

SOCIAL CHARTER

Re-affirming that the principal goal of SAARC is to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia, to improve their quality of life, to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development and to provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realize their full potential.

Recognising that the countries of South Asia have been linked by age-old cultural, social and historical traditions and that these have enriched the interaction of ideas, values, cultures and philosophies among the people and the States and that these commonalities constitute solid foundations for regional cooperation for addressing more effectively the economic and social needs of people.

Recalling that all Member States attach high importance to the imperative of social development and economic growth and that their national legislative, executive and administrative frameworks provide, in varying degrees, for the progressive realization of social and economic goals, with specific provisions, where appropriate, for the principles of equity, affirmative action and public interest.

Observing that regional cooperation in the social sector has received the focused attention of the Member States and that specific areas such as health, nutrition, food security, safe drinking water and sanitation, population activities, and child development and rights along with gender equality, participation of women in development, welfare of the elderly people, youth mobilization and human resources development continue to remain on the agenda of regional cooperation.

Noting that high level meetings convened since the inception of SAARC on the subjects of children, women, human resettlements, Sustainable developments, agriculture and food, poverty alleviation etc. have contributed immensely to the enrichment of the social agenda in the region and that several directives of the Heads of State or Government of SAARC Countries at their Summit meetings have imparted dynamism and urgency to adopting regional programmes to fully and effectively realize social goals.

Reiterating that the SAARC Charter and the, SAARC Conventions, respectively on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution, Regional Arrangements for the Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia and the SAARC Agreement on Food Security Reserve provide regional frameworks for addressing specific social issues, which require concerted and coordinated actions and strategies for the effective realization of their objectives.

Realizing that the health of the population of the countries of the region is closely interlinked and can be sustained only by putting in place coordinated surveillance mechanisms and prevention and management strategies.

Noting, in particular, that Heads of State or Government of SAARC Countries, at their Tenth Summit in Colombo in July 1998, re-affirmed the need to develop, beyond national plans of action, a regional dimension of cooperation in the social sector and that the Eleventh SAARC Summit in Kathmandu in January 2002 directed that a SAARC Social Charter be concluded as early as possible.

Convinced that it was timely to develop a regional instrument which consolidated the multifarious commitments of SAARC Member States in the social sector and provided a practical platform for concerted, coherent and complementary action in determining social priorities, improving the structure and content of social policies and programmes, ensuring greater efficiency in the utilization of national, regional and external resources and in enhancing the equity and sustainability of social programmes and the quality of living conditions of their beneficiaries.

The Member States of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation hereby agree to adopt this Charter:

Article I

General Provisions

- 1.** States Parties shall maintain a social policy and strategy in order to ensure an overall and balanced social development of their peoples. The salient features of individual social policy and programme shall be determined, taking into account the broader national development goals and specific historic and political contexts of each State Party.
- 2.** States Parties agree that the obligations under the Social Charter shall be respected, protected and fulfilled without reservation and that the enforcement thereof at the national level shall be continuously reviewed through agreed regional arrangements and mechanisms.
- 3.** States Parties shall establish a people-centered framework for social development to guide their work and in the future, to build a culture of cooperation and partnership and to respond to the immediate needs of those who are most affected by human distress. States Parties are determined to meet this challenge and promote social development throughout the region.

Article II

Principles, Goals and Objectives

- 1.** The provisions made herein shall complement the national processes of policymaking, policy-implementation and policy-evaluation, while providing broad parameters and principles for addressing common social issues and developing and implementing result-oriented programmes in specific social areas.
- 2.** In the light of the commitments made in this Charter, States Parties agree to:
 - Place people at the center of development and direct their economies to meet human needs more effectively;
 - Fulfill the responsibility towards present and future generations by ensuring equity among generations, and protecting the integrity and sustainable use of the environment;

- Recognize that, while social development is a national responsibility, its successful achievement requires the collective commitment and cooperation of the international community;
- Integrate economic, cultural and social policies so that they become mutually supportive, and acknowledge the interdependence of public and private spheres of activity;
- Recognize that the achievement of sustained social development requires sound, equitable and broad-based economic policies;
- Promote participatory governance, human dignity, social justice and solidarity at the national, regional and international levels;
- Ensure tolerance, non-violence, pluralism and non-discrimination in respect of diversity within and among societies;
- Promote the equitable distribution of income and greater access to resources through equity and equality of opportunity for all;
- Recognize the family as the basic unit of society, and acknowledge that it plays a key role in social development and as such should be strengthened, with attention to the rights, capabilities and responsibilities of its members including children, youth and the elderly;
- Affirm that while State, society, community and family have obligations towards children, these must be viewed in the context of inculcating in children intrinsic and attendant sense of duty and set of values directed towards preserving and strengthening the family, community, society and nation;
- Ensure that disadvantaged, marginalized and vulnerable persons and groups are included in social development, and that society acknowledges and responds to the consequences of disability by securing the legal rights of the individual and by making the physical and social environment accessible;
- Promote universal respect for and observance and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, in particular the right to development; promote the effective exercise of rights and the discharge of responsibilities in a balanced manner at all levels of society; promote gender equity; promote the welfare and interest of children and youth; promote social integration and strengthen civil society;
- Recognize the promotion of health as a regional objective and strive to enhance it by responding to urgent health issues and outbreak of any communicable disease in the region through sharing information with each other, imparting public health and curative skills to professionals in the region; and adopting a coordinated approach to health related issues in international fora;
- Support progress and protect people and communities whereby every member of society is enabled to satisfy basic human needs and to realize his or her personal dignity, safety and creativity;

- Recognize and support people with diverse cultures, beliefs and traditions in their pursuit of economic and social development with full respect for their identity, traditions, forms of social organization and cultural values;
- Underline the importance of transparent and accountable conduct of administration in public and private, national and international institutions;
- Recognize that empowering people, particularly women, to strengthen their own capacities is an important objective of development and its principal resource. Empowerment requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions and sharing the results equitably;
- Accept the universality of social development, and outline an effective approach to it, with a renewed call for international cooperation and partnership;
- Ensure that the elderly persons lead meaningful and fulfilling lives while enjoying all rights without discrimination and facilitate the creation of an environment in which they continue to utilize their knowledge, experience and skills;
- Recognize that information communication technology can help in fulfilling social development goals and emphasize the need to facilitate easy access to this technology;
- Strengthen policies and programmes that improve, broaden and ensure the participation of women in all spheres of political, economic, social and cultural life, as equal partners, and improve their access to all resources needed for the full enjoyment of their fundamental freedoms and other entitlements.

Article III

Poverty Alleviation

- 1.** States Parties affirm that highest priority shall be accorded to the alleviation of poverty in all South Asian Countries. Recognising that South Asia's poor could constitute a huge and potential resource, provided their basic needs are met and they are mobilized to create economic growth, States Parties reaffirm that the poor should be empowered and irreversibly linked to the mainstream of development. They also agree to take appropriate measures to create income-generating activities for the poor.
- 2.** Noting that a large number of the people remain below the poverty line, States Parties re-affirm their commitment to implement an assured nutritional standards approach towards the satisfaction of basic needs of the South Asian poor.
- 3.** Noting the vital importance of biotechnology for the long-term food security of developing countries as well as for medicinal purposes, States Parties resolve that cooperation should be extended to the exchange of expertise in genetic conservation and maintenance of germplasm banks. They stress the importance of the role of training facilities in this area and agree that cooperation in the cataloguing of genetic resources in different SAARC countries would be mutually beneficial.

4. States Parties agree that access to basic education, adequate housing, safe drinking water and sanitation, and primary health care should be guaranteed in legislation, executive and administrative provisions, in addition to ensuring of adequate standard of living, including adequate shelter, food and clothing.

5. States Parties underline the imperative for providing a better habitat to the people of South Asia as part of addressing the problems of the homeless. They agree that each country share the experiences gained in their efforts to provide shelter, and exchange expertise for effectively alleviating the problem.

Article IV

Health

1. States Parties re-affirm that they will strive to protect and promote the health of the population in the region. Recognizing that it is not possible to achieve good health in any country without addressing the problems of primary health issues and communicable diseases in the region, the States Parties agree to share information regarding the outbreak of any communicable disease among their populations.

2. Conscious that considerable expertise has been built up within the SAARC countries on disease prevention, management and treatment, States Parties affirm their willingness to share knowledge and expertise with other countries in the region.

3. Noting that the capacity for manufacture of drugs and other chemicals exists in different countries, States Parties agree to share such capacity and products when sought by any other State Party.

4. Realizing that health issues are related to livelihood and trade issues which are influenced by international agreements and conventions, the States Parties agree to hold prior consultation on such issues and to make an effort to arrive at a coordinated stand on issues that relate to the health of their population.

5. States Parties also agree to strive at adopting regional standards on drugs and pharmaceutical products.

Article V

Education, Human Resource Development and Youth Mobilization

1. Deeply conscious that education is the cutting edge in the struggle against poverty and the promotion of development, States Parties re-affirm the importance of attaining the target of providing free education to all children between the ages of 6 - 14 years. They agree to share their respective experiences and technical expertise to achieve this goal.

- 2.** States Parties agree that broad-based growth should create productive employment opportunities for all groups of people, including young people.
- 3.** States Parties agree to provide enhanced job opportunities for young people through increased investment in education and vocational training.
- 4.** States Parties agree to provide adequate employment opportunities and leisure time activities for youth to make them economically and socially productive.
- 5.** States Parties shall find ways and means to provide youth with access to education, create awareness on family planning, HIV/AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases, and risks of consumption of tobacco, alcohol and drugs.
- 6.** States Parties stress the idealism of youth must be harnessed for regional cooperative programmes. They further stress the imperative of the resurgence of South Asian consciousness in the youth of each country through participation in the development programmes and through greater understanding and appreciation of each other's country. The Organized Volunteers Programme under which volunteers from one country would be able to work in other countries in the social fields shall be revitalized.
- 7.** States Parties recognize that it is essential to promote increased cross-fertilization of ideas through greater interaction among students, scholars and academics in the SAARC countries. They express the resolve that a concerted programme of exchange of scholars among Member States should be strengthened.

Article VI

Promotion of the status of women

- 1.** States Parties reaffirm their belief that discrimination against women is incompatible with human rights and dignity and with the welfare of the family and society; that it prevents women realizing their social and economic potential and their participation on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the country, and is a serious obstacle to the full development of their personality and in their contribution to the social and economic development of their countries.
- 2.** States Parties agree that all appropriate measures shall be taken to educate public opinion and to direct national aspirations towards the eradication of prejudice and the abolition of customary and all other practices, which are based on discrimination against women. States Parties further declare that all forms of discrimination and violence against women are offences against human rights and dignity and that such offences must be prohibited through legislative, administrative and judicial actions.
- 3.** States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure to women on equal terms with men, an enabling environment for their effective participation in the local, regional and national development processes and for the enjoyment of their fundamental freedoms and legitimate entitlements.

4. States Parties also affirm the need to empower women through literacy and education recognizing the fact that such empowerment paves the way for faster economic and social development. They particularly stress the need to reduce, and eventually eliminate, the gender gap in literacy that currently exists in the SAARC nations, within a time-bound period.

5. States Parties re-affirm their commitment to effectively implement the SAARC Convention on Combating the Trafficking of Women and Children for Prostitution and to combat and suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of women, including through the cooperation of appropriate sections of the civil society.

6. States Parties are of the firm view that at the regional level, mechanisms and institutions, to promote the advancement of women as an integral part of mainstream political, economic, social and cultural development be established.

Article VII

Promotion of the Rights and Well-being of the Child

1. States Parties are convinced that the child, by reason of his or her physical and mental dependence, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth.

2. The child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.

3. States Parties shall protect the child against all forms of abuse and exploitation prejudicial to any aspects of the child's well-being.

4. States Parties shall take necessary actions to implement effectively the SAARC Convention on Regional Arrangements for the Promotion of Child Welfare and to combat and suppress all offences against the person, dignity and the life of the child.

5. States Parties are resolved that the child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him or her to develop its full potential physically, mentally, emotionally, morally, spiritually, socially and culturally in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity. The best interests and welfare of the child shall be the paramount consideration and the guiding principle in all matters involving his or her life.

6. States Parties agree to extend to the child all possible support from government, society and the community. The child shall be entitled to grow and develop in health with due protection. To this end, special services shall be provided for the child and its mother, including pre-natal, natal (especially delivery by trained birth attendant) and post-natal care, immunization, early childhood care, timely and appropriate nutrition, education and recreation. States Parties shall undertake specific steps to reduce low birth weight, malnutrition, anemia amongst women and children, infant, child and

maternal morbidity and mortality rates, through the inter-generational life cycle approach, increase education, literacy, and skill development amongst adolescents and youth, especially of girls and elimination of child/early marriage.

7. States Parties shall take effective measures for the rehabilitation and re-integration of children in conflict with the law.

8. State Parties shall take appropriate measures for the re-habilitation of street children, orphaned, displaced and abandoned children, and children affected by armed conflict.

9. States Parties pledge that a physically, mentally, emotionally or socially disadvantaged child shall be given the special treatment, education and care required by his or her particular condition.

10. States Parties shall ensure that a child of tender years shall not, save in exceptional circumstances, be separated from his or her mother and that society and the public authorities shall be required to extend particular care to children without a family and to those without adequate means of support, including where desirable, provision of State and other assistance towards his or her maintenance.

11. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislative, administrative, social and educational measures, to protect children from the illicit use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances as defined in the relevant international treaties, and to prevent the use of children in the illicit production and trafficking of such substances. In this respect, States Parties shall expedite the implementation of the SAARC Convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances at the national and regional levels.

Article VIII

Population Stabilisation

1. States Parties underscore the vital importance of enhanced cooperation in the social development and well-being of the people of South Asia. They agree that national programmes evolved through stakeholder partnership, with enhancement of allocation of requisite resources and well-coordinated regional programmes will contribute to a positive atmosphere for the development of a socially content, healthy and sustainable population in the region.

2. States Parties are of the view that population policies should provide for human-centered approach to population and development and aim towards human survival and wellbeing. In this regard, they affirm that national, local or provincial policies and strategies should aim to bring stabilization in the growth of population in each country, through voluntary sustainable family planning and contraceptive methods, which do not affect the health of women.

3. States Parties shall endeavour to inculcate a culture of self-contentment and regulation where unsustainable consumption and production patterns would have no place in the society and unsustainable population changes, internal migration resulting in

excessive population concentration, homelessness, increasing poverty, unemployment, growing insecurity and violence, environmental degradation and increased vulnerability to disasters would be carefully, diligently and effectively managed.

4. States Parties shall take action to ensure reproductive health, reduction of maternal and infant mortality rates as also provision of adequate facilities to enable an infant to enjoy the warmth of love and support of his/her parents.

5. States Parties also agree to set up a SAARC Network of Focal Institutions on population activities for facilitating the sharing of information, experiences and resources within the region.

Article IX

Drug de-addiction, Rehabilitation and Reintegration

1. States Parties agree that regional cooperation should be enhanced through exchange of information, sharing of national experiences and common programmes in the specific areas, which should receive the priority consideration of the appropriate mechanisms both at the national and regional levels.

2. States Parties identify for intensive cooperation, the strengthening of legal systems to enhance collaboration in terms of financial investigation; asset forfeiture; money laundering; countering criminal conspiracies and organized crime: mutual legal assistance; controlled deliveries; extradition; the updating of laws and other relevant structures to meet the obligations of the SAARC Convention and other related international obligations, and developing of measures to counter drug trafficking through exchange of information; intercountry cooperation; controlled deliveries; strengthened SDOMD; regional training; frequent meetings at both policy and operational levels; strengthening the enforcement capabilities in the SAARC countries; enhanced control of production and use of licit drugs, and precursors and their essential chemicals.

3. Keeping in view the complementarities between demand reduction activities and supply control programmes, States Parties agree that all aspects of demand reduction, supply control, de-addiction and rehabilitation should be addressed by regional mechanisms.

Article X

Implementation

1. The implementation of the Social Charter shall be facilitated by a National Coordination Committee or any appropriate national mechanism as may be decided in each country. Information on such mechanism will be exchanged between States Parties through the SAARC Secretariat. Appropriate SAARC bodies shall review the implementation of the Social Charter at the regional level.

2. Member States shall formulate a national plan of action or modify the existing one, if any, in order to operationalise the provisions of the Social Charter. This shall be done through a transparent and broad-based participatory process. Stakeholder approach shall also be followed in respect of implementation and evaluation of the programmes under National Plans of Action.

Article XI

Entry into force

The Social Charter shall come into force upon the signature thereof by all States Parties.

Article XII

Amendment

The Social Charter may be amended through agreement among all States Parties.

IN FAITH WHEREOF We Have Set Our Hands And Seals Hereunto.

DONE In ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN, On This The Fourth Day Of January Of The Year Two Thousand Four, In Nine Originals, In The English Language, All Texts Being Equally Authentic.

Begum Khaleda Zia
PRIME MINISTER OF THE
PEOPLE'S
REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH

Maumoon Abdul Gayoom
PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES

Jigmi Yoezer Thinley
PRIME MINISTER OF THE
KINGDOM OF BHUTAN

Surya Bahadur Thapa
PRIME MINISTER OF THE
HIS MAJESTY'S
GOVERNMENT OF NEPAL

Atal Behari Vajpayee
PRIME MINISTER OF THE
REPUBLIC OF INDIA

**Mir Zafarullah Khan
Jamali**
PRIME MINISTER OF THE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF
PAKISTAN

**Chandrika Bandaranaike
Kumaratunga**
PRESIDENT OF THE
DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST
REPUBLIC OF SRI LANKA