

Address by Mr. P S Rana, Secretary, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India and Chairman of the meeting in the First Meeting of the Heads of the Statistical Organisations SAARC Member States held on 26th - 27th May 2005 at Kolkata.

It is indeed a memorable day for all of us. We are meeting for the first time to deliberate on the formation of a Forum for Statistical Cooperation under SAARC leadership. Statistics has played a major role in strengthening the official data system of all countries. No country can afford to ignore the importance of Statistics since this is the back bone of information system for developmental planning, policy analysis and advocacy.

With the introduction of globalisation, and new world trade regime, the statistical boundaries among various countries have collapsed. This phenomenon has opened the path of group action and regional cooperation for putting across regional issues, needs, and problems. Setting up SAARC itself is an outcome of such a process. Internationally, the United Nations Statistical Commission is deliberating and issuing guidelines on common concepts, definitions, classifications, methodologies, censuses, surveys, statistical quality and standards. These initiatives are generally dominated by some of the well organized regional groups in statistics. Be it Central Product Classification or housing and population censuses, the group approaches are having more or less overriding impact than individual country views. In all such international fora, these Groups are dominating. Since our region has many things in common, we should be in a position to pose our stand and views in the UNSC in a better and stronger manner through a group framework.

In the context of purchasing power parity promoted under “International Comparison Programme”, it is a matter of great concern to all Statisticians to ensure that “their country should not suffer because of data gaps existing as per the product basket prescribed under ICP”. The United Nations Statistics Division has taken up a lead role to standardize common concepts and definitions but recent developments show a kind of bias. Approaches as well as methodologies are tilted towards developed economies and the concerns of developing countries like ours in the SAARC region are not adequately addressed. This will definitely have a serious effect on our policy planning in the international scene and data comparison programme of this region. This is quite evident when we look at the country data published and disseminated by various national and international agencies.

It is true that all countries in this region may not be statistically strong individually but I am sure if we stand together, we can definitely make a breakthrough using our intellectual abilities and capacities. I am, therefore, extremely hopeful and optimistic that during two-day deliberations, we would be in a position to come to a common understanding for mutual cooperation in Statistics.

SAARC has the Integrated Programme of Action (IPA) consisting of a number of Technical Committees (TCs) in the areas of Agriculture and Rural Development; Health and Population Activities; Women, Youth and Children; Environment and Forestry; Science and Technology and Meteorology; Human Resources Development; and Transport. High level Working Groups have also been established to strengthen cooperation in the areas of Information and Communications Technology, Biotechnology, Intellectual Property Rights, Tourism, and Energy.

With the signing of SAFTA, a fresh beginning has been made in the regional economic cooperation. SAFTA is scheduled to come into force from 1st January 2006 and will be fully operationalized by 2016. Under SAFTA a phased tariff liberalization programme is envisaged. This is a historic step for regional economic cooperation. However, we have to bear in mind that SAFTA may not automatically lead to enhancement of intra-regional trade. Along with SAFTA, we need a number of trade facilitation and other complimentary measures to be able to reap the benefits of SAFTA. It is heartening to note that Agreements on Promotion and Protection of Investment; Establishment of a SAARC Arbitration Council; and Multilateral Tax Treaty with a limited scope with regard to the avoidance of double taxation are being negotiated. It is, therefore, also essential to establish a framework for strong statistical cooperation in the region.

Taking note of economic and Human Resource Development needs in the region, the two day meeting of the Heads of Statistical Organisations here has importance. We may put our ideas together to draft recommendations and terms of reference for the forum in statistics for the appropriate SAARC body. We can develop statistical standards, exchange statistical professionals and experts for mutual benefits. In the region, we have many Centres of excellence in statistics. All of us can benefit by getting our manpower properly trained in these centers in various applications and uses of Statistics. I understand SAARC is constructing its Indicators on the pattern of MDGs. We can expedite the development of such indicators. We can also bring out SAARC Statistical Year Book and many other associated things.

I now request Honourable Minister, Mr. Oscar Fernandes to inaugurate the First Meeting of the Heads of Statistical Organizations of SAARC Member States and deliver the inaugural address.
