

Multiple crises and rising inequality in South Asia

Social movements in recovering people's livelihoods and human rights



SIXTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY (GA) OF SAAPE

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Introduction

SAAPE, a regional people's platform working united against the structural causes of poverty and social injustices in South Asia has been continually engaging over the years in strengthening and consolidating the socio-political movements in the region. Contributing to a political process of poverty eradication through conscious efforts by promoting peoples' politics of good governance, food sovereignty, gender equality and labour rights through their mechanisms, SAAPE aims to achieve its mission by strengthening people's struggles and movements across the countries in South Asia. SAAPE strongly believes in a democratic political process that helps to strategise genuine politics of poverty eradication through creating an enabling environment of options and opportunities leading to people's political empowerment.

SAAPE initiative has already passed its 21 years of struggle against poverty. The Manesar meeting (2000) and the South Asia Civil Society Network (SACSN) meeting (2001) formed this alliance to collectively organise campaigns and fight against poverty, injustice and inequality in the South Asia region.

The rationale for forming a regional alliance

A stratified and feudal socio-political order coupled with exploitative colonial histories marked the greatest challenge for the birth of new and free nation-states in the region during the middle of the 20th century. Social differences and economic inequalities have been at the heart of the ongoing political turbulence in the countries of the region thus jeopardizing often the brave experiments with democratic polity, plurality and participation. The poor indeed become the worst sufferers of this turbulence losing out on land and other rights, entitlements, identity and political space.

In spite of different political and governance structures, each South Asian countries find itself in positions of adversity in the global economy with negative trade balances and mounting public debt. These compulsions along with the pressures of their respective bourgeoisie in alliance with international capital have driven the South Asian governments to accept structural adjustment programmes spearheaded by the World Bank/International Monetary Fund and to agree to moves towards integrating global markets through privatisation and deregulation. Changes in the role of the states in South Asia have come to a point where it is

widely accepted that the state will withdraw from several core' social sectors and will invite private business interests for spearheading these.

Context of Sixth General Assembly

Along with various social, economic and political upheavals in South Asia, the COVID-19 pandemic seriously affected people's livelihood and survival options while exposing the poor state of our public sector.

The return of the Taliban to the Afghanistan government came as a setback for the progressive forces in the world, particularly for South Asia. The forcible takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban fighters is condemned everywhere. The establishment of another religious fanatic state in South Asia will promote religious sectarianism throughout the region and anti-peace measures will continue. The denial of women's rights to education and work is unacceptable. In Afghanistan, a staggering 95 per cent of Afghans are not getting enough to eat, with that number rising to almost 100 per cent in female-headed households, according to the UN. Acute malnutrition rates in 28 out of 34 provinces are high with more than 3.5 million children in need of nutrition treatment support¹.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the ugly face of neoliberalism which has miserably failed to protect people's lives. Hundreds of thousands lost their lives causing grave damage to the poor and to the economic livelihoods of millions in the informal sector. The crisis brought by the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the frail nature of our public health systems. Although uneven across the region, it is already evidenced that the public health systems are unable to cope with the current burden of disease. Four decades of neoliberal capitalism have destroyed basic public services including quality public health care and universal social protection. Globalisation for South Asian countries resulted in greater privatisation of health care and a reduction in the role of the state. South Asia, by and large, has seen the reduction of primary health care centres in the predominantly rural areas making quality health care impossible for the poor. In India, millions took to the roads in an exodus of a kind hardly seen since Partition days. Afraid of being caught in the cities without shelter, work, food etc. millions chose to travel home to their villages on foot.

The situation and difficulties faced by the poor, women and vulnerable section of every community, struggling hard to survive in the time of lockdown, curfews and other restrictions are serious and unimaginable. Globally, patriarchal, gendered norms of unpaid care work are being reinforced at homes that are resulting in rampant domestic violence. Millions of workers have lost jobs and livelihoods, particularly women who are contract-based and casual, consequently deepening hunger, and individual and household debt crises. Migrant workers are in miserable conditions in South Asia as millions are struggling to live without food and a place to rest and sleep and women migrant workers are most vulnerable. Panic and fear are common sentiments that are affecting people's minds. The disruption in the global supply chain followed by an exponential hike in food prices and other essential services has significantly impacted the livelihood of the workers, daily wage earners and low-income families.

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113982>

Background Paper

The people who work in the informal and unorganised sectors, daily wage earners, hawkers, migrant workers etc. are facing the brunt of the adverse situations where they have become helpless in their lives. *Therefore, the economic recovery of small scale producers and the continuation of workers and their families' decent living after various waves of the pandemic needs to be discussed and should be taken care of.* The Russia-Ukraine crisis could put the brakes on a global and South Asian economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. As net importers of commodities, the South Asian economies are vulnerable to soaring commodity prices, rising inflation, lower external demand, disruptions in supply chains and increasing poverty².

Similarly, the case of vaccine equity remained a most contested issue between the global North and the South as developed countries and the big-pharma companies who are producing the COVID-19 vaccines opposed the TRIPS waiver proposal submitted by the government of India and the government of South Africa. The TRIPS waiver on the COVID-19 vaccine technology could have been a milestone in protecting the lives of millions of people by providing free and fair access to such facilities.

In Sri Lanka, the people lost their confidence in the government which is mired in corruption and incompetence - a fatal combination that has brought the country to this pathetic level and has ruined the lives of ordinary people. The impact of the crisis is well documented in the national and international media, showing people standing in queues for hours to get basic essentials, unable to afford food and medicine and the country too is unable to provide basic services of health, education, and social security and electricity. This crisis in Sri Lanka has become a unique moment for the Sri Lankan people's political awakening to oust the autocratic rule represented by the Rajapaksa regime.

The hate and division are being spread in our societies by political parties and ideologies. Especially how it has become difficult even next to impossible for civil society & people's groups to function in the vitiated climate.

In this context, the Sixth General Assembly of SAAPE, which is held once every three years, is focusing on the multiple issues in South Asia including but not limited to economic recovery, women and unpaid care work, climate, food and agriculture, tax justice and the role of civil society and social movements to defend people's rights and protecting their livelihoods.

This General Assembly will also discuss future strategies, campaign strategies, and SAAPE membership.

The GA will be attended by SAAPE delegates/members from South Asian countries and civil society partners in the North and the South who are involved in the issues of poverty and exclusion. They mainly include the representatives from peasant organisations, women's coalitions, NGOs, trade unions, social movements, and independent academics and human rights activists.

² <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/how-should-south-asian-economies-respond/>