

Challenges and Potential of SAARC in Comparison with ASEAN

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Abstract

The study compares the socioeconomic development of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to that of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). SAARC was established on December 8, 1985, as a result of former President Ziaur Rahman's efforts to promote the welfare of the people and mutual trust. ASEAN was founded in August 1967 with the goal of accelerating the region's economic growth, social progress, and cultural development while also promoting regional peace and stability. The SAARC countries share problems such as poverty and unemployment. SAARC countries have a GDP per capita four times that of ASEAN. A qualitative analysis based on secondary data pertaining to SAARC and ASEAN reveals that SAARC has not been more successful than ASEAN. National and international conflicts are common within SAARC. SAARC has 22% of the world's population and 3% of the world's economy, and there are enormous opportunities for economic growth and human development.

Keywords: ASEAN, Cooperation, Economic development, SAARC, Trust

Introduction

The study compares the socioeconomic development of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to that of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). SAARC was founded on December 8, 1985, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, to promote regional cooperation in peace, stability, sovereignty, and economic prosperity. According to Article I of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Charter, the association's major objectives are as follows: a) to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life; b) to contribute to mutual trust, understanding, and appreciation of one another's problems; and c) to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical, and scientific fields. The cold war caused many countries to realize the importance of cooperation and mutual respect for independence among similar socioeconomic countries worldwide. The success of The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) prompted such regional and geopolitical cooperation to begin. To

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some extent, ASEAN serves as a model for SAARC (Bhalla, 1990). The ASEAN Declaration was signed on August 8, 1967, in Bangkok, Thailand, by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Later, Brunei, Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia joined to expand the bloc. ASEAN was formed to ensure intra-regional and external political solidarity among member countries by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand (Acharya, 1998).

South Asia is home to over 1.5 billion people and a significant market for the global economy. It is remembered for its social, religious, geographical, and civilizational diversity throughout the world. This region is also abundant in natural resources. However, it has faced difficulties since its inception. Even free trade was unable to make the leap, and the free movement of people within SAARC has yet to be implemented. SAARC has yet to launch a major development project. SAARC could not make the same economic strides as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN countries have open borders and open trade, like the European Union. In terms of regional security and order, ASEAN has been more effective than SAARC (Sridharan, 2008, p. 3).

ASEAN experienced underdevelopment and long-term instability during its formation. ASEAN is now a global economic hub that exemplifies cooperation and stability. ASEAN has made significant economic progress, with intra-ASEAN trade increasing from 17.9% in 1980 to 26.9% (of total trade) in 2007 (Rahman, 2011). ASEAN has a net FDI flow of 16.7%, while SAARC has a flow of less than 4%. SAARC has a literacy rate of around 54%, while ASEAN had a rate of 94.9 in 2016 (ASEAN Statistics Highlights, 2018). SAARC is still striving for cooperation and development. Poverty and inequality are more pronounced in the region following Africa's Sub-Saharan region and Latin America.

The main goal of SAARC was to promote regionalism through cooperation. It has been linked to a variety of mid-level triangular relationships among states, civil society, and private companies (Soderbaum, 2003). Over three decades, SAARC has been questioned due to ineffectiveness, and it has been overshadowed by geopolitics, particularly between India and Pakistan. Nonetheless, due to its size, economy, and military might, India has been the focal point of SAARC. Whatever the challenges, cooperation is essential for economic development, as demonstrated by ASEAN, and thus the SAARC concept remains viable. Like the European Union (EU) or ASEAN, pragmatic economic regionalism has the potential to foster self-confidence and cooperation (Alagappa, 1995). Many people wonder why SAARC could not become more effective. Is SAARC still in need of cooperation? This paper uses secondary literature analysis to answer these questions. Secondary data was gathered from a variety of reliable sources, including published documents, books, and journal articles about SAARC and ASEAN.

Literature Review

According to Leifer (1983), ASEAN has evolved over time into a functioning diplomatic community while also increasing in international stature. Similarly, Bhalla (1990) contends that ASEAN, which is nearly two decades older than SAARC, is a valid model for SAARC, despite the two groups' different geopolitical settings and levels of development. Similarly, Acharya (1998) states that ASEAN has prioritized culture in terms of interaction and socialization, which has resulted in long-term attitudes and habits regarding conflict and peace management.

Furthermore, Sridharan (2008) compared SAARC and ASEAN and discovered that SAARC's role in preventing violent conflicts was much less settled or resolved, whereas ASEAN developed an incremental, consultative, and consensus-based approach that resulted in a more stable regional order. This is not to say that the region is without conflict. He contends that regional cooperation in SAARC is at an early stage in South Asia. Majid (2011) compared SAARC and ASEAN and concluded that SAARC has a long way to go before becoming an effective regional cooperation organization. He believes that SAARC's unique geopolitical environment and lack of operational mechanisms are impeding meaningful regional integration progress. Despite cultural differences and differences in political and governmental systems, ASEAN is a model of regional cooperation. He mentions that ASEAN and this organization formed a partnership for mutually beneficial cooperation in economic, political, and security areas. Sahasrabudde (2010) conducted a comparative study of SAARC and ASEAN and discovered that SAARC has had no effect on the situation, whereas ASEAN has played an important role in establishing a security community. ASEAN prioritized economic development. He claims that SAARC has had no impact on the regional environment, has not contributed to the formation of a security community.

ASEAN has made significant economic progress, with intra-ASEAN trade increasing from 17.9% in 1980 to 26.9% (of total trade) in 2007 (Rahman, 2011). The ability of ASEAN to create a region free of armed conflict arguably resulted in a stable environment. There are conflicting threat perceptions in South Asia. However, there have been some positive developments. According to Karim (2019), ASEAN nations have become more integrated through increased intraregional trade and commerce as well as connectivity, whereas SAARC countries have tended to be hostile. With the execution of SAARC Preferential Trading Agreements, SAARC has made some progress toward its stated goal of enhancing trade and investment (SAPTA). Singh (2019) emphasizes that the main challenge for SAARC countries is rural development. Because more than one billion SAARC citizens live in rural areas, there is an urgent need to improve rural life conditions through improved physical connectivity. At the 13th summit in Dhaka in November 2005, Indian Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh emphasized connectivity. Greater understanding and appreciation of each country's

problems is required, as is the acceleration of economic growth, the enhancement of self-reliance, and the promotion of South Asia's welfare.

Major Socioeconomic indicators of SAARC and ASEAN

Area and Population: SAARC countries account for approximately 3% of the global land area. It covers roughly one-third (22%) of the global population (UN, 2020). India has the largest population in SAARC, accounting for 74% of the total SAARC population. India alone accounts for approximately 17% of the total world population. Bhutan, on the other hand, is small, and the Maldives has a small population, accounting for only 0.03% of the total SAARC population. Figure 1 shows that Pakistan and Bangladesh account for 12% and 9% of the total SAARC population, respectively, after India. Table 1 also shows that, except for Bhutan, the population density in the region is higher than the average (25 people per square km).

Table1: Size in terms of area and population of SAARC countries, 2019

Countries	Areas (Sq. km)	Population	Population density
Afghanistan	652000.00	38,041,754	60
Bangladesh	147570.00	163,046,161	1265
Bhutan	38394.00	770,465	20
India	3287263.00	1,366,417,754	464
Maldives	297.80	539,352	1802
Nepal	148181.00	28,608,710	203
Pakistan	881913.00	216,565,318	287
Sri Lanka	65610.00	21,323,733	341

Source: UN, (2020)

There is also a significant disparity in population growth rates. The majority of SAARC countries have population growth rates ranging between 1 and 1.5%, with Afghanistan having the highest (2.4%), followed by Pakistan and the Maldives (2%), all of which are higher than the average SAARC growth rate (1.25%) (see Figure 1).

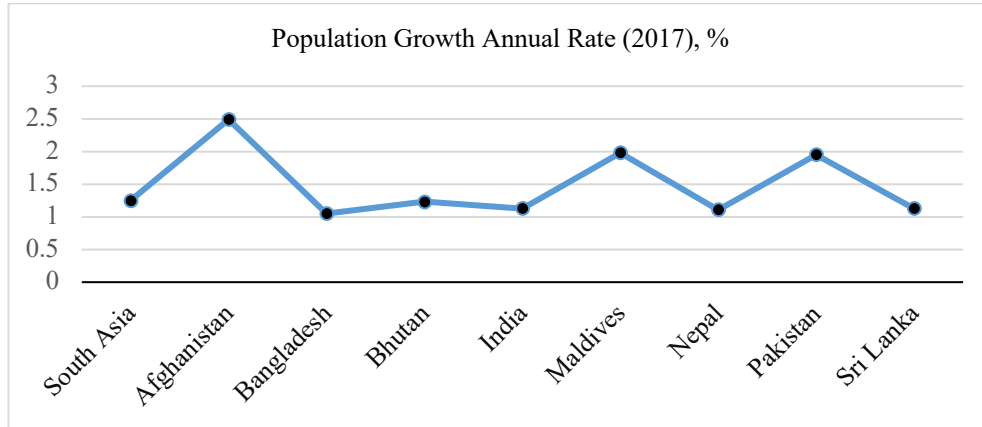


Figure 1: Population growth annual rate, %. Source: SAARCCChamber, 2020

Rural-Urban Population

The majority of the population in SAARC lives in rural areas. About 82% of people in Sri Lanka live in rural areas implying that society is agrarian, with agriculture being the primary source of income. Bhutan, on the other hand, has the highest proportion of urban residents (40.17%), while Sri Lanka has the lowest (18.38%) (Figure 2). The SAARC countries have recently been focusing on urbanization, and rural-to-urban migration is common.

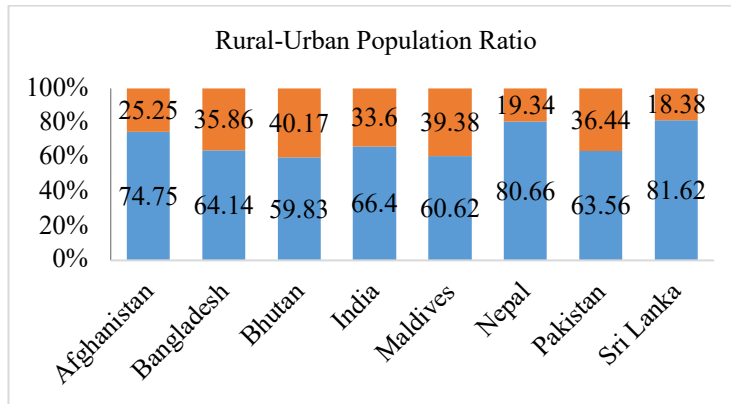


Figure 2: Rural-urban population ratio in SAARC countries in 2019, %

Penetration Population

The Internet is a symbol of progress because it connects people to the market. Mobile penetration in SAARC countries has contributed to positive social changes, and

increasing mobile penetration will lead to socioeconomic development in any country. Maldives has the highest penetration population (70%) in the country, while Afghanistan has the lowest (20%) (Figure 3). India is the world's second-largest online market, trailing only China, with approximately 560 million internet users.

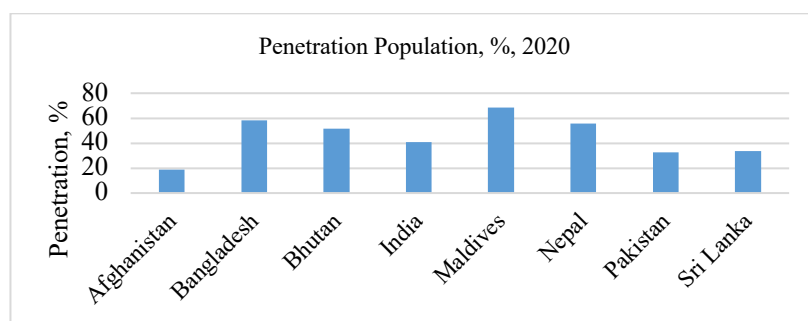


Figure 3: Penetration population in SAARC

Human Development Index

The Human Development Index (HDI) measures life expectancy, education, and per capita income in a country. Sri Lanka has the highest HDI value (0.78) and is ranked 71st out of 189 countries, followed by the Maldives (0.72) and India (0.647). Afghanistan has the world's lowest HDI ranking, standing at 170 out of 189. There is a significant disparity in GNP per capita, with the Maldives ranking high (12549) and Afghanistan ranking low (1746) (Table 2).

Table 2: Human Development Index in SAARC countries

Countries	HDI World Ranking	HDI Value	Life Expectancy of birth (years), SDG 3	Mean years of Schooling, SDG 4.6	GNI per capita (PPP \$), SDG 8.5
Afghanistan	170	0.5	64.5	3.9	1746
Bangladesh	135	0.61	72.3	6.1	4057
Bhutan	134	0.617	71.5	3.1	8609
India	129	0.647	69.4	6.8	6829
Maldives	104	0.72	78.6	6.8	12549
Nepal	147	0.58	70.5	4.9	2748
Pakistan	152	0.56	67.1	5.2	5190
Sri Lanka	71	0.78	76.8	11.1	11611

Source: UNDP, 2019

In the context of Nepal, the overall HDI value is improving; it was 0.378 (in 1990), representing a low quartile, and it now stands at 0.579 (in 2018), representing a lower human development category, ranking 147 out of 189 countries (Chaudhary, 2020). Nepal ranks 147th out of 189 countries; life expectancy is higher than the South Asian average, but the average year of schooling is lower. Similarly, Nepal has a much lower GNP per capita in South Asia.

GDP and Economy

India's GDP is massive, accounting for more than two-thirds of regional GDP by value, while Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan, and the Maldives account for less than 1%. India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have the largest economies, accounting for 9.07%, 8.32%, and 8.32% of regional GDP, respectively. Table 3 shows that GDP per capita varies greatly within SAARC. The Maldives has the highest GDP per capita (10332 USD), while Afghanistan has the lowest (528 US Dollars). Sri Lanka and Bhutan come in second and third place, respectively. Similarly, Singapore has the highest per capita income in ASEAN, at 64581.9 US dollars, while Cambodia has the lowest (1510.3 US dollars). Malaysia and Brunei, on the other hand, have more than 10000.00 US dollars. ASEAN has a per capita income that is more than four times that of SAARC.

Table 3: Annual GDP and GDP per capita of SAARC and ASEAN

Countries	Annual GDP (M \$)	GDP per capita, \$
SAARC countries		3097.75
Afghanistan	19630	528
Bangladesh	288424	1788
Bhutan	2582	3423
India	2718732	2010
Maldives	5328	10332
Nepal	29040	1034
Pakistan	314588	1565
Sri Lanka	88901	4102
ASEAN countries		12979.82
Brunei	16,250	31628.3
Cambodia	28,330	1510.3
Indonesia	1,289,429	3893.6
Laos	18,464	2542.5
Malaysia	434,059	11373.2
Myanmar	59,530	1326
Philippines	401,662	3102.7
Singapore	423,632	64581.9
Thailand	534,758	7273.1
Viet Nam	413,808	2566.6

Source: World Bank, 2018

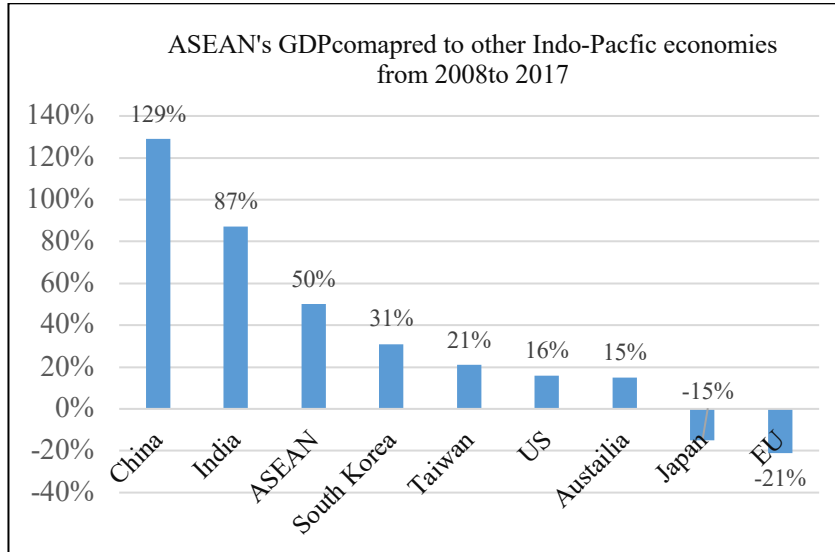


Figure 4: ASEAN GDP

Source: International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook (October 2018), 2017 data. *Real GDP growth was calculated in constant US\$ using World Bank methodology. For further information on methodology, please visit AsiaMattersfrAmerica.org/sources-and-methodology

Figure 4 reveals that China represents 129% of GDP, ranking first, followed by India with 87% and ASEAN (35%). It indicates that Asia-pacific is on the path of fast-growing developing countries. Table 4 shows that SAARC has the lowest foreign direct investment (FDI) in comparison to ASEAN. ASEAN received more than double the amount of FDI received by SAARC countries. India received 87.8% of total FDI inflows in SAARC, followed by Pakistan (5.3%), Bangladesh (3.6%), and Sri Lanka (2%). Other SAARC countries received less than 1% of total FDI inflows. Similarly, Singapore received a high FDI inflow, accounting for 50% of ASEAN's total, followed by Indonesia (14.7%), Vietnam (9.5%), and Malaysia (9.1%). At the same time, FDI plays a critical role in achieving the country's economic development.

Table 4: FDI Inflow in SAARC and ASEAN

Countries	FDI Inflow	FDI Share (%)	FDI Ranking
SAARC			
Afghanistan	786.3	0.19	6
Bangladesh	14999	3.64	3
Bhutan	248.9	0.06	8
India	361782	87.81	1
Maldives	3173.5	0.77	5
Nepal	770.7	0.19	7
Pakistan	21926	5.32	2

Sri Lanka	8305.6	2.02	4
ASEAN			
Brunei	4050.3	0.39	10
Cambodia	17810.7	1.74	8
Indonesia	150599.2	14.74	2
Laos	5367.8	0.53	9
Malaysia	93075.6	9.11	4
Myanmar	20599.1	2.02	7
Philippines	37776.3	3.69	6
Singapore	520765.4	50.97	1
Thailand	74106.2	7.25	5
Viet Nam	97666	9.56	3

Source: UNCTAD Start Database

Poverty, Inequality, Unemployment Rate

Over three decades, SAARC's poverty headcount ratio at \$1.90 per day (2011 PPP) (% of the population) has fallen from 47.4% in 1990 to 16.1% in 2013. However, there is still a significant gap. Despite its GDP dominance, India has more than 20% of the world's poorest people, followed by Nepal and Bangladesh. Nonetheless, India has made significant progress in reducing absolute poverty since 2000. Between FY2011/12 and 2015, poverty at the international poverty line (2011 PPP \$1.90 per person per day) fell from 21.6 to an estimated 13.4 percent. More than 90 million people escaped extreme poverty and improved their living standards during this period, thanks to robust economic growth (World Bank, 2020). Sri Lanka, on the other hand, is well below the poverty line. Sri Lanka's international poverty rate for upper-middle-income countries is higher, at \$5.50 per day per person (Figure 5). Bhutan has made significant strides in recent years to reduce poverty and raise living standards.

Figure 5 shows that there is also a significant disparity in the unemployment rate (as a percentage of the total labour force). Afghanistan has the highest unemployment rate at 8.84% (of the total labour force), while Bangladesh and Nepal have unemployment rates that are three times lower than Afghanistan. The remaining countries are in the 4 to 5 range.



Figure 5: Unemployment rate (% of the total labour force), World Bank, 2020

Discussion

Despite recent progress in economic and infrastructure development, SAARC has a high unemployment rate. However, India places a high value on infrastructure development. According to the 2017 Economic Complexity Index (<https://oec.world/en/profile/country/bgd/>), India is the world's 17th largest export economy, followed by Bangladesh (54th), Pakistan (68th), and Sri Lanka (70th) (79th). Bhutan is at the bottom of the list, ranking 176th. Similarly, Nepal, a tiny landlocked country, has made some progress in social development over the last decade but is still lacking in infrastructure development. In SAARC, Sri Lanka has the highest human development index, followed by the Maldives. Surprisingly, Bhutan achieved higher GDP per capita income in the region by developing hydropower and adopting the concept of happiness as a global development indicator. Overall, SAARC has a lower GDP per capita than ASEAN, with a fourfold difference.

Sociocultural view: For centuries, SAARC countries have had strong cultural and economic ties. Most religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, originated on this continent. Islam is the dominant religion in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and the Maldives. Christianity has also taken shape in SAARC through its integration into local culture. Political reasons occasionally lead to communal violence. Despite vast religious differences, coexistence and cooperation are remarkable. Religious values are deeply embedded in society. According to Adams (2001), the impact of culture on economic development in SAARC has piqued scholarly interest. Beyond Protestantism,

according to Max Weber, "ethics" are incompatible with the new economic pattern. If the development proceeds as planned, such a viewpoint is likely to change soon.

Socioeconomic gap and urbanization and population: There is a widening socioeconomic divide and pervasive poverty throughout SAARC countries. Agriculture and livestock are common occupations for most people; however, subsistence agriculture has largely dominated. For decades, urbanization has been rapidly increasing. Rural-urban migration is also common. Poor health and sanitation, as well as infrastructure, are major concerns. Messy and hidden urbanization is symptomatic of a failure to adequately address congestion caused by urban population pressure (Ellis and Robers, 2016:1). Population growth and density appear to be serious issue for many SAARC countries.

Connectivity and free trade: It has been challenging to implement the idea of connectedness and free trade in SAARC due to security concerns. The free trade deal for motor vehicles was rejected in November 2016 by the National Council (NC), Bhutan's upper house of parliament. It was hoped that the agreement would usher in a new era of regional integration and increased cooperation. The formation of BIMSTEC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand) implies, to some extent, the failure of SAARC. According to Bhattacharjee (January 2018), the failure of SAARC to foster cooperation in South Asia has pushed regional players to seek an alternative; BIMSTEC, a grouping of nations in the Bay of Bengal region, is widely regarded as a viable option. BIMSTEC aims to strengthen economic and technical cooperation among South Asian and Southeast Asian countries.

Poverty reduction, infrastructure development (roads, telecommunications, primary health, and education), and e-commerce are necessary for connectivity. It should not be forgotten that ASEAN implemented free mobility after extensive policy reforms. Bilateral efforts have proven to be more effective than SAARC's regional basis. For example, the Indo-Sri Lankan and Indo-Nepal Free Trade Agreements are succeeding where SAARC's free trade could not.

Conflict resolution: SAARC as a regionalism has been problematic from the start because South Asia has been plagued by ongoing conflicts both at the interstate and domestic levels (Mukherjee, 2014). However, the SAARC has failed to become a platform for conflict resolution. Internal conflicts have afflicted all countries to varying degrees. There is a high level of animosity between India and Pakistan. The main interstate conflict in South Asia is between India and Pakistan—two nuclear powers. Many academics believe that SAARC activities have cast a shadow over the border conflict between India and Pakistan. In this case, mediation is critical, but SAARC has been failing in this regard. SAARC has failed to pursue diplomatic values in the same way that ASEAN has evolved into a functioning diplomatic community while growing in international stature (Leifer, 1983:106). ASEAN members have not used military

force to settle inter-state disputes since the organization's inception. However, Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya and ethnic conflicts in Indonesia must not be overlooked (Hamal, 2014).

Challenges and Implications

Poverty, unemployment, population growth, and inequality are major issues in the SAARC region. These factors are to blame for creating an unfavourable environment for investment and free mobility of people within SAARC countries. While the SAARC region's economy has shown signs of improvement in recent years, the region still struggles with issues related to infrastructure development and technology adoption. In rural areas, illiteracy and superstitions are widespread. According to Bista (1991), fatalism is a factor that has hampered development in many SAARC countries. Ordinary people still do not have access to high-quality education and healthcare. Except for Bhutan and the Maldives, high population growth is a major issue. Furthermore, the flow of FDI in SAARC is low due to sociocultural complexity, security, tax policy, and bureaucratic barriers.

Unemployment in the region is high, posing a significant challenge as well as social inequality. Slums and unplanned urbanization are also on the rise in many SAARC countries. Urbanization is one indicator of development in and of itself, but it appears to be problematic in SAARC. In SAARC countries where patriarchy reigns, the gender gap is wide. Religious fundamentalism and extremism are emerging as new challenges for the region. Only economic development and modernization can reduce extremism and superstition. Malaysia and Indonesia, both Muslim-majority countries, can be used as examples.

Unresolved colonial tensions, ambiguous or contested border demarcations, the historically porous nature of border regions, competition for natural resources, and the "less-" or "un-governed" nature of many such areas all contribute to the identification of border regions as sites of latent conflict (Avis, 2020). The border disputes between Bangladesh-India; Nepal-India; India-Pakistan remain unresolved. In order to harness a congenial relationship among the SAARC countries, border disputes need to be resolved. According to the 1950 India-Nepal Peace Treaty, Nepal and India have an open border that is currently burdening both countries. Sometimes an open border with no clear demarcation in many places causes problems in both countries. The passport may not be appropriate, but a digital identity card can be used to track people's movements, which may aid in the fight against crime and trafficking.

India's aversion to the concept of free movement appears to be motivated by terrorism and security concerns. The development of international border areas such as India-Nepal, India-Bhutan, and India-Bangladesh appeared to have been influenced by Nehru's viewpoint; the international border touching with India was viewed as a buffer

zone, particularly after the Indo-China war, and thus border areas were not developed for security reasons after 1960. The development of border areas is critical in order to reduce crime and smuggling on a large scale. Most of the crimes and smuggling have been observed in Nepal's border states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. The socioeconomic conditions in these border areas appear to be deplorable. Nepal must also abandon ultra-nationalists' conservative views on border development, as Nepal Tarai areas bordering Indian states have remained underdeveloped.

Furthermore, agriculture, climate change, infrastructure, security, investment, tourism, and other fields require SAARC's attention. All SAARC countries are working to eradicate poverty through economic development and technological modernization. More investment cooperation will be required for this. Only a pragmatic tax policy and a technology-based bureaucracy can ensure investment in SAARC countries. The main problem of SAARC is lacking 'of trust'. ASEAN has demonstrated that mutual respect for sovereignty must be a prerequisite for developing trust that leads to cooperation, which is considered essential for economic development. SAARC must learn from ASEAN's consultative and consensus-building approach, as well as pragmatic reforms that result in a stable regional order and, ultimately, economic development based on realism in international affairs. The general idea behind regionalism is to help reduce conflict between neighbours and facilitate and produce development cooperation, which has been the SAARC's shortcoming. Nonetheless, SAARC accounts for 3.8 percent of the global economy and 22% of the global population and thus has the potential and opportunity to grow faster than ASEAN.

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