



‘How to Make South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals (SANS) More Effective and Sustainable’

Report of Brainstorming Meeting held on 4 August 2021

Background

A virtual brainstorming meeting on “How to Make South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals (SANS) More Effective and Sustainable” was convened by South and South-West Asia Office (SSWA) of UNESCAP on 4 August 2021. The objective of this dialogue was to bring together SANS members to hear their perspectives on strategies for strengthening SANS and making it a more effective and a sustainable network for achieving the 2030 Agenda in South Asia.

At the beginning of the session, Mr. Adnan H. Aliani, Officer-in-Charge, UNESCAP-SSWA, New Delhi delivered the opening remarks. This was followed by an overview presentation by Dr. Rajan Sudesh Ratna, ESCAP-SSWA and a panel discussion facilitated by Dr. Nagesh Kumar, Director, Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID), India. The panel included distinguished speakers - Dr. Fahmida Khatun, Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh; Dr. Selim Raihan, Executive Director, South Asia Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM), Bangladesh; Ms. Wangmo, Senior Programme Officer, Tarayana Foundation, Bhutan; Dr. Sabyasachi Saha, Assistant Professor, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), India ; Dr. Arvind Kumar, President, India Water Foundation, India ; Dr. Posh Raj Pandey, Chairman, South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics & Environment (SAWTEE), Nepal ; Dr. Abid Suleri, Executive Director, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Pakistan ; and Dr. Ganga Tilakaratna, Research Fellow and Head of Poverty and Social Welfare Policy Research at the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS).

The session was held on Ms Teams platform and had participation from the SANS member think tanks from South Asian countries. The programme is at Annex – I of this report.

Key Highlights

Some of the key messages emanating from the Policy Dialogue are the following:

- **SANS an enabler for subregional cooperation in South Asia**

SANS has been developed with an aim to foster greater sub regional cooperation among the South Asian nations. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the gaps in our health and social infrastructure and the post pandemic period also possess significant challenges for building back better along with green recovery. As countries recover from COVID-19, these challenges have enhanced the need for subregional cooperation and SANS could play an important role of an enabler towards subregional cooperation in South Asia.

- **Creating SANS as a member driven network for long term sustainability**

The South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals (SANS) has been conceptualized to inspire greater subregional cooperation by sharing good practices on sustainable development and act as a knowledge sharing platform among all South Asian stakeholders. The success of the SANS network will only be achieved if all the network partners proactively get engaged in its initiatives and guide the way forward in this regard. There was a common consensus to work towards creating SANS as a member driven network with members contributing towards collaborative research, policy dialogues and knowledge database and developing SANS guidelines on the lines of SAARC.

- **Frequent engagement (discussions, meetings) among the focal point of contact for improved networking**

To ensure continuity of the SANS network and to promote networking, it was suggested for assigning focal points of contact from all members and to conduct regular meetings (formal/informal agenda) between the focal points of contact. This would enable effective knowledge transfer, undertake collaborative research which in turn would lead to joint collaborations and more conversations around regional cooperation.

- **Organising joint research and events**

Doing joint research and organising events jointly under SANS will strengthen its network and make this platform more effective in assisting countries achieve the SDGs. The members agreed to explore possible areas for joint research, annual publication, analysis and capacity building under SANS. ESCAP agreed to fund these activities partially.

- **SANS a rich depository of good practices and knowledge resources**

SANS has been developed with an intent of becoming a rich depository of good practices and would aid in accelerating interaction, learning and implementation of SDGs in the South Asian countries. A set of already implemented case studies which have brought about a positive change to the society are considered as good practices. The database of good practices and knowledge resources may act as a good learning lesson about challenges faced and actions implemented in different countries to resolve issues, thereby facilitating the implementation of SDGs. Further, it was

suggested to provide access of webpage and dedicated sections to each member states as a means of strengthening the website.

- **Preparation of a calendar of events and circulating a news bulletin or newsletter about SANS activities**

It was suggested to prepare a calendar of events under SANS which would help in identifying some of the research and policy-making activities. Further, sharing a news bulletin/ newsletter/ an annual report about SANS activities, state of SDGs, updates about knowledge resources by the SANS network, or even by the member institutions could help in increasing the visibility of SANS portal and make it more effective and sustainable in the long run. It was recommended for creating a request template form that could be shared to all members for providing updated knowledge resources which in turn would be uploaded on the SANS web portal on a regular basis.

- **Inclusion of private sector in policy dialogues/consultations**

Organizing a series of workshops or policy dialogues related to SDGs, can provide a platform for stakeholders from the region to discuss, collaborate and would facilitate effective consultations. It was recommended for engaging the private sector as well in the context of SDGs as a large part of implementation of SDGs is done by the private sector.

- **Expanding the participation to South and South-West Asian countries Iran and Turkey**

As countries try to recover from pandemic impacts, participation of more institutions would be help in building back in a more sustainable manner. The challenges faced provide an opportunity for enhancing regional cooperation and SANS can have an important role in this through its members. Hence, it was suggested to expand the participation and the membership criteria is uploaded on the webpage. Further, panelists appreciated the idea of broadening of the membership of the SANS network to include Iran and Turkey.

Summary of Proceedings

- **Mr. Adnan H. Aliani, Officer-in-Charge, UNESCAP-SSWA, New Delhi**, at the outset acknowledged the presence of Dr. Nagesh Kumar, Director, ISID, India under whose guidance and leadership SANS website was visualized and developed. He recalled that during the high-level policy dialogue held in October 2018 and the 3rd SDG forum on the SDGs held in Dhaka in December 2019, the need for a South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals (SANS) was emphasized and it was also recommended that the UNESCAP South and South West Asia Office (UNESCAP-SSWA) should facilitate this network and serve as a secretariat given its neutral inter-governmental character, multisector expertise, regional outreach, and the mandate for fostering regional cooperation for development. In response to these recommendations, under the leadership of Dr. Nagesh Kumar, the SANS portal was launched at the opening session of the 4th South Asia Forum on SDGs held on 2 December 2020. The SANS portal aims to be a single platform to share SDG case studies/ good practices from the South Asian region as well as many knowledge products. He further underlined that the success and sustainability of SANS will only be achieved if all the network partners proactively get engaged in its initiatives and guide the way forward in this regard. As part of his concluding remarks, he shared the objective of this meeting, that is, to discuss the strategies for strengthening SANS and make it a more effective and sustainable member driven network for achieving the 2030 Agenda in South Asia. Additionally, exploring the possible areas for joint research, analysis and capacity building under SANS and strengthening the sustainability of SANS and stated that he looked forward to the productive session with all the participants of the meeting.
- **Dr. Rajan Sudesh Ratna, Deputy Head and Senior Economic Affairs Officer, ESCAP-SSWA, New Delhi**, presented an overview on the South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals (SANS), the progress made till date and the objectives of this session. He spoke about the SANS launch at the 4th SDG forum in December 2020 and shared that the design and development of the website has been done in house which is a continuous work in progress. Additionally, the database of good practices is being prepared on an ongoing basis and is available on the website. In the process of finalizing the future roadmap for SANS, he shared about the SANS membership, the advisory committee, the various aspects of the website and underlined upon the issues for discussion today. He highlighted the issues that this meeting needs to deliberate its future work programme so as to make SANS more effective and visible.
- **Dr. Nagesh Kumar, Director, Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID), India** while moderating the panel discussion, acknowledged that with the collective vision of all South Asian think tanks and organizations, SANS is progressing well. He highlighted that mobilization of resources, sub regional good practices and expertise are critical in reviving the economies of South Asian countries and accelerating the progress towards sustainable development goals. He stated that as countries recover from COVID-19 pandemic, SANS could play an important role and can act as an enabler towards sub regional cooperation in South Asia. He further asserted that this

brainstorming meeting comes at a crucial time as South Asian countries are looking to build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerate SDGs implementation efforts to recover in a more resilient and inclusive manner. He emphasised the need for collaboration amongst the think tanks and ESCAP in doing joint research and organise trainings and capacity building programmes on various issues that are important for South Asia.

- **Dr. Fahmida Khatun, Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh**, expressed her appreciation for the SANS and lauded the timeliness of this initiative as South Asian countries lag in implementing the commitments of the SDGs. The South Asian countries have been impacted severely by the COVID-19 pandemic due to lack of health and education infrastructure. She felt that this has affected people of this region far more than those in the advanced countries and underlined upon the aspect of the data unavailability while trying to track SDGs under various targets and indicators. She highlighted that CPD has conducted various studies on various aspects of SDGs and there were many disappointing findings due to lack of crucial indicators of the statistics. She further laid emphasis on the aspect of data authenticity, the quality of data and the usability of data. In the context of COVID-19, it has become important to have real-time data to evaluate the impact in terms of employment, income, and on many social achievements. In reference to the Bangladesh country, she highlighted the challenges being faced as the nation recovers from the impact of the pandemic. Firstly, the need to have a comprehensive data set on the impact of the COVID-19 to understand the damage and its extent. Secondly, the impact of climate change and its worsening impact. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has projected that by 2050 Bangladesh's coastal areas for settlement, agriculture production, and industrial production would be affected. Thus, it was emphasized that the impact must also be dealt

along with the current challenges and while addressing those challenges, appropriate policies, work must be undertaken in parallel at the domestic, regional, and global level. To conclude, she stated that the efforts need to be put at all levels to build back better from the impact of COVID-19 and CPD would support research, dissemination, training, and capacity-building.

- **Dr. Selim Raihan, Executive Director, South Asia Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM), Bangladesh** recalled the views shared by other panellists including the need to synchronize the works of the think tanks and research organizations in South Asia, preparation of a monthly or bi-monthly news bulletin and presented his thoughts on making SANS more effective and sustainable. Firstly, he proposed for a categorization of defined activities related to SDGs, research, and the synergies among the SANS members. Secondly, he suggested for preparation of an annual calendar of SANS which would be helpful in identifying some of the research and policy-making activities. Additionally, linking the news bulletin with the annual calendar would help in increasing the outreach. Thirdly, he felt a need to bring in networking within policy makers and believed that participation of leaders, policy makers and champions (influential policy makers) within the countries in the policy-making discussions would enable effective consultations. He highlighted the need to engage with private sector in the context of SDGs as a large part of implementation of SDGs is done by the private sector. He also expressed his admiration for the efforts put in by Dr. Abid Suleri, Executive Director, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Pakistan to effectively engage the policymakers in Pakistan and in some part of South Asia as well. Fourthly, after studying the website of SANS, he proposed for removing categorization in the membership criteria with an intent of making it more inclusive. Fifthly, he emphasized on the need to undertake knowledge sharing to make the knowledge platform on SANS effective by means of sharing research, surveys, discussing

on topics around COVID-19 impact on SDGs and so on. He remarked “SANS is meant to do some very non-conventional work, given the need of the time”. The next point that was stressed upon was the data issue, including the data lag in all the countries. He further explained this in context of poverty, and shared that Bangladesh undertook that last survey in the year 2016 and in India in the year 2011. Poverty is an important component of SDG and during the pandemic, poverty levels have risen quite significantly in all the South Asian countries including the effect on employment. Further, in reference to this capacity building program, he highlighted upon the technical programs involving policy makers and secondly for regional cooperation, banking upon SDGs as a common platform for effective discussions. He concluded on a positive note by stating that SANEM is willing to provide support to SANS via research, capacity-building, networking, and via engagement with policy makers and the private sector.

- **Ms. Wangmo, Senior Programme Officer, Tarayana Foundation, Bhutan** shared a brief about Tarayana Foundation, stating that is a non-profit organization, working towards upliftment and enhancing the lives of vulnerable and rural communities. She stated their organizations efforts are primarily divided into two programs, namely social development program and social economic development program. She further highlighted that currently, Bhutan does not have any civil society platform for sustainable development goals and expressed that that the existing Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have not given major focus to the SDGs. In Bhutan, the Gross National Happiness Commission Secretariat are responsible for central planning and coordination of all social economic development plans and are responsible for the successful implementation of the SDGs. She concluded by stating that at Tarayana Foundation, they have taken part in training programs for SDGs, in undertaking reforms and preparing scorecards, Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), sharing reports and all

programs and activities are being planned in alignment to the SDGs.

- **Dr. Sabyasachi Saha, Assistant Professor, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), India** voiced his affirmation about SANS initiative and felt that the listed practices, initiatives and sustainable practices mentioned on the SANS website could act as good learning lessons about challenges faced and actions implemented in different countries to resolve issues. He highlighted that some of the challenges faced by the member nations predate the pandemic, and underlined that, localized efforts are being undertaken through partnership at provincial, state, governments as well as civil societies. Reiterating that the SANS portal can provide us learning experiences, he stated that the post pandemic response should be robustly captured as this could provide the policy makers with vital information to build a more resilient region. Further, he acknowledged the impending challenges of climate change, its effect on the region and asserted upon the need to respond at the earliest. Additionally, he indicated about the lack of conversation in the region on various issues and felt the need for efficient regional cooperation. He mentioned about the importance of localizing development and local supply chains and stated the need for certain elements of production to be domesticated to absorb any future shocks that the region may encounter along with cooperation among countries. Joint research would lead to joint collaborations and believed that stronger policy advocacy is of vital essence where the countries are falling short of their commitments to regional cooperation. Lastly, he stressed upon the need to research means of implementation of SDGs and collaborate on futuristic ideas such as knowledge corridors along with building stronger collaboration in partnership for science, technology, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

- **Dr. Posh Raj Pandey, Chairman, South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics & Environment (SAWTEE), Nepal**, expressed his appreciation for SANS and felt that it has been successful in initiating evidence-based discussion in South Asia and providing new ideas to policy makers, particularly in issues concerned with SDGs as well as in articulating policies in addressing the challenges of the Covid pandemic. He shared that progressive and frequent engagement of network members in various activities would help in strengthening the network and make it more sustainable. He proposed few approaches to do so, with the first one being to emulate SAARC and BIMSTEC's official process. He detailed that specific sectors/ areas should be assigned to a selected think tank which would there forth act as the leading institute for the assigned sector, and this institute would be responsible to propose the research agenda, develop proposals for funding, conducting workshops and trainings etc. Second proposal shared was in the context of strengthen the think tanks, organizations and institutes by the means of regular workshops and training to be organised jointly. The focus during these workshops should be on young researchers and mid-level government officials. Another point put forth by him as a means of strengthening the web site by providing access to dedicated sections to each of the member states. Lastly, he felt that to ensure long term sustainability, strengthening our ability to mobilize resources is critical and attention should be paid in this

learnings of engaging with various networks over two decades. Among the various lessons learnt, the first lesson that he shared was the need to be socially acquainted with the individuals involved in the network and this would help in ensuring continuity of networks. According to him, many networks in the region maintained their continuity with social interactions and expressed his concern in this regard with travel restrictions imposed by countries due to the pandemic. To ensure continuity of the SANS network and to promote networking, he suggested for assigning focal points of contact from all members and to conduct monthly meetings (formal/informal agenda) between the focal points of contact. He further highlighted that civil societies played a crucial role in bringing ministries, governments of different states closer and stated that SANS should act on the lines of SAARC. He also expressed that SANS members could help shape the agenda of cooperation for sustainable environment goals as they had an impact on their respective government representatives and had access to resources to produce tangible results. Additionally, he suggested to initiate the compilation of a joint annual report on sustainable development goal by a dedicated team responsible for publishing state of SDGs in South Asia through the SANS platform, which can be funded by ESCAP. Furthermore, he underlined upon the need to help the government in revising Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Lastly, Dr Suleri shared

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