South Asian regionalism, social development and COVID-19: Lessons for SAARC from the EU’s social model

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Abstract
There is little research done on the social agenda of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). As an analysis of the organization’s social agenda is relevant to the challenges and opportunities offered by COVID-19, this article aims to draw lessons for SAARC from the development model of the European Union (EU). Erstwhile literature on SAARC has not compared its progress in terms of social development with that of the EU. Hence, this study aims to answer the following questions: What are the key differences between the social development approaches of the two organizations, and what can SAARC learn from the EU’s social model? The analysis in this research is largely based on an extensive review of official documents from the EU and SAARC. This article argues that collective social development is in line with SAARC’s functionalist approach that prioritizes cooperation in non-controversial areas like human security. Based on the comparative analysis, this article proposes a three-tier social development approach for comprehensive social development across South Asia. This study argues that, despite its socio-economic and political challenges, SAARC has a lot to gain from adopting the EU’s social model.

Keywords
COVID-19, European Union, regionalism, social development, South Asia

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Introduction

Since the beginning of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic continues to affect almost all SAARC member states. As early as March 2020, there were confirmed cases of COVID-19 in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives (WHO, 2020). India’s proposal for a regional response via SAARC received a positive response, and a SAARC-level videoconference was hosted by New Delhi on 15 March 2020 in which Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi announced the SAARC Emergency Fund to address the pandemic. Despite initial reservations on how this fund should be managed through the SAARC secretariat, a Pakistani official did participate in this virtual meeting involving heads of state of other SAARC member states (Ahmed, 2020). Notable was the absence of the Pakistan Prime Minister of Pakistan but a Pakistan representative raised the issue of restrictions in Jammu and Kashmir (Ahmed, 2020). Nonetheless, in April 2020, Pakistan hosted a videoconference of SAARC health ministers at which all SAARC members shared their experiences of managing the pandemic and supported the idea of a regional approach (Dawn, 2020). This shows a renewed interest in SAARC from all member states to handle human security challenges, for example health risks. At this juncture, considering the momentum of activities at the SAARC level, it is important to see what lessons can be drawn from other more successful organizations to enhance social development in South Asia through SAARC. This research, therefore, aims to answer the following questions: What are the key differences between the social development approaches of the two organizations, and what can SAARC learn from the EU’s social model?

Since its creation in 1985, SAARC has often been a victim of political differences between its member states, especially between India and Pakistan, its two biggest members. SAARC has often faced hiccups due to bilateral relations between its members in the form of meeting cancellations. An example is that of India’s lobbying with other SAARC members, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan, to not participate in the scheduled 2016 summit in Pakistan (Dawn, 2007). Consequently, SAARC only organized 18 summits instead of 35 during 1985–2022. Since the Uri terrorist attacks in the Indian-administered Kashmir in 2016, the relationship between India and Pakistan has not normalized and this continues to affect SAARC. The costs of non-cooperation are growing due to emerging challenges like COVID-19 that require a timely appraisal of how SAARC can help its member states deal with such crises. It is therefore important to examine how other prominent regional organizations have progressed in collective social development and responded to COVID-19. Hence, this article focuses on the EU.

We acknowledge that the two contexts, i.e. South Asia and Europe, are very different. For example, there is no single dominant player in Europe; in South Asia, however, India’s centrality is prevalent due to its geographic position, population size and share of 80 percent of the region’s GDP (Chaturvedi et al., 2015: 80). Despite India’s dominance, another major actor is Pakistan, with considerable influence in Afghanistan. Even within Europe or the EU region, Germany’s economic influence and France’s political clout are noticeable. The two regions are also historically and culturally different. While Christianity is the dominant religion in the EU (Weiler, 2003), South Asia is religiously very diverse (SAARC, 2018). SAARC has four majority-Muslim, two majority-Hindu and two majority-Buddhist countries. South Asia is also home to the world’s largest Hindu and Muslim populations. The EU region has a population of 511 million (7.3 percent of the world’s population), a GDP of US$16.48 trillion, an inflation growth rate of 0.09 percent and a life expectancy of 81 years (Vienna Institute of Demography, 2016; World Bank, 2016). By virtue of being a union of developed states, the EU is the most generous bloc, providing foreign aid to developing
parts of the world (Hunt, 2014). In contrast, SAARC members are mainly classified as developing and least-developed states. With 1.84 billion people (roughly 20 percent of the world’s population), the SAARC region is more than three times the population of the EU region but only had a total GDP of US$3.3 billion, an inflation growth rate of 4.73 percent and life expectancy of 54.4 years (UNCTAD, 2016). Despite these differences, there are policy and institutional lessons that SAARC can learn from the EU’s social policies and systems.

Collective social development has been a subject of academic inquiry for over 50 years (Nahar, 2015). The World Bank (2004) defines social development as socially inclusive and equitable. Morris (2010: 144), however expands this definition by making social development people-centred. While states respond to their challenges domestically, there is a growing collaboration at regional and global levels. There are regional organizations created through which states not only respond to challenges posed by globalization but have also worked towards greater connectivity (Baylis et al., 2011: 431). Regional organizations by design aim to address collective challenges, including social issues, and as argued by Barker (2003), the social development of a single country is insufficient. Amin (1999) and Healey (1999) argue that regional development paves the way for the development of regional institutions. As this article argues, collective social development suits SAARC’s functionalist approach and will help it avoid constraints from political differences among its members. Functionalism, an international relations theory, focuses on common interests and needs shared by states through cooperation at various levels. Functional cooperation has been a key feature of intergovernmental cooperation, especially through SAARC, whereby international organizations take actions to address practical and technical problems rather than engaging in cooperation in matters of a political and security nature (Mitrany, 1966). A study on SAARC argued:

The functionalist approach to regionalism is a slow process and the achievements of certain stages, particularly towards economic integration, have taken decades in other regions, such as the EU. Functionalism is more time-consuming in developing regions home to traditional rivals and greater asymmetry among the member states, which is typically the case of SAARC. (Ahmed, 2013: 187–188)

There is a plethora of literature on SAARC. Most of that focuses on inter-state conflicts and regional cooperation (Ahmed, 2013, 2017). There are also studies that have focused on structural challenges, such as India’s dominance and the organization’s expansion in the shape of Afghanistan’s membership (Bhasin, 2008). In terms of SAARC’s comparison, there have been previous studies that have compared SAARC with the EU and also the Association of Southeast Asian Nations with a particular focus on human rights, for example the management of refugees (Ahmed, 2013, 2018). Considering how social development has been central to SAARC’s agenda, this study aims to bridge the gap in terms of what SAARC can learn from the EU’s social model to improve the welfare of South Asians.

This study is largely based on an extensive review of official documents from the two chosen organizations and other relevant literature, such as journal articles. In terms of the structure of this article, it begins with an overview of SAARC, followed by an analysis of the EU’s social policies and systems. Finally, it examines the possibility of learning from the EU’s social development for SAARC, with a particular focus on how the two organizations have responded to the coronavirus pandemic.
An overview of SAARC

In 1985, SAARC was established with the agenda of regional development through greater cooperation among its members. Unlike European regionalism, the foundations of SAARC were not built by a unity or conflict resolution between South Asia’s key players, i.e. India and Pakistan. Given bilateral tensions in the region, a decision was made by the founding members of SAARC, as reflected in the SAARC Charter, to adopt a functionalist approach for cooperation in non-controversial areas. SAARC was created with the underlying assumption that ‘cooperation can be achieved through SAARC without addressing the political problems of the region’ (Reed, 1997: 244). However, there has been another assumption that through functionalism, particularly through economic cooperation, the political challenges of South Asia, especially between India and Pakistan, can be addressed (Brar, 2003: 31; Morin, 2008: 4). This has not been the case so far and the India–Pakistan rivalry has been a constraint to SAARC. Brar (2003: 32) notes that ‘given the fact that the region has an inordinately high share of disputed boundaries, divisive politics and checkered democracy, no one ever expected that regional cooperation in South Asia would be a runaway success’.

SAARC’s journey of over three decades represents some inherent challenges. Since the beginning, it has suffered from political disruptions in the form of disputes between its member states, especially involving India and Pakistan. The SAARC Charter requires the heads of member state to meet once a year but only 18 SAARC summits were held until June 2018, including 10 in the first 15 years. Ahmed (2017: 50) notes that scheduled summits have been cancelled 14–15 times and only five summits have been held on scheduled dates at scheduled venues. The 2016 SAARC summit, scheduled to take place in Islamabad, was cancelled due to objections from India, Afghanistan, Bhutan and Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2016). There are also many examples of irregular meetings and procedures during 2004–2017 (SAARC, 2018). It is therefore time to re-think SAARC’s key focus, especially its social agenda, to enhance and promote collective social development across the region.

Social agenda

The SAARC Charter provides a clear mandate for social development through regional cooperation in South Asia. Considering its charter, SAARC has developed a social agenda for cooperation among its members, as is stated in the SAARC Social Charter emphasizing joint actions against disease, poverty and infant and maternal mortality (SAARC, 2018). In the first two decades, SAARC’s social agenda was mostly limited to agreements and institutionalization; in its third decade, it progressed to promoting the implementation of its agreements across the region.

At the 15th SAARC Summit held in Colombo in 2008, a charter was signed for the SAARC Development Fund (SDF). The SDF was established in 2010 to mainly focus on social development and other projects, including infrastructural development. A long-term vision behind the SDF is to create a SAARC Development Bank for financing infrastructural and social development projects. The SDF prioritizes the welfare of the people of South Asia by focusing on uplifting quality of life and creating social and economic progress through poverty alleviation and development. Through SDF’s social focus, SAARC has initiated many projects with selected non-governmental organizations in every member state (SDF, 2018). Like the case of other SAARC ventures, the SDF operates through the financial contributions of its member states and other partners (Ahmed, 2013: 118). With the SDF secretariat in Thimphu, it began operations with an initial
funding of US$300 million, including US$100 million of voluntary contribution from India and US$300,000 from China which is a SAARC observer (Ahmed, 2013: 118–119). By July 2018, the SDF had completed financial closure of US$73.75 million, of which US$47 million was already disbursed (The Hindu, 2018). The Chief Executive Officer of SDF, Sunit Motiwal, said in an interview that the ‘SDF is working to enhance its credit portfolio to US$300 million’ (Hindu, 2018).

Although education and health are two key components of social development, these areas have not received enough attention at the SAARC level. This is clear from how little work has been done in this area through SAARC (see Table 1). This is because SAARC initiatives lack funds and human resources (Ahmed, 2013: 126).

SAARC has made significant progress in terms of human security compared to other areas, such as energy and transnational crimes. While there is the SAARC Energy Centre in Pakistan, there has been limited cooperation in the energy sector due to political differences. Similar is the case of joint actions against terrorism and drug trafficking as SAARC’s work in those areas is limited to two initiatives called desks in Colombo (Ahmed, 2013). All initiatives mentioned in Table 1 continue to progress; for example, the South Asian University which was established in 2010 in India. Students from all South Asian countries have been attending the university for degree programmes in a variety of disciplines, including international relations. Similarly, the SAARC Human Resources Development Centre in Pakistan has been actively offering capacity-building programmes for participants from all SAARC countries. The SAARC Agriculture Centre aims at food security and has some important initiatives like the SAARC Food Bank which now has 241,580 metric tons of food grains that can be used by any member state in food emergencies (SAC, 2021). It is, however, surprising to see that SAARC has made no announcement of using the SAARC Food Bank to deal with an ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the country is experiencing another wave of insecurity, with roughly 11 million people facing food insecurity (Suri and Mona, 2021). While South Asian countries like India and Pakistan have sent humanitarian aid, SAARC has done nothing to help Afghanistan.

**Background to European social development**

The European integration began after the Second World War, when most of Central and Western Europe were experiencing the challenge of post-war reconstruction. Facing common challenges like the lack of economic development, the following countries laid the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951: France, West Germany, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Luxembourg (Dedman, 1996; Hussain, 2017). The ECSC treaty had various articles on fixed wage, social benefits, uplifting living standards of the labour force, employment, fundamental needs of health and immigration regulations (ECSC, 1951). This mechanism

| Health                          | Education                              | Other                                |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre, Kathmandu | South Asian University, New Delhi       | SAARC Agriculture Centre, Dhaka       |
|                                 | SAARC Human Resources Development Centre, Islamabad | SAARC Disaster Management Centre, India |
generated the much-needed economic interdependence among the member states and paved the way for resolving their political differences, especially between France and Germany.

The Treaty of Rome was signed in March 1957 and led to the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC) which was built on the foundations of unity between France and Germany (Dedman, 1996; Dinan, 1999; Hussain, 2017). The Treaty of Rome cited the word ‘social’ 46 times, showing the significance of social issues for the Community (EEC, 1957). The treaty used the phrase as a distinctive title of ‘Social Policy’. In addition, it emphasized the harmonization of social systems and policies among the members through collaboration in a range of areas, including employment, working conditions, labour laws, occupational training, social security, workplace hygiene, protection of workforce from occupational accidents, collective bargaining between employees and employers, paid holidays and equal wages for equal work without sex discrimination. Furthermore, the Economic and Social Committee was established for coordination between members (EEC, 1957). The EEC introduced the European Social Fund and the European Social Policy (EEC, 1957). The governments of member states, however, were still independent to formulate their social policies, but the European Community had the power to intervene in certain matters concerning common social issues. This created a synergy and harmonization among the social systems of member states (Hantrais, 2017: 4). Another development was the Single European Act (SEA) signed on 17 February 1986 in Luxembourg. It also empowered the EEC’s provisions in relation to a European social policy (Dedman, 1996; Dinan, 1999; Hussain, 2017).

A major development in European regionalism is the establishment of the EU through the Maastricht Treaty or the Treaty on European Union on 7 February 1992 (Dinan, 1999). In this Treaty, 11 members signed the complete ‘Social Chapter or Protocol’, which includes social security/protection of the workforce, equal opportunities, equal working conditions, information, consultation, employee representation, right to protest and job creation (BBC, 2017; European Commission, 1997). In 1994, the European Commission issued a white paper in which it defined the European Policy known as the European Social Model (ESM) (Blanpain, 2011). Remarkably, the ESM was derived from the European Trade Union Confederation’s five main elements: (1) safeguarding fundamental social rights; (2) social protection; (3) social dialogue; (4) social and work-related regulations; and (5) state responsibility for employment opportunities (ETUC, 2017).

Following the Lisbon Treaty of 2000, the ESM was institutionalized during the first decade between 2000 and 2010 (Vandenbroucke, 2017). It was implemented through the Europe 2020 Strategy on 3 March 2010 (Nolan and Whelan, 2013). The strategy was formulated to meet economic and social targets by 2020. These targets were: to reduce unemployment in the region by 75 percent; invest three percent of the EU’s GDP into research and development; move at least 20 million people out of poverty; reduce the school dropout rate by 10 percent; and ensure that at least 40 percent of people aged 30–34 have completed higher education (EU, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). These targets have been translated into policies and actions in each member state. There is a proper system of monitoring and feedback of these targets by the EU’s statistics office, EUROSTAT, which regularly publishes progress reports (EU, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). In continuation of the 2020 Strategy, the EU approved €80 billion in funding for seven years (2014–2020) (European Commission, 2014). As shared earlier, the ESM clearly indicates that this is not a single model but a mix of many concepts and practices. Based on this discussion, we propose to analyse the ESM or the EU’s social development measures in three stages. In the first stage, the social policy, model or measures were developed through treaties, provisions, policies or decisions.
Then the EU developed comprehensive implementation systems. Finally, there is a proper evaluation mechanism according to which the strategies are measured, and corrective actions are taken when required.

**Lessons for SAARC**

The SDF is an important initiative that supports various projects under its economic, infrastructure and social windows. While the social window focuses on health, the SDF did little in terms of developing and promoting a regional response to help SAARC members’ response to COVID-19. Bhutan, which is home to the SDF secretariat, however, received US$500,000 towards its response to the pandemic (SAM, 2021). Considering that it was an emergency, the SDF should have diverted funds towards the SAARC Emergency Fund to support all member states.

Despite its small pool of funding, the SDF is a good start in terms of social development in South Asia. Increasing SDF’s funding may take long and may require SAARC to seek greater support from its observers, such as the EU, the United States and China. A key lesson from the European Social Fund is that the SDF should focus more on social development in member states with poor socioeconomic indicators, as the EU has done with countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Similar SAARC initiatives need to prioritize investment in its least developed countries to ensure that the whole region progresses collectively. Based on the UN definitions, SAARC considers Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal as the least developed countries. Thus, the SDF needs to prioritize more development in these countries than in other member states that are categorized as developing states. India is the biggest contributor to the SDF, and SAARC’s social programmes would make little sense if most of India’s funding went back to India in a boomerang aid policy. Such a shift in the SDF’s disbursement strategy would also make its programs more focused, with a priority on social progress in its least developed countries.

Compared to the EU’s well-defined supranational mechanisms, SAARC has not reached that stage yet. SAARC has, however, made progress in reaching consensus on its social agenda through the SAARC Social Charter and the implementation of the SDF. The implementation of the SAARC Social Charter is limited as the Association lacks mechanisms to ensure that its instruments are implemented and evaluated at national levels. Strategic management of any plan requires three steps: formulation, implementation and evaluation (David, 2015). As seen in the EU’s case, the development of policies is only a first step in the mechanism. SAARC needs to focus on the last two important stages to develop workable policies, action plans and evaluation frameworks. The SAARC Secretariat needs to create an expert panel to re-assess its social development mandate and programs to review the implementation of its all policies across the region. The EU regularly evaluates its policies and programs and, if required, re-designs them for better results. Further, based on our analysis of the ESM, we propose a multilayer model for consideration by SAARC (see Figure 1). As many SAARC initiatives have been operational for a number of years, it is timely for the institution to set up a monitoring and evaluation mechanism to learn from those initiatives and make proper adjustments going forward.

**Layer 1: Formulation of a collective social system**

ESM is a combination of many theories. Applying the Esping-Andersen (1990) model to SAARC, there is no similarity between the Scandinavian–Corporatist–Anglo-Saxon models and SAARC or its member states. However, the transitional economies of Central and Eastern Europe (post-
communist EU members) have financial and social difficulties that do resemble the conditions of many SAARC members. According to Alavi (1972), a combination of ‘stateness’, uneven capitalist development, large rural scale and rising urban poverty is still evident across South Asia. The SAARC Charter reflects the Association’s objectives, such as peace, freedom, social justice, economic prosperity and collaboration in economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields (SAARC, 2016). The SAARC’s Social Charter focuses on poverty elimination, women’s empowerment, youth mobilization, promoting health, human resource development and safeguarding children’s rights (Shaikh and Mir, 2016).

A lesson to be drawn from the EU is to involve the corporate sector in social development to address some of the issues from the SAARC Social Charter. The EU has been active in this regard and the Green Paper in 2001, CSR Communications in 2002 and 2006 and the CSR Strategy for 2011–2014 are some examples (European Commission, 2014). The EU clearly emphasizes CSR for social development in Europe. Considering the growth of the corporate sector in several of the SAARC states, especially India and Pakistan (IMF, 2017), SAARC should develop a CSR strategy to gain more industrial support for the SDF. In March 2017, the president of the SAARC Chambers of Commerce visited Islamabad and proposed the idea of the business community’s involvement in social development (News, 2017). The SDF has approved a budget of US$1.5 billion for CSR activities in South Asia (PHD Chamber of Commerce, 2018).
CSR is a key component of the SDF that aims to make progress in human welfare in South Asia through poverty alleviation and social and economic progress. We propose a few actions for strengthening the effectiveness of this layer. The EU is continuously undergoing restructuring and enhancement and building new institutions and mechanisms for a robust social system across its region. We understand that the EU can do this because of sufficient political will and human and financial resources. SAARC also emphasizes institutional improvements and reforms (Ahmed, 2013; Delinic and Pandey, 2012) but does not have the required monitoring and evaluation mechanism. In contrast, the EU has a long history of formulating social policies, building social institutions and setting social targets for its member states. The EU social development focuses on five key areas, including social rights, social protection, social dialogue, social and work-related regulations and state responsibility for employment (ETUC, 2017). We propose that SAARC should develop a proper social policy and set feasible targets for member countries so that its social agenda can be effective.

Layer 2: Implementation of a collective social system

SAARC organizes meetings, albeit irregularly because of political challenges, among high-level officials, such as health ministers, and ministry representatives dealing with women, youth and children’s issues, to deal with collective social problems. In 2002, SAARC members reached an agreement on the SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution. In 2009, SAARC released a report entitled ‘Regional Poverty Profile’. There seems to be momentum in connection to human security issues, but SAARC lacks the ability to translate these instruments into meaningful action plans. SAARC often faces the challenge of not being able to hold meetings among its members’ heads of state and this becomes a key constraining factor in terms of the organization’s ability to translate its vision into actions. It is at such meetings that SAARC leaders approve new programmes; therefore, the organization needs to ensure regular summits.

Some researchers indicate that SAARC has failed to implement its action plans (Chowdhury, 2001; Liaquat, 2018). The EU’s policy implementation is generally successful due to two reasons: its supranational structures where member states are bound to adopt the binding decisions; and a complex bureaucratic structure of institutions, its subsidiaries, committees’ work, regular meetings and proper funding. SAARC should also realize that policymaking, development of institutions and establishing structures are not enough. SAARC needs to develop a comprehensive bureaucracy, committees, delegated staff and other structures for proper operationalization of its goals and plans.

Layer 3: Evaluation of a collective social system

Based on the EU model, SAARC has a missing third layer. Here SAARC needs to pay more attention by developing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for all its initiatives. As an institution, SAARC needs to do more in terms of receiving progress reports from its member states to ensure that progress is made in key areas of social development in the light of the SAARC Social Charter. In this regard, SAARC can learn a lot from the EU.

All EU institutions have monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. We have already discussed that there is a proper system of monitoring and feedback of social targets through the EU’s statistics office, EUROSTAT, that regularly publishes progress reports (EU, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). In
addition, the European Court of Justice specifically has the mandate to interfere in any misconduct or acts during institutional conflicts. The European Ombudsman works to promote good administration at the EU level and has a mandate to investigate complaints concerning all EU institutions. The main area of investigations includes cases of power abuse, discrimination, unfair conduct, lack of information, unjustified delays in processes and unfair conduct (European Union, 2018c). The European Ombudsman yearly publishes reported complaints in relation to any misconduct by EU institutions. As per the 2017 report, 15,837 cases were filed, and the Ombudsman opened inquiries on 447 of them (European Parliament, 2018). It is hard to imagine this level of cooperation through SAARC because of a trust deficit between its member states, for example between India and Pakistan. Still, SAARC could start at a smaller scale by developing a comprehensive and transparent evaluation mechanism for its social development projects, including the ones implemented through the SDF.

The role of the SAARC Secretariat is crucial because unlike other initiatives the secretariat has the representation of all member states. The secretariat in Kathmandu is mainly run by diplomats seconded from all member states. It is therefore through the secretariat that SAARC can start conversations to evaluate its initiatives. The Secretariat could work with the SDF to ensure that some funding is allocated towards monitoring and evaluation of its programmes. In the first phase, the evaluation of programmes under the social window could be prioritized.

**Hindrances**

The full implementation of the ESM model may face a range of challenges in South Asia. SAARC is an intergovernmental organization and does not have the power to enforce its policies like the EU. Also, SAARC suffers from political challenges like the India–Pakistan tensions due to which the organization’s performance has been affected. The 19th SAARC summit which was scheduled to take place in Islamabad has not yet taken place because of India’s opposition to attending an event in Pakistan – a country that it blames for cross-border terrorism in India (Ahmed, 2016). As argued by Bishwakarma and Hu (2021), the rivalry between the two biggest members remains a major hurdle for regional cooperation in South Asia. Besides asymmetric power relations, scholars have identified a variety of other challenges, such as tariff and non-tariff barriers and connectivity issues, due to which regional cooperation has not progressed much in South Asia (Ahmed, 2013; Gill, 2020). Hence, South Asia remains one of the least integrated regions of the world.

As an organization representing developing and least-developed states, SAARC also faces other challenges due to which it may struggle to implement the ESM model. The socio-economic realities of South Asia are different from those of the EU region. In this regard, poverty is a major challenge, as roughly 40 percent of the total population of about 1.6 billion of the SAARC member states live below the poverty line (Jiali, 2012: 163). The COVID-19 pandemic has further deteriorated this situation. According to a World Bank estimation, the pandemic created 62–71 million new poor in 2020 and 48–59 million in 2021 in South Asia (Nule and Xie, 2021).

The ESM represents the values shared by the EU members – equality, solidarity and identity – but SAARC has not been able to promote such values or a collective identity among its members. There is also a huge difference in terms of the financial capacity of SAARC and the EU. The SDF began operating with initial funding of US$300 million (Ahmed, 2013: 118–119) compared to €30.5 billion for the European Development Fund for 2014–2020 (European Union, 2018a, 2018b). The SDF’s funding capacity is well below the needs of South Asia. SAARC is a much smaller organization of eight member states, with the majority facing their own economic
challenges; therefore, the SDF may not have the funding required to implement its agenda. There are, however, options by collaborating with SAARC observers and other donor organizations to generate more funds for the SDF and its social and health windows.

**Responses from the EU and SAARC to COVID-19**

South Asia is home to roughly a fifth of humanity and many big cities are densely populated, making millions more vulnerable to the coronavirus pandemic. In November 2020, South Asia recorded 10 million cases of coronavirus, accounting for 18 percent of global cases and 11 percent of global deaths (Ahluwalia and Maan, 2020). In contrast, Europe has been one of the badly affected regions and had recorded 29,927,859 cases by the second week of January 2021, and overall 662,326 deaths, with the most in Russia, the UK, France, Italy and Spain (ECDPC, 2021). Although SAARC faces many challenges, for example inter-state conflicts and funding shortages, we feel that it is important to see how the EU – a far more developed and supra-national organization – has responded to the pandemic to understand how its social systems performed in times of crisis.

While South Asian states have struggled to respond to COVID-19, we feel that it is also time to see how the EU reacted to the pandemic to see if there are any lessons for regional cooperation in South Asia. The immediate EU response to COVID-19 was not exemplary because the organization faced difficulty due to different health policies across the region (Celi et al., 2020). Borders were closed and health services were provided by EU member states to their citizens, but the EU learned fast and within a few weeks took important steps to devise an effective strategy against the pandemic. The response of national governments was also phenomenal in terms of supporting households, unemployed people and businesses but the EU was behind the scenes helping its member states (Janse and Tsanova, 2020). Firstly, the European Central Bank initiated a budget of €750 billion under the pandemic emergency purchase program. Consequently, European financial institutions agreed on a further €540 billion for safeguarding businesses, jobs and healthcare in the region. The EU developed a comprehensive approach to ensure job security and its overall economic response to the coronavirus crisis can be seen through a total investment of €3.7 trillion, including €524 billion for national measures taken under the EU budgetary rules, €100 billion for the EU short-time work schemes, €70 billion in the shape of direct budget support, €2.5 trillion for nation liquidity measures, €240 billion for the European Stability Mechanism Pandemic Crisis Support for member states and €200 billion for the European Investment Bank’s financing for businesses (EC, 2021).

As SAARC is mainly comprised of developing and least-developed states, with Afghanistan dependent on donors, it cannot generate the same amount of funds as the EU. The Emergency Fund – created following India’s proposal – managed to generate only US$21.8 million, including nearly half (US$10 million) from India (Zameen News, 2020). It is unclear how the SAARC Emergency Fund would operate and for what purposes, for example whether this money would be used for COVID-19 vaccination or job protection in member states. Although India was the key actor behind the creation of the SAARC Emergency Fund, New Delhi has been engaged in its bilateral vaccine diplomacy instead of using SAARC for this purpose. This is evident through India sending 3.2 million free doses of its domestically manufactured vaccines to Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives (Vardhan, 2021). This is a key difference between how big or influential members operate in the EU as they use their regional organization for a region-wide approach instead of bilateralism.
The coronavirus pandemic has shown us how certain human security challenges affect us all beyond state and regional borders. It is through more cooperation that we can handle such challenges. SAARC has a lot to learn from how other regional organizations, in particular the EU, have responded to the pandemic through collective measures. This will of course require more political will from SAARC member states by de-politicizing cooperation in human welfare areas. Considering the devastating impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on South Asia and the world, it is a timely opportunity for SAARC and other stakeholders, such as the EU, to devise regional and global approaches that will help us deal with such challenges in the future. As the EU holds an observer status within SAARC, there is potential for some inter-organizational cooperation to ensure that such challenges are addressed in a timely fashion. It is time for SAARC to strengthen or revive its functionalist approach to ensure that cooperation in human security areas is not hindered by political tensions. The pandemic offers an opportunity because all SAARC countries have been affected and also the region’s migrant workers lost jobs due to COVID-19-related dynamics in regions like the Gulf. SAARC should ideally think of an extensive social model to also focus on South Asian migrant workers who desperately need assistance in terms of re-integration.

**Conclusion**

SAARC has remained a weak regional organization due to socio-economic and political challenges, for example the India–Pakistan rivalry. Despite some success through agreements to address human security challenges, for example the SAARC Social Charter, SAARC has not been able to promote collective social development in South Asia. Many of its mechanisms, such as the SDF, lack sufficient funding and human resources. The coronavirus pandemic, which has badly affected countries around the world, has provided SAARC with an opportunity to enhance South Asian regionalism with a greater focus on human welfare. Based on the assessment of the political impasse faced by SAARC, this article makes the case for the reinvigoration of its social agenda as a tool to promote and enhance inter-dependence among its members. This will very much be a continuation of its functionalist approach.

This article focused on lessons from the EU’s social development model and approaches for SAARC. The EU has three strategic dimensions focusing on social, economic and political aspects through formulation, implementation and evaluation phases. This comparative analysis of SAARC and the EU indicates that the former should align its vision, mission, objectives and strategies as seen in the ESM. SAARC can achieve its objective of promoting regional cooperation through a well-defined, interconnected, integrated method of formulation, implementation and evaluation of the SAARC Social Charter. This research proposes a three-layered model for SAARC’s agenda of social development in South Asia. SAARC has already applied some aspects of this model in the light of its Social Charter and initiatives, especially through the SDF. Although many SAARC initiatives lack funds and human resources, the Association can learn from the EU. The third layer of a proposed social development model is where SAARC seems to be the weakest and needs to pay much more attention by developing mechanisms of reporting, evaluation and monitoring.

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Notes
1. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Maldives are majority Muslim, India and Nepal are majority Hindu and Bhutan and Sri Lanka are majority Buddhist states.
2. ‘Each State Party shall take appropriate measures, consistent with the relevant provisions of national and international law, for the purpose of ensuring that refugee status is not granted to any person in respect of whom there are serious reasons for considering that he or she has committed an offence set forth in Article 3 of this Additional Protocol’ (SAARC, 2016: 106).

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