

Press release

5th South Asia Economic Summit concludes

ISLAMABAD (13 September 2012): The 5th South Asia Economic Summit concluded today with participants calling for enhanced regional cooperation to address South Asia's woes by building on the recent positive developments that have taken place in the region, mainly the improvement in the relationship between India and Pakistan.

Speaking as the chief guest of the concluding session, Foreign Minister of Pakistan Hina Rabbani Khar said that the solutions to the myriad problems plaguing the region can only come through confidence and trust among SAARC member states. She emphasized the need for the people of the region to look at themselves first as citizens of the region, arguing that the prosperity of an individual country depends on the prosperity of the region. Referring to the recent improvement in Pakistan's relations with India and Afghanistan mainly on the trade front, she reiterated Pakistan's commitment to remove all bottlenecks to its trade with its neighbours, which would ultimately benefit the entire region. She also expressed Pakistan's commitment to address issues of food insecurity and climate change through a regional approach.

Discussing the development agenda for a new South Asia, Professor Rehman Sobhan, Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue, Dhaka, said that growth in South Asia has never been inclusive; therefore, to make the growth process inclusive, people's access to assets is necessary. He added that one way of doing so would be getting people engaged in value addition process. Dr Saman Kelegama, Executive Director, Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, identified three opportunities for South Asia in the next several decades: a demographic dividend, a rising middle class, and surging remittances. In the same session, Dr Jagadish Chandra Pokharel, former member of National Planning Commission, Nepal, stressed the need to link the regional cooperation process with the Millennium Development Goals, and highlighted the critical importance of collaboration of institutions of higher learning in the region.

Speaking in a session on Climate Change Challenges for Sustainable Development, Antoine Bouet, Senior Research Fellow, International Food Policy Research Institute, presented the findings of a research that South Asia is likely to be strongly adversely affected in terms of agrofood production and real income due to climate change, with Pakistan suffering the most. He argued that trade policy reforms can help mitigate the impacts of climate change only if they are ambitious. Puspa Sharma, Research Director, South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE) highlighted the gap between ambitious commitments in declarations and woefully poor implementation in issues of climate change in SAARC. He emphasized the need to shift the focus of the climate finance regime at the global level to adaptation from the existing excessive focus on mitigation. He suggested that the SAARC Technological Initiative be utilized to harness the potential of harnessing South-South technological transfer within South Asia. Fahmida Khatun, Head of Research, Centre for Policy Dialogue, pointed at the huge gap between commitment and disbursement of climate finance. She further argued that the SAARC Development Fund has not been utilized to finance climate change-related projects.

The three-day Summit brought together about 200 participants, including experts and academics, policy makers, private sector representatives, civil society representatives and media persons from all eight South Asian countries. The participants included 114 foreign delegates. The goal of the event, held under the theme “Making growth inclusive and sustainable in South Asia”, was to provide inputs to the 18th SAARC Summit. The Summit was organized by Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad. SAWTEE was one of the co-organizers of the event.