**SAARC Finance Ministers meet**

The Thirteenth Informal Meeting of the SAARC Finance Ministers was held in Nadi, Fiji, on 02 May 2019 on the sidelines of the Fifty-Second Annual Meeting of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on 1-5 May 2019.

H.E. Mr. Yuba Raj Khatiwada, Minister for Finance of Nepal, chaired the Meeting.

In their statements, the Hon. Finance Ministers/Heads of Delegation briefed the Meeting about the current status of economic progress achieved in their respective countries and progress made under various mechanisms of SAARC. They appreciated the contribution made by ADB in the region’s economic growth and expressed the hope that SAARC would make further progress to achieve its full potential for the benefit of the peoples of the region.

H. E. Mr. Amjad Hussain B. Sial, Secretary General of SAARC, while addressing the Informal Meeting, said that financial institutions, including cooperatives, could play a proactive role in promoting Financial Inclusion across the region.

South Asia Regional Economic Adviser of ADB made a presentation on "South Asia’s Economic Outlook and Risks for 2019 and 2020".

Mr Chanchal Chand Sarkar, Director (Economic, Trade and Finance), SAARC Secretariat, also attended the Meeting.

**SAARC Agriculture Ministers meet**

The Fourth Meeting of the SAARC Agriculture Ministers was held in Thimphu on 27 June 2019. H. E. Lyonpo Dr. Tandi Dorji, Hon’ble Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Royal Government of Bhutan, addressed the Inaugural Session as the Chief Guest. H. E. Lyonpo Yeshey Penjor, Hon’ble Minister for Agriculture and Forests of Bhutan, delivered remarks at the Inaugural Session. H. E. Mr. Amjad Hussain B. Sial, Secretary General of SAARC, also addressed the Inaugural Session.
The Hon’ble Ministers, *inter alia,* agreed to promote multi-sectoral approaches to attain higher level of food safety and nutrition security; promote climate resilient agricultural strategies and technologies; expand agro-processing and building competitive agricultural value chains; facilitate gender mainstreaming and attracting youth and women in agriculture; intensify agricultural research, development and innovation through higher public investment and public-private partnership; and adopt appropriate measures for addressing issues related to transboundary animal diseases.

The Hon. Ministers adopted the “Thimphu Statement on Agriculture and Rural Development” reaffirming their commitment to further strengthen regional cooperation in Agriculture and Rural Development for enhancing food, nutrition and livelihood security. They also adopted a ‘Statement on SAARC’s Cooperation on Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR)’.

Hosted by the Kingdom of Bhutan, the Fourth Meeting of the SAARC Agriculture Ministers was preceded by the Senior Agriculture Officials’ Meeting on 26 June, Ninth Meeting of the Technical Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development on 25 June and the Third Multi-stakeholders’ Dialogue on 24 June.

The Fifth Meeting of the SAARC Agriculture Ministers will be held in Nepal.

### Regional Consultation on Fish Culture

The “Regional Consultation on Fish Culture in Cages and Pens in Reservoirs, Lakes, Rivers and Marine Waters for Aquaculture Diversification in South Asia” was held in Pokhara, Nepal, on 17-19 April 2019.

The Hon’ble Minister for Land Management, Agriculture and Cooperatives, Gandaki Pradesh, inaugurated the Meeting as Chief Guest.

H. E. Mr. Amjad Hussain B. Sial, Secretary General of SAARC, also addressed the Inaugural Session.

In his address, the Secretary General stated that with increasing global population, the demand on fisheries for food and nutrition security has substantially increased and that Asia is the largest contributor to world aquaculture.

The Regional Consultation provided the opportunity to the participants to identify the drivers of aquaculture diversification, review research and development needs for the sustainable aquaculture development and share the best practices and experiences in aquaculture to help meet the challenges of the Member States.

Organized by the SAARC Agriculture Centre in collaboration with the Government of Nepal, the Regional Consultation was attended by the representatives of seven Member States.

### Workshop on Gender Sensitive Value Chain

The Regional Consultation Workshop on Gender Sensitive Value Chain in South Asia was held in Kathmandu on 12-14 June 2019. The Workshop was inaugurated by Hon’ble Minister for Land Management, Cooperatives and Poverty Alleviation of Nepal.

H.E. Mr. Amjad Hussain B. Sial, Secretary General of SAARC, addressed the Inaugural Session.

While addressing the Inaugural Session, the Secretary General said that gender equality and development of sustainable food systems were interdependent goals and in South Asia, a larger number of women were engaged in agriculture, contributing significantly to the goal of food security. Therefore, the contribution of women to the region’s economies was enormous and must be duly recognized, he mentioned.

The Workshop was aimed at sharing the best practices on value chain related interventions, analyzing food system from gender perspectives and identifying challenges and opportunities in establishing and strengthening gender sensitive value chains. Organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the Asian Farmers’ Association in collaboration with the SAARC Secretariat and the SAARC Agriculture Centre, the Workshop had the participation of representatives both from the government and non-governmental entities as well as from regional and international organizations.

### Workshop on Developing SAARC SDG-4

The South Asia Statistical Development Workshop on Developing SAARC SDG4: Monitoring Framework and Preparatory Meeting for the Fifth APMED 2030, was held on 21-24 May 2019 in Kathmandu.

H. E. Mr. Amjad Hussain B. Sial, Secretary General of SAARC, addressed the Inaugural Session.

In his address, the Secretary General said, “One of the objectives of SAARC, as enshrined in its Charter, is to provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realize their full potentials. This we believe is possible through education.”

Citing the directives of the leaders at the Eighteenth SAARC Summit, he said that they have expressed their resolve to eliminate illiteracy from the region in line with the global goal of education for all and ensuring quality education in all institutions by reforming curricula, teaching methods and evaluation systems adequately supported by physical, technical and other facilities. “At the same Summit, our leaders also agreed to promote regional cooperation in the field of vocational education and training,” he said.
The Workshop discussed ways to enhance the monitoring capacities of the SAARC countries in the context of SDG4.

The Workshop was organized by UNESCO and UNICEF in partnership with the SAARC Secretariat and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

Sixth South Asia Public Procurement Conference

The Kingdom of Bhutan hosted the Sixth South Asia Region Public Procurement Conference on Professionalization of Public Procurement for Better Performance in Thimphu on 22-24 April 2019. It was attended by the heads of Public Procurement Agencies of all the Member States of SAARC.

The Conference was inaugurated by H.E. Mr. Namgay Tshering, Hon’ble Finance Minister of the Royal Government of Bhutan.

H.E. Mr. Amjad Hussain B. Sial, Secretary General of SAARC, and Mr. Chanchal Chand Sarkar, Director (Economic, Trade and Finance) represented the SAARC Secretariat in the Conference.

The Conference brought together the heads of Public Procurement Agencies and other key stakeholders in South Asia to learn from one another with a view to making their public procurement systems more effective.

H. E. Mr. Amjad Hussain B. Sial, Secretary General of SAARC, while addressing the Inaugural Session, said that “Public procurement is yet to become a part of formally agreed areas of regional cooperation under the auspices of SAARC. This sector, however, does have great importance for the economies of all the South Asian countries”. It was estimated that the South Asian countries spent around US $ 550 billion on public procurement of goods and services, and that a clear roadmap on grievance redressal mechanism, including dispute settlement process, could help improve efficiency in public procurement, he said. The Secretary General also briefed the participants of the Conference about the SAARC Arbitration Council (SARCO) and South Asian Regional Standards Organization (SARSO).

On 29 June 2019, the Kingdom of Bhutan hosted a ceremony to mark the conclusion of the Second SAARC Cultural Capital Programme. H.E. Dasho Sherub Gyeltshen, Hon’ble Minister for Home and Cultural Affairs of the Royal Government of Bhutan inaugurated the Closing Ceremony. H.E. Mr. Amjad Hussain B. Sial, Secretary General of SAARC, addressed the Closing Ceremony.

During the Fourteenth SAARC Summit in New Delhi in April 2007, the leaders of SAARC had adopted the SAARC Agenda for Culture, which identified several facets for collaboration in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of the region.

In keeping with the provisions of the SAARC Agenda for Culture, Bamiyan, Province of Afghanistan, was declared the SAARC Cultural Capital for 2015. Thimphu was declared the SAARC Cultural Capital for 2018-19. As the SAARC Cultural Capital, Thimphu hosted several programmes and activities to showcase Bhutan’s unique cultural heritage. These include, the SAARC Handicraft Exhibition and Workshop in May 2018, Food Festival in February 2019, and Film Festival in April 2019, among others.

In his address at the Closing Ceremony, H. E. Mr. Amjad Hussain B. Sial, Secretary General of SAARC, said that South Asia, which reflected a rich and plurality of cultural traditions, had shared civilization, constituting a historical basis for sustaining harmonious relations among the peoples of the region. “The emergence of SAARC should, therefore, be seen as the raison d’etre for further strengthening cordial ties among the Member States,” he stated. “The declaration of Thimphu as the SAARC Cultural Capital for 2018-19 is due recognition of its rich and diverse cultural heritage.” He felicitated the Royal Government and the people of Bhutan over this accomplishment. He also commended the sustained efforts of the Royal Government and the people in the preservation of Bhutan’s rich cultural heritage and environment.

India will host the SAARC Cultural Capital for 2019-2020.
The Second SAARC Literary Award was presented to Dr. Anisuzzaman from Bangladesh, a distinguished writer and academic in Bengali literature, at a ceremony held in conjunction with the SAARC Cultural Capital Closing Ceremony in Bhutan. This Award, presented to a writer nominated by the Member States in alphabetical order, is aimed at promoting literature as well as recognizing literary talents in the region.

The Heads of University Grants Commissions or Equivalent Bodies met in Kathmandu on 30-31 May 2019.

H. E. Mr. Amjad Hussain B. Sial, Secretary General of SAARC, addressed the Inaugural Session. He stated that as early as in 1988, at the Fourth SAARC Summit, the leaders had decided to include education as one of the areas of regional cooperation. Since then, the priority attached to the promotion of education in the region is amply manifest in the Declarations of successive SAARC Summits.

The Meeting discussed several important issues relating to higher education in the South Asian Region, including mutual recognition of professional degrees, quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms, and Open and Distance Learning.


H. E. Dasho Rinzin Dorji, Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Royal Government of Bhutan, inaugurated the Dialogue, preceding the Ninth Meeting of the Technical Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development. H. E. Mr. Amjad Hussian B. Sial, Secretary General of SAARC, also addressed the Inaugural Session of the Dialogue.

The Dialogue made important recommendations on various cross-cutting regional issues and challenges in agricultural and rural development. They include, among others, harmonization of Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) Policies, sharing of germplasms, revitalization of rural activities, involvement of youth and women in Agriculture, and building competitive agricultural value chains.

The First Multi-Stakeholders’ Dialogue on Agriculture was held in October 2010 in Bangladesh on the theme ‘Management of Soil or Land—Towards Sustainable Agriculture in South Asia’ and the Second Multi-Stakeholders’ Dialogue was held in April 2016 in Bangladesh on the theme ‘Pulse Research and Development in SAARC Region: Challenges and Way Forward’.
The Technical Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (TCARD) held its Ninth Meeting in Thimphu on 25 June 2019.

H. E. Dasho Rinzin Dorji, Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Royal Government of Bhutan, inaugurated the Meeting. H. E. Mr. Amjad Hussian B. Sial, Secretary General of SAARC, also addressed the Inaugural Session.

The Committee reviewed the status of implementation of the decisions/recommendations of various meetings held since its Eighth Meeting. It made a number of important recommendations for effective implementation of the decisions. It also identified several concrete areas for project-based collaboration.

The representatives of International/Regional Specialized Organizations attended a particular session of the Meeting. They briefed the Committee about their activities and initiatives in the SAARC Region and discussed areas for further collaboration. The Committee requested the Organizations to extend support in formulating regional projects, especially on crop modelling, rural revitalization and development of germplasms, among others.

The SAARC Senior Agriculture Officials’ Meeting (SAOM), preparatory to the Fourth Meeting of the SAARC Agriculture Ministers, was held in Thimphu, Bhutan, on 26 June 2019.

The Meeting was inaugurated by His Excellency Mr. Lyonpo Yeshey Penjor, Hon’ble Minister for Agriculture and Forests, Royal Government of Bhutan. In his opening remarks, the Hon’ble Minister stated that the Meeting of Senior Agriculture Officials indicated a point of convergence of all regional forums and consultative processes mandated to introspect and redefine agricultural agenda for the region.

H. E. Mr. Amjad Hussian B. Sial, Secretary General of SAARC, also addressed the Inaugural Session.

The Meeting reviewed the status of implementation of the decisions/recommendations of various meetings held since its last Meeting, considered the activities of the SAARC Agriculture Centre and made several important recommendations. It also adopted the Reports of the Ninth Meeting of the Technical Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development and the Third Multi-Stakeholders’ Dialogue on Agriculture.

Mr. Dadhi Ram Bhandari, Director (IPA), SAARC Secretariat, represented the Secretary General of SAARC at the Technical Working Group (TWG) Meeting of the Commonwealth Accelerated Development Mechanism for Education (CADME) in London on 28-29 May 2019. The Director briefed the Meeting on ‘Cooperation in Education within the Framework of SAARC’. The presentation mainly covered the current policy priorities as outlined by the recent SAARC Summits and Meetings of the SAARC Education Ministers, institutional setups, key documents, ongoing partnership with external agencies and opportunities for further collaboration.

Besides reviewing the status of implementation of the Nadi Declaration Action Plan, the Meeting held substantive discussion on the critical issues faced by the Commonwealth Member States to attain educational goals and targets vis-à-vis the 2030 Development Agenda. It identified four key areas for effective implementation of the Nadi Declaration Action Plan, which include Securing adequate financing, Commonwealth of Learning, Peace, Safety and Security in School, focus on STEM subjects and maximum use of ICT for its accelerated implementation. It also deliberated on several toolkits developed by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the UN on the implementation of SDG4, in particular, and overall monitoring and implementation of SDGs, in general.

The Meeting was attended by ten members of the Technical Working Group, representatives of Regional Organizations (EU, AU, CARICOM, Pacific Community), High Commissions of the Commonwealth Member States based in London, UNESCO, and senior officials of the Education/HR Ministries of the Government of India and Sri Lanka.

The Technical Consultation discussed and identified key actions needed to translate policies into accelerated interventions in early childhood and women’s nutrition in South Asia and prepared draft documents of regional importance to improve women’s nutrition and guidance on multi-sector approaches for improving young children’s diets in the region.

H.E. Mr Amjad Hussain B Sial, Secretary General of SAARC, inaugurated the meeting.

The Third Regional Conference on maternal nutrition to be organized by SAARC and UNICEF will be held in September 2019.

Regional Economic Integration Study (Phase II)

The Fourth SAARC-ADB Special Meeting of the representatives of Commerce and Finance Ministries of the Member States of SAARC on Regional Economic Integration Study (Phase II) was held in Kathmandu, Nepal, on 24-25 June 2019 with the financial and technical assistance of the ADB. The Meeting was attended by all the Member States of SAARC. The Meeting was inaugurated by H.E. Mr. Matrika Prasad Yadav, Hon’ble Minister of Industry, Commerce and Supplies, Government of Nepal. He thanked the Asian Development Bank and the SAARC Secretariat for their efforts in promoting SAARC process for the welfare of the people of the region.

The objective of the Meeting was to finalize the Regional Economic Integration Study and to identify ways and means for moving towards South Asian Economic Union (SAEU) in a planned and phased manner as directed by the SAARC Leaders at the Eighteenth SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu in November 2014. Mr Chanchal Chand Sarkar, Director (Economic, Trade and Finance), represented the Secretary General of SAARC in the Meeting.

The Meeting reiterated the following recommendations for implementation on a priority basis:

- Reduction/Removal of Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs) and Para-Tariff Barriers (PTBs)
- Energy Cooperation
- Trade Facilitation Measures
- Investment Cooperation
- Reduction of products in the Sensitive Lists
- SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS)
- Improvement in Connectivity (rail, road, air, maritime) among the Member States

Implementations of these prioritized recommendations will facilitate the transition of SAARC from SAFTA to SAEU.

Prior to this Meeting, three such SAARC-ADB Special Meetings of the representatives of Commerce and Finance Ministries of the Member States of SAARC on Regional Economic Integration were held: India, 14-15 April 2015; Malé, Maldives, 27-28 January 2016; Islamabad, Pakistan, 14-15 April 2017.

SAARC Rabies Workshop

The SAARC Rabies Workshop on “Enhancing Progress Towards Rabies Elimination Goal of ‘Zero by 30’ in the SAARC Region” in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) was held on 26-28 June 2019 in Kathmandu, Nepal. The Workshop was attended by all Member States, represented by both human and animal health exports.

The Workshop provided useful forum to review country progress, share success stories and good practices, discuss issues of mutual concern and identify concrete, national and regional roadmaps to achieve the elimination goal. The Workshop mapped out the ground realities regarding rabies prevention and control programmes in the Member States towards achieving ‘Zero by 30’ goal, and updated participants on available tools, frameworks and success stories on their application. It also developed draft multi-sectoral national country plans and activities for ‘Zero by 30’ or rabies elimination goals based on SARE assessment or questionnaire survey further consolidated during the Workshop.

Activities carried out by SAARC Specialized Bodies and Regional Centres

SAARC Agriculture Centre (SAC)

2. SAARC Regional Consultation on “Fish Culture in Cages and Pens in Reservoirs, Lakes, Rivers and Marine Waters for Aquaculture Diversification in South Asia”, 17-19 April 2019, Nepal.


7. Regional Training on “Smart Agricultural Water Management Interventions for Enhancing Water Productivity and Resilience in South Asia”, 18-22 June 2019, India.

**SAARC Cultural Centre (SCC)**


3. SAARC Culture Capital Thimphu (Closing Ceremony), 29 June 2019, Bhutan.

4. SAARC Literary Award, 30 June 2019, Bhutan.

**SAARC Energy Centre (SEC)**


**South Asian University (SAU)**

1. Short Plays On Gender Sensitization, 10 April 2019, India.

2. Seminar on Global Compact on Refugees, 18 April 2019, India.

3. International Conference on “Poetic Imagining (s) of South Asia: Borders and Nations”, 22-23 April 2019, India.


5. SAU Award Ceremony, 3 June 2019, India.