

CONCEPT NOTE

South Asia Labour Conference: Strengthening Regional Cooperation to Promote Decent Work in South Asia

Background

Over the past few decades, a fundamental paradigm shift has occurred across the world economy. Today national economies have become more closely integrated into an interdependent global economic system, and there is a growing appreciation for development of all aspects associated with human resource management. Global economy has not only created new opportunities, but has also thrown up new challenges to business managers. Development of human resource which has become critical to the success of organizations, regardless of their size,¹ is most significant of these challenges.

Labour Markets in South Asia Countries have a number of commonalities - which demands that the Region should come up with a common understanding and strategy to properly govern its labour market, enhance labour productivity and ensure provision of decent working conditions in line with international labour standards. These countries are endowed with large labour force – a sizeable portion of which migrates to other countries for jobs. They have mostly rural economies – dependent on agriculture, mostly small and unproductive landholdings, relatively higher rural to urban migration, growth of self-employment and shrinking wage-employments. The Region has slow growth of manufacturing sector with dominance of agro-based industries (textiles, leather etc). Generally women in all countries have started to compete with men for jobs but they need more exposure, skill and government support to get their due share in labour markets. Young population in these countries is also growing and catalyzing demands for jobs. All these countries, therefore, need to make investment in the growing young population to transform them into an engine of economic growth.

The development strategies of nations usually define their socioeconomic growth rates. These strategies mostly respond to the challenge of unemployment which results in social exclusion of large sections of the society. If manpower development is kept high on agenda then many other associated problems such as unemployment, urbanization, globalization and demographic shifts in population can also be addressed. Development strategies should inter-alia aim to scale up skills and improve access to education for both women and men. This could help countries move to a virtuous circle of higher labour productivity, more employment and income generation opportunities and sustainable socio-economic development.²

Significance of Labour Productivity in South Asia

South-Asia Region houses largest population in the world and is trying to control rising poverty, improve labour productivity and provide better work conditions to workers. The Region is witnessing a number of challenges to fast-paced development. Addressing these challenges requires an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual support. While regional countries may have competing interests in trade and commerce they have common interest in scaling up labour productivity and human resource development. Albeit some interventions (including those under umbrella of SAARC) have taken place, there is still room for more concrete joint efforts to optimize improvement in human

¹'Productivity and Human Resource Development in South Asia' by SAARC-HRD Centre

²Workshop Report on Development Strategies to Mitigate Employment Problems in South Asia 2012

resource. The Region also needs to learn from good practices from some of the successful economies in the neighborhood – including China and Turkey.

Some countries in the SAARC Region have shown improvement in their growth rates by investing in skills and technology, but others continue to experience stagnation in reducing unemployment, underemployment and social exclusion. These countries should come up with development strategies which inter-alia address employment problems, urbanization, globalization, and demographic shifts in population. These strategies need to give top priority to manpower development and provide unemployed with appropriate demand driven skills, enabling them to become productive and get decent employment. Governments of the SAARC Member States need to work with development partners and donors to address capacity constraints, generate productive and decent employment opportunities and ensure women's participation in wage employment to raise income and overcome poverty.

Recent Initiatives for Labour Productivity and Human Resource Development

In recent past some of the SAARC Countries have been awarded special packages to export their industrial goods to international markets (e.g. through Generalized System of Preferences). However, these packages require a strong compliance for labour and social standards. Regional cooperation and interventions can facilitate meeting these standards.

Among the recent initiatives at South Asia Region, the most prominent ones include compilation of research publications and workshops on labour productivity and human resource development by SAARC- Human Resource Development (HRD) Centre. These researches and workshops also cover Small & Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Vocational Training and Skill Development, Microfinance, Labour Market databases, Foreign Direct Investment, Human Trafficking and Youth Development. Besides, a SAARC Research Network (SARNET) has been established (based in New Delhi) which has initiated some interesting research interventions on labour market conditions in SAARC Region. A SAARC-level network of Trade Unions is also being established titled 'SAARC Trade Union Confederation (SARTUC)' and a process for a Regional platform for 'Employers' is also under consideration.

ILO and some other development agencies have also started regional initiatives on different dimensions of 'Decent work promotion' including 'Protection & Governance of Labour Migration'; thematic research on value chains and workers' vulnerability and improving working conditions.

South Asia Labour Conference to Promote Regional Cooperation to Improve Labour Market Governance

The Provincial Government of Punjab with the support of the Federal Government of Pakistan aims to enhance cooperation among South Asia Countries for joint initiatives to improve Labour Market Management and Labour Market Policies through convening a three day Ministerial level South Asia Labour Conference in Lahore which shall commence on 24th April and end on 26th April 2014. The Conference is being organized with the following objectives:-

- i. To identify common gaps in Labour Market Governance, Labour Productivity and compliance with International Labour Standards in South Asia Region;
- ii. To explore the possibility of creating joint Regional Strategies to improve Labour productivity and enhance human-competitiveness in the Region;
- iii. To explore opportunities to share and learn best Labour practices from participating countries.

- iv. To showcase initiatives of the Government of Punjab to improve Labour legislation in line with International Conventions particularly with respect to Gender, Child and Bonded Labour and , Occupation Safety.
- v. To provide a platform to other countries of the region to showcase their initiatives for promotion of Labour welfare.

The Conference would promote South Asia cooperation among Regional countries and would particularly be used to establish regional strategies in the following areas of Labour Market Management:

- i. Harmonization of Labour Laws and Policies in the Region in line with International Labour Standards (inclusive Labour market policies)
- ii. Creating better working conditions and enhancing Labour productivity and competitiveness
- iii. Strengthening Labour Market Information Systems and supporting evidence-based Labour Policy development in the Region
- iv. Strengthening Labour Migration and establishing common platform to negotiate better working conditions with host-countries (Gulf, Europe and American countries)
- v. Strengthening Occupational Safety & Health Management Systems
- vi. Strengthening Social Protection Systems for Workers
- vii. Protection of rights of vulnerable Labour groups(forced Labour, child Labour & women workers)

Expected Results

The conference will be designed to effectively achieve following results:

- i. An initial stocktaking of Labour market governance, Labour productivity situation and key challenges in enhancing Labour competitiveness
- ii. A commitment among SAARC Countries to promote social standards and compliance with International Labour Standards (ILS)
- iii. Tripartite thematic 'Working Groups' established under SAARC-HRD Centre to develop 'Regional Strategies' for improving Labour productivity and compliance with international standards

Conference Design

- i.** The three day Ministerial Level South Asia Labour Conference will be hosted in Lahore, will commence on 24th April and end on 26th April 2014.
- ii.** Chief Minister Punjab will inaugurate the Conference.
- iii.** Representatives of the concerned Ministries from the Federal Government and Labour Ministers and their administrative secretaries from all the federating units will be invited to participate in the Conference.
- iv.** Key Labour market stakeholders from SAARC Countries (Labour Ministers, Secretaries, Employers & Workers) will be invited to facilitate knowledge and experience sharing besides future planning. Apart from SAARC Countries dignitaries will also be invited from selected Countries including China and Turkey.
- v.** Tentative plan of the activities is annexed.
- vi.** An Industrial Exhibition will be organized to showcase SAARC/local products.
- vii.** Conference will be an event packed with technical deliberations, networking, social events and commitments for an agreed future way forward.

Expected Outcome

- i.** Informed understanding of regional Labour issues for development of regional strategies for betterment of workers.
- ii.** A joint statement of commitment by country delegates – identifying areas of common interest and mode of collaboration
- iii.** Announcement of a SAARC Labour Forum to be housed in SAARC- HRD Centre at Islamabad to facilitate regional cooperation on Labour issues.
- iv.** Work initiation on 'Regional Strategies' to promote Labour productivity and improve working conditions.
- v.** Agenda for the next South Asia Labour Conference