

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

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Introduction

Since its founding in 1985, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has been acting as the nodal intergovernmental agency to collaborate across the seven countries in South Asia—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Member states have developed cooperative agreements and linkages in the areas of agriculture and rural development; health and population activities; women, youth and children; environment and forestry; science, technology and meteorology; human resources development and transport. In these areas of development cooperation, SAARC has formed several Integrated Programmes of Action (IPA) to provide policy recommendations and coordination support to the initiatives and activities being undertaken by the member countries in cooperation with the SAARC Secretariat. Several high-level working groups have been formed in areas like biotechnology, intellectual property rights, tourism and energy.

In the field of ICT, South Asia as a region is witnessing a phenomenal growth in ICT infrastructure and ICT usage among the population. During the past five years (2000–05), countries have made tremendous progress in all sectors of information society development—connectivity, content, community, commerce, culture, capacity, cooperation and capital (Rao 2005). Overall, member countries have achieved significant progress in telecom connectivity, especially in the mobile phone segment. Against this backdrop of a burgeoning ICT penetration across the region, the role of SAARC as the leading coordinating mechanism among the governments of South Asian nations has been unremarkable. More specifically, SAARC has limited itself to initiating several dialogues among the ministers of

communication, telecommunications and IT, on the subject of developing a common ICT framework.

Regional cooperation in the ICT sector

SAARC started building development cooperation in the ICT sector during the Ninth SAARC Meeting held in May 1997 in Malé, the capital of Maldives. The Ninth SAARC Summit also identified the inadequate and poor communication infrastructure prevalent in member countries as one of the significant challenges to development cooperation across the region. The Summit recommended simplifying complex documentation procedure and use of transactional software to increase economic cooperation among the member nations.

The Malé Summit led to the First SAARC Communications Ministers' Conference in Colombo in May 1998. In that conference, the Ministers adopted a Plan of Action on Telecommunications to give impetus to the telecommunications sector in the region. The Plan of Action, which was adopted during the Second Meeting of the Communications Ministers held in Islamabad in June 2004, has the following goals and objectives:

1. to promote cooperation in the enhancement of telecommunication links and utilization of information technologies within the region;
2. to minimize disparities within and among Member States in the telecommunications field;

3. to harness telecommunication technology for the social and economic uplift of the region through infrastructure development by optimal sharing of available resources and enhanced cooperation in technology transfer, standardization and human resource development; and
4. to evolve a coordinated approach on issues of common concern in international telecommunications fora.

The Second Conference also adopted a common position on issues of concern to the region in the telecommunications sector to be presented at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Tunis in November 2005. The conference also recognized the need to develop a framework of knowledge sharing on ICT development across the region. The Working Group on Telecommunications and ICT was given the responsibility of developing ICT performance indicators. SAARC also identified the need to partner with two institutions—the SAARC Human Resource Development Centre, Islamabad and the Asia Pacific Telecommunity—to implement the proposed plan of action.

SAARC institutions working on ICT for development

SAARC works primarily through the participating government line ministries, such as the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Ministry of Information Technology or Ministry of Telecommunications. Apart from the SAARC Secretariat and relevant line Ministries in the national governments, several specialized organs within the SAARC Secretariat have been created to develop technical expertise, exchange human resources and foster research and learning in various areas of development in SAARC member countries. In 2004, SAARC reconstituted its High-Level Working Groups and Technical Committees. Thus the Working Group on ICT was formed in the SAARC Council of Ministers' Meeting in January 2004 in Pakistan.

In the last two decades SAARC has established several centres of excellence in the priority areas of development cooperation:

1. SAARC Agricultural Information Centre (SAIC), Dhaka
2. SAARC Meteorological Research Centre (SMRC), Dhaka
3. SAARC Tuberculosis Centre (STC), Kathmandu
4. SAARC Documentation Centre (SDC), New Delhi
5. SAARC Human Resources Development Centre (SHRDC), Islamabad
6. SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre, Maldives
7. SAARC Information Centre, Nepal
8. SAARC Energy Centre, Pakistan

SAIC, which was set up in Dhaka in 1988, was the first regional institution established. It links several national agricultural research institutions in South Asian countries to facilitate the exchange of technical information to strengthen agricultural research and development activities in the region. The main activities of SAIC include providing information services through publication of the Directory of Agricultural Institutions, Directory of Agricultural Scientists and Technologists and Agricultural Periodicals of the SAARC Countries. It completed a Bibliography of Women in Agriculture and a Bibliography of Agro-forestry in the SAARC Region. It also maintains databases on Fish Diseases and on Potato Cultivation in the SAARC Region. Recognizing the value of ICT use in its work and in agricultural development, SAIC organized a three-day workshop on 'Attempts and Successes of ICT Roadmap to Villages in the SAARC Countries' on 6–8 October 2004 (SAIC 2004).

Media content exchange

SAARC has developed several initiatives to promote exchanges of media content among member countries. Successive meetings by the Information and Communication Ministers of SAARC member countries led to the development of a common position for the development and exchange of media and content throughout the region, as reflected in the 'Dhaka Communiqué: A SAARC Plan of Action on Media and Information.' Adopted during the First Meeting of Information Ministers of SAARC countries held in Dhaka on 25–26 April 1998, the Plan of Action articulates a Comprehensive Strategy for Cooperation in the field of Media and Information with the following goals and objectives:

1. To actively encourage greater flow of information in the SAARC region on all issues of common concern to member countries for the promotion of peace and harmony in South Asia as well as sustained development of all peoples of the region;
2. To generate, disseminate and exchange information materials in support of SAARC and all SAARC initiatives in important areas, with special emphasis on trade and investment, social and cultural development, functional cooperation, environmental protection and human resource development;
3. To promote the optimal utilization of available resources and facilities in the SAARC region to strengthen cooperation

in the field of media and information and upgrade the professionalism of media persons through human resource development programmes and regional exchanges;

4. To initiate collective regional actions to enable member countries to fully benefit from the use of new technologies to ensure greater flow of information within the region and between South Asia and the outside world; and
5. To consistently work to project and promote a positive image of SAARC abroad as well as provide regular information on specific SAARC initiatives.

In order to achieve these objectives, Information Ministers agreed to implement the following:

1. Ensure the free flow of information, newspapers, periodicals, books and other publications.
2. Reduce postal and telecommunication rates for media transmission and information materials.
3. Increase cooperation among news agencies of SAARC countries.
4. Facilitate easier travel for media persons within the region.
5. Work towards the evolution of a SAARC-recognized Regional Media Forum.
6. Hold an annual conference of editors and working journalists from SAARC countries.
7. Create a Web page for exchange of news among news agencies of SAARC countries.
8. Enhance exchange of data through e-mail and the Internet.
9. Arrange regular exchange of TV and radio programmes.
10. Organize regular exchange and joint production of documentaries and films and hold periodic SAARC film festivals.
11. Arrange training for media persons of SAARC countries.
12. Include SAARC orientation modules in the syllabi of national media training institutes.
13. Improve the programmes under the SAARC Audio Visual Exchange (SAVE) Programme by making them more attractive and popular and increasing their frequency.
14. Hold annual meetings of heads of national TV and radio organizations to review the SAVE Programmes.
15. Evolve model guidelines on transnational satellite broadcasting in the region.
16. Examine the financial and technical feasibility of establishing a SAARC satellite.

17. Explore the feasibility of setting up a SAARC Information Centre with Media Production, Research and Training units, as well as a SAARC Media Development Fund.
18. Discourage negative projection of member countries by media in SAARC countries.

The Ministers agreed that an appropriate mechanism should be set up to oversee the implementation of the SAARC Plan of Action on Media and Information. For one, the SAARC Audio Visual Exchange (SAVE) Committee has been entrusted with the task of producing and implementing the SAVE Programme. The Committee conceptualized and promoted the SAARC Radio and TV Music Festival to promote regional culture. It has also agreed to air Radio and TV Music Festivals on a regular basis.

Conclusion and recommendations

Given its status as the nodal intergovernmental coordination institution for South Asian countries, SAARC's role as a catalyst for using ICTs in regional development cannot be over-emphasized. Through the SAARC Centres of Excellence and a better coordination mechanism through the governments of member countries, SAARC can help deepen the uses of ICTs in specific contexts. SAARC regional institutions, especially those dealing directly with issues related to the Millennium Development Goals, should increase their efforts to harness innovative applications of ICTs in their work, and encourage rapid exchange of knowledge and expertise within the region. SAARC should be able to work more closely with the private sector and civil society organizations that have excelled in this field to promote knowledge sharing and exchange of experts across South Asia.

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