

Introduction

History and Evolution of SAARC

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) comprises the seven countries of South Asia, i.e. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

It is an Association based on the consciousness that in an increasingly interdependent world, the objectives of peace, freedom, social justice and economic prosperity are best achieved in the South Asian region by fostering mutual understanding, good neighbourly relations and meaningful cooperation among the Member States which are bound by ties of history and culture.



The idea of regional cooperation in South Asia was first mooted in May 1980. After consultations, the Foreign Secretaries of the seven countries met for the first time in Colombo in April 1981. This was followed by a meeting of the Committee of the Whole in Colombo in August-September 1981, which identified five broad areas for regional cooperation.

The Foreign Ministers of South Asia, at their first meeting in New Delhi in August 1983, adopted the Declaration on South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) and formally launched the Integrated Programme of Action (IPA) initially in five agreed areas of cooperation namely, Agriculture; Rural Development; Telecommunications; Meteorology; and Health and Population Activities.

The Heads of State or Government at their First SAARC Summit held in Dhaka on 7-8 December 1985 adopted the Charter formally establishing the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

The objectives, principles and general provisions contained in the SAARC Charter are as follows:

Objectives

- To promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life;
- To accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realise their full potential;
- To promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia;
- To contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems;

- To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields;
- To strengthen cooperation with other developing countries;
- To strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interests; and
- To cooperate with international and regional organisations with similar aims and purposes.

Principles

- Cooperation within the framework of the Association is based on respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and mutual benefit;
- Such cooperation is to complement and not to substitute bilateral or multilateral cooperation; and
- Such cooperation should be consistent with bilateral and multilateral obligations of Member States.



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General Provisions

- Decisions at all levels in SAARC are to be taken on the basis of unanimity; and
- Bilateral and contentious issues are to be excluded from the deliberations of the Association.