**Peace through shared prosperity**

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Countries and regions prosper together. Shared responsibility leads to shared prosperity which, in turn, brings in a stable and peaceful political environment that is critical for sustained growth and development. There are many examples to that effect in recent times.

The East Asia and Pacific region leads the way to sustainable and resilient development. It has made remarkable progress in reducing poverty and driving global growth, though concerns are growing about high income inequality. Competitiveness and inclusivity have improved significantly. Regional collaboration in financial inclusion, agri-business, sustainable energy, public private partnerships, and sharing South-South knowledge is noteworthy.

In Europe and Central Asia, shared prosperity gains are quite strong in a high growth environment. Before the onset of Covid-19, capital inflows and credit growth remained strong. Regional focus has been on connectivity for growth, energy, creating markets, financial sector stability, a vibrant private sector, de-risking private investments, improving government efficiency, and service delivery, though an aging population poses a demographic challenge.

Similarly in the Latin America and Caribbean Region, one finds a global footprint on strong trade linkages with the world and a growing importance as a global buyer and seller. It is contributing to an expanding global labour supply through demographics and migration, there are massive natural endowments and the region a first mover on climate action. Infrastructure services are being strengthened, investment in human capital and efforts to protect the poor are leading the way to economic integration.

In Africa, power grids have connected a dozen countries from Senegal to Nigeria opening the potential for more power generation across borders. Twenty countries have been connected to high-speed cable, lowering costs and increasing coverage. Millions of farmers benefit from new technology and seeds. Many African Centers for Excellence have been established in over twenty countries to close the science and technology gap. There is regional collaboration to support the non-extractive sectors -- agribusiness, manufacturing and services --to expand job opportunities while promoting economic diversification.

In the Middle East and North Africa several regional cooperation initiatives have been launched, most notable amongst these are regional water sector initiatives, Pan-Arab regional energy trade and Education for Competitiveness. Also there have been efforts at gender mainstreaming, building resilience to climate risk and refugee shocks. Following COP-22 in Morocco, the new Middle East and North Africa climate change action plan was approved; it puts renewed emphasis on this agenda in the region.

South Asia continues to be the least connected and the least integrated region. Stubborn challenges delay and threaten progress. It remains home to one-third of the world’s extreme poor. Severe forms of exclusion, particularly related to gender, caste, and ethnicity are impediments to peoples’ wellbeing. Many human development outcomes are poor, especially learning outcomes. India and Pakistan have some of the highest infant mortality rates across all comparators. Huge infrastructure gaps need billions of investments. The region lags behind all regions in access to electricity, telecoms, and improved sanitation.

The energy mix relies mostly on coal. Messy urbanisation with almost 150 million people residing in slums is another major challenge. South Asia lags behind on most governance indicators. Stunting levels prove difficult to reduce. There is a triple deficit in job creation --number of jobs, good jobs, and suitable jobs for women. New risks bring additional threats air pollution is the highest among regions, the number of forcibly displaced people is growing, and the lives and assets of the poor are the hardest hit by natural disasters.

The South Asian region needs to focus more on the following six areas: i) producing, sharing, and using high quality knowledge to underpin structural reforms; ii) strengthening governance and security, addressing fragility; iii) greater social and financial inclusion; iv) developing new partnerships and leveraging external resources for a greater impact in strategic areas; v) supporting the private sector, and creating markets; and vi) pushing harder to address the high cost of doing business in a fragile environment, fueled by security risks and low capacity.

We also need to push harder to promote global public good --reducing emissions, accelerating energy transitions, strengthening environmental protection and gender action plans.

The region has had a difficult history with extremely low levels of economic cooperation and integration. It’s exports account for only two percent of world exports. Tensions, stresses, hostilities, and conflicts between India and Pakistan are pulling down the entire region. The largest country has a greater responsibility to help the downtrodden come out of the poverty trap. Smaller countries will benefit more than the rest in terms of access to bigger markets.

This is not to suggest that we give up or abandon our principled positions on any of the core issues affecting the relations between India and Pakistan. China-Taiwan, China-Japan, China-US, France-Germany, US-Canada have had their share of stresses and strains but trade, commerce and economic cooperation between them has gone on since decades. Peace has a better prospect through shared prosperity.

Similarly, on water, Pakistan being the lower riparian, any stalemate on the subject does not suit us. We should be aiming to maximise the untapped potential of the Indus Basin. Lastly, South Asia needs to focus more on South-South cooperation in terms of trade, forging partnerships and knowledge sharing --and try to optimise cooperation not just within the region but also with both East and West Asia.

The first and foremost consideration before every state and government should be the welfare and prosperity of its citizens; the rest should be secondary. Leadership is all about taking tough decisions in the public interest and it is time to make such choices.

The writer is a former civil servant.