South Asian Women’s Convergence
Addressing Gender Inequality through Fiscal Justice and Access to Basic Services

The South Asia Regional Convergence on Addressing Gender Inequality through Fiscal Justice and Access to Basic Services was organised by the SAAPE women’s rights campaign group along with the social movements and mass-based organisations in Negombo, Sri Lanka from 19 to 20 November 2018.

The convergence was set up with two broader purposes: i) To understand the challenge of inequality as a general concept, particularly in terms of its drivers and dimensions that link to fiscal policies, and ii) To collectively devise a collective action plan in South Asia in order to address gender inequality through the lens of fiscal justice. The convergence focused on identifying the problem at its very roots and with key defining factors, and to then come together in order to find meaningful and impactful resolution from this regional dialogue between activists and civil society members.

Total 42 participants from South Asian countries in the convergence representing civil society organisations and social movements discussed and deliberated on the issues and devised a national and regional plan of actions to protect and promote tax and fiscal justice and fight against inequality. The declaration and action plan that were devised through the discourse of this convergence call for renewed and specialised efforts from the civil society and activists to engage in a collective manner with governments and the grassroots to bridge the divide in communication that prevents
marginalised groups like women and children, and their interests from being heard in an impactful and inclusive way.

Divided into multiple discussion sessions, the convergence provided a platform for similarly engaged civil society members to share and build their knowledge amongst one another. After the keynote addresses, discussants were faced with a number of categorised questions the purpose of which was to watch patterns in experience emerge that could inform a cohesive regional narrative of what short and long-term goals were to be adopted by the civil society.

**SAAPE Poverty Report 2019 Editorial Board Meetings**

SAAPE has been publishing the triennial South Asia Poverty Report since 2003. The 6th edition of the Poverty Report 2019, will be published by the end of 2019. The report will focus on the issues of migration and how it perpetuates poverty and inequality in the South Asia region.

The country reports are being prepared by the country writers group. In order to support the writing process, and to assist in theoretical frameworks, three Editorial Board meetings have been organised in Kolkata and Bangalore in the month of September, December 2018 and February 2019 respectively.

The Editorial Board members of SAAPE Poverty Report 2019, academia, researchers, social activists and students from South Asian countries participated and contributed to the discussions.

**South Asia Regional Workshop on Inequality**

South Asia Regional Workshop on Inequality was held on 29-30 March 2018 in Kathmandu, Nepal to report on the situation of the different South Asian countries and draft an initial conceptual framework for the SAAPE report on “Increasing Inequality in South Asia: Causes and Consequences”. Participants from six South Asian countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) took part in the event.

Participants of the workshop shared some crucial ideas in the context of data analysis for inequality report which was followed with country specific discussion. The meeting was concluded with the finalisation of report outline with timeframe.

**Programme Strategy Planning and Progress Review Meeting**

SAAPE Core Committee (CC) members and advisors sat together on 02-03 July 2018 in Kathmandu, Nepal to plan campaign strategies and review of the current campaigns that are being coordinated by SAAPE members across the region. During the meeting, CC members and advisors
Role of Private Sector in Public Services to Achieve SDGs

A National Consultation on the “Roles and Responsibilities of Private Sector in Public Services for Achieving SDGs in Nepal” was jointly organised by LDC Watch, South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE), and Resource Centre for Primary Health Care (RECPHEC). The Consultation aimed at fostering a meaningful discussion on the possible cooperation between the government, private sector, and civil society for affordable, accessible, timely and quality public service delivery in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Chief Guest Hon’ble Vice-Chairperson of National Planning Commission Prof. Dr. Puspa Raj Kadel stated that the private sector has a major role in filling the annual 17 billion USD investment requirements for meeting the SDGs in Nepal. He also highlighted that at the time when the concept of liberalism has been questioned, the private sector should not have an all-in-all profit motive, but should also bear social responsibilities.

As a key note speaker, Gauri Pradhan, Global Coordinator of LDC Watch, emphasised on three roles of private sector in meeting the SDGs in Nepal: business role, financing role, and implementation role. He urged the private sector to provide quality public services adhering to the Ten Principles of UN Global Compact based on human rights, labour, environment, and anti-corruption.

The Opening Session was chaired by Mr. Shanta Lall Mulmi, Executive Director of RECPHEC. It was followed by a Panel Discussion comprising of representatives from private sectors and CSOs working in public service areas, mainly health, education and transportation.

The Consultation unanimously adopted a eight-point Declaration in the end. The Consultation had an active participation of 66 attendees from the government, business associations, consumer forums, and civil society organisations.

South Asia Fight Inequality Actions during the Global Week of Action 2019

A number of events are organised during the Global Week of Action in January 2019 by civil society groups in the countries around the world to highlight and showcase how people’s solutions are the ways to tackle the root causes of poverty and inequality.

As a part of the Fight Inequality Global Campaign, SAAPE members organised inequality actions in South Asian countries.

In Afghanistan, SAAPE campaign member organisations Development and Humanitarian Services for Afghanistan, Killid Group and Sanayee Development Organisation along with numerous civil society organisations organised talk shows, round table discussions via Radio Killid, press release from January 21-23, 2019. Further, the pamphlets on inequality in local languages, Dari and Pashto, were printed and widely disseminated during the campaign activities.

Similarly, in Bangladesh, SAAPE Bangladesh campaign
organisations Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS) and INCIDIN Bangladesh along with numerous social movements and civil society organisations to organise human chain, cultural programme, press conference on 20 January 2019, and also printed leaflet, poster in local language (in Bangla) which was widely disseminated during the inequality actions.

SAAPE campaign member organisations- Manitham Trust and Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA) organised a public programme in Tamil Nadu on 19 January 2019 in Dindigul city, India, followed by street campaign with the demand of ending gender inequality which was attended by participants from Dindigul, Trichy and Madurai district.

In Nepal, SAAPE in collaboration with Human Rights Alliance, Humanitarian Accountability Monitoring Initiative (HAMI) launched the Nepal Inequality Report ‘Fighting Inequality in Nepal: The Road to Prosperity’ on 11 January 2019. Poem recitation and art exhibition was organised on 22 January 2019 in Kathmandu to express solidarity to fight against inequality and to raise voices for equality. The inequality that is prevailing in our society was addressed in the campaign through poems recited by various leading and renowned poets. These poets and artistry work satire to the World Economic Forum which was being held in Davos City, Switzerland.

In Pakistan, SAAPE member organisations Labour Education Foundation, Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee in collaboration with Chanan Development Association and OXFAM Pakistan organised an action oriented programme with the theme Fight Inequality, Beat Poverty in Lahore, Pakistan on 23 January 2019. Some of the events, for instance equality festival, painting
competition, documentary shows, theatre performance highlighting different forms of inequality in Pakistan on the issues of bonded labour, child marriage and lack of education facilities for all. The event was attended by women, children, workers, farmers, civil society activists, students etc. Speakers from various civil society organisations and representatives of working class citizens highlighted the growing inequality in Pakistan and in South Asia.

In Sri Lanka, various social movements and civil society organisations organised educational and village level campaigns against unequal practices and rising inequality such as arts, poems and creative writing competitions in 12 coastal districts of Sri Lanka. The member organisations also launched videos on various forms of unequal practices and development through social media.

**Obituary**

We deeply mourn the demise of the world acclaimed Marxist thinker and renowned political economist Samir Amin. He was one of the constructive thinkers and always remained as a great source of inspiration for those who believed in the possibility of alternative and better world.

We would like to recollect our memory of having a noted political economist in one of our programmes organised from 10 to 12 November 2008, The Conference on Democracy, Development and Peace in Asia, where we got an opportunity to listen to his thought-provoking keynote speech. During his speech, he said that since the imperialist system is not associated with the social progress it is losing its legitimacy credibility in many places. He also said that the recent financial crisis was the result of the capitalistic economy and the utilitarian system of the capitalism should be ended. He blasted big economies, particularly the US, the UK and Japan, for what he called “their hegemonistic approach vis-a-vis global resources.” Terming the recent collapse of Wall Street a tip of the iceberg, the Egyptian scholar said the fall of capitalism was imminent.

We shall always admire and draw strength from his firm position against the corporate globalisation and the fight for social justice.

We offer our deepest condolences and strength to the bereaved family. Till the end Amin continued to write, critiquing several global developments.

We reproduce below an interview of his which in essence reflects his opinions on the global order.

On behalf of SAAPE Founders, Members and the Regional Secretariat,

Netra Timsina, Regional Co-ordinator, SAAPE

13 August 2018
Migration in South Asia: Poverty and Inequality

With an objective to bring together the social activists, researchers, academia and students, SAAPE in collaboration with Institute of Public Policy (IPP), National Law School of India University (NLSIU) organised a regional conference entitled “Migration in South Asia: Poverty and Inequality” in Bangalore, India from 24 to 25 February 2019. The conference was designed to lay out the important concerns with regard to poverty and migration; to explore the regulatory framework governing rights of residents; and State responses to issues of migration in South Asia. The various sessions at the programme specifically took up discussions on economic reforms and the compulsions behind distress- led migrations; gendered interrogation of poverty and migration; constitution and citizenship; migration, decent work and trafficking; and State’s responses to migration issues. The discussions on the issues of migration, inequality and poverty and contributions from the participants will be utilised in the forthcoming SAAPE Poverty Report 2019, “Migration in South Asia: Perpetuating Poverty and Inequality”.

“End Gender Inequality through Fiscal Justice and Access to Basic Rights!”

Negombo Declaration

We, the people of South Asia from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka working as members of parliament, in political parties, civil society and mass-based organisations, business and academia, gathered in Negombo, Sri Lanka on 19 and 20th of November 2018 at the South Asian Women’s Convergence on Addressing Gender Inequality through Fiscal Justice and Access to Basic Rights, are extremely concerned about the staggering level of inequalities affecting millions of women in South Asia. We resolve not to be silent but rather, to fight to create a fair and equal society.

- We express grave concerns about the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and call upon states to take immediate measures to reduce the rising inequality.
- We demand that South Asian governments make immediate efforts to increase the tax to GDP ratio to mobilise tax revenue through progressive direct taxes and reduce the burden of indirect taxes.
- End unproductive tax incentives, tax exemptions and tax holidays under the pretext of attracting investments that drains public tax revenue. The South Asian states must come together and collaborate to end this race to the bottom.
- Increase public spending on priority social sectors such as education, health and social protection in order to address inequality from which women will gain more. Reduce military and other unproductive expenditure.
- We demand that states take pro-active initiatives to end gender pay gap. Living wages should be ensured for every trade and occupation.
- We demand that South Asian governments recognise, reduce and redistribute women’s unpaid care work through valuation, technological innovations and investment to free women of such oppression.
- Expedite process of gender budgeting and engage women’s group to work on the gender budgeting and taking care of gender dimensions.
- Invest in promoting women-led business and enterprises.
- Ensure equal representation of women in all decision making bodies, especially, in all fiscal policy-making process, implementation and monitoring.

To achieve these demand we decide to come together and,

- Campaign across the region to create awareness around the issues.
- Train & mobilise people around the demands and create visible actions across the region.
- Unite South Asians to raise their voice in unison to demand an end to gender inequality.
- As an immediate action, we all agree to arrange public mobilisations during World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, between 18-25 January 2019 in Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, as a part of worldwide movement against inequality. The mobilisations will include demonstrations, rallies, art work, musical performance, cartoons etc.

20 November 2018
Securing SAARC’s Future

The role, scope and importance of SAARC should not be compromised just because of conflict between India and Pakistan.

During his speech at Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) conclave held in September 2016 in India, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi challenged Pakistan to make war against poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and infant and maternal deaths and show that Pakistan can beat all of them before India. He said “let both countries fight to see who would eradicate poverty first… I want to tell the youth of Pakistan, let’s have a war on ending unemployment… I want to call out to the children in Pakistan, let’s declare war on illiteracy. Let’s see who wins. Let’s declare war on infant mortality and maternal deaths.” These deliberations came after the terrorist attack near Uri in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir which claimed lives of 14 soldiers and four attackers.

Despite his challenge, the reform that he had promised has not happened in his own country. The unemployment rate in India rose to 7.2 percent in February 2019, which is highest since September 2016, and up from 5.9 percent in February 2018, according to data published by Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE). Similarly, there is huge income inequality. Top one percent of Indian population owns 73 percent of the country’s wealth, according to the Oxfam report.

The relation between India and Pakistan has further deteriorated after the terrorist attack in Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir on February 14. Even after the peace gesture shown by Pakistan by repatriating the

Source: https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/securing-saarc-s-future/?categoryId=opinion
Indian Air Force (IAF) pilot, Modi government is provoking people by undermining the positive developments. Anti-Pakistani image and provocations are helpful to grab the nationalist feeling of the majority of Indians which BJP is doing for the sake of winning the upcoming elections.

Collateral Damage

The bilateral relationship between India and Pakistan has always been a decisive factor in the future of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Established in 1985 with an objective to enhance the regional cooperation and to promote socio-economic development in the region, SAARC is now at the brink of extinction after thirty-three years of its existence. Though SAARC has a distinct value and importance for the people of South Asia due to their commonness in many aspects of their lives, the interest of various member states often makes it hard for the regional organization to sustain. The 19th SAARC Summit, which was supposed to be held in the capital city of Pakistan, Islamabad, was postponed due to India’s boycott, and four other countries expressing inability to join the summit.

Every country should strive for prosperity and growth but the policy that India is taking to isolate Pakistan from every regional initiative seems to be counter-productive to promote the regional peace and integrity in the South Asia. Being the largest country in terms of geography, population and economy, India has a very important role in promoting peace and harmony in the region. Despite these expected roles, India has shown unwillingness to become the savior of SAARC which makes the South Asian people often worried amidst hope for regional peace, progress and prosperity.

The trade and transit embargo imposed by India on Nepal in 2015 put three million Nepali children under five at the risk of death due to a shortage of food, fuel and medicine. India’s reluctance to provide additional air entry points to Nepal could create problems in operation of under-construction regional and international airports in Nepal. Nepal has been denied water as per the Mahakali Treaty. These are the examples of how the economy of small land-locked countries can be jeopardized by acts of an emerging economy like India.

Common Platform

SAARC is important to promote equitable growth of every member states in the region as it discusses and agrees on common benefits. As bilateral issues are not discussed in the SAARC forum, India and Pakistan can settle their differences through peaceful dialogue to promote peace and security in the region. By and large, the role, scope and importance of SAARC should not be compromised because of the conflict between the countries as it carries the aspiration of people of the region.

Increasing presence of China in most of South Asian countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives has alarmed India to act indifferently as it wants to minimize China’s engagements in the region. The instability and the rise of religious fundamentalism in South Asia are also a matter of major concern for China. Except for India, none of the countries of South Asia have shown unwillingness to join China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Hence, in terms of economic opportunities and strategic direction, China is massively increasing its investment and cooperation strategies in South Asian countries. Though China, an observer member of SAARC since 2005, wants to get full membership of SAARC, India does not entertain this idea.

It is clear that India is preventing revival of SAARC process. As the chair of SAARC, Nepal has been trying to create a favorable environment to organize 19th SAARC Summit during various formal and informal meetings with the heads of the states. This is good. But Nepal should go an extra mile. It should propose that 19th summit will be held in Kathmandu. Alternatively, it can propose Sri Lanka, which is scheduled to hold the summit after Pakistan. In that case, India might not get an excuse to hold SAARC process hostage.