

**First Meeting of Heads of Statistical Organisations
of SAARC Member States**

(Kolkata, 26-27 May 2005)

Statement by H.E. Mr. Chenkyab Dorji, Secretary General, SAARC

Hon'ble Mr. Oscar Fernandes, Minister of State (Independent Charge), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India

H.E. Mr. P.S. Rana, Secretary, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India

Dr. R.C. Panda, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India

Dr. S.K. Nath, Additional Director General, Central Statistical Organisation, Government of India

Distinguished delegates and invitees,

At the outset I wish to thank the Government of India for hosting this important meeting and the warm hospitality that has been extended to all of us. The presence of the Hon'ble Minister in our midst is testimony to the importance that the Government of India attaches to the SAARC process. It is as a result of Government of India's initiative that cooperation in statistics has been inscribed on the agenda of SAARC. This is indeed timely in view of the deepening and widening of cooperation in SAARC.

2. The proposal for cooperation in statistics received the enthusiastic support of the Member States and the SAARC Council of Ministers approved it last year. The Committee on Economic Cooperation (CEC), at its meeting in November 2004, also welcomed the offer of India to host this meeting to examine the possibility of initiating cooperation in the field of statistics with a view to finalizing standard formats for exchange of statistical data in various economic and social fields.

3. The Twelfth Summit held in Islamabad in January 2004 witnessed the signing of, among others, the landmark Agreement on the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) which is to enter into force on 1 January 2006, just seven months from now. At the Summit, the SAARC Leaders called for maintaining the momentum and moving towards further broadening of economic cooperation. They reiterated their commitment made at the Eleventh Summit (Kathmandu, January 2002) for the creation of a South Asian Economic Union (SAEU).

4. The high level directives led to a quickening in the pace of economic cooperation with negotiations being undertaken on Draft Agreements covering Investment Promotion

and Protection, Setting up of a SAARC Arbitration Council, and, Cooperation in Tax and Customs Matters which are currently at advanced stages of finalisation. With a view to facilitating intra-regional trade, the SAARC Standing Group on Standards, Quality Control and Measurements has made important recommendations in the area of harmonization of standards, conformity assessment procedures, testing and metrology as well as accreditation. New bodies were also established to give special focus on areas such as biotechnology, energy, ICT and tourism.

5. Poverty Alleviation has been declared to be the overarching goal of SAARC activities and the Leaders at the Twelfth Summit decided to undertake regional projects in order to combat it. However, in order to tackle poverty at the regional level certain basic statistical parameters have to be agreed upon and it is important to have a profile of poverty in the region. The SAARC Secretariat was tasked by the Leaders at an earlier Summit with the preparation of a SAARC Regional Poverty Profile periodically. Two Profiles have been prepared by the Secretariat so far. We have embarked upon a third Profile with focus on productive employment for poverty reduction.

6. The Leaders at the Twelfth Summit also decided that SAARC Development Goals (SDGs) would be identified by the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA) which had been established earlier. The SDGs were to be identified in the areas of poverty alleviation, health, education and environment setting out a blueprint for the region for the next five years. The Commission identified the regional goals, which are expected to be considered by the Thirteenth Summit to be held in Dhaka. During the preparation of the two Regional Poverty Profiles and the identification of the Draft SDGs, the biggest challenge faced was the lack of readily available, credible and comparable data in the region.

7. The foregoing would have given an idea of the nature and extent of activities being undertaken by SAARC currently and the potential for future cooperation. It would be clear that without the solid foundation of basic statistical data, which is easily accessible and comparable, regional projects cannot be based on a sound footing. It is in this context that this First Meeting of the Heads of Statistical Organisations of Member States assumes critical importance. It would have to develop a road map for creating a database covering, in the initial stages, the key areas of cooperation identified in SAARC so as to facilitate the process of regional integration. We are indeed fortunate that the South Asian region is richly endowed in terms of human resources and has to its credit several internationally renowned statisticians. Today, we begin the process of harnessing these formidable resources in the field of statistics in the best interests of the region. I wish you all success in your endeavours.

8. In conclusion, I wish to once again thank the Government of India for hosting this important meeting and for the excellent arrangements made. Thank you.