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# SAARC – THE PRIORITIES AND CHALLENGES OF THE FUTURE

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), now in its eighth year of existence, was conceived primarily as a cooperative venture with a predominantly socio-economic agenda. Through the creation of this Association the seven member countries sought to institutionalize cooperation in areas of common interest where there was no bilateral contentious problem. The guiding spirit of the Association has been, from its very inception, to explore the commonalities of the member countries to advance the pace and widen the scope of intra-regional cooperation. Such an incremental approach it was perceived could ultimately transcend the whole gamut of inter-state relation in South Asia. Eight long years have passed since SAARC was launched. Early this year Seventh SAARC Summit was held in Dhaka heralding the beginning of the second cycle of SAARC activities. The Thirteenth Session of SAARC Council of Ministers is about to be held in Dhaka marking a vital mid point between extended Summits. It is perhaps relevant to ask at this point how successful SAARC has been in giving expression to our regional collectivity and in accomplishing the goals which it set before it. It is equally important to consider what priorities should this Association have to lead its member countries into a new millennia with perceptible and far-reaching impact for the wellbeing of their teeming millions.

#### GAINS OF THE RECENT PAST:

In retrospect it will be no exaggeration to conclude that the first cycle of SAARC was not without some tangible gains. During this phase of SAARC's activities the countries in South Asia were provided with a firm institutional framework to promote collective actions on a wide front. Precise terms of reference for various SAARC countries were laid down and a large number of activities of

short term nature vastly increased interaction among member countries. This has definitely narrowed the critical knowledge gap that separated the member countries. Cultural exchanges in all their aspects have also increased creating a congenial condition for promoting a distinct South Asian identity. Although the pace of progress in some core areas of cooperation has been rather slow priorities in these areas have been identified. At no point member countries have denied that these priorities are not important. On the contrary, there is a growing awareness about the imperative need to initiate concrete actions in these key areas and achieve visible impacts for the people in this region who account for nearly one-fifth of the entire humanity.

#### A POSITIVELY EVOLING AGENDA FOR THE GOOD OF SOUTH ASIA :

The positive evolution in the growing agenda of SAARC and its particular relevance to the people and countries in South Asia can be seen specially from the rich contents and wide scope of the series of decisions taken during successive SAARC Summits especially the Seventh SAARC Summit held in Dhaka early this year. Widespread incidence of poverty is no doubt the single greatest challenge facing the countries in South Asia during these closing years of the current millennia. Even if the extremes in estimates are left out, poverty in South Asia in 1991 was estimated to be approximately 30 to 40 per cent of the region's total population. That places the number of poor, according to these estimates, between an appalling 330 to 440 million. The policy ramifications of this all pervasive wide incidence of poverty and risk inherent in leaving it unat-

tended are much too well known. The Seventh SAARC Summit thus rightly identified this problem as one of the single most important challenges requiring priority attention during the coming years. The Seventh SAARC Summit also adopted a significant step towards extending cooperation in the core economic areas by concluding the Agreement on SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA). During this same Summit Heads of State or Government also underscored the need for national, bilateral, regional and global programmes for the protection and preservation of environment, sustained and serious efforts on the population front and science, education and technology. The SAARC leaders also unequivocally committed themselves to the protection and promotion of the rights and interests of the disadvantaged groups like women, children and the disabled. The Summit leaders reaffirmed once again their commitment to pay special attention to the monitoring of security of small states, collective projection of common position on relevant economic and other issues.

#### SOME CRITICAL ISSUES REQUIRING PRIORITY ATTENTION :

All this, particularly such an impressive agenda with so many important issues, implies great responsibilities. There is undoubtedly the need for relevant and sharper tools, time bound programmes and focussed attention on relevant issues. These imperatives clearly imply the necessity for several concrete steps in future. For example in the area of poverty eradication during the Seventh SAARC Summit, the member countries pledged their unequivocal commitments to eradicating poverty and to draw

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