percent of men. Likewise, in Bangladesh, close to 7 percent of women are unemployed compared to 3 percent of men.

In South Asia, the “not in employment, education or training” rates are notably higher in women than men; while one in three women fall under this category in other regions in Asia, it is one in two women in South Asia.

### **Not in employment, education or training**

Country	Men	Women
Afghanistan (2017)	18.3	65.9
Bangladesh (2017)	9.8	44.6
India (2019)	14.3	48.3
Maldives (2016)	21.5	25.3
Nepal (2017)	20.0	42.0
Pakistan (2019)	7.6	54.9
Sri Lanka (2016)	18.1	35.4

Source: ESCAP database

Study of previous pandemics and health crises – Ebola in 2014, Zika in 2015-16, SARS, swine flu and bird flu – highlight that these crises impacted the gender agenda adversely and left long-lasting effects on gender equality. Similarly, COVID 19 has extensively affected professions over-represented by women like the retail sector, tourism, hospitality industry and the informal sector.

Most women in the region are employed in the informal sector, which offers no safety net or social protection. For instance, over 80 percent of women in non-agricultural jobs in South Asia are in informal employment; comparatively, 54 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean are in informal employment. In Bangladesh, the readymade garment sector, which employs about three million women, is the worst hit. A quarter of garment workers lost their jobs due to declining global orders during the pandemic. Wage gaps are significant in low-paid jobs, and it decreases with jobs that require higher education. Already vulnerable working in the informal sector, women are doubly disadvantaged due to gender gaps in wages. Migrant labourers are further disadvantaged as they earn less than nationals and locals. And migrant women labourers earn substantially less than their men.

Occupational segregation has further increased the vulnerability women face concerning their employment. A notably higher percentage of women are employed in part-time, short term, temporary, irregular and low-paying jobs which offer little or no social protection. For instance, in India, women comprise entirely of the one million Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) community health workers instituted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to principally focus on maternal and child health. During the pandemic, ASHA workers have been at the forefront of the fight against COVID 19; in 2020, ASHA workers in Uttar Pradesh traced more than three million migrant returnees. With little protective gear and earning about \$30-\$40 a month, these workers are currently assisting in testing, tracing and coordinating treatment for COVID 19 patients.

Furthermore, what is worrisome is that the UN predicts a “prolonged dip in women’s incomes and labour force participation” due to the pandemic. South Asia has one of the worst female labour force participation in the world, and in recent years, it has been declining further. India has the lowest female labour force participation rate at 20.8. Other countries with similarly low rates are Afghanistan (21.2), Pakistan (21.9) and Nepal (26.3). Bangladesh and the Maldives are relatively better at 36.3 and 42.2. A complex set of factors exclude women’s contribution from the formal economy. Principal among them

is unpaid work and care, resulting in a low female labour force participation rate. The disproportionate amount of unpaid care and work undertaken by women make them unavailable to undertake gainful employment in the formal sector, which is more secure and offers better social protection. South Asian men undertake the least amount of unpaid care and work among all regions. In Afghanistan, 17 percent of men are engaged in unpaid work compared to 73 percent of women. Before the pandemic, Indian women spent 297 minutes a day doing domestic work compared to 31 minutes by men. In Pakistan, it was as little as 28 minutes. In India, during the pandemic, unpaid care and work by women have increased by almost 30 percent. Additionally, school closures have added to the time commitment of women and girls. The pandemic has increased the responsibilities of girls at home, and there is a clear danger of many of them not returning to schools when they reopen.

## **EDUCATION**

Education is the primary catalyst for women's empowerment and the fundamental driver for achieving gender goals and targets. Child marriages and teenage pregnancies are high among girls with little or no education. In India, three out of four trafficked persons are illiterate. Communities with high levels of illiteracy and little education witness a proportionally high level of crime against women and children. Though most countries in the region have reached gender parity in education, the school dropout rates, particularly at the senior secondary levels, continue to be high. In India, more than six million children are out of school.

The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns and restrictions have severely impacted learning and learning targets in South Asia. Even before the pandemic, 58 percent of children in Bangladesh were behind in their minimum reading proficiency. This figure is expected to rise to 76 percent due to the pandemic. About 38 million students missed out on the opportunity to receive formal learning and education. Overall, in South Asia, the pandemic has kept 391 million students out of school.

As most classes went online, it has created a substantial digital divide among the students, further spiralling inequality among them. In India, just about 8 percent of students enrolled in government schools could attend online classes. In Bangladesh, less than half the surveyed students had access to remote learning through television, mobile phones, radio and the internet. Despite all of them having access to mobile phones, most did not have access to the internet. Another survey revealed that of the 21 percent of households with access to online learning, about 2 percent used them. The digital divide is quite stark, with 91 percent of students from affluent families having access to television compared to 9 percent of students from poorer backgrounds.

In its report published last year, the World Bank cautioned the impact prolonged school closures would have on learning. It warned that a minimum of five months out of school and accompanying learning losses would have a lifetime impact on a generation of students' productivity. It calculated a loss between \$622 billion and \$880 billion in future earnings lost due to learning losses triggered by the pandemic. The estimate was for five months of out of school learning losses. Most schools in the region have remained shut for more than fifteen months.

Education remains the significant driver to women's representation and voice across all sectors reducing gaps and inequalities.

## CONCLUSION

The prognosis on the impact of COVID 19 on the SDGs, and SDG 5 in particular, does not look good. Even before the pandemic, the progress of most of the South Asian states on SDG 5 was very slow. As evident from the dashboard tracking the global advancement of all SDGs within the region, Bangladesh and Nepal have made moderate progress. Yet, it is insufficient to attain the targets by 2030. Major challenges remain for the other countries in the region, and their scores are stagnating or progressing at less than the required rate.

**SDG tracker for SDG 5 in South Asia**

Country	Status	Trend
Afghanistan	Major challenges remain	Score stagnating or increasing at less than fifty percent of the required rate
Bangladesh	Significant challenges remain	Score moderately improving, insufficient to attain the goal
Bhutan	Major challenges remain	Score moderately improving, insufficient to attain the goal
India	Major challenges remain	Score stagnating or increasing at less than fifty percent of the required rate
Maldives	Major challenges remain	Score stagnating or increasing at less than fifty percent of the required rate
Nepal	Significant challenges remain	Score moderately improving, insufficient to attain the goal
Pakistan	Major challenges remain	Score stagnating or increasing at less than fifty percent of the required rate
Sri Lanka	Major challenges remain	Score stagnating or increasing at less than fifty percent of the required rate

Source: <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org>

Despite the SDGs offering a gender-specific goal for the first time within a global framework and being a great first step, it still fell short of feminists' expectations. Primarily, the SDGs failed to address the structural factors that formed the foundation of inequality. Secondly, it naively equated development with women's empowerment without addressing the flawed economic model that did not include women's contribution through unpaid care and work. The pandemic has exposed and accentuated these cracks within the SDG framework. It has ripped apart the Band-Aids seeking to address inequality without delving into the foundation of inequality. As a result, the gap has deepened and widened beyond a point where it cannot be ignored. The pandemic may well have reversed decades of work on women's empowerment exactly in the cracks in the global framework that the feminist critiques have been pointing out.

Looking ahead, it is essential to realise and recognise that women will be the backbone of recovery in the region. Towards this end, there is an urgent need to advance gender equality and address the upsurge in gender-based violence during the pandemic and reverse the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women. Furthermore, countries in the region should focus on an inclusive recovery strategy by targeting women in all aspects of economic recovery and stimulus plans. Governments in the region should actively support women entrepreneurs, address discriminatory laws and policies, and ease their access to financial products and benefits. Programs to support women's early return to economic activity will play a central role in minimising the long-lasting adverse effects of the pandemic on the gender agenda.

There is a pressing need to address the pandemic's effect on education, particularly to mitigate the learning losses triggered by the lockdowns. Even while attempting to reduce the digital divide and inequalities perpetrated by online and alternative teaching mediums, it is vital to address dropouts and absenteeism, especially among girl students.

Earlier this year, UN Secretary-General Guterres remarked, "women's equal participation is the game-changer that we need." India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are among the top ten countries with women heads of state for most years in the past fifty years. However, South Asian women's representation in the parliament and the cabinet is less than 20 percent, though their representation in local bodies is much higher. In Sri Lanka, only ten percent of women occupy high positions in the government, and the ratio of men-women at the highest decision-making level is 6:1. In Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, about ten percent of women occupy leadership roles in the corporate world; it is less than five percent in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Promoting women's participation in the socio, economic and political spheres is vital for a gender-responsive policy formulation and resource allocation. In the context of the pandemic, crises responses led by primarily male-dominated decision makers failing to engage women in leadership roles have exacerbated existing gender inequalities.

The pandemic has once again brought to centre stage the critical question regarding women's empowerment - is it a goal, or is it a process towards realising women's agency? In that context, does the SDG framework help in the realisation of women's agency and their ability to question, negotiate and reframe structures and institutions that are inimical to gender empowerment? Getting the South Asian countries quickly back on track on Agenda 2030 will be a small step in that direction.

# **Impact of COVID-19 on Sustainable Development Goal 6 (Clean Water & Sanitation) in South Asia**

Sanghamitra Subba<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6, Clean Water and Sanitation, is one of the most important SDGs that pertain to the COVID-19 pandemic as proper hand-washing is a frontline defense against the virus. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) practices, subsequent water management systems, and clean water infrastructure in battling such a virus. In addition to this, the pandemic has impacted the progress of South Asian countries in achieving SDG 6 due to lockdowns and financial losses.

In many South Asian countries, good progress has been made towards achieving targets 6.1 Sanitation, 6.2 Drinking Water, 6.3 Waste Water, and 6.5 Water Resource Management through improvements in drinking water supply, sanitation, decentralized wastewater treatment systems, and trials of Integrated Water Resource Management at the local level (UNESCAP, 2018). However, vast improvements in providing safe drinking water to rural areas, unsustainable water withdrawals, cohesive data management to monitor the progress of SDG 6, and new research and action on water and climate change are necessary to meet targets by 2030. Not only has the pandemic stressed the need for such changes, but it has underscored inequalities in accessing clean water and sanitation, and insufficiencies in ensuring relevant facilities for all. COVID-19 has shifted the priorities of the public and private sector as financial resources have been reallocated to tackling the economic and health crises. However, the achievement of SDG 6, ensuring availability and sustainable management of clean water and sanitation for all, means being well-equipped to handle COVID-19 and future global health crises.

## **Importance of WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) programs-a crucial component of SDG 6**

Although WASH programs have been emphasized as an important aspect of public health, they are more vital than ever because hand-washing can help prevent COVID-19 transmission. The pandemic has demonstrated why it is crucial to achieving SDG 6 as the WHO emphasizes "ensuring evidenced-based and consistently applied WASH and waste management practices in communities, homes, schools,

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marketplaces, and health-care facilities" (WHO, 2020), and the CDC instructs washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds throughout the day (CDC, 2002). By making steady progress in SDG 6 and reaching its targets by 2030, South Asia can ensure that the public is equipped with the necessary WASH tools to prevent the spread of a pandemic.

Furthermore, the pandemic has demonstrated why hand hygiene and general WASH practices need to be adapted to varying situations. Although proper hand-washing was extensively advocated as a means to curb the spread of COVID-19, because it required taking into consideration "critical times for hand-washing", it exposed "the limitations of mass media campaigns in communicating new and more nuanced behavior" (WaterAid, 2020). Education on changing hand hygiene practices needs to be at the forefront of WASH campaigns as "hand-washing with soap has become a relatively complex behaviour to promote," (WaterAid, 2020) but essential to limit infection transmission. This is especially important in countries like India where more than 40% of the population does not have the habit of washing their hands automatically after using the toilet (Pogrebna & Kharlamov, 2020). With studies demonstrating a "strong correlation between the hand-washing culture and the magnitude of outbreak in different countries" as well as "significant heterogeneity in hand-washing habits around the globe" (Pogrebna & Kharlamov, 2020), it will take time for certain countries to adapt to COVID-19 WASH protocols. But more rigorous WASH practices mean ensuring adequate access to a clean water supply and sanitation facilities.

Moreover, with a global pandemic like COVID-19 requiring us to change hand-washing practices, in South Asia where the proper hygiene practice behaviors are not as rigid, water infrastructure is key to ensuring that such practices are adhered to and sustained. Although the importance of hand-washing during the pandemic was communicated extensively in South Asia, a WaterAid assessment of hand-washing behavior in the region during COVID-19 found that such behavioral changes in hand hygiene were mainly fear-driven (WaterAid, 2020). While such "large-scale hygiene promotion" using "different emotional triggers to motivate hand hygiene practice and sustain behaviour change" is vital in implementing WASH practices and highlighting the importance of SDG 6, it needs to be followed by water infrastructure and management systems to ensure that people have access to such facilities at home and in public places.

### **Ensuring WASH facilities, water infrastructure and water security-crucial during pandemic**

Implementing and sustaining WASH practices across South Asia requires establishing adequate WASH facilities, water management systems, and water security which pertain to achieving SDG 6. The pandemic has further underscored the need to make strides in establishing water infrastructure in the region as ensuring "universal access to public hand hygiene stations and making their use obligatory on entering and leaving any public or private commercial building and any public transport facility", "improving access to hand hygiene facilities and practices in health care facilities," and washing hands frequently at home (WHO, 2020). So, "with the realization that water security and scarcity have critical implications for both the effectiveness of Covid-19 response efforts and for promoting growth and building resilience in a post-pandemic world" (SAWI, 2020), we need to not only achieve SDG 6 targets

by 2030 but accelerate progress towards it to ensure that we are better prepared to deal with future public health crises.

However, adequate hand hygiene and sanitation is difficult to implement and sustain because "public water supply in South Asia is deficient in terms of availability, accessibility, quality, and equity" (ADB, 2019; Jacquet, Pachauri, & Tubiana, 2010), and it's even worse in urban areas. Even now, 59% of the population in Afghanistan, 53% in Nepal, 66% in Bangladesh, 40% in India, and 39% in Pakistan do not have access to hand-washing facilities with soap and water (WHO & UNICEF, 2019). As "many cities in the region, both large and medium-sized, face the risk of water shortages, due to outdated water supply systems and inadequate infrastructure to harvest and store rainwater in," (UNESCAP, 2018), an increasingly urbanized South Asia will face shortages in water supply if stakeholders are unable to fulfill growing demand. With the Water Security Index indicating that South Asia is and will be one of the regions hardest hit by poor water security (ADB, 2013), immediate technical and policy interventions are necessary.

The lack of adequate water supply and facilities for households in South Asia poses a problem during a pandemic in which proper and frequent hand hygiene practices are essential to protecting oneself from the virus and preventing it from spreading. In India, as 146 million homes or 82 percent of households in rural areas and 60 percent of households in urban areas do not have access to piped water, and almost 33% of the country faces water shortages, frequent and proper hand-washing seems like an impossible feat. In Pakistan, due to "worsening extremes of climate, lower rainfall, inadequate storage and increasing demand due to COVID-19" (Wahid et. al 2020) household supply of water will continue to deteriorate, putting the country at risk of a water crisis.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities in accessing water across South Asia. Even now, in South Asia, 153 million people lack access to hand-washing which include "nearly 50 per cent of urban Bangladeshis, for example, or 29 million people; and 20 per cent of urban Indians, or 91 million, lack basic hand-washing facilities at home" (UNICEF, 2020).

However, innovative hand-washing facilities have been established in public spaces to encourage hand hygiene. In Nepal, contactless hand-washing stations with soap and water were established by organizations such as WaterAid across Kathmandu Valley. The 50 contactless hand-washing stations are used by more than 14,000 people daily with soap and water being refilled accordingly. Although this was a small-scale project, the study found "contactless hand-washing facilities are an effective way to promote it and people find these facilities useful" (WaterAid, 2020). If such facilities were expanded across South Asia, it would be beneficial in curbing the spread of the pandemic.

Similarly, in the discussion of reassessing ongoing water management systems due to COVID-19 and adapting indicators of SDG 6 accordingly, there is a need to reassess current water management systems as the norm is not suitable during a pandemic, especially in urban areas. With more people sequestered at home due to COVID-19 lockdowns and water supply distribution shifts from industrial to domestic, Neal (2020) describes the pandemic as a "wake-up call for urban planners and bureaucrats to integrate water sensitive urban design and water smart cities into their policies and practices, and this

includes peri-urban informal settlements." This is visible in Pakistan as the number of COVID-19 cases rises in informational urban settlements where there is a lack of water and people depend on expensive truck-supplied water (Neal, 2020).

Achieving sanitation targets of SDG 6 through the establishment of waste and sewage management systems can enable the monitoring of SARS-CoV-2 in sewage. Although there is no conclusive research on the fecal-oral transmission of SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19 (Pandey et. al, 2021), monitoring sewage systems in South Asia can be effective in detecting virus caseload because SARS-CoV-2 RNA signals increase "as the number of confirmed cases increase" and "reduces considerably once community caseloads decrease." This can be a "cost effective solution for COVID-19 surveillance" (Lodder et., 2020; Randazzo et. al, 2020) for countries in South Asia that cannot afford to conduct mass PCR and antigen testing (Mallapaty, 2020).

Moreover, the establishment of proper sewage and waste management systems can be useful in the detection of other pathogens and act as an early warning system for future pandemics as wastewater tracking has been used to monitor polio and drug use (WHO, 2021). However, since such wastewater monitoring is limited if "majority of households are not connected to sewerage networking" there is a need for greater investment in wastewater systems in South Asia (Pandey et. al, 2021), stressing the need to achieve sanitation targets for SDG 6 on time.

The pandemic has also highlighted the inadequacies in South Asia's water infrastructure to implement those practices. On one hand, domestic demand for water increases as lockdowns force people to stay at home (Rohilla, 2020), but on the other hand, water utilities face revenue loss as families are unable to pay bills due to job loss and pay cuts. The pandemic has put even more pressure on already constrained water systems in South Asia as "many water utilities were already under pressure before the pandemic due to the lack of resources dedicated to expanding distribution networks, building water treatment plants, addressing ongoing maintenance of infrastructure, and/or enhancing capacity to manage systems and maintain standards" (Neal, 2020). This indicates that achieving SDG 6 might be a challenge in a post-pandemic world where the COVID-19 has exacerbated inequalities in access to clean water within the South Asian region.

Moreover, although there is a lack of region-specific data regarding the impact of the pandemic on the water and sanitation sector, "capital expenditures in the water sector will decline during the 2021 period" (Global Water Intelligence, 2020) and revenue collections reductions (IFC, 2020) are likely to occur. A fall in industrial demand would impact "the whole water supply chain, including operators, technology companies, contractors, chemical supplies, and consultants" (IFC, 2020), exacerbating an already lacking water supply system. In Nepal, water service providers reported a reduction in revenue collections with some reporting a 25-50% decline (USAID, 2021). Such reductions in water utility revenue could be attributed to lowered industrial water demand due to lockdowns (IFC, 2020). In India, as lockdowns force businesses to close and the population recedes to their homes, it has caused an increase in domestic demand for water. However, due to a lack of proper water infrastructure and sufficient piped water facilities, the water supply is insufficient to meet the pandemic-induced demand.

In addition, even before the pandemic, to meet targets 6.1 and 6.2, and reverse trends for targets 6.4 and 6.6, Asia and the Pacific needed to accelerate relevant programs (UNESCAP, 2019). However, as South Asia is making strides in economic recovery in the upcoming year, there might be a silver lining in getting back on track to achieve SDG 6.

## **Recommendations**

To mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on South Asia's progress of achieving SDG 6 and to ensure that the region meets the overall targets of the sustainable development goal by 2030, the following recommendations should be taken into consideration:

- Collect relevant empirical and geospatial data from multiple levels and sectors to improve data management of water and sanitation systems for the development of relevant and necessary interventions; strengthen regional capacity for data collection and develop unified water quality standards (UNESCAP, 2018); catalog pre- and post-pandemic gaps in the availability of drinking water and sanitation services (UNESCAP, 2019).
- Transform and scale WASH policies and practices to adapt to dealing with future global health crises (Donde et al., 2021).
- Mainstream SDG 6 by integrating means of achieving targets into government framework and planning (UNESCAP, 2018).
- The improvement of "water-effective irrigation agriculture, community-based water, and sanitation services, and locally resilient disaster risk reduction such as the combination of community protection and farmland flood retention" (ADB, 2020) is necessary for the promotion of sustainable water infrastructure.
- Establish and promote dedicated focal points at the regional and national levels for the monitoring of SDG 6 such as the South Asia Water Security Initiative (SAWASI).
- Improve hand-washing facilities in public spaces that incorporate innovative design features like contactless taps and greywater recycling systems (WHO, 2020).
- Adopt the One Water approach which is based "on the premise that all forms of water (rainwater, groundwater, surface water, brackish water, used water, fit-for-purpose reuse water) are linked and form a system that provides the most effective service when managed in an integrated fashion" (FAO, 2020). For this, implement reclaimed water, cloud seeding, water-from-air devices, rainwater harvesting, and desalination.
- Promote multiple financial strategies for the private and public sector to establish water infrastructure such as loans from microfinance institutions (MFIs) and commercial banks through credit enhancement initiatives, and co-investments (Water.org, 2021).
- Implement a trans-boundary approach to ensuring water security in South Asia by signing regional agreements (UN Water, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has a two-fold impact on South Asia's progress towards achieving SDG 6. On the one hand, the pandemic has made achieving the sustainable development goals more important than ever as proper WASH practices are essential to curbing the spread of the virus. On the other hand,

due to lockdowns, economic losses, and budget cuts, the pandemic has caused a setback in reaching SDG 6 targets when South Asia was already not on track to achieve the goal by 2030. However, by integrating the targets of this goal, promoting regional cooperation and coordination in establishing a trans-boundary approach to water security in the region, implementing innovative water and sanitation technologies, and adopting financing strategies to fund water and sanitation infrastructure, South Asia might be able to achieve SDG 6 and ensure clean water and sanitation for all by 2030.

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# The Impact of COVID-19 on SDG 7

Mahesh Raj Bhatta<sup>1</sup>

## **Context:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented human suffering, destabilizing the global economy, and disrupting the lives of billions of people worldwide. The pandemic-related crises that has been plaguing the world since early 2020 is very likely to jeopardize the global commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Moreover, the pandemic has created the most significant shock to the global energy system in decades and has created a great deal of uncertainty in the collective efforts to achieve SDG 7. Furthermore, many SDGs will be jeopardized if universal access to affordable, reliable, and modern energy services is not ensured, as energy is inextricably linked to progress on poverty eradication, gender equality, food security, health, education, clean water and sanitation, jobs, innovation, transportation, and other goals.

With less than a decade left to achieve the SDGs, the year 2020 marked the start of a dedicated Decade of Action to deliver on the 2030 Agenda, which began with the global pandemic of Covid-19. The COVID-19 crisis threatens to derail the clean energy transformation and universal energy access movement. That is something that the world cannot afford. To ensure sustainability, energy security, and a just and inclusive energy transition, energy access, renewable energy, and energy efficiency investments must be at the heart of economic recovery packages.

## **SDG 7: Why it matters?**

SDG 7 aims to provide everyone with affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy. This entails doubling the global rate of energy efficiency gains and significantly increasing the percentage of renewable energy in the energy mix. For our daily lives to run smoothly and develop equitably, we need reliable and affordable energy services. All sectors benefit from a well-established energy system, including businesses, medicine, and education, as well as agriculture, infrastructure, communications, and high-technology. Poor access to energy supplies and transformation systems, on the other hand, is a constraint to human and economic development.

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Fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and gas have been major sources of electricity production for decades, but burning them emits large amounts of greenhouse gases, which contributes largely to climate change and have negative consequences for people's health and the environment. This is a problem that affects everyone, not just a select few. Furthermore, global electricity consumption is rapidly increasing. In a nutshell, countries will be unable to power their economies without a reliable electricity supply.

Without electricity, women and girls from developing countries have to spend hours fetching water, hospitals cannot function properly, health clinics cannot store vaccines, students cannot study at night, and people cannot run competitive businesses, and so on. The lack of clean cooking fuels, such as wood, charcoal, dung, and coal, has a negative impact on the health and well-being of approximately 3 billion people, resulting in indoor air pollution.

According to the United Nations, global investment in sustainable energy infrastructure needs to triple from \$ 400 billion to \$1.25 trillion per year by 2030. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, which have the greatest energy deficits, require world wide support to improve energy access. This includes putting in more effort to find clean, efficient, and affordable alternatives to health-hazardous cooking stoves. As per the UN, air pollution from biomass burning for cooking and heating causes four million premature deaths each year. The UN also claims that energy use accounts for 60% of total global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, one of the primary causes leading to climate change.

Faced with this situation, the UN has declared it necessary to ensure that all people have access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy as SDG 7 out of its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, approved in September 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda.

### **Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all**

The world is still making progress toward sustainable energy targets, though not at the rate required to meet the Goal by 2030. Improved energy efficiency and increased access to electricity have made some progress. However, millions of people around the world continue to be without this basic service, and progress on clean cooking fuels and technologies has slowed, posing a threat to public health. Moreover, South Asia is one of the regions where energy deficiency is very high therefore achieving target 7 is significantly crucial for the holistic growth of the region.

Amidst this backdrop, the pandemic has further threatened the entire regional eco-system including health, economic and social aspect. Furthermore, the pandemic has highlighted the critical need for affordable and reliable energy in various sectors most importantly in hospitals and health facilities and for people to have access to clean water and fuel. Simultaneously, the crisis will undoubtedly stymie efforts to achieve Goal 7. Supply chain disruptions could wreak havoc on energy services, and lowered incomes could make it difficult for people to afford them.

## SDG 7: Tracking and analyzing progress toward

**Access to Electricity:** SDG target 7.1 is universal access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy services; 7.1.1 focuses on access to electricity. According to the World Bank report-*Tracking SDG 7: The Energy Progress Report 2020*<sup>2</sup> published in 2020<sup>3</sup>, over a billion people have gained access to electricity since 2010. As a result, in 2018, around 90 percent of the world's population was connected. Despite recent progress, above 789 million people still lack access to electricity, and the SDG target of universal access by 2030 appears unlikely to be met, especially if the COVID-19 pandemic causes major disruptions. Regional disparities continue to exist, and underdeveloped regions are still a long way from meeting the target. For instance, Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, particularly the South Asian sub-continent lag behind in achieving the targeted goal, which eventually has negative consequences for SGD target 7. India, after Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo, has the world's third-largest electrification deficit, with 64 million people without electricity.

**Access to Clean Cooking:** According to the same report (WB, 2020), nearly three billion people, mostly in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, still lack access to clean cooking fuels and technologies. Under the existing and planned policies, 2.3 billion people would still be without access to clean cooking fuels and technologies in 2030. The pandemic is likely to increase the toll of prolonged exposure to household air pollution, particularly among women and girls, caused by the use of raw coal, kerosene, or traditional biomass for cooking.

**Renewable Energy:** The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected renewable energy development. Beyond its immediate health effects, the pandemic has had far-reaching consequences for economic activity and, as a result, energy consumption. To slow the virus's spread, governments around the world imposed restrictions on most social and economic activities, such as transportation, industrial production, and services, resulting in a significant increase in energy demand.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on renewable energy development differ depending on the end-use sector. Global electricity demand is expected to fall 2% in 2020 compared to 2019, according to preliminary estimates from the International Energy Agency (IEA), but renewable energy generation is expected to increase by nearly 7% year on year. Long-term contracts, low marginal costs, priority grid access, and the ongoing installation of new renewable capacity all helped to boost renewable electricity generation while all other fuels declined (IRENA 2021)<sup>4</sup>.

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2 Note: The report is an annual joint effort of the International Energy Agency (IEA), the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), the World Bank (WB), and the World Health Organization (WHO), all appointed by the United Nations as global custodian agencies responsible for collecting and reporting data related to the energy targets of SDG 7.

3 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/energy/publication/the-tracking-sdg-7-report-the-last-decade-to-leave-no-one-behind>

4 IRENA (2021), Renewable capacity statistics 2021 International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), Abu Dhabi. [https://trackingsdg7.esmap.org/data/files/download-documents/2021\\_tracking\\_sdg7\\_chapter\\_3\\_renewable\\_energy.pdf](https://trackingsdg7.esmap.org/data/files/download-documents/2021_tracking_sdg7_chapter_3_renewable_energy.pdf)

**Energy Efficiency:** Primary energy intensity (total primary energy supply per unit of gross domestic product) increased by 1.7 % in 2017, bringing the annual gain from 2010 to 2017 to 2.2 % - far better than the 1.3 % average from 1990 to 2010, but still short of the original target rate of 2.6 %. Achieving SDG 7.3 on energy efficiency will necessitate a primary energy intensity improvement of at least 3% per year between 2017 and 2030, which will be a difficult task. According to preliminary estimates, the improvement rate in 2018 and 2019 continues to be lower than the required rate, which is further affected by the global pandemic in 2020 and 2021, necessitating even greater improvements to meet the target.

**International financial flows to developing countries in support of renewable energy:** Only a small portion of the promising increase inflows has reached the least-developed countries. In 2017, total flows were \$21.4 billion, more than double what they were in 2010. To achieve the SDG 7 target by 2030 in a post-covid-19 world, enhanced cooperation and far more support to the world's poorest countries will be required.

#### Primary indicators of global progress toward SDG7 targets<sup>5</sup> :



Source: Tracking SDG 7: The Energy Progress Report 2021

5 [https://trackingsdg7.esmap.org/data/files/download-documents/2021\\_tracking\\_sdg7\\_executive\\_summary.pdf](https://trackingsdg7.esmap.org/data/files/download-documents/2021_tracking_sdg7_executive_summary.pdf)

## **SDG 7: In the time of the Covid-19 crisis**

Sustainable energy should be at the heart of countries' efforts to recover from the COVID-19 crisis in a way that improves and strengthens them. Energy services are critical to fight against and win over the pandemic, including powering healthcare facilities and keeping medicines and vaccines in cold stores, providing clean water to people, and providing communications services to connect people, share information, and facilitate education during social distancing. Increasing investments in sustainable energy solutions will help countries respond to the pandemic while also creating significant green jobs, empowering women, lowering greenhouse gas emissions, and advancing other SDGs. The 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement should serve as a road map for more resilient societies with better health systems, fewer people living in extreme poverty, greater gender equality, and a healthier natural environment.

In the coming years, the COVID-19 crisis is likely to have a significant impact on SDG 7 progress. As the pandemic spread, 2020 was expected to see the steepest drop in energy investment, with a 20% drop in capital spending compared to 2019<sup>6</sup>. Depending on the priorities of national recovery efforts and the global response to assist those in need, the pandemic could either widen existing sustainable energy access gaps or accelerate progress toward achieving SDG 7.

Governments in developing and underdeveloped countries, including those in South Asia, will need to reverse their current trend of increasing coal-fired generation capacity and instead implement policies that will allow for a rapid de-carbonization of the electricity mix. Strengthening governments' climate policy commitments with plans that include a clear commitment to phase out coal, remove fossil fuel subsidies, and increase support for renewables and energy efficiency will provide new opportunities for countries to develop low-carbon economies, resulting in significant benefits for long-term development.

In response to the pandemic, many governments' attention has been diverted away from clean energy. Due to the current crisis, many countries have put clean energy legislation, renewable energy reverse auctions, and policy developments on hold. Demand for energy is declining, which has resulted in a rise in the use of renewable energy in many countries. However, a rebound will occur eventually, and this transient phenomenon will most likely revert to the status quo. Some renewable energy projects have been halted due to component supply chain disruptions. As poor air quality appears to be a major risk factor for virus-related mortality, providing clean cooking for rural populations becomes even more important.

### **Boosting investment in clean energy**

In the aftermath of the pandemic, clean energy can also help the economy recover. Renewable energies are a job-creation engine. According to UNDP, the renewables sector employed a record 11 million people worldwide in 2018, with the International Renewable Energy Agency estimating that this number could rise to 42 million by 2050.

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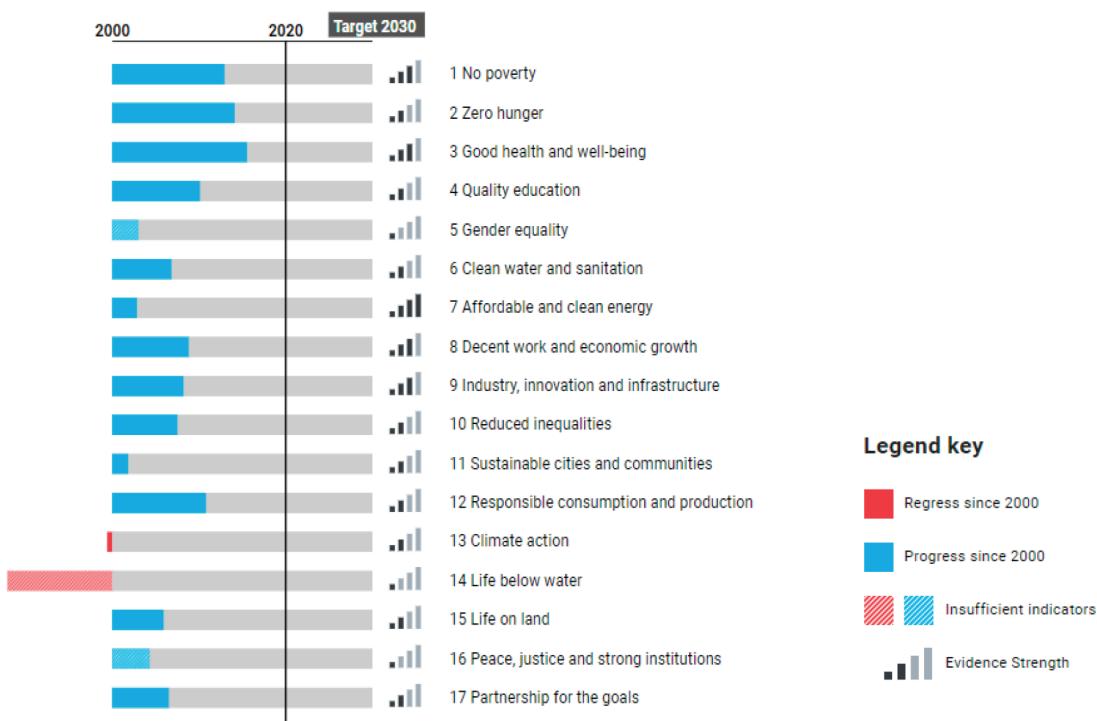
6 ACCELERATING SDG7 ACHIEVEMENT IN THE TIME OF COVID-19.

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26235UNFINALFINAL.pdf>

Local economies benefit from clean energy as well. Small businesses can benefit from decentralized, off-grid energy systems, which can also provide additional revenue streams. Clean energy is available, affordable, and reliable. However, the potential for large-scale renewable energy projects in many developing countries and economies remains largely untapped. This is also true in case of South Asian countries. Investment in this sector is still far below than what would be required to achieve the full development and climate benefits of clean energy. In the post-COVID scenario, it appears that it will be difficult for the developing countries to make a huge investment in clean energy as their economy has been largely paralyzed. Nonetheless, for overall development and sustainable growth, countries need to prioritize clean energy and should be ready to invest in this sector.

## South Asia and SDG 7

South Asia as a region is facing an unprecedented socio-economic impact of the pandemic. Every possible sector in the region, including health, tourism, education, industry, etc. has been severely impacted at different levels bringing regional economic growth to a halt. The COVID-19 outbreak struck South Asia just as the Sustainable Development Goals were gaining traction and countries were beginning to make some progress. Moreover, safety measures like months of lockdown, closing international borders, and travel restrictions undertaken by the governments of South Asian countries have crushed their economy. According to simulations based on the UNESCAP-SANEM CGE model, COVID-19-related measures could push up to 132 million people into extreme poverty in South Asia, reversing progress made over the decade and jeopardizing SDG achievement<sup>7</sup>. As a result of the pandemic, South Asia has suffered significant damage, making it one of the worst-performing regions in 2020. According to the UN published report- *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2021: South Asia*, the regional economic growth slowed dramatically from 3.1% in 2019 to -8.6% in 2020, a far cry from the 5.1



7 <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/event-documents/Fourth%20SASDG%20Concept%20Note.pdf>

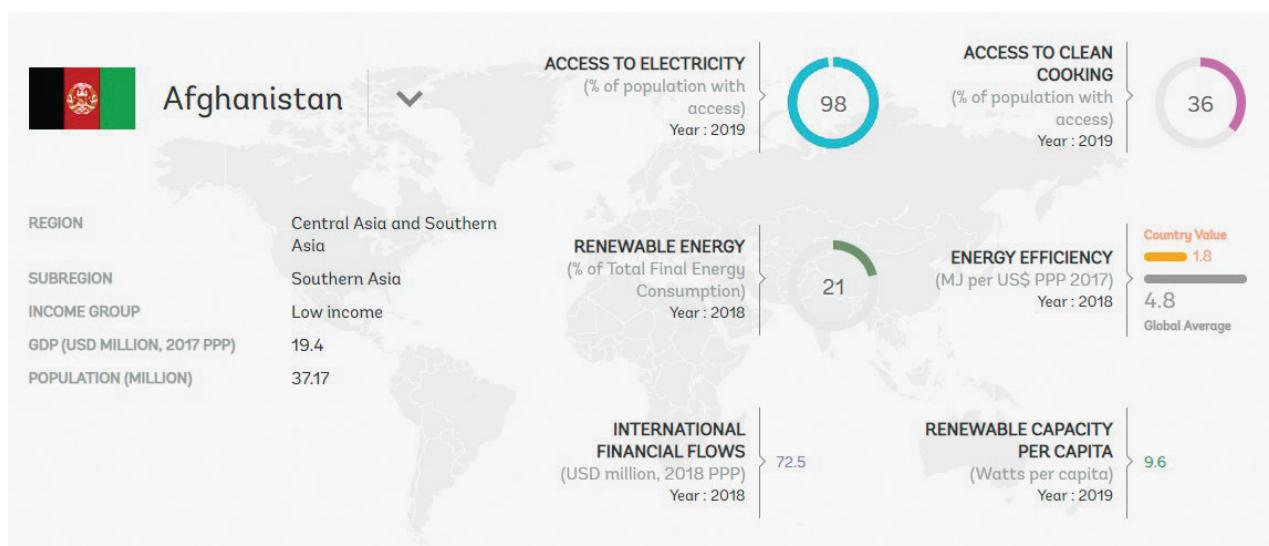
## Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on SDGs of South Asia

percent growth forecast for 2019<sup>8</sup>. Prior to COVID-19, the region was more or less on track to meet its education (SDG 4) and energy (SDG 7) targets, but lagged behind on access to drinking water and basic sanitation (SDG 6), ending hunger (SDG 2), reducing income inequality (SDG 10) and achieving gender equality (SDG 5), while regressing in the area of peace, governance, and institutions. However, since the pandemic has adversely hit every possible sector, it seems difficult for the region to build back better as planned before the pandemic.

Fig: SDG progress in South Asia, 2020

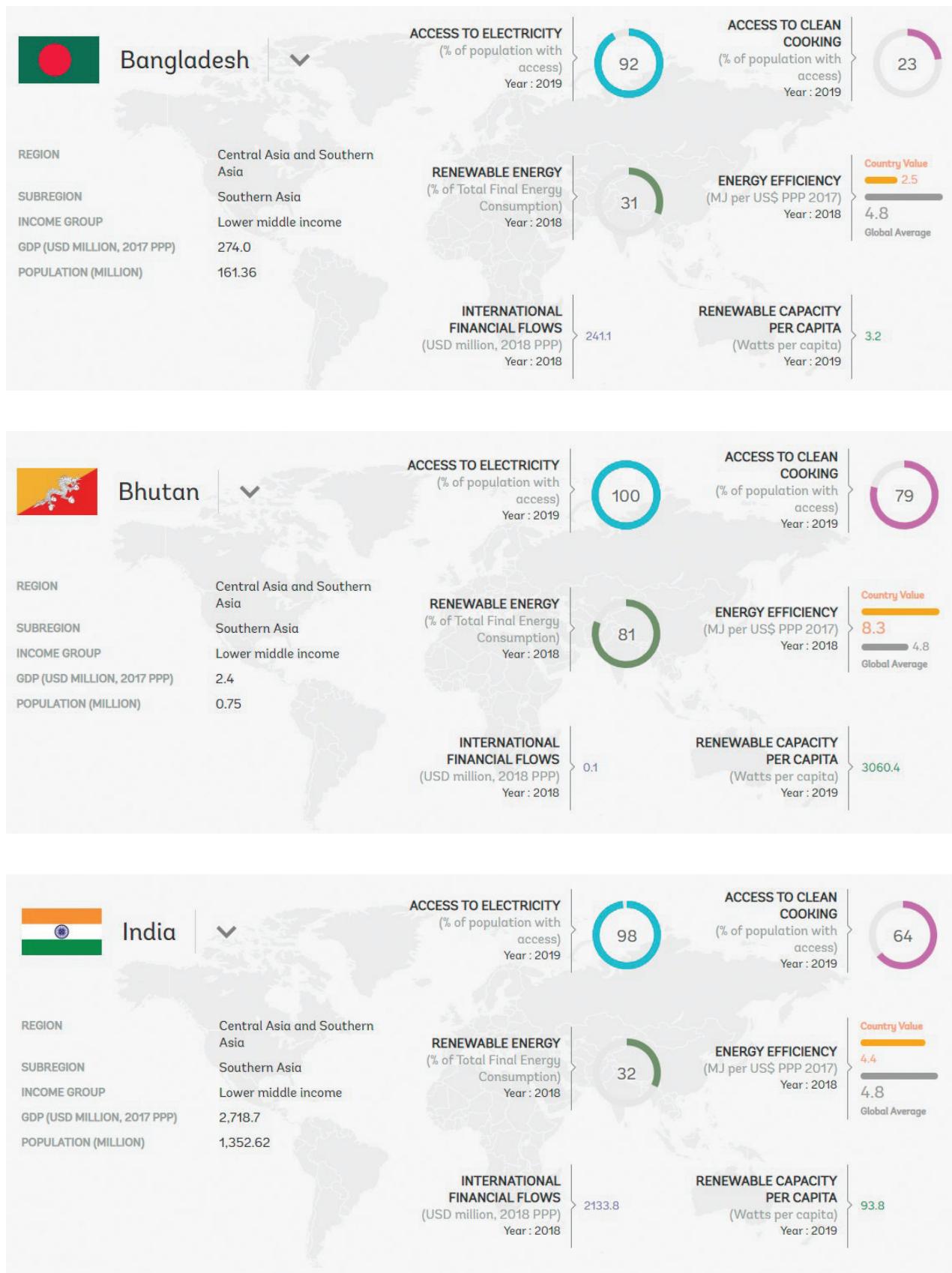
Source: Asia Pacific SDG Gateway. Accessed at <https://data.unescap.org/data-analysis/sdg-progress#>

To advance SDG 7, the Energy Progress Report provides country by country updates on energy access, energy efficiency, renewable energy, and international cooperation. It evaluates each country's progress on these four pillars and gives a snapshot of how close we are to meeting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) targets. The Report tracks and evaluates progress toward the 2030 goal of universal access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy. According to the most recent data and selected energy scenarios, the world is not on track to meet SDG 7 at the current rate of progress. The situation of each South Asian country over target 7 have been retrieved from the Energy Progress Report Dashboard and listed below<sup>9</sup>.

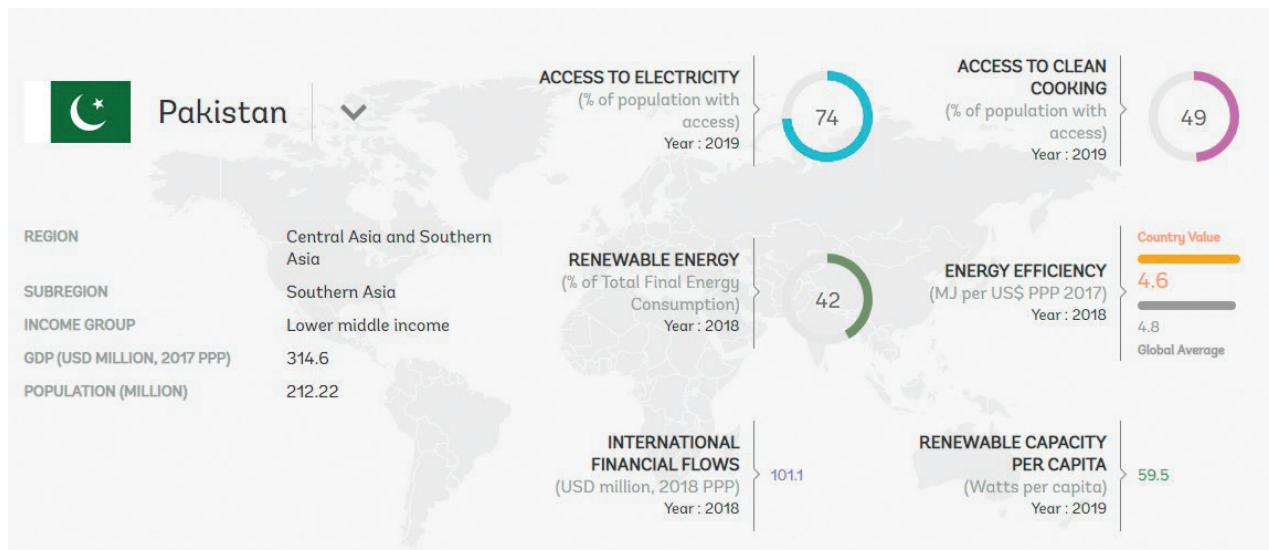
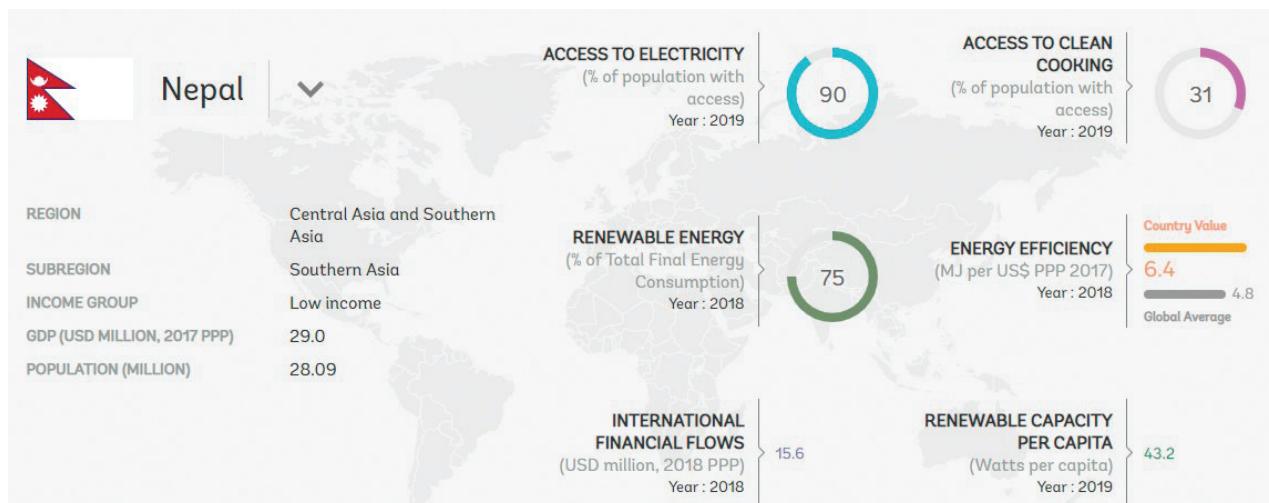
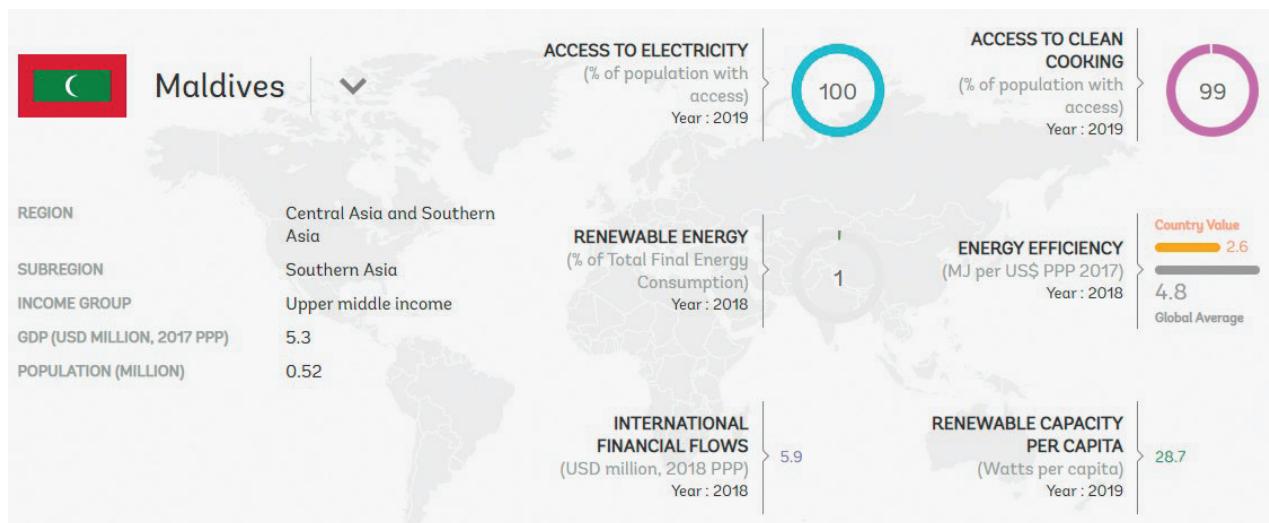


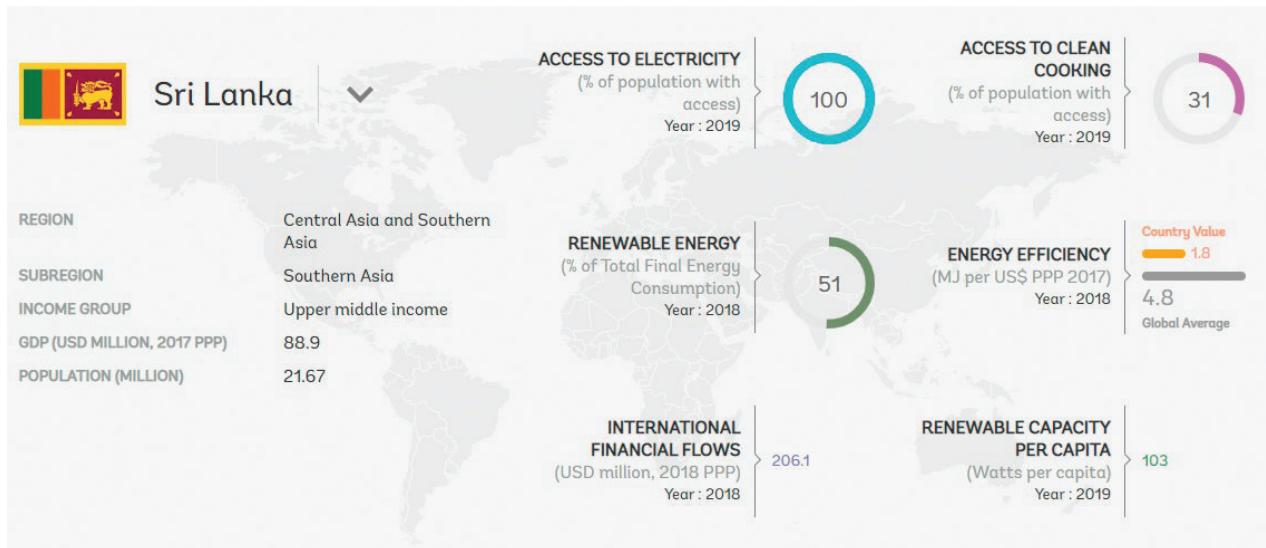
8 [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESP2021\\_CH3\\_SA.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESP2021_CH3_SA.pdf)

9 <https://trackingsdg7.esmap.org/>



## Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on SDGs of South Asia





### Intended nationally determined contributions of countries to cut GHG emissions in South Asia<sup>10</sup>

Member State	Commitment
Afghanistan	Aims to cut emissions by 13.6% from business-as-usual levels by 2030, conditional on international support, and reduce vulnerability to climate impacts. Estimated cost \$17.4 billion.
Bangladesh	Plans to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 5% by 2030 compared with business-as-usual levels in the power, transport and industry sectors, rising to 15% on international support.
Bhutan	Plans to remain carbon neutral as set out in 2009. Repeats commitment to keep 60% of territory forested.
India	Aims to cut greenhouse gas emissions for each unit of GDP 33% to 35% from 2005 levels by 2030. Targets 40% of electricity from non-fossil fuel sources by that date. Estimated cost \$2.5 trillion
Maldives	Aims for 10% emission cuts from business-as-usual levels by 2030, rising to 24% with international support.
Nepal	Aims to reduce dependency on fossil fuels by 50% by 2050 and achieve 80% electrification through renewable energy sources with appropriate energy mix. Plans to maintain 40% of the total area of the country under forest cover.
Pakistan	No measurable target available yet. "Pakistan is committed to reduce its emissions after reaching peak levels to the extent possible, subject to affordability, provision of international climate finance, transfer of technology and capacity building."
Sri Lanka	Aims for a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of 7% from business-as-usual levels by 2030, or up to 23% with international support. Estimated cost \$420 million.

Source: UNESCAP, based on country submissions of intended nationally determined contributions to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

10 For details see [www4.unfccc.int/submissions/INDC/Submission%20Pages/submissions.aspx](http://www4.unfccc.int/submissions/INDC/Submission%20Pages/submissions.aspx).

Other South Asian countries, with the exception of Bhutan and Nepal, stated their intended mitigation contribution in terms of percentage reductions in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions or emission intensity. By 2030, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka aim to reduce GHG emissions/carbon intensity from 5% to 24%. In comparison to 2005, India pledges to reduce emissions intensity by 33 % to 35% by 2030. While Bhutan did not make a specific commitment to reduce GHG emissions, it stated its intention to remain carbon neutral, meaning that GHG emissions will not exceed carbon sequestration by the forests. Nepal's stated commitments, on the other hand, were to reduce fossil fuel dependency, maintain forest cover, and use an appropriate mix of renewable energy in the energy mix.

## **Significance of SDG 7 for South Asia**

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is particularly relevant for South Asian countries, which account for nearly 40% of the world's poor, nearly half of the world's malnourished children, and face a number of development and infrastructure gaps. The achievements of South Asia vary not only across SD goals and targets, but also between and within countries. Nonetheless, with one fifth of the world's population, South Asia unquestionably has a significant role in the global achievement of the SDGs.

Given South Asia's high vulnerability to climate change, policies for transformative development must re-engineer growth towards sustainable development pathways. Changing the energy mix to favor renewable energy sources such as hydro, solar, and wind; moving to cleaner fuels such as gas-based energy; and implementing new technologies to reduce emissions from conventional energy generation should be part of South Asia's de-carbonization strategy. Industry must transition to more sustainable production methods such as increased energy efficiency and waste recycling. As part of sustainable consumption, lifestyle should change and focus more on reusing, recycling and reducing unnecessary consumption as well as, as part of a sustainable consumption strategy, sustainable solid waste management must be implemented. Despite low per capita emissions, South Asia may be one of the most vulnerable regions to climate change.

**Based on the Tracking SDG7:** The Energy Progress Report 2021<sup>11</sup>, below are the key five takeaways: The report tracks progress toward the SDG 7 targets of access to electricity and clean cooking, renewable energy, and energy efficiency on a global, regional, and country level. Tracking SDG 7 in this way provides a clear picture of how far we still have to go to ensure that everyone has access to clean, affordable energy by 2030. Energy is necessary for economic activity and for ensuring a more just, healthier, and prosperous future for all.

In light of this, the most recent findings of Tracking SDG7, which uses data from 2019 and earlier, are concerning. According to the report, 759 million people around the world still do not have access to electricity, and 2.6 billion people cannot cook in a clean and safe manner.

According to Damilola Ogunbiyi, CEO and Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Sustainable Energy for All, and Co-Chair of UN-Energy, said: "*The latest Tracking SDG7 findings should serve*

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<sup>11</sup> [trackingsdg7.esmap.org/data/files/download-documents/2021\\_tracking\\_sdg7\\_report.pdf](https://trackingsdg7.esmap.org/data/files/download-documents/2021_tracking_sdg7_report.pdf)

*as a wake-up call to the global community. So many development goals hinge on access to clean, affordable energy- from creating new economic opportunities to securing gender equality to addressing climate change. Countries without energy access will fall further behind because of the pandemic, which is why we need 2021 to be a year of ambitious action on energy access and transition”<sup>12</sup>.*

1. Incremental progress on electricity access will be undone by COVID-19 unless we act fast
2. Minimal annual gains in clean cooking access make universal access by 2030 improbable
3. Asia has made progress across all SDG7 targets, as a result of increased energy investment
4. Under developed geographical regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia continues to lag behind in terms of energy access and efficiency.
5. Modern renewables and energy efficiency are pillars of a clean energy transition that supports development- they need to be scaled up.

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a serious threat to billions of people around the world. South Asia is no exception, and the pandemic has posed a serious threat to the region. Because of job losses, health and economic crises, disruptions in the food supply chain, and other factors, millions of people from various sectors including daily wages to small and medium enterprises to industries have been hit hard by the pandemic. Furthermore, the pandemic has thwarted regional goals to meet the SDGs, including an unprecedented level of hunger and poverty in the region.

As the world continues to fall short of achieving universal access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy by 2030, the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the need to expand sustainable energy solutions. Given the large proportion of the population without access who live in remote, rural, poorer, and vulnerable communities, countries must safeguard the gains made prior to the COVID-19 outbreak and prioritize leaving no one behind in order to meet the SDGs targets by 2030. To encourage faster deployment of new technologies, stronger political commitment, long-term energy planning, increased public and private financing, and appropriate policy and fiscal incentives will be required.

Once the pandemic is completely over, there may be a return to normalcy. COVID-19 has provided some positive lessons that can be applied to SDG 7, such as increasing the use of technology for remote working and learning to reduce traffic congestion, energy demand, and air pollution. Policymakers should take these into account as they manage the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. Government stimulus packages should emphasize renewable energy, energy storage, and electric vehicles as ways to accelerate de-carbonization and greening of the economy. In the current circumstances, countries worldwide including South Asian nations can consider economic stimulus options that not only address the immediate crisis, but also ensure long-term societal, economic, and environmental sustainability- with SDG 7 at the forefront of these goals.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.seforall.org/news/five-takeaways-from-tracking-sdg7-the-energy-progress-report-2021>

# Pervasive Informality: How South Asia's jobs could be saved in the face of COVID-19?

Dikshya Singh<sup>1</sup>

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic battered South Asian economies, the region was already battling decelerated economic growth and lack of decent work. The pandemic and the measures taken to stem the spread of the disease caused the gross domestic product (GDP) of six out of eight countries in the region to contract in 2020 (see Table 1). As of mid-May 2021, the second wave of the disease is devastating India and Nepal while Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have also seen a surge in the number of cases. All these countries have opted for national or targeted lockdown again as they did in late March 2020. The restricted movement of people and shuttered businesses to halt the spread of infection mean economic activities coming to a standstill, resulting in loss of income and revenue for businesses and loss of employment and livelihoods for people. A slow recovery that the region has seen in the past few months seems to be faltering again, increasing risks to income and employment security.

The impact of strict containment measures has reversed different socio-economic gains achieved by the countries in South Asia in the past decade. Moreover, the pandemic increased the existing social and economic vulnerabilities of the people in the region. The unprecedented uncertainty created by the pandemic has jeopardized the possibility of South Asian countries meeting the targets laid out by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. To meet the SDGs, having a robust economic expansion, that could provide income and employment security to the people, is an essential parameter. The SDG 8 focuses on decent jobs and economic growth that envisions sustainable economic growth complemented by inclusive and decent employment for all. In South Asia, where informal jobs and casual work make up the majority of employment, contraction in the economy will further increase the vulnerability and precariousness in the labour market. This research paper will look into the impact of the pandemic on the employment prospects focusing on the widespread informality in South Asia and possible measure to help the informal workforce considering the short- and medium-term economic outlook of the region.

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## Economic outlook

Although expanding GDP may not be the only prerequisite for higher levels of employment, better job quality can only be attained when the economy is growing (Nayar et. al., 2012). Studies have shown that economic growth is positively associated with job creation, most famously postulated is Okun's Law.<sup>2</sup> However, the impact of growth on the level and quality of jobs created varies by country context and existing structure within the economy, thus not all growth can be translated into widespread employment opportunities (Basnett and Sen, 2012). South Asia had been experiencing an accelerated growth over the three decades since 1980, albeit the individual countries' performances vary (International Growth Centre et. al. 2010), resulting in a significant reduction in poverty in the region. However, in the second decade of the 21st century, mostly in the second half of the 2010s, the economic growth in the region had started to slow down (Taskin, 2020). The major economies of South Asia -India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka-encountered a decline in industrial production, liquidity constraints and a slowdown in domestic demand amidst contracting exports (World Bank, 2019). The 2020 outlook for Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan were not as dire as that of the bigger economies (*ibid.*). Then the COVID-19 pandemic upended all the estimates and projection for the whole world and South Asia is no different.

**Table 1 GDP growth estimates for 2020 and 2021**

	2020**	2021**	2020*	2021*	2020***	2021***
Afghanistan			-1.9	1	-5	4
Bangladesh	5.2	8.2	3.6	5.1	3.8	5.03
Bhutan	-6.3	4.2	-1.8	2.9	-0.82	-1.92
India	-8	10.5	-8.5	10.1	-8	12.55
Maldives	-29.3	13.5	-28	17.1	-32.24	18.87
Nepal	-2.12	3.98	-1.8	2.9	-1.88	2.89
Pakistan	-0.4	2.1	1.3	2	-0.39	1.5
Sri Lanka	-1.7	5	-3.6	3.4	-3.57	4
<hr/>						
***IMF, World Economic Outlook 2021 (IMF, 2021)						
* World Bank South Asia Economic Focus Spring 2021 (World Bank, 2021b)						
**Individual govt. estimates taken from Bangladesh: Ministry of Finance, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (2020); Bhutan: Ministry of Finance, Government of Bhutan (2021); India: RBI (2021); Maldives: Maldives Monetary Authority (2021); Nepal: CBS (2021); Pakistan: Finance Division. Government of Pakistan (2020); Sri Lanka: Central Bank of Sri Lanka (2020).						

The pandemic, considered to be worse than the global financial crisis of 2008, led to a complete collapse of South Asia's economic activities for a couple of months from March 2020. According to the World Bank's nighttime light intensity observation, the light intensity (which is a proxy for economic activities)

2 Named after economist Arthur Okun, Okun's law shows a negative relationship between unemployment and output. Hanif et. al. (2021) found GDP negatively influencing the unemployment rate in Afghanistan, India and Sri Lanka only.

declined to about 3/4th of what it used to be in normal times during March to August 2020 in South Asia (World Bank, 2020). Although agriculture and industrial sectors were relatively less affected, the services-based economies-where services sectors, such as tourism, travel, trade and transport, contributed to a larger share in the GDP-did not see a swifter recovery. As a result, fiscal years ending in 2020 saw all of South Asian countries' economy contracting with an exception of Bangladesh (See Table 1). Bangladeshi economy did quite well in the first eight months of the fiscal year before the pandemic forced the economy to shut down, hence was able to clock a considerable growth (Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh, 2020). With tourism coming to a standstill, the Maldives suffered the most. As shown in Table 1, the contraction of the economy was worse in Bhutan and Nepal than the estimates from multilateral agencies. The economic slump has been multi-sectoral, though agriculture was less affected compared to manufacturing and services. The contracting economic growth has dire implications on the employment and income situation, pushing more people in the region to absolute poverty.

### Precarious job situation

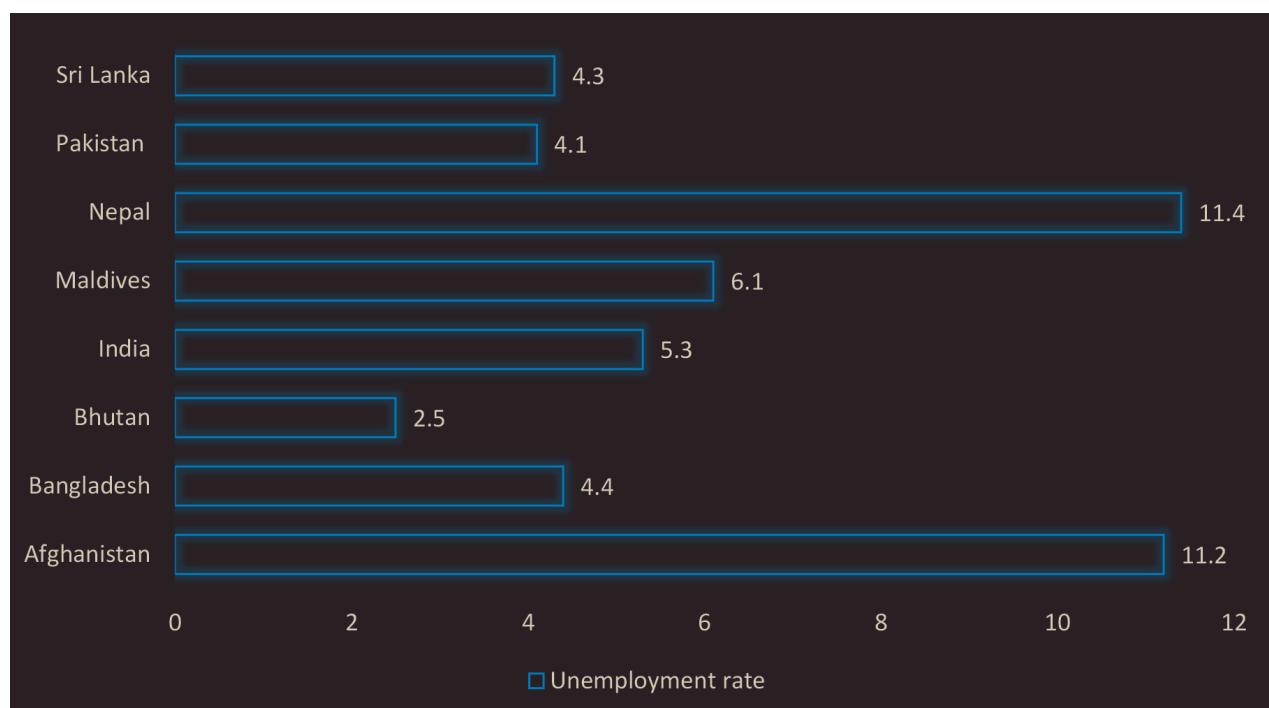
The economic contraction is expected to undo the last three years' progress achieved by South Asia in terms of poverty reduction, according to estimates (World Bank, 2021b). The loss of income and employment caused by the pandemic can quickly increase the number of the vulnerable, given the lack of social security protection in the region. Even before the pandemic hit, the region has been characterized by the prominence of low-quality jobs despite relatively low unemployment figures. Economists have plotted a U-shaped relationship between an income-per-capita and employment rates.<sup>3</sup> The poorer countries will have more people -young and old, women and men-in the labour force as the only way to fulfil their basic needs is via earning themselves. In poorer economies, the majority of the labour force is either engaged in the unorganized sector, self-employed or micro-entrepreneurs.

South Asia is also no different as more than 3/4th of workers in South Asia depend on income from activities in informal sectors (World Bank, 2020). The share of workers in informal employment (including agriculture) is estimated to be at 87.8 per cent for South Asia (ILO, 2018). The impacts of the pandemic have been worst for the informal workers and those in vulnerable jobs. These workers do not have coping mechanisms in place, either in the form of social protection or insurance, to help them ride out the interruptions in employment. Thus the pandemic has affected them the worst. Similarly, the crisis also threatens to reverse the strides made in terms of women's engagement in paid employment as more females suffered from crisis-induced inactivity and reported a greater decline in working hours and employment (ILO, 2020). Employment in informal sectors is attributed to a larger adverse impact on women's job prospects than on men. In any disaster, the severity of the impacts depends on the pre-existing level of the vulnerabilities; this pandemic also deepened the existing vulnerabilities present in South Asia's labour market-lack of decent jobs.

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3 Note: According to studies, the poorest countries have a higher level of employment considering that people will have to work from early ages for sustenance. As the country's per capita income grows, households can afford to delay entry into the labour market thus labour market participation falls. Further, per capita income growth will lead to higher wages and a skilled workforce. As more people who have tertiary education and expertise in their fields enter the workforce, it increases the labour force participation (Beyer, Chocce and Rama, 2018).

Figure 1 Unemployment rate in South Asia (latest figures available); Source: ILO (2020)



According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), South Asia witnessed a larger loss in working hours with a decline of 27.3 percent-equivalent to 170 million full-time jobs--in the period of April-June (ILO, 2020). The same report estimates that South Asia may have lost 50 million jobs in 2020 due to COVID-19 (*ibid.*). India, South Asia's largest economy, saw more than 100 million workers out of job during the peak of lockdown in June 2020. Despite the job recovery, about 15 million workers are out of work as of the end of 2020 (Azim Premji University, 2021). Similarly, the pandemic-induced lockdown in Pakistan affected 27.31 million working population between April and July 2020 (PBS, 2021). Among them, 75 percent suffered job loss. Although 18.4 million of those were able to get back to work from August onwards, the country still expects to see about four million addition to unemployment (PIDE, 2020). Nepal estimates that about 924,000 individuals have lost employment due to COVID-19 (NPC, 2021). Further, additional 640,000 labour emigrants are projected to come back to Nepal making employment generation one of the biggest challenges in the post-COVID scenario. The pandemic caused about 10.1 million persons in Bangladesh to lose their employment while the income loss of around 65 percent was experienced in the early months of the pandemic, that is April 2020 (CPD, 2021). Although Bangladesh had fared better than any other South Asian economy, the projection regarding full recovery of the lost jobs appears to be slower (*ibid.*). The unemployment rate in the first two quarters of 2020 rose by 0.5 percentage points in Sri Lanka due to COVID-19 induced restrictions (World Bank, 2021). The overall unemployment in the first two quarters increased by 6 percent and is expected to remain above the level for the rest of the year (de Mel and Perera, 2020).

Despite the low rate of COVID-19 infections in Bhutan, the pandemic left a large section of its population without a job given that tourism is one the biggest employment generating sector with about 16 percent of the working population engaged in the sector while 63 percent of household are dependent on tourism, directly and indirectly (National Statistics of Bureau, 2020). According to a rapid assessment,

83 percent of the surveyed Bhutanese reported the COVID-19 pandemic affected their employment status (*ibid.*). Moreover, businesses such as guiding, rafting and vehicle hire businesses had remained shut and these are the sectors that have the most casual workers employed. Closed borders and restriction in movement also impacted construction and trade, leading to further job losses in the services sector (World Bank, 2021b). The Maldives, another tourism-dependent economy where the sector contributes 26 percent of the GDP, has been reeling under the pandemic impact. Among the workers whose employment and income have been affected, more than half are reported to be tourism and accommodation (Ministry of Economic Development, Government of Maldives and United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Likewise, 44 percent of the workers surveyed faced redundancy and 24 percent reported leave without pay (*ibid.*). Afghanistan also reported a large number of job losses during the lockdown as COVID-19 Business Pulse Survey showed that 23 percent of workers had lost their jobs, and 37 percent of firms reported laying off at least one employee (IFC, 2020). According to another survey undertaken by World Bank from August to November 2020 in Afghanistan, 63 percent reported income loss and 23 percent reported wage loss though only 4 percent reported job loss (World Bank, 2021c).

## Pervasive informality

One of the common threads in all of the South Asian countries and COVID-19 impact on employment, the most of those affected are either employed in informal sectors or hold informal work contracts. Informal work usually refers to work that is not covered regulated or protected by existing legal or regulatory frameworks and it may also include non-remunerative work done at the income-producing enterprise.<sup>4</sup> These jobs are not necessarily in informal firms—the firms that operate without proper registration, but may exist in large incorporated firms as well where these workers are employed on daily wage basis or piece-rate basis. For example in Nepal, 62.2 percent are employed in the informal sector while informal employment makes up 84.6 percent of the total employed (CBS, 2018). The defining characters of informal work is the lack of protection from labour laws and any other forms of social protection afforded to formal workers. Hence, informal workers are more vulnerable to losing jobs and have to work in unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, work in low-skill low-paying works with irregular working hours. Although the informal sector provides income opportunities to those left out of the formal job net and helps pump the economy through integrating into the formal sector, informal sectors' productivity tends to be lower. Further, the uncertainty and precarious nature of existence, due to its lack of regulatory and legal protection, resulting in a high level of inefficiency, lack of access to finance and use of irregular channels to access services (Loayza, 2018). There are a lot of advantages of remaining informal and informality helps the firms and workers to remain dynamic, but the informal sector's inefficiency can be reflected in the fact that their share in GDP is lower than their share of labour employment (*ibid.*). Likewise, informal labour productivity is between 25 to 75 percent of total labour productivity (*ibid.*). The persistence of informal labour in developing economies is considered an

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4 According to ILO, the definition of informal employment is “all remunerative work (i.e. both self-employment and wage employment) that is not registered, regulated or protected by existing legal or regulatory frameworks, as well as non-remunerative work undertaken in an income-producing enterprise. Informal workers do not have secure employment contracts, workers’ benefits, social protection or workers’ representation.”

obstacle to sustainable development as informal workers are likely to be poorer and their lack of social protection leave them vulnerable to all kinds of shocks (Deléchat and Medina, 2020). Moreover, more women are in informal works than men, thus it is closely linked to gender inequality as well.

	Informal	Formal
Bangladesh	89.4	10.6
India	88.8	11.2
Nepal*	84.6	15.4
Pakistan	80.8	19.2
Sri Lanka	70.6	29.4
Source: World Bank (2020)		
*Source: CBS (2018)		

In South Asia, different structural reasons, such as relatively limited share of the manufacturing sector has resulted in only one-tenth of the working-age population with regular jobs (Beyer, Chocce, and Rama, 2018). In every country, informal workers have faced the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 induced economic contraction. According to the World Bank estimates, the poorest third of the population relying on the informal economy in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan lost 9, 13, and 16 percent of their incomes, respectively (Bussulo, Sharma and Timmer, 2020). In Pakistan, the pandemic led to a slump in the construction, manufacturing and transport sectors, where workers tend to be low-skilled and under informal contracts. As a result, 74 percent of the workers who lost their jobs during the early days of the pandemic are in informal sectors (PBS, 2021). Similarly, in Sri Lanka, a larger share of earning loss were shouldered by the low-income earners as more than 1.7 million temporary employees in the private sector are at the risk of layoffs and wage cuts (Jayawardane, 2020). Despite the increased share of manufacturing in the economy, thanks to its burgeoning readymade garment sector, more than 89 percent of workers in Bangladesh are informal as of 2016 (World Bank, 2020). In the export-oriented RMG sector, 95 percent of employees are informal as executives in the factories enjoy perks of formal employment workers on the factory, irrespective of their skill-level, are informally contracted (Rahman, Bhattacharya and Al-Hasan, 2018). Self-employed workers in the tourism sector in Bhutan and Nepal saw their earnings dry up as tourism came to a halt. According to ILO, 3/4th of workers in the tourism sector in Nepal are in informal jobs (ILO, 2020b). These workers are left with no income or security and had to look for alternate jobs or go back to agriculture, which is already a low productivity sector, due to the COVID crisis.

Informal works tend to be counter-cyclical, that is during an economic downturn more jobs are created in the informal sector (Colombo, Menna and Tirelli, 2019). This effect is stronger in the least developed economies. The workers who lose jobs turn towards self-employment and micro-entrepreneurship—the largely informal sectors. Informal sectors—be it work or enterprise—tend to have less barriers for entry and do not require high levels of skills or technology. In India, a study found that nearly half of formal salaried workers moved into informal work, either as a self-employed, casual wage earner or informal salaried workers in 2020 (Azim Premji University, 2021). The shift in jobs and the pandemic resulted in worsening income of the workers as monthly earnings of workers fell on an average by 17 percent during the pandemic. Self-employed and informal salaried workers faced the highest loss of

earnings (Azim Premji University, 2021). The post-COVID scenario is feared to be of low-quality jobs and decreased earning rather than of unemployment.

## Possible Steps

As the renewed wave of the pandemic has threatened to reverse the economic progress in South Asian countries, employment conditions have remained equally vulnerable. The COVID-19 has further exposed the inequality and schism present in the region's labour market. The high-income earners, with access to employment protection, turned to remote working that allowed them to continue their jobs which protected them from potential exposure to the virus. On the other hand, low-income earners, requiring hands-on presence, such as construction, transport and small businesses, among others, were afforded such security as they had to struggle between choosing to preserve their lives and preserving their livelihoods. Since there is no certainty when the pandemic will be over, how the workers in precarious jobs are going to fair in the medium- to longer-term will depend on the nature and speed of the recovery. The recovery will largely depend on the active policy actions of the governments. The situation of the informal sector has worsened as the policies fail to address their existence and target most of the relief and recovery measures towards rehabilitating formal firms and workers. Formalizing informal workers is a difficult task and may not be entirely desirable considering the complex political economy of South Asia. But the policy apparatus can be designed to support the workers when in need.

The pandemic has further highlighted the need for robust social protection that prevents people from falling into poverty in the face of shocks. The social security schemes in the forms of unemployment allowances, job guarantee programmes, direct cash transfers, among others, work as buffers in the face of job and income losses. Five out of eight countries in South Asia resorted to cash transfers to the poor and vulnerable people. Such programmes may put some pressure on the national coffers, but it helps sustain effective demand and augment cash flow in the economy, hence preventing businesses from closing. One of the effective ways to help informal workers is by help preserving their employers and such social safety net may just help with that. However, the policies need to be targeted towards protecting the labour market not only employment. Nepal's Social Security Fund (SSF)'s actions in response to the pandemic is an example of a misplaced relief measure. The SSF contributed the social security contribution of the high-income earning white-collar workers with job security for four months in 2020 and is repeating that for 2021 too. The SSF practically subsidized the salaries of the workers that were not even facing any job or income loss. Instead, SSF could have used the relief money to introduce schemes to bring medium-earning self-employed workers, such as that in tourism and entertainment sectors, into their fold.

Since informal workers are typically employed in smaller businesses either as owners or as workers, preserving those businesses can also be a way to help prevent deterioration of the job quality. Governments can offer help to the businesses by extending eviction protection, easing financing by shouldering the risk of lending, helping firms with payment of the wages for some months. Although these measures can effectively be accessed by formally registered firms, rent support and other such measures can also help informal businesses as well.

Further, as the dichotomy between informal and formal workers and firms is quite blurry and these sectors get integrated at various stages of production networks, one way to go about is by insisting certain labour protection is achieved in the supplier chain. Following the 2013 Rana Plaza crash in Bangladesh, many fashion firms that out-source their products have been cautious in this regard. Although more safety is needed in this regard, such social labour audit could be helpful as the world moves towards sustainable recovery. Similarly, such integration between formal and informal network is present in the tourism industry as well. Although tourism industry workers are relatively organized in the form of tourism workers associations and organizations, empowering these workers' bodies and helping them set up unemployment insurance could be one way for the governments to secure their income situation in the face of disasters.

As the policymakers devise policies to help create sustainable jobs and institutionalize decent jobs in response to COVID-19 pandemic, they need to understand the differentiated impacts of the disasters on different sections. The impact of disasters depends on the ability of the affected, which in turn depends on different social, economic and political factors. In the cases of job and income losses due to pandemic, the white-collar workers were more resilient given the social protection afforded to them than blue-collar workers. Similarly, more women faced decreased hours of employment due to nature of their role in society and the economy. Thus, sustainable job policies need to comprehend the heterogeneity of the different sections while framing policy so that everyone in this region could have access to decent and secure employment opportunities.

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# The Impact of Covid-19 on SDG 9 in South Asia

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## Abstract

The appalling spread of the Covid-19 has threatened several human lives, disrupted livelihoods and affected trade and businesses across the world. The global economy has shown signs of major disruptions and has been heading towards a major recession through the economic crisis. Since the global economy is deeply tied and integrated through the supply chains, it has been affected dramatically by the pandemic. South Asian countries were most affected as they had to deal with a more challenging situation due to their large population, weak health facilities, high poverty, low socio-economic conditions and inadequate living space. The Covid pandemic has severely affected SDG 9, that is, industry, infrastructure and innovation as the pandemic has affected economic growth by increasing the fiscal deficit and monetary burden and increased the risk of macro-economic stability. Therefore, this paper will explore and analyse the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on SDG 9 in the South Asian region.

## Introduction

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, South Asia lagged in 15 out of 17 goals despite robust economic growth and impressive progress in poverty reduction. The pandemic has been causing extensive disruption and impacting infrastructure project owners in ways reminiscent of a financial crisis by disrupting supply chains and the labour market.

South Asian countries have imposed stringent lockdowns to contain the virus which has subsequently affected the lives of millions of people. The SDG 9, that is, industry, infrastructure and innovation has been affected due to the pandemic in terms of the economic growth, increase in fiscal deficit and monetary burden and increase in the risks of macroeconomic instability and reducing income from tourism and travel. Furthermore, there was dwindling micro-small and medium industries and informal businesses.

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Covid-19 has also led to impact the trends and patterns in the use of public transport, air travel and global infrastructure development. Infrastructure has been deeply impacted due to supply chain disruptions, labour disruptions and slow revenue generation.

If we take the example of India, the pandemic has impacted the Indian Private Companies such as Larsen & Toubro, Grasim Industries, Aditya Birla Group, BHEL and Tata Motors and several startups too (Srivastava, 2020). The pandemic has shown how disasters can converge to threaten lives, livelihoods, and social and economic systems. However, Governments in the region have been quite slow to incorporate a multi-hazard, multi-sectoral perspective into their preparedness management and infrastructure systems. Furthermore, critical infrastructure like hospitals, schools and evacuation shelters play a prominent role in disaster response, but many South Asian countries have not operationalised an integrated system of risk analytics for health and disaster management.

Several SDGs have linkages with one another, for instance, the health SDG (3) carries ripple impacts on the lack of innovation and infrastructural capacity building. The SDG 9 also include the utilities regarding the real estate and telecommunications industry which contribute to capacity building through infrastructure and logistics development.

Some industrial towns and cities were hit by the pandemic with production losses accentuated by supply chain disruptions and financial market volatilities. Evidently, small and medium-sized enterprises and companies were also hard hit due to the pandemic. Global real estate has been impacted too, and investment levels have declined 29% year-on-year during the first half of 2020.

Covid-19 has been spreading drastically in the overcrowded unhygienic conditions in the urban slums of Karachi, or Dharavi in Mumbai causing a threat to the entire population. In India, for example, the share of the slum population in India fell only marginally from 18.3% to 17.4% between the 2001 and 2011 censuses (ESCAP, 2020).

Poor investment in the health sector also resulted in poor public health infrastructure in terms of the number of beds and health personnel too. It is seen that on average, Bhutan, the Maldives and Sri Lanka are better equipped in terms of health amenities than other countries in the region.

There is a definite shift to digital mode of work and education, which has propelled a sufficient increase in data traffic and use of broadband services from the households. All crucial industry groups recorded significant decline in output during the first quarter of FY 2020-21, with the construction industry, transport and hospitality services bearing a larger share of the brunt of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown measures introduced. The agriculture, forestry and fishery industries showed resilience and performed significantly well, exhibiting a growth of 3.4 per cent over FY 2019-20. (Ratna, 2020)

Due to restrictions in travel, the widely affected sectors are tourism, sports, entertainment (cinema), education, transport, manufacturing and remittances. Foreign remittances are one of the main sources of foreign exchange earnings and household income in South Asian countries. With the closure of the remittance transfer businesses, loss of employment abroad, and absence of travel back home,

remittance inflow in South Asia is expected to decline significantly. For example, activities in the Maldivian and Bhutanese tourism sectors had essentially been halted. The tourism sector is an example wherein both supply and demand side have been impacted.

The manufacturing sector, most notably the Bangladeshi garment industry which employs millions of people, has already seen entire factories close due to decreased demand from resellers abroad (Wright and Saeed 2020). European Union (EU) and the US buyers have cancelled around \$1 billion of garment orders from Bangladesh. Nepal also witnessed the cancellation of export orders in the handicrafts sectors for which the EU and the US are major markets, amounting to around US\$165 Million.

The South Asian countries experienced inflation in 2020 owing to the impact of the pandemic. The fiscal deficit has been slightly lower than 2019 because of the sharp fall in oil prices as well as due to disruption in supply chains, where imports are expected to be reduced more than the reduction of the exports.

Remittance, too, is one of the important sources of livelihood for millions of poor households. Many migrants have lost their lives in foreign lands. The pandemic has placed many internal migrant workers in dire conditions with many of them losing their jobs and unable to return home due to disruptions in transport facilities and movement restrictions. The migration and remittance sectors have been affected heavily by the COVID-19 pandemic. In South Asia, remittance flow is likely to decline from US\$ 140 billion in 2019 to US\$ 135 billion in 2020 and projected to decline to US\$ 120 billion in 2021 (World Bank and KNOMAD, 2020)

In South Asia, the majority of the population is either self-employed or involved in agricultural-related activities. Service and industrial sectors are other employers in the region, while micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and the informal sector services engage the workforce. For instance, in India 36 million MSMEs employed 60 million people and contributed significantly to the national economy (Dev and Sengupta, 2020). In other South Asian countries, MSMEs also play a very important role in providing employment and income, contributing to exports and earning foreign currency. The informal work sector and the MSMEs have been hit by the pandemic across the region. Many MSMEs could not sustain themselves during the lockdown restrictions and left many informal sector workers unemployed. For example, in Nepal, more than a million informal sector workers have lost their jobs temporarily or permanently and require relief materials from the state (Awasthi, 2020). In Pakistan, about 12 million workers were likely to face layoffs due to lockdown and the country's sluggish economic recovery (PIDE, 2020). Lack of social security makes the workers vulnerable to any economic shocks that affect their livelihoods. Therefore, the pandemic has also turned into a crisis exposing millions of workers to food, income and other forms of insecurity. The Covid-19 has pushed the world economy into a recession which is worst after the great depression of the 1930s.

The high rate of layoffs in the industrial sector has been having effects on employment and the household income, food and nutrition security and livelihood security too. Most of the informal sector workers are poor and, therefore, it would have significant implications for poverty, food and nutrition.

Food insecurity is a challenge that is caused by the disruption of agricultural production, food supply chains and loss of income across countries. Food prices have been increased due to the low supply of agricultural production. The most vulnerable population in South Asia are those exposed to weather-related disasters (flood, droughts), conflict or are living in extreme poverty in countries with weak social protection programs.

South Asian countries have lower than the average public health expenditure. For example, Karachi in Pakistan and Delhi in India lack Intensive Care beds, healthcare workers and financial resources to meet the growing demand for healthcare services. (WHO, 2020)

Agricultural value chains and livelihoods of the agriculture-dependent population has been suffering due to the pandemic. The rural economy and livelihoods are disrupted by the pandemic and restrictions on the movement of goods and services. COVID-19 has disrupted agricultural operation in the region because of shortages of labour and inputs, as shut-downs extended to rural areas, village roads, transportation and marketing of goods, all to control the movement of people to effectively curb the spread of the pandemic. Across South Asia, rural population depend on agriculture and its related activities for their livelihoods. According to FAO (2020), the pandemic restrictions in Bangladesh severely hampered the country's export of tropical fruits. Additionally, due to travel restrictions, seasonal labourers could not reach the agricultural sites for the Boro rice harvest, which accounts for over half the nation's rice production.

The pandemic has further disrupted the food transportation and supply chain in different parts of South Asia, and due to this restriction, prices of farm products have collapsed. For instance, farm prices for wheat in India have declined substantially due to a lack of facilities to transport the harvest to the markets (Dev and Sengupta, 2020).

Regional cooperation in South Asia in the form of SAARC, BIMSTEC, BBIN could supplement the actions in addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic. The COVID-19 outbreak hit South Asia at a time when the SDGs were gaining traction and countries had begun to make progress towards some of the Goals although not on track to achieve most of the Goals.

## **Way forward**

A roadmap shall be developed for achieving short, medium and long term goals to revitalize the national and sub-national economy by keeping in mind, the needs of the poor and vulnerable group. With the vaccine rollout, the industrial sector needs to be careful with the efficacy of proper vaccination centres across the region. The focus should be on boosting economic activities to recover the economy and in implementing the best possible stimulus to achieve financial recovery.

Organising the fiscal, monetary and development intervention in an integrated manner so that different policy measures complement each other and multiply their effects in economic recovery. Furthermore, focus could be on improving long-term productivity and resilience by investing in a balanced portfolio of physical, human, social and natural capitals. For example, investment in health, education, skills

development, innovation, technological upgrading, and green infrastructure and natural capital will increase the productive capacity of the population and provide sustainable returns for future generations. Regional cooperation should be promoted to facilitate expedient cross-border movement of essential goods and services. South Asian countries must work together to address the challenge of pandemic and pursue quick and sustainable economic recovery. There should be a review of the policy priorities by withdrawing subsidies from fossil fuels and providing subsidies to green recovery, improving health facilities and boosting economic activities.

The decentralised urban governance structures should be promoted to enable smaller sustainable cities to grow, build greater resilience through relying on local supply chains, local actors as change agents and also reduce concentration in some of the dense urban centres. A reconfiguration of the urbanization strategy in South Asian cities in terms of long-term, multi-sectoral, integrated approaches for sustainable and resilient urban growth is vital. The urban strategy should also focus on a more sustainable pattern of urban mobility and public transport in the cities by revisiting city planning concepts.

In line with supporting the MSMEs, the fiscal stimulus could also be assisting in generating demand through closing the infrastructure gaps by building large scale sustainable and resilient infrastructure. Another priority should be to close gaps in digital connectivity and broadband networks to ensure that all sections of society have access to online learning tools.

Few countries have been heavily dependent on global supply chains of key products. As the Western and Japanese multinational enterprises (MNEs) reconfigure their value chains as a part of de-risking and diversification strategies, South Asian countries could offer themselves as potential venues for offshore locations.

The essence at the core of the SDGs must be embraced along with tending to issues arising out of the grim social and economic aftermath of the pandemic so as to drive policy changes. Embracing development goals helps the world prepare better for global crises as they have the potential to ensure access to universal health coverage and better primary services which would be more inclusive.

Building resilience across various economic sectors and implementing solutions that mitigate various trade-offs existing within the framework is of utmost importance. To prevent a debt crisis, poor countries must be allowed to suspend debt payments and reassess debt sustainability beyond the crisis.

Governments and monetary authorities must continue to stabilize financial markets by continuing to induce much-needed liquidity. Governments must also partner with private financial institutions to roll over debt to SMEs and individuals.

The sustainable investment must be promoted, for example, by requesting mandatory disclosures, minimum standards for investment products and requirements for advisors to ask about sustainability preferences for investment.

The rise of automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI) threatens jobs and increases wage inequality. Therefore, it is necessary to put people and decent jobs first. The public sector should not only aim to accelerate technological progress, but also address exclusion and risks of discrimination, and ensure that the benefits reach the society at large.

Although the COVID-19 crisis brings extraordinary challenges to the achievement of the SDGs, it also brings extraordinary opportunities for solidarity. Multilateral actors and countries should come together to rebuild a better world and ensure healthy economic, social and financial well-being for all.

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# **COVID-19 and Inequality: The Impending Circular Trap in South Asia**

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While, the impact of COVID-19 is being felt across the world, its fallout on South Asia are important to analyse, because of the numbers. According to an analysis, "the job loss and loss of livelihood opportunities due to the pandemic is likely to push 132 million people into extreme poverty and accentuate inequalities."<sup>2</sup> It is not only the number of people who would be affected, but also the class/sector they belong to, and their inability to cope up with the COVID-19 challenge, and bounce back.

In South Asia, the above analysis is also important, as it would impact on the achievements during the last decade. According to a World Bank report on Sri Lanka, "the crisis threatens to reverse significant welfare gains from recent years, though a gradual recovery could return the country to a path of poverty reduction. Prior to the pandemic, growth was inclusive and poverty reduction strong; the poverty rate at \$3.20 per day (in 2011 purchasing power parity terms) declined from 16.2 percent in 2012/13 to 11 percent in 2016, according to the latest available survey data."<sup>3</sup>

This paper has the following hypotheses:-

First, though inequality existed in South Asia, and in rest of the world even before, the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened it during 2020-21.

Second, the post-pandemic recovery is likely to deepen the inequality in South Asia leaving long term scars.

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1 Professor & Dean, School of Conflict and Security Studies, National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bangalore

2 Beckie Malay and Pradeep Baisakh, "Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Inequalities in Asia," <https://gcap.global/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Inequalities-in-Asia-GCAP-11-Nov.pdf>. The report says, "South Asia has approximately one fourth of the World's population but one third of World's poor. The job loss and loss of livelihood opportunities due to the pandemic is likely to push 132 million people into extreme poverty and accentuate inequalities<sup>12</sup>. It is going to reverse the gains made for last several years in the regions on poverty reduction. Gaps in the public health infrastructure posed serious challenges to the governments to attend the pandemic in terms of testing and treatment."

3 World Bank. *The COVID-19 Impact on Livelihoods and Poverty in Sri Lanka: Background Note to Sri Lanka Poverty Assessment*. 2021. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/35496/Background-Note-to-Sri-Lanka.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=>

Third, the post-pandemic economic restoration in South Asia, would see a K-shaped recovery, with a few sections bouncing back, while the others facing a further decline.

Fourth, the pandemic fallout is likely to reverse or negatively impact some of the gains that the region has achieved in terms of achieving the SDG.

### **Inequality on the Eve of COVID-19**

According to South Asia inequality report, published in 2019, months before the onslaught of COVID-19 pandemic, reported the following:

"South Asian countries have failed to make use of the economic growth in the region to improve the lives of the poor and reduce widely prevalent inequality. The Gini coefficient has increased between 2010 and 2017 in all eight South Asian countries which implies that the region as a whole is moving towards greater inequality. The Gini coefficient in Afghanistan has increased from 27.82 to 31 whereas it increased from 29.8 to 33.5 and from 36.4 to 39.8 in Pakistan and Sri Lanka respectively. Though there has not been drastic increase in the Gini coefficient in other countries, there are no signs of its decline either. A Gini coefficient approaching 40.0 indicates that inequality is alarming in that society with a handful of people controlling the economy and a large majority of the population left behind and deprived of the basic services to make a meaningful livelihood. Going by the trends, it is indispensable that the South Asian countries are likely to cross this mark soon."<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, before the onslaught of the pandemic, the situation in South Asia was not rosy, in terms of equality. There were numerous studies on the extent of inequality before 2020.<sup>5</sup> These studies looked at inequality from a larger perspective, covering income, GDP, wealth, rural-urban, gender, class, health, education, etc. These studies also prove the existence of inequality in South Asia, not only between the countries, but also within countries. There are adequate data to prove the existence of inequality within countries in terms regional/provincial differences, and even within the provinces over class, gender and rural-urban divides. There are also studies underlining inequality, in terms of access to resources – education, health and related areas, provided by the State.

However, there have been multiple efforts during the last two decades that was stabilising the situation and improving the economic conditions of individuals. The question is not about, whether there was inequality before the pandemic or not; rather it is about, what the pandemic would do to inequality, and the progress that were made during the last two decades.

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4 "Growing Inequality in South Asia," *South Asia Inequality Report 2019*, South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) Secretariat, 2019.

5 For example, see the following: Martín Rama, Tara Béteille, Yue Li, Pradeep K. Mitra, and John Lincoln Newman, *Addressing Inequality in South Asia*, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, 2015.

## **COVID-19 and Inequality**

The impact of COVID-19 on inequality in South Asia, will have to be analysed in two sections:- First, the immediate impact, in terms of the ability of people to deal and cope with the pandemic in the first and the second waves so far. There are adequate reports across South Asia, showcasing, how different sections of the people, belonging to different regions and classes had access to immediate relief. This would cover both sectors - health and economy. As explained below, one could see a huge difference in how the pandemic has affected different sections in South Asia differently. Though, the pandemic has had a devastating impact across the sections so far, some have been affected more, than the rest.

Second, the long term impact of the pandemic, in terms of the ability of the people to address the recovery – economic and social. As the pandemic ravaged for the second year in a row, and no light at the end of the tunnel, it is also important, how the post-pandemic recovery is likely to be. Given the current differences in meeting the immediate challenge of facing the pandemic, one could argue that the post-pandemic recovery would increase the inequality.

The above two sections need to be analysed in detail.

### **Pandemic and the Inequality in Access to Healthcare**

A primary issue of inequality during the pandemic is access to healthcare. According to India Today report, "While ultra-rich Indians have successfully managed to distance themselves from the growing health crisis, a majority of the population - even middle and upper-middle-income families have been forced to deal with the Covid-19 crisis with limited resources."<sup>6</sup>

Pandemic has hit the healthcare sector the worse. Given the poor expenditure on health sector in South Asia, governance issues relating to its infrastructure, and the larger political attention to the government health care system, the sector was already under stress. The pandemic not only broke it, but also highlights the essential need to strengthen the health infrastructure in South Asia at an emergency level.

The focus of this paper is not about the pandemic and the health infrastructure, but how the fragile infrastructure made access to health a problem, especially for those who cannot afford. From medicine to beds to basic access to oxygen, the rich could use their money power and influence to access all the above, the poor could not. While the rich also faced casualties due to the pandemic, the problem is not due to access. Many belonging to the middle and lower classes, and in rural areas, could not even reach the hospitals or health centres. Numerous stories across South Asia, on how people died outside the hospitals due to non-availability of beds would tell the story of access to healthcare by non-rich sections.

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6 Koustav Das, "How Covid-19 crisis has exposed India's growing wealth gap," India Today, 29 April 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/business/story/explained-how-covid-19-crisis-has-exposed-india-s-growing-wealth-gap-1795932-2021-04-28>. According to the report, "Even those who have the financial capacity to afford critical drugs, oxygen and hospital beds have struggled during the Covid-19 crisis in India."

## The Worse hit: Informal Sector

Across South Asia, the pandemic has hit the informal sector the worst. The informal sector includes all areas – agriculture, manufacturing and services, and affected all three sectors. While the sufferings of the migration workers are captured well, thanks to the numerous photos and documentaries, the informal sector is not about the construction industry and migration workers alone. It covers a larger gamut.

According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, during 2020, the pandemic resulted in thousands of factory workers and private employees being laid off, with the lockdown hitting the daily wage earners the most.<sup>7</sup> In Sri Lanka, according to a World Bank report, “while poverty levels are relatively low, vulnerability is high, because the informal nature and the low productivity of many jobs lead to low earnings...Moreover, high levels of informality, at about 70 percent, and widespread precarious employment arrangements suggest a high risk of job displacement or earnings losses in the event of adverse shocks.”<sup>8</sup>

The nature of informal sector clearly means, the middle and lower middle classes would be affected more. And it would cover the rural-urban divide. In South Asia, the primary focus of the informal sector from the pandemic has been on the construction industry and the migrant labour. While the construction industry in the urban, and semi-urban areas are an important segment, they are only a part of it. Even in organised sectors, there is a small number of the labour force, that would come under the informal sector. According to a World Bank analysis, “decades of sustained high growth, South Asia’s informal sector shows little sign of abating - even increasing in some cases. More than 80 percent of all workers engage in informal activities, and more than 90 percent of the region’s businesses are informal.”<sup>9</sup> A report on Bangladesh garment industry titled “The Weakest Link in the Global Supply Chain: How the Pandemic is affecting Bangladesh’s Garment Workers” highlighted on the impact of the pandemic on sectors, which are considered as stable and better positioned. Garment industry in Bangladesh had to be closed, and it impacted the poor labourers more.

Without a contract or any legal protection, the informal sector has suffered the worst during the pandemic. Since those who are engaged in the informal sector belong to the lower classes, these two are likely to face the brunt of the pandemic – both during, and in the post-pandemic recovery.

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7 Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, State of Human Rights in 2020, May 2021, <http://hrccp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/State-of-Human-Rights-in-2020-20210503-KEY-ISSUES.pdf>.

8 World Bank. *The COVID-19 Impact on Livelihoods and Poverty in Sri Lanka* : Background Note to Sri Lanka Poverty Assessment. 2021. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/35496/Background-Note-to-Sri-Lanka.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

9 “COVID-19 has worsened the woes of South Asia’s informal sector,” 7 December 2020, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/covid-19-has-worsened-woes-south-asias-informal-sector>.

## **Wealth Inequality: The poor becomes poorer, While...**

According to an Oxfam report, titled the “Inequality Virus,” “since the virus hit, the rich have got richer and the poor poorer.” According to this report, “In the first months of the pandemic, a stock market collapse saw billionaires, who are some of the biggest stockholders, experience dramatic reductions in their wealth. Yet this setback was short-lived. Within nine months, the top 1,000 billionaires, mainly White men, had recovered all the wealth they had lost. With unprecedented support from governments, the stock market has been booming, driving up billionaire wealth, even while the real economy faces the deepest recession in a century.”<sup>10</sup>

Across South Asia, though the pandemic hit all sections across, the rich are likely to bounce back better, and get richer, as reported above. On the other hand, the poor are likely to take a longer time to bounce. According to the above Oxfam report, “Mukesh Ambani is India’s richest man; his company is called Reliance Industries, and it specializes in petrol, retail and telecommunications. Between March and October 2020, his wealth more than doubled, reaching \$78.3bn, and he jumped from being the 21st richest person on Earth to the sixth richest. During that period, the average increase in Ambani’s wealth in just over four days represented more than the combined annual wages of all of Reliance Industries’ 195,000 employees.”

## **Pandemic and Gender: Women are at a Larger Loss**

Despite an early warning on how the pandemic could impact the gender, the State and the civil society did not prepare adequately to address the larger question. One of the UN reports authored by UN Women, did highlight the gender dimensions of the pandemic and its implications in the socio-economic fields, and advised to get prepared in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>11</sup> The report also underlined an important aspect of gender and healthcare. It referred to reality in the health care sectors, where the women are at the front line forming the first responders.

However, South Asia could not get ready and address the pandemic impact on women. According to an analysis, because of the lockdowns in Pakistan, the subsequent restrictions on movement, “made it difficult to access health care facilities, especially for women in remote areas. Anecdotal evidence indicates that women bear additional domestic burdens of caregiving and carrying out disease prevention measures. This increases their exposure to COVID-19. In many cases, women are expected to continue working even when they fall sick.”<sup>12</sup>

Women are not only in the health sector but also involved in the domestic household activities. Across South Asia, women form an important part of the informal sector, which is one of the worst hit sectors,

10 “The Inequality Report,” Oxfam Briefing Paper 21, January 2021. <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621149/bp-the-inequality-virus-250121-en.pdf>

11 “The First 100 Days of the COVID-19 Outbreak in Asia and the Pacific: A Gender Lens

12 Kosar Bano and Kanwal Waqar, “COVID-19 and gender inequality in Pakistan,” 1 October 2020, <https://www.icimod.org/article/covid-19-and-gender-inequality-in-pakistan/>

as explained above. According to an analysis, "Women are essential to the subcontracting system, especially for small enterprises operating out of home-based or informal workshops. Of the 12 million home-based workers in Pakistan, 80% are estimated to be women. Many women employed by small or medium businesses and/or working as domestic workers have faced pay cuts or layoffs due to a slowdown in economic activity and inability of employers to continue paying wages in the face of COVID-19. Pakistan's women-owned microenterprises, often smaller than men-owned, have been 8% more likely to lose their entire revenue due to the on-going pandemic."<sup>13</sup> In Bangladesh, most of those who were employed in the garment industry were women.

Women also were the worst affected because of the pandemic, because of the long lockdown and closures of schools. For example, in Pakistan, "increased financial vulnerability has led parents to pull their daughters out of schools and arrange early marriages for them."<sup>14</sup> In Bangladesh, quoting data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, a report mentioned incidence of child marriage has increased by 13% during the COVID pandemic, making this the highest rate of child marriage in the country in the past 25 years.<sup>15</sup>

A worse fallout also was on domestic violence. During the pandemic, there has been an increase in domestic violence. For example, in Pakistan, during 2020, there was a 25 percent increase in domestic violence in Punjab province alone.<sup>16</sup>

## Pandemic and Education

Education has been one of the worst hit sector due to the pandemic. While numerous sectors had to be closed, certain sectors were allowed to open, and other sectors were given an option to operate from home. Education sector was one of those, where the governments – both at the federal and provincial levels, where it was permitted to have online classes. Across the sectors – primary, medium and higher education, during 2020 and 2021, educational institutions were closed first, but were opened subsequently, where the classes were allowed to be held online.

Resumption of classes through online mode, has increased the inequality. While the private institutions were better positioned to conduct online classes across South Asia, state run educational institutions are badly equipped – both in terms of infrastructure and in terms of capacity of the teachers. As a result, private educational institutions have managed to address the challenge of online classes. Unfortunately, the majority of students are with the state run institutions, than in private schools/colleges.

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13 Hina Shaikh, "Has COVID-19 exacerbated gender inequalities in Pakistan?," 10 March 2021,  
<https://www.theigc.org/blog/has-covid-19-exacerbated-gender-inequalities-in-pakistan/>

14 Kosar Bano and Kanwal Waqar, "COVID-19 and gender inequality in Pakistan," 1 October 2020,  
<https://www.icimod.org/article/covid-19-and-gender-inequality-in-pakistan/>

15 Addressing gender inequality during Covid-19 pandemic," *Daily Star*, 6 April 2021,  
<https://www.thedailystar.net/law-our-rights/news/addressing-gender-inequality-during-covid-19-pandemic-2072965>

16 Hina Shaikh, "Has COVID-19 exacerbated gender inequalities in Pakistan?," 10 March 2021,  
<https://www.theigc.org/blog/has-covid-19-exacerbated-gender-inequalities-in-pakistan/>

Second, online classes are also likely to increase rural-urban divide in education. While the urban areas are better positioned, because of the connectivity, the rural areas are left behind. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, "the pandemic was a huge blow to educational institutions, with students compelled to attend online classes to the detriment of thousands in Balochistan, the tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Gilgit-Baltistan, who had little or no access to reliable internet connections."<sup>17</sup>

One could observe a similar problem in Bangladesh with most students staying home in different parts of the country during the lockdown. Internet facilities are still scarce in rural areas, as students use mobile internet that disrupts Internet communication due to poor internet signals. Plus, the internet is still very expensive. Third, there are some technical problems related to computer and smartphone management, such as low literacy.<sup>18</sup> Dhaka Tribune, quoting a report (The Education Watch Report 2020-21) published by Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), said: "58% of students surveyed were not technologically equipped with electronic devices or smart phones to access distance learning services."<sup>19</sup>

The question in the rural areas is not only the infrastructure, but also the availability of internet, and its quality. While the urban areas have better internet connectivity, good speed and a larger bandwidth, all of them are lacking in rural areas. In Nepal, for example, "running online classes does not seem to be feasible for most rural schools in Nepal. It is estimated that only 56% people in Nepal have access to internet."<sup>20</sup> A report in the India Today, also refers to the same challenge in India.<sup>21</sup> Another report published by an Indian Think Tank refers to the following three challenges: "Physical infrastructure (unreliable electricity supply, study space, and overall home environment); Electronic devices (access to smartphones, computers, TV, among others); and the Internet (3G, 4G, or Broadband)."<sup>22</sup>

Third, the class divide amongst the parents. While the upper and upper-middle class can afford to provide the necessary instruments – laptops or smart phones for their children to access online classes, it has not been an easy task for the middle and lower classes. Consider a household with more than two

17 Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, State of Human Rights in 2020, May 2021, <http://hrdp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/State-of-Human-Rights-in-2020-20210503-KEY-ISSUES.pdf>.

18 Mohammad Moniruzzaman Khan et al., "Online Education System in Bangladesh during COVID-19 Pandemic," Scientific Research, Vol.12, No.2, February 2021, <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation.aspx?paperid=107521>.

19 Mamun Abdullah and Fahim Reza Shovon, "In Covid-19, education is prey to collateral damage," *Dhaka Tribune*, 12 April 2021. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/education/2021/04/12/in-covid-19-education-is-prey-to-collateral-damage>

20 Saraswati Dawadi, Ram Ashish Giri, and Padam Simkhada, "Impact of COVID-19 on the Education Sector in Nepal: Challenges and Coping Strategies," <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED609894.pdf>.

21 "Challenges in Indian education system due to Covid-19 pandemic," India Today, 10 May 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/featurephilia/story/challenges-in-indian-education-system-due-to-covid-19-pandemic-1800822-2021-05-10>.

22 Mehr Kalra and Shivakumar Jolad, "Regression in Learning: The High Cost of COVID-19 for India's Children," 2 August 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/regression-in-learning/>

children, attending online classes. It would mean more than two instruments, internet connectivity and parental attention.

Fourth, the case of dropouts, due to the pandemic. Outside the reasons relating to rural-urban divide, and the state and private institutions, pandemic is also likely to impact over the economic ability of the parents to afford education for their children. A report from Nepal refers to this challenge, as "many parents have lost their jobs due to the pandemic and their economic crisis has worsened than ever before. Therefore, it is likely that some parents may not be able to afford their children to attend school (or university) and children may need to work to provide economic support to their family. It is estimated the situation will be worse in rural areas."<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

To get back to the hypothesis, though inequality existed in South Asia, and in rest of the world even before, the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened it during 2020-21.

Second, the post-pandemic recovery is likely to deepen the inequality in South Asia leaving long term scars. The pandemic is likely to impact the middle and lower classes more, than the upper class. Also, the informal sector is likely to be the worst hit; since most of the above two classes are engaged more in the informal sector, they are likely to suffer more.

Third, the post-pandemic economic restoration in South Asia. It would see a K-shaped recovery, with the upper class and the formal sector managing the pandemic and bouncing back, the others would take a longer time to stabilise. They would face a further decline, even after the pandemic, and would take a longer time to stabilize.

Fourth, the pandemic fallout is likely to reverse or negatively impact some of the gains that the region has achieved in terms of achieving the SDG. From education to gender, the region has invested in multiple sectors that deal with the SDG. The pandemic is likely to impact all those sectors, and dent the positive achievements. It would take a longer time for the states to address those sectors; the immediate priority would be to face the COVID-19 – the third and the fourth waves. SDG goals will have to wait for the time being.

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<sup>23</sup> Saraswati Dawadi, Ram Ashish Giri, and Padam Simkhada, "Impact of COVID-19 on the Education Sector in Nepal: Challenges and Coping Strategies," <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED609894.pdf>.

# **The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Sustainable Development Goal 11–Sustainable Cities and Communities**

Apekshya Shah<sup>1</sup>

## **Background**

Urbanization around the globe has led to record growth of cities. Major metropolises, such as New York, Guangzhou, Mumbai to name a few, are as eminent as the state they are part of. Heart of every country's economy, urban spaces are home to 55% of the world population amounting to 4.2 billion people and are responsible for 70% of global economic output. It is estimated that by 2050, two out of three people in the world will be living in cities. However, with a concentration of people and activities, governments are faced with increasing challenges to manage metropolitan areas, and the need for sustainable growth of cities has been largely acknowledged. Most of the people living in cities have not been able to benefit from urbanization due to lack of planning, while rampant consumption and industrialization have had a damaging effect on the environment. The situation is worse among developing countries, where most people's access to and standard of basic amenities are becoming questionable with the growing threat of 'urban poverty trap'. Even during the pandemic, the cities have been hit the hardest with 90% of corona cases being reported in metropolitan areas putting their resilience to test.

Thus, managing urbanization has become a growing concern to all countries around the globe and numerous global initiatives have been introduced in recent times. In this background, the Sustainable Development Goal 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities, is a landmark global initiative endorsing management of urbanization to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. To this end, this paper aims to study the challenges and opportunities faced by urban areas, particularly in the South Asia Region (SAR), to achieve SDG goal 11 and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **Century of Cities**

Cities have been the most consequential form of social organization for our civilization and have been largely responsible for the advancement of humankind as 'engines' of national economies, innovation,

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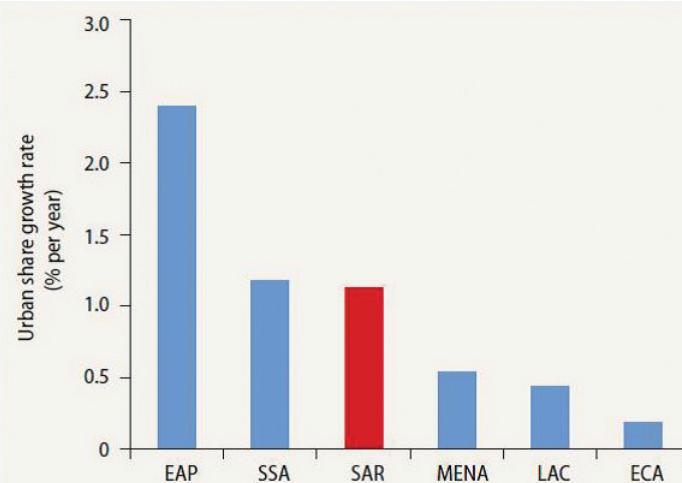
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and employment. Some ancient cities like Istanbul have outlasted great regimes and empires (Khanna, 2016). Still, it was the industrial revolution in Europe that truly led to urbanization drawing people from the rural areas to 'cities'. Cities are an outcome of urbanization as it fuels economic growth and job creation by enabling skilled labor force and concentration of businesses to interact closely, in turn, increasing productivity, also known as economic agglomeration (Henderson, 2005). People moving from rural areas, or international migrants, to urban areas, facilitate the process. Thus, over the years, owing to industrialization and economic development, an unprecedented amount of people have shifted to cities in hope of jobs and a better supply of basic services, like health and education, while natural population growth has also contributed to the figure. Urbanization has increased exponentially in the 20th century onwards with Asia and Africa taking the lead role in recent years. It is predicted that from the period of 2018-2050, 96% of urban growth will occur in Asia and Africa, with three countries alone—China, India, and Nigeria—accounting for 35% of urban population growth (UN Habitat, 2020). The ever increasing cities of Asia have been largely facilitated by the globalization-driven liberalization policy allowing cities to thrive through their integration into the world market. While mainly, China and India, are driving the process, countries of South East Asia have also gone through major transformations improving productivity and growth of the entire region.

Developing countries and emerging economies are urbanizing at a faster pace because economic development and urbanization go hand in hand. Although Asia is urbanizing the fastest in the world, South Asia Region (SAR), as per the estimates, is the least urbanized region in the world, even behind Sub-Saharan Africa (Ellis and Roberts, 2016). Nepal and Sri Lanka are among the ten least urbanized countries with an urbanization rate below 10% (United Nations, 2019). Still, the region is experiencing record growth in urban population, with more than 300 million joining the urban population between 2011 and 2030 (see Figure 2). In the case of Nepal, only 17.1% of the population resided in urban areas in 2013 but by 2014/ 2015, 40% of Nepal's population resided in municipalities due to the increase in designated urban areas from 58 to 217 (MoUD, 2016). With one of the highest annual urbanization rates of 1.9%, the country is going through a rapid transformation (Bakrania, 2015).

The classification of a city varies from country to country and the common method used is the number and density of inhabitants in a defined administrative boundary. For instance, in India, a population

Figure 1. Annual urban growth rate of South Asia



**Note:** EAP = East Asia and Pacific; ECA = Europe and Central Asia; LAC = Latin America and the Caribbean; MENA = Middle East and North Africa; SAR = South Asia; SSA = Sub-Saharan Africa.

**Source:** Ellis and Roberts 2016, the World Bank

of at least 5,000, a minimum density of 400 residents per square kilometer, and at least 75% of male workers need to be employed outside agriculture for the place to be called a city (MoUD, 2016b), while Nepal uses a single basic criterion of more than 9,000 people (Ellis & Roberts, 2016). Some countries designate metropolitan territories through an administrative decision, like in Sri Lanka, where an area administered by municipal and urban councils is considered a city. Countries also classify areas based on economic parameters or other urban characteristics (United Nations 2019).

The growth of cities in terms of population and territory has created numerous megacities holding more than ten million inhabitants, while the emergence of new metropolises, planned and unplanned, have also been a common phenomenon. From New York and Tokyo in 1950, the number of megacities has risen to 28 at present. It is estimated that by 2030, there will be more than 40 megacities, which will quarter 730 million people, 14% of the urban population (Khanna, 2016). Megacities are the center of economic activity and some would argue that they are even more important in many ways than countries. Growth and connectivity between cities have also led to the creation of 'city clusters' that are the most vibrant regions in the world and focal points of global economic activity and as shown in (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Urban population growth forecast



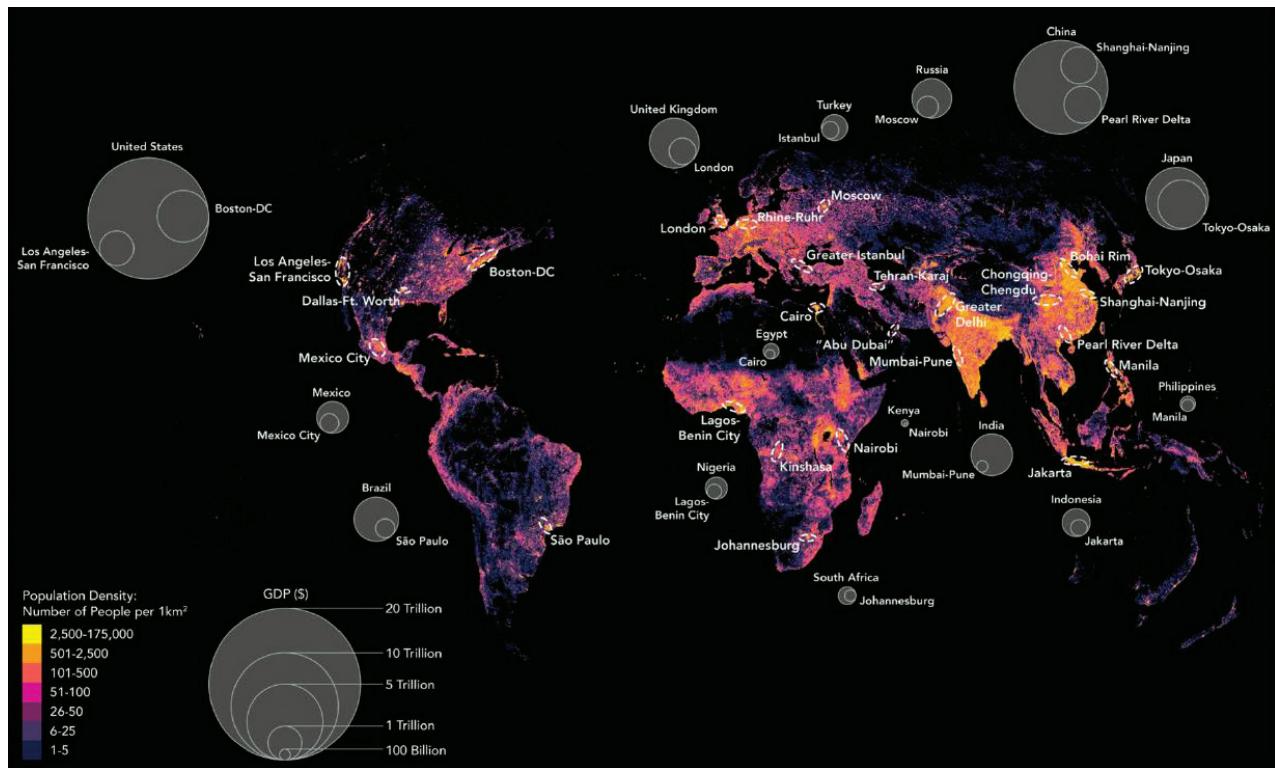
Billion people

8 \_

6 \_

Source: Asian Development Outlook 2019, ADB

Figure 3. MEGACITIES AS THE NEW ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY



*Note: Cities, home to half the world population, dominate economic landscape of all countries. The dotted circle on the map are the mega-city cluster areas, while the large circles signify the share of the national economy the cities represents. Source: (Khanna, 2016)*

## Cities of despair

While the positive impact of urban agglomeration for economic growth, poverty reduction, and human development has certainly been a boon, particularly for the emerging economies and developing world where millions have been lifted out of poverty, they have been undermined by spontaneous urbanization. Lack of synchronized planning and unprecedented demographic growth has made urban communities more vulnerable, mostly in the developing world where rapid development took place in a relatively short period due to technological innovations (Moretti, 2014). Lack of affordable housing, substantial air and water pollution, deficits in key urban infrastructure like transport, water supply, waste management, rising income inequality, and increasing natural disasters amidst climate change, make cities susceptible to different types of risks. The challenges facing the cities are primarily social, economic, and environmental.

## Housing, access to essential services and transport

Rapid demographic growth in urban areas has led to an increase in inadequate housing or informal settlements also known as slums, especially in cities of developing countries (Davis, 2006: 31). Poor physical condition, overcrowded, poorly ventilated, limited access to municipal services and

being located far from employment nodes and basic facilities are the basic characteristics for these settlements. Poverty among city dwellers is particularly high in SAR, while demographic pressure and unplanned growth in cities have given rise to informal settlements and hostile-to-life structures—26% of South Asia's urban population, an estimated 130 million people live in slums (Ellis and Roberts, 2016). India and Pakistan account for more than half the slum population of the region in terms of an absolute number of people living in informal settlements but Afghanistan with (88%), Bangladesh (61%) and Nepal (58%) respectively have the highest proportion of slum dwellers in SAR.

Spread over 216.51 hectares, Dharavi in Mumbai is the largest slum in Asia, housing 42% of the city's population (Kshetrimayum, et al., 2020), while in Nepal around 10% of the urban population live in informal settlements (MoUD, 2016). As per the World Bank estimations, between 2010 and 2050, the region will require an additional 203 million housing to accommodate projected population growth. Besides, owing to poor governance and corruption, building codes are easily flouted in South Asian capitals resulting in poorly built infrastructures. The 2013 garment factory collapse in Dhaka, the world's densest city, killed more than 1,100 workers and injuring 2,500, (Safi & Rushe, 2018) and the impact of the Gorkha Earthquake 2015 in Kathmandu was a stark reminder of the hazards of poorly built infrastructure in urban areas. Despite Kathmandu being the most high-risk seismic zone in terms of a city, uncontrolled urban development and weak construction practices largely prevail in the capital with two-thirds of the buildings in the city not fit to withstand a 8 magnitude earthquake (World Bank, 2012).

Access to essential services like water, sanitation, among others also remains a concern in growing metropolises. As per the Urban Expansion Program, 60% of new urban settlements in developing countries are not connected to a central water system. It is estimated that more than 700 million people residing in urban areas worldwide lack access to adequate sanitation, and 150 million do not have clean drinking water (WBGU, 2016). In addition, almost half of the cities inhabiting more than 100,000 people worldwide are situated in water-scarce basins, which is further exasperated by climate change. The cases of severe water shortage in Chennai in 2019, when the city's reservoirs ran dry are an indication of the future scenario (United Nations, 2019).

Transportation also plays a significant role in cities of developing nations and beyond. Lack of good public transport can have a dire impact on urban poor to reach employment or access services while purchasing personal vehicle gets encouraged among the middle class burdening the air quality. The situation is particularly bleak in Kathmandu that houses 2.5 million people—an increment of 60% over the previous decade, increasing the fastest in the country (MoUD, 2016). The Capital merely has 5,300 public transport plying the roads, which constitute a meager 3% of the total vehicles in the city (World Bank, 2013). In the meantime, the number of private vehicles has increased by 399% from 1995-2008, despite a tax of nearly 250% on automobiles.

### **Global warming and disaster risks**

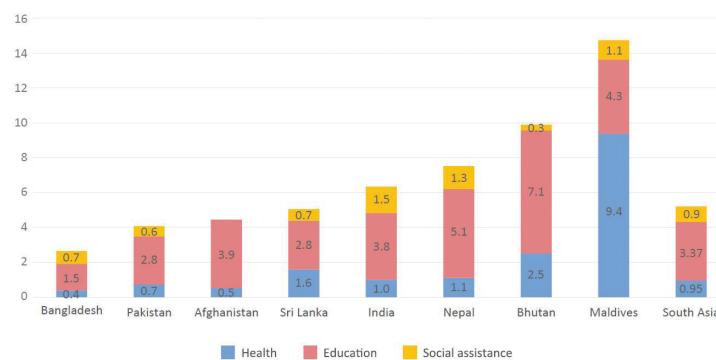
Given the sheer size of the population and activity, urban areas contribute to biodiversity loss, high resource and energy consumption patterns, and high levels of pollution and carbon emissions. It is estimated that over two-thirds of the world's energy consumption and 70% of human-induced

greenhouse gas emissions are produced in cities (UN-Habitat 2020). Out of the top 30 cities in the world with the poorest air quality, 17 are in SAR, with the emissions in the region rising by 3.3% annually since 1990 (World Bank, 2012). Degrading air quality has been a major health risk globally liable for 7 million premature death. In the case of South Asia, air pollution contributes to between 13% and 21.7% of all deaths in SAR and approximately 58 million disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) through respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses (Krishan, et. al., 2017)

Even in terms of municipal waste, the situation looks bleak with cities worldwide producing more than 1.3 billion tons annually, which could double by 2025 (Hoornweg et al., 2013). Due to lack of organized waste management, it has been estimated that about 70% of municipal waste end up on landfill sites globally which often contaminate surface water, groundwater, or soils and emit greenhouse gases. (WBGU, 2016)—70%-80% of the waste produced in the SAR ends up in the ocean most of which consists of plastic (Schafer, 2019). Poor waste management contributes to environmental degradation impacting people and biodiversity while also contributing to various forms of risks.

Underlying natural risks compounded by susceptible structures and poor governance make people living in cities more vulnerable to natural disasters. Most South Asian countries are prone to natural disasters and from 1971 to 2009, the region experienced 1,017 disasters that affected 2 billion people, (World Bank, 2012). The number of people exposed to natural hazards is estimated to be increasing by 3.5% annually in SAR, the fastest growth rate in the world (ADB, 2020). Moreover, due to global warming, climate-related disasters are on the rise which makes the situation all the more difficult. Flooding is most common among South Asian countries impacting the largest number of people. Aside from floods, droughts are projected to be more intense and prolonged in India and Bangladesh with the increase in global warming, while landslides and glacial lake outbursts floods are expected to be more frequent in the mountainous regions of Bhutan and Nepal (World Bank 2012 and ADB 2020).

Figure 4. Social expenditure (health, education and social assistance) by country, as a percentage of GDP



Source: Bloch (2020), UNICEF

### Growing inequalities

While urbanization has led to poverty reduction, ill-balanced growth, failure in providing equal opportunities and livable spaces to people living in cities is glaring. Millions living in slums across capitals are a small reflection of the haves and have-nots in city areas, signifying the ever-increasing gap between the rich and poor. The growing inequality and exclusion in urban societies in relation to income and assets compound socio-economic disparities

affecting the disadvantaged groups' employment, housing, access to good-quality public services and facilities, along with exposure to health-impairing environmental impacts (WBGU, 2016 ADB, 2019). As per the World City Report (UN-Habitat 2020), "inequality strongly affects vulnerable groups like women

and girls, older persons, indigenous people, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees and people living in poverty, all of whom are excluded from full participation in economic, political and social life." Soaring unemployment, inflation, insecurity with increasing inequality and exclusion make cities prone to political instability as well. The Arab Uprising in 2011 across capitals of the Middle East where people protested against poverty, unemployment, and government corruption or the occupy Wall Street protests in New York's Zuccotti Park the same year against record levels of wealth inequality in America are prime examples of growing discontent among people around the urban centers.

Urban poverty is particularly high in South Asian cities while the absence of key urban infrastructure, especially in regards to transport, water supply, and sanitation, makes the situation worse for the poor. The region houses 80% of Asia's urban poor with numbers rising remarkably between the periods of 1990-2008 (Mathur, 2013). Given that the growth story of SAR does not reflect in the development of livable cities, spectators argue that South Asian countries could perhaps be entering into 'urbanization of poverty trap'. Moreover, with a large number of young people entering the workforce, rising unemployment is also a growing concern. Although economic growth in South Asia has improved labor productivity, it has failed to generate jobs. Between 2005 and 2015, the number of South Asians aged 15 and above grew by 1.8 million per month but estimates confirm that employment rates mostly declined during the last decade creating "jobless growth" (Mathur, 2013; World Bank, 2017). To make matters worse, the countries are not doing much to improve the situation and are spending the least on health, education, and social assistance (as a percent of gross domestic product—GDP) than any other regions, (see figure 4), directly impacting the standard of living in urban areas. Poor governance and a high level of corruption further fuel resentment among urban dwellers.

### **Impact of Covid-19 in South Asian Cities**

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 was the worst-case scenario for urban areas and a litmus test of all cities in case of emergency. As the epicenter of all outbreaks and transmissions with over 90% of all confirmed cases coming from urban centers, the pandemic engulfed all metropolises around the world. Given the nature and sheer magnitude of the outbreak, implementing safety measures, promoting hygiene and sanitation, maintaining food supplies, operation of public utilities, and adequate protective equipment for frontline workers, among other diverse range of challenges, became a task for all countries. However, some countries despite having urban population density were successful in managing the situation. Addressing overcrowding and maintaining standard levels of hygiene in houses and public spaces, including transport, is crucial in surviving the pandemic, which most emerging economies could not afford (UN-Habitat, 2020).

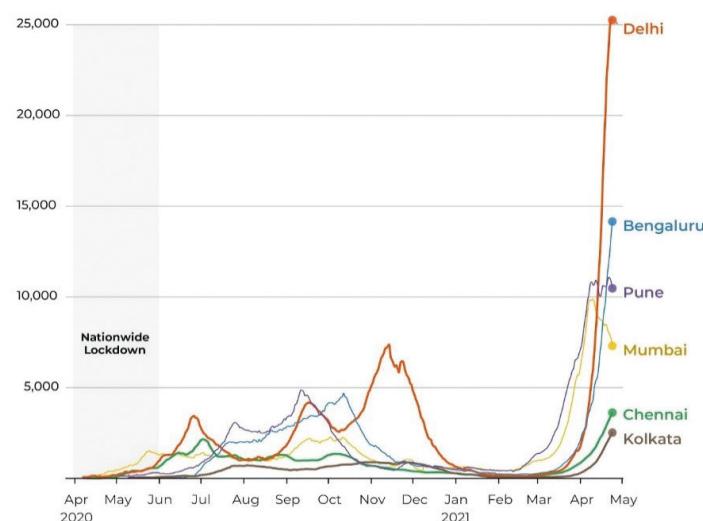
Developing countries, already burdened with challenges in the urban areas and housing the largest sections of urban poor, struggled the most. Self-isolation and physical distancing was impossible inside slums. Besides, inadequate water, poor sanitation, and hygiene in slum areas made the issue of transmission and control all the more difficult. The Dharavi slum in Mumbai that has a population density of 270,000 people per square kilometer and home to about one million inhabitants became a major epicenter of COVID-19 in India (Golechha, 2020). With strict lockdowns, providing food, access to affordable health services, and quarantine facilities were also impediments for the under-resourced

local governments. Lockdowns made people realize the importance of green, open spaces while the disregard for children and youth while planning urban areas was also highlighted (UN-Habitat 2020). Overcrowding and dearth of public transportation became a great health hazard for the city dwellers during the pandemic and will continue to remain so.

The ailing health sector of the developing countries has been hit the hardest with most hospitals struggling to manage the overwhelming flow of patients. The second wave of Covid-19 in 2021 is proving to be more hostile for SAR, with cases soaring among all capitals, with India being the worst hit. Indian cities reported a second wave in April 2021 reporting a record-breaking number of 400,000 cases and more than 4,000 deaths a day, the highest single-day figure globally so far. By mid-May, as per official records about 23 million infections had been confirmed and roughly 250,000 people had been declared dead since the pandemic began in 2020, but actual figures were most likely much higher according to experts (Yeung, 2021).

Hospitals running out of beds and basic amenities like oxygen left thousands desperate for medical services in Indian cities with dead bodies piling up for cremation (Moole, 2021). The heart-wrenching sights of people burning their dear ones in mass cremation in public parks of Indian cities (BBC, 2021) and the dumping of dead bodies into rivers traumatized the world (Das, 2021). Nepal is the second-worst hit country in SAR during this period, reporting as high as about 9,000 cases and death of more than 200 in worst days. The situation was similar in cities around Nepal, with hospitals running out of oxygen, ventilators, and beds to accommodate corona patients (Guardian, 2021). The government even took out a notice appealing to people to take personal measures as the health system was not able to cope with the situation (The Kathmandu Post, 2021).

Figure 5. Covid-19 cases in Indian Cities,  
April 1-24, 2022



Source: State Health Bulletin, Reuters, in Chughtai and Haddad, Aljazeera

The utter failure of the health sector during the pandemic has been appalling and exposes the shortcomings of government in prioritizing the health of their citizens. Although urban areas represent the best health infrastructure, they are not sufficient for the ever-increasing population, while good-health services are largely unaffordable for most people creating major health disparities within urban societies (Bloch, 2020). With meager spending of 1.2% of GDP in the health sector, 60% of Indians have to pay for health services, and even in normal conditions, one in every 20 families is pushed into poverty by medical expenses annually (Economist, 2021). The case of other South Asian countries is no better,

(see figure 4). In the case of Nepal, the country has 26,930 beds in 194 hospitals, public and private, 1595 ICU beds, and 840 ventilators for the population of more than 30 million, most of which is provided by the private sector and are concentrated in urban centers, chiefly Kathmandu (MoHP, 2020).

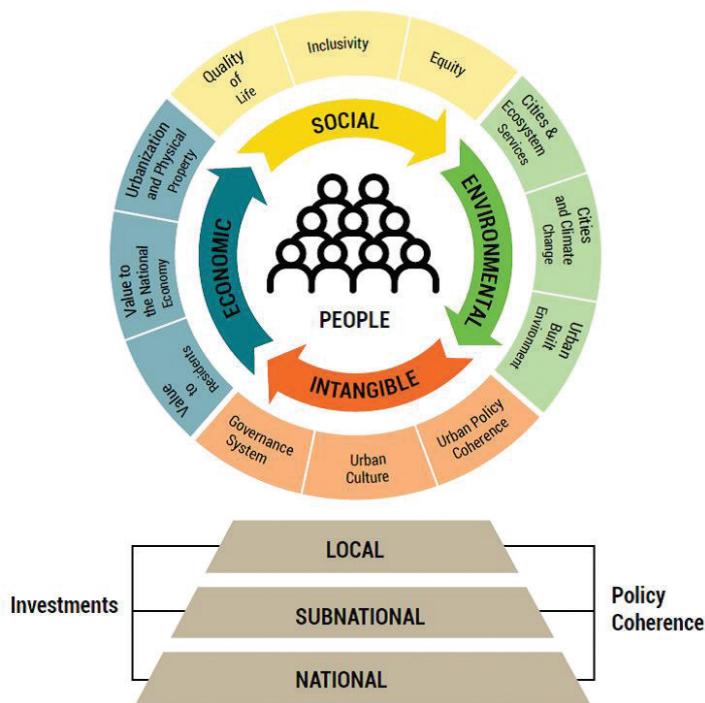
Further, the economic impact of the pandemic has left the region more vulnerable in days to come. Countries taking measures such as strict or partial lockdown of urban areas to mitigate the outbreak have had a devastating impact on the economy, primarily on lower-income groups (World Bank 2020). Millions of daily wage workers and most people employed in the informal sector were rendered jobless for months, stranded without savings, shelter, or food, many forced to leave for their villages. In India, after the government announced a sudden lockdown in May 2020, millions of domestic migrant workers left from cities in hopes to reach their homes. In the absence of public transport, desperate migrants took any mode possible, from bicycles to walking. The homeward exodus led to 971 non-COVID deaths due to exhaustion, hunger, accidents and some even committed suicide (Kumar& Choudhury, 2021). The long lines of Nepali migrant workers returning from India in bordering towns of Nepal created an emergency in the country, from managing transmission to addressing employment needs, local governments struggled to manage the returning workers (ILO, 2020).

The incident was a cold reminder of how urban agglomeration largely functions on the back of the lowest strata of society, while they are protected and promoted the least. The benefit of urbanization renders useless without addressing the needs of low-income groups. More than 80% of people in South Asia are employed in the informal sector, while 90% of businesses are informal (World Bank, 2020). In the case of Nepal, 90.5% of women in employment, 80% of the entire workforce, and 50% of enterprises are part of the informal sectors (UNICEF, 2020; World Bank 2020). The businesses and people belonging to these sectors are particularly vulnerable as they lack access to rights and government protection such as social security or formal finance. However, not taking measures to protect them can deteriorate the situation further—the video of a street vendor setting himself on fire in protest at state corruption and brutality in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid became a catalyst for the Tunisian Revolution and the wider Arab Spring (Lageman, 2020). Even during the corona outbreak in 2020, youth in Kathmandu took to the streets against the government's poor performance in handling the Covid-19 pandemic, while corruption scandals continued to rock the capital despite the country reeling under one of the most unprecedented crisis of the century (Sharma, 2020).

According to estimates, 122 million people lost jobs in India in 2020 with the unemployment rate increased to 27.11%, while almost 2 million jobs were disrupted in Nepal (World Bank, 2020). Moreover, the global GDP is predicted to shrink by 5.2% in 2020 with the global extreme poverty rate expected to rise for the first time in over 23 years (UN-Habitat, 2020). The picture is particularly austere for South Asia with more people being pushed into poverty than in any other region in 2020—between 50 and 60 million people were expected to become poor by the end of the year in SAR due to the economic crisis unleashed by the pandemic (World Bank, 2020). Thus, inequalities are to rise further in the region, and with governments struggling to finance urban development needs in days to come, the preexisting problems in urban societies could increase further.

## Discussion and Recommendations: Future of SDG 11

Figure 6. Conceptualizing the value of sustainable Urbanization



Source: State Health Bulletin, Reuters, in Chughtai and Haddad, Aljazeera

The problems plaguing cities as observed above mainly arises out of the mismanagement of urban growth which largely undermines the benefit of economic agglomeration. The increasing disparities between the people living in cities, environmental degradation, and exceeding patterns of consumption is a growing concern, and the solutions to those problems are spelled out in SDG 11, Sustainable cities and societies. By adopting the 2030 Agenda, countries largely acknowledge the need for sustainable urbanization and are part of other global frameworks promoting the same, such as the Sendai Framework on Disaster Reduction, the New Urban Agenda, and the Paris Agreement on climate change (UN-Habitat, 2020; WBGU, 2016). These are the main global documents that promote a shared vision for just, safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, resilient, and sustainable

cities and human settlements to foster prosperity and quality of life for all.

The goals set out in these documents represent the shift in global discourse with cities now recognized as central actors to securing a sustainable future, earlier viewed primarily through the lens of challenges to be addressed. Earlier, sustainable urban development was predominantly measured by economic growth, but the cost of intangible value such as effective institutions, good governance, cultural diversity, inclusiveness and equity was largely ignored which contributed greatly to the complexities of urbanization. However, SDG 11 and other global documents now promote people-centered development, as inclusive and equitable societies, harness the most benefit of urbanization and economic growth does not automatically address poverty and inequality in urban centers, (see Figure 6). Moreover, the New Urban Agenda also endorses the concept of 'Right to City', a growing urban movement around the world, to address poverty reduction, social exclusion, and environmental risk caused by rapid urbanization. Brazil is one of the first countries to operationalize the 'Right to City' with a City Statute (2001) that expands on chapter II of the Constitution and establishes the Ministry of Cities. With increasing significance, the network of cities and 'city diplomacy' has also been on the rise such as the C40 network, the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments and Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance, among others.

## **Recommendations:**

The impact of the covid-19 pandemic has been loud and clear, adversely affecting the achievements made by cities on SDG goal 11 so far. In this context, the SAR will need to reinforce its commitment to achieving sustainable urbanization.

- With the highest number of urban poor, the situation further exasperated by the pandemic, reducing inequality within countries and making access to housing, education, health services, and public transport regardless of income is of utmost importance. Planned urbanization is an efficient way to enhance social value and inclusion, particularly through redistributive policies targeting the lower-income groups. Vulnerable sections of society, such as people with disabilities and women, among others, require further attention.
- The governments need to increase social expenditure in urban areas, particular attention needs to be given to health infrastructure and affordability of health services. Also, with the issue of mental health being a major concern during the pandemic, more needs to be done to promote and remove the stigma associated with mental illnesses.
- Environment degradation and increasing risks from natural disasters have to be taken into account and commitment to Sendai Framework and the New Urban Agenda should be prioritized by endorsing national and municipal policies relating to urban planning. Degrading air quality in South Asian cities need urgent attention, while green infrastructure such as cycling lanes, rainwater harvesting, tree plantations to name a few should be promoted. Improving public transportation within cleaner models of vehicles can go a long way in keeping the air clean, the road less congested and people connected. People with a disability require special attention in case of SAR.
- It has been well established that countries and mainly the cities need to take these initiatives to implement and improve the situation locally. The SDG goal 11 although misses out in emphasizing the role of local governments as frontline services provider; local governments need to be strengthened with more authority and resources.
- With the Covid-19 most likely to adversely affect government spending, countries need to mobilize private funds for urban infrastructure. Given that the private sector largely drives urbanization in SAR, they should be made accountable for sustainable urban development through government regulations. Technological innovations should be encouraged for inventive solutions to urban problems, while role of civil society should be encouraged in bringing behavioral change in society.
- International finance mechanism should be looked into for securing expertise and resources. International funding from development banks, the Green Climate Fund, or Official Development Assistance could be directed to municipalities.

South Asia being the least urbanized region in the world is a boon but as they rapidly urbanize, they should take the advantage of the knowledge around sustainable urbanization to manage their

municipalities. It is of utmost importance that the countries keep track of the developments happening during the pandemic such as an increase in poverty, job loss, change in consumption pattern, and so on, to be able to mitigate the after-effect of the pandemic. As governments are putting economic recovery plans and packages, priority should be given to actions that provide social protection, diversify earnings or alternate livelihoods, and follow a more environmental and climate and social resilient pathways. The recovery plans provide an opportunity for countries and their urban centers to work further and harder in meeting the SDGs.

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# Covid-19 and Responsible Consumption and Production

Anupama Pokharel<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

With more than a third of the world population put under lockdown, the pandemic has halted the global economy leading to unprecedented economic losses. Consumption and production pattern has been disrupted. What started as health crisis has quickly turned into a socio-economic crisis, and at the time of writing this paper is turning into a humanitarian crisis, especially in the developing nations of the South-Asia. The virus has disrupted the progress of many goals that were considered to be the framework for what our future world will look like. The pandemic has a direct negative impact on the first ten SDGs like no poverty, zero hunger, good health, decent employment, etc. Though in the early period of lockdown, we saw immediate relief in few other SDGs like 12 to 15 which focused on responsible consumption and production, climate action, life on water and land; these are short term relief and may lead to the major overall negative impact on the ecosystem.

Among the 17 SDGs and their targets set to achieve by 2030, this paper will focus on the impact of coronavirus on Goal number 12, "Responsible Consumption and Production", which clearly states "to ensure sustainable consumption and production practices within the biophysical capacity of the earth, to reduce the global consumption rate and to improve the quality of life of people by allowing access to basic service, green and decent jobs" (UNEP, 2020). The main objective of this goal is to create an economy that is healthy for both people and the planet itself (UNEP, 2015). SDG 12 has eleven targets in total; four of them are to achieve by 2030, one by 2020, and the rest six have no time period (United Nation Sustainable Development, 2020).

Given the broad scope of goal no 12, it isn't easy to measure the progress made by each nation towards this goal. According to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) report, "integrating the development concept with environmental sustainability is one of the major challenges till date and the economic growth up till now has always been at the cost of environmental degradation" (UNEP, 2020). In such a context, SDG 12 is vital for understanding how the future economic growth should be. The holistic framework of SDG shows some interactions among all of its targets, but given the broad

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aspect that goal 12 covers, it is linked with almost every other SDGs. The paper will firstly focus on what kind of social behaviour changes towards consumption and production were brought forward by the coronavirus and its impact on the environment and SDG 12.

### **Impact of Coronavirus on SDG 12**

Even before the pandemic, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) report of 2019 suggested that no country of South Asia will achieve any of the 17 SDG goals in the given time period of 2030 despite making significant improvements in several sectors. Among those SDG, in the case of goals 6, 8 and 12, it is found that there exist either regression or stagnancy (ESCAP, 2019). In such a scenario, the global pandemic has been a considerable blow to the worldwide economy, especially the already struggling economy of South Asia. The funding for these SDGs has always been significantly less. Currently, most of the governments in South-Asia are only focused on providing immediate health response to the crisis without putting any thought into the consequence of the toxic waste that is being produced as a result of this pandemic (Cherian, 2020).

Covid-19 pandemic is likely to bring significant changes in critical variables of SDG 12 such as consumer behaviour on saving and spending, manufacturers' priorities, structural change on the global workforce, change in the supply chain and the investment and overall change in environment (Coveri et al., 2020). The lockdown measures to control the spread of the virus has slowed down economic activities across the globe and has a significant environmental impact. Talking about the structural ecological implications, the global energy demand reduced for the first time after World War II. As per the report published in Nature Climate Change , the daily global emission decreased by 17% in 2020 compared to 2019, which led to a drastic improvement in air and water quality (Quéré et al., 2020). In South Asia, Delhi alone saw a reduction of 79% in air pollution, the first time in many decades (Cherian, 2020 ; Rume & Didar-Ul Islam, 2020). Lockdown, closure of the domestic and international border and control on the mobility of people and goods lead to the drastic decrease in transport like airways, railways and other means like bus, trucks, etc. Many industries and power plant halted their production except for the production of the essentials goods. These lead to the decrease in the emission of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and sulphur dioxide. The total global spending on fossil fuel decreased by 4% compared to 2019, and the demand for coal fuel reduced by 8% as of 2020 compared to previous years (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020 ; Mousazadeh et al., 2021). Similarly, as per the International Energy Agency(IEA), the oil demand decreased by 435,000 barrels globally in only the first two months (IEA, 2020). The coal-based power generation dropped by 26% in India alone (CREA, 2020). The containment measures resulted in a sharp drop in fossil fuels resulting an overall reduction in energy consumption, especially in countries of South Asia where the focus on a green economy is much less.

Similarly, the restriction on the transportation and mobility of people also caused a sharp drop in the footprints in popular tourist destinations like beaches and resorts, and the reduction in industrial waste due to the slowdown in manufacturing allowing many water bodies and ecologies around it to recover. We saw news articles showing how the Yamuna river in Delhi became clean (Arif et al., 2020 ; Saadat et al., 2020). Coronavirus has offered some positive exchanges in the chemical composition of the world. The lockdown caused the reduction in emission of nitrogen oxide to 22-77%, ranging in different parts.

The emission of carbon dioxide also follows a similar trend (Mousazadeh et al., 2021). Conventional energy demand like electricity usage has also reduced because many public spheres remain closed for almost an entire year. All of these have a significant impact on ensuring a better environment and managing toxic waste, one primary target under SDG 12. However, it is essential to understand that these are short-term positive impacts because of the lockdown and travel ban measures put forward in response to reduce the spread of the virus. It is essential to know that the world will go back to normal, so it is crucial to see what will happen in the long-term.

While on the one hand, we saw significant improvement in the environment; another change which is bought forward by the pandemic is an increase in the excessive production and consumption of plastic products and medical waste globally. The pandemic resulted in a massive amount of medical waste in the form of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) kits, which includes masks, gloves, face shields, glasses, and so on, to control the virus and rapid proliferation and disposal of the disinfectant. It is reported that Polypropylene used in the making of N-95 mask and Tyvek for protective coverage remain in the environment for a long time and release toxic waste to the environment (Calma, 2020 ; Rume & Didar-Ul Islam, 2020). In the early phase of the pandemic, when research was limited, almost every government of South-Asia released disinfectants into the public sphere to kill the virus. Till today, public places like airports, government buildings, supermarkets are continuously using disinfectants without any idea about the proper procedure and their effect on the environment (Rume & Didar-Ul Islam, 2020).

Similarly, there is literature suggesting that virus can stay on the surfaces of these products for quite sometime. Therefore, the toxic waste should be handled efficiently to limit further spreading and protect the environment. However, none of the governments of South Asian nations are talking about this issue. This is also directly hampering one of the major targets of SDG 12 that is to manage the chemical waste responsibly. Target 12.4 of the goal focusses on achieving the environmentally sound management of toxic waste and chemical by 2020 and reducing hazardous waste production per capita (UNEP, 2015). In this case, there is a significant regression as one of the major impacts of coronaviruses is the widespread use of disposal mask and the proliferation of disinfectants. There is no standard or procedure, especially in South Asia, to properly handle medical waste. Individuals, including the people testing positive, use disposable masks and gloves and throw them out in the trash. There are also no standard bodies to check the proliferation of the disinfectant, and almost no one is talking about the impact this excessive medical waste will have on the environment on the policy level. Global e-waste has also increased significantly. In the context of both work and education online, the sales of electronic gadgets and laptops have boomed. Similarly, many people are dependent on online delivery because of the quarantine, which creates a large amount of waste and plastic in shipping the essentials. These changes in consumption patterns will have a negative impact on the environment (Cherian, 2020).

One of the points worth further exploring is the impact on general consumer behaviour as the pandemic prolongs. As lockdown measures are still there, consumers are cautious of where they spend, bringing a significant change in household consumption pattern (Blundell et al., 2020 ; Cohen, 2020). Though initially there was a stage of panic buying, as the situation prolonged, people are focusing on only buying the essential needs especially in countries of South Asia like Nepal, Bangladesh, India, where

a large number of people are in the informal sector. Furthermore, the lockdown coincided with the key crop season in Nepal and the rest of South Asia, which may lead to a decrease in the yield (IIDS, 2020 ; Joshi et al., 2021). It has had a direct impact on the household income, which will hamper people's access to food, health, education, sanitation and so on.

Rapid diffusion and the pandemic's global impact also proves how interlinked the consumptions and production of goods and service has become over the last decades and how important it is to come up with a regional plan to tackle these issues. As practised during the lockdown, the habit of reduced consumption can be encouraged towards more sustainable consumption.

### **Potential Strategies For Maintaining Sustainable Consumption and Production**

The positive effects on the environment, consumer and production trends may be short term, so it is important to convert this short-term effect into long term benefit of creating a sustainable lifestyle and environment. Many countries in the world, including countries of South Asia, are currently focused on coming up with post-pandemic economic recovery plans to improve the livelihood of its citizens and restart the global economy.

This pandemic can be an opportunity for transition from fossil fuels towards a cleaner and greener alternative. The government can focus in renewable energy project and can support the industries with this agenda. The massive stimulus package announced around the world should align with SDG goals to accelerate its progress. The recovery package by the governments should not be mis-used by industries that contribute to environmental degradation. The roadmap for recovery from the COVID-19 should consider the change in consumer and societal behaviour to ensure Responsible Consumption and Production. In post-pandemic time, the governments can further invest in green and public transport and encourage citizens to use bicycles for short-distance travel. It is now proven that people in South Asia lack knowledge on toxic waste disposal. So, the governments should also focus on raising awareness by using mass media. It is also time to implement sustainable ecotourism practices, especially in a country like Nepal, where tourists' material footprint had a significant adverse environmental impact. The news of waste at the top of Mount Everest recently made a global headlines. The Visit Nepal Year Nepal 2020 was disrupted by the pandemic, but it is essential to have an environment-friendly economic policy in any future tourism year (Barbier & Burgess, 2020).

Furthermore, in the case of South Asia, which is developing and lacks significant funding for Research and Development, it is of paramount importance to come up with a regional strategy to tackle common development concerns. When India got affected badly by the virus, entire South Asia felt its impact. Issues that go beyond borders like the pandemic, calamities and climate change, therefore, demand a collective regional approach. SDGs related to climate, energy, biodiversity, clean infrastructure, development of capacities are transnational in nature, and the regional approach helps increase efficiency and meet the SDGs in the given time period. Given the vulnerability of South Asia with regards to climate change, it is time to move towards cleaner energy sources like hydropower, solar and wind and use advanced technologies to reduce emission from conventional energy sources. A common and a binding policy regarding cleaner and greener economy promoted through a regional organization

like SAARC will help us achieve SDG 12. Furthermore, awareness campaigns consisting of 3Rs- recycle, reduce, and reuse can be launched throughout the region to control waste management and bring changes in lifestyle (ESCAP, 2016).

There is no doubt that Covid-19 has brought to spotlight the issue of responsible consumption and production patterns. In the recent months, we've seen a slew of articles and opinions on the impact of the virus and its implications for sustainability. The real test will be once the vaccines are widely distributed. In the post-pandemic phase, people should keep in mind the lesson coronavirus has taught them and continue practising responsible consumption behaviour as during the lockdown.

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# **Impact of COVID-19 on SDG Agenda No. 13 : The South Asian Perspective**

A N M Muniruzzaman<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

The onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic has severely deteriorated economic growth and recovery from its subsequent backlash seems like an uphill battle. COVID-19 is a severe threat to the global security as it poses prolonged implications for the growth and development indicators. The pandemic has not only reduced the level of economic growth and development but also reversed the long-lasting trends of advancement. The objective of this paper is to evaluate how COVID-19 has impacted Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13, with the respective viewpoint of South Asia.

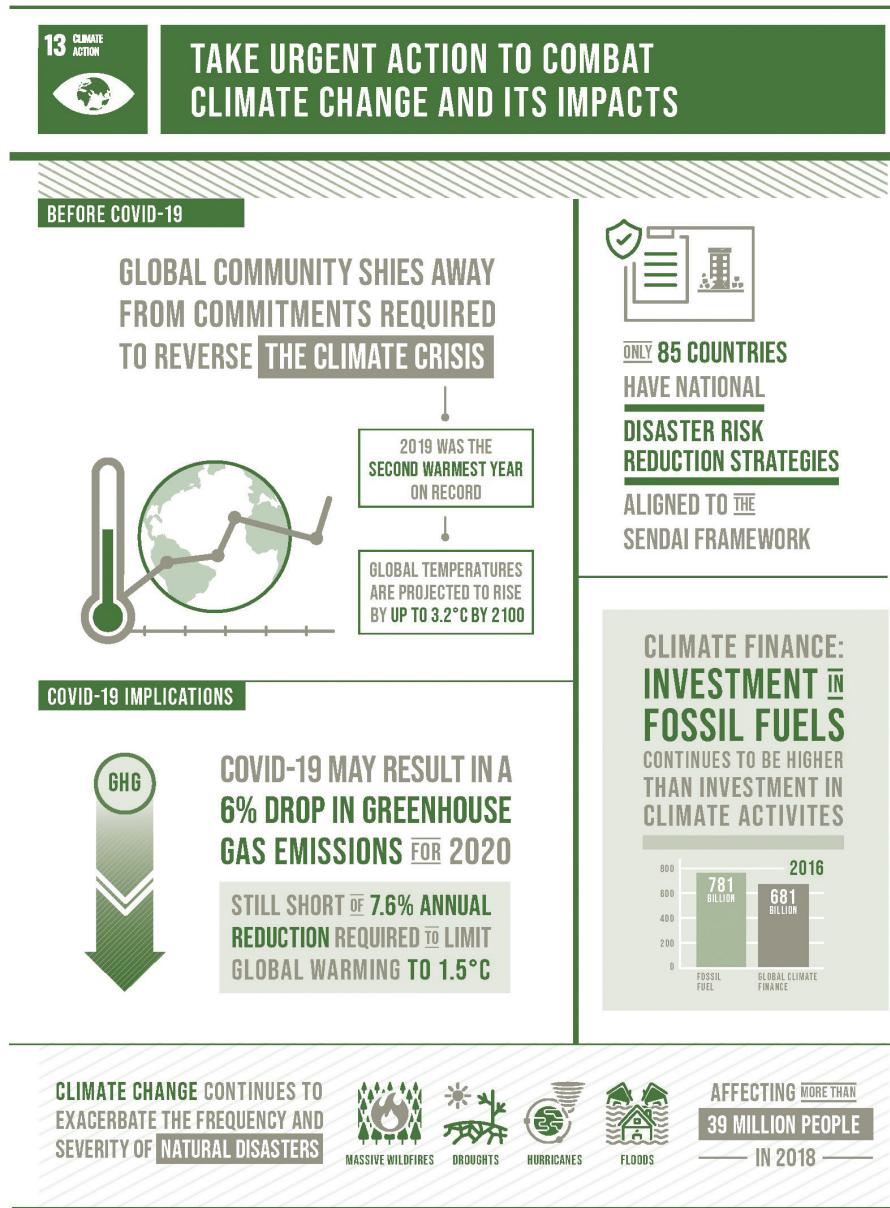
All the United Nations Member States adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as a global call to action in order to eradicate poverty, protect the planet and ensure all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030<sup>2</sup>. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13 is vital in terms of combating climate change and its adverse impacts. SDG 13 is also primarily devoted to dealing with a range of other concerned issues: amount of funds invested in the climate crisis, compliance of Disaster Risk Reduction Strategies with Sendai Framework, impact of climate change on natural disasters, the amount of greenhouse gas emissions, climate change investment in relation to fossil fuels investment and other related issues. SDG 13 deals with five key areas: resilience & adaptive capacity, climate change policies, climate change awareness, United Nations Framework for Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) commitments and climate change planning & management<sup>3</sup>. The outbreak of COVID-19 has created a major impact on SDG 13 across the region. The pandemic includes both positive and negative ramifications across the region. The diagram below depicts the state of climate change before and after COVID-19.

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2 Sustainable Development Goal. United Nations Development Programme. (2021). <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>

3 Goal 13 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Take Urgent Actions to Combat Climate Change and Its Impacts. United Nations. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal13>



*Figure 1- Climate Change Before and After COVID-19  
(Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs)*

### Impact of COVID-19 on SDG-13: South Asia and the World

The outbreak of pandemic has led to reduced commitment to climate action as the world undergoes a public health emergency. Although South Asia is home to fastest growing economies of the world, there are prospects of economic fallout due to the pandemic. This economic fallout is likely to have an adverse impact on the amount of climate finance across the region. The economic consequences of pandemic in South Asia are even greater than the healthcare challenges in the region<sup>4</sup>. Even before the pandemic,

4 Haqqani, H. & Pande, A. Nine Months of COVID-19: The Impact of South Asia. Hudson Institute.  
[https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/Pande%20Haqqani\\_%20Nine%20Months%20of%20COVID%20The%20Impact%20on%20South%20Asia.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/Pande%20Haqqani_%20Nine%20Months%20of%20COVID%20The%20Impact%20on%20South%20Asia.pdf)

there were concerns about the inadequate funds in order to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement and Sendai Framework<sup>5</sup>. Due to the pandemic, there will be even greater funding gaps. As governments across the world are experiencing funding gaps, it is a bad news for climate finance commitments. As most of the countries are investing funds to deal with the ravages of COVID-19, there will be a decline in climate finance. Hence, the response finance mechanisms in order to deal with climate change are under imminent threat due to the pandemic.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has taken the spotlight away from the climate action. Even before COVID-19, the global community was not involved in sufficient commitments to reverse the climate crisis. Investment in fossil fuels still remains high in spite of the pandemic. There are some notable countries in the world where climate change is a crucial concern, yet they need to keep investing in undesirable sectors to sustain people's livelihoods. Polish government is investing \$35 million in order to buy unwanted coal to revive an industry "shaken by the pandemic"<sup>6</sup>. In the same manner, the province of Alberta located in Canada is investing \$1.1 billion into a new oil pipeline deemed "essential" for economic recovery<sup>7</sup>. The same issue can be seen in Australia's Queensland where it is necessary to fast-track a new coal mine to help the state recover from the devastating impacts of COVID-19<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, the outbreak of the pandemic has led to governments investing in undesirable sectors which must be forgone in order to reverse the negative implications of climate change. The similar trend is also being observed in South Asia.

The ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have enduring consequences for the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and environmental groups. For such groups, springtime is usually the period with most activities. This is when they go out to plant trees, clean up waste or go on educational forest hikes. It is also a period when they search for new donors in order to continue their operations. Financial difficulties are worrisome for these groups as they are spending more time on cutting off employees rather than carrying out the organisation's environmental purposes. Several groups are unable to avail the coronavirus stimulus packages. These groups play a key role in terms of combating the negative impacts of climate change. Their important work has always helped to address the core issues concerned with climate change. They also helped to reduce greenhouse gas emissions which are a major contributor to climate change. As the field implementation plans of NGOs and environmental groups are being hampered due to the pandemic, it will have negative implications for climate action resulting into a decline in the progression towards SDG-13.

As the governments in South Asia are busy in containing the spread of COVID-19, there are disruptions in the field of data collection activities. Hence, many national statistical offices are unable to deliver official monthly and quarterly statistics regarding the progress on SDG 13. According to a recent survey conducted by the United Nations and the World Bank, the outbreak of COVID-19 has affected the

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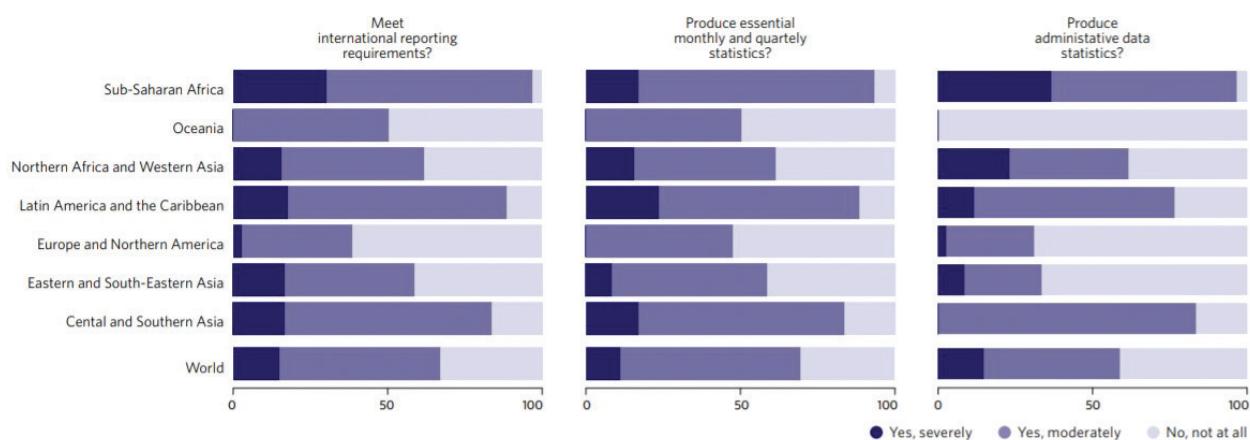
5 Quevedo, A. Peters, K. & Cao, Y. The Impact of COVID-19 on Climate Change and Disaster Resilience Funding: Trends and Signals. Overseas Development Institute.<https://odi.org/en/publications/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-climate-change-and-disaster-resilience-funding-trends-and-signals/>

6 Kottasová, I. Gupta, S. & Regan, H. The One Chance We Have. Cable News Network.<https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2020/09/world/climate-covid-money-intl/>

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

operations of most national statistical offices. Approximately 65% of offices are partially or fully closed, 90% have instructed staff to work from home, and 96% have partially or fully stopped face-to-face data collection<sup>9</sup>. The outbreak of the pandemic is not only creating a major setback in the process of achieving 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, but is also widening global data inequalities. This will be a real challenge for South Asia to monitor the progression trends concerned with SDG 13. The chart below assesses the impact of pandemic in various parts of the world. As it can be seen, Central and South Asia's ability to produce administrative data statistics is moderately hampered due to COVID-19. Furthermore, the ability to produce essential monthly and quarterly statistics has been severely impacted due to the pandemic. The pandemic has also crushed the region's capacity to meet international reporting requirements.



*Figure 2 – Survey Results (Percentage): How the Current COVID-19 Pandemic is Affecting the Ability of Regions*  
(Source: The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020)

On the contrary, the pandemic has led to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. According to United Nations Framework for Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), global lockdown led to a decline in carbon dioxide emissions by a maximum margin of 27%<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, the emissions released by surface transport has accounted for approximately 43% of the decline<sup>11</sup>. There are less environmental footprints due to less production and transportation<sup>12</sup>. On account of a huge reduction in human activities, lesser transports were on the roads, most of the industries were closed down, attributing to improved air quality in the South Asian countries<sup>13</sup>. There has always been a destructive relationship between humanity and the natural world. Due to a reduction in human activities, there have been improvements in soil

9 The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020. United Nations.

<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf>

10 Friedlingstein, P. Quéré, C. L. Canadell, P. & Jackson, R. & Peters, G. Impact of COVID-19 on CO2 Emissions.

United Nations Framework for Convention on Climate Change. [https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/1.GCP\\_.pdf](https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/1.GCP_.pdf)

11 Ibid.

12 Bhowmick, S. Onward to The Sustainable Development Agenda 2030: Will COVID-19 leave many behind? Observer Research Foundation. (2021). <https://www.orfonline.org/research/onward-to-the-sustainable-development-agenda-2030/>

13 Kandari, R. & Kumar, A. COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown: Effects on the Air Quality of South Asia. Springer Nature. 2021. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42398-020-00154-6>

health and water quality. The need to impose measures concerned with regulating pollution has also declined. Areas of high biological diversity provide humanity its best defense against climate change by regulating local climate. It further reduces the risks of climate-related hazards such as sea-level rise and floods<sup>14</sup>. Activities such as the commercial wildlife trade, logging and deforestation, and the expansion of agriculture into previously undisturbed areas were rampant before COVID-19 and these activities used to put high pressure on the ecosystems. Due to the lockdown and government restrictions, such human activities came to a halt leading to better conservation of biodiversity. The disruption of nature caused by human activities has also led to the global pandemic. Maintaining biodiversity is integral in terms of protecting plant life which absorbs carbon from the atmosphere and helps to mitigate climate change. The solution to deal with such pandemic is also linked to biodiversity as there should be an end to commercial trade of wildlife for human consumption. Hence, conservation of the remaining intact ecosystems is the key to halt climate change, biodiversity loss and the next pandemic. During the pandemic, conservation of elephants in Nepal has greatly improved due to less movement of human in the parks.

The pandemic had pervasive effects not only on jobs, economies and governments but also on marine ecosystems<sup>15</sup>. Due to the pandemic, the health of the ocean has largely been positive due to the reduction in various sectoral pressures that cause pollution, excessive fishing, loss of marine habitat and introduction of invasive species. On account of a decline in human activities, there are significant slowdowns in the fisheries, shipping, coastal tourism and coastal development. Various factors such as lower demand from export markets and the challenge of practicing sanitary measures on fishing boats have contributed to a decline in demand of shrimp, octopus, crab, snapper, grouper, squid and mahi-mahi. Approximately two-thirds of the commercial fish are supplied to the restaurants in United States of America hence the pandemic has led to a fall in its demand<sup>16</sup>. The demand for mahi-mahi in Ecuador has declined due to the significant reduction of tourism. There are also international linkages in markets which have reduced the demand for fishes, for instance, demand for lobster in Florida has plummeted due to the eradication of such markets in China. This has also adversely impacted the demand for fishes in South Asia. COVID-19 driven reduction in fishing pressure could lead to the recovery of depleted stocks in case the trend continues for at least 10-15 years. There is approximately 10% decline in container trade for 2020 as a consequence of the pandemic<sup>17</sup>. Decline in shipping traffic will also reduce the sector's greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, the outbreak of the pandemic has improved the marine ecosystem.

There are further scopes for the region to harness mutual benefits in terms of pandemic recovery and climate and disaster resilience. The pandemic offers an opportunity for South Asian countries to reevaluate priorities in order to build greener and climate-resilient economies. According to a report of UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific, SDG 13 is one of the key areas of greatest

14 Oakes, L. E. Olson, S. H. & Watson, J. Preventing Pandemics, Global Warming and Environmental Degradation All At Once. Cable News Network. 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/22/opinions/pandemics-global-warming-linked/index.html>

15 Hudson, A. The Ocean and COVID-19. United Nations Development Programme. 2020. <https://www.undp.org/blogs/ocean-and-covid-19>

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

concern<sup>18</sup>. Despite significant progress on some goals such as quality education (Goal 4), without extra efforts, the region is likely to miss all 17 goals by 2030<sup>19</sup>. Particularly, the region needs to reverse trends on responsible consumption and production (Goal 12) and climate action (Goal 13) where the region is going backwards<sup>20</sup>. The process of decision making needs to be based on risk analysis in order to perform well on climate and disaster resilience finance, especially during the pandemic response. Based on the poverty line being equivalent to \$3.20 and \$5.50, the figure of poverty is expected to reach 138 million and 102 million, respectively<sup>21</sup>. Approximately 42 million people are expected to fall below the poverty line less than of \$ 1.90 which is set by the World Bank<sup>22</sup>. As a result of this, SDG 1 which relates to zero poverty might receive more priority from the governments across the region and this in turn may overshadow the significance of climate actions in order to be on par in terms of achieving SDG 13. South Asia requires huge climate investments in several sectors: \$410 billion need to be invested in renewable energy, \$670 billion in greening the vehicle fleet and more than \$1.5 trillion to ensure the future production is green and resilient<sup>23</sup>. South Asia has a potential capacity to unlock \$ 3.4 trillion in climate-smart investment opportunities<sup>24</sup>. Hence, it is crucial for the region to reevaluate the climate investment policies in view of the COVID-19 situation to achieve SDG 13 by 2030.

## **Recommendations**

In order to the set targets within 2030, the region needs to take more policies on measuring environmental targets. Use of product with low emissions must be promoted more effectively. Cutting off food waste is a must to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the agricultural sector. Statistical capacity must be enhanced in order to track the progress concerned with climate action. Periodic review should be conducted on a timely basis to reevaluate the steps taken by the concerned authorities. Temporary gains in terms of greenhouse gas emissions due to the pandemic must be sustained. Awareness-raising measures must be undertaken by all members of the society. The authorities must introduce climate-smart approaches for managing land and water.

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18 Nia, A. B. Hermouet, E. &Shayani, D. Asia and The Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and The Pacific. [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/ESCAP\\_Asia\\_and\\_the\\_Pacific\\_SDG\\_Progress\\_Report\\_2020.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/ESCAP_Asia_and_the_Pacific_SDG_Progress_Report_2020.pdf)

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Bird, N. Markhof, Y. Burattini, B. Soares, F. V. & Chretien, E. Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19, Policy Responses and The Missing Middle in South Asia. International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth &The United Nations Children's Fund. [https://ipcig.org/pub/eng/RR47\\_Socio\\_economic\\_impacts\\_of\\_COVID\\_19.pdf](https://ipcig.org/pub/eng/RR47_Socio_economic_impacts_of_COVID_19.pdf)

22 Ibid.

23 Maheshwari, A. Kerr, T. & Malik, A. Climate Investment Opportunities in South Asia: An IFC Analysis. International Finance Corporation. World Bank Group. (2017). <https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/fa3bea68-20f1-4cb4-90b9-3e812d38067f/Climate+Investment+Opportunities+in+South+Asia+-+An+IFC+Analysis.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=I.raVua>

24 Ibid.

## **Conclusion**

The pandemic has brought to light the fault lines that were present due to the rapid industrial growth that economies across South Asia have exhibited over the years. The government-enforced lockdowns had a considerable positive impact on the environment with major polluting components, such as industries and vehicles, coming to a halt. Although a glimpse of hope can be seen in terms of environmental recovery, the future seems rather bleak as economic recovery will outdo the environmental dividends of the pandemic. So, going forward, the challenge countries will face is how to manage economic growth in a sustainable way. In conclusion, the pandemic has given us the opportunity to reshape our policies to deal with the pressing issue of climate change and achieve SDG 13.

# SDG 14: Life below Water

Dr. Rasheeda M. Didi<sup>1</sup>

## Context

The ocean is the single largest ecosystem in the world that covers three-quarters of the surface of the earth and provides habitat to more than 90% of the earth's living species (Sevilla, Lopez, & Hanbauseen, 2020). It plays a fundamental role in sustaining life by serving various purposes – viz. providing food and minerals, generating oxygen, absorbing greenhouse gases (GHG), mitigating climate change, influencing weather patterns and temperatures, and facilitating maritime transport and trade (UNCTAD, 2014). Oceans play a vital role in providing direct as well as indirect opportunities for economic growth, employment, and development to people irrespective of whether they live near or far from the coastal regions. However, the dependence of humans on oceans and its resources for sustenance and growth has put the ecosystem under tremendous pressure – 60% of the global marine ecosystem that have been supporting livelihoods have either been degraded or are being used unsustainably (UNESCO, 2017); 20% of the coral reefs globally have been lost and the other 20% have been degraded; mangroves have been reduced to 30 to 50 % of their historical cover; and 29% of sea grass habitats are estimated to have disappeared (IOC/UNESCO, 2015). Climate change effects – rise in sea-level, ocean warming, and ocean acidification – have also further strained the marine species and habitats (OECD, 2020) that has global implications.

Millions of people globally, especially the poor and the marginalized, have been depending on the marine ecosystem as a source of livelihood generational activities – ocean based economy is estimated to be valued at USD 3-6 trillion per year; fish provides at least 15% of protein to 4.3 billion people globally (United Nations, 2015); marine and coastal biodiversity directly provide livelihoods for 3 billion people; and over 200 million people are directly and indirectly employed in marine fisheries (United Nations, 2021). Moreover, around 40 percent of the world's population that live within 150 kilometers of the coastal region have oceans at the heart of their lifestyle and cultural activities (Stuchtey et al., 2020, IAEA, 2021). Consequently, the disruption of maritime ecosystem not only has environmental and economic implications but also possess threat to the cultural as well as social dimensions of the society.

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<sup>1</sup> Author is independent Lecturer, Researcher based in the Maldives. Special thanks to Mr. Hussain Rasheed, an avid diver for his inputs. Also thanks to Ms. Shreya Khakurel for transcribing this article.

## **Impact of Covid-19 on Maritime Ecosystem in Maldives**

Maldives, as an island nation, has had ocean and its resources as a part of its lifestyle and developmental activities. However, the increasing adversities of climate change and global warming has greatly stressed the maritime ecosystem to a point where the existence of the island nation itself has been endangered. Coral bleaching has been rampant in the Maldives marine ecosystem. Prior to 2015, coral bleaching used to happen once every 10 years but since 2015, the phenomenon has been observed every year. Large scale land reclamation activities in the ocean have also taken place to create new resorts and enlarge islands, whose sedimentation process has been aggravating the already existing negative impacts of coral bleaching. Likewise, introduction of new harbors – to better facilitate maritime trade and transportation – have also taken place.

The unprecedented onset of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the temporary suspension of human movement all around the world. Maritime trade contributes significantly in the growth of the global economy – around 80 percent of the global trade by volume and over 70 percent of global trade by value has been carried out via sea transport (UNCTAD/RMT, 2018); and shipping trade amounted to more than USD 14 trillion in value in 2019 (International Chamber of Shipping, 2021). The world's population has been projected to increase to 9 billion by 2050, which will increase the demand for food, jobs, energy, and raw materials (OECD, 2020). The consequent increase in economic activities will result in overexploitation of the natural resources, including maritime resources. A temporary halt in human activities and vehicular movements has been a welcome sight. There has been significant reduction in the frequency and the volume of oil spilled in the ocean bodies, which has allowed the natural ecosystem to breathe and start healing from the continuous strain it has been under since the past few decades.

In Maldives, the pandemic-induced halt in commercial fishing did not bring about much change in ocean conservation. Since the last decade, Maldives has banned net fishing and has instead been practicing coal line fishing for commercial purpose. Moreover, aside from Tuna, the country has predominantly been consuming reef fish. Since the country has been employing relatively sustainable commercial fishing methods since the past, it has become challenging for us to objectively measure any pandemic-induced impacts on ocean fish.

The reduction in tourism activities has also not brought about significant positive changes in Maldives' maritime ecosystem. The government had been strictly enforcing restriction on tourism activities in order to prevent any further damage on the reefs. On a more micro-scale, the littering of fishing lines in the water from tourists has reduced drastically. However, with the widespread usage of face masks due to the pandemic, the possibility of water being polluted by such surgical masks as well as plastic gloves and empty sanitizer bottles, prompting other forms of environmental concerns exist, if not monitored properly.

A more recent phenomenon is the effects of chemicals used by inexperienced, new farmers to whom plots of land have been given. The chemicals pollute ground water, which is connected to the sea. If unmonitored, there could be a similar type of experience like Kiribati (Marine Pollution Bulleting, 2021), where ground water contaminated sea water.

## Conclusion

Maritime ecosystem has been providing tremendous economic growth and development activities for billions of people all over the world. However, while the economic growth and its resulting benefits have been welcomed, the growth has been achieved at the expense of the environment. The rapid increase in land reclamation, coral bleaching, and construction of new harbors have resulted in the overexploitation of marine and coastal resources in Maldives causing various environmental adversities.

Proper study and research has not been done adequately in Maldives or other island nations to measure the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on life below water (SDG 14). More research needs to be carried out. At hindsight, we can state that it has had a positive impact. But the damage the ecosystem has incurred over the past few years have been tremendous, making it challenging to observe significant changes due to the pandemic in a year's time. However, despite that, Maldives should capitalize on this unprecedented situation and incorporate sustainable practices that promote environmental sustainability, economic development, and social inclusivity.

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# Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 on SDG 15: Life on Land

Ujjwal Upadhyaya<sup>1</sup>

Shreya Khakurel<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

A healthy ecosystem is essential for all kinds of organisms, including human beings (BISEPST, 2002). The conservation of endangered species (both flora and fauna) and the maintenance of the ecosystem integrity affect both local and global communities, natural systems, and the economy (Upadhyay, 2005). The pristine forests are not only imperative for wild endangered species but also play a crucial role in the lives of the people living in and around the forests, sharing the geographical space for their own survival (Upadhyay, 2005). Globally, around 1.6 billion people depend on forests for sustenance, fuel, and medicinal plants; 10 million people are employed in the forestry sector (UNDP 2020), 2.6 billion people depend directly on agriculture for a living; and 80 percent of forests shelter 80 percent of all species of animals, plants and insects (UNDP 2020). The forests also provide proper functioning of the natural habitat and climate (Upadhyay, 2005) – it prevents the occurrence of soil erosion and flood, and can account for one third of the carbon mitigation efforts needed to maintain the global temperature below 2 degree Celsius (UNDP, 2020).

Since the industrial revolution, more than half of the total existing forests have been cleared, degrading and deserting the global terrestrial land, which has made such regions susceptible to various water-induced hazards like drought, erosions, floods, and landslides (Upadhyay 2015/16). In India alone, over the past 50 years, drought and erosion have primarily contributed to the reduction in soil fertility and degradation of 40 percent of the total arable land (Bhattacharya et al, 2015). In Nepal, soil erosion and the crop harvesting process removes an estimated 1.8 million tons of plant nutrients but only 0.3 million tons of organic and mineral fertilizers replenishes, depleting the land productivity. Annually, Nepal loses over 240 million cubic meter of fertile topsoil (Chalise et al. 2019). Furthermore, to meet the rising food demands of the burgeoning population, there is rigorous practice of till-farming and intensive farming, along with excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, worsening land and

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soil degradations (Acharya & Kafle, 2009). Consequently, mountain ecosystems and fragile terrain and slopes have become more vulnerable to disasters like landslides, glacial lake outburst floods, flash floods, and avalanches' – made more adverse by the increasing global warming and climate change effects. Loss of soil in the mountains has raised riverbeds by 10-30 centimeters in the Nepalese plains (Chalise et al 2019).

Forest and biodiversity conservation is a multifaceted issue comprising people and their poverty status, access to livelihood and economic opportunities, dependency on natural resources, and their interaction with and state of coexistence with wildlife (Upadhyay & Prasain, 2019).

**SDG 15: Life on Land** is an effort to curb existing and potential adversities of such an issue and seeks to promote socio-economic well-being through long-term environmental preservation. It strives to restore forests, rangelands, bio-corridors and lands that were destroyed from water-induced disaster, simultaneously also conserving existing forests, mountain and desert ecosystems, and wildlife and biodiversity. However, meeting its objectives has become more challenging with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Impediment of the economy by the pandemic has forced and projected to force millions of people into poverty. Consequently, environmental deterioration will increase as people's dependence on forests and natural resources increases, making the restoration and conservation initiatives more imperative than ever.

## **Analysis**

### **Status of Forest and Wildlife**

Despite adopting conservation initiatives, forests continue to deplete. Forests have served as a resource that fulfills diverse human needs. People living within or adjacent to dense forests heavily depend on forest products and resources for subsistence and income (World Bank, 2004). Such communities are often mired with extreme poverty (Hill, 1999), and over 90% of the people living in extreme poverty depend on forests for some part of their livelihoods (OECD, 2009). Forests and its resources serve as a safety net for the poor (Dudley et al., 2010); wild fruits, mushrooms, herbs, timber, and non-timber forest products (NTFP) contribute significantly to their subsistence (OECD, 2009); and forestry sector formally employs 10 million people and informally employs 30-50 million people in developing countries (OECD, 2009).

In 2015, 29% of the people living in extreme poverty worldwide – 216 million out of estimated 736 million – lived in South Asia (World Bank, 2018). Poverty, in South Asia, has been disproportionately concentrated in the rural regions where the people are primarily dependent on agroforestry that help sustain their livelihood and income generation activities (World Bank, 2004; World Bank, 2008). In India, fallow fields, forests, pastureland, fishing grounds and wetlands generates 12% of the income in a poor household (OECD, 2009). Limited access to or complete lack of alternative sources of income generations of such groups has historically burdened the forest resources. With the temporary halt or complete loss of other income generation sources due to the pandemic, the existing and additional poor households will heavily rely on natural resources for income generation. Moreover, climate change induced adverse environmental conditions – high ecological vulnerability, low productivity of

natural resources, and limited access to land and other resources – have made sustenance challenging (World Bank, 2002). Consequently, even prior to the pandemic, poor individuals were forced to overuse environmental resources to meet their day-to-day needs (ADB, 2020), which will increase drastically due to COVID-19 induced poverty. Globally, it has been projected that between 119 and 124 million people will additionally be pushed into poverty in 2021, with around 60% estimated to be living in South Asia (Lakner et al., 2021). The consequent pressure on the forests and its resources has posed a serious threat to not only the preservation of biological species but also has negative impacts on other resources like water, soil, and hydrological systems.

## **Economy and Impact on Environment**

Annually, on an average, approximately 46,000 to 71,000 workers migrated overseas from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan between 2012 and 2017 (Rutkowski, 2020). The remittances sent by the migrant workers are equivalent to 6%-30% of the total GDP of South Asia (Rutkowski, 2020); remittances amounted for nearly 28% of Nepal's GDP (Haque & Islam, 2020) and more than 5% of Pakistan's, Sri Lanka's, and Bangladesh's in 2018 (United Nations, 2019). As the world's largest recipient of remittances, in South Asia it plays a vital role in reducing poverty (United Nations, 2019) and strengthening the financial resilience of households with implications for rural human capital development (Rutwoski, 2020). Remittances in South Asia have been projected to decline by 4% to USD 135 billion in 2020 (World Bank, 2020). Since over 40% of the total global remittances are sent to rural areas, curtailing of remittances will result in severe income shock in those areas (FAO, 2020).

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries – Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman – observe the largest movement of South Asian migrant workers (ILO & GIZ, 2015). After the first-wave of the pandemic, employment was predicted to fall by 13% in GCC countries (Mathew, 2020), affecting the low-skilled and semi-skilled migrant workers (Sharma et al., 2020). Adversities from consequent job losses and earnings have been disproportionately high for migrants working in informal sectors and in relatively low-skilled jobs (Ratha et al., 2020). As millions of migrant workers return to their rural villages, their local ecologies get further strained (Huang, 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, additional income from remittances allowed rural households to farm their land less intensively (Fox et al., 2020). In Nepal, on average, 16% of the land was left uncultivated by farm households with migrants, which allowed a significant resurgence of tree cover (Fox et al., 2020). However, reduction in remittances and lack of work for returning migrants (UNICEF, 2021) has forced many to exploit local forests, and other natural resources to collect food and other necessities (Huang, 2020). A field survey around the buffer-zone area of Chitwan National Park in Southern Nepal, conducted in March 2021, revealed that the pandemic induced temporary freeze in tourism activities and related businesses, paired with reduced remittances, has increased people's dependency on the conserved forest resources. The survey also showed that the frequency of people visiting the forest has increased since the onset of the pandemic.

Forest biomass energy like firewood remains one of the most affordable and accessible energy sources for rural people in South Asia (UNDESA, 2020). An upsurge of opportunistic illegal logging has been

observed across rural Asia (Huang, 2020). A preliminary review of case data from 11 protected areas of Nepal, conducted by DNPWC and WWF-Nepal, showed the alarming increase in illegal extraction of timber and NTFPs: 514 cases within the first month (March) of the lockdown and additional 96 cases in the first 10 days of April were filed compared to the 483 cases reported altogether in the preceding 11 months (Fair, 2020). In Kashmir, 4,342 cubic feet of timber was seized from smugglers and 103 police reports were filed against 306 perpetrators (Parvaiz, 2020).

Wildlife poaching across South Asia has also increased alarmingly. For sustenance and income generation, illegal animal trade and poaching has increased in India, Pakistan, and Nepal (Godbole, 2020). With governments imposing lockdown and focusing on mitigating the health crisis, organized crime groups have been using the vulnerable and unemployed rural people for their illegal wildlife trade business. In Nepal, one of the poachers arrested was a returned migrant that had lost employment in the city due to the lockdown (Saeed et al., 2020). In Pakistan, amidst the lockdown period, from March 20 to April 30, 2020, 600 cases of illegal hunting and poaching were recorded compared to 150-200 cases during regular months (Saeed et al., 2020). 65 demoiselle cranes were caught being transferred (Godbole, 2020), with a crane being valued anywhere between PKR 7,000 to PKR 2 million (Saeed et al., 2020). Likewise, an elephant, 3 crocodiles, and 6 Himalayan musk deer were poached in Nepal; 55 cases of poaching of chinkara, black buck, spiny-tailed lizard, desert hare, peafowl, monitor lizards and grey francolin in Western Rajasthan; and a leopard skin, and 50 kg of chital deer meat were seized in India (Saeed et al., 2020).

Positively, the 90-days lockdown across South Asia temporarily improved the air and water quality, aided forest growth, and reduced encroachments of wild species. Restriction of vehicular movements on roads and highways fragmenting habitats and the halt in tourism activities enabled wildlife to wander freely in their habitat. In Nepal, Rhinos' population went up from 645 in 2015 to 752 in 2021 (NTNC 2021; WWF 2021), which should also be attributed to local user groups' efforts in strict regulation and management of park and adjacent buffer zone community forests.

Karakoram-Hindu-Kush-Himalaya (HKKH) – globally, the most culturally and physically diverse landscape comprising world's highest mountains and snowcaps – are perennial sources of water to more than 160 million people in South Asia (Banskota, ICIMOD, 2003) The terrain houses a plethora of diverse flora and fauna, including endangered species. However, these newly formed mountain geo-structures are fragile and vulnerable to seismic and climate induced natural disasters, with implications on humans and other living species. Moreover, poverty and lack of income sources paired with the burgeoning population poses threat to the region. It will become more vulnerable to erosions, landslides and soil degradation as deforestation increases to meet the population's demand for fuel wood, timber, fodder, and land for cultivation and housing. Amidst high risk posed by climate change induced geo-disasters, people have been surviving merely through adaptation, which enhances the urgency for increased sustainable forest management, eco-friendly farming and harvesting technologies, and protection of wild species in the region.

## **Relaxation of Environmental Laws**

Following massive collective shock of the public from natural or manufactured disasters, neo-liberal economic policies push privatization and deregulation in the form of 'shock therapy' that unjustly transfers wealth and power to corporate elites (Klein, 2008). To meet the targeted economic growth, countries might amend strict environmental laws to be relatively lenient, enabling industries to scale up production at the expense of the environment. In India, since the initial lockdown restrictions, the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change has approved the establishment of a new coalmine in an elephant reserve and signed off on a preliminary drilling inside a wildlife sanctuary that houses endangered lion-tailed macaques and great Indian hornbills (Chandrashekhar, 2020). India's draft of The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification 2020 has exempted several projects from public consultation, removed judicial control, and excused a substantial number of projects from getting EIA clearance in the pre- and the post-monitoring phases (Aggarwal, 2020). Even in Nepal, the rationale, implementation and monitoring of Initial Environmental Examinations (IEE) and Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) are becoming feeble for development projects.

### Way Forward

To successfully reserve the degraded conditions of the ecosystem and meet the objectives laid down by the SDG 15, following mitigating measures are suggested:

- Promoting and strengthening community-based forest management policies to enhance local communities' responsibilities towards the environment,
- Restoring ecological hotspots and bio-corridors, especially to safeguard keystone species' long-range migration,
- Abating illegal wildlife poaching and timber-logging through community-based and community-led anti-poaching initiatives, done in collaboration with national parks,
- Improving socio-economic conditions of rural poor communities living around forest areas to shift their dependency on natural resources through green economy oriented income generating activities, alternative energy sources, involvement in ecotourism, and village-based homestay tourism,
- Introducing and practicing integrated settlements and relocation of people living in vulnerable hilly lands to prevent sloppy terrains from natural disasters,
- Promoting organic and no-till agriculture to maintain the soil quality; introducing and making agroforestry more practicable for the supplement of adequate agro-products,
- Introducing eco-friendly technology to maximize the yield at lower environmental cost,
- Identification and reclamation of wastelands, marsh land and virgin lands for cash crop oriented farming to prevent further degradation of pristine forests,
- Increasing government's responsiveness and accountability towards environmental protection to ensure that concerned governmental and non-governmental agencies sincerely abide by the environmental laws.

Economic activities cannot exist in a vacuum and higher economic growth alone cannot mitigate the adversities of the Covid-19 pandemic. Unsustainable exploitation of natural resources need to be discouraged at all levels, especially since the onset of the second-wave of pandemic – from March

2021 – is only going to magnify the already existing adversities across South Asia. Sustenance and income generation activities with higher environmental costs have direct impact on the local and the global society, making the protection of all wild species and communities of life imperative for the maintenance of a healthier ecosystem.

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# Challenges of Implementing SDG-16 amidst COVID-19

Shafqat Munir<sup>1</sup>

*"The most common reason why nations fail today is because they have extractive institutions."*

-Daron Acemoglu, *Why Nations Fail*

## Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 was a revolutionary goal set out by the United Nations (UN). For the first time, the international community acknowledged the pivotal role that effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions play in ensuring sustainable development. The goal is just as important in its own right as it is towards a holistic delivery of the UN's 2030 agenda. Even though the world has seen a stark rise in conflicts over the last decade, strides made towards ending violence, strengthening institutions, and bolstering access to justice continue to be uneven. Millions of people live in insecurity with continued deprivation of fundamental rights and the pandemic has only exacerbated the situation with South Asia particularly experiencing a significant roadblock in achieving this goal. With constant pressure on health infrastructure from rising COVID-19 cases, governments forgo the opportunity cost of resources dedicated to stabilizing the health sector. Rates of domestic and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) have also increased like never before. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) estimated that the pandemic has the potential to cause a rise in 15 million additional GBV cases globally. The number is based on a 20% increase in violence during government-enforced lockdowns<sup>2</sup>. Nationwide lockdowns have led to people losing their jobs, especially those in the lower-income bracket, and slipped them below the poverty line. All these factors combined have and will continue to be a source of instability across the world. On a more global scale, the pandemic has made the absence of multilateralism more apparent, with countries closing their borders and looking out for themselves regarding vaccination. Thus, challenges exist on both domestic and multilateral levels, and this paper will offer an analysis of SDG-16 across various levels. The paper will investigate the concept and relevance of the goal, the global fallout from the pandemic and explore the significant challenges faced when trying to implement SDG 16. Finally, the paper will provide some ways to overcome these challenges and look at a way forward in the post COVID era.

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<sup>2</sup> Impact Of COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-Based Violence, Female, Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage. UNFPA, 2020.

### Concept, Underlying Targets and Relevance



## PROMOTE PEACEFUL AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, PROVIDE ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR ALL AND BUILD EFFECTIVE, ACCOUNTABLE AND INCLUSIVE INSTITUTIONS AT ALL LEVELS



Source: United Nations

### Goal 16 Targets<sup>3</sup>

- 16.1 *Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere*
- 16.2 *End abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against and torture of children*
- 16.3 *Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all.*
- 16.4 *By 2030, reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organized crime.*
- 16.5 *Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms.*
- 16.6 *Develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels.*
- 16.7 *Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision making at all levels.*
- 16.8 *Broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance.*
- 16.9 *By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration.*
- 16.10 *Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.*
- 16.A *Strengthen relevant national institutions, including through international cooperation, for building capacity at all levels, particularly in developing countries, to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime.*
- 16.B *Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development.*

People across the globe need to be free of fear from all forms of violence and feel secure regardless of their gender, religion, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Weak institutions and limited access to justice remain significant threats to sustainable development<sup>4</sup>. The vulnerabilities of existing weak institutions have led to the current instability caused by the pandemic. South Asia has relatively weaker inclusive institutions and has experienced some of the worst effects of COVID-19. India has seen its health

3 "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions". |United Nations Sustainable Development, 2021,

4 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions: Why They Matter. |UN, 2015.

infrastructure suffer extensively due to a rapid rise in the number of cases<sup>5</sup>. Bangladesh has seen a sharp rise in domestic violence coupled with other COVID induced problems. Lockdowns have left vast number of people scavenging for survival due to unexpected termination of their employment. Militant groups, which were previously suppressed, are now beginning to emerge from the shadows. To ensure the fallout does not go out of hand, governments, civil society and communities must work together to ensure there is adequate access to justice and inclusive participation at all times, even during a crisis.

## **COVID-19 and Global Fallout**

COVID-19's onslaught has disrupted global stability. The aftermath of the ongoing pandemic has seen global financial infrastructure take a significant hit resulting in recessions across the globe. Many of middle income and lower-income countries were forced to see significant amounts of their populations catapult into poverty, alongside observing a stretching gap of income inequality<sup>6</sup>. However, the financial fallout is not the only consequence with growing cyber-attacks and frauds, discrimination and violence against vulnerable groups, illegal activities and malpractices<sup>7</sup>. Many developing countries have faced the major brunt of this pandemic due to poor health infrastructure coupled with high population density. Above all, the aftermath of COVID-19 has slowed down the progress of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the coming days. Without major overhaul and ensuring the absolute best of efforts and policy formulations to adapt to the "new normal", achieving these goals presents itself to be more and more challenging with each passing day.

## **Significant Challenges towards the Implementation of SDG-16**

Akin to the implementation of other sustainable development goals, the progress towards ensuring peace and justice and establishing stronger institutions has progressed at a slower pace than anticipated. Implementations of meeting the core targets of Sustainable Development Goal 16 had poised as a challenge even before COVID-19 spread. The status quo has only compounded and the following are some of the key challenges identified for implementing SDG 16 that require urgent solutions:

### **1. Access to Information**

The lack of access to information has become a major challenge due to COVID-19. In the digital age, the importance of data cannot be stressed enough. The exertion of challenges regarding access to viable data and information has slowed down the implementation process of SDG 16 goals and objectives. It has also blurred the option to comprehend the scale of the havoc it has caused. Furthermore, it also blocks the scope for a thorough analysis and the appropriate plan of action to be adopted to get the whole process back on track.<sup>8</sup>

5 "India Covid: Delhi Hospitals Plead for Oxygen as More Patients Die" | BBC News, 2021,

6 'COVID-19 and Global Governance' | Journal of Management Studies | Levy, D.L., 2020.

7 'Tackling the fallout from COVID-19. |' Economics in the Time of COVID-19 | Boone, L., Haugh, D., Pain, N. and Salins, V., 2020. p37.

8 Measuring progress on SDG 16: Understanding the effects of the pandemic to rebuild and move towards the

## 2. Decline in Regard for Rule of Law

There has been major decline concerning the rule of law and access to justice on a global scale. This spawns several challenges and will have major ramifications during these pressing times. The decline in the rule of law and access to justice exacerbates the already worsening situation during a health crisis. It has only decreased the effectiveness of public institutions and the effectuation process of public policy implementations, which has yielded very harmful ramifications.<sup>9</sup>

## 3. New Poverty

Many countries around the world have faced major growth in poverty rates. It is estimated that the pandemic will push as many as 150 million people to extreme poverty, in an unprecedented number. The advent of poverty slows down the process of promoting equality and the rule of law and often provides the breeding ground for discrimination, exploitation, and tension amongst the general masses. This has been particularly prevalent in the middle to lower-income countries around the world – a representation of the vast majority of people residing in South Asian countries. The growing unrest between the different masses within the society provides growing tension, disrupting the prerequisites for peace and social cohesion.<sup>10</sup>

## 4. Corruption

COVID-19 has put an enormous strain on the financial security of almost all the people around the world. This has often pushed individuals associated with relevant authorities and institutions to fall prey to corruption and has provided room for opportunistic entities to have their footprints in the decision-making process. COVID-19 has seen noticeable cases of improper and illegal practices, predominantly in regions like Latin America, where curbing the practice of corruption has become a significant challenge, alongside the mitigation of damage caused by this major health crisis. The surge in crime showcases the challenge towards ensuring the mitigation of corruption worldwide. It also excludes the general masses from the major decision-making process, dilutes the transparency of the process while segregating the concentration of power in a very uneven manner, and undermining the targets of the SDG-16.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. Continued Trafficking and Illegal Trade

It can often be perceived that, during COVID-19, with the lockdown and travel restrictions in place, the practices of illegal trade, exploitations and trafficking should have gone down. However, that hasn't been the case as smugglers and profiteers have come up with new ways and business models to conduct their drugs, wildlife and human trafficking. COVID-19 has also limited the outreach of state and

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*achievement of peaceful, just and inclusive societies* | International IDEA| Idea.int. 2021.

9 ibid

10 COVID-19 to Add as Many as 150 Million Extreme Poor by 2021. |World Bank, 2021.

11 COVID-19 and Latin America's Epidemic of Corruption. | Wilson Center, 2021.

non-state authorities. It has also limited their capabilities towards ensuring the apprehension of these syndicates, curbing these illegal practices, and adopting necessary measures and providing services to the victims of these activities.<sup>12</sup>

## **6. Child Vulnerability**

COVID-19 has deprived the most basic human and health care needs of one of the most vulnerable groups in the entire population: children. As the situation worsens, more and more children are being deprived of crucial medical aids and vaccinations. They have been unable to receive adequate parental care and have also been exposed to abuse and exploitation.<sup>13</sup>

## **7. Gender-Based Violence**

During the pandemic, one of the most tragic exposures has been the rise of violence against women and children. During the lockdown, following government directives, individuals mainly resided within the house to slow down the spread of the virus. Notwithstanding, it has often led to deprived individuals being confined with their family members. This overall situation has led to an alarming growth in violence against women and children, as they often had to go through unspeakable levels of aggression from the perpetrators. For instance, during the first wave of COVID-19, 70% more gender-based violence cases were documented in April and May of 2020 than in the previous year<sup>14</sup>. However, this was just the initiation of a far worse situation for victims of gender-based violence all across the country, even resulting in a few deaths. This showcases the absence of the rule of law and institutional oversight to stop this practice and highlights a major challenge towards promoting gender equality and safeguarding victims of such aggressions. It also illustrates the impact of COVID-19 upon the policy formulations process towards combatting such issues.

## **8. Global Power Dynamics**

COVID-19 has promoted an era of de-globalization and introduced major hurdles towards the promotion of multilateralism and cooperation. The pandemic has seen an era of strategic cooperation but has also intensified existing strategic tensions. New strategic concepts have emerged and many countries like Bangladesh are now faced with an option of choosing one over the other. Retaining their strategic autonomy has therefore become an important consideration for any small and middle powers. Moreover, vaccine nationalism has also highlighted the limits of multilateralism and the growing trend of anti-globalization. People across the world have begun to wonder about the ineptitude of multilateral institutions.

12 *The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Trafficking in Persons and the Responses to the Challenges – World | ReliefWeb 2021*

13 *Key asks for 2020 SDG Voluntary National Reviews: SDG 16. | Unicef.org, 2021*

14 *Violence Against Women In Bangladesh Reaches Breaking Point. | The Organization for World Peace, Gibson, E., 2021.*

## 9. Militancy

With the continuation of the pandemic, crime rates have significantly shot up following the rise in poverty and decline in financial solvency. The pandemic has taken a huge mental toll as well, with cases of depression, anxiety and even suicides increasing. This has been utilized as an opportunity by various militant outfits, both local and international, to speed up their recruitment process. They have weaponized the pandemic to further their cause and draw more impressionable and vulnerable minds to engage in militant activities<sup>15</sup>. The growing dependence of individuals upon social media and various other outlets provided them to further attract newer militants through volatile content and messages. The militant groups have also diversified their financial means to adapt to this modern-day phenomenon<sup>16</sup>. However, the measures to battle these aren't there as most countries, and their governments are often too exhausted battling the issue at hand. Thus, the absence of a global body towards addressing this rapidly growing problem can have dire consequences and prevent the promotion of peace and justice.

COVID-19 has not only introduced a decline in the practice of promoting access to information and promoting human rights but has also provided only a narrow few with substantial access towards resources and the decision-making process. This has brought into question the accountability, credibility of different institutions that should be at the forefront of mitigating these problems. Under these circumstances, negligence has significantly triumphed. This not only reduces the public trust in government entities but also reduces the effectiveness of the institution itself. All the factors mentioned above act as a significant deterrent towards the establishment of transparent and effective institutions and can be perceived as a substantial threat to democracy itself.

## Overcoming Challenges and Way Forward

Tackling the challenges posed when implementing SDG 16 will be no small feat. The effort will require a holistic approach with engagement from governments, civil society and other relevant actors. The multifaceted nature of the challenges will also demand work on multiple levels if adequate results come to fruition. As such, a few components have been identified that can be used to ensure effective implementation of SDG16 for the days to come:

### I. Implementing Strong National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs)

NHRIs play a unique role in the integrated implementation and monitoring of human rights and SDGs. They can connect national and international facets, as well as the state and civil society. They can create dynamic environments for social inclusion and help their nations meet international requirements. Further, some NHRIs are equipped enough to handle individual complaints, allowing them to be early warning mechanisms on conflict prevention.

### II. Private Sector Engagement

A majority of the people in South Asia work as workers in private industries such as factories,

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15 "Seeing COVID-19 As an Opportunity" | The Cairo Review of Global Affairs, 2021,

16 "Terror Financing Surges Amid COVID-19" | The Economic Times, 2021.

mills, fisheries, etc. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure proper engagement with owners to ensure employees are not being exploited and reasonable working conditions are being met. Furthermore, in light of the pandemic, discussions need to be held to ensure schemes or safety nets to prevent financial instability of workers in case of a crisis, such as the current pandemic<sup>17</sup>.

### **III. Youth Inclusion**

Although a significant portion of the population in South Asia consists of the youth, they are often underrepresented. Countries, especially those with demographic dividends, should harness their youth as a resource in implementing SDG 16 targets. Youth engagement is an ideal mechanism in building the foundations of a robust and inclusive institution for the future.

In conclusion, while the achievement of a truly inclusive and sustainable development, with justice for all and at various levels, is a laudable goal; it must not obscure the inevitable trade-offs inherent in governance and in the very concept of equity. Inadequate government infrastructure is often blamed as the major impediment towards implementing the goal. Furthermore, social norms and stigmas will also prove to be a significant hurdle. As such, overcoming these challenges demand innovative and robust solutions. If we are to truly create inclusive institutions, public-private partnerships coupled with dynamic community engagements schemes are of utmost importance. Although the state has a major role to play, the effort in implementing SDG 16 demands a whole-of-society approach. Thus, the goal can only reach its intended targets through an inclusive, shared decision-making process.

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17 "Leaders Discuss Private Sector Role in SDG 16" | News | SDG Knowledge Hub | IISD 2021,

# The Impact of Covid-19 on SDG 17: Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

Mohan P. Lohani<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction :

The international community, including Nepal and other South Asian countries, positively responded to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2000. Nepal noted with satisfaction the progress made in achieving most of the goals with 'strong national commitment' coupled with 'global support and cooperation'. A logical follow-up to the MDGs was the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the UN in September 2015 which coincided with the promulgation of a new constitution of Nepal in September the same year. The commitment of South Asian countries to SDGs with 17 goals is as strong, firm and irrevocable as it was to the MDGs. It has been six years since Nepal started implementing the SDGs with a great deal of seriousness as it' aspires to graduate to a developing nation from a least developed country (LDC) status in the next few years, a middle-income country by 2030 and a developed nation by 2043. Experts opine that Nepal needs massive investments to achieve eight or nine percent growth rate before it can get rid of LDC stigma. Nepal has drawn the attention of the international community to the failure of developed countries to fulfill their past commitments to increased assistance to developing countries, including LDCs. Nepal's Foreign Minister in a message to UN General Assembly through virtual medium on June 19 this year, called upon development partners to provide substantial financial resources in order to help LDCs like Nepal meet their requirements for sustainable development.

The SDGs with 'serious development related challenges, like lack of socio-economic opportunities, marginalization, discrimination, poor governance, violation of human rights, rule of law and prolonged and unresolved conflict have received priority attention of the government of Nepal which has integrated them into mainstream policies and programs'.

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## Covid-19: A Global Pandemic

After the outbreak of Covid-19 in December, 2019 in the Wuhan city of China, the virus soon spread to other parts of the world, such as Europe, the US, Brazil and to South Asian countries too. Nepal situated between the two Asian giants was not an exception. In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that Covid-19 was a global pandemic and advised all countries affected by Covid infection to take precautionary measures to stop the further spread of the virus. Corona virus cases of infection have been constantly on the increase as evidenced by the US, India and Brazil being the largest infected countries. India reported to be in the grip of the second wave of the deadly virus last January was forced to impose further lockdowns, quarantines, hospitalizations and other restrictions.

The pandemic sweeping across the globe was vividly described by Arundhoti Roy, an eminent Indian writer, in an article published in April last year in the Financial Times. She wrote: 'The number of cases worldwide this week crept over a million. More than 50,000 people have died already. Projections suggest that number will swell to hundreds of thousands, perhaps more'. She further adds 'The virus has moved freely along the pathways of trade and international capital, and the terrible illness it has brought in its wake has locked humans down in their countries, their cities and their homes. Whatever it is, corona virus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to nearly a half like nothing else could'.

## How Nepal Faces the Covid crisis

Government of Nepal imposed the nationwide lockdown on March 24 last year, despite the fact that corona virus cases and fatalities arising therefrom were not alarmingly high. There were only two Covid-19 infected patients. In a period of seven and a half months (March-October 2020), the number of confirmed cases rose to over 1,60,000 with more than 850 deaths. At the time of writing this paper, death toll in Nepal due to Covid-19 has already crossed more than eight thousand. Several experts at home and abroad have described the outbreak of corona virus across the globe as a mind-boggling pandemic.

The lockdown, while it forced people to stay indoors avoiding all physical and social contacts, affected all sectors of national life resulting in the closure of not only schools and colleges, but also business firms and department stores. Not only public transport but also domestic and international flights were cancelled. Lockdown caused shortfall in employment opportunities and gave a death blow to tourism, one of the main sources of national revenue and employment, as the country was expecting more than two million tourists in 2020. Those who were abroad were forced to return home in their villages, and they were jobless. In highly developed countries like the US, millions who lost their jobs during the pandemic could apply for unemployment benefits. This was not the case with Nepal or most countries of South Asia as jobless poor families had difficulty in making their both ends meet. So much so, there was acute shortage of food.

The impact of the virus on food security in South Asia was highlighted by the World Bank in its report last year: 'Millions of poor households across the South Asian region fear starvation, inadequate food

supply and soaring prices. The rural and the urban poor, who spend up to four-fifths of their income on food, are the ones mostly affected. It is feared that in countries like Nepal, with high levels of food insecurity and widespread malnutrition among children, the consequences of the virus spreading widely could reverse the declining trend in poverty and prove to be catastrophic and far reaching'.

As the second wave of the virus swept across South Asia, there was shortage of not only hospital beds, oxygen, ventilators, health workers with PPEs and testing kits but also vaccines. Because of the inadequacy of public health facilities, the most vulnerable were no doubt the poor people, apart from the elderly population above 65. Public reaction was outrageous when the Ministry of Health and Population, Government of Nepal, announced its decision effective from October 18 last year to deny free treatment to Covid-19 patients. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) took a serious note of the decision and issued a press release reminding the government about the constitutional provision on the right to health and urged the concerned authorities not to run away from responsibility of ensuring access of every citizen to free health during the pandemic.

The then Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, in a nationally televised address on October 23 last year responded to the growing criticism from the opposition and from within his own political party and categorically stated that it was the primary duty of the government during the Covid pandemic to protect the lives of its citizens from the crisis. He said: 'In our fight against the virus at a difficult moment like this, government would not deviate from its responsibility towards its citizens in providing them health care and protecting their lives'. Reminding the people that the fight against the virus had nothing to do with party politics and some vested interests, he assured them that the government would strongly follow its guidelines and regulations for the health safety and security of its citizens. The Prime Minister's assurance that the government would spare no pains to control the surge and spread of the virus and provide treatment to Covid patients, including oxygen, ventilators, hospital beds and vaccines, irrespective of their economic status, helped assuage the fears and worries of the people. As regards the vaccines, the Finance Minister presenting the budget for FY 2078/79 on May 29 this year earmarked 25 billion rupees for procuring vaccines from different friendly countries like the US, UK, Russia, China, India and EU. These countries have responded positively to help Nepal in the hour of crisis.

### **Covid – 19 Pandemic: Regional Perspective**

The impact of Covid – 19 pandemic in South Asia and South East Asia led the member states of SAARC and BIMSTEC to convene separate meetings to discuss regional approaches aimed at further strengthening cooperation to combat the impact of COVID – 19 pandemic together. The first Meeting of the SAARC Planning Ministers attended by all 8 member states was convened by Pakistan on 25 November last year in virtual mode. The Meeting called for closer regional collaboration to realign efforts of the Member States to fight the further spread of the Coronavirus and to mitigate its after effects on the socio-economic development of the region.

The Meeting, while sharing national experiences in implementation of SDGs, agreed to revitalize regional approaches to successfully attain the Sustainable Development Agenda – 2030, particularly in respect of poverty, food security, hunger, health, education, inequality and financing for sustainable

development. SAARC Secretary General Mr. E.R. Weerakoon described the Meeting as the reflection of the priority attached to the effective implementation of SDGs in the region. He further said, 'This Ministerial Meeting assumes considerable significance in the context of the direction of the Eighteenth SAARC Summit to initiate an inter-governmental process in contextualizing SDGs in the region.'

On March 15 last year (2020), during a video conference of the SAARC Heads of State and Government, Prime Minister Modi of India proposed a Coronavirus Emergency Fund for the region in response to the global Coronavirus pandemic. India pledged US dollars 10 million to the fund. PM Modi's proposal was heartily supported by other SAARC members. India's External Affairs Ministry, commenting on PM Modi's initiative and contribution designed to help member states in need of assistance to combat the pandemic, stated, 'it has helped us move much faster and without any hindrance.'

BIMSTEC leaders in their messages commemorating the 23rd anniversary of its establishment on June 6 last year, resolved to further strengthen cooperation to collectively combat COVID - 19 impact. PM Modi of India, who pledged to extend all necessary support to the countries in the region to tackle and overcome the pandemic, said, 'India stands ready to share its expertise, resources, capacities and knowledge, with all countries in the region.'

PM Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, host to BIMSTEC secretariat, underscored her country's commitment to work closely with BIMSTEC members in all areas of cooperation encompassing trade, investment, energy, connectivity and people-to-people contact, disaster management, public health, combating terrorism and extremism as well as dealing with adverse effects of climate change and poverty alleviation. PM KP Sharma Oli of Nepal, in his message, called for a collective response to Covid crisis. The leaders noted that the economic gains registered by BIMSTEC countries are constantly being threatened by natural disasters, climate change, pandemics, poverty and economic disparity.

India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar addressing the 17th BIMSTEC ministerial meeting, which comprises seven countries (5 from South Asia and two, Thailand and Myanmar, from South East Asia), laid emphasis on developing the BIMSTEC brand of tourism and called for collaboration in intra-regional tourism badly hit by the ongoing Covid – 19 pandemic. It may be noted that nearly 1.5 billion people or 22 percent of the global population comes under the BIMSTEC and has a combined GDP of 2.7 trillion dollars. Despite the global financial crisis, BIMSTEC's members were able to sustain last year an average 6.5 percent economic growth.

### **Vaccines for all: Global priority**

There is a consensus among all South Asian governments that in order to ensure the effective implementation of all goals for sustainable development (SDGs), their populations representing all age groups need to be vaccinated against the deadly virus that has knocked humanity off balance on all continents. Following the outbreak of the second wave in India, there was a catastrophic surge in cases of Covid infection with deaths crossing more than three thousand a day. It was reported that as India faced a devastating surge of new coronavirus infections overwhelming its health care system, people were taking desperate measures such as unverified medical treatments to keep their loved ones alive.

The situation was not so grim when India known as the world's vaccine powerhouse provided to Nepal one million doses of Covishield in grant assistance. Last February, Nepal placed an order for two million doses of Covishield (Astra Zeneca) vaccine produced by the Serum Institute of India. While half of the order quickly arrived, India gripped by the second wave expressed its inability to supply the vaccines on the ground that there was growing demand at home. Nepal found itself in a desperate situation to procure vaccines from wherever it could - China, the US, the UK and Russia. The government was criticized for wasting more than three months by not diversifying vaccine procurement.

Increasingly under pressure to procure vaccines at the earliest, Nepal decided to buy four million doses of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine. The vaccine, however, would be bought under a non-disclosure agreement as proposed by Sinopharm. The premature media report in Nepal about vaccine procurement from China made the Chinese unhappy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Nepal, was compelled to issue a statement: 'The Government of Nepal has requested the Government of the People's Republic of China to give preference to Nepal on vaccine cooperation. The process to secure vaccines from different countries including China is still ongoing. Media reports on quantity, price, delivery and other relevant information about the vaccine procurement are premature, speculative and misleading. The Ministry refutes such unfounded and baseless media reports' (The Kathmandu Post, June 19, 2021). It may be noted that China provided to Nepal 1.8 million doses of Sinopharm vaccine for free in grant assistance.

In its bid to mobilize multiple channels, Nepal approached Russia to make available its vaccine Sputnik V which had already received emergency use authorization. A high-level Russian team visited Kathmandu to hold negotiations with Nepal's Health Ministry on logistics, the number of doses, price and delivery time. The Russian ambassador's response to PM KP Oli's request for cooperation in vaccine procurement was positive.

The G-7 Summit of the richest countries of the world, which was hosted by UK on June 11-12 this year, expressed the leaders' resolve to beat Covid-19 by intensifying international effort to vaccinate the world by getting as many safe vaccines to as many people as possible as fast as possible. Apart from commitment to provide for one billion doses over the next year, the summit decided to strengthen collective defenses against threats to global health. The second priority of the summit was to reinvigorate the G-7 economies by advancing recovery plans that build on the 12 trillion dollars of support which they have already put in place during the pandemic. Recovery plans include plans to create jobs, invest in infrastructure, drive innovation, support people and level up so that no place or person, irrespective of age, ethnicity or gender is left behind. The richest countries reaffirmed their desire and decision to strengthen their partnerships with other countries around the world. A new partnership envisages investment for infrastructure, including an initiative for clean and green growth. The G-7 agenda would follow multilateral rules-based system. The G-7 countries further look forward to working alongside G-20 countries and with all relevant international organizations to secure a 'cleaner, greener, freer, fairer and safer future for our people and planet'.

## **Looking forward to multi-stakeholder and global partnerships**

Nepal as well as the rest of South Asia are aware of the fact that the 16 SDGs, apparently ambitious, cannot be achieved and implemented successfully through government efforts alone. The importance of support, participation and cooperation from all stakeholders, including global partnership is too obvious to overemphasize. For instance, Nepal's National Planning Commission (NPC), in its national review of SDGs, categorically states that 'all stakeholders play critical role in advocacy, knowledge generation, investment, implementation, monitoring and evaluation'. Such multiple stakeholders that include the public and private sectors, cooperatives and civil society organizations such as women and youth, indigenous and other marginalized groups are expected to contribute significantly and productively to the realization of goals and objectives for sustainable development. The NPC review is appreciative of good progress made by all stakeholders in the implementation of the SDGs in their respective areas of competence. Efforts therefore need to be made to further enhance and strengthen collaboration with all stakeholders in the years to come.

No less important is the need for ensuring and strengthening global partnerships and their involvement in the expeditious implementation of the SDGs through meaningful and substantial cooperation. It is quite obvious that the SDGs cannot be effectively implemented without serious commitment, efforts and huge investments from the global partnerships. Such partnerships will feel encouraged to learn that Nepal as well as other countries of South Asia have spared no pains to promote new technologies and technological adaptations aimed at enhancing efficiency in production as well as service delivery in key areas of sustainable development.

Realization of all the SDGs is not going to be possible through the efforts of an individual country alone. There has to be concerted efforts by all, especially through the assistance of richer countries. This is precisely why the SDG 17 was designed as it mentions, 'Strengthen domestic resource mobilization, including through international support to developing countries, to improve domestic capacity for tax and other revenue collection' and also 'developed countries to implement fully their official development assistance commitments, including the commitment by many developed countries to achieve the target of 0.7 per cent of ODA/GNI to developing countries and 0.15 to 0.20 per cent of ODA/GNI to least developed countries; ODA providers are encouraged to consider setting a target to provide at least 0.20 per cent of ODA/GNI to least developed countries.'

## **Conclusion**

It is clear from the foregoing that the smooth and speedy implementation of the SDGs suffered a setback due to the impact of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic with its devastating consequences for all sectors- social, economic, political and environmental- across the globe. It is hoped that availability of vaccines to all age groups of the population in all countries, particularly in developing countries including SAARC and BIMSTEC member countries as well as LDCs, will go a long way in containing the spread of the virus and bringing them nearer, sooner than later, to the end of the pandemic. All developing countries, including Nepal and its South Asian neighbors, have pinned high hopes on the SDGs and their beneficial, encouraging and positive impact, with global support and cooperation, not

only on individual country economies but also on the overall global economic growth and prosperity. There is no reason to despair, as Robert Stanford of UN University reminds us: 'in our post-pandemic world we will need to make not a partial but a full transformation, one in which self-interest again aligns with planetary realities'.

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