Inequality in South Asia

Inequality on a historical march is even more rising on a world scale and South Asia is no exception. South Asia has been appropriating a significantly large share of global income. During the last decade, the share of income poor in South Asia has increased, despite the share of multidimensional poverty showing only a marginal decline. Multi-dimensional poverty refers to deprivation of more than one dimension such as health, education, living standards, etc.

According to studies such as Bourguignon & Morrison, Inequality among World Citizens: 1820-1992 published in 2002, the global poverty rate dramatically dropped from 94% (1820) to 10.7% (2013) during the last two centuries. Strangely enough, South Asia’s share of global poor has increased from 21.3% to 33.4% during the period of 1990-2013, only ahead of Sub-Saharan Africa which accounts for the largest share (50.7%). This despite the fact that the number of poor people living in South Asia actually fell by 248.8 million during 1990-2013.

All accepted standard indicators, viz. the Gini Coefficient, Quintile and Palma ratios points to acute inequalities in the region. Several studies and reports reveal the absence of equitable access to resources, jobs, market and development. A deadly combination of these factors has resulted in a disproportional share of the poor people compared to other regions of the world. According to the World Bank, the quality education received by the poor, and access to secondary school for girls, remain important challenges. The same applies to access to health services and sanitation, with rural areas which are at serious disadvantage.

This serious growth of inequality in South Asia is a result of government policies and programmes that benefit only a handful of rich leaving behind a large section of society who are denied access to basic human rights and needs. Existing welfare policies, practically negligible have been vastly inadequate to improve the lives of the marginalized people, the millions suffering at the bottom for generations. Poverty and exclusion are the outcomes of the exclusive policies of the states as well as parastatal agencies favouring the rich and neglecting the poor and vulnerable groups. The fruits of the economic gains have been limited to the elite who have monopolistic access to resources and market participation. Not only have public policies in South Asia failed to deal with structural inequalities, but they have also been constantly shaped and reshaped to serve a minority at the top (the 1%).

Extreme inequalities of wealth are destroying much of the region as in other parts of the planet. The region is in the throes of a downward spiral as disparities of wealth and power compound and worsens. While the economy surges, inequality subverts democracy, culture and security with a tiny elite at the top owning the wealth almost entirely. This is most visible in the urban landscapes. A number of studies show that class, ethnicity, religious and caste inequalities represent the growing axis of residential segregation in urban South Asia. The expanding middle class and rapid urbanisation in South Asian countries also corresponds to the widening of income gap, which is manifested in growing unemployment, rural-urban migration and slum-dwelling, where millions are deprived of the basic amenities to life.

Most South Asian countries are ranked low in the Gender Inequality Index (GII). Indicators like average years of schooling, per-capita income and labour force participation rates indicate that women in the region lag significantly behind in comparison to men. One in every two women in South Asia faces violence in her home. There is significant gender discrimination between a girl child and a boy child. In South Asia, there are 50 million fewer women in the population. Girls and women in South Asia die prematurely through neglect and violence. 56 percent of women in South Asia are illiterate and one third of all maternal deaths in the world occur in the region.

- Inequality Campaigns in South Asia
- SAAPE Call for COVID-19 Crisis and Debt Cancellation in South Asia
- South Asia Inequality Report 2019 Launching Events
- SAAPE Campaigns and Publications
South Asia has the world’s most skewed gender wage gap in terms of income inequality by gender. This region falls among the few regions in the world where the gender labour force participation gap is both tremendously large and continuously growing. Gender gaps in labour market participation is very wide in South Asia. It is anticipated to remain so in the near future, primarily due to the exceedingly low participation rates of women in the labour market. Implicit in this trend, there are apprehensions that owing to restrictive gender and cultural norms, women in South Asia are more constrained in terms of their choice to seek paid employment.

South Asia has emerged fast as one of the most unequal regions of the world. Earlier, it was believed the size of economies was inadequate to ensure a dignified and decent living for its high population so as to bring prosperity in the region. However, this is not the case so, anymore. The last three decades have witnessed huge economic growth and interestingly, has been coupled with a surge of inequality, too. Interesting changes occurred in South Asia between 1980 and 2015, Afghanistan moved from a status of low inequality to medium inequality; Bangladesh moved from medium inequality to high inequality; though Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka remained within the medium inequality range, Sri Lanka was at the border of high inequality; India moved from high inequality to very high inequality and both Bhutan and; Maldives moved from very high inequality to medium inequality.

Inequality in the region is not incidental but structural, the outcome of a state system driven by pro-rich and pro-elite legal, regulatory and related institutional setups. The need of the hour is rethinking in dealing with structural inequalities – both economic and extra economic. South Asian countries need to thoroughly revamp and reorganise their welfare policies to address these structural causes. This needs to be changed towards people-centric progressive provisions both in the constitution as well as law. Universal access to basic services and genuine equal opportunities for all should form the cornerstone of the process to form an equal society. The state must guarantee access to land, water and other natural resources that are vital to sustain people’s livelihood.


The coronavirus outbreak has become a pandemic, infecting over 15 million people and claiming the lives of 630,781 people across the world (as at 23 July 2020). In South Asia, India has been the worst affected by the outbreak followed by Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan and other countries. This grave situation has created havoc in the South Asian countries where the public health care system is in a crisis. Healthcare for those infected with COVID-19 should be available to all people without discrimination, including the most vulnerable and marginalised.

It is in this spirit that the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and the South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) are committed to creating an initiative to build a platform that enables civil society to share and continue their works as well as to increase solidarity and resilience as a community in South Asia. With an objective to continue people’s interactions through regional platform, this initiative was started. Total of five webinar sessions were organised during this series. The webinar series provided a forum for CSOs to discuss about the socio-economic situations in South Asia and develop a regional strategy.

Following sessions were organised from 20 May till 01 July 2020.

1. Redefining and strengthening human rights activism and development work in the Context of COVID-19 in South Asia
2. Session 2: What are the responses from South Asian countries in COVID-19 to protect women’s and children’s rights?
3. Session 3: COVID-19, Debt and Inequality: Restructuring the architecture of financing for human rights and development
4. Session 4: Situation of migrant workers and informal workers and their rights to work and health: Addressing poverty and inequality
5. Session 5: Envisioning radical changes in public health system in South Asian countries to meet the universal goal of right to health for all
Fight Inequality Alliance members across the world organised various campaigns to demand social, economic, political as well as environmental justice. A number of events were organised during the Global Week of Action by various civil society organisations in South Asian countries to highlight and showcase how people’s solutions are the ways to tackle the root causes of poverty and inequality. Alliances and networks involved in fighting an end to inequality believe in the need of consolidating people’s power and mobilising them to reverse the course, and address inequality.

As a part of the Fight Inequality Global Campaign, various activities were organised in South Asian Countries (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) during Global Week of Action 2020 (18-25 January 2020).

**Bangladesh:** As a part of the Fight Inequality campaign, SAAPE members in Bangladesh organised Press Conference, Human Chain and distributed campaign materials during the inequality actions. A press conference “Let’s End Inequality Together – Make South Asia Fair for All” held in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 18 January 2020. Likewise, a human chain was organised on 20 January 2020. About 400 people including Adibasi leaders, farmers-labours-trade union leaders, intellectuals, cultural personalities, teachers, journalists, writers, students participated in the programme. The human chain demanded effective steps to reduce poverty gaps, wage gaps, discrimination against women and also demanded the government to tax rich individuals and companies to regulate to get their fair share. 1500 copies of leaflet were disseminated among the participants of human chain, press meet, SAAPE Bangladesh Chapter member organisations, relevant government departments and civil society members.

**Pakistan:** In Pakistan, Fight Inequality campaigners organised the various activities to raise the voice against inequalities in the country during Global Week of Action 2020. A press conference to deliver the message against the rising inequalities in the world and especially in Pakistan was organised on 19 January 2020 where speakers highlighted the issue of inequality through different examples and statistics. Similarly, a group of young performers demonstrated a street play in Toba Tek
Singh on 22 January 2020 which emphasized the inequalities women are facing in patriarchal society and why it is needed to be addressed and eliminated for the bright and prosperous Pakistan. Also, a public debate was held in Gujranwala on 24 January 2020 on inequality and how these inequalities are affecting common people in their day to day lives. Speakers demanded that new tax reforms consumption taxes should be made less regressive by having different levels of taxes on different goods and essential foods like grains consumed by the lower income groups should be made tax free. On 25 January 2020, a demonstration was held in Multan as expression of concern against inequality where participants raised slogans against inequality and they surely expressed their concern and fear about rising inequality in the country. Moreover, leaflets printed in local language were distributed during the campaigns among the general public.

India: As part of the Davos mobilisation programme, several campaigns were carried out at different places in India. On 18 January 2020, a campaign to fight against inequality was organised at the Nagrakata Tea Estate in the Jalpaiguru district of West Bengal in collaboration with Progressive Plantation Workers Union (PPWU). The main demands of the campaign was to improve the living condition of tea plantation workers which is one of the most impoverished communities in the country. Around 300 workers from Nagrakata tea estate, Naya Sayli tea estate, Hope tea estate, Zurai tea estate, Neoranuddy tea estate, Diana tea estate, Batabari tea estate and others joined the meeting. A public meeting in collaboration with Project Affected Peoples Association (PAPA) was organised at Maluthi in Dumka district, Jharkhand on 23 January 2020 to fight against inequality. The programme focused on the devastating impacts of coal mining on the local communities destroying their lives and livelihoods. Around 120 people from the mining affected Dumka district of Jharkhand and Birbhum & Asansol district of West Bengal along with civil society members participated in the programme. In the same way, planning meeting to mobilise the inequality movements was held on 21 January 2020 at Dindigul. Campaign activity protesting Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) - 2019 was discussed in the meeting and issue of gender inequality in India was also raised. Moreover, Fight Inequality – Global Protest of public meeting and street campaign was held on 25 January 2020 at Marunoothu Dindigul, Tamil Nadu. During the public meeting, the campaigners raised their voices against inequality and brought the issues from the grassroots level and discussed about the economic crises and workplace violence faced by women in India. In addition, around one thousand people participated in the protest in the human chain programme held on 30 January 2020 at Dindigul district. During the protest, the public demanded to save Indian Constitution and to withdraw CAA, NPR and NRC which are against illiterate, poor and mainly the women who are living with the husband’s identity as per Indian tradition and are forced to prove their parental identity and let them to live peacefully.

Nepal: Expressing the solidarity with regard to Global Campaign, Nepal also organised a programme titled “Voices for Equality on Canvas” on January 19, 2020 in Jawalakhel, Lalitpur. The event was held in open space in the presence of renowned artists and 500 participants. The artists painted the canvas to convey the message for equal society among people. With the lead taken by Senior Artist and Former Vice Chancellor of Nepal
Academy of Fine Arts, Kiran Manandhar, a canvas painting was prepared at the venue with the message to end existing inequality. The art work was accompanied by other 10 renowned Nepali artists. In addition, 10 other canvas paintings representing different dimensions of inequality was also exhibited. Those paintings portrayed the inequalities based on class, caste, gender, religion, geography and so on. Participants of the programme expressed their views and perspectives on inequality with reference to the arts displayed in the event. In the event Kiran Manandhar emphasised that artists have an important role to play in the various social, political and cultural movements in the world and in the present context, Nepali still have to experience equality and artists should continue to work to awaken people and society to achieve the desired equality.

Sri Lanka: Inequality campaign in Sri Lanka was launched by SAAPE members to contribute on raising dialogue on health, education and social security measures in the country. Several activities were conducted in Sri Lanka during Global Week of Action 2020. Leaflets were distributed during the campaign in the public places like bus stands, fairs, streets and villages. Also, stickers were pasted in public and private transport services and public places to aware people about the issues of inequality. Home to home education and mobilising campaign was also conducted as a part of the Global Week of Action 2020. In addition, a printed cap was used as a education material in schools.


The SAAPE publication ‘The South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE): A Platform for South Asians History of a Journey (2001-2020)’ is launched online on 04 March 2020 on SAAPE Website. The report is the historical account of SAAPE since its inception in 2001. SAAPE felt the need on various platforms including with financial partners and alliance members to have an account of SAAPE, not just from a factual side but also have a social-political account of its formation and the choices it has made because of its political bases.

This report is the reflection of the works that SAAPE’s members have done in 18 years of SAAPE’s history. In fact, this is a contour (profile) of the political work performed by SAAPE on the issues of poverty and inequality in South Asia for the last two decades.

This report includes the reflection of impressions, experiences and knowledge as all SAAPE members who had contributed to this process through various ways- sharing their experiences, feelings and emotions- many of them were interviewed, many of them had responded to the questionnaires and provided extremely useful insights about SAAPE’s work indicating future direction to be followed.
Inequality Report 2019: Growing Inequality in South Asia

South Asian countries have failed to make use of the economic growth in the region to improve the lives of the poor and marginalized people of the community, mostly, women, girls and marginalized communities and reduce inequalities the region is facing. Extreme inequalities are destroying the region putting a threat to democracy, culture and security, and most seriously posing a threat to women's human rights, says, the report ‘Growing Inequality in South Asia’ launched by South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE).

The report reveals the seriousness of growing inequality in the region as a result of government policies and programmes that benefit a handful of the rich and leave behind a large number of people who are denied access to basic human rights and needs. The report also analyzes the causes and drivers of inequality and demonstrates concrete evidence of widening inequalities in the region.

Prominent community and researchers of the eight countries of South Asia were engaged in preparation of this Inequality Report in collaboration with Oxfam International. The inequality report was launched in four South Asian countries, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

In India, SAAPE and Center for Women’s Development Studies (CWDS) organised the launching event on 26 September 2019. Civil society activists, researchers and academicians attended the event. In the event, Dr. Kumud Sharma pointed out the issue of reducing poverty and inequality, as it is a systemic cumulative process which enforces some sections of the society to remain in the same state. Shobha Raghuram added that there was resistance of extreme isolation of women’s labour and loss of body rights where women labourer were exported to Gulf countries and many of them used to return with broken body parts. In addition, Prof. Himanshu questioned the idea of South Asia as a concept as the area is quite diverse in many aspects. He congratulated the report to address the complex idea of South Asia that has different dimensions of social structure and varied stimulus for growth and development with a common background of colonial struggle.

Likewise, SAAPE and National Alliance for Human Rights and Social Justice – Nepal (Human Rights Alliance) jointly organised the South Asia Inequality Report 2019 launching programme followed by the discussion on the issues of inequality on 18 September 2019 in Kathmandu, Nepal. The representatives from the government, political parties and the civil society participated in the event.

Similarly, in Pakistan, the launching event was held on 15th November 2019. The event was hosted by SAAPE.
SAAPE is producing the sixth edition of its triennial South Asia Poverty and Vulnerability Report (2020) by the first week of September 2020. This report will try to highlight and discuss the underlying causes of the migration of the poor, from both within a country as well as from a regional perspective. The report will be based on insights and inputs gathered from various country reports. SAAPE strives to make this report to cater to the needs of the academic community, policy researchers, policy formulators, movement groups across South Asia and the civil society outfits who have been deeply engaged into the process of social transformation towards uplifting cause of the commons in general and that of the poor migrants in particular. Apart from the macro-understanding of the policy pursuits and the political process in South Asia having impact on the lives and livelihoods of the migrants, emigrants and refugees in South Asia, the Report will try to be a mirror to urban existence for the poorest, highlighting the effects of increasing inequalities on the working people, as also all other sections of society.

For the production of the report six Editorial Board meetings were held from September 2018 to August 2020. The report publication process was delayed due to the outbreak of coronavirus in December 2019. The Editorial Board decided to prepare one additional chapter on COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on migration in South Asia and plights of migrant workers.

The report will contain the regional chapters with abridged versions of the country reports. Eight country authors have prepared the country reports which are very rich both in terms of information and analysis. SAAPE is approaching to book publishers (having international readers) to publish the poverty report at larger public domain to have larger impact of the report.
Call for Immediate Cancellation of South Asian Countries’ Debts!

The coronavirus has unveiled the spectre of a larger crisis. A majority of the planetary economies were already in the throes of over-production, stagnation and even, a recession, which deepened with the day since the sub-prime crisis of 2008-09. The pandemic has exacerbated the situation. The unemployment figures are rising every day and it is estimated that many small businesses and even a few business corporations will be bankrupt. This health crisis and its cascading economic consequences could well plunge many countries in the South into an unprecedented crisis, pushing millions of people into poverty.

We will be entering a new debt crisis. Already, in July 2019, the IMF reported that among low-income countries, 9 are over-indebted and 24 are close to that situation. The external sovereign debt in countries of the South is a source of concern, notably because of its dramatic increase within the last two decades and also, due to the similarities with the pre-crisis debt situation of Third World countries in the 1980s. Additionally, the economic crisis means that export-dependent southern countries will find it difficult to earn hard currencies, the remittances are going to reduce significantly and, low financial investments. This will put enormous pressures on the capacity of these countries to service existing debts. The governments will also bail out private corporations adding enormous pressures on the public coffers.

South Asia, is no exception and faces a similar situation. The region faces enormous challenges to deal with the COVID-19 and post-pandemic situations. The major concern for the region is, obviously, the frail healthcare systems. The daily news of death and infection has intensified the virus fears compounded by the absence of a viable public healthcare system. This is coupled with the widespread poverty, vulnerability, insecurity and precariousness that will surely get amplified with the spread of the pandemic. A gloom surrounds as we complete more than two months of lockdown.

In the region, this disaster is exacerbating the already existing insecurity and precariousness. The region’s public healthcare infrastructures lack the capacity to deal with a pandemic, of such a scale. Due to rampant privatisations carried over the last three decades. South Asia is far deficient of adequate healthcare standards including doctors, nurses, midwives, hospital beds, primary health centres and others. The overwhelming majority of the population do not have access to public healthcare and private healthcare systems during COVID-19 turned to be more irresponsible and unaccountable by closing the doors for COVID-19 infected people behaving them as vectors for their hospitals. This has resulted in difficult access to healthcare facilities, particularly women, children and other disadvantaged groups in the society.

Apart from healthcare threats, millions of migrant workers and daily wage earners, across the region, were stranded for months, helplessly, miles away from home, staring at an uncertain future without money, food or jobs. According to the ILO, almost half the global workforce – 1.6 billion people – are in immediate danger of having their livelihoods destroyed. It is clear that South Asia will have a disproportionate share of such impacts as the regional economies houses the largest number of the precarious workforce on the planet. For millions of workers, no income means no food, no security and no future. Millions of businesses around the world are barely breathing and the smaller ones have the least recourse to necessary resources in times of such dire crisis. The self-employed and contract workers are also in imminent danger of seeing their livelihoods disappear.

The multifaceted dangers due to the pandemic can only be faced by rebuilding public healthcare systems, strengthening social protection measures including unemployment benefits and livelihood compensations, especially to those in the informal economy and others who are vulnerable. This would entail a huge public expenditure and investments in the social sector, something that has been done away within the last four decades.

The complications are compounded by the public external debt of the regional economies that has almost doubled between 2009 and 2018, from US$ 366.201 billion to US$ 730.063 billion. This debt is imposed by the international financial institutions (WB and IMF) with the complicity of the ruling classes in our countries. It is noted that most countries spend a huge proportion of their revenues in debt servicing with Sri Lanka and Pakistan having the highest debt to GDP and also, the debt to revenue ratio. The debt crisis will exacerbate an already bad condition with respect to the capability of these countries to pay back their loans. South Asia itself was already one of the poorest regions. If the present debt burden is not relaxed, the countries in this region will be more vulnerable and trapped in crisis.

As it stands now, the debt crisis has a self-reinforcing dynamic. The rise in debt service and the deterioration in investment in developing countries will resulted in net resource transfers from the developing countries to the
developed countries. This will prevent domestic capital formation and will also result in a drain on valuable foreign exchange earnings.

Any effective fight against the COVID-19 pandemic requires huge resources and therefore, the limited resources of the South Asian countries should be devoted to fight the pandemic rather than reimbursing international creditors. Under these circumstances, we demand the cancellation of all illegitimate debt of the South Asian countries. The UN body dealing with trade, investment, and development issues, the UNCTAD also recognises that the debts of many countries in the South must be written off. It has also clarified that debtor countries can unilaterally declare themselves in the suspension of payments without creditors being able to demand arrears in the future.

The cancellation of external debts of the countries of the region would enable them to free vital resources for rebuilding public healthcare infrastructure, as well as other urgent needs in this economic environment, threatened by sharp drops in income, loss of taxes and revenues and increased expenditure.

It is also necessary to embark on a developmental path that prioritises peoples’ needs over the interest of the powerful and the propertied class. The resources for such developments could be generated through the cancellation of public debts. A citizen audit is also necessary to identify illegitimate, odious and illegal parties and demand their repudiation. The legal arguments of the state of necessity, a fundamental change of circumstance and/or force majeure could be invoked to support such unilateral sovereign repudiation.

We also demand:
- Permanently cancel all illegitimate debt which should include all bilateral, multilateral and private debt for all the countries of South Asia especially those under heavy-debt burden with low economic growth forecast.
- Form a citizens’ debt audit committee to ascertain the illegitimate part of the debts.
- Citizens should be provided with the necessary information on spending for better monitoring and engage them in setting priorities.
- Governments in South Asia must use the additional resources earned through debt relief to strengthen the health system and protecting livelihoods. The resources should not be diverted for other purposes.
- Suspend the payment of household loans and micro-credits until countries are totally out of the grips of coronavirus;
- Replace microcredit institutions by self-managed cooperatives of local populations and by a public credit service granting loans at zero or very low-interest rates;
- End privatisation of public services and the promotion of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) whose ultimate aim is to mobilise public money to nourish the private sector;
- Use this opportunity to mobilise domestic revenue through progressive taxation on large wealth;
- Reduce the defence budget in the region;
- The international financial institutions including the IMF, the World Bank and other informal groups that essentially feed North/South asymmetries should drastically change the current policies of the lending;
- Provide emergency additional finance to the South - excluding Official Development Assistance - by means of zero-interest loans, repayable in whole or in part in the currency desired by the debtor countries;
- Expropriate “ill-gotten wealth” by the elite, the rich and dominant classes and retrocede them to the populations concerned and under their control;
- Replace the current Official Development Assistance in its current form to an unconditional form of obligations of the developed country as part of the reparation and solidarity.
- Adopt policies for a just transition.

COVID-19 in South Asia
The coronavirus outbreak has become a pandemic, infecting over 15 million people and claiming the lives of 630,781 people across the world (as at 23 July 2020). In South Asia, India has been the worst affected by the outbreak followed by Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan and other countries. Infections have crossed over 1,786,911, out of which 39,965 have lost their lives. This grave situation has created havoc in the South Asian countries where the public health care system is in a crisis. And amidst all the chaotic and panic situation, it is important to be updated about the breakout and the effects it is having around the globe. To keep everyone updated with the latest data and information, SAAPE is sharing infographic on its website and social media pages on daily basis.
SAAPE is concerned about the great danger that COVID-19 pandemic poses in South Asia. The pandemic has already made the lives of the people miserable and woeful. The world is entering in a new phase of history. The pandemic has exposed the ugly face of neoliberalism which has miserably failed to protect our lives. Hundreds of thousands have died, health workers in the front lines of this battle have been put at risk, as country after the country failed to provide adequate protective gear to their doctors, nurses and others. It has the potential to cause grave damages to the poor and to the economic livelihoods of millions in the informal sector. If we are unable to contain the spread of this virus, allowing it to spread to high-density areas, slums, working people neighbourhoods, refugee camps and other centres of vulnerability and poverty, South Asia will be left to face health, economic and social disasters on a scale never experienced before. The developed world is being overrun by the pandemic and their economies driven into recession. The chances of South Asia, therefore coping is woeful. The world is entering in a new phase of history.

The current crisis has 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. Three decades of neoliberal capitalism have destroyed basic public services including quality public health care and universal social protection. The average expenditure on public health in South Asia has hovered around 1.3% of the GDP. Even Italy and France which have been the epicentre of the pandemic were investing around 11% of the GDP and yet they have been unable to stem the tide of deaths and the increasing pressures on their health system to cope with the pandemic. 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 an impossibility for the poor.

The majority of the people depend on the public health system. This system is on its knees today. Bangladesh has 112 ICU beds and 400 ventilators for a population of about 165 million. Pakistan, a country of 220 million people has a bed-to-population ratio of less than one per 1,000 when the recommended average by WHO is five per 1,000. The WHO also mandates a doctor to population of 1:1000, while in India it is 1:1,404. For people living in rural areas and completely dependent on government healthcare facilities, the doctor to patient ratio is abysmally low with 1:10,926. Other countries also lack adequate facilities to face the current pandemic. The situation in Nepal is also

### SAAPE Campaigns

The unique value of SAAPE campaigns is connecting and linking the country campaigns on-going in the countries of South Asia on similar issues, providing common platform for CSOs to bring them at the national platform first and then scale up to regional level for extending solidarity to each other's struggles for rights, share good practices and lessons to strengthen democracy and social justice in the region.

The regionalisation of the issue will give opportunity to link to formal processes of regional organisations such as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as feedback from social movements to incorporate its mechanisms, CSOs platforms formed on the basis of issues will act as pressure groups both at national and regional policy processes and their implementation. SAAPE has the opportunity to function as a common platform to bring synergies on the common issues, raised by the different movements and campaigns.

SAAPE campaigns mainly focus on the major three themes: 1) women's rights, 2) land & resource grabbing and 3) minimum wage.

The campaigns have mainly four stages of engagements. 1) review of national and regional policies/laws on land & resource grab, women's rights, and minimum wage/social protection were carried out to identify the gaps in the policies and the practice. 2) documentation of the right violation cases on various issues under three campaigns of the project followed. 3) based on the documented cases, preparation of the reports, submission of the memorandum to the concerned government agencies, and writ petition to address the raised issues were conducted as the third stage of the campaign. 4) SAAPE campaign members continue to lobby and advocacy activities and follow up on the raised issues with the policy-makers and the government at the local, national, and regional levels. Based on all these engagements, SAAPE campaign members are receiving responses from the concerned government agencies and in some cases the court hearings.
not different as there are only about 360 ventilator machines in the country and 260 of them are in the Kathmandu Valley. Afghanistan is also facing a severe shortage of coronavirus tests and ventilators. In Afghanistan as of April 2, the country’s two designated coronavirus hospitals had only 12 working ventilators between them. According to Sri Lanka’s Government Medical Officers Association, Sri Lanka only has about 600 intensive care unit beds with ventilators.

As millions are compelled to be in confinement, the majority, especially, the vulnerable are in situations without any decent social safety nets, income and struggling with getting food. Millions of informal workers have been left to their own devices as states had destroyed institutions to support them. The lockdowns that were declared on the populations have caused extreme difficulties to the people, necessary as they may have been. 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. We are also concerned about 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. 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, individual and household debt crises. Migrant workers are in miserable conditions in South Asia as millions are struggling to live without food and place to rest and sleep and women migrant workers are most vulnerable. Panic and fear are common sentiments that are affecting people’s minds.

South Asian countries have failed to make use of economic growth to improve the lives of the poor and marginalised people, mostly women, girls and marginalised communities and reduce inequalities the region is facing. Extreme inequalities have deepened the health, social and economic crises by allowing the rich to plunder and earn profits even from basic services, which the states have handed over to them. The poor and the working people are facing extreme forms of destitution and vulnerability at the time of COVID-19 crisis, living without adequate basic needs materials to keep alive and prevent from the disease- foods, soaps, water and proper shelter. To contain the spread of coronavirus, the governments in South Asia have issued travel restrictions, curfews, lockdowns to maintain social distancing and possible outbreaks. 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.

Many South Asian countries are now paying the price for diluting, not implementing and in some cases as in India-repealing and proposing to repeal even more pro-labour laws. Ironically and happily the Government of India has now issued orders to say that no one should be terminated from employment and that wages should not be denied even if workers have not come for work and that rents payable by workers should be waived by landlords. While we are happy to see that through these orders the old dogma of “Flexible Labour” and “Ease of doing business” is put on hold-this still amounts to ‘too little– too late’. We urge all South Asian Governments to learn proper lessons from this crisis for the future and steps taken to cry halt to anti-labour thinking that has been quite rampant in our region.

The video conference of the head of states of SAARC member states held in March 2020, though a welcome step, is totally inadequate to deal with the current crisis as it fails put in place practical measures to ensure that every country can intensify testing as well as ensuring that the region secures adequate health equipment, medicines, protective clothes and sanitizing materials. The threat posed by COVID-19 cannot be treated solely as a health risk but must be seen as a threat to the overall development of South Asia. The economic dimensions of this crisis require a comprehensive emergency response by SAARC. We need, now more than ever, a regional response as opposed to countries responding in isolation because the virus knows no border and its implications are of a trans-boundary nature. We need democratic space more than ever to combat this crisis and strongly condemn any attempts to curtail dissent in society.

South Asia faces some of the world’s worst socio-economic inequalities which contribute to one of the worst gaps in access to healthcare facilities. Barring a few exceptions, a dysfunctional public health system plagues patients all across the region. The bulk of the population is at the mercy of the overstretched and underfunded public health system. Therefore, we demand the following actions from the South Asian governments to address urgently to fight the COVID-19 crisis:

1) The SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund should be utilised proportionally to provide support and assistance as per the need of any member state. A regional mechanism should be formed to share and exchange knowledge, information and ideas on the status and fight against the COVID-19 and express solidarity to collectively fight against the impending danger of the pandemic in the region.

2) Investing in basic services, particularly the health sector, to better prepare ourselves to combat challenges that we may face in the future. All the basic services should be provided by the governments ensuring its quality, sustainability and better preparedness for any looming danger. Similarly, ensuring universal social
 protection for all at the time of crisis is another important step which enables all the poor and vulnerable people to sustain at the time of crisis. Strengthen social protection and start thinking for a new vision of South Asia with all people have a universal minimum income.

3) South Asian governments should call for the cancellation of all external debts so that the resources can be concentrated to provide quality basic services to the people. India being the member of G20 must raise the agenda of debt cancellation at the G20 Finance Ministers’ and Central Bank Governors virtual meeting, taking place next week, 15 April 2020.

4) The governments should ensure that everyone is supported at these critical times and expenses are paid through progressive taxation on rich who have immensely benefited from the economic growth and neoliberal policies.

5) SAAPE call on all South Asian governments to reduce military and defence budget by at least 10% of the national expenditures every year. The health budget should be increased to a minimum 10% of the total national budget.

6) The governments must adopt social protection measures such as social cash transfer and distribution of resources and care to safeguard the livelihoods of the most vulnerable as well as the various employees who have lost their source of income due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

7) The governments must reduce the financial burdens on small businesses and low-earning individuals by reducing VAT and other taxes. This will reduce their burden as they face increased uncertainty during these crises.

8) We urge the global political leaders and particularly the South Asian governments to take lessons from the failure of neoliberal policies exposed by COVID-19. The privatisation of the health sector resulting in downsizing and squeezing of public services particularly neglecting the role of the public health system has led us to this situation where deaths are daily occurring, where the elderly are dying in old age homes without being counted as COVID-19 related deaths (as in UK and France). This is high time to transform the current challenges to opportunities by transforming the global order from the controls of global wealth by a handful of people to developing mechanisms so that the wealth and opportunities are distributed evenly to develop the facilities for essential services.

9) There must be curbs placed on the runaway mechanisms built up by the private sector in health care who are not regulated and who take little responsibility when there is a pandemic of this scale and magnitude.

It is time for a serious reconsideration of where we are headed in the future…are we people-centred societies or are we to be governed and subjected to conditionalities which do not have the agreement of the people? The lockdown has seriously impacted on peoples’ access to basic foods, employment and dependence on governments making the decisions without informing the citizens well in advance. While the curve may be flattened due to the lockdowns it is also true from various field reports being generated by civil society organisations that there is hunger, homelessness and joblessness facing millions of workers across the countries. Palpable anxiety is also leading to an alarming increase in domestic abuse of a kind rarely seen.

South Asia’s future lies in cooperation, peoples’ power and strong democratic governments not super-rich elite led power. Therefore, it is imperative that we rebuild our movements to fight for a South Asia free of inequality, disease, hunger and homelessness. Redistributive justice, a life free of hunger, a life that enjoys social protection must be guiding values of our societies. This pandemic and the toll it is taking on society is a symptom of what we have done in building unequal societies and living in a state of over-consumption, trade wars, and disregarding the call for a sustainable development trajectory for South Asians.

We express our deepest solidarity to the people who are fighting this crisis by working in the frontlines to save lives. We express our solidarity with the millions of migrant labour left homeless and facing an uncertain future. We express our solidarity with the women and children of hundreds of households where domestic abuse and child sexual abuse has increased. We express our solidarity with the farmers who are being forced to destroying their own crops because interstate trade and transport have been stopped in the lockdown.

We urge governments to see the pandemic from people’s perspectives and take swift action to contain the pandemic and at the same time to begin a new chapter in South Asian cooperation to combat poverty and all its threats to humanity.

11 April 2020