

Press Release:

Delegates from South Asia call for a paradigm shift in EU Development policy

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The EU needs to give more priority to social issues and democratic reform in its cooperation policy with South Asia, urged two prominent social activists from the region in a meeting held in the European Parliament on Tuesday 14 June.

In the event organised by Eurostep, the South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) and hosted by Richard Howitt MEP, contributions were given by Mr Howitt, the Commission and civil society representatives from the North and South. In particular, Farooq Tariq and Rokeya Kabir - two key social activists from South Asia and members of the core committee of SAAPE gave critical insights regarding the main issues facing the region at present.

Ms Kabir argued that the current trend in development policy of focusing on energy and infrastructure is misguided and this does "nothing to address the social problems" of the region. She further argued that privatisation of the health and education sectors, as advocated by many donor bodies "only works for the private sector", and serves to widen the gap between the rich and poor.

Mr Tariq called for support for democratic reform, arguing that "for the first time in recent history we have democracy in all eight countries in South Asia. However, the nature of this democracy is questionable and a true democratic revolution is needed in the region". Moreover, in the Pakistani budget announced last week, approximately 20% was allocated to defence. According to Mr Tariq, this reflects a wider militarisation of society in South Asia. In response to this trend, the EU and the international community must "carefully monitor government spending in the region" if poverty eradication is to be placed firmly on the agenda of the governments of South Asia.

The meeting was introduced by Mr Richard Howitt MEP, who highlighted that the eradication of poverty has to be the overarching goal in EU relations with developing countries. Taking this into consideration, Mr Howitt strongly argued that all Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) must include human rights clauses. As Human Rights spokesperson for the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) in the EP, he further contended that without such an approach, the EU's cooperation with the region runs the risk of "being blind to poverty".

The meeting also saw a response from Mr Jos Jonckers from DG DEVCO, who argued that "the EU must not compromise our principles and values of human rights and democracy in development cooperation with partner countries". Indeed, EU development cooperation must actively promote these, argued Mr Jonckers.