A Background Note

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM on “Initiation of the South Asia Citizen’s Social Charter”

A. Background

Over the last several decades, almost all the South Asian countries made progress towards economic development. Poverty has been reduced, though not significantly. Despite the progress, social ills continue to plague these countries: inequality is on the rise, within the countries there are vast regional disparities, the women and the poor feel dis-empowered, the poor’s ability to access public goods continues to remain marginal and the incidence of serious governance abuses abound. For quite some time now, the civil society organizations in the region have shown great dexterity in addressing these difficult issues, mainly within the confines of their own national boundaries. In recent times, however, the national civil society organizations have come to recognize the importance of connecting and networking across the region in order to pursue the cause of social development and good governance within a shared perspective.

The South Asian Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS) is a recent initiative of some eminent social science professionals, former policymakers and civil society leaders who are all strong advocates of both South Asian cooperation as well as citizen-based social development initiatives in their respective countries. The headquarters of SACEPS is currently based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The organisation has focal points in all the member countries of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

To promote social development in the South Asian region, SACEPS, in collaboration with the Marga Institute based in Colombo and with technical support from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), is engaged in preparing a document termed as the South Asia Citizens’ Social Charter (SACSC). This document is expected to be adopted by civil society organizations as the framework document for future advocacy and dialoguing at the policy level with the South Asian governments as well as among civil society across South Asia.

At the initiative of the SACEPS Task Force on Social Development and supported by UNDESA, the first draft of the SACSC has already been discussed at a meeting held in Dhaka, Bangladesh during 12-14 December 2002. Among other eminent citizens of the region, the meeting was attended by the Nobel Laurete Prof. Amartya Sen who is also the International Advisor of SACEPS.

The recommendations of the Dhaka meeting have since been incorporated into the final draft of the Citizen’s Social Charter which would now be presented at the regional symposium in Colombo, Sri Lanka during February 25-27, 2003, for further discussion and adoption. The goal is to link this civil society document that would articulate the citizens’ perspectives to social development, with the inter-governmental process of the SAARC (South Asian Association Regional Cooperation). It is expected that as a follow
up to this interaction, SACEPS will aim to seek endorsement of its key elements of the citizens’ charter with that of the official SAARC social Charter. The eventual goal of the Colombo symposium is to ensure that the commitments incorporated in the Social Charter at the SAARC Summit are subsequently enforced on the ground at the country level and that the respective governments remain committed to and accountable for the implementation of the provisions of the Charter.

UNDESA has been collaborating with SACEPS to assist in the preparation of the SACSC document, provided inputs to the Colombo conference and assisted in the finalization of the draft SACSC document. It is hoped that this interaction between SACEPS and UNDESA will remain an on-going process which will extend beyond the Colombo symposium to support a continuing dialogue among the leading citizen’s, NGOs and other civil society organizations to advance the cause of social development in the South Asian region.

Upto 60 eminent participants from civil society organizations and national governments from around the region along with regional, and international agency representatives, have been invited to participate in the symposium. The Under Secretary General, Mr. Nitin Desai is also participating in the Colombo Symposium.

B. Objectives

The objective of the symposium is to advance the dialoguing and the networking process initiated by SACEPS and evolve strategies to strengthen partnerships and outline approaches for the practical implementation of the South Asian Citizens’ Social Charter. The meeting is designed to provide a forum for NGOs, CSOs and government officials to come together to identify obstacles and formulate ways to further contribute to social development both at the regional as well as at the country level.

C. Anticipated outputs and future activities

The expected outputs and follow-up activities to the symposium include:
- Technical papers on the initiation of SACSC process and on the social policies arising out of the Social Charter. These papers will also need to address the practical implications of linking policy formulation with implementation and will have to identify the obstacles encountered and lessons learned from such a process of civic activism.
- A draft Social Charter, along with detailed background country reports, have been prepared at the country level for 6 SAARC countries to be used as inputs for drafting the South Asian Citizen’s Social Charter. The Colombo symposium will eventually discuss and approve the draft of the charter as well as discuss concrete recommendations on the how to initiate and implement the provisions of the Charter.
- Sharpening of the focus of the technical work of the Division of Public Administration and Development Management/DESA on socio-economic governance issues in the South Asia Region.
- Organization of additional meetings and technical support missions to developing countries of the region to support this work
- Exchanging ideas of the civil society-based SACEPS type initiatives in other regions such as Africa, to help improve partnering between CSOs and governments for pro-people policy development and socio-economic upliftment of the citizens of the countries of the regions.

For further details, contact:
1. Prof. Rehman Sobhan  
   Executive Director  
   South Asian Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS)  
   Dhaka, BANGLADESH  
   Phone: 8802-9133199 (Office)  
   e-mail: rehman@citechco.net

2. M. Adil Khan  
   Chief,  
   Socio-economic Governance and Management Branch  
   UNDESA  
   Phone: 1-1212-963 6168  
   e-mail: khan4@un.org