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DEFENDING AND PROMOTING DEMOCRACY & CIVIC SPACE WITH SDGS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Democracy in South Asia sub-region is confined to procedural, ritual and sacrament electorism. Democracies prevail but with enormous deficits, elections take place without sanctity. Democratic deficits can be classified in the form of the absence of good governance, rampant corruption, rising extremism, deeply entrenched fundamentalism and criminalization of politics. Similarly, challenges to electoral sanctity are being demonstrated in the form of the use of money, muscle and manipulation at all stages of electioneering that contributes to curtail the very notion of universal suffrage, genuine and periodic polls. There is a clear missing link of democracy with legitimate and inclusive participation of the commoners.

The quarter of a century-old SAARC is a mixed baggage of emerging, stable, conflict-ridden, and post-conflict societies. Some of the member countries are encountering painfully protracted political transition whereas the politics of appeasement, deception and compromise are common phenomenon both at domestic, bilateral and multilateral affairs. In the recent past, some of the contemporary emerging democracies have been marred with frequent light and shadow of democracy. Some of the so-called stable democracies are confronted with the tendency of pseudo and illiberal democracy. Often in the region, marginalized and minorities are the hardest-hit which has bent widespread incidences of cynicism, frustration, anger, revenge and violence.

Unfortunately, the existence of significant ongoing rights abuses is not acknowledged and often underplayed by the governments and also by the state media. In certain circumstances, the popular demand for democratic and fundamental rights are met with military repression and draconian laws thereby showcasing serious encroachment on non-derogable rights such as the right to life, freedom from torture and bondage as the routine of the day. Serious human rights violators are often let scott-free under political patronage and enjoy the culture of silent amnesty. The SAARC member states have ratified some international human rights instruments but they score one of the lowest records on the globe in safeguarding them. Key instruments such as the Refugee Convention, Rome Statute on International Criminal Court and Migration Convention are yet to be ratified by majority of the member states. Deeply entrenched culture of impunity is hijacking the notion of the basic rule of law.

The SAARC is advancing bright sides too in the path of democratic development. At people-to-people level, growing common aspiration and bond of solidarity on human rights, peace and justice

is forging. Nations now seem to be moving on the trail of irreversible open society process although the achievements remain far from satisfaction. Societies confronted with high intensity internal armed conflicts are in the process of tangibly transformative evolution. Inclusive approach is embraced in some societies in the arena of political empowerment through major constitutional reform.

There are enormous opportunities and risks factors to establish such a mechanism in the region. Although SAARC has adopted some welfare based, economic and crime-preventive conventions, it is the only regional grouping on the globe without any inter-governmental body on human rights. In all aspects of regional arrangements, human rights component gets deliberately ejected. The reasons which led to the installation of the institutions of regional arrangements in other regions are equally valid for South Asia region. Human rights form part of international customary law and an inter-state concern. In the contemporary globalized world, human rights no longer constitute a matter for the exclusive determination by individual States. A regional inter-governmental human rights instrument could provide an impetus to the development of regional arrangements in other field of endeavor e.g. economic and political co-operation.

On SDG attainment front: South Asia is amongst the fastest growing regions in the world, with an aggregate GDP well in excess of USD 3 trillion and a population in excess of 1.8 billion. At the same time, it has significant deficits in human development – 37 per cent of the world's poor and nearly half of the world's malnourished children come from the region. Through the looking glass consumption and income have led to social and economic marginalisation across rural and economic populations. These ironies and contradictions make it imperative to focus on not only faster but also more inclusive growth, which is pro-poor, pro-women, pro-nature and pro-jobs.

The region still has the highest concentration of poverty, globally – 37 per cent of the world's poor living in extreme poverty are from South Asia. Targets on maternal and child mortality, sanitation and hunger have not been met. Overall, progress in South Asia has been uneven between countries in the region and between communities and districts within countries. There is also a clear gender divide in terms of outcomes and deprivations. The indicators for nutrition and maternal and reproductive health services have moved slowly not only in the relatively lower growth economies of Nepal, Pakistan, Bhutan and the Maldives but also in the rapidly growing economy of India. It

is clear that significant ground needs to be covered with respect to indicators of social development such as health and education.

On VNR an UPR front: Common UPR recommendations in SA relate to SDG 16: Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions, as the highest recommendations include ratification of Optional Protocol II of ICCPR and Prohibition of Death Penalty except for Nepal. Other two recommendations include ratification of the Rome Statute on ICC except for Bangladesh, Bhutan and Maldives, and combatting human trafficking. On SDG 5: Gender Equality and SDG 10: Reducing Inequalities, the recommendations include ensuring speedy investigation and justice in the cases of GBV, recognition of same-sex marriage, and elimination of all form of sexual and GBV. Accordingly on SDG 4: Quality Education, the common recommendations include, ensuring free and compulsory education, promotion of human rights education in the school curriculum, and ensuring disabilities friendly education system. Finally on SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, the recommendations are, ratification of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention 2011, ensuring proper rehabilitation to human trafficking victims, and combatting child labour.

On CSO engagement front: While SAARC is an inter-governmental association, successive Summits have emphasized on importance of promoting P2P (people to people) contacts at all levels outside State sector. Despite many hurdles, CS of SA, despite no room for formal engagement with SAARC official process, has continued not only to advocate for peace and amity in the region, but also to recommend measures to strengthen SAARC, taking cue from the success story of ASEAN and the EU. The South Asian CS is a robust and enthusiastic group of people from every profession that has time and again demanded that SAARC must become a flexible alliance that is effective and efficient. Community of academics, CSOs, women leaders, NGO representatives and media persons are an illustrious community with shared values championing democracy, peace, freedom and greater economic integration.

Series of Peoples' SAARC organized around actual SAARC Summits aim to promote greater awareness about SAARC, share experiences and lessons learnt from other regional organizations, promote greater interaction among people, and encourage wider participation of CSOs in SAARC's activities. As members of CS, media and academia, interactions and activism are underway not only sharing views with one another through papers and writings/presentations but also thru structured dialogues with SAARC Secretariat and a wide array of governmental non-

governmental luminaries. There is hardly any dedicated room for CSO engagement with BIMSTEC process and it largely works in isolation from public domain without bottom-up approach in selecting the agenda to ensure more participation from the private sectors and civil society at large. Regarding ASEM's relevance, although ASEM leaders pledged at their Summit in 2006 to better involve social partners in the ASEM dialogue process, there is a little say of CSOs from SA in the ASEM proceedings. Only three SA countries (Bangladesh, Pakistan and India) are part of ASEM.

On C'19 front, the pandemic and resulting economic distress the region is encountering, particularly those in the informal sector and dependent on climate-sensitive livelihoods such as agriculture and fisheries, clearly demonstrate the complex and multi-level interactions resulting in cascading risks of climate-induced natural hazards, including extreme events, and such global pandemic and the far-reaching multiplier impacts across political boundaries. Despite multiple challenges and setbacks, SAARC member states and the Heads of State have demonstrated their willingness and commitment to collaborate and cooperate on common regional challenges and opportunities. The SAARC C'19 Emergency Fund, set up through a unanimous agreement in early March 2020, reflects this existing collective and political commitment. Despite many such efforts, the region is likely to experience the worst economic slump in 40 years. The unfolding economic stress and vulnerabilities are exacerbated by pre-existing vulnerabilities, including vulnerabilities linked to climate change impacts and disasters like floods, droughts and cyclones.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This cursory reflection on the theme Defending and Promoting Democracy and Civic Space with the SGDs in special reference to SGD 5, 10 and 16 especially reflects on the overall regional situation and practice in general for the attainment of SDG. We have attempted to unveil dynamics, challenges, instruments, obligations and future course of direction in addressing the ever-challenging issue of SDGs attainment, human rights, civic space and democracy along with impact of C'19 in the same.

The Asia-Africa Democracy Forum commissioned this report along with other research themes in connection with the convening of the virtual conference from 26th to 28th October, 2021. We are grateful towards Asian Democracy Network (ADN) and Community of Democracies and other agencies for recognizing the necessity of Defending and Promoting the Democracy and Civic Spaces as one of the issues of critical concern in the region as an integral component of the collaborative research.

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ABBREVIATION AND ACRONYMS

AADF	Asia-Africa Democracy Forum
ADN	Asia Democracy Network
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
CIVICUS	World Alliance for Citizen Participation
C'19	COVID-19
EU	European Union
EIU	Economist Intelligence
FEMBOSA	Forum of the Election Management Bodies of South Asia
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GDI	Gender Development Index
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GII	Gender Inequality Index
GoN	Government of Nepal
HKH	Hindu Kush Himalaya
ICC	International Criminal Court
IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
NHRIs	National Human Rights Institutions
P2P	People-to-People
SA	South Asia
SAAPE	South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solution Network
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UN ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children Education Fund
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
VNR	Voluntary National Report
WB	World Bank
WHO	World Health Organization

1.1. Methodology

This research was completed in the course of three months, which commenced on 24th of August 2021 and ended on 11th November 2021. The Report provides an overview of the impact of C'9 on SGDs, Human rights and Democracy in South Asia drawn from some key documents like SDSN report, CIVICUS' data, RSF Press freedom Index, International IDEA's and EUI's data on Democracy and Human rights and SDGs-UPR recommendations. The report was developed with support from the Asian-African Democracy Forum and was presented to the ADN team including other sub-regional researchers at four webinars and a virtual conference.

Focusing on South Asia, this study report includes data analysis and feedback gathered from the webinar and virtual conference which was held on 6th September, 21 September, 5th October, 19th October and 26th - 28th October 2021 respectively with the organizing community, experts and other researchers across the sub-region to present the findings of this analysis and to validate the same with country's recent experiences.

1.2. Sustainable Development Goals 2030

Adopted by the United Nations as a universal call to action in 2015 with the aim of ending poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring peace and prosperity to all by 2030, Sustainable Development Goals (widely known as Global goals) has been a matter of constant discourse at present.¹ Total of 17 SDGs are integrated recognizing the necessity of balanced development for ensuring social, economic and environmental sustainability.²

There are on-going efforts to support regional collaboration on SDGs. For an instance, South Asia Forum on the SDGs (SASF), which is a sub-regional preparatory for the larger Asia Pacific Forum on countries, reiterated their commitment to deepen regional cooperation for sustainable and resilient recovery from Covid-19. Further, recent Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) Call to Action

¹ UNDP, 'What are the Sustainable Development Goals?', available at: <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>

² Ibid

(October 2020)³, signed by environment ministers of the eight HKH countries, including six SAARC member countries, built on the robust scientific evidence base of the HKH Assessment and outlined six urgent actions.⁴

Promoting more engagement and learning through civil society-led initiatives is a matter of concern. In addition to these commitments through inter-governmental processes, many development partner-funded and civil society-led initiatives could contribute to more participatory and inclusive processes of resilience building which will ensure no one is left behind. Such examples includes the World Bank-funded Climate Adaptation and Resilience for South Asia (CARE) Project⁵, the Government of Sweden-supported and Oxfam-managed Transboundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSAs) project⁶ and the Rockefeller Foundation-supported Asian Cities Climate Change Resilience Network (ACCCRN).⁷ Initiatives like these could also support more engagement and leadership of women and youth through multi-country and regional level networks, collaboration and learning platforms. One such example is the Mahila Housing Trust (MHT)-led Women's Action Towards Climate Resilience for Urban Poor in South Asia project⁸ which is facilitating women empowerment in low-income households in Bangladesh, India and Nepal to increase their resilience to impacts of climate change. As these new CUTS International-managed M-Connect project⁹ shows, regional trade and connectivity is another entry point to foster cooperation on inclusive and resilient infrastructure and value chains.

Experts have underscored the need to revitalize SAARC to tackle climate change and related security risks in South Asia in order to successfully attain the SDGs.¹⁰ The on-going pandemic recovery and other climate change and disaster impacts that the region has been experiencing are

³ ICIMOD, 'HKH Call to action', available at: <https://www.icimod.org/hkh-calltoaction/>

⁴ Philippus Wester et.al, 'The Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment', ICIMOD, 2019.

⁵ The world bank, 'Climate Adaptation and Resilience For South Asia', available at: <https://tinyurl.com/jz6waspx>

⁶ OXFAM, 'Water governance in transboundary rivers of South Asia', available at: <https://tinyurl.com/kurw57y9>

⁷ ACCCRN, 'Connecting People to Build Inclusive Urban Climate Change Resilience', available at: <http://www.acccrn.net/about-acccrn>

⁸ United Nations Climate Change, 'Women's Action Towards Climate Resilience For Urban Poor in South Asia', available at: <https://tinyurl.com/s6vm8bzc>

⁹ CUTS International, 'Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multi-modal Community in the BBIN Sub-region', available at: <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/project-brief-m-connect.pdf>

¹⁰ Florian Krampe & Ahsok Swain, 'Is SAARC Prepared to combat climate change and its security risk?', available at: <https://tinyurl.com/266wyj3v>

unique windows of opportunities to further improve regional cooperation on resilience through SAARC and other regional institutions to this end.¹¹

On this note, active participation of the citizens in civic life and Protection of the Human rights of all citizens are often noted as two of the major elements of Democracy.¹² Thus, based on the theme of this research ‘Defending and Promoting Democracy and Civic Space with SDGs’, the data collection and analysis therein will mostly be focused on SDG-5 (Gender equality), SDG-10 (Reducing inequality) and SDG-16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institution) which are substantially relevant to the theme.

¹¹Jyotiraj Patra manages Oxfam's TROSA programme, ‘Views expressed are solely those of the author’, available at: <https://asia.oxfam.org/latest/blogs/regional-cooperation-resilience-through-saarc>

¹² Larry Hat Diamong, ‘What Democracy is’, available at: <https://diamonddemocracy.stanford.edu/speaking/lectures/what-democracy> OHCHR, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/RuleOfLaw/Pages/Democracy.aspx>

CHAPTER-TWO: COVID-19 PANDEMIC

2.1. Impact of COVID-19 in South Asia

COVID-19, which has been termed as a ‘worst human and economic crisis of our lifetime’ by the UN Secretary General, has demonstrated both, social as well as economic impact in SA. Lockdown and other stringent measures undertaken by governments in SA countries to contain the spread of the virus have cast a heavy shadow on the lives of many. For the first time in four decades, SA economies are likely to shrink, testing the dynamism and resilience of South Asian economies. Economic growth rate of SA which was estimated to be increasing by 6.1% has gone down to -2.7% after the outbreak of virus indicating substantial loss by 8.8% as a whole.¹³ Similarly, lack of alternative modes of education followed by increasing rate of Job loss, Gender based violence and rise in poverty stands as other prominent problems faced by SA due of C’19.

A recent report published by UNICEF¹⁴ has revealed that the education of 400 million Children have been impacted by C’19 across SA alone and the deadly virus has further kept 391 million students out of school.¹⁵ Similarly, as per UNWOMEN, preexisting inequality amongst poor women and girls, gender and ethnic minorities, women and girls with disabilities in SA have further been intensified amid.¹⁶ Also, more than 90% of women in Nepal and India working in informal and home-based jobs have been severely impacted by the C’19. Job loss in women is specifically high in India, resulting in 80% of job losses between March and April 2021 by women in rural parts of India working in informal sectors. Besides, the World Bank has estimated around 48 to 59 million people in SA to remain to become poor in 2021.¹⁷

¹³ UN ESCAP, ‘COVID-19 and South Asia: National Strategies and Subregional Cooperation for Accelerating Inclusive, Sustainable and Resilient Recovery’, available at:

https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/South%20Asia%20Covid-19%20Paper_5.pdf

¹⁴ UNICEF, ‘Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in South Asia’, 19th Oct 2021, available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yb7cam8x>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gizem Yarbil Gurol and Gretchen Luchsinger, ‘Overview: In South Asia, COVID-19 deepens gender disparities’, UN WOMEN, available at: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2021/07/covid-19-deepens-gender-disparities>

¹⁷ World Bank Analysis, available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/overview>

In this light, detailed country wise impact of COVID-19 in South Asia has been elucidated below:

i. Afghanistan

While implementing activities to mitigate the spread of C'19, humanitarian actors in Afghanistan continue to respond to other ongoing and emerging humanitarian needs. Natural disasters and Taliban's takeover across the country continue to displace thousands of families, compounding pre-existing vulnerabilities and making them potentially more susceptible to exposure to and transmission of C'19.

Additionally, following Taliban's takeover, World Health Organization (WHO) has recently expressed its concerns over the situation of C'19 in Afghanistan and pace of vaccination therein.¹⁸ Amid the political turmoil, the organization also anticipates rapid rise in the cases of C'19.

ii. Bangladesh

The humanitarian vulnerabilities and needs emerging as a result of lockdown measures, and its resulting economic implications will be nuanced for specific clusters of at-risk populations, based both on geographic and dimensions. The impact will also be most pronounced for people who are already suffering from multiple vulnerabilities and deprivations. More people are likely to be vulnerable categories due to expected challenges. This includes people marginally above the poverty level falling below the poverty line due to loss of income and employment during this period. People rely on unsustainable, daily wage-earning in order to support themselves and their families. Current situation measures have and will continue to severely affect daily wage earners. Further specific needs and vulnerabilities around gender, disability, age, ethnicity (indigenous groups), returnee migrant workers, income levels and employment type continue to emerge and will increase with time. While it is difficult to predict all downstream impacts of the current situation, early planning and preparation for emerging and known challenges will be critical for the humanitarian sector to be prepared to mobilize and respond in a timely manner. While the number of C'19 cases has remained relatively low, they are in an upward trajectory (Johns Hopkins data).

¹⁸ World Health Organization, 'Statement', available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/news-updates>

iii. Bhutan

Bhutan, a small Himalayan country with resource constraints did a commendable job in combating C'19 pandemic. Bhutan did not lose its single citizen to the pandemic in 2020 and there have been only 3 C'19 related deaths as of mid-August 2021.¹⁹ However, despite exemplary achievement in averting a public health crisis, the country has not been able to ward off the crippling economic impacts of the pandemic. Indefinite closure of the southern border has resulted in the manufacture and trade deficit and created adverse impact on the imports of the goods. Similarly, the construction sector also remains amongst heavily impacted areas due to its dependence on foreign workers.²⁰ Because of this, food prices in Bhutan have increased by 15% (aprox.) and the urban residents who are reliant upon the imports across the borders felt one of the immediate impacts of C'19 in Bhutan.²¹

A Rapid Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of C'19 on the Tourism Sector conducted by Bhutanese government in collaboration with UNDR and other UN agencies revealed that two-third of the households surveyed rely on tourism for their livelihood and three in four households saw their income fall by 50 to 100 percent amid Pandemic. Many households reportedly lack savings to crawl through the crisis. Nevertheless, *Kidu*, a relief support formed by His Majesty ensuring economic support and loan waiver to the vulnerable individuals have helped ease the economic difficulties. Additionally, an economic contingency plan of Nu. 4.492 billion has helped in supporting the tourism, construction sectors, agriculture and livestock production. *Kidu*, an important social protection prerogative of His Majesty has further assisted 52,644 individuals in sustaining their livelihood amid pandemic.

iv. India

On March 24, India's government announced a nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of C'19, closing schools and non-essential businesses, and suspending air and rail travel. India has been hit hard by C'19. The country currently has the second largest number of cases in the world after the United States. The economic impact of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic in India has

¹⁹ Wordometer, available at: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

²⁰ Voluntary National Report, Bhutan, 2021.

²¹ UNICEF, 'UN agencies warn economic impact of COVID-19 and worsening inequalities will fuel malnutrition for billions in Asia and the Pacific', available at: <https://www.unicef.org/bhutan/press-releases/un-agencies-warn-economic-impact-covid-19-and-worsening-inequalities-will-fuel>

been largely disruptive. India's growth in the fourth quarter of the fiscal year 2020 went down to 3.1% according to the Ministry of Statistics.

The Chief Economic Adviser to the Government said that this drop is mainly due to the coronavirus pandemic effect on the Indian economy. Notably India had also been witnessing a pre-pandemic slowdown, and according to the World Bank, the current pandemic has "magnified pre-existing risks to India's economic outlook".

Impact of C'19 has been multiple and not only limited to society at large. From the perspective of the economy both rural and urban have been impacted adversely. As India is recognised as the land of diversity, the impact of C'19 is diverse and countless. Amidst the lockdown in Indian society, multiple issues related to social, educational, economic, political, agricultural, psychological levels and many more have been noticed which has created a devastating impact on the lives of the people.²² India is likely to be worst affected among the world's major economies even after the pandemic wanes, with output 12% below pre-virus levels through the middle of the decade, according to Oxford Economics. Migrant workers during the C'19 pandemic have faced multiple hardships. With factories and workplaces shut down due to the lockdown imposed in the country, millions of migrant workers had to deal with the loss of income, food shortages and uncertainty about their future. Following this, many of them and their families went hungry. Thousands of them then began walking back home, with no means of transport.²³

v. Maldives

The first positive case of C'19 was reported on 7th March 2020 in Maldives. Following this, on 12th March 2020; Maldives declared a State of Public Health Emergency.²⁴ Altogether 222 C'19 related deaths have been reported as of 19 August 2021 in Maldives. Apart from human casualty, like every other country, Maldivian economy also suffered a downfall due to the unprecedented health and economic crisis. The Maldivian economy is largely based on the tourism sector. Due to the travel restrictions, the Ministry of Finance anticipated the contraction of Maldivian economy

²² Abhishek Soni, 'C'19 and its impact on Indian society', Oct 27, 2020

²³ BBC, 'Coronavirus in India: Desperate migrant workers trapped in lockdown', available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52360757>

²⁴ UNDP and Ministry of Economic Development, 'Impact of the COVID-19 crisis in the Maldives', p. 6.

in the range of -11.5% to -29.7% by 2021.²⁵ Further, since the citizens of Maldives are primarily reliant on tourism, C'19 has reportedly decreased the household earnings of many families. Tourism Employees Association of Maldives estimated that 11,000 workers would be on no-pay leave amid the pandemic.

However, due to the strong recovery in tourist arrivals and continued investment in tourism sector by Maldivian government, World Bank's report²⁶ released on 15 April 2021 anticipated the growth of GDP by 17.1% in 2021. Additionally, the World Bank is currently running 10 operations with a total net commitment of \$182 million in Maldives to assist in the combatting of economic impact of C'19 in the country.²⁷

vi. Nepal

Nepal, a landlocked country aspiring to graduate from a Least Developed Country status, stands highly vulnerable to the unfolding C'19 pandemic. Heedful of its vulnerabilities, the Government enforced a nationwide lockdown and activated its federal, provincial and local level mechanisms to respond to the crisis. Nepal Government has reported over 742K C'19 cases as of 19 August 2021. Meanwhile, the secondary impact of the global pandemic is huge and it is already taking a serious toll on an economy that relies heavily on remittances, imports fueled by remittances, informal labor, and tourism revenues. The persistent drumbeat of positive tests and reported deaths in other countries due the pandemic has created widespread concerns. Nepal is starting to suffer the most abrupt and widespread cessation of economic activity due to the outbreak of this virus. As per the analysis by the Asian Development Bank, the outbreak of this deadly disease will hit almost every sector of the Nepali economy, shaving up to 0.13 per cent off the gross domestic product and rendering up to 15,880 people jobless. The impact has already started to surface in number of sectors like tourism, trade and production linkages, supply and health. Especially the entire service industries: tourism, aviation and hospitality sector have been hit hard by the outbreak. With the launch of the Visit Nepal 2020 campaign in January, the country was hoping

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ World Bank, 'Maldives Development Update: A Digital Dawn, April 2021', available at: <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/93bdbd79b45eeb504743f4514f1095e1-0310062021/original/April-2021-Maldives-Development-Update.pdf>

²⁷ World Bank, 'Press release', available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/04/27/world-bank-committed-to-support-maldives-post-covid-recovery>

to attract two million visitors, but due the corona pandemic the campaign got cancelled which has shattered the hospitality and tourism related business sector. With this the tourist arrival rate has declined to below 10 percent, from 70 percent before the C'19 outbreak. Tourism sector, being one of the largest.

vii. Pakistan

On 9 May, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf government almost completely lifted a nationwide lockdown it had imposed in late March. Pakistan subsequently saw a surge in cases, placing it among the top twelve pandemic-affected countries. The government justified the easing of nationwide restrictions on economic grounds; indeed, the lockdown's toll on the most vulnerable, workers and the poor has been brutal. Yet signs of economic recovery since it was lifted are few, while the virus threatens to overwhelm ill-equipped and under-funded health systems. Government's mixed messaging and misinformation from some religious leaders mean that many disregard public health advice.

The PM's initial downplaying of the pandemic's health risks led to widespread public disregard for social distancing. The removal of restrictions on communal prayers in mosques also increased the risks of new virus clusters. Many clerics advocated religious practices that undercut physical distancing and other preventive measures. The federal government's easing of lockdown measures, despite warnings by the political opposition and medical professionals that transmissions surged, and the further lifting of the lockdown, encouraged public complacency. Though the government urges people to respect social distancing rules, these calls are largely ignored. Many believe that the pandemic is over. The federal government's adoption of what it calls a "smart lockdowns" strategy was not enough. The strategy entailed removing restrictions in specific areas within cities or regions where the authorities assess that case rates are relatively low and imposing them where they are high. Poor data and low testing rates have hampered efforts to "track, trace and quarantine".

viii. Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's inspector general ordered police to arrest those who "criticize" officials involved in the coronavirus response, or share "fake" or "malicious" messages about the pandemic. Police announced that it would arrest those who disseminate false or disparaging statements about

government officials combating the spread of the C'19 virus. The next day, five persons were arrested on charges of posting false and misleading content about C'19 on social media. In March, curfew was announced from 4pm-6am every day. Traveling to and from other districts is completely prohibited (except for individuals who are providing essential services). The order further designated some villages as isolated areas, in which no one is allowed to enter or leave.

According to police spokespeople, more than 40 people were arrested for spreading coronavirus-related "fake news." A number of those arrested were affiliated with the dissolved opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party. The law on National Management in the State of Emergency provided the government with broad new powers during a state of emergency. These included: banning meetings and gatherings; restricting people from leaving their homes; mobilizing military forces; surveilling telecommunications "by any means"; banning or restricting news media that may harm "national security" or create confusion about the state of emergency; and other measures that are "suitable and necessary" to respond to the emergency. "Obstructing" the state's response to the emergency, or noncompliance with the response in a way that creates "public chaos," is punishable by up to 5 years in jail and a fine of up to 5 million riels (\$1,200). Organizations found culpable of these offenses may be fined up to 1 billion riels (\$247,000).

2.2.State and Trend of C'19 Cases and Deaths

SN	Country, Other	Total Cases	New Cases	Total Deaths	New Deaths	Total Recovered	New Recovered	Active Cases	Serious, Critical	Tot Cases/ 1M pop	Deaths/ 1M pop	Total Tests	Tests/ 1M pop	Population
	Asia	79,619,020	51,344	1,174,828	755	76,709,682	60,471	1,734,510	25,650					
1	India	34,308,140	1,963	459,203		33,697,740	8,248	151,197	8,944	24,539	328	611,278,853	437,214	1,398,124,254
2	Bangladesh	1,570,238	256	27,880	7	1,534,073	237	8,285	1,362	9,409	167	10,409,158	62,375	166,880,617
3	Pakistan	1,274,578	561	28,477	11	1,223,531	544	22,570	1,313	5,624	126	20,923,001	92,329	226,613,299
4	Nepal	813,828	395	11,434	7	793,271	439	9,123		27,277	383	4,441,934	148,879	29,835,947
5	Sri Lanka	542,686	474	13,770		513,880	340	15,036		25,202	639	5,381,256	249,905	21,533,228
6	Afghanistan	156,323	16	7,284	3	128,848	57	20,191	1,124	3,899	182	775,161	19,332	40,097,200
7	Maldives	88,058		243		85,942		1,873	23	159,166	439	1,605,027	2,901,109	553,246
8	Bhutan	2,622	1	3		2,611	1	8		3,349	4	1,204,522	1,538,435	782,953

Source: Worldometer (As of November 3, 2021)

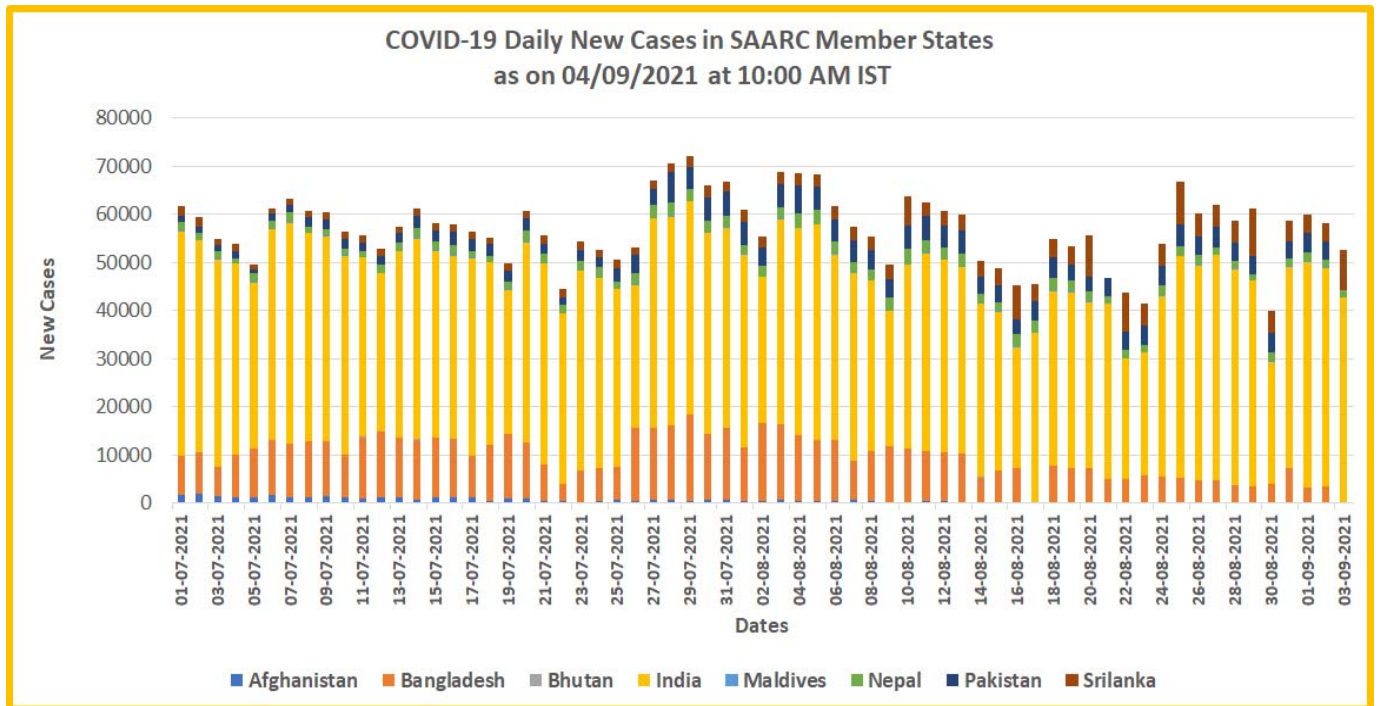
Table.1

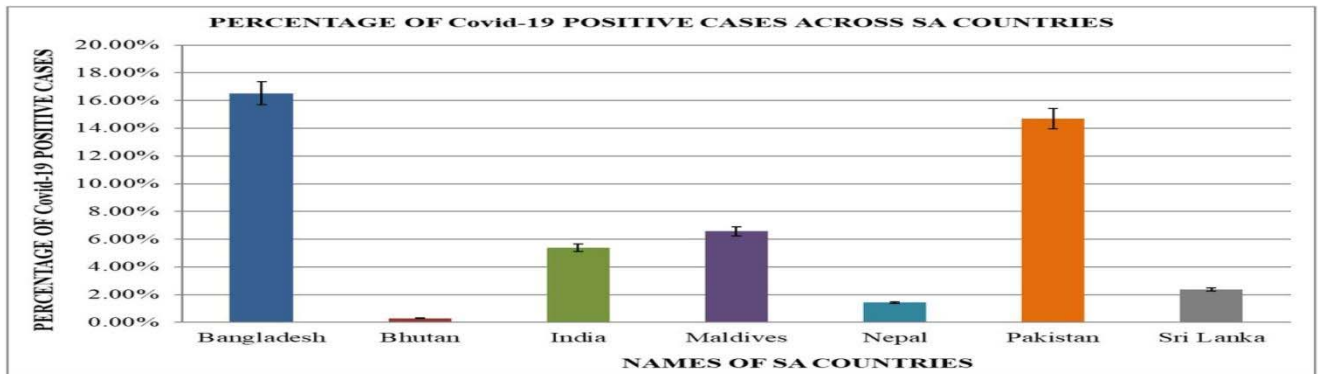
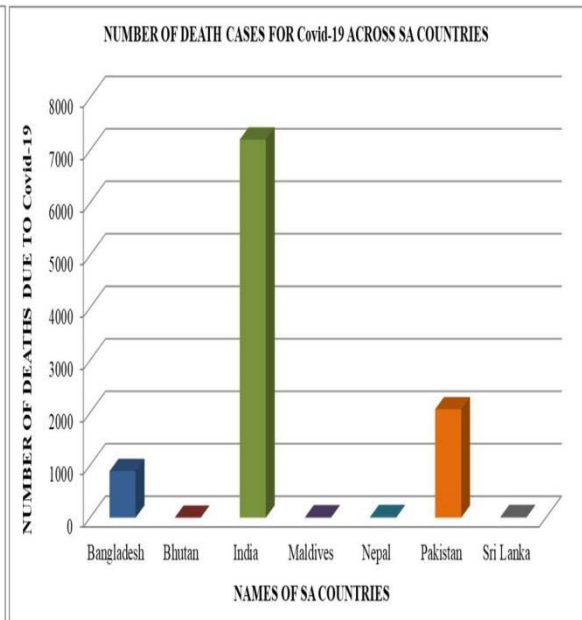
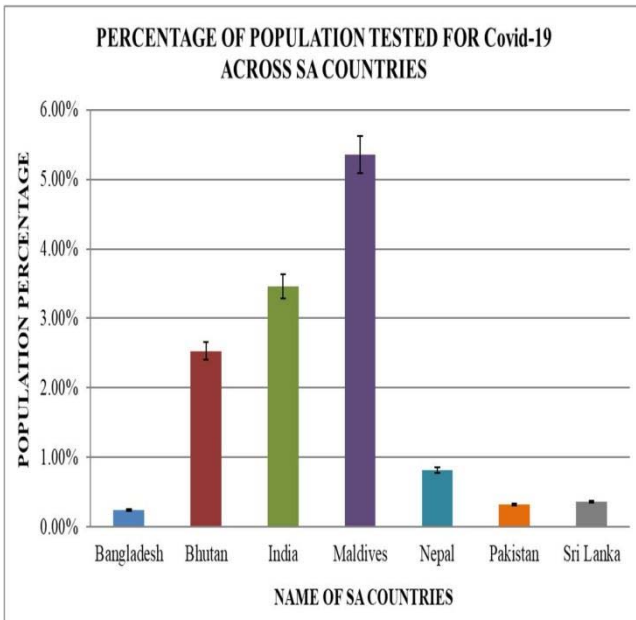
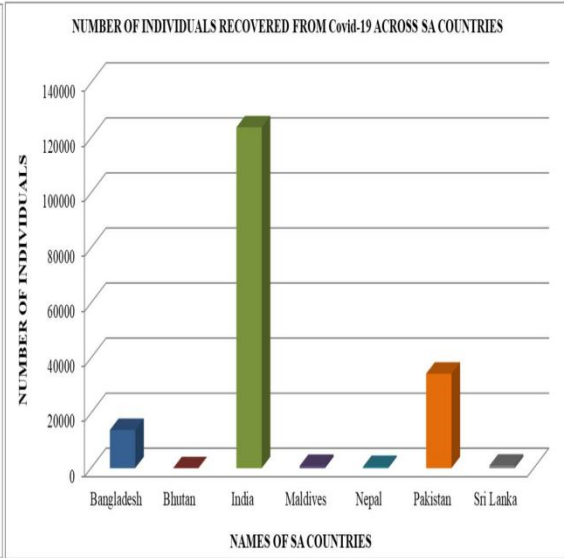
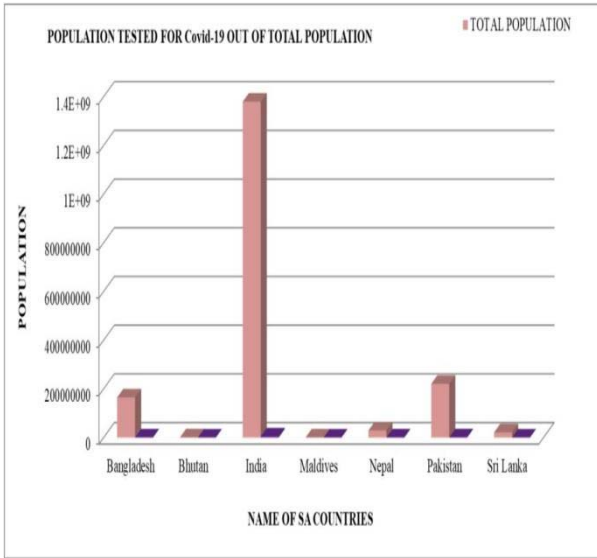
AFFECTED POPULATION IN PERCENTAGE (FROM MOST TO LEAST AFFECTED)

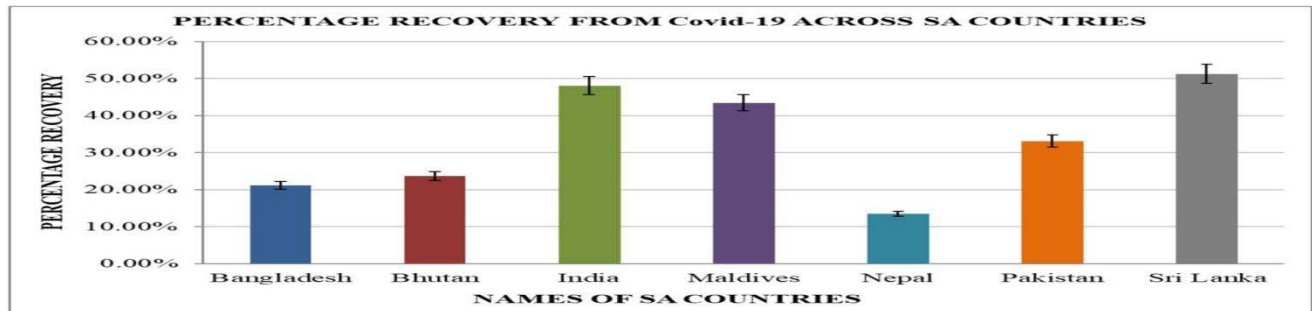
SN	Countries	Affected Population in %
1	Maldives	15.52%
2	Nepal	2.69%
3	Sri Lanka	2.46%
4	India	2.43%
5	Pakistan	0.55%
6	Afghanistan	0.38%
7	Bhutan	0.33%
8	Bangladesh	0.09%

Table.2

C'19: MID-YEAR IMPACT







SA, home to a quarter of the world’s population, following the surge of virus, shortly became a new global epicenter of C’19 pandemic. On 6 May 2021, India reported more than 400,000 new cases in one day, taking its total tally of confirmed cases to 21.5 million. Yet, this was likely to be a significant underestimate. As the disease increased, India along with several SA nations also faced a resurgence of cases.

Nepal, which shares a porous border with India, started to experience a massive spike in infections. With the beginning of second wave, daily cases increased 30-fold from 303 to 9,317, or an increase of 2,975%, between 12 April and 12 May. With India stopping exports of oxygen, Nepal struggled to find alternative supplies. To make matters worse, Nepal has been in the midst of political upheaval, with its then PM having lost a vote of confidence and parties failing to form a government when the pandemic was in its peak. Further, after experiencing a second wave last year, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka also witnessed a surge with infections picking up sharply. The new surge in cases posed a huge challenge to a region already struggling to vaccinate its population

Evinced from table 10, Maldives, specifically Male (the capital) with 15.25% of its total population already being affected by C’19 stands as the most affected country in South Asia while Bangladesh, with the 0.09% of its total population being affected by C’19, stands as the least impacted country in South Asia. Area constraint in Male followed by large number of migrant workers concentration has been considered as two of the major reasons for Maldives being most affected country and swift testing followed by collaboration with NGOs and Private sectors to tract and combat C’19 has been deemed chief reasons for least spread rate in Bangladesh.

Nevertheless, referring to Table.3, the C’19 trend is decreasing in all the South Asian countries at present. All the negative impacts rendered by C’19 will hopefully be mitigated once the situation will fully normalized or ‘new normal’ will be practically adopted.

2.3.State and Challenges Related to Vaccination

VACCINATION RATE					
SN	Countries	Number of Vaccination	Vaccinated Population (%)	Covid Trend	Data Unavailable
1	Bhutan	1,081,086	71%	Decreasing	Afghanistan
2	Maldives	731,796	68.90%	Decreasing	
3	Sri Lanka	26,298,093	60.30%	Decreasing	
4	India	893,203,984	32.70%	Decreasing	
5	Nepal	13,742,124	24%	Decreasing	
6	Pakistan	82,830,350	19%	Decreasing	
7	Bangladesh	49,559,691	15.20%	Decreasing	
8	Afghanistan	Not available	Not available	Decreasing	

Source: COVID-19 Tracker: <https://tinyurl.com/ffnun79x>

Table.3

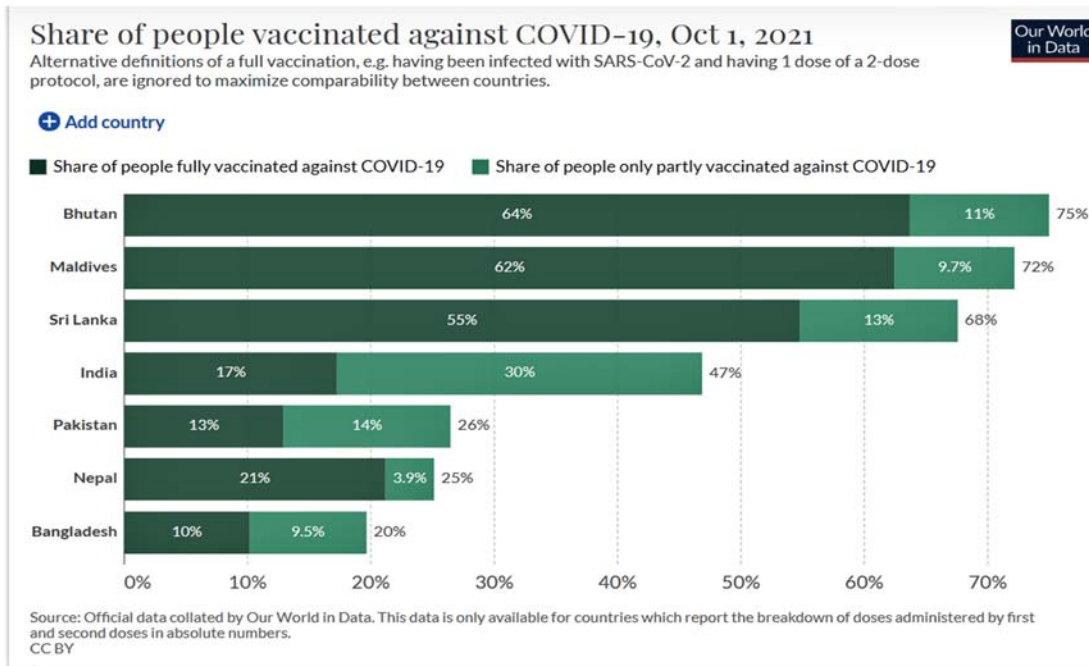


Table.4

Immunization campaign in SA was kicked off by India in mid-January²⁸ with the aim of vaccinating 300 million people by August. Following this, the country successfully administered more than 12 million doses of Covishield, AstraZeneca vaccine manufacturing them locally in Serum Institute of India. Soon after that, other SA countries including Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal,

²⁸ US News, 'India Starts World's Largest COVID-19 Drive', available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yhpnwac4>

Bhutan and Bangladesh also initiated the immunization receiving the donation from India.²⁹ For Pakistan's rescue, China donated 500,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine in March.³⁰ Notably, the vaccination campaign in South Asia was initiated prioritizing front line workers and the elderly population. So far, evident from Table.3 and 4, Bhutan have fully vaccinated 64% of its population, Maldives 62%, Sri Lanka 55%, India 17%, Pakistan 13%, Nepal 21% and Bangladesh 10%. The data for Afghanistan is however unavailable as of now. This data demonstrates that the smaller states like Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka have managed to vaccinate larger percentage of the population whilst other countries with larger population, like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal are still trailing behind on vaccination. Besides, swift vaccination campaign in Bhutan was widely praised by UNICEF as a 'great success story'.³¹

The ongoing anti-vaccination propaganda spreading through social media followed by wait for more effective vaccines (Western-vaccines) have somehow hurdled the swift vaccination program in South Asia. A poll conducted in Pakistan revealed that 49% of the participants were hesitant to take the vaccine while 39% were ready to get vaccinated once it becomes available.³² This problem was however discarded once the government restricted staff from entering to offices in the public sector, schools and hospitality and transport business without getting vaccinated. The social media fueled anti-vaccination propaganda impacted Sri Lanka and Bangladesh was well.³³ The same hesitance however, was not detected in Nepal. A study carried out by Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility in collaboration with Yale University revealed that 97% of the population in Nepal was ready to get vaccinated accounting to the highest rate in the world.³⁴ At present, lack of information regarding booster dose in South Asian countries has become a common problem.

²⁹ The Hindu, available at: <https://tinyurl.com/e898dr8j>

³⁰ Aljazeera, 'Pakistan receives first COVID vaccine shipment from China', available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/1/pakistan-receives-first-shipment-of-coronavirus-vaccine>

³¹ The Hindu, 'Success story: Bhutan vaccinates most of population after donation', available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4he9zhv5>

³² Geo News, 'Most Pakistanis choose not to get coronavirus vaccine: survey', available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc5xu25s>

³³ Stephan Uttom, 'Poor response to Bangladesh's COVID-19 vaccination drive', available at: <https://www.ucanews.com/news/poor-response-to-bangladeshs-covid-19-vaccination-drive/91329>

³⁴ The Kathmandu Post, 'COVID-19 jab acceptance highest in Nepal, study finds', available at: <https://tinyurl.com/t89acptp>

CHAPTER-THREE: PROGRESS ON SDGs

3.1. Overall Implementation

S.A Countries	2016			2017			2018			2019			2020			2021		
	Score	Rank	Spillover score	Score	Rank	Spillover score	Score	Rank	Spillover score	Score	Rank	Spillover score	Score	Rank	Spillover score	Score	Rank	Spillover score
Afghanistan	36.5	139	n/a	46.8	150	n/a	46.2	151	93.8	49.6	153	94.5	54.2	139	99.3	53.9	137	99.34
Bangladesh	44.4	118	n/a	56.2	120	n/a	59.3	111	97.9	60.9	116	98	63.5	109	99.4	63.5	109	99.33
Bhutan	58.2	82	n/a	65.5	81	n/a	65.4	83	88.2	67.6	84	88.7	69.3	80	93.7	70	75	93.9
India	48.4	110	n/a	58.1	116	n/a	59.1	112	99.6	61.1	115	99.4	61.9	117	98.8	60.1	120	98.9
Maldives	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	72.1	47	69.6	67.6	91	87.8	69.3	79	88.26
Nepal	51.5	103	n/a	61.6	105	n/a	62.8	102	98.5	63.9	103	98.5	65.9	96	99.1	66.5	96	99.15
Pakistan	45.7	115	n/a	55.6	112	n/a	54.9	126	99.3	55.6	130	99.4	56.2	134	99.6	57.7	129	99.68
Sri Lanka	54.8	97	n/a	65.9	81	n/a	64.6	89	94	65.8	93	94.2	66.9	94	96.5	68.1	87	96.37

SGD INDEX 2016 - 2021, SDG Dashboard

Table.5

SDG Index assesses each country's overall performance on the 17 SDGs. Overall Score of (0) signifies worst possible outcome while (100) signifies best or targeted outcome. To note: Countries like Finland, Sweden's overall index score is 85+ (highest noted so far), this makes these countries one of the top performing countries in terms of progress towards 17 Goals.³⁵ In the context of South Asia, evident from Table.5, Bhutan with the average score of 66 Stands as the top performing country for 5 consecutive years (From 2016 to 2021) except in 2019, where Maldives, overrode Bhutan with its inception where as Afghanistan, with the average score of 47 stands as the worse performing country for 6 consecutive years (from 2016 to 2021).

Overall, the SA countries are seemingly doing decent in terms of progressing towards 17 Goals with Average score of 45 to 50+ overall. It is important to note that, according to the 2020 SDGs report published by United Nations, no country was on tack to meet the targets by 2030 even before the pandemic and like every other regions, given the fact that implementation of all the SDGs require some form of resources and financial support, economic downfall resulted by the outbreak of COVID-19 has created a massive hurdle in the implementation of SDGs in South Asia. For an instance, Standard chartered SDG investment map³⁶ estimates that India alone require the investment of \$2.64 trillion to meet the SDGs by 2030.

³⁵ Sustainable Development Solution Network, 'Sustainable Development Report', 2021, p.4.

³⁶ Business Insider India, 'UN says it won't be able to achieve sustainable development goal by 2030', available at: <https://tinyurl.com/wz68wtw>

3.2. Goal-5: Gender Equality



Table-6

COUNTRIES	RANK (2021) out of 173	RANK (2020) out of 153
Bangladesh	65 th	50 th
Nepal	106 th	101 st
Sri Lanka	116 th	102 nd
Maldives	128 th	123 rd
Bhutan	130 th	131 st
India	140 th	112 th
Pakistan	153 rd	151 st
Afghanistan	156 th	-----

Source: Gender Gap Index 2020 and 2021

Table.7

Gender based violence and gender discrimination is a common human rights issue faced by South Asian States. Evident from the World’s Economic Forum, 2021’s gender gap index, whose analysis is primarily dependent upon ‘**Economic participation and Opportunity, Educational attainment, Health and Survival and Political empowerment of a women**’ Apart from Bangladesh, no other South Asian countries falls under top 100 countries with less gender inequality amongst 173 Nations. However, Bangladesh, despite being one of the top performers in South Asia in terms of ensuring gender equality, the gender gap has widened by 0.7% amid pandemic.

Enactment of progressive laws with nominal implementation of the same has further aided to the static rate of gender inequality in the South Asian States. **Countries like Bhutan and Maldives have somehow shown progressive change** in gender gap index (Table.7), nevertheless; the gender-based discrimination in these countries is still adamant and the progressive is not commendable.

Besides, as per UN WOMEN, pre-existing inequality amongst Poor women and girls, gender and ethnic minorities, women and girls with disabilities have further been intensified amid pandemic in South Asia.³⁷ Nepal and India, inter alia, faces the high rate of disproportionate job loss and women based violence in South Asia.

More than 90% of women in Nepal and India working in informal and home-based jobs have been severely impacted by the COVID-19. Job loss in women is specifically high in India, resulting in 80% of job losses between March and April 2021 by women in rural part of India working in informal sectors. Nepal police's data reveals that the cases of intimate partner violence, including marital rape, domestic violence and other forms of violence are on rise amid pandemic. [1169 domestic violence cases and 354 case of other violence reported since the first lockdown in March) Additionally, cyber violence, child marriage and trafficking are found to be rising, both in Nepal and in India during pandemic. India have operated around 700 One-Stop-Crisis centers supporting more than 300,000 women facing violence and abuse amid pandemic.

In this light, the country wise situation of SDG-10 in South Asia has briefly been discussed below:

i. Afghanistan

Despite the efforts and progresses in gender equality over a decade, Afghanistan ranks last (156th) in the Global Gender Gap report 2021³⁸ and 169th on the Gender Inequality Index 2020.³⁹ It remains amongst the country with highest level of inequality especially in reproductive health, women's empowerment and economic activity⁴⁰. Global Gender Gap report is specifically based on Economic participation and opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival and Political

³⁷ N(16)

³⁸ World Economic Forum, 'Gender Gap Report', 2021, available at: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf

³⁹ Gender Inequality Index (GII), available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-index-gii>

⁴⁰ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-index-gii>

Empowerment. Rank of Afghanistan in this report sufficiently demonstrates existing Gender inequality in the country.

ii. **Bangladesh:** Coming up as one of the top performers amongst South Asian countries in reducing the gender gap in recent decade, Bangladesh ranks 65th out of 156 countries in World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report in 2021. However, this gap between men and women in the country has widened by 0.7% specifically in terms of economic opportunities amid pandemic.⁴¹

iii. **Bhutan:** Bhutan ranks 130th out of 156 countries in World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report 2021. The rank demonstrated high rate of existing gender disparity in terms of Economic participation, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival and Political Empowerment.

iv. **India:** Evinced from the Global Gender Gap report 2021, Gender parity in India seems to be quite high. India has been ranked 140 with the score of 0.625 in the report making India bottom three South Asian countries upholding gender equality amongst the countries selected for the purpose of this research.

v. **Maldives:** Maldives ranks 128th out of 156 countries in World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report 2021.

vi. **Nepal:** In terms of Gender equality, Nepal ranks 106th out of 156 countries in World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report 2021. This makes Nepal 2nd country with least gender disparity in South Asia after Bhutan.

vii. **Pakistan:** Pakistan ranks 153th out of 156 countries in World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report 2021. This evidently shows the existing gender disparity in the country. Also, the country has been enlisted in the Tire-2 watch list in terms of Human Trafficking.⁴² This makes Pakistan one amongst three South Asian countries (selected for the purpose of this study) to be enlisted as a country with significant number of trafficking victims or country showing little to no effort on combating the severe forms of trafficking in their respective states.

⁴¹ Financial Express, 'Pandemic widens gender gap in Bangladesh', available at: <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/pandemic-widens-gender-gap-in-bangladesh-1624943061>

⁴² US Department of State, available at: <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2010765.html>

viii. Sri Lanka: Existing gender disparity in Sri Lanka is evident from its rank at 116th out of 156 countries in World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap report 2021.

Hence, Evident from Table.6, gender disparity stands as one of the common problems in SA and major challenges in terms of achievement of SDG-4 is stagnant in all other SA countries except for Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal where the challenges are moderately improving.

3.3. Goal-10: Reducing Inequalities



Table.8

Unavailability of Data regarding the status of SDH-10 is a common problem in South Asia, which is evident from Table.8 above. However, based on other independent sources, the existence of inequality in SA is quite vivid. Social as well as economic inequality persists in SA, which is evinced from International Poverty rate of 15.09%⁴³ and unemployment rate of 6.63% in 2020, marking a rise by 1.54% in comparison to 2019.⁴⁴

The existing inequality has further been intensified by the outbreak of deadly virus. According to the Global Call to Action against Poverty⁴⁵, a new form of inequality ‘VACCINE INEQUALITY’

⁴³ TM Tonmoy Islam et.al., ‘ International Comparison of Poverty in South Asia’, Asian Development Bank, p.144.

⁴⁴ Macro trends, ‘South Asia Unemployment Rate 1991-2021’, available at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/SAS/south-asia/unemployment-rate>

⁴⁵ Global Call to Action Against Poverty, ‘Asia’, available at: <https://gcap.global/region/asia/>

has arose in SA amid pandemic. The unprecedented job loss amid pandemic has further deepened this inequality.

According to Asian Development Bank’s, two common problems aggravating the inequalities in South Asia are noted to be,

- i. Unequal distribution of wealth and resources.
- ii. Lack of access to most basic services to some.

3.4. Goal-16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

SDSN Index 2021 - Country Report

Dashboards: ● SDG achieved ● Challenges remain ● Significant challenges remain ● Major challenges remain ● Information unavailable

Trends: ↑ On track or maintaining SDG achievement ↗ Moderately improving → Stagnating ↓ Decreasing ** Trend information unavailable

	Afghanistan	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Maldives	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
INDICATORS								
1. Homicides	●	↑	●	●	●	**	●	↑
2. Unsentenced detainees	●	**	●	**	●	**	●	●
3. Population who feel safe walking alone	●	↓	●	**	●	**	●	↓
4. Property Rights	●	**	●	**	●	**	●	↓
5. Birth registration with civil authority	●	**	●	**	●	**	●	**
6. Corruption Perception Index	●	→	→	↑	→	↑	→	→
7. Children involved in child labor	●	**	●	**	●	●	●	●
8. Exports of major conventional weapons	●	**	●	**	●	●	●	**
9. Press Freedom Index	●	→	●	↑	●	↓	→	●
10. Access to and affordability of justice	●	↑	●	**	●	**	●	↓
11. Persons held in prison	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table.9

We live in an increasingly divided world where some regions enjoy sustained peace whilst other experience endless conflict and violence. Nevertheless, achievement of Sustainable Development Goal is unthinkable without assurance of peace, stability, human rights and effective governance.

Concerning South Asia, Implementation status of SDG-16 is quite concerning. Evinced from Table 9 which is based on 11 indicators’ analysis, Bhutan, *inter alia*, stepping forward as the only South Asian country with achievement of SDG16 on track, stands as a best performing country in terms of implementation of the same. On the other hand, major challenges in terms of achievement of SDG-16, in all other South Asian countries apart from Bhutan and Maldives are either stagnating or moderately improving.

Nevertheless, despite the data showing the SDG-16's implementation on track in Bhutan, information collected from other sources demonstrates that the rate of Human trafficking is still high in Bhutan and the country haven't yet criminalized all forms of child sex trafficking.⁴⁶

Additionally, followings are noted to be some of the common problems experienced by SA in terms of achievement of SDG-16:

- a. Corruption: Major challenges concerning corruption are either stagnant or moderately improving in all South Asian countries other than Bhutan.
- b. Human Trafficking: Not even one South Asian countries sits at Tier 1 (Countries doing enough to combat Human Trafficking) under the US Department of State's trafficking in person report, 2020.
- c. Unavailability of Information evinced from Table 9 itself.

In this light, country specific situation of SDG-16 in South Asia has been noted below:

i. Afghanistan:

For decayed, Afghanistan has been going through conflict, insecurity and inadequate institutional capacity to ensure access to justice. Report published by the Global Institute for Economic and Peace in 2021⁴⁷ reveals that the economic cost of violence in most affected countries ranges from 23.4 to 59.1% of the GDP, the same in Afghanistan for 2020 was noted to be 50.3% of the GDP and was ranked 163rd in the Global peace Index that year.

Additionally, Transparency International's Global Corruption Perception Index 2020 ranks Afghanistan 165th out of 178 countries. Further, the state has been enlisted as Teir-3 country in terms of human trafficking for not fully complying with the minimum standards and not making significant efforts to do so.

Even though the country passed 482 laws and regulations⁴⁸ to provide a governance framework for the State functioning and operation of free market and civil societies, hope for implementation

⁴⁶ N(44)

⁴⁷ Institute for Economics and Peace, 'Economic Value of Peace 2021', available at: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/EVP-2021-web.pdf>

⁴⁸ Voluntary National Report, Afghanistan, 2021, p.5. available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/280392021_VNR_Report_Afghanistan.pdf

of the same is exceedingly dubious following the Taliban's overtaking. Additionally, alongside government's efforts in achieving the targeted goals, Afghanistan faced existing and emerging, social and political challenges creating hurdle in the overall achievement of the SDGs.⁴⁹ COVID-19 along with its social and economic consequences have prolonged the peace process in the country.

ii. Bangladesh

Bangladesh has formed National Human Rights Commission, issued Right to Information Act for the assurance of SDG 16 in Specific. As per the VNR report 2020, the number of human trafficking's victims has declined to 0.61 from the baseline 0.85 as of 2018, for every 100,000 population. However, Bangladesh still stands in the list of Tier 2 countries making reasonable efforts but not fully complying with the minimum standards to combat the cases of Human Trafficking. Further, for ensuring the institutional accountability, under social protection program; government has implemented some governance related initiatives like annual performance agreement; citizen charter, national integrity strategy and grievance redress system.

iii. Bhutan

The rate of homicide has dropped from 3.8 per 100,000 populations in 2002 to 1.9 in 2018. Besides, in terms of corruption, as per Transparency International Corruption Index 2020, Bhutan secures its rank at 24th least corrupt countries in the world and ranks 1 in South Asia.⁵⁰ Similarly, despite the notable efforts made by government in combating the cases of trafficking, Bhutan does not meet minimum standards for the elimination of the same. Due to this, it has been downgraded to Tier 3 in the list of countries whose government do not fully comply with the minimum standards and are not making significant effort to do so. Country has not yet criminalized all forms of child sex trafficking.⁵¹

iv. India

In the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals, India's rank has been slipped by 5 from 115 in 2020 to 120 in 2021. Country ranks below four South Asian countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka with overall SDG score of 61.9 out of 100. On one hand, the rate of homicide

⁴⁹ Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform, Afghanistan VNR 2021 Key Messages, available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/afghanistan>

⁵⁰ Transparency International, 'Corruption Perception Index', available at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/nzl>

⁵¹ US Department of State, available at: <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2010765.html>

has been dropped from 4.56 per 100,000 populations in the year 2000 to 3.1 in 2018.⁵² On the other hand, the percentage of unsentenced detainees amongst overall prison population has increased from 65.80% in 2006 to 67.70 in 2018. Additionally, the corruption rate perception index 2020 ranks India 86th with score of 40 which is a drop from rank 80 last year. Further, India has been ranked 140 with the score of 0.625 in the report making India bottom three South Asian countries upholding gender equality amongst the countries selected for the purpose of this research.

v. Maldives

Maldives lack update data. Nevertheless, Maldives has made significant progress in combating the corruption. This is evident from the 2020's Corruption index which rank Maldives 70th least corrupt country in the world with the score 29. Country's rank was 130th in the year 2019. Further, the country remain Tier 2 as a country whose government do not fully comply with the act's minimum standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards in combating Human Trafficking.⁵³

vi. Nepal

As per the data published by Nepal police, the crime rate in Nepal rose by 40% between 2014-15 to 2018-19.⁵⁴ The cases of crime rose to 39,389 the fiscal year 2018-19 from 28,070 in 2014-15. Similarly, Transparency International enlists Nepal amongst one of the most corrupt states in the world with received point less than 50 since 2014. Total of 25,152 complaints of Corruption were filed in the year 2018/19 in Nepal. In this, verdicts in 84.8% of the cases were rendered in the favour of the CIAA. CIAA Nepal has promulgated 4 years institutional strategic plan (2076/77 to 2080/81) with the aim of creating corruptionless society. Four approaches to combat the corruption includes, Remedial approach, Preventive approach, Promotional approach and, Institutional capacity building approach.

Just like majority of South Asian states, Nepal is also labeled also stands as Teir 2 countries whose government do not fully comply with the Act's minimum standards but are making commendable efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards. Amid the pandemic, Ministry of Law and Justice along with Nepal Bar Association established a mobile legal aid clinic in

⁵² SDNS, 'Country Profile: India', available at: <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/india>

⁵³ U.S. Department OF State, '2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Maldives', available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/maldives/>

⁵⁴ The Kathmandu Post, 'Crime rate in Nepal rose by 40%', available at: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/12/08/crime-rate-in-nepal-rose-by-40-percent-in-past-five-fiscal-years-police-data-reveals>

collaboration with UNDP to provide legal services to the needy and vulnerable. Further, NHRC also introduced mobile human rights camps in order to monitor and provide necessary human rights counseling to the vulnerable groups.⁵⁵

vii. Pakistan

Crime against Children and women are skyrocketing amid pandemic in Pakistan. The cases of domestic violence in Pakistan increased by 200% from January to March 2020.⁵⁶ Similarly, a report ‘cruel numbers’ published in 2020 revealed that 8% children were abused each day in 2020 and 80% of the abusers were known to the children.⁵⁷ Further, Child marriage remained yet another serious problem in Pakistan with 21% of the girl child marrying before the age of 18 and 3% before the age of 15.⁵⁸

The country has been enlisted in the Teir-2 watch list in terms of human trafficking.⁵⁹ This makes Pakistan one amongst 3 South Asian countries (selected for the purpose of this study) to be enlisted as a country with significant number of trafficking victims or country showing little to no effort on combating the severe forms of trafficking in their respective states. Additionally, evinced from the shrinking rank of Pakistan in Corruption perception index from 120th least corrupt country in 2019 to 124th in 2020; rate of Corruption is seen to be increasing in the state.⁶⁰

viii. Sri Lanka

The numbers of grave crimes in Sri Lanka have decreased from 28,328 in the year 2019 to 26,651 in 2020.⁶¹ However, in terms of human trafficking, country stands as a Teir 2(watch list) along with Pakistan and Bhutan. This makes Sri Lanka one amongst 3 South Asian countries (selected for the purpose of this study) to be enlisted as a country with significant number of trafficking victims or country showing little to no effort on combating the severe forms of trafficking in their

⁵⁵ UNDP, ‘Advancing Access to Justice during COVID-19’, available at:

<https://www.np.undp.org/content/nepal/en/home/blog/2020/Advancing-access-to-justice-during-COVID19.html>

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch, ‘Events of 2020: Pakistan’, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/pakistan>

⁵⁷ ANI, ‘Crime against children in Pakistan on the rise’, available at:

<https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/crimes-against-children-in-pakistan-on-the-rise-8-children-abused-every-day-in-2020-report20210410125629/>

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ N(44)

⁶⁰ N(52)

⁶¹ Sri Lanka Police, ‘Grave crime abstract for the year 2019 and 2020’, available at:

<https://www.police.lk/index.php/item/138-crime-statistics>

respective states. Besides, the corruption rate pursuant to corruption perception index has increased in the country. Sri Lanka secured its rank as 93rd least corrupt countries in 2019, which has fallen to 94th in the year 2020.

3.5. Top Five SDGs-UPR Recommendations

South Asia (8)								
South Asia (8)	Afghanistan	NA	300 / 277 (92%)	SDG 16 (24%)	SDG 5 (21%)	SDG 4 (9%)	SDG 1 (3%)	SDG 3 (2%)
	Bangladesh	430 / 394 (92%)	288 / 217 (75%)	SDG 16 (23%)	SDG 5, 8 (11%)	SDG 10 (5%)	SDG 4 (3%)	SDG 1, 3 (3%)
	Bhutan	291 / 200 (69%)	257 / 187 (73%)	SDG 16 (13%)	SDG 5 (12%)	SDG 4 (9%)	SDG 8 (7%)	SDG 1 (6%)
	India	339 / 169 (50%)	296 / 184 (62%)	SDG 16 (18%)	SDG 5 (15%)	SDG 8 (7%)	SDG 4 (6%)	SDG 10 (5%)
	Maldives	541 / 419 (77%)	297 / 222 (75%)	SDG 16 (29%)	SDG 5 (16%)	SDG 8 (5%)	SDG 10 (5%)	SDG 3 (3%)
	Nepal	308 / 235 (76%)	217 / 207 (76%)	SDG 16 (20%)	SDG 5 (16%)	SDG 4, 8 (8%)	SDG 1 (4%)	SDG 3 (4%)
	Pakistan	489 / 372 (76%)	326 / 189 (58%)	SDG 16 (16%)	SDG 5 (13%)	SDG 4 (5%)	SDG 8 (5%)	SDG 10 (4%)
	Sri Lanka	444 / 242 (54%)	554 / 438 (79%)	SDG 16 (18%)	SDG 5 (11%)	SDG 1, 10 (6%)	SDG 2 (4%)	SDG 8 (3%)

Table.10

Evident from Table.10, most of the UPR recommendations received by South Asian states either relates to SDG-16, SDG 5, SDG 1, SDG 8, SDG 4 or SDG 10. On that note, some of the common recommendations relating to these SDGs received by South Asian countries have been enlisted below:

SDG-16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

Common UPR recommendations received by SA States for the implementation of SDG 16:

- i. To ensure Right to Life to all the citizens, ratify Optional Protocol II of ICCPR and Prohibit Death Penalty. (Except for Nepal)
- ii. Ratify Rome Statute (Except for Bangladesh, Bhutan and Maldives)
- iii. Promulgate and Implement strict laws to address caste-based discrimination and take measures to effectively investigate on this regard.
- iv. Combat Human Trafficking: South Asian States is a Hub for human trafficking. Not even one South Asian countries stand at Tire 1 (Countries doing enough to combat Human Trafficking) under the US State Department's Trafficking in Person Report, 2020.
- v. South Asian Countries like Nepal and Bangladesh have shown efforts to protect the rights of minorities and ensured their rights under the State's constitution. However, if we are to see 'South Asia State of Minorities Report 2019', hatred

and discriminate against minorities amongst South Asian Nation is rampant. Considering this, Protect and promote the rights of vulnerable groups including ethnic minorities and accession of 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugee and 1967 protocol relating to the status of Refugee are another common UPR recommendation received by South Asian States.

SDG-5: Gender Equality

Gender based violence and gender discrimination is a common human rights issue faced by SA States evinced from the fact that only Bangladesh amongst all the SA States secured its position under top 100 countries with less gender parity in recent 2021's gender gap index.

Common UPR recommendations received by SA States for the implementation of SDG 5:

- i. Take effective steps to eliminate all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, including broadening definition of family and domestic violence and establish safe reporting environment of sexual and gender-based violence in the country.
- ii. Ensure speedy investigation and effective access to justice on the cases of gender-based violence.
- iii. Recognize same sex marriage and commit to end violence at all level of society against LGBTIQ+ (Queer) community.
- iv. Provide equal access to citizenship to the women.
- v. Ensure gender-sensitive transitional justice process.

SDG-4 & 10: Quality Education & Reducing Inequality

According to UNICEF, despite the improvement in school enrollment in South Asian states, more than 50% of the children live in learning poverty (not being able to read and understand simple text by age 10 to 12.5), nearly 22 million children in SA have missed out their early childhood education due to the pandemic and around 424 million students have affected by the school closures.

Common UPR recommendations received by SA States for the implementation of SDG 4:

- i. Ensure free and compulsory education and promote Human rights education in the School curriculum.
- ii. Take necessary measures to promote access to education or vocational trainings in children with disabilities (especially girls with disabilities), Dalits and marginalized groups.
- iii. Increase the government's expenditure in the field of education and promote inclusive (Particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan) and quality education. (increasing girls' secondary education)
- iv. Teach children about Climate change adaptation and mitigation

SDG-1: No Poverty

South Asian countries including Nepal, Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka pronounce themselves, as a Socialist State, yet the income/economy gap between the citizens of South Asian Nations are excessive.

Common UPR recommendations received by SA States for the implementation of SDG 1:

- i. Promulgate proper policy to guarantee access to economy to the people living in poverty in a tangible and practical manner.
- ii. Improve the judicial system and law enforcement bodies to reduce corruption and poverty.
- iii. Prioritize reducing poverty in vulnerable and marginalized community.
- iv. Increase social inclusion and Support microfinance programs to combat poverty.

SDG-8: Decent work

Supply of cheap labour for paid domestic work without any social protection is an alarming problem in SA. None of the SA States has ratified ILO Convention 189 concerning 'decent work for domestic workers'. Further, these States proclaims 'collection of data of informal labours' as a proactive state intervention to ensure decent working environment to the domestic workers without ratification of ILO Convention 189.

Common UPR recommendations received by SA States for the implementation of SDG 8:

- i. Ratify ILO Domestic Workers Convention 2011.
- ii. Ensure proper rehabilitation to the victims of trafficking. [Provide support to the victims of human trafficking, forced labour and those who have been sexually exploited]
- iii. Continue relevant consultation on combating trafficking in person.
- iv. Strengthen National strategies to combat child labour.

CHAPTER-FOUR: DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

4.1. Democracy (EIU)

												Full democracy	8-9	9-10	
												Flawed democracy	6-7	7-8	
												Hybrid regime	4-5	5-6	
												Authoritarian regime	0-2	2-3	3-4
	Year	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020					
	South Asia (8)	Rank (/167)	Score (/10)	Rank (/167)	Score (/10)	Rank (/167)	Score (/10)	Rank (/167)	Score (/10)	Rank (/167)	Score (/10)				
	Afghanistan	149	2.55	149	2.55	143	2.97	141	2.85	139	2.85				
	Bangladesh	84	5.73	92	5.43	88	5.57	80	5.88	76	5.99				
	Bhutan	98	4.93	99	5.08	94	5.3	92	5.28	84	5.71				
	India	32	7.81	42	7.23	41	7.23	51	6.9	53	6.61				
	Maldives	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-				
	Nepal	102	4.86	94	5.18	97	5.18	92	5.28	92	5.22				
	Pakistan	111	4.33	110	4.26	112	4.17	108	4.25	105	4.31				
SA	Sri Lanka	66	6.48	62	6.48	71	6.19	69	6.27	68	6.14				

Source: EIU Democracy Index

Table.11

The assessment of Democracy Index is based on five categories namely, electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, & civil liberties.⁶²

Evident from table.11, not even a single South Asian country has been recognized as a country with ‘Full Democracy’ in last five years. Even India, which has been time and again referred the largest democracy in the world followed by Sri Lanka has been enlisted as the countries with ‘Flawed Democracy’ since last five Years.

Other South Asian countries, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan has been practicing ‘Hybrid regime’ since last five years and Afghanistan on the other hand has been exercising ‘Authoritarian regime’.

In nutshell, South Asian states been often experiencing ‘Light and Shadow Democracy’ due to emergence of authoritarian regimes while democratic transitions are emerging.

⁶² Economist Intelligence Unit, ‘Democracy Index 2020’, available at: <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>

4.2. Democracy and Human Rights (International IDEA)

STATE OF DEMOCRACY								
■ 0.00 - 0.399 Low performance ■ 0.40 - 0.70 Mid-range performance ■ 0.701 - 1.00 High performance								
Source: IDEA International	Afghanistan	Bangladesh	India	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	Bhutan	Maldives
Indicators	Afghanistan	Bangladesh	India	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	Bhutan	Maldives
Regime Type	Hybrid	Authoritarian regime	Mixed	Mid range Democracy	Weak Democracy	Mid-range Democracy		
Representative Government	0.41	0.35	0.61	0.65	0.52	0.73		
Clean Election	0.41	0.33	0.65	0.68	0.48	0.78		
Inclusive Suffrage	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.88	N/A	N/A		
Free Political Parties	N/A	0.42	N/A	N/A	0.5	N/A		
Elected Government	N/A	0.51	N/A	1	1	1		
Fundamental Rights	0.36	0.39	0.54	0.61	0.41	0.56		
Access to Justice	0.33	0.4	0.57	0.63	0.39	0.58		
Civil Liberties	0.59	0.46	0.53	0.66	0.5	0.54		
Freedom of Expression	N/A	0.39	0.51	0.59	0.49	0.5		
Freedom of Association and Assembly	0.64	0.46	0.49	0.66	0.49	0.49		
Freedom of Religion	0.42	0.46	0.38	0.49	0.33	0.44		
Freedom of Movement	0.48	0.56	0.56	0.72	0.5	0.63		
Person Intergity and Security	0.4	0.25	0.39	0.46	0.32	0.41		
Social Rights and Equality	0.27	0.28	0.4	0.45	0.44	0.45		
Social Group Equality	0.32	0.26	N/A	0.47	0.49	0.4		
Basic Welfare	0.38	0.5	0.49	0.49	0.38	0.71		
Gender Equality	0.31	0.48	N/A	0.54	0.49	0.59		
Checks on Government	0.52	0.39	0.58	0.62	0.58	0.49		
Effective Parliament	0.47	0.3	0.55	0.66	0.58	0.4		
Judicial Independence	N/A	0.28	N/A	0.54	0.53	0.52		
Media Integrity	0.71	0.61 y	N/A	0.66	0.63	0.6		
Impartial Administration	0.26	0.26	0.53	0.45	0.38	0.44		
Absene of Corruption	0.19	0.22	0.49	0.4	0.36	0.43		
Predictable Enforcement	0.4	0.32	N/A	0.53	0.39	0.46		
Participatory Engagement	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A		
Civil Society Participation	0.6	0.53	N/A	0.64	0.66	0.58		
Electoral Participation	N/A	0.78	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.75		
Local Democracy	N/A	0.12	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.52		

Table.12

Evident from International IDEA's data based on seven indicators and 28 categories enlisted in Table.1.2, South Asian countries either experience Hybrid regime or Weak/mid-range democracy or Authoritarian regime. It is necessary to note that the data for Bhutan and Maldives are unavailable for this interpretation.

Further, countries like Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India have demonstrate very weak performance in terms of upholding representative government, assurance of Fundamental rights, freedom of expression, religion, person's integrity and security, assurance of social rights and equality, check on government, Impartial administration and Local democracy.

On the other hand, Nepal, practicing mid-range democracy stands as the best performing state in SA upholding the democratic values and ensuring basic human rights to its citizens.

4.3. Press Freedom (RSF)

												Good:	
												Problematic:	Fairly Good:
												Bad:	Very Bad:
Region	Countries	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
		Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score
SA(8)	Afghanistan	120	37.75	120	39.46	118	37.28	121	36.55	122	37.7	122	40.19
	Bangladesh	144	45.94	146	48.36	146	48.62	150	50.74	151	49.37	152	49.71
	Bhutan	94	30.73	84	30.73	94	30.73	80	29.81	67	28.9	65	28.86
	India	133	43.17	136	42.94	138	43.24	140	45.67	142	45.33	142	46.56
	Maldives	112	34.17	117	39.3	120	37.95	98	32.16	79	29.93	72	29.13
	Nepal	105	32.62	100	33.02	106	32.05	106	33.4	112	35.1	106	34.62
	Pakistan	147	48.52	139	43.55	139	43.24	142	45.83	145	45.52	145	46.86
	Sri Lanka	141	44.96	141	44.34	131	41.37	126	39.61	127	41.94	127	42.2

Table.13

Analysis of the situation of media freedom by RSF is based on ‘Pluralism, Independence of the media, quality of legislative framework and safety of journalists.’

Vivid from Table.13, situation of Press Freedom in South Asia is either bad (Majority) or Problematic (Bhutan & Nepal) for six consecutive years. Bangladesh, stands as the best amongst the worse and Afghanistan (before Taliban’s takeover) stands as the best amongst problematic in South Asia in terms of press freedom.

4.4. Civic Space: A Bedrock of Democratic Society

		Open	Narrowed	Obstructed	Repressed	Closed
SN	COUNTRIES	Civic Space				
1	Afghanistan	Repressed (Under watch list)				
2	Bangladesh	Repressed				
3	Bhutan	Obstructed				
4	India	Repressed				
5	Maldives	Obstructed				
6	Nepal	Obstructed				
7	Pakistan	Repressed				
8	Sri Lanka	Obstructed				

Source: CIVICUS

Table.14

Evident from Table.14, Civic Space in South Asian countries are either ‘Repressed’ or ‘Obstructed’.

The given situation evidently signifies that:⁶³

- The civic space is heavily contested by the power holders and political elites.
- There are hurdles in the full enjoyment and effective realization of fundamental rights.
- Existence of fear of surveillance, harassment and even death while criticizing the power holders is apparently prevalent.

Besides, recently, following Taliban's takeover, Afghanistan has been listed under the watchlist by CIVICUS.

Amid the pandemic, governments are using C'19 responses to justify authoritarian rule, undermining democratic norms. Some governments even claim that an authoritarian approach is the best way to defeat the pandemic. They have touted a strict, top-down and tech-enabled approach as not only necessary, but ideal for protecting public health—even at the cost of individual rights.

⁶³ Monitor Tracking Civic Space, 'Frequently Asked Questions', CIVICUS, available at: <https://monitor.civicus.org/FAQs/>

CHAPTER-FIVE: CSO's INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

5.1. South Asian Forum on SDGs

Asia Pacific Regional CSOs Engagement Mechanism South and South West Working has been coordinating the civil society process in the sub-region. It is directly in touch with UNESCAP particularly with its sub-regional office and has been regularly and proactively participating in South Asia Forum on the SDGs.

It is also organizing South Asia Peoples Forum every year as part of ensuring civil society engagement in a structured manner with concrete agenda for action. Concerned CSOs in South Asia are participating in the Peoples' Forum as well as in UNESCAP's Forum.

5.2. South Asian Regional Organizations

#	QyhuW ryhuq hqy#	FylyVrfhw#SdufEdwlrq##
VDDUF#	kwsv-2z z z lvduf0hflnj2##	ShrsdV#DDUF-#kws-2z z z lshrsdvdulflnj2#
EIP VWHF#	kwsv-2ep vhflnj2##	QD#
DVHP #	kwsv-2z z z lvhp hprendglnj2##	DvD#Hxursh#ShrsdV#lnxq #DHSI, #kwsv-2hsilqir2#

#

#	VDDUF#	EIP VWHF#	DVHP #
\hdu## Irxgqdwlrq#	;#shfhp eh#<;8#	9#xqj#<<:#	4<<9#
P hp ehukls# Fulub#log# Vwxfwah#	P hp ehukls-#rxk#Dvdq#rxqwlhv# Vwxfwah# IIFrxqf#Dsh{#srdf Qp dnbj#erg # unshvqng#e #kh# ryhuq hqy# khdgv# #kh# hp eh#vwhv# IIFrxqf# #P hlvhu# #rp sulh# # Iruhjq#P hlvhu# <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dfwlrq# #rp p lvhv# ● Whfkqfcd# #rp p lvhv# ● Z nunbj# #uxsv# ● Surjwpp hqj# #rp p lvhv# 	P hp ehukls-#rxk#Dvdq#log#rxk#hdw# Dvd# Vwxfwah#	P hp ehukls-#lnu#Hxurshq#log#Dvdq#Qdwlrq# # Vwxfwah# DVHP #/#kqhusbqng#e #kh# #lvhu# #wxfwah# <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Srdwfd# ● Hfrqrp Ie/#log## ● Vrfbd#xwud# #rshudwlrq##

<p>#</p> <p>#</p>	<p>Flow Chart Showing the Working Structure of BIMSTEC (Kuala, 2014).</p>		
<p>Dvib/ P hp ehvks/ #5354/ #</p>	<p>Hljkw/ rxxk/ Dvib/ rxxqwh/ #</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dijkdqw/ # Edjoghv/ # Ekxw/ # Iqgb/ # Pdgyhv/ # Qhsd/ # Sdnw/ # Vulldqnd/ # 	<p>Vyhq/ rxxqwh/ lfoxg/ j-#</p> <p>Iyh/ rxxk/ Dvib/ rxxqwh/ #</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Edjoghv/ # Ekxw/ # Iqgb/ # Qhsd/ # Vulldqnd/ # <p>Wz r/ lrp/ rxxk/ hdxw/ Dvib/ #</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> P dqp d/ # Wkdlqg/ # 	<p>84/ \$duqhu/ rxxqwh/ lfoxg/ j-#</p> <p>5; / vlvn/ r-# / xurshdq/ K q/ r/ q/ #</p> <p>43/ Dvib/ vlvn/ #</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Euxq/ l/ \$duxw/ d/ # Fdp erg/ # Iqgrqhv/ # Odr/ \$GU/ # P d/ v/ # P dqp d/ # Sk/ ss/ b/ hv/ # V/ l/ j/ ds/ r/ h/ # Wkdlqg/ # Y/ hv/ q/ p/ #
<p>Dvib/ P hp ehvks/ #</p>	<p>QD/ #</p>	<p>QD/ #</p>	<p>QD/ #</p>
<p>Jxgb/ Subf/ s/ v/ #</p>	<p>Subf/ s/ v/ # / r/ y/ h/ l/ j/ q/ # / t/ x/ d/ d/ / # / v/ n/ u/ l/ r/ u/ b/ b/ / b/ y/ n/ j/ u/ / # / s/ r/ d/ l/ f/ d/ / # / b/ g/ h/ s/ h/ o/ g/ h/ q/ f/ n/ / # / r/ q/ d/ v/ u/ i/ n/ h/ q/ f/ n/ / # / b/ y/ n/ u/ q/ d/ i/ i/ l/ v/ / # / r/ k/ # / P/ h/ p/ e/ h/ v/ / v/ l/ v/ n/ / # / d/ o/ g/ # / x/ w/ d/ e/ h/ q/ h/ i/ w/ #</p>	<p>Subf/ s/ v/ # / r/ y/ h/ l/ j/ q/ # / t/ x/ d/ d/ / # / v/ n/ u/ l/ r/ u/ b/ b/ / b/ y/ n/ j/ u/ / # / s/ r/ d/ l/ f/ d/ / # / b/ g/ h/ s/ h/ o/ g/ h/ q/ f/ n/ / # / r/ o/ b/ y/ n/ u/ i/ n/ h/ q/ f/ n/ / # / b/ y/ n/ u/ q/ d/ i/ i/ l/ v/ / # / s/ h/ d/ f/ n/ k/ d/ e/ r/ o/ h/ / # / l/ w/ n/ q/ f/ n/ / # / o/ g/ # / x/ w/ d/ e/ h/ q/ h/ i/ w/ #</p>	<p>QD/ #</p>
<p>q/ #</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Surp/ n/ v/ # / k/ # / z/ h/ d/ d/ h/ # / r/ k/ # / s/ h/ r/ s/ v/ # / # / r/ x/ k/ # / Dvib/ # / o/ g/ # / p/ s/ y/ h/ # / k/ h/ # / x/ d/ d/ # / r/ # / i/ n/ # Dffh/ d/ u/ d/ h/ # / f/ r/ q/ p/ I/ # / j/ u/ r/ z/ w/ # / r/ f/ d/ s/ u/ r/ j/ u/ v/ # / o/ g/ # / f/ x/ w/ d/ e/ h/ y/ h/ o/ s/ p/ h/ q/ # / b/ # / k/ # / u/ n/ j/ l/ r/ o/ # / # / s/ y/ b/ b/ j/ # / k/ # / b/ g/ y/ b/ x/ d/ # / k/ # / r/ s/ s/ r/ u/ w/ q/ w/ # / w/ # / y/ n/ # / b/ j/ j/ q/ w/ # / o/ g/ # / h/ d/ d/ h/ # / w/ k/ l/ # / x/ d/ e/ r/ v/ h/ q/ w/ d/ # Surp/ n/ v/ # / o/ g/ # / w/ h/ q/ j/ w/ h/ q/ # / f/ r/ d/ f/ w/ # / h/ d/ d/ h/ q/ f/ n/ # / d/ p/ r/ q/ # / k/ # / r/ x/ q/ w/ h/ # / r/ # / V/ z/ k/ # / Dvib/ # 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> F/ u/ n/ d/ h/ # / o/ g/ # / h/ o/ d/ e/ d/ j/ # / h/ o/ y/ l/ r/ q/ p/ h/ q/ # / i/ n/ # / d/ s/ b/ # / f/ r/ q/ r/ p/ I/ # / g/ h/ y/ h/ o/ s/ p/ h/ q/ # / w/ u/ x/ j/ k/ # / b/ h/ q/ w/ i/ l/ f/ d/ w/ r/ q/ # / o/ g/ # / p/ s/ o/ p/ h/ q/ w/ l/ r/ q/ # / # / s/ h/ f/ i/ l/ # / f/ r/ r/ s/ h/ u/ d/ w/ r/ q/ # / u/ n/ i/ f/ w/ # / b/ # / k/ # / h/ f/ w/ u/ # / r/ # / w/ d/ g/ # / b/ y/ n/ v/ p/ h/ q/ # / o/ g/ # / b/ g/ x/ w/ u/ # / w/ n/ k/ q/ r/ a/ j/ # / # / x/ p/ d/ q/ # / h/ f/ r/ x/ w/ h/ # / g/ h/ y/ h/ o/ s/ p/ h/ q/ # / x/ u/ l/ p/ # / b/ j/ u/ l/ f/ x/ w/ u/ h/ # / h/ q/ h/ u/ j/ # / # / o/ g/ # / b/ j/ u/ d/ w/ x/ f/ w/ u/ h/ # / o/ g/ # / w/ d/ q/ v/ s/ u/ d/ w/ i/ r/ q/ # Dffh/ d/ u/ d/ h/ # / f/ r/ q/ p/ I/ # / j/ u/ r/ z/ w/ # / d/ o/ g/ # / r/ f/ d/ s/ u/ r/ j/ u/ v/ # / b/ # / k/ # / x/ e/ 0/ u/ n/ j/ l/ r/ o/ # / w/ u/ x/ j/ k/ # / b/ y/ h/ o/ g/ h/ d/ y/ n/ v/ # / b/ # / d/ # / v/ s/ i/ l/ # / # / t/ x/ d/ d/ # / o/ g/ # / s/ a/ u/ q/ h/ u/ k/ s/ # 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ex/ l/ o/ # / b/ # / u/ n/ d/ h/ # / o/ g/ # / h/ u/ d/ o/ g/ # / j/ # / e/ h/ v/ # / h/ q/ # / k/ # / s/ h/ r/ s/ v/ # / # / k/ # / # / z/ r/ # / h/ j/ l/ r/ q/ # / # / o/ g/ # / # / w/ d/ e/ d/ k/ # / # / w/ h/ o/ j/ v/ k/ h/ o/ g/ # / b/ j/ d/ a/ r/ x/ h/ # / z/ # / o/ g/ # / u/ v/ # / # / a/ r/ e/ d/ # / l/ v/ x/ i/ v/ # F/ r/ q/ w/ x/ h/ # / h/ b/ i/ n/ f/ l/ o/ j/ # / k/ # / s/ a/ u/ q/ h/ u/ k/ s/ # / e/ h/ v/ # / h/ q/ # / Dvib/ # / o/ g/ # / x/ u/ r/ s/ h/ # / # / k/ # / # / s/ r/ d/ l/ f/ d/ # / h/ f/ r/ q/ p/ I/ # / f/ x/ w/ d/ e/ # / o/ g/ # / w/ k/ # / u/ n/ d/ v/ # / # / f/ r/ r/ s/ h/ u/ d/ w/ r/ q/ # F/ u/ n/ d/ h/ # / o/ g/ # / u/ n/ d/ h/ # / # / s/ h/ d/ f/ n/ # / o/ g/ # / k/ d/ u/ g/ # / g/ h/ y/ h/ o/ s/ p/ h/ q/ # / # / k/ # / f/ r/ p/ r/ q/ # / b/ y/ n/ u/ i/ v/ # / # / o/ g/ # / d/ v/ s/ i/ d/ w/ i/ r/ q/ # / x/ d/ k/ # / v/ # / s/ k/ r/ o/ g/ # / # / k/ # / # / s/ u/ s/ r/ v/ n/ # / # / o/ g/ # / s/ u/ b/ f/ s/ v/ # / # / k/ # / # / Q/ # / k/ d/ u/ n/ # / # / v/ s/ h/ f/ w/ # / i/ n/ # / b/ # / p/ r/ f/ u/ d/ # / # / k/ # / # / x/ d/ # / # / o/ z/ # / # / t/ x/ d/ d/ # / # / x/ w/ i/ n/ # / o/ g/ # / # / x/ p/ d/ # / b/ j/ # / w/ # / # / f/ r/ q/ # / h/ u/ # / # / u/ # / k/ # / # / h/ o/ y/ l/ r/ q/ p/ h/ q/ # / o/ g/ # / w/ k/ # / # / a/ r/ e/ d/ # / l/ v/ x/ i/ v/ #

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<p>U h o w i r q v k s # z l k # k h # K Q #</p>	<p>P r X # F r q f o x g h # z l k # # X q l i n g # Q d w i r q v # k l o u h q # l x o g # - X Q I P H L , / # # X q l i n g # Q d w i r q v # r q h u h q f n # r q # w d g h # d o g # G h y h a r s p h q w # X Q F W D G , / # # X q l i n g # Q d w i r q v # G h y h a r s p h q w # S u r j u d p p h # X Q G S # b o g # # X q l i n g # Q d w i r q v # S u x j # b o g # # u p h # F r p e d w i r q # X Q G F F S , / # #</p>	<p>F r q v x o d w i r q # z l k # K Q # i n v b h q w # F r n g b d w n # b # e d o j # d g h v k # r # b j v f x w # k h # s r v l e b # f r n g b d w i r q # # F r q v x o d w i r q # z l k # X q l i n g # Q d w i r q v # h j l r q d # F h q w h # i n # s h d f n # b o g # # l d p d p h q w # - X Q U F S U , # r # b j v f x w # k h # s r v l e b # f r n g b d w i r q # i n # k h # p s o p h q w d w i r q # # X Q V F # i n v r o w i r q # 8 7 3 I # # I q f o x v i r q # # K Q N # s u b f l e b i v # b # k h # G h f o u d w i r q # # h j # # l x w # # E I P V W H F # v x p p l # G h f o u d w i r q # # i l l p v # K Q N # k d o # e d v h g # I q h u d w i r q d # w d g b j # # w n p , / # #</p>	<p>F r r s h u d w i r q # b o g # S d u q h u w k s # z l k # K Q # w d o g v # i v # q h # r # k h # h # b j h g o d # i n p v # # D V H P # # S r d i f d # # l o i # # # D V H P # # o r # # f r y h u w # X q l i n g # Q d w i r q v # I q h u d w i r q d # u g h # s u b f l e b i # #</p>
<p>P h f k d q j p # i n # V R # D f f h v #</p>	<p>V D D U F # d z # / V D D U F # K q l y h u w # V r x w # D v i d q # I h g h u d w i r q # # K q l y h u w # Z r p h q # V r x w # D v i d q # I u h # P h g b # D w r f b w i r q # # S h r s o i v # / D D U F #</p>	<p>Q r # h s d u d w i r q # h f k d q j p # #</p>	<p>D v l # # i x u r s h # s h r s o i v # # l r u x p # #</p>
<p>U r d # # F V R v #</p>	<p>F r q v x o d w i r q # u r d # b # k h # i n p d w i r q # # f r q y h q w i r q v # # R u j d q l d w i r q # # # s h r s o i v # / D D U F # # V x e p l v i r q # # # h f o u d w i r q v # r # k h # j r y h u p h q w # z # s h r s o i v # / D D U F # #</p>	<p>F r q v x o d w i r q # u r d v # b # e r d f q d n b j # #</p>	<p>#</p>

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SA is one of the least connected regions where political/security crises have long impacted on regional cooperation endeavor. Even as trade, connectivity and travel have become helpless victims in the face of bilateral problems. SAARC and BIMSTEC are two chief inter-governmental regional organizations working to strengthen the peace and cooperation between countries across SA but their efficacy is in question.

Despite many hurdles and having no room for formal engagement, CSOs of SA, have continued to not only advocate for peace and amity in the region, but also to recommend measures to strengthen SAARC, taking cue from the success story of ASEAN & the EU. The SA CSOs is a robust and enthusiastic group of people from every profession that has time and again demanded that SAARC must become a flexible alliance that is effective and efficient.

While SAARC is an inter-governmental association, successive Summits have emphasized on importance of promoting P2P contacts at all levels outside State sector. SAARC has further maintained MoUs with a number of UN agencies such as UNICEF, UNDP, UNDCP, and UNESCAP on various fronts and has created a number of forums where CSOs may have an opportunity to engage in the organization indirectly.

Community of academics, CSOs, women leaders, NGO representatives and media persons are some of the illustrious community with shared values championing democracy, peace, freedom and greater economic integration. Together, they are not only deliberating on what remain as the main issues and problems in South Asia, but also have devised appropriate strategies to overcome for the overall betterment of one fifth of humanity. Series of Peoples' SAARC organized around actual SAARC Summits aim to promote greater awareness about SAARC, share experiences and lessons learnt from other regional organizations, promote greater interaction among people, and encourage wider participation of CSOs in SAARC's activities.

As members of CSOs, media and academia, interactions and activism are underway not only sharing views with one another through papers and writings/presentations but also through

structured dialogues with SAARC Secretariat and a wide array of governmental and non-governmental luminaries.

In BIMSTEC, there is hardly any room for CSOs engagement with organization's process and it largely works in isolation from public domain without bottom-up approach in selecting the agenda ensuring more participation from the private sectors and civil society at large.

With regards to ASEM, although the leaders of ASEM pledged at their Summit in 2006 to better involve social partners in the ASEM dialogue process, there's a little say of CSOs from South Asia in the ASEM proceedings given the fact that only three countries (Bangladesh, Pakistan and India) are members of ASEM.

CHAPTER-SIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Recommendations on COVID-19

- Advancement of cross-sectoral cooperation is on the rise.
- Coordination, conflict of interest and tradeoffs are some of the major constraints.
- Sustainable finance with local ownership is lacking.
- Increasing the outreach of global goals to the remote communities is critical.
- Accountability and measuring performance of stakeholders would keep the track intact.
- Constant calls for an honest reflection of Agenda 2030 by CSOs and private sector is vital.

6.2. Recommendations on SDGs and Human Rights

- Immediately start combating the massive economic deficit rendered by COVID-19.
- Learn from the good practices of other SA countries, preferably those which are economically, culturally, geographically as well as population-wise similar.
- Keep record and collect the credible data about the implementation status of SDGs. For an instance, unavailability of data in terms of SDG-10 is a common concern.
- Build a robust and inclusive monitoring and accountability frameworks is vital to ensure the tracking and advancement of SDGs attainment progress/regress graph.
- Focus on capacity building and economic empowerment of women and generate employment for the citizens in order to effectively implement SDG-5 and 10.
- Ensure women's participation at decision making levels mitigating the gap between law in book and law in action.
- Make the best use of the development partner-funded and CSO-led initiatives in addition to commitments through inter-governmental processes to contribute to more participatory and inclusive processes of resilience building that will ensure no one is left behind.
- Amplify the greater need for generating high quality and disaggregated data as highlighted in various country contexts.
- Ensure cross learning from one another concerning SDG adoption and implementation and mobilization of funds through the SAARC and BIMSTEC platforms.

- Exert the on-going pandemic recovery and other climate change and disaster impacts as unique windows of opportunities to further improve regional cooperation on resilience through both governmental and non-governmental regional institutions.
- Countries recognize the need for whole-of-government approaches from a rights-based approach designed to enable integrated approaches to planning across the policy spectrum.
- Demonstrate a concrete expression with increased investments for regional commonness to regional emergency funding mechanisms under SAARC and BIMSTEC to ease the shock that people below poverty line are bearing with.
- Ensure and apply methodical engagement in “localization processes” to integrate the global SDGs into their national policies, through a mapping of existing plans and gap analysis.

6.3. Recommendations on Democracy and Civic Space

- Preventing/mitigating abuse of public emergency powers
- Addressing legal problems and justice needs of individuals and communities
- Mitigating disruption of justice and legal services when court service was dilapidated
- Monitoring human security, safe migration, and potential for trafficking
- Countering misinformation and disinformation by authoritarian regimes
- Faced with challenges to providing reliable and accessible information
- Sustaining an unprecedented pressure on democratic systems
- Resisting disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable and marginalized populations
- Steadfast opposition to restrictions on rights and consolidation of power by autocrats
- Intensifying advocacy for civic freedoms towards protection efforts of vulnerable communities by public awareness-raising campaign
- Promoting regional solidarity to address impact on vulnerable population by monitoring/tracking threats to civic space.

6.4. Recommendations on International Engagement

- Taking stock of achievements on cooperation between UN and regional human rights mechanisms as well as other inter-governmental and non-governmental arrangements;

- Identification of key human rights challenges faced by human rights defenders and civil society and how cooperation between the CSOs and regional human rights mechanisms could support them;
- Recognizing ways to enhance the capacity of CSOs and human rights defenders to engage and interact with regional platforms;
- Sharing good practices, challenges and lessons learnt regarding cooperation between civil society and human rights defenders from both the regions;
- Ascertaining common trends and possible new forms of cooperation with human rights defenders and civil society;
- Establishment of a permanent coalition platform of CSOs from both the regions and organizing periodic meeting to share issues of critical concern in the field of SDGs, rights and freedoms; and
- Generating resources to support national organizations who aspire to formulate strategic tactics to counteract governmental threats and assaults to inspire cross-regional solidarity and enhance cross-border exchange between different organizations

6.5 Strengthening CSO Participation in Global Arena

- Intensifying campaign that criteria for accreditation and registration of participants in any international online meetings/forums are clear, objective, inclusive, non-discriminatory, and such criteria must be easily accessible and easily understandable.
- Promoting and advocating for effective implementation of the UN Guidance Note on the Protection and Promotion of Civic Space suggests three Ps (Participation - Protection – Promotion).
- Advocacy for availability of online platforms’ information on meetings and events in a timely manner and easily accessible formats including different languages whenever possible, and communicate procedures for participation in advance and clearly
- Creating an enabling environment for civil society to ensure the need for appropriate fiscal and regulatory conditions; adequate forums for voicing concerns; and the inclusion of civil society in the legislative process

- Developing civil society capacity by encouraging dialogue and the exchange of experiences on a range of topics including financial and technical issues. This differs from ‘capacity building’, which may follow a donor-driven agenda.
- Promoting institutional sustainability to avoid civil society dependence on foreign donors. Local meetings and fund-raising events are possible ways of ensuring a strong local support base and independent sources of finance
- Encouraging multi-stakeholder partnerships between governments, donors and civil society which enables civil society to express their views and participate in decision-making in international forums
- Exploring participation through forms other than the official process, particularly through “shadow” or “spotlight” reports for example, in the human rights treaty monitoring review as well as SDGs VNR process in the HLPF.
- Engagement in coordination of inputs from foreign NGOs, collations and alliances, which work on different SDGs and can facilitate dialogues between NGOs and the Government.
- Creation of a national alliance and leading civil society process in the country and exploring representation in both regional and international forums if possible physically otherwise remotely.
- Submitting language stemming from a collective CSO process in any regional/international forums’ deliberations so that there is a section in the proceedings of the CSO inputs.

CHAPTER-SEVEN: CONCLUSION

On Democracy Front: South Asia's history of democracy presents a mixed picture. While India and Sri Lanka have a better record of democratic rule, the other states of the region – Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan, Maldives and Bhutan – have experienced significant military and/or authoritarian rule in their political evolution. Compared to most of the countries in South Asia, Sri Lanka has a better record of democratic rule. It has maintained consistency in democratic transition from one government to the next since the colonial time to the present. Democracy in India has a similar history; its democracy can be messy, thanks to its diversity, poverty and underdevelopment, and authoritarian tendency is not absent in the Indian democratic set-up.

India has largely managed, except for a brief period of emergency rule from 1975 to 1977, democratic transition of power since it gained independence in 1947. Indeed, India is a significant case of successful democracy in the non-western world. The democratic credentials of Sri Lanka and India are not flawless, yet their persistence in the preservation of democratic norms is a significant achievement simply because of the fact that many of their peer post-colonial states could not sustain such a consistency in democratic rule. The other states of South Asia have varied experience in their political evolution. Pakistan has experienced repeated military takeover of power and the military has ruled the country for almost half of its existence as an independent state. It was only in May 2013 for the first time in Pakistan's history that a democratic transition of power took place. Before that the tenure of each elected government was cut short by direct or indirect military intervention.

Although democracy has gained some ground in Pakistan, the military still wields profound influence in the running of the state, in particular in the areas of security and key foreign policy issues. The civil-military relationship in that country is still significantly tilted in favor of the latter. Pakistan still has some way to go in terms of democratic consolidation, although the democratic trajectory in that country is positive.

Bangladesh has a similar history like that of Pakistan in terms of democratic experiment, although its record in this regard is slightly better. Democracy in Bangladesh has gained significant ground since the overthrow of the Ershad military regime in 1990 although it yet had to endure two years of indirect military rule from 2007 to 2008. The key challenge to Bangladesh's democracy is that the politics is very confrontational, particularly between the two major political parties of the

country – the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Bangladesh also still has some way to go in terms of democratic consolidation. Nepal presents an interesting picture in terms of democratic rule. The Maoist insurgency ravaged the country for over a decade from 1995 onward. The negotiated end of the insurgency through the signing of a peace deal in November 2006 was a major development, which created a ground for Nepal to return to the path of democracy. Since then the Nepalese democratic experiment has been messy and the Nepalese have yet to find a consensus on a draft constitution. The latest Constituent Assembly elections took place on 19 November 2013, which promulgated a new constitution in 2015. Notwithstanding all odds and continuous bickering of the Nepalese political parties, the most positive aspect of the Nepalese democratic process is that since the end of the Maoist insurgency, the country has maintained a democratic process and major incidences of violence have not returned. The recent fragmentation of political parties in power has left a major frustration among public regarding the future of a stable government.

Bhutan is an interesting case of democratic experiment. The country was an absolute monarchy before the king of Bhutan began to voluntarily relinquish power eventually leading to the first parliamentary elections in March 2008. After the completion of the first elected parliament, Bhutan held its second general elections in July 2013 in which the opposition party won the most seats and formed the next government. Bhutan is steadily making progress in democratic consolidation and is building its democratic institutions.

After 30 years of authoritarian presidential rule, the Maldives held their first multi- party democratic elections in 2008 in which the Democracy in South Asia 15 incumbent president Mamoon Abdul Gayoom was defeated. The first five years of democratic rule was turbulent but Maldives held its second multi- party presidential election in September 2013, which was annulled by the country's Supreme Court. After more than a month of legal wrangling eventually the presidential election took place in early December 2013, in which Abdullah Yameen was elected as the country's next president. The Maldives has consolidated its democratic rule in recent years and its democratic trajectory is positive notwithstanding the confrontational nature of the country's political process.

Afghanistan historically has been an unstable state and a fertile ground for big power rivalry. Military coup and revolution have been integral elements of the country's history. It has frequently

been subjected to the military occupation of outside powers. In the 1980s, the country was under the occupation of the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, it experienced a civil war in which the Pakistan-backed Taliban, a hardline Islamist group, eventually captured power in Kabul in 1996. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban was toppled by the US and since 2001, the NATO forces had been fighting alongside the government against the Taliban insurgency until now. Notwithstanding the raging insurgency of the past decade, the country has maintained a semblance of democratic rule with an elected president and a parliament. The country is yet to chart a clear democratic path and the future of Afghan democracy is uncertain. With rising of Taliban again, the hard-earned democracy and human rights of 20 years of investment has been badly jeopardized.

On Human Rights Front: Despite the committed efforts of human rights defenders and national human rights institutions across South Asia, achieving human rights objectives, particularly in the post-conflict setting, remains a daunting task. Almost all the countries in the South Asian region - Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka – face common challenges of impunity, endemic violence, and institutionalized discrimination in realizing their human rights goals.

These challenges are further aggravated by the high prevalence of poverty, imbalanced development, political instability, slow economic growth, low literacy, widespread malnutrition and rampant gender-based violence, along with discrimination in education, nutrition, health and employment. The issues of impunity, endemic violence, forced migration and lack of accountability mechanism have been raised in different regional forums and conferences, including through the SAARC. NHRIs have also been playing an important role to advocate for human rights protection and promotion

On SDGs attainment front: The achievement of the SDGs will require accelerated progress in the social sector for South Asia and a total revolution in long-term economic planning. Through the looking glass political leadership, private sector cooperation and technological innovation. Since member countries have to drive the SDG agenda themselves, it is important for South Asia to demonstrate very specifically what the SDGs and their action imperatives mean in the local context across the dimensions of social, economic and environmental development. With one-fifth of the world's population, it is vital that SA achieves the global SDGs. As countries in SA begin to implement their action plans for the SDGs, the aim of this compendium is to provide cutting-edge

analysis of the SDG Agenda 2030 with respect to social development. The collection offers a set of curated chapters that provide a frank assessment of the SDGs in a South Asian context and flag key policy priorities in order to overcome implementation challenges in practical ways. A clear road map in South Asia for achieving the SDGs based on an analysis of poverty reduction, inequality, health/wellbeing, water and sanitation is still lacking– from planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring and feeding back into further planning and budgeting. South Asia is not on track to achieve most SDGs, and in some countries, and for certain goals, the direction of change is contrary to what is required. Most goals will be missed at the current rate of progress, and for at least 12 of the targets, the direction of change is negative. One important reason for this is the persistence and even increase in inequalities, suggesting that striving towards Goal Ten (Reducing Inequalities) may be an important precondition for meeting the other goals in this region.

There is great potential for regional cooperation and coordination in the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda among the South Asian countries. Besides sharing development experiences, it is argued that regional cooperation could fruitfully support the achievement of SDGs by South Asian countries through the building up of productive capacities through a coordinated industrial development strategy, exploiting regional value chains through strengthened connectivity and enhancing resilience to natural disasters. Given their similar initial conditions, shared history and culture and analogous governance systems, regional cooperation could be an important means of implementation in South Asia, complementing individual national strategies with substantial benefits of regional cooperation in South Asia for achieving the SDGs.

Despite a common history, cultural affinity, geographical contiguity and potentially complementary economies, SA remains the least integrated sub-region in Asia, which extracts a large toll in terms of reduced economic, social and environmental attainments for its citizens. These areas of cooperation among the goals and targets of the SDGs that are likely to deliver the largest benefits through cooperative efforts. Various institutions and organisations set up to foster sub-regional cooperation in SA should be made more effective. Some of the implementation challenges, including data, monitoring and availability and outline a framework of action to achieve the SDGs is a must. More active public policies are needed to increase higher levels of human development in SA, and the 2030 agenda provides a germane framework to achieve the

goals of economic, social and environmental progress. For SA, therefore, the SDGs offer not only a greater sense of urgency and scope for convergence but also a fresh set of ideas and opportunities to tackle 21st-century challenges and innovation in data use and visualization for action. For the world to meet SDGs, SA has to be the crucible for analysis, advocacy and action along with a growth strategy that is “pro-poor, pro-rights, pro-women, pro-justice, pro-nature and pro-peace”.

The End