

# 6<sup>th</sup> SAARC Business Leaders Conclave

March 16-18, 2018 Kathmandu, Nepal.

“Unleashing Shared Prosperity Through Economic Integration”



**SAARC CHAMBER OF  
COMMERCE & INDUSTRY**

APEX BUSINESS ORGANIZATION OF SAARC



SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR REGIONAL CO-OPERATION



# 6th SAARC Business Leaders Conclave (SBLC)

March 16-18, 2018.  
Kathmandu, Nepal.



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SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR REGIONAL CO-OPERATION

# CONTENT

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	05
<b>PLENARY SESSION 1</b> UNLEASHING SOUTH ASIA: A MANTRA FOR SHARED ECONOMIC PROSPERITY	07
<b>PLENARY SESSION 2</b> POLITICAL & ECONOMIC CONVERGENCE FOR GROWTH: THE WAY FORWARD	09
<b>PLENARY SESSION 3</b> SOUTH ASIA: BUILDING PARTNERSHIP IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY	11
<b>PLENARY SESSION 4</b> REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND ENERGY COOPERATION: SUCCESS THROUGH SYNERGY	13
• <b>PARALLEL SESSION A</b> TOURISM PROMOTING AND BRANDING OUR COMMON CULTURAL HERITAGE AND FOSTERING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING	16
• <b>PARALLEL SESSION B</b> AGRIBUSINESS: TARGET - DOUBLING AGRIBUSINESS BY 2030	19
• <b>PARALLEL SESSION C</b> DIGITAL ECONOMY: A FUTURE FOR SOUTH ASIA	21
<b>PLENARY SESSION 5</b> TURNING SETBACKS INTO COMEBACKS: ROLE OF PRIVATE SECTORS	23
<b>PLENARY SESSION 6</b> INVESTING IN INFRASTRUCTURE: ENSURING BETTER SOUTH ASIAN CONNECTIVITY	25
<b>PLENARY SESSION 7</b> STRENGTHENING CONNECTIVITY AND TRADE IN SOUTH ASIA: THE CASE FOR GENDER-RESPONSIVE LOGISTICS	27
<b>PLENARY SESSION 8</b> WOMEN EMPOWERING SOUTH ASIA	29
<b>PLENARY SESSION 9</b> MINISTERIAL ROUND: SHARED PROSPERITY UNLEASHING INVESTMENT IN SOUTH ASIA	31



The 6th SAARC Business Leaders Conclave (SBLC) was organized by SAARC Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SAARC CCI) in collaboration with Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FNCCI) and Government of Nepal, in partnership with Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) and World Bank, on March 16-18, 2018, at Kathmandu, Nepal.

The 6th SBLC was organized under a theme “Unleashing Shared Prosperity through Economic Integration” and was aimed at deliberating upon the key issues of regional economic integration, energy, digital economy, agriculture, trade and investment, and empowering youth and women in the South Asian economies.

President SAARC CCI, Mr. Suraj Vaidya in his welcome address said that we are living in the era of great

Talking about his tenure as a President of SAARC CCI, Mr. Vaidya commented that during such turbulent times we continued with our efforts to mitigate the confrontation and facilitate cooperation between the eight member nations of SAARC. “We convened meetings or events in each of the SAARC countries every quarter. Some of the highlights in the two years; from ground zero we have invested and neared completion of our headquarters in Islamabad at the cost of \$10.2 million” Mr. Vaidya said. We are able to open two regional office in Mumbai and Colombo that are all predominant business centers in the region he shared. Continued with his special address, Mr. Vaidya emphasized the region has many problems but problems can be resolved only when we start speaking, there is need to find platforms for the business people to meet and media to exchange views, and artists to meet together and the people of South Asia to talk, speak and appreciate and by bringing our nations



transition and change, last few years have not been good for globalization and regional integration. Even in SAARC region, conflicts and turbulence seem to be persisting but SAARC, during its relatively short existence, withstood a difficult path seeking ways to think through inter-regional and bilateral tensions. Highlighting the importance of business leader conclave Mr. Vaidya said “today, our presence at the conclave is a proof of commitment of all member states of SAARC to make SAARC a living and a dynamic force despite the challenges we are called upon to face from time to time”

Mr. Vaidya also said that the SAARC region has immense opportunities to be unleashed. The SAARC Business Leaders’ Conclave is a flagship event of SAARC and has emerged with immense importance not merely for business community but also for governments and larger society to allow exchange of views. The conclave deals on issues that directly affect the lives of the people. Mr. Vaidya shared that the next two days are extremely important because of participation of senior leaders, bureaucrats, experts and business people who would be expressing their views and opinions.

closer in terms of economic engagement and by creating economic stake in each other’s progress we can promote overall welfare of our people.

Highlighting the importance of regional connectivity, Mr. Vaidya shared that “The biggest problem in South Asia is impediments to do business and the policies that hinder business. At SAARC Chamber of Commerce we made ‘Free Movement of People’ our top priority in the region. We have experienced tremendous amount of problems when people can’t move, trade becomes an impossibility and investment stagnates. To make it easier for business people to move around the region, SAARC Chamber has taken the mantle of leadership on the behalf of private sector. We made presentations to immigration officers of Governments to make the movement of people in general and businessmen in particular easier in the region”.

On the occasion, Mrs. Bhawani Rana, President of Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) shared “South Asian countries have tremendous potential which needs to be tapped and move forward with a shared vision to achieve inclusive

# Introduction

growth of the region. South Asia is being considered as one of the fastest growing regions of the world with its population of more than 1.7 billion people”

Mrs. Rana said that “It is high time now that the countries in this region need to shift from consumption to investment-led economic development. The SAARC countries are endowed with both natural and human resources. We need collective efforts to convert our resources into wealth. Shared prosperity must be our common objective and strategic goal.

Concluding her speech she applauded Mr. Suraj Vaidya, President of SAARC CCI and his entire team for their tireless efforts and dynamic leadership and taking SAARC CCI to newer heights and we all look forward to this SAARC CCI leadership helping to materialize SAARC economic integration, she added.

Addressing the conclave, Regional Director FNF, Dr. Ronald Meinardus acknowledged the vision of SAARC CCI. He said that from the very beginning, the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry has been the privileged and most important regional partner of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF). He also shared that “we support the aspirations and the vision of SAARC Chamber and the many businessmen and businesswomen of South Asia. He emphasized that economic freedom and cooperation across borders hold the key to development and peace. This is a perspective that the organizers of this great event have so eloquently put into the catch phrase Unleashing shared prosperity through economic integration”

Mr. Meinardus also highlighted that the challenges lie within the nation states themselves and much remains to be done for the SAARC member countries to reform their economies and open up to international trade and competition. Concluding his special address at inaugural ceremony of 6th SBLC he wished and hope that this conclave would be fruitful in promoting economic cooperation among SAARC nations.

Addressing the inaugural session H.E. Amjad B. Sial, Secretary General, SAARC said that the participation of distinguished personalities in the conclave reflects the importance given to the promotion of economic relations among the member states of SAARC. The convening of this conclave is important for SAARC for two good reasons, first it brings together the prominent business leaders to discuss the role the private sector in the process of regional economic integration and secondly the theme of the conclave reflects the 18th SAARC Summit declaration where the leaders renewed their commitment to achieve the South Asia economic union. He mentioned that “Promoting regional economic integration is a priority of SAARC and in realizing this objective, we are making constant efforts in bringing down tariffs, we’re also in the process of operationalizing SAARC Agreement on Trade and Services. He said that connectivity is the top most priority of the SAARC today, improved connectivity and

enhanced economic relations will not only push trade but also promote tourism and people to people contacts.

Talking about regional energy cooperation, His Excellency, Mr. Sial commented that SAARC is actively pursuing the goal of regional integration in Energy. “In order to turn up a SAARC market for electricity, the SAARC Framework Agreement for energy cooperation has been signed and its certification process is under way”. He said that “Public Private Partnership remains a crucial cornerstone for promoting regional economic integration and for connectivity. SAARC CCI can play a vital role in this regard”.

Hon’ble Minister Matrika Prasad Yadav Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies said that the theme of the business conclave is very timely and contextual as the whole of South Asia is aiming at equitable benefits, and that is attainable in a short span of time when regional integration of SAARC nation becomes a reality. He said that it is a bitter truth that despite our sincere efforts and commitment South Asia is still falling behind. However we need to utilize SAARC as a regional instrument to materialize the noble objectives of economic integration through economic integration. Mr. Parasad shared.

He further said that the borders should not be only restricted for the flow of goods and people but open to investment in infrastructure development, technology transfer and new opportunities for younger generation. This will become faster when our region gets well integrated, he added.

In his Presidential address Hon’ble KP Sharma Oli, Prime Minister of Nepal extended his best wishes for the grand success of 6th SBLC, “It is very appropriate and timely that private sector and the business community of South Asia are gathered here in this Conclave to start a new drive for economic integration. We are extremely positive towards the slogans such as investment for creating job opportunities and investment for production”

While addressing the august gathering, he said the conclusions drawn from this three day business conclave shall produce something that will guide the governments of SAARC region. He believed that the conclusions will be very valuable to go ahead to meet our aspirations of development and prosperity and wished that, the 6th conclave will be a conclave of success” he added.

Mr. OM Bahadur Rajbhandary, Vice President, SAARC CCI (Nepal Chapter) extended vote of thanks at the end of the inaugural session. He said that the 6th SBLC is culmination of the efforts of SAARC Chamber and its Secretariat, its constituent Federations and National Chambers. He said that “No one can deny that the South Asia has unlimited potential, the phenomenal economic transformation that is happening throughout most of our region in the recent past, vindicates that SAARC CCI stand that South Asians are the most enterprising people, capable to find solutions to any problem”.



## MODERATOR

Mr. Nischal Nath Pandey,  
Director,  
Center for South Asian Studies  
Nepal



6TH SAARC BUSINESS LEADERS CONCLAVE



## PLENARY SESSION 1

### UNLEASHING SOUTH ASIA: A MANTRA FOR SHARED ECONOMIC PROSPERITY



SAARC CHAMBER OF  
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## SPEAKERS

- Mr. Chandra Kumar Ghimire,  
Secretary,  
Ministry of Commerce (Nepal)
- H.E. Mr. Manjeev Singh Puri,  
Ambassador,  
Embassy of India in Nepal
- Mr. Zubair Ahmed Malik,  
Former President, FPCCI (Pakistan)
- Mr. Macky Hashim,  
Former President, SAARC CCI





## The panel discussed models for fostering better business partnerships and ways to enhance the intra-regional capital flows and mechanisms to unlock the potential of regional economic cooperation and integration while building deeper public-private collaborations.

The panel discussed the prospects of unleashing the enormous socio economic potential of South Asian region and deliberated on how South Asia as a region can achieve equitable socio-economic growth and deliberated upon the opportunities to unleash the potentials of South Asia. Although SAARC process has opened new avenues in the regional integration process, however we are not being able to get benefited from the union of eight countries, the panel agreed.

The panel observed that movement of cargo in South Asia is pricey and causes exorbitant cost and time and as a consequence the landlocked countries are suffering the most. The panel found that in order to get pace with the global momentum, South Asian economies have to redesign policies and plans of actions for enhanced regional connectivity. The panel also called on both the Public and Private sectors in the region to work for regional connectivity and cooperation in the Private Public Partnership modules.

The panel also identified the role of FDI to increase regional cooperation among the SAARC states. The panel observed that South Asian economies need to attract FDI across and within the region as well. It was identified that the SAARC economies have to make maximum efforts as society, economy, the private sector led dialogue and actions may ease doing business in the region.

The panel also observed that a well-integrated South Asia, will have a bigger market and SAARC can be a win-win forum. It was recommended that the comparative advantages of the countries must be acknowledged by each other in the region. The panel suggested to not

only share vulnerability and poverty, but to share the prosperity amongst us.

The speakers emphasized that it's a high time to think out of the box and look for opportunity within. The role of private sector in South Asia is commendable. We only have to change the mindset of our politicians for which all the private sector shall come together. To unleash South Asia, we should leash the political setup of the region. Dialogues can resolve problem, trade between India and Pakistan has increased after last SBLC, and the list of tradable items has been increased from 196 items to 600 plus items. South Asia is rich on natural mining and resources, rather than using those resources we are supplying those to other countries. Connectivity must increase and we must attract FDI. The business sector is ready to lead the process and unleash the potential of the region.

The panel acknowledges the critical role that SAARC Chamber of Commerce is playing in the process of regional integration. Considering the Most Favored Nation (MFN) status, which has to be equally distributed within the region, SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry was advised to take lead. The complementarity of the countries will give advantage to all the countries in the region. The countries like Nepal and India in the region have shown excellent example of integration from the past.

It has been widely agreed that South Asia has not been able to tap its potential benefit from regional integration. Low levels of intraregional trade and investments are difficult to justify economically, especially with increased growth in almost all countries of the region.

Concluding the session the speakers opined that, it is the need of the hour that countries in the South Asian region should put aside their differences and conflicts and come together and act for the development of the region. The panel was of view that the process of unleashing is neither new nor difficult, only the political leadership of the SAARC countries have to come together and own the regional integration mission led by the business community.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The session called upon increased cooperation between member-states to facilitate harmonization arrangements in areas such as investment treaties, customs procedures, arbitration, double taxation, and access to market information and legal systems and removal of impediments for the Foreign Direct Investment. These arrangements will increase efficiencies in the region and make businesses more profitable.
- The session called upon the political leadership of the South Asian nations to step beyond historic differences to achieve the end objective of stability and prosperity in the region, by increasing the South Asian integration efforts.
- It was agreed that the most critical element of the integration process in South Asia is building confidence and filling the huge trust deficit between the countries. The potential of increasing trade and investment and better positioning, to have a say in global governance, has the potential of uniting South Asian countries, while sidelining political differences to pursue regional integration.
- South Asia needs to work in a coordinated manner and devise a common investment policy if it is to succeed in attracting huge FDI inflow. This policy framework is long overdue, and the governments of the region should focus on institutional development so as to ensure transparency, accountability and predictability.



## MODERATOR

Ms. Sumnima Udas,  
CNN International  
Correspondent



## PLENARY SESSION 2

### POLITICAL & ECONOMIC CONVERGENCE FOR GROWTH: THE WAY FORWARD



## SAARC CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

APEX BUSINESS ORGANIZATION OF SAARC



## SPEAKERS

- Hon'ble Mr. Pushpa Kamal Dahal,  
Former Prime Minister (Nepal)
- Mr. Salman F. Rahman,  
Advisor to Prime Minister of  
Bangladesh, President of Bangladesh  
Awami League & Former President,  
SAARC CCI



**The session focused on how the leaders and opinion makers of South Asia can help to create commonality of interests and remove the basis for conflicts in the region. The session deliberated upon the key facts that the political harmony among the SAARC nations is the only viable solution to enhance the process of regional integration by creating a conducive business environment.**

Addressing the session, the panel recognized that the region is endowed with enormous potential, considering the fact that the largest number of poor people dwells in this region and it has not been able to meet the expectations of peace and prosperity. There's a gap between growth and prosperity and it can be achieved through collaboration and collective political will.

Political stability is a must for an integrated SAARC. Political commitment for peace and stability will build the trust in the region and a serious discussion is needed to settle the political issues. SAARC mandate has to be reviewed to mitigate political differences to create a conducive environment for economic growth.

The panelist accentuated that the role of China in the South Asian region is a solution rather than the problem. India has to play the role of the leader and if it does not do it, the regional bilateral relation among SAARC countries will break down into conflicts. So one cannot ignore the role that China is playing in this region. In order to make China the part of the solution, we need to get our acts together.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The session agreed that serious discussions are a must to create a dialogue for economic development in South Asia. Leaders must initiate this for the conducive environment and connectivity of mind and resources.
- The session called upon greater bilateral dialogues between the regional actors, as bilateral political discussion can solve the issues. South Asian Leaders should courage to take business along with politics for the development of entire region.
- The session called upon for creation of an enabling policy environment to deepen the existing trade arrangements into comprehensive cooperation mechanisms covering not only trade in goods but also services and trans-border movement of investment and personnel. The other areas that need attention are rationalization of trade documentation and removal of non-tariff barriers.
- The session also reinforced to overcome the regional energy crises and to enhance cross border energy trade in the SAARC region. The national grids of each country need to be interconnected to meet the market demand within the region.

The SAARC economic initiatives can be fruitful if the nations agrees to focus and address the barriers affecting growth of intra-regional trade flows. The panelist acknowledged that of intra-regional trade flows offer an immense potential for massive economic growth. The impact of the transformation will affect the lives of people and do away with the curse of poverty and deprivation which many continue to face the region.

The panel was of the view that energy is an integral part of sustainable growth and trade. South Asian region has an immense potential to generate power and energy through its natural resources. To overcome the energy deficit in the region the panel recommended that the national grid of each country needs to be interconnected and meet the market demand within the region. The amount of investment flows in energy, within and across the region will be immeasurable. This also would unleash the unimaginable growth which individual countries today, do not visualize

The panel concluded that it is the high time the governments and the private sector as well as people of the region realize that economic integration is the only viable option available to build a more prosperous and socio-politically cohesive South Asian region. The need of the hour is for us to realize that our individual national interest is best served if we give priority to our collective regional interest. Other regions such as ASEAN and EU have proved that in spite of conflicting political views, not only is regional integration possible but it has resulted in tremendous improvement of the standard of living of individual citizens and of society as a whole.



## Moderator

Ms. Ayanthi Gurusinghe,  
Director, Karpos Consultant  
Sri Lanka



6TH SAARC BUSINESS LEADERS CONCLAVE



## PLENARY SESSION 3

### SOUTH ASIA: BUILDING PARTNERSHIP IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY



SAARC CHAMBER OF  
COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

APEX BUSINESS ORGANIZATION OF SAARC



## SPEAKERS

- Mr. Aroop Zutshi,  
Global President & Managing Partner,  
Frost & Sullivan
- Ms. Shu Ya, Founder,  
OBOR International Platform
- Mr. Xiang Wenbo,  
Executive Chairman, China South Asia  
Business Council, CCPIT
- Ms. Sophie Kemkhadze,  
Deputy Country Director UNDP (Nepal)



## This session focused on building partnerships of South Asian entrepreneurs, technology and knowledge pool of other regions including the efforts by SAARC CCI in this direction.

While addressing the occasion the panelists opined that for building partnerships and strong linkages in the global perspective, SAARC needs to be connected with the rest of the world. The panelists were of view that there are big opportunities out there, the region comprised of powerful countries and has a potential to establish itself as key player in the global arena. The region has already seen people from within the region wielding their skills to build unicorns.

Addressing the session, the speakers said that in terms of building partnership in the global economy, Nepal and China through their partnership gained immense benefits. Nepal has great demands in agriculture and infrastructure which will play a crucial role in determining Nepal's economic growth and prosperity. China is already importing a lot of Nepalese handicrafts and will continue to do so in future.

The session observed that the world now has come together to forge a partnership under Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). It is not within just the interest and capacity of governments, or the UN system or the development partners to ensure that the goals are met; it is really about forging partnerships and ensuring

meaningful engagements of the private sector for the attainment of the SDG.

The panelists were of view that today businesses do not need to convert themselves into charity or philanthropy organizations; they should stay where they are and continue to make profits. But in the meantime, entrepreneurs should also explore ways by which businesses can make profits while still contributing to the SDGs. And that should also be the goal behind the new partnerships that we forge henceforth.

Concluding the session, the panelists acknowledged the role of global partnership in strengthening the SAARC region across the globe. The panelists were of the view that, the SAARC as a region holds immense potential and the potential has not yet being transformed into meaningful figures, with intra-regional trade at 5 percent while the European Union contributes 25% to their intra-regional trade, the SAARC region gets less than 5 percent of global outbound FDI while EU boast of 23 percent.

The panel observed that there is much room for forging stronger partnerships in the region. Access to funds/capital is another opportunity that the region can leverage. There is more capital available out there today, than there are opportunities to deploy them. The region today needs sets of smart solutions to the common problems that exist today. Start-up ecosystem thus has a tremendous opportunity to be successful enabling the individuals to be a job creator rather than being an employee.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Fostering regional partnerships and joint ventures has become indispensable for the development of the region and the development partners of the region must work together towards building a market for one another, to reap the benefits each has to offer to another.
- From development perspective the region should set its focus on, and make investments in human capital, enabling business environment, reducing barriers to trade and enabling more trade-within the region and beyond and build partnerships and strong linkages in the global perspective, SAARC needs to be connected with the rest of the world.
- The panel also called upon the regional private and public sector to join hands to encourage an eco-system for the startups, provide an adequate enabling environment for the young entrepreneurs and women entrepreneurs to play their part in the economic progress of South Asia.

## MODERATOR

Mr. Anil Chitrakar,  
President, Siddharth Inc.  
Nepal

## REMARKS BY

H.E. Ms. Alaina B. Teplitz, US  
Ambassador to Nepal (US)



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## PLENARY SESSION 4

### REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND ENERGY COOPERATION: SUCCESS THROUGH SYNERGY



SAARC CHAMBER OF  
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## SPEAKERS

- Dasho Sonam P. Wangdi,  
Director General, Department of  
Hydropower and Power System (Bhutan)
- Mr. Vijay Kharbanda,  
Director, SARI/EI/IRADe
- Prof. Dr. Mohammad Tamim,  
BUET (Bangladesh)
- Mr. Deepak Amitabh, Chairman and  
Managing Director, PTC India Ltd. (India)
- Mr. Michael Satin, Director, Office of Clean  
Energy and Environment, USAID, India



## The session extended to explore the extent to which the energy cooperation is meaningful to the South Asian member states and the benefits a regional energy cooperation mechanism offers to the people of South Asia.

The panel deliberated upon the issues of energy shortages, the entire region is facing. It was observed that the South Asia regions is growing rapidly by an average GDP growth of 7% per annum but the per capita energy consumption is far below the global average of 580 KW/h compared to 3000 KW/h, and concluded that the region consumes 75 percent less energy than the global average. The speakers were of view that “South Asia is experiencing rapid change on several fronts: rapid economic growth, industrialization, an increasing population, and accelerating urbanization. All of these changes increase the demand for electricity. However, several positive developments have underlined the regions commitment to energy cooperation”.

The panelists recognized that the energy sector could play a key role in the region’s socio economic development and can be a vital driver of regional integration. The panel highlighted that the region is facing issue of increasing demand for energy, sustainable development, low competitiveness, reducing environmental impacts, transfer of knowledge today in this field. There is need for collaborative and collective action across the entire region, oriented towards tangible results.

While continuing with the discussion the panelist said that energy policies implemented in the member countries of South Asia reflects individual strategies that take little account of the choices made by neighboring countries. Despite the proximity of their markets, complementarities may exist as well as the opportunities for economies of scale. The need for the significant investments required to develop these sectors coupled with the need to organize the associated technology transfers, offer many opportunities to build truly innovative public private partnerships.

It was acknowledge that the existing power trade in the region may be a win-win situation for the South Asian countries and provides a strong foundation for accelerating regional power trade. A study by South Asia Regional Initiative for Energy Integration (SARI/EI) showed that accelerated power trade between India and Nepal may increase Nepal’s GDP by over \$120 billion in the next 30 years. Without this energy trade, the growth rate would be 39 percent lower. Another SARI/EI study found that Bangladesh could save 30 percent in energy costs by importing electricity from India instead of using imported fuels to power domestic electricity production. It was shown from the international experience that most cross-border energy trade begins with bilateral interactions. The panelists said that bilateral agreement provides a foundation for multilateral arrangements

and transactions. South Asia is gradually moving along this path, only it needs to coordinate regional energy regulations and policies.

During the session the panelist were of the view that the energy sector is highly capital intensive that has long gestation period. Thus it requires a lot of investment in this sector. Therefore, the issue of energy integration carries a lot of gravity for South Asia. In the SAARC region Afghanistan, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri-Lanka host small power systems. Pakistan and Bangladesh host mid-sized power systems, while India hosts a large power system. Currently, cross-border energy trade (CBET) within the region stands at 2300 MW which is expected to double by 2019. The history of cross border energy trade between Bangladesh and India lends the region a great lesson as to how much the region could benefit through it. In short, energy cooperation is a win-win for all from all aspects.

The panelists expounded that without the adequate supply of energy, economic growth of the entire region will be greatly hindered. Although the SAARC region hosts a diverse range of sources of energy; thermal, coal and hydro etc, the need for cooperation and integration in terms of energy needs to be amplified. Furthermore, the speakers suggested that the renewable and clean energy, hydro energy, can be the leading tool for South Asia for energy security.

The panelists considered that a liberal policy is very important for energy sector development and in order to move forward one has to first make a commitment, then a decision and move forward with the decisions and continue to mitigate challenges that one will be confronted with along the way. Making incremental improvements in policies; without making a move, ideas will simply not materialize they reinforced.

Considering the ground realities, the panelists recognized that regional integration and cooperation in energy is a long process, it took 23 years of talking between India and Bangladesh to initiate cross border energy trade (CBET). Initially a huge political mistrust prevailed among these two countries. But in the recent years both these two countries have been engaged in CBET and it is expected that, volume of energy trade might reach 10,000 MW between these two counties in the next ten years.

The panel identified that lack of clear political will and existence of mistrust among nations is the major hindrance towards energy cooperation in the region. Regulations similarly play a vital role in defining the success of the idea of regional integration and energy cooperation. A commercial framework of business is really crucial-unless something is commercially viable, nothing will really work. Many of the countries in SAARC region rely on hydrocarbons for energy generation, which offers little price stability also there is a demand supply mismatch which results in power outage, which then affects all other economic activities that it fuels. The speakers



identified that the region has sizeable capacity in terms of hydropower, coal, solar wind and biomass for electricity generation. It would be thus pragmatic to shift and utilize the resources for energy generation that the region has.

Concluding the session, the panelists emphasized that energy cooperation is an essential factor for regional integration. Specifically for the private sector, availability, reliability and cost of energy have direct impact on their business as well as it affects the economic opportunities they generate and resulting benefits that accrue to their respective nation and the region. Therefore, it was

acknowledged by the speakers that the importance of concepts like energy security, energy cooperation and regional integration are paramount.

The panelists suggested that to benefit from the great prospect that trade and marketplace offer, South Asia needs to make sure that it has the right regulatory and financial framework in place. This is where continuous dialogues between the government, the private sector and the civil society organizations can play a big role in the process of integration.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- In terms of cooperation, South Asia should move away from treating electricity as a political commodity and rather move towards treating it as an economic commodity and let businesses take care of the rest--as in case of any other product, and introduce market concepts in the energy industry.
- There is a need to identifying the technically and economically feasible cross-border interconnections based on a scenario analysis and possible financing options.
- To implement the multilateral and regional there is a need to harmonize legal and regulatory frameworks dealing with cross-border trade along with an Energy Charter Treaty for greater security for cross-border energy transfer related investments and transactions.





## MODERATOR

Mr. Suman Shakya,  
Co-Founder,  
Nepal Entrepreneurs' Hub

## CHAIR BY

Mr. M. Yonass Mohmand,  
SAARC CCI Vice President  
Afghanistan



6TH SAARC BUSINESS LEADERS CONCLAVE



## PARALLEL SESSION A

### TOURISM PROMOTING AND BRANDING OUR COMMON CULTURAL HERITAGE AND FOSTERING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING



SAARC CHAMBER OF  
COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

APEX BUSINESS ORGANIZATION OF SAARC



## SPEAKERS

- Mr. Deepak Raj Joshi,  
CEO, Nepal Tourism Board (Nepal)
- Mr. Wouter Schalken,  
Sr. Tourism Specialist,  
The World Bank Group (Singapore)
- Ms. Minha Faiz,  
President,  
Women in Management (Maldives)



**The travel and tourism sector generates nearly 10% of economic output and supports 1 in 11 jobs in the global economy, making it a critical global industry. With plethora of tourism products, South Asia offers tremendous opportunities in the tourism and hospitality sector. The panel intended to explore South Asia tourism branding strategies, aviation networks and investment opportunities, emerging trends and best practices, reinforcing people to people contact to create South Asia as a premier destination in the global market.**

Addressing the session the panel recognized the need of intra-regional tourism in the SAARC region. The speakers were of the view that the region has an immense potential in tourism. However, the potential has remained untapped for many years. Globally, some 1.2 billion tourists travel around the world annually, of which South Asia hosts a mere 17.1 million. Needless to say, there is a lot of potential out there that South Asia can tap on if it positions itself right.

The panelists observed that as a region, South Asia has seen a lot of political unrests, followed by many state of emergencies. This single-handedly has compromised a lot of dividends that the region could have reaped through tourism. Considering the fact tourism industry could play a crucial role in alleviating poverty in the region. For this the region needs to promote intra-regional tourism.

Acknowledging the importance of tourism in the region the panelist said focusing on better connectivity through railway, roadway and airways has to be a priority agenda for promoting tourism in the region. There are issues related to quality of management and services in the region, poor physical infrastructure is a bitter reality, and then there are some genuine safety and security concerns in the region.

The panelists called upon the member countries to come together to battle these hindrances for shared prosperity. There are various genuine administrative concerns as well, like visa and other administrative procedures at borders and entry-points; these need to be simplified as well. A SAARC tourism Visa is something that could be brought to practice through consensus.

The panel was of the view that the political leadership in South Asia has always agreed in words to work to promote regional tourism. However, much is yet to materialize. There is room to try a new approach. There are a number of gaps like lack of quality physical connectivity, lack of joint promotions, lack of focus on specialized services and amenities, etc. that have been keeping the region from harnessing the immense potential that all people talk about.

The panel called upon the social and political leaders of the regions to come together and create a forum to talk about these gaps and share each other's experience in terms of dealing with some of these problems within their borders and talk about how they could be implemented beyond borders.

The panelists were of the view that the region has one of the strongest brands in the world tourism map. It offers a mix of adventure activities, spiritual tourism, immense geographical and cultural diversity, etc. On the basis of these very factors, the region has managed to maintain a steady growth of the industry over the last six decades consistently. Yet, that is just a fraction of all the benefits that the industry has to offer to the region.

One of the biggest agendas for the region, going forward, has to be working on joint promotion and ensuring a bigger presence in the source markets. The speakers identified that most tour operators in the region are inter-linked. But governments have done very little to supplement these efforts that these private actors have put together by themselves over the decades.

The panel identified the role of E-Commerce and IT infrastructure in promoting tourism industry. Integrating e-commerce should be one of the major agendas for the region at the moment; being able to do things online matters these days. IT infrastructure plays a significant role in today's tourism industry. The panel suggested to the member countries to move forward and come together to host tourism fairs to boost tourism in the short-term. Local promotion is another very important aspect. The region could promote regional tourism to tourists, and South Asia should do its homework to make sure that tourists spend more and more. Trained manpower is another need of the region, and an integration to the digital media, goes without saying, is something that all countries in the region need to work towards.

Concluding the session the panelists agreed that tourism development is a long term race, not a sprint; merged with the fact that South Asia has been seeing some of the greatest growths, it paints a hopeful picture of the future of tourism industry in the region.

Furthermore, the panelists suggested that one of the major things for the key actors in the region is to study and analyze the current patterns of travel all over the world. People do not just travel to a country for the sake of travelling; they want to do certain things in that country. South Asia needs to identify clearly what it offers to the people and more importantly, why people are coming to this part of the world, and should focus on such areas.

The panel was of view that religious, adventure and spiritual tourism are some of the major thematic areas for South Asia. Each country should focus on building new activities/engagements and promote them to increase the length of tourists. Along this end, there might be



lessons for each country to learn from many other countries in the world that have leveraged their natural and artificial resources to avail from tourism.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- To facilitate South Asia as an integrated tourism hub, it is critical that air, sea and road access be expanded and enhanced and artificial barriers are addressed for visitors to the region and for each of the countries in the SAARC alliance.
- Bhutan practices a low-volume high-impact tourism. In return, Bhutan attempts to make sure that it gives to its tourists the experience that it has positioned itself as in the global tourism market. Other countries, and the region together, could work along a similar approach.
- Considering this very role of the private sector thus far, the region (and its governments) needs to encourage more private entrepreneurship and investment. The governments could also subscribe to the idea of Leave Travel Concessions (LTCs) to promote intra-regional tourism. And most importantly, the region needs to heavily work on its infrastructure.
- SAARC should also make the effort to improve the image of the region through joint marketing to promote regional tourism. Strategic alliance needs to be struck between different government agencies, private sector, tourism service providers and other key stakeholders. South Asia should also liberalize the industry to induce as much investment as possible.



## MODERATOR

Mr. Zubair Ahmed Malik, Former  
President, FPCCI Pakistan

## CHAIR BY

Mr. Iftikhar Ali Malik,  
Vice President SAARC CCI  
Pakistan



6TH SAARC BUSINESS LEADERS CONCLAVE



## PARALLEL SESSION B

### AGRIBUSINESS: TARGET - DOUBLING AGRIBUSINESS BY 2030



SAARC CHAMBER OF  
COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

APEX BUSINESS ORGANIZATION OF SAARC



## SPEAKERS

- Dr. Posh Raj Pandey  
Executive Chairman, SAWTEE (Nepal)
- Mr. Jalaluddin Sayeed,  
Businessman, Afghanistan
- Ms. Susan Mathew,  
CUTS International (India)
- Mr. S.N. Chaudhary,  
CEO of Pran, Bangladesh



**The prosperity of the overwhelming portion of the South Asians is not possible without transformation of agriculture as it employs a very large segment of the population. The session shared the experiences of South Asian countries in accelerated transformation of the agricultural sector and turning it into high value, high growth endeavors.**

The panel found massive gaps between national, regional and global standards. Secondly there is trade cost and the South Asian countries have very high trade cost within the region. Third, is financial facilities mainly banking facility, cooperation and foreign exchange is required to trade with each other. As all members of SAARC are not members of the Asian Clearing Union, we need to devise some mechanism to clear trade without using any external currency.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- To improve the agriculture sector, we need to have better connectivity, and for that it is essential to develop the infrastructure first and enhance the connectivity between the relevant stakeholders.
- The panel called upon the member states of SAARC to gradually reduce trade barriers with a view to creating an open and competitive regional market, for agri-products in particular, and pursue more open markets with greater private sector involvement among a wider set of international trading partners.
- The regional trade in agriculture could only be enhanced by liberalizing trade, but the present large sensitive list contains majority of tradable agricultural goods.
- The session also called upon fostering an enabling environment, through improving environmental governance, regulations on land, water and biodiversity resources; investments in infrastructure, agricultural R&D and agricultural innovation systems; improving rural land market rights and access, and increasing access to credit for farmers.

The speakers identified huge potential in agricultural sector. They reinforced that there is no proper connection between farmers and consumers, and hence there exist a gap to identify the comparative advantage.

Addressing the session the speakers accentuated the potentials of agriculture sector and shared that South Asia can produce vegetable which are high value crop for example Ginger of Nepal, orange of Bhutan coming to India and exported to other countries.

Similarly, Pakistan does not produce tea which they could import from India, its large volume is currently imported from other country. India recently started to put consumer price index instead of calculating constant price. Other South Asian countries must also look after this matter depending upon their Government. The panel recommended to let each country find out the money-making crop within its country and focus on those.



## MODERATOR

Mr. Ashutosh Tiwari,  
Managing Director,  
SAFAL Partners

## CHAIR BY

Mr. Karma Dorjee,  
Vice President  
SAARC CCI Bhutan



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## PARALLEL SESSION C

### DIGITAL ECONOMY: A FUTURE FOR SOUTH ASIA



SAARC CHAMBER OF  
COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

APEX BUSINESS ORGANIZATION OF SAARC



## SPEAKERS

- Mr. Dulith Herath,  
Chairman and Founder, Kapruka  
(Sri Lanka)
- Mr. Hem Raj Dhakal, MD, Global IME  
Technologies (Nepal)
- Mr. Michael Foley,  
CEO, Grameen Phone Ltd. (Bangladesh)



**The session reconnoitered the prospects of digital economy in South Asia given that the region has made a name and fame in providing solutions to the digital economy of the world. To mitigate the challenges of regional integration, the region needs to integrate itself to the growing global digital economy.**

The panelist were of view that today the way of doing business is changing all over the world and its changing in South Asia as well. SAARC region can greatly benefit from E-Commerce, as the concept of retail stores are on a decline globally and on the contrary, e-commerce is booming with each passing day.

The panelist were of view that “In developing countries like in SAARC region, where addresses are difficult to find and infrastructure is not in good condition, e-commerce can still prosper. There is a need of young tech intelligent people in policy making levels of facilitation of digital economy and e-commerce. The region has unique competitive advantage and can get benefit from the new wave of jobs of the digital economy because of the region’s skilled and young workforce, especially in computer science, computer engineering, and it offers relative low labor costs”.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The panel recommended that there are lot of new opportunities in Business Process Outsourcing. Currently investors from all over the world keeps an eye on South Asia. We should identify right opportunity, build courage and appropriate strategy to pull in for the FDI.
- The panel recommended that there are lot of opportunities in the digital economy need to be identified, better technology will mitigate the risk of data security in the South Asian region.
- High levels of data security can only be achieved through a lot of thought process, policies, discipline and capital. Countries should generate enough employment opportunities to keep the young and tech-savvy population working and motivated.

The panelists were of the view that the youth with the modern mobile technology is the catalyst for the digital economy. Around half of the South Asian population is young and the youth is increasingly innovative, tech-savvy and has good communications skills, hence the digital economy offers diverse service.

The session observed that the mobile phone penetration in South Asia Region shows immense possibility of e-commerce. Mobile phone is the key to not only provide connectivity but also to enter the digital economy. Digital economy and e-commerce will greatly benefit from the growing mobile penetration. The huge unbanked population in the region can access the world of e-commerce through their mobile phones.

Concluding the session the panelists said that E-Commerce is a capital-intensive business. Huge portion of population still use feature phones and that is limiting the users from benefiting from e-commerce in the region. There is a need to include the poorer population and those without digital literacy in the world of e-commerce. E-commerce isn’t only for elites or highly educated or digitally literate population. It is for all. It should be provided in such a way that all can access it and reap its benefits.

## MODERATOR

Mr. Ruwan Edirisinghe,  
President, FCCISL  
Sri Lanka



## PLENARY SESSION 5

### TURNING SETBACKS INTO COMEBACKS: ROLE OF PRIVATE SECTORS



**SAARC CHAMBER OF  
COMMERCE & INDUSTRY**

APEX BUSINESS ORGANIZATION OF SAARC



## SPEAKERS

- Ms. Shobana Kamineni,  
President, CII (India)
- Mr. Zubair Ahmed Malik,  
Former President, FPCCI (Pakistan)
  - Dasho Phup Chiring,  
Secretary General, BCCI (Bhutan)
  - Mr. Shekhar Golchha,  
Sr. Vice President, FNCCI (Nepal)





**The business organization of a country has a large role to play in the process of integration. They are not only a voice of the community, they also can act as change agents in preparing the community to take benefits from the integration. No integration effort will be successful if there is no strong backing from the business community for the process. The session deliberated on the role of the national chambers, the business leaders and private sector activists.**

During the session the panel acknowledged the role of private sector in moving SAARC forward. Private sector is moving forward despite challenges even when governments of two countries are not talking. The government, on the other hand, has always underestimated the potential of private sector.

While discussing the role of private sector the speakers at the sessions said that forty percent of the population of this region lives in poverty. It is the duty of private sector to try to create better opportunities for them, as private sector is the major job creator and private sector are the key people who open the door for prosperity. Private sector has always kept its foot and is trying to influence the government. The private sector can understand the difficulties and comes up with the solution for the government regime.

It was acknowledged that private sector, is the key stakeholder in the region. It is the private sector who believes that it has a great role as it can rightly point out and say to the government that it needs to keep its politics aside and let the private sector run the economy. Problems such as connectivity have always been a major hindrance in the progress of this region. We all know that this region stores natural resources, agriculture, mineral resources and water resources. Today, there is only 5%

intraregional trade compared to 25% in ASEAN and 60% in European Union countries. The main problem is that we take two steps forward and again one step backward as we take steps of government as our fate. It is time to raise our voices and point out what is right or wrong to tell the governments, as we are the major source of financing to the government.

Addressing the session the speakers said that to turn setback into come back, we should mainly focus on connectivity of air, water land and sea. The vision and goal should be clear. We must accept the mutual certifications between countries and let's make SAARC energy grid operational, and similarly with motor vehicle agreement. Now it is the right time to raise the issues that are hampering the socio-economic growth of the region, the panel reinforced. We have a population of 1.7 billion and we just have 5% intraregional trade. The major issue is connectivity, integration and infrastructure.

While discussing the speakers emphasized that the integration can only happen when the policymakers provide a conducive environment. For turning set back into come back, let's honor the signatories that are bilateral multilateral or regional, the panel agreed. Let's put emphasis to connectivity of the region at first. The business leaders and the apex bodies must come up with the solution.

Concluding the session the speakers said that when we look at the ground reality only 5% intra-regional trade is happening here. We are the poorest region in the world; our infrastructure is one of the worst in the world. We are very poorly in terms of HDI indicators as well. The major reason behind this is that we, in South Asia, are into self-preserving politics. When politics become self-preserving we can't think of the region. Until we agree to look beyond this self-preserving politics, it is not possible to look for regional cooperation. Till the time we do not have a mentality that the region is ours, it is not possible to flourish.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Private sector can play a crucial role in elevating the poverty by creating jobs and provide opportunities for youth and women of South Asia and can open the doors for prosperity.
- Problems such as connectivity have always been a major hindrance in the progress of this region. The private sector has an important role to play, mainly through public-private partnerships to build core infrastructure as a pillar for economic growth and development. Governments can also benefit from private sector expertise in building an efficient infrastructure network and creating a conducive environment to building infrastructure and connectivity.
- Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) often lack the resources to invest in innovation to fuel productivity and development. Yet, strengthening SMEs may help drive these processes and foster entrepreneurship.
- To better mitigate risks and realize the benefits of private sector action, informed dialogue between policy makers and businesses will be crucial. Business and Government leaders should discuss ways, multinational corporations can promote economic and social development through these dialogues.
- Exchange of knowledge and best practices on doing business, both public and private sectors can better define their contributions to mutual interests. The private sector can be the engine of growth, innovation and job creation, government's efforts to establish stable and supportive environments are critical.



## MODERATOR

Mr. Macky Hashim,  
Former President,  
SAARC CCI

## OPENING REMARKS BY

Hon'ble Dr. Yubraj Khatiwada,  
Minister of Finance,  
Government of Nepal



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## PLENARY SESSION 6

### INVESTING IN INFRASTRUCTURE: ENSURING BETTER SOUTH ASIAN CONNECTIVITY



SAARC CHAMBER OF  
COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

APEX BUSINESS ORGANIZATION OF SAARC



## SPEAKERS

- Mr. Sebastian Saez,  
Lead Economist-GTRI South Asia,  
The World Bank
- Dasho Ugen Tsechup Dorji,  
Vice Chairman,  
Singye Group of Companies & Former  
President, SAARC CCI
- Mr. Amir Ramin,  
Director General,  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Afghanistan)
- Mr. Shaban Khalid,  
Director, Ittehid Steel, Pakistan



**The session looked into developing cooperation in infrastructure development and connecting the South Asia surface-road, rail, water and air transportation to ease movement of goods and people within the region. Addressing the session, the speakers said that the current modalities of infrastructure development in South Asia are complementary rather than competing. Connectivity remains one of the most important agendas of this region. This is more important for landlocked countries like Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan, and research has shown that the landlocked countries confront bigger challenges than rest of the world.**

The speakers said that we only talk about building transport corridors, but recent studies have shown that most profitable transport corridors are those that are built around economic corridors. That could be a game changer in the days to come.

The panelist were of view that the South Asia region still suffers from connectivity and infrastructure deficits. The need of hour is to adopt a forward-looking agenda to think beyond intra-regional connectivity and recognize the need for enabling inter-regional connectivity, such as linking South Asia with contiguous regions, including Central Asia, and beyond by all modes of connectivity. The session agreed that all the member countries of the SAARC region have to recognize the need for improving the state of connectivity both within their borders and

with other countries in the region. However they are yet to take advantage of the connectivity initiatives taken by multilateral bodies. Instead, they have been a victim of politics based on legacy issues that inhibit effective inter-state engagement. Persisting differences at the political level, coupled with huge imbalances in trade and investment, are often used by vested interests to cultivate negative stereotypes and strengthen misperceptions in the region.

Acknowledging the importance of infrastructure in the South Asian region the panel advocated free movement of people throughout South Asia. Focus should be on enhancing the efficiency of the administrative procedures regarding immigration and trade. Transfer of technology is an important factor which can assist in connectivity despite all hurdles.

Infrastructure problem is a vicious cycle and these infrastructure issues add more burden to economies. The session also implored the member states to develop maritime infrastructure too to promote both intra and inter-regional connectivity and trade and unleash the potential of the vast Indian Ocean region that hosts over 40 states and nearly 40 per cent of the world's population.

Concluding the session, the panelist, said that the intra-regional trade in South Asia has remained stagnant at 5%. The reason is lack of hard and soft infrastructure to connect business and traders across the region along with corrective efforts between the regions government, private sector, and donors to collaboratively and systematically address these infrastructural shortfalls. It was acknowledge that the Private public Partnership can be viable solution within the South Asia to deal with the infrastructure gap.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The session felt a dire need to improve the interoperability of customs electronic interfaces and harmonize the operating procedures of border crossing points and land customs stations.
- There is need to develop a network of multi-modal transport systems connecting and integrating the entire South Asia region.
- Improved infrastructure and connectivity also means better governance, which creates conducive environment for greater domestic and foreign investment and value chain.
- Broadening the political space and cultivating the constituencies needed to operationalize and sustain collaborative development strategies.

## MODERATOR

Ms. Mandakini Kaul,  
Senior Regional Cooperation  
Specialist, World Bank

## OPENING REMARKS BY

H.E. Mr. Peter Budd,  
Australia's Ambassador  
to Nepal



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## PLENARY SESSION 7

### STRENGTHENING CONNECTIVITY AND TRADE IN SOUTH ASIA: THE CASE FOR GENDER-RESPONSIVE LOGISTICS



SAARC CHAMBER OF  
COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

APEX BUSINESS ORGANIZATION OF SAARC



## SPEAKERS

- Ms. Selima Ahmad,  
President and Founder of Bangladesh  
Women Chamber of Commerce and  
Industry and Vice Chairperson of Nitol-  
Niloy Group (Bangladesh)
- Ms. Ayanthi Gurusinghe,  
Director, Karpos Consultant, Sri Lanka
- Dr. Mariyam Shakeela,  
Chair, SIMDI Group (Maldives)
- Ms. Dhashma Karunaratne,  
Chairperson, Women in Logistics &  
Transport (Sri Lanka)



**This session intended to analyze the role of gender-responsive logistics in trade facilitation. It is well known that South Asia is one of the least integrated sub-regions in the world, limiting trade and economic cooperation opportunities for both producers and consumers. It is perhaps less well known that women share of formal trade in South Asia is also extremely low when compared to other Asian sub regions. Facilitated by the World Bank. The session explored not only the challenges but also collaborative ways forward for faster and more equitable trade led economic growth across South Asia.**

Addressing the session, the speakers said that as the world dynamics are changing, politically, economically and technologically, women must be included in these advanced systems and must be key contributors as consumers, investors and policymakers. The regional cooperation and integration in SAARC is vital for an inclusive growth, sustainability, and stability.

The panel identified that the logistics and connectivity have been a major hindrance for women traders and entrepreneurs in South Asia. These challenges range from difficulties in acquiring business visas to handling excessive bureaucracy and red-tape in customs office. The custom clearance takes several days that increase the demurrage charge; this compels the already struggling women to pay excessive fines. Access to finance is the foremost challenge the women in South Asia face. Most investments, be it in education or business, are made for the male members of the family. This limits the women to

undertake a greater role in the society and the economy. Access to market is yet another area of challenge for the women of South Asia.

The speakers opined that despite being competent, women are unable to participate in international expos and forums because travelling alone is considered a taboo in the society. The final challenge women face is access to technology. Women disproportionately hold jobs related to technology and STEM sectors. Such restricted access to opportunities not only limits a woman's chance for economic equality, but also deprives them from a marketplace of much-needed talent, pathways for innovation, and financial returns.

To triumph these challenges, the speakers suggested that the countries need to increase women's financial inclusion by giving large corporate loans and grants. Also, policies that correct bias, whether in the workplace or within communities, should be implemented. Moreover, connectivity and technology access for women needs to be improved. Women must capitalize on the available e-commerce platform as it not only provides a global market at hand but also saves women the difficulty of travelling and attending expos. If the countries are able to mitigate these challenges, women can fully participate and prosper in the workforce and the economy.

Concluding the session the panel recommended that in order to overcome the gender challenges, gender specific objectives in the projects and programs, that are designed, need to be incorporated by developing women inclusive strategies and creating equal opportunities. Empowering women is good economics and not just a moral imperative. Companies and economies can make greater gains with proportionate women employee representation. Women empowerment is a game changer for economies to unleash their potential.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The private sector is the key driver of economic growth and women are to participate in generating business opportunities that will accelerate growth and reap financial and economic benefits. For this the private sector in South Asia must play a leading role.
- Develop and improve physical infrastructure keeping in mind women's concerns. This would include investing in safe and secure infrastructure facilities like separate toilets for women with regular water supply, separate waiting rooms for women and maintaining the access roads in good condition.
- Incentivize women's participation in cross border trade by providing a discounted rate for storage and warehousing facilities.
- Establish efficient and helpful banking and foreign exchange facilities on both sides of the border, preferably with female support staff.
- Incorporating gender specific objectives in projects and programs and enhance e-commerce participation business visas.

## MODERATOR

Ms. Sumnima Udas,  
CNN International  
Correspondent



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## PLENARY SESSION 8 WOMEN EMPOWERING SOUTH ASIA



SAARC CHAMBER OF  
COMMERCE & INDUSTRY  
APEX BUSINESS ORGANIZATION OF SAARC



## SPEAKERS

- Ms. Sushila Karki,  
Former Chief Justice,  
Supreme Court (Nepal)
- Ms. Rohina Siddique,  
Free Women Writers (Afghanistan)
- Dr. Mariyam Shakeela,  
Chair, SIMDI Group (Maldives)
- Mrs. Shabana Khan,  
President, LMKR (Pakistan)



**The economic growth and transformation are well co-related with the active involvement of Women in the economy. South Asia has a long history of women involvement in the economy and public life. The first executive head of any nation in the world was a South Asian. Women have assumed the position of executive chief of government in four largest economies South Asia. The businesses headed by women have been most innovative and contributing to the welfare of the people. This session specially focused on the contribution of women in the South Asian growth story.**

The panel identified that as the global economy strives to be technologically advanced, specifically the women need to be made familiar with technology. Therefore, education be it formal or informal is vital to the success of women. Moreover, support and supervision from the government and private sector are needed to resolve issues and to make the micro-segment of the economy a reality.

The speakers were of view that for women to be empowered, they need to have equal access to education and health care, as well as the freedom to start businesses. Women invest 80 percent of their incomes in their families and communities, and women-led local governments are both more honest and provide more public services. When we invest in women's education and give them the opportunity to access credit or start a small business, the economic, political, and social benefits ripple out far beyond the home.

The speakers were of view that women entrepreneurs across the world and especially in the South Asian region

are still struggling to take their rightful place in economic life. Even though more and more women are starting businesses globally, they still manage fewer businesses than men, and run businesses that are in less profitable sectors, that grow more slowly and are ultimately more likely to fail. These gender gaps impose real costs on society. When women do not participate equally in entrepreneurship, economies lose the benefits that would otherwise be provided by new products and services, additional revenues and new jobs; economies also lose out due to the long-term negative effects on workforce skills and education occurring when half of the potential pool of labour is not developed.

The panel recognized that the gender dimension is a critical element in the development and it cannot be overlooked. Exclusion of women has a high opportunity cost in the economy. It is a disruptive form of human capital disinvestment that stops women of their rights to realize their full potential

The session agreed that, to unleash the enormous potential in form of female work force, it is unavoidable for the SAARC member countries to make every possible arrangement to encourage continuous participation of women in every field, every walk of life at every possible stage for a developed and prosperous South Asia.

Concluding the session the speakers emphasized that the multifaceted and multileveled inclusive policies need to be enacted- starting from infancy, to school curricula- to bring girls/women at the forefront and change the underlying structure. The school curricula which is often gender biased, needs to be eliminated. Girls need to be provided opportunities where they can engage in active roles, in classrooms, and in schools, so that they become more creative and learn to think as leaders. Thus, they must be conditioned to play active roles.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Panel recommended that, if we want to empowered women of South Asia, they should have equal access to education and health care, as well as the freedom to start businesses. When we invest in women's education and give them the opportunity to access credit or start a small business, the economic, political, and social benefits ripple out far beyond the home.
- To unleash the enormous potential in form of female work force, it is inevitable for the SAARC member countries to make every possible arrangement to encourage continuous participation of women in every field, every walk of life at every possible stage for a developed and prosperous South Asia.
- The multifaceted and multileveled inclusive policies need to be enacted- starting from infancy, to school curricula- to bring girls/women at the forefront and change the underlying structure.



## MODERATOR

Mr. Kunda Dixit,  
Editor, Nepali Times

## INTRODUCTION & WELCOME BY

Mr. Padma Jyoti, Former  
President, SAARC CCI



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## PLENARY SESSION 9

### MINISTERIAL ROUND: SHARED PROSPERITY- UNLEASHING INVESTMENT IN SOUTH ASIA.



SAARC CHAMBER OF  
COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

APEX BUSINESS ORGANIZATION OF SAARC



## SPEAKERS

- Hon'ble Mr. Matrika Prasad Yadav,  
Minister of Industry,  
Commerce and Supply (Nepal)
- Hon'ble Mr. Humyoon Rasaw,  
Minister of Commerce and Industries  
(Afghanistan)
- Hon'ble Mr. Lyonpo Lekey Dorji,  
Minister of Economic Affairs (Bhutan)





**South Asia is one of the most dynamic regions in the world, with a population of 1.67 billion people and economic growth of 7.1 percent over the last decade, however, Intra-regional investment is smaller than 7.1 percent of the overall investment. The panel discussed ways to integrate the economies by enhancing mutual trade and investment in South Asia**

Addressing the session, the panel said that the theme of connectivity is most appropriate theme around which the entire region can prosper. Even though the region has not been succeeded in turning into a single market. Mutual suspicions and displaced fears have put brakes on many serious efforts. The region can be developed as one destination for investment. We used to think that investment follows trade but in today's world, trade follows investment. Investment is the surest means to cement and give a route to trade ties.

The panel deliberated upon the issues pertaining to connectivity and investment. The speakers said that most businessmen experience horrendous procedural hassles while attempting to do business across the border. So simplification and unification of procedures and paperwork is the need of the hour. Infrastructure such as transport and transit is another bottleneck hindering our trade. The governments need to make a priority to tackle this bottleneck.

It was discussed that the SAARC has not been able to fulfill its pledges in its charter and South Asia is the least integrated and deprived region of the world. Intra-SAARC trade only makes up 5% of the international trade of the region, a 7% of the investment in international investments is within or among SAARC countries. This is very worrisome for all of us. SAFTA and SATIS have not been as effective as they promised, and as expected. The panel identified that weak infrastructure, insufficient investment, border restriction and bureaucratic hassles are the main reason for hampering the process of economic integration and cooperation.

- Build and plan a pan-South-Asia infrastructure. Commitment to invest in infrastructure and trade facilitation is required to remove the physical barriers in South Asia.
- Remove the last mile and unspoken barriers in trade and investment in the region. This is the well know technical and NTBs including sensitive list. A range of domestic taxes that make investment in the region difficult must be eliminated.
- Uphold the spirit of economic liberalization. In recent years, there is a growth of economic nationalism, protectionism, and decreasing commitment to the multilateral trading system. These developments put at risk the trade as the region exports more to the world than within itself.
- SAARC energy cooperation is yet another important factor. While trade in goods remain very low, there is a large unrealized potential to increase trade and investment through trading of energy.
- Competitiveness needs to be built. Not all countries in the region are of the same size or have the same resource endowments and competencies. It is important that the asymmetry of size and capabilities are recognized to build competitiveness.

Concluding the session the panel said that if we believe in the role of the private sector as the engine of growth, we have to make sure it is a non-political engine. The best way to do this is conducting our own business in a more responsible way. It is not easy but a beginning must

In order to move ahead: the speaker shared that the South Asian region needs to focus on the following four points.

- Joint investment for connectivity
- Streamline border control and ease of doing business
- Encourage intra SAARC investment through CIPA
- Give priorities to upgrade regional highway railroads, waterways and air line connections.

It was acknowledged that the region has a huge potential for economic cooperation and integration. With shared history and culture, the location of the region itself, located between Souths, Central, and West Asia offers a great strategic advantage that can be leveraged to accelerate the growth of the region and consecutively the attainment of the goals of the association. Along with this line, some countries have already begun working on enhancing their connectivity on areas like energy. As a region that is home to world's largest concentration of poor, and as a region that aspires to attain prosperity, investment is a crucial element for the entire region. And without energy, there will be no investment.

The speaker accentuated that in order to move forward, the priority agenda for SAARC should be building a conducive environment in the region. The facts and figures of South Asia in terms of geography, demography, biodiversity, diversity, and of shared knowledge is commendable. It was agreed that the major issues that have held the regional politics and the economy hostage are the issue of security. A good way to deal with that is that the countries come together and work on joint projects.

Addressing the session the panel said the question lies, where South Asia stands in this tectonic shift that taking place in the real alignment of global economic order. To bring all the bilateral and regional commitments to a logical end, through this it can be shown that SAARC is serious about intra-regional trade for economic growth. The speakers expounded that from global perspective shared prosperity through trade and investment can be promoted as follows:

be made. As a region, unity is required to build on the strengths of trade and investment by complementing each other thereby intensifying the region's productive capacity. Only then the region will prosper.







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