

**COLOMBO STATEMENT
ON CHILDREN OF SOUTH ASIA**
(Colombo, 10 July 2009)

We, the Ministers, responsible for the matters related to children, of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Member States, from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, having assembled at the Fourth SAARC Ministerial Conference on Children in Colombo on 10 July 2009,

In light of the 1996 SAARC Rawalpindi Resolution on Children in South Asia, whereby the SAARC Ministers declared 2001-2010 as the Decade of the Rights of the Child and, *inter alia*, agreed to eliminate child labour, initiate and strengthen community based social support systems, reduce the Under-5 Child Mortality Rate, lessen the severe and moderate malnutrition and enable all children of primary school age to complete school;

Renewing our commitments to the SAARC Social Charter, the SAARC Convention on Regional Arrangements for the Promotion of Child Welfare, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Optional Protocols; SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution and the SAARC Framework for the Protection, Care and Support of Children Affected by HIV/AIDS; the SAARC Development Goals (SDGs) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs);

Recognising that despite putting in place comprehensive, innovative and forward-looking approaches, policies and programmes in the Member States regarding safety nets and social protection for the vulnerable, South Asia continues to face challenges in timely attainment of SDGs and MDGs and the realization of children's rights, exacerbated by conditions of disasters, climate change, conflicts, economic crisis and poverty;

Noting that South Asia is experiencing high levels of low birth-weight babies, underweight children, infant and maternal mortality; increasing child poverty and disparities affecting holistic development of children;

Noting that although the net school enrolment rate has increased, the number of out-of-school children is still high in most of the Member States, and challenges persist to improve retention, completion and quality education and learning experiences;

Further noting that unregistered births greatly hamper governments' efforts to provide a protective environment for children; and harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and children living without family care as a consequence of displacements, armed conflicts, child labour and trafficking in children further compound the problem;

In order to achieve our common goals and shared vision for the children of South Asia, we collectively resolve to urgently:

i. address child malnutrition in South Asia by *inter alia* initiating and expanding interventions against malnutrition before and during pregnancy; accelerating nutrition improvement interventions and ensuring regular nutritional monitoring of children and pregnant women;

ii. Improve water and sanitation by *inter alia* increasing access to safe drinking water, improved sanitation and hygiene, and empowering the community to scale-up community-based prevention and care interventions;

iii. Expand non-discriminatory access to free primary health and education services through provision of child-friendly education and quality health services; ensuring that education leads to employable skills and all children, including girl child and children with special needs, complete at least primary schooling; integrated management of childhood illnesses, including care, support and protection for children living with HIV/AIDS and prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV/AIDS;

iv. Enhance early childhood care and development by initiating inclusive child friendly, family focused services integrating parental support systems, ensuring social justice to

children with disabilities and their parents; and better psycho-social development and adjustment to formal school; and

v. Enhance and make effective child protection efforts by gradual introduction of compulsory and free registration of all births and marriages; eliminating the practice of child marriage; eradicating child labour through measures of social protection such as decent work or incentives for vulnerable families; and ensuring children living in or displaced by conflict are afforded care, counseling and support; and ensuring harshest possible punishment for perpetrators of violence against children and strengthening justice for children, rehabilitation, care and support systems for child victims of all forms of abuse and survivors of trafficking.

We further agree that an in-depth assessment of the progress made in the implementation of the SAARC Decade of the Rights of the Child (2001 – 2010) should be undertaken collating the lessons learnt, initiatives to scale up and recommendations for follow up and future course of action. In this regard, experience sharing and collaborations, especially to replicate and expand successful country-experiences and best practices within the Region, may be explored. SAARC processes should also undertake focused, result-oriented and time-bound regional/sub-regional projects, including through the Social Window of the SAARC Development Fund, to achieve the above.
