



## Concept note

*Reimagining South Asia and South Asian regionalism*

**Emerging Political and Economic Crises in South Asia  
People's Platforms Promoting Just and Equitable Society**

### **People's SAARC Regional Meeting 2022**

26 May 2022

Kathmandu, Nepal

#### **Background information**

The people of South Asia share contiguous geographical space and similar social and cultural ethos that shape the people's lifestyle, belief system, cultural specialities, material practices and social relationships in the region. Their beliefs and cultural practices are also influenced by one another. Although SAARC formally started working in the South Asia region in 1985, which had more than three decades of experience in regional cooperation, had not achieved or headed towards fulfilling the commitments made so far. The cancellation of the 19th South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit which was scheduled to be held in Pakistan in November 2016, deeply dismayed the people of South Asia and it was an unfortunate instance of the use of SAARC Summits for coercive neighbourhood foreign policy rather than a tool of peacebuilding for regional development and prosperity.

Contrary to this, civil societies of the South Asia region are continuously pushing, pressurising the government to revive the regional intergovernmental organization and implement commitments made by the regional body. Most importantly, these campaigns and movements are raising the issues of ignored and neglected, people. The South Asian governments have undermined the people's basic rights such as rights to food health, shelter, education, decent work and employment. Dereliction of people's agenda is the most undemocratic practice we are suffering from in South Asian states. Thus, the state level SAARC being unable to fulfil its promises, the idea of People's SAARC was floated more than one and half decades ago. Different people's platforms in the South Asia region were organised as parallel events a few days before the official SAARC summit in different countries of South Asia. After organising a series of country consultations focusing on people's agendas to be addressed, People's SAARC events were organised in 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011 and 2014 in Kathmandu, Nepal; Colombo, Sri Lanka; New Delhi, India; Male, Maldives and Kathmandu, Nepal respectively.

After the cancellation of SAARC to be held in 2016 in Pakistan, the future of the SAARC remained in question. However, the inter-dependence and inter-relationship between people to people in South Asia remain vital as always in the domains of family, culture, livelihoods, trade, ecology and environment. The interdependence is more relevant at a time when many crises such as climate crisis, pandemic crisis, economic crises and political instability threaten the basic life of people in the regions. Given the recent political and economic crises faced by Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, the people of these countries need solidarity and support from the people of other countries as the governments turned to be oppressive and not responsible to their citizens. With the rationale above, the promotion of platform politics to bring the people together to protect and defend their rights and interests is a dire need of the present time for saving people from suffering.

In this context South Asian people's movements (women, youth, peasants, labour, socially marginalised groups, human rights activists, academics) and civil society organisations have planned to meet on 25-26 May, 22 in Kathmandu to revive the People's SAARC as a common platform of people of South Asia.

People's SAARC has been committed to visions of alternative political, social, economic and cultural systems that enable the sustainable development of societies in the region. It promotes the democratic

practices that will do away with autocratic rule and all forms of discrimination based on gender, caste/ethnicity, religion/culture, nationality/country of origin, language and geopolitical location of habitation. While gender discrimination in South Asia is widespread, Hijab as a male imposition is an extreme form of patriarchy. While we oppose communalism and politics of religious polarization forcefully, it is important to speak out against patriarchy and misogyny exercised within the religion.

South Asia has been an epicentre of conflicts including ethnic, political, religious and social ones. The ethnic and religious conflicts often lead to extremism in South Asia. The region has multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious societies and this multiplicity has given rise to a variety of clashes. The ethnic and religious conflicts have often turned to be extremism that has seriously violated the rights of minorities in South Asia. The rise of religious extremism can have profound effects on the political forces of the states. What starts with community affects people on a domestic level and may cause a ripple effect within the state institutions. The cost of the conflict has to bear by women, the poor, youth, children and marginalized people. Many of the South Asian ruling classes who run the governments have violated the ethnic and religious minorities' rights by misusing the state power for their benefit. Extremism is not an attribute of a particular religion, but extremists who adhere to their respective religions in South Asia have been known to exhibit extremist tendencies, often bolstered by the proclamations of certain leaders in power, who have openly spoken out against secularism. The agitation against the minority religious groups in the states has created a riptide of extremist views that feed into the nationalist agendas.

People's SAARC stands for inclusive and accountable democracy free from any form of exploitation, oppression and external interventions. It creates an environment in which everyone will have the opportunity to realise the full development of human potential; restore the ecological balance and harmony with nature; eliminate the artificial and human barriers that divide lands, people and minds; and transcend all boundaries. People's SAARC needs to be developed as a process-based political platform or space for South Asian people to come together and coordinate among themselves to voice their concerns, consolidate and strengthen their work and networks as well as take forward an institutional engagement with the intergovernmental bodies and its members. While People's SAARC used to relate and respond to the SAARC agenda, as the SAARC is not functional for the last 6-7 years, it goes beyond the ritual SAARC process and envisions a South Asian-ness that resonates with the necessities and priorities of the people of South Asia.

## **Present Predicament**

Across the region, democracy has been weakened, corruption has increased and the rights of citizens including civic spaces are being denied finally a few South Asian governments are failed even to keep the nation-states as custodians of their citizens. Development in the region is affected by corrupt political leadership, inefficient state institutions and growing militarization. India ranks 7th globally in terms of defence expenditure, while Pakistan's military budget is 3.5 per cent of its GDP. All other South Asian countries' military budget is at least more than 1per cent of their GDP.<sup>1</sup> There is a **crisis of democracy**, as governance is manifested by increased pervasive nepotism and corruption, misappropriation of state funds, an absence of transparency and accountability in public administration, and a lack of respect for the rule of law. The current state failure of Sri Lanka due to indebtedness is an explicit example of misappropriation of resources, nepotism, corruption and absence of accountability.

Market and profit-driven globalisation has reached unprecedented levels and exacerbated extreme inequality, and global governance involves a range of actors and institutions, several of which are against the people surviving at the margin. The dominant neoliberal growth model that is at play currently has been severely and even violently restructuring the region's economic policies and cultural life of the

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.sipri.org/databases>

# PEOPLE'S SAARC

people and curtailing and devaluing the very essence of democracy directly or indirectly. International Financial Institutions and Multinational Companies have been the major players in sucking the profits from the common people. Women, informal sector workers, small peasants and marginalised people who form a two-thirds population of South Asia have been the victim of unequal global governance.

Furthermore, global challenges, such as Covid-19, climate change, poverty, energy crisis, the rise of prices of food and essential goods and the transnational nature of many emerging threats to human security in South Asia pose the question of the capability of the nation-states to contend with challenges that go beyond national boundaries. Business as usual is a sure recipe for persistent social crises and turmoil and conflicts, which threaten human security and aggravate ecological disasters on different scales. Augmenting the resilience of South Asian societies and building cross border solidarities is essential given the continued use by global and regional powers of the guise of development to further reinforce their economic and political hold on this region through loans, aid, foreign investment, 'humanitarian' and military interventions.

Since gaining independence, South Asian states have yet to settle down to mutual co-existence, let alone to cooperation and a peaceful relationship. Even though under the guise of SAARC the region has created heaps of declarations promoting regional cooperation and mutual support, real cooperation and support have been lacking. Contemporary developments pose an even greater challenge to *reimagining South Asia and South Asian regionalism*. The present situation calls for new responses.

The rise of fundamentalism and extremism in the region has further weakened the collective effort required to promote regional cooperation and peace among the countries of South Asia. Populist governments are curbing democratic freedoms in the name of nationalism that divides and excludes people. Vulnerable communities and particularly women bear the brunt of politics of religious polarization. Recently Muslim women in India were in the crossfires of patriarchy and communal politics over the hijab. Women across South Asia must stand up against the divisive politics furthering patriarchal worldviews and structures.

## **Programme justification**

This proposed People's SAARC regional meeting to be held on 26 May 2022 will analyse the current changing landscape of South Asia and reflect on the role of People's SAARC and identify the new roles of People's SAARC in the changing political context. This meeting will also consider the emerging regional alliances and their role in uniting/dividing the South Asian unity to have an in-depth understanding of the trend of grouping and sub-grouping of the region that will have an impact on the rights of the people of South Asia.

People are finding themselves more and more politically alienated, denied fundamental rights as well as access to instruments necessary for realising their rights. The State which is conceived as a space for peaceful resolution of conflicts remains fragile even as States are capturing more and more draconian powers of control aimed at curtailing people's movements and legitimate forms of organisation and resistance. More and more decisions affecting the everyday life of the people are being dictated by MNCs and global financial institutions to which there is no democratic access and from where there is no accountability.

Reclaiming the region and developing sustained regional alternatives requires that we amalgamate politics and the economy that serves people and opposes the greed of elites. Reclaiming the region means recreating regional integration based on human rights principles – people-centred and people-oriented. The challenge, then, for civil society and peoples' movements in the region is to come up with and assert an alternative vision of regional integration or new regionalism based on peoples' needs and aspirations.

12 May 2022