

Second Meeting of BIMSTEC Expert Group on Poverty Alleviation

12 November 2020, New Delhi, India (Virtual)

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- His Excellency Mr. Nagendra Nath Sinha, Secretary, Department of Rural Development, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India;
 - Dr. Biswajit Banerjee, Joint Secretary (IC), Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India;
 - Senior Officials' of the Government of India;
 - Distinguished delegates;
 - Ladies & gentlemen;

Good Morning!

It is a great privilege and honor for me to address at the Second Meeting of BIMSTEC Expert Group on Poverty Alleviation, which happens to be my very first Meeting as the Secretary General of BIMSTEC. You may kindly be aware that I have assumed charges as the Secretary General of BIMSTEC on 06 November 2020. For your kind information, I am still in home quarantine in compliance with the COVID-19 protocol of the host government. However, considering the importance of today's Meeting, I have taken the liberty of delivering my remarks from my official residence in Dhaka.

At the very outset, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Government of India, in particular, the Ministry of Rural Development for hosting this long awaited meeting. (*Note: The First meeting was held in Kathmandu on 01 November 2017 and 2nd was proposed to be held in 2018*). I would also like to extend my sincere appreciation to all the delegates of all Member States for their participation in this important meeting today.

Honourable Delegates,

Poverty Alleviation is one of the 14 priority areas of BIMSTEC cooperation, which is a common concern of all the Member States. There was a time when people believed that the existence of poverty is inevitable in certain areas of the world, and the Bay of Bengal region formed a part of this poverty map. It gives me immense pleasure to mention the fact that the region has been making tremendous economic progress during the last decade in its stride to put itself out of the poverty map. However, the recent success of South Asian countries in poverty reduction is being eroded as millions of people have lost their daily income due to ongoing COVID pandemic. A huge number of workers engaged in the informal sector have lost their livelihoods. The COVID pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to BIMSTEC and South Asian Countries. While the pandemic was initially a health crisis, it has now turned into an economic crisis by seriously disrupting trade, travel, remittances and other domestic economic activities.

Distinguished participants,

You will agree with me that Poverty Alleviation is an umbrella sector that has significant relevance with other priority sectors of BIMSTEC. Therefore, cooperation and collaboration with other sectors like, Agriculture, Trade & Investment, Transport & Communication and others are imperative in order to move our region forward and eradicate poverty ultimately.

The theme of Fourth BIMSTEC Summit held in Kathmandu on 30th & 31st of August 2018 was “Towards a Peaceful, Prosperous and Sustainable Bay of Bengal Region.” This same spirit was echoed by the BIMSTEC Leaders by *‘recognizing that eradication of poverty is the greatest regional challenge in realization of development objectives and expressing firm commitment to working together for the implementation of the Agenda 2030 for a Sustainable Development’*. The Leaders also expressed their commitment to nurturing the workforce by taking concrete measures to provide decent job opportunities for them through increased investment in service and production sectors of the economies.

Considering this concern and to support the efforts of the Member States to alleviate poverty, it is crucial that we collectively gear up our efforts in all sectors to achieve our over-arching goal of poverty alleviation in the region. While there is political commitment in the leadership, there are challenges and constraints in its implementation, the main one, being finance. Therefore, we need to expedite project based cooperation that will target specific issues and areas. And in order to operate such initiatives, BIMSTEC is exploring closer collaboration with organizations that have similar mandates such as SAARC, ASEAN. BIMSTEC is also collaborating with development partners including the ADB, OECD, World Bank and others that may contribute to the establishment of a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable Bay of Bengal region.

Distinguished Delegates/Ladies & Gentlemen,

The success of BIMSTEC Member States in poverty reduction is being eroded as the pandemic has put millions out of job. The governments of BIMSTEC Member States are forcefully responding to this immediate challenge with large rescue packages. However, as the pandemic is prolonging, it is going to seriously affect the economic growth and overall welfare of the people of BIMSTEC region bringing more population under the verge of extreme poverty.

In the above context, I hope this Second Meeting of BIMSTEC Expert Group on Poverty Alleviation will review the progress made so far in the implementation of **BIMSTEC Poverty Plan of Action**, which aims to alleviate poverty in BIMSTEC region and suggest best measures to take forward the Agenda 2030 in the new context of COVID pandemic. The Governments of the BIMSTEC Member States may individually respond to these challenges by strengthening the health system, providing income support for the poor and offering stimulus packages to the businesses. Given the cross-border nature of the crisis, BIMSTEC Member States may also initiate collective action to tackle the worsening poverty situation in the region.

Finally, I would like to thank the Government of India for organizing this important core meeting in the midst of COVID-19. I would also like to thank all the Member States for attending this meeting and look forward to a productive discussion. Last but not the least, the Secretariat here assures all our support in making the meeting result orientated and a success.

I thank you all.
