

High-Level Political Forum 2022

Statement by Arjun Kumar Karki, on behalf of LDC Watch and South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE)

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Esteemed colleagues, as we gather here today at the High-Level Political Forum to talk about the Sustainable Development Goals, a big majority of the population in the Global South and the Least Developed Countries, is still living and working in very difficult circumstances. Access to quality medical services and quality education is very limited and they constantly face multiple crises in their lives where they are forced to live under gruelling circumstances. With the advent of COVID-19 and even before that, our countries face multiple crises of widespread and acute economic recession and climate crisis. These crises, we have come to find, are actually the burden of the poor, not that of the rich all over the globe.

In South Asia, particularly, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, girls face incredible hurdles to pursue their education, and across the region, they lack opportunities for finding meaningful employment. Today we are in a situation where more than 50 per cent of children live in learning poverty, unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10 and 12.5 million children at the primary level and 16.5 million children at the lower secondary level are out-of-school. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of children complete primary education without mastering the foundational skills of basic numeracy and literacy, let alone the 21st-century skills required for meaningful employment, personal well-being and active participation in society. In the South Asian countries, we have also had the highest youth population, around 30 percent, who are not in any form of education, employment or training. Since the outbreak in March 2020, school closures in South Asia have affected approximately 434 million learners. In addition, an estimated 22 million children from South Asia have missed out on early childhood education in their critical pre-school year as COVID-19 shut childcare and early education facilities.

Although there is some improvement in gender equality, where most of the LDCs have achieved gender parity in primary schools, the gender gap for tertiary education remains very wide. Coverage of social protection programmes in LDCs is very limited. Today, the majority of the LDCs are confronted by conflict, painful transition and instability, symptomatic of poverty, vulnerabilities and deprivation of basic rights. Disasters and diseases are becoming common and additional development challenges. People of LDCs require resilience in the face of multiple crises. But resilience should not be limited to only recover from these shocks and ability to bring oneself back to one's original situation of poverty in any adverse situation or shocks; resilience should encompass the capacity, not only to manage shocks or stresses, but move out of existing struggles.

The COVID-19 pandemic followed by an economic slowdown has hugely impacted the lives of billions of people. Workers, daily wage earners, hawkers, street vendors, and peasants in the LDCs have been facing the brunt of the privatisation of essential services and

informalisation of labours. According to the Oxfam Inequality Report 2021, the absence of universal health coverage has starkly and disproportionately affected marginalised groups at a time when socio-economic inequalities are growing because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Marginalised communities are also facing a disproportionate burden of out-of-pocket expenditure on health which is rising day by day.

Due to the privatisation of essential services, people's access to quality services has reduced. The government's investment in health and education is low. According to WHO, up to 5 billion people will be unable to access health care in 2030 if governments don't increase spending on primary health care. Countries must increase spending on primary health care by at least 1% of their GDP to turn around increasing health service gaps, which is crucial for the LDCs and LLDCs.

We demand free and fair access to the COVID-19 vaccine to the people of LDCs and LLDCs as huge resources have been invested by them to fight the pandemic taking away resource allocations for other social spendings such as those in education, trade, and productive capacities at stake. The rapid increase in the indebtedness after the onset of the pandemic demands immediate cancellation of LDC debt so that LDC governments can use those resources to strengthen the capacity for quality basic services, trade, production, preparedness and other urgent state responsibilities.

However, the Doha Programme of Action (DPoA) only encouraged a voluntary transfer of technology to make some developing and LDCs capable of producing life-saving vaccines such as the COVID-19 vaccine (para 64). For encouraging research and innovation, we should not compromise with the lives of people (para 166 of DPoA). The TRIPS waiver on the vaccines, therapeutics and related medical products should be supported by all governments to ensure that everyone is safe. No one is safe until everyone is safe. Therefore, to face this difficult time, we call for a genuinely people-centred development cooperation which advances meaningful policy approach and practices that works in the interest of general peoples with focus on the most marginalised and vulnerable communities.

Dear friends, almost seven years of the 15-year period of the implementation of SDGs has already passed where LDCs had the space to think about new development agendas, developing new policies and investing in new programmes. They were envisioned to challenge the conventional approach of developmental planning and implementation and explore new development pathways that are fairer and more sustainable than before. But, in this seven-year period, we have faced additional burdens and their capacities have hardly improved, and now find it very difficult to think outside the box and maintain the vision they had amidst the multiple crises facing them.

Now, more than ever, we need a paradigm shift in the way we approach today's persistent and complex development challenges. Instead of attempting to bring dramatic change, we need to focus on real people in real circumstances facing real problems and figure out a path of real change for our people. To achieve this, there needs to be a well-rounded effort, both social and technical, where the systemic problems need to be tackled considering the voices of the powerless and the poor. Failing to heed the painful lessons of the pandemic, international financial institutions as well as many governments in the Global North and South continue to pursue the same neoliberal agendas that have privileged the interests of

multinational corporations. Their policies have thus prioritized profits over people and the planet, and have caused the failure of public services that has led to more deaths and pandemic casualties.

Dear friends, we have a strong will to have a democratic system based on the tenets of modernism, but it is often marred by religious extremism, sectarian violence and military adventurism which is diminishing democratic participation, gender justice and economic opportunity. Due to deep-rooted religious beliefs and patriarchal traditions as reflected in the series of triennial South Asia Poverty and Vulnerability Reports produced by South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication, women are denied their fundamental rights in South Asia. Efforts to introduce positive changes are resisted by the ruling elite in many ways, often exploiting ignorance and taboo prevailing in the society. The rising religious fundamentalism in the region has further exacerbated the plights of women and girls preventing them to access their basic human rights and the right to live with dignity. This has become a major impediment to achieving gender equality in almost all countries of South Asia.

It is also equally critical to adopt tax and fiscal policies that truly respond to the needs of people and the planet, reduce unjust tax burdens on people, fairly tax the wealth of elites and corporations, and serve to reduce inequalities and enable the realisation of human rights and sustainable development. We need cooperation from the developed countries to stop illicit financial flows and fight for a more equitable distribution of taxing rights and build inclusive, transformative and sustainable economies that genuinely serve the needs, interests, and futures of people and the planet. To meet the goals and targets set out by the SDGs, it is imperative that we do not accept any global tax deal and other initiatives that reinforce inequalities in decision-making around global tax rules or serve only the interests of multinational corporations and a few elite countries. Considering the critical urgency of the situation, it is of vital importance to form a genuinely inclusive, democratic, and transparent intergovernmental tax body under the auspices of the United Nations.

Dear colleagues, as we deliberate upon the Sustainable Development Goals, we need to be mindful of the fact that we need to bring real change in the lives of the people of the LDCs and avoid getting trapped in bureaucratic debates around target-setting and monitoring. Equally important is the fact that LDCs should not only rely on developed countries as it can set a harmful precedent where they are increasingly dependent upon the rich countries and the International Financial Institutions for their own development. It is critical that LDCs should cooperate with each other and build strong South-South cooperation. In the midst of a global agenda, we need to share each other's learning, knowledge and leadership on how to adapt the agenda in the national context toward the path of sustainable development. We have been promised a lot of help from rich countries and despite all the promises around official development assistance (ODA), our demands such as adequate and fair climate finance, including loss and damage have not been delivered. The SDGs give us a unique opportunity to transform the lives of citizens all over the world. Governments, donors, development partners and the private sector have taken up the SDG mantra but we still need to develop targets and ways of monitoring progress that are inclusive of the voices of the South, including strong civil society participation from the LDCs. In any scenario, efforts to support the development of marginalised groups involve tackling inequality and redressing the imbalance of power amongst nations and regions.

What we should collectively aspire to, as envisioned when forming the SDGs, is indeed a universal commitment to a sustainable future amongst the community of all nations. While indeed the LDCs should adhere to an appropriate development model, this model need not replicate the unsustainable and often damaging model of the developed countries. LDCs are certainly capable of developing and following a different and sustainable pathway to development. We demand that developed world keep to their words and fulfil their duties and obligations to the rest of the world regarding Official Development Assistance (ODA), climate justice, vaccine equity, women's rights, and children's education, and not repeat the mere rhetoric.

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