



Reimagining
South Asia in 2030
15-16 October 2016
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Ninth South Asia Economic Summit (SAES IX)

Reimagining South Asia in 2030

Organised by
Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh

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www.saes9.cpd.org.bd

Concept Note

Background of the SAES Initiative

The South Asia Economic Summit (SAES) was conceived as a platform to discuss and debate on the issues perceived as critical to advancing the causes of deepening regional cooperation and integration in South Asia. Five leading think tanks of South Asia took the initiative in 2008 to organise the SAES. These were: Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh; Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS); Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), India; Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Pakistan; and South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE), Nepal. The founding members were entrusted with the responsibility of convening an annual Summit, on a rotating basis. The Summit would bring together key stakeholders of South Asia's integration and also experts and scholars from beyond the region, who worked on the issues of interest and concern to South Asia.

The idea that informed the initiative was to bring together, Davos style, key stakeholders from the academia, policy and private sectors to come up with innovative ideas and actionable agendas to address the emerging challenges in areas of economic development of the countries and socio-economic advancement of the people of South Asia. It was felt that there was a need for a deeper understanding of the problems and challenges confronting South Asia at a time of rapid changes within the region, and in view of a fast-evolving global scenario. SAES was to be a two-track learning opportunity: for researchers, to share results of evidence-based research, and what these could mean in terms of policy making in various critical areas of development and regional cooperation in South Asia; and for policymakers and non-state actors, to exchange views as regards major challenges in implementing the various policies and initiatives to deepen South Asian integration. By leveraging contributions from across a diverse range of disciplines and by drawing contributions from research and policy making communities, SAES was envisaged to emerge as an intellectual enterprise important in South Asia from which policymakers, researchers and non-state sectors would stand to gain. The wealth of knowledge produced through the SAES was also envisaged to feed into the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) with a view to making the process more effective, and decisions more evidence-based. In fact, SAARC Secretariat and SAARC Chamber have always shown keen interest in this annual event, and they have been partners in most of these Summits.

A look at Table 1 shows that various themes of past SAES conclaves have covered a broad spectrum of issues reflecting both emergent and emerging challenges facing South Asia at that particular time.

These selected themes had both immediate and near-term relevance as well as medium to long-term consequences. In 2008 the SAES I focused on issues related to establishment of free trade area in South Asia; in 2009 SAES II discussed issues of global financial and economic crises and what these meant for South Asia; in 2010 discussions at SAES III centred on climate change and its implications for South Asia; in 2011 in the backdrop of the global economic recovery SAES IV deliberations centred on how South Asian countries should calibrate their policies and reposition their economies in view of this; in 2012 discussions at SAES V took place around inclusiveness and sustainability as two core objectives of economic development in the South Asian context; in 2013 the theme of SAES VI was on identifying appropriate modalities to advance the cause of regional cooperation in South Asia in a way that would be both dynamic and inclusive; in 2014 the central theme of discussion at SAES VII was how best to design policies towards a 'South Asia Economic Union'; and in 2015, SAES VIII held in Islamabad, hosted by the SDPI (a departure from the tradition of rotation as SAWTEE was not able to host the event because of the devastating earthquake in Nepal), chose sustainable development in South Asia as its theme. As can be seen from the choice of the above-mentioned themes, successive SAES annual meets have strived to bring on board a wide range of issues to promote the cause of dynamic, inclusive and sustainable South Asian integration.

Table 1: A Brief Summary of Previous SAES Events

Events	Host, Place and Dates	Themes
First South Asia Economic Summit	IPS-Colombo: 28 July-3 August 2008	Economic Integration in South Asia: SAFTA and Beyond
Second South Asia Economic Summit	RIS-New Delhi: 10-12 December 2009	South Asia in the context of Global Financial Meltdown
Third South Asia Economic Summit	SAWTEE and SACEPS-Kathmandu: 17-19 December 2010	Regional Economic Integration, Climate Change and Food Security: Agenda for the Decade 2011-2020
Fourth South Asia Economic Summit	CPD-Dhaka: 22-23 October 2011	Global Recovery, New Risks and Sustainable Growth: Repositioning South Asia
Fifth South Asia Economic Summit	SDPI-Islamabad: 11-13 September 2012	Making Growth Inclusive and Sustainable in South Asia
Sixth South Asia Economic Summit	IPS-Colombo: 2-4 September 2013	Towards a Stronger, Dynamic & Inclusive South Asia
Seventh South Asia Economic Summit	RIS-New Delhi: 5-7 November 2014	Towards South Asia Economic Union
Eighth South Asia Economic Summit	SDPI-Islamabad: 7-8 December 2015	Regional Cooperation for Sustainable Development in South Asia

Each of the SAES meets has come up with a concrete set of recommendations based on the discussions at various dedicated sessions which saw evidence-based presentations, and lively exchange of opinions among leading scholars, policymakers, practitioners and representatives from non-government organisations (NGOs) and grassroots organisations. Recommendations originating from SAES events were shared with policymakers in SAARC countries and were also fed into the SAARC Summit process. Papers presented at SAES events, proceedings and outputs of successive SAES meets have come out as dedicated volumes and were posted on websites of participating institutions. These constitute a rich repository of knowledge, policy options and policy recommendations concerning regional integration in South Asia.

SAES outputs are widely quoted in professional and academic circles and policymakers take note of these. Indeed, several high-level policymakers, including parliamentarians, take part in SAES sessions in various capacities. Hence SAES recommendations, have served as valuable inputs to designing action agendas concerning many issues of importance to South Asian development. These included the idea of developing a regional power grid in South Asia, basin-wide river management in the region and moving from Free Trade Agreement (FTA) to a South Asian Economic Union and others. Thanks to this, over the years SAES events have evolved into one of the most prestigious and looked-forward-to events for scholars, experts, policymakers and development practitioners with interest in development and regional integration in South Asia.

Focus of SAES IX in Dhaka

In view of the discussions that have taken place at the preceding SAES events, SAES IX intends to take the discourse forward by (a) building on the earlier discussions held in previous SAES meets; (b) taking into cognisance the new challenges facing South Asia in view of the regional and global dynamics; (c) coming up with innovative ideas to address the emerging challenges in view of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and (d) identifying concrete measures to implement the ideas.

The overarching theme of SAES IX is “Reimagining South Asia in 2030”. Deliberations at SAES IX would focus on envisioning a South Asia which by 2030 will be an upper-middle income region with high GDP growth rate, a strong middle class, zero hardcore poverty and hunger, sustainable cities, and structurally transformed economies with a strong manufacturing sector. As is known, 2030 is also the year when the goals and targets set out in the SDGs are to be attained in full measure. The SDGs commit the global community of nations to work towards a future that will be inclusive, equitable and sustainable. The future of the SDGs will, to a large extent, hinge on how South Asia is able to tackle the manifold challenges that inform the pathways towards 2030. Thinkers, practitioners and policy stakeholders dealing with developmental challenges in implementation of the Agenda 2030 in South Asia will need to deploy their collective expertise and wisdom to identify the roadmap to realise the vision 2030 as envisaged under the SDGs. Think tanks involved in SAES initiatives are also actively contributing to the SDG debate through the *Southern Voice on Post-MDG International Development Goals*, a network of 49 think tanks across three continents - led by CPD, by way of undertaking policy-oriented research and disseminating the findings among the policymakers and stakeholders.

South Asia is also faced with new global challenges, such as Brexit. Since South Asia is linked with the economy of the UK through trade, investment and remittances, the UK’s decision to leave the European Union (EU) may have implications for the South Asian countries. South Asian least developed countries (LDCs) have been enjoying duty-free, quota-free market access for their products to the EU market under the Everything But Arms (EBA) initiative which helped these countries to increase their exports to the EU market significantly. Following Brexit, how trade relationship with UK will take shape, whether such privileges will be offered by the UK, and whether the UK economy will be strong enough to import from other developing countries within South Asia, are issues to be considered. How the UK will take investment decisions and whether it will make its immigration policy stricter for the South Asian citizens are matters of concern.

Therefore, business as usual will not do, and pathways dictated by past trends are unlikely to be effective. South Asia will need to think out of the box if its future is to be shaped in accordance with the high ambitions set out in the SDGs.

SAES IX in Dhaka will hopefully be an excellent platform to deliberate on some-of the key issues of interest and concern to South Asia in this context. Designated experts are invited to present keynote papers to kick-off the discussion at various sessions. Each session will have a number of guiding questions to set off the deliberations.

Proposed Sessions

Besides Inaugural and Closing Sessions, SAES IX envisages the following sessions:

- *Role of Political Leadership in South Asia – How will it look in 2030?*
- *Pathways to Sustainable Development by 2030 – What are the challenges for South Asia?*
- *Transforming South Asian Economy by 2030 – What do we want to achieve?*
- *Building an Inclusive, Just and Peaceful Society in South Asia - Who are the change agents?*

Participants

Invited guests from abroad will include participants from SAES partner institutions, and policymakers and experts from SAARC countries as well as experts invited by the co-organisers. They will be joined by high-level representatives from key stakeholder groups in Bangladesh including policymakers, experts, development practitioners and development partners.

Role of Partners

They will be knowledge partners in organising SAES IX. Partners can also be a part of SAES IX through resource commitments. They can also organise particular session(s) where they will sponsor participants of that session including participants' airfare, lodging, food and other related expenses.