

# GOOD NEIGHBOURS

ADVANCING REGIONAL INTEGRATION, COOPERATION  
AND ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

## Thinking beyond borders: South Asia's budding economists unite since 2004

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#OneSouthAsia

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Each year, nearly a hundred South Asian economics students gather to share research papers, listen to lectures by distinguished scholars, and debate the finer points of economic theories. For many, the South Asia Economic Students Meet (SAESM) is their first experience of regional cooperation in an area with a long history of political divisions.

SAESM is a notable example of how people-to-people contact can change hearts and minds. The annual conference focuses on regional economic development issues. More importantly, it encourages

conversations, friendships, and trust among students from the region, including natives of India and Pakistan.

Students who attend the event are seen as future leaders who can help influence regional cooperation and peace initiatives in South Asia. SAESM is loosely based on Europe's successful student exchanges after World War II to rebuild institutions and national relationships. The annual SAESM conference invites economics students to exchange ideas on regional trade and economic growth that can reduce poverty. Such discussions are important for South Asia,

which is home to 36 percent of the world's poor and half of all malnourished children.

For Ritwika Sen of India, SAESM was a life-changing event. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Illinois, USA, and participated in SAESM in 2011 as a student of St. Stephen's College. "SAESM was essentially the first time that I met like-minded peers from across South Asia. It helped to broaden my outlook on the region and the amazing things that we can accomplish with more cooperation," she said.

## The journey since 2004

At the heart of the SAESM story is a group of dedicated academics in different colleges across South Asia, investing their time and skills to organize and lead the conferences year after year. The idea of an economics students meet to build cross-border friendships began in 2004 when Dr. Deb Kusum Das of Delhi University's Ramjas College visited Lahore University of Management Sciences in Pakistan. Back at Ramjas College, his students in the Economics Society club were excited about creating a regional platform. The grassroots initiative quickly drew support from Prof. Turab Hussain of Lahore University of Management Sciences, followed by professors and students at the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh and the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka.

The first SAESM was held in 2004, hosted by Ramjas College. Ninety-four students from

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka attended. "Bright smiles, lots of energy, and plenty of good will" is how the Times of India described the proceedings in an article on 4 February 2004. Since then, the conference has been held every year in different South Asian countries. In 2005, SAESM was held in Pakistan at Lahore University of Management Sciences. In 2007, Nepal's Tribhuvan University joined the event and the World Bank began supporting SAESM. In 2011, the event widened to include Bhutan's Royal Thimpu College followed in 2013 by Afghanistan's Kabul University. SAESM has survived domestic tensions, border skirmishes, and cancelled SAARC summits, and also managed to build a good reputation for itself within the economics circuit in South Asia.

Overall, the idea behind SAESM seems to be born out of two motivations. The first motivation is to promote people-to-people contact, despite not-so-favorable political discourses. The second motivation is to improve the state of economics education in the region and use the knowledge from the subject in service towards regional growth, development, and cooperation.

Firsthand experiences of crossing the border also gives the participants a concrete idea of the challenges to regional cooperation in the region. Unlike much of the world, visas can be difficult to obtain for certain nationalities in South Asia. Some students have had to book circuitous routes through other countries because of sudden coolness in their home country's relationship with the country hosting SAESM. For example, in

2014, the delegation of Pakistani students had to fly through Dubai and Nepal to reach the conference in Bhutan because the Indian government refused to grant transit visas. SAESM thus not only becomes an opportunity for improving theoretical knowledge on regional cooperation, but also contributes to practical understanding of the status quo.

## First impressions to lasting legacy

SAESM unofficially begins with an ice-breaker in the evening when all teams have arrived and is usually organized by the World Bank representative at the event. Polite greetings rapidly blossom into enthusiastic exclamations of shared ancestry ("my grandmother came from Sylhet!") and common tastes ("I love *kottu roti* too!"). Fans of Bollywood are quick to begin a game of *antakshari* and the musically-inclined form strategic international partnerships to make a winning team. The next morning, at the official inauguration, everyone stands for the national anthems of all participating nations. It is a very moving display of mutual respect and understanding.

During the week-long SAESM, speakers lead panel discussions on topical economic issues. Over the years, the quality of research papers and presentations has steadily improved, attracting top students throughout South Asia. Judges choose a best paper for each of the competition's

annual subthemes and the best overall paper wins the Sen-Haq Award. 'Budding Economist'- an economics quiz competition- is the more gladiatorial event. Participants go through a written test and quiz to qualify for a final round where their mettle is tested on an individual basis in a publicly-held panel interview that is as interesting to watch as it is to participate in. The last person standing is crowned the 'Budding Economist of South Asia' and this marks the end of the conference.

Dr. Selim Raihan, Professor of Economics at the University of Dhaka and Executive Director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling, a key mentor of the SAESM initiative from Bangladesh, said SAESM is about much more than prizes. The real benefit is for students "to see someone from another country in South Asia," something unimaginable a generation ago, and still out of reach for millions in South Asia today. The most dramatic demonstrations of such meetings are made by students from India and Pakistan who are surprised that the people on the other side are human beings just like them.

Students are also able to identify opportunities with peers for future research collaborations, an important step for those planning post-graduate study in economics at home or abroad. For many, the SAESM experience shapes their future research interests and professional choices.

Trade economist Nishant Khanal said he attended SAESM as a student from Nepal. After graduation, he worked on a regional

trade promotion network project with a German development agency and participated in the South Asia Economic Summit. "Recently, I worked as South Asia program manager at Students for Liberty with more than 100 volunteers from South Asia. The network which I built at SAESM has helped me a lot in my professional life."

The conference, with its paper presentation sessions and keynote lectures and panels over three days, is also a great opportunity to learn about new topics and methods of doing research. Tshering Wangdi, a SAESM alumnus from Bhutan says, "SAESM has helped me to not only gain knowledge of people representing different nations, but also enhance my skills in economics and statistics."

SAESM has proved to be a great networking opportunity for its participants, but it goes even further to cement that friendship through a two-day retreat which is held at the end of the conference. The retreat organizes activities giving students a cultural, geographical, and social snapshot of the host country. For example, the 2014 SAESM in Bhutan included hiking to a monastery perched 10,000 feet high in the Himalayas. The six-hour hike gave students plenty of time to argue, debate, and challenge each others' ideas while developing trust.

On the last evening of SAESM 2014, all the participants sang "we shall overcome," to join their voices together. What began as a sweet and soulful rendition of the same melody in English, Hindi, Bengali, and

Urdu ultimately swelled into an energetic and enthusiastic chorus with a fast beat, because everyone was buoyed by hope and the meaning held by the words of that song. Students express surprise when they discover how much they have in common.

Nearly a thousand students have participated in SAESM since it began. Some of the early participants now have established careers as economists, academics, journalists, and other professionals exercising significant influence in policy making of their respective countries. Cyril Almeida, 2004 alumnus of SAESM, is a senior journalist in Pakistan who served as the assistant editor for Dawn - Pakistan's oldest and most widely read English-language newspaper. After graduating from Lahore University of Management Sciences, he studied jurisprudence as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. He was named the International Press Institute's 2019 World Press Freedom Hero.

## What's next?

SAESM is evolving into a formal institution with more transparency and accountability. In 2016, it formed a governing council with plans to enlist academics and experts from outside the SAESM network to provide advice and support. As the council focuses on the coordination of all activities among different countries and expanding the network beyond the annual conferences,

it has also created a rotating secretariat. Dhaka-based South Asian Network on Economic Modeling was chosen to be the first host.

Country coordinators are discussing ways to expand the organization, possibly by sponsoring research projects, publishing high-quality papers in a journal, and holding week-long classes in advanced research techniques. There is potential for expansion by collaborating with entities such as the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling in Bangladesh; the South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment network in Nepal; and research centers on South Asian issues at the London School of Economics, University of California - Berkeley, and Sciences Po in Paris. Many SAESM alumni from the past 15 years are now well-placed to help an expansion.

SAESM faces some critical challenges in the coming years, one of which relates to establishing formal institutions to manage the event. Each conference takes enormous resources to organize, especially in a region where bilateral tensions are high and government institutions do not reliably grant visa applications. Some thought has been given to organizing future conferences in neutral locations outside South Asia just to avoid logistical nightmares, and while the proposal may be sensible, the boost to the local economy from hosting a large-scale event and other benefits of internationalization will be lost to South Asia.

There are issues related to participation as well. Critics say several South Asian countries send students from a limited set of universities, whose student bodies may not fairly represent the nation's population. SAESM could be a more effective platform for regional peace building by adding more universities as partners. Greater publicity about the annual event could generate more interest and improve accessibility to the forum.

Overall, SAESM has managed to grow simply on the hard work of the country coordinators and the enthusiasm and trust of students, without having a permanent office or an address.

There is little doubt that SAESM has helped create better economists who are aware of regional development. Participants warmly recount their experiences and their Facebook pages show deep interests in transboundary issues and cultural practices. Many former students say they pay close attention to elections, communal violence, and natural disasters that affect neighboring countries.

It is not an exaggeration to say that SAESM changes the participants. If regional cooperation seemed inconceivable or hadn't crossed their minds before, the memories of conference and the retreat serve as a constant reminder of the possibility.

"SAESM alumni are future ambassadors of their countries and of the idea of South Asia." – Sanjay Kathuria, former lead

economist and coordinator, South Asia Regional Integration, The World Bank.

Ebadulrahman Hashemi, former Research Subject Matter Expert with Afghan Ministry of Interior Affairs and a recent graduate in policy economics from Massachusetts, USA,

attended the conference as an economics student from Afghanistan in 2018. The week of conversations with other students from the region permanently changed the way he views himself, Hashemi said. "SAESM transitioned me from an Afghan to a South Asian."

## Endnotes

1. In prestigious universities of South Asia, one of the indicators of success for an economics major is to get selected to represent their country at SAESM. Only 11 percent of students in India who apply are selected to attend SAESM.
2. 'Reflecting on SAESM 2018' (SANEM, 6 February 2018)

Picture credits: Nikita Singla

## GOOD Neighbours Series

A key objective of the World Bank's South Asia Regional Integration, Cooperation and Engagement (RICE) approach is broadening evidence-based communication and outreach activities that will help strengthen the case for RICE and generate domestic demand. The 'Good Neighbours' series showcases successful cross-border stories demonstrating regional cooperation to build support for regionalism in South Asia.

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