



Concept note:

Changing political landscape of South Asia and role of People's SAARC

People's SAARC Regional meeting 2017

13 - 14 September 2017

Kathmandu, Nepal

Background information

The people of South Asia share contiguous geographical space and similar social and cultural ethos that shape the people's life style, belief system, cultural specialities, material practices and social relationships in the region. Their beliefs and cultural practices are also influenced by one another. Though SAARC formally started working in South Asia region since 1985, which is 32 years of experience in regional cooperation, has not achieved or heading 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 is an unfortunate instance of the use of SAARC Summits for coercive neighbourhood foreign policy rather than a tool of peace building for regional development and prosperity.

Contrary to this, civil societies of South Asia region are continuously pushing, pressurising government to implement their commitments. Most importantly, these campaigns and movements are raising ignored, neglected, and unheeded agendas and issues of people. Dereliction of people's agenda is the most undemocratic practice we are suffering from in South Asia. Thus, the state level SAARC being unable to fulfil its promises, the idea of People's SAARC was floated more than a decade ago. Different people's platforms of South Asia region have organised parallel events prior to official SAARC summit in different countries of South Asia. After organising 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 cancelation of SAARC to be held in 2016 in Pakistan, the future of the SAARC remains in questions, while the inter-dependence and inter-relationship between people to people in South Asia remains vital as always in the domains of family, culture, livelihoods, trade, ecology and environment.

In this context South Asian people's movements (women, youth, peasants, labour, socially marginalised groups etc) and civil society organisations have planned a strategic meeting of People's SAARC from 13 to 14 September 2017 in Kathmandu, Nepal.

People's SAARC has been committed to visions of alternative political, social, economic and cultural systems that enable sustainable development of societies in the region that will do away with majoritarian rule and all forms of discriminations based on gender, caste/ethnicity, religion/culture, nationality/country of origin, language and geo-political location of habitation; lead to a situation of inclusive and accountable democracy free from exploitation, oppression and external interventions; create a climate in which each individual will have the opportunity to realise 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 has evolved 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 SAARC and its members. While People's SAARC does relate and

respond to the SAARC agenda, it also goes beyond them to envision 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. Development in the region is affected by the corrupt political leadership, inefficient state institutions and growing militarisation. 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 1 per cent of their GDP.¹ 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, a lack of respect for the rule of law.

Business driven globalisation has reached unprecedented levels, 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 people and curtailing and devaluing the very essence of democracy directly or indirectly.

Furthermore, global challenges, such as climate change, poverty, energy crisis, 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 conflict resolution to further reinforce their economic and political hold on this region through aid, '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 has 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 in the region has further weakened the collective effort required to promote regional cooperation and peace among the countries of South Asia. The recent case of withdrawal by India from 19th SAARC Summit and supports extended by other countries of the region to alienate some countries is a threat to regional integrity which needs urgent attention of the governments and the people. Regional initiative should not be withheld by any country because of any bilateral concerns and issues and this should not be used as a bargaining chip to solve their problems. The cancellation of 19th SAARC Summit has further raised confusion among people that whether SAARC will be effective to rejuvenate people to people connection, regional co-operation and regional integrity.

Program justification

This proposed People's SAARC regional meeting to be held on 13 and 14 September 2017 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 in order to have in depth understanding of the trend of grouping and sub-grouping of the region that will have impact on the rights of the people's of South Asia.

¹<https://www.sipri.org/databases>

PEOPLE'S SAARC

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.

Similarly, the role of SAARC needs to be strengthened to make an effective effort for regional cooperation, regional integrity and peace. SAARC should not remain in the limbo because of any bi-lateral issues between any of the member countries.