

South Asia Call to Action for APFSD 2026



The **South Asia Constituency** is a regional coalition of civil society organizations, community groups, and activists from South Asia working on sustainable development and people-centered policies, and it operates within the **Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism (APRCM)**.

The **APRCM** is a platform that enables civil society across the Asia-Pacific to engage with governments and the UN on development agendas like the SDGs, ensuring grassroots voices are represented.

Prepared for **APFSD 2026**, this **South Asia Call to Action for 2026** underscores the urgency of advancing **inclusive and sustainable development** across the region and calls upon governments, regional bodies, and development partners to take coordinated, accountable action; it also serves as a concise guide to key priorities and recommendations to inform decision-making and strengthen collective implementation efforts.

South Asia is a region rich in culture, resilience, and human potential. Yet millions of people, especially Indigenous Peoples, women, informal workers, marginalized communities, and rural populations, continue to face structural inequalities that limit their opportunities and silence their voices. Shrinking civic space, rising debt burdens, climate vulnerability, and exclusionary governance systems further deepen these challenges and weaken public trust.

Development in South Asia cannot be defined only by highways built, cities expanded, or economic growth rates achieved. True progress must be measured by whether it protects human rights, reduces inequality, strengthens accountable public institutions, and ensures that decision-making processes include the meaningful participation of those most affected.

Sustainable development requires more than financial investment; it demands justice, transparency, and inclusive governance. Policies must prioritize people over profit, resilience over short-term gains, and long-term environmental sustainability over extractive growth models. Communities on the frontlines of climate change, economic precarity, and social discrimination must not only be consulted but also empowered to lead.

We call for a renewed commitment to rights-based, people-centered development across South Asia, where civic freedoms are safeguarded, public institutions are responsive and transparent,

religion and caste-based discrimination are addressed, and no one is left behind. Sustainable development is not only about economic expansion; it is about dignity, equity, participation, and intergenerational responsibility.

Only when the voices of the least heard are placed at the center of policy and practice can South Asia achieve a just, inclusive, and sustainable future.

Structural Barriers to SDG Progress

Across South Asia, escalating public debt and rising debt-servicing obligations are significantly reducing fiscal space for investments in water systems, renewable energy, social protection, climate adaptation, and inclusive infrastructure. External financial conditionalities and limited transparency in fiscal negotiations constrain national autonomy and often prioritize austerity over equity. Independent and transparent public debt audits are urgently needed to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate debt and to ensure that development finance serves public interest.

The conditionality imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank entrenches austerity, subsidy removal, and large-scale privatization across South Asia, compelling governments to cut public spending, withdraw agriculture, energy, and food subsidies, and sell public assets in the name of reform. These measures prioritize debt repayment and investor confidence over social welfare, disproportionately burden workers and marginalized communities, narrow democratic policy space, and deepen external dependency, reinforcing structural inequality rather than enabling sovereign, rights-based development.

Across South Asia, militarization increasingly functions as a governing strategy that facilitates land appropriation, resource extraction, and elite consolidation under the rhetoric of security and development. Expansive security regimes create environments where communities can be displaced with limited accountability. This dynamic is further shaped by competing geopolitical and infrastructural power projections, which drive corridor-building, strategic partnerships, and territorial influence across the region. Together, these forces reinforce a coercive political economy in which military installations and mega-infrastructure projects prioritize accumulation and control over community wellbeing, highlighting the urgent need for demilitarization, land justice, and people's sovereignty.

Governance systems across the region face increasing strain. Corporate capture of land, water, and natural resources, coupled with weak regulatory enforcement, is deepening inequality and environmental degradation. Feudal land systems and agribusiness monopolies undermine food sovereignty and rural livelihoods. At the same time, shrinking civic space and regulatory pressure on rights-based organizations restrict meaningful public participation in SDG monitoring and implementation.

Gender inequality remains systemic and cross-cutting across all Goals under review. Insufficient gender-disaggregated data, weak gender-responsive budgeting, and limited participation of women and gender-diverse persons in policy processes continue to produce exclusionary outcomes. Sustainable cities cannot be considered inclusive if women and transgender persons

face violence in public toilets, transport hubs, or disaster evacuation centers. Infrastructure development under SDG 9 must incorporate both physical and social safety considerations.

Basic service gaps persist. Water insecurity, inadequate sanitation, unreliable and inequitable energy access, and exclusionary urban planning disproportionately affect rural communities, informal settlements, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV, and gender-diverse populations. Infrastructure planning must move beyond construction toward safety, accessibility, and dignity.

Regional cooperation under SDG 17 remains fragmented and under-institutionalized. Partnerships must move beyond ad hoc consultations toward structured accountability frameworks where governments report back to civil society and affected communities.

Priority Areas for Action

South Asia Constituency calls for:

1. Fiscal Justice and Economic Reform

- Conduct independent and transparent public debt audits.
- Ensure inclusive and transparent fiscal negotiation processes involving civil society.
- Rebalance economic models toward care (people) -centered, equity-driven development rather than profit maximization.
- Reduce excessive defense expenditure and reallocate resources toward health, education, climate adaptation, and social protection.
- Call to reject austerity, subsidy removal, and forced privatization imposed by international financial institutions.
- Demand for reclaiming policy space from external creditors and resisting externally dictated economic reforms.

2. Protection of Civic Space and Democratic Accountability

- Safeguard freedoms of association, expression, and participation.
- Establish institutionalized consultation and reporting-back mechanisms between governments and civil society.
- Strengthen accountability frameworks to regulate corporate actors and prevent land and resource capture.
- Explicit call to dismantle repressive security laws, counterterrorism frameworks, and surveillance regimes that are used to criminalize dissent and restrict civil society.
- Protection against harassment, intimidation, and violence targeting activists, journalists, and grassroots organizers.
- Safeguard civic space from conditionalities imposed by international financial institutions, foreign governments, and donor-driven agendas that constrain local democracy.
- Prevent external actors from shaping policy in ways that prioritize corporate or strategic interests over community rights.

- Not just regulation, but enforceable sanctions against corporations involved in land grabs, environmental destruction, and displacement.
- Public oversight of foreign investment projects to prevent neo-colonial extraction under the guise of development.

3. Gender Justice and Intersectional Inclusion

- Institutionalize gender-responsive budgeting with measurable and publicly reported outcomes.
- Mandate collection and reporting of gender-disaggregated and identity-sensitive data.
- Ensure meaningful participation of women and gender-diverse communities in water governance, energy planning, infrastructure design, and urban resilience strategies.
- Integrate safety audits in infrastructure planning, particularly in transport hubs and public sanitation facilities, in collaboration with local transgender networks.
- Aligned gender-responsive budgeting standards across countries ensure fair resource distribution, enhance accountability, and systematically integrate gender equality into national public finance systems.

4. Inclusive Basic Services and Infrastructure

- Guarantee universal, safe, and affordable access to water and sanitation, especially for women, girls, and marginalized gender identities.
- Expand decentralized and community-led renewable energy systems to ensure equitable energy transition.
- Integrate HIV considerations into WASH, energy, urban planning, and infrastructure frameworks to ensure continuity of services and inclusive access.
- Strengthen disaster resilience systems that protect vulnerable communities without discrimination.
- Improving transport systems, upgrading health facilities, and expanding digital health services such as telemedicine and mobile health platforms can help ensure continuous treatment and better adherence to ART.
- Coordinate regional procurement of medicines and ensure ART portability, enabling uninterrupted HIV treatment across borders for migrants, displaced people, and binational families.

5. Strengthened Regional Cooperation (SDG 17)

- Deepen South–South collaboration on finance, climate adaptation, agriculture, and sustainable infrastructure.
- Create formal regional platforms for shared monitoring, knowledge exchange, and accountability.
- Promote development cooperation models rooted in solidarity, equity, and mutual responsibility.

- Meaningful participation of PLHIV in policy design, implementation, and monitoring is essential to ensure rights-based, accountable, and people-centered development.
- Establish regional mechanisms for collective oversight of extractive industries, land acquisitions, and large-scale infrastructure to prevent exploitation of communities and ecosystems.
- Create participatory regional governance mechanisms where civil society, Indigenous peoples, informal workers, and marginalized communities have meaningful decision-making power.
- Regional cooperation must include climate reparations, loss-and-damage frameworks, and joint adaptation strategies that prioritize ecological justice over corporate-driven megaprojects.
- Promote regional financial instruments that redistribute wealth and resources among countries rather than channeling capital to foreign investors or elite-controlled sectors.

Conclusion

South Asia stands at a pivotal moment. Rising debt burdens, climate shocks, inequality, and democratic backsliding threaten the transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda. Yet the region also possesses strong community leadership, youth movements, and regional solidarity networks capable of driving transformative change.

We call on governments, regional bodies, development partners, and international financial institutions to adopt rights-based, gender-just, and participatory approaches that place people, dignity, and planetary sustainability at the center of development policy. Progress on SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11, and 17 must be measured not only by infrastructure built or funds mobilized, but by whether the most marginalized communities experience tangible improvements in safety, access, representation, and justice. Advancing coordinated action on SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11, and 17 will strengthen health systems, reduce inequality, and uphold the principle of leaving no one behind.

Endnotes

This South Asia Call to Action is the collective outcome of the contributions and inputs provided by members of the South Asia Constituency who actively participated in the meeting conducted on 17 April 2026, prior to the APFSD Peoples Forum in Bangkok. The content reflects the discussions, ideas, and consensus reached during the meeting. It was further shared more broadly with South Asia members for additional inputs, ensuring a wider consultation process and strengthening the accuracy, inclusivity, and representation of diverse viewpoints across the region.

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