

## Report

### Regional Consultation on Advancing Social Dialogue and Empowering Solidarity for Trade Unions in South Asia

13-14 May 2025

Colombo, Sri Lanka



### Background

Social dialogue is one of the essential mechanisms for trade unions and workers' rights for fostering labour relations, supporting economic development, and promoting decent work in the world of work. As per the definition of the International Labour Organization (ILO), "Social dialogue is defined to include all types of negotiation, consultation or simply exchange of information between, or among, representatives of governments, employers and workers, on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy." Additionally, the ILO considered social dialogue as the best tool in promoting better living and working conditions, improving good governance, as well as social justice. Thus, the social dialogue consists of the various forms, including tripartite (government, employers, and workers) and bipartite (between employers and workers) interactions at different levels - enterprise, sectorial, national, and regional. Moreover, tripartism and social dialogue are integral components of the Decent Work Agenda by the ILO and essential tools for achieving it.

Regardless of the significance, the social dialogues in South Asian countries have been going through several challenges and difficult phases. Some of the challenges of the implementation of effective social dialogue can be discussed as: weak institutional framework, high informal sector, weak enforcement of labour laws, political instability, growing influence of multinational corporations and large corporate entities, government policies those which are not aligned with international labour standards (ILS), pro-capitalist governments, limited engagement from

employers in the process, and also the fragmentation of trade unions. Thus, to address these challenges in South Asia, trade unions could use social dialogue as an important tool to promote labour rights and international labour standards.

In the context of South Asia, social dialogue is necessary for promoting workers' rights, strengthening industrial relations, and ensuring economic growth. The effectiveness of social dialogues can be increased by strengthening institutional mechanisms, encouraging inclusive participation, and promoting regional solidarity, even though difficulties and challenges still exist and the trade unions have to rethink the process to make it more inclusive and credible. The regional consultation mainly focused on trade union perspective, and taken as an opportunity to discuss the current situation of South Asian countries on social dialogue mechanism, role and efforts from SARTUC affiliates, exchange best practices, and importantly, work on the strategies and action plan for trade unions to advance the social dialogue process, including enhance solidarity for trade unions at regional level. Therefore, SARTUC, in coordination with Mondiaal FNV, has successfully organised a two-day “**Regional consultation on Advancing Social Dialogue and Empowering Solidarity for Trade Unions in South Asia**” in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on 13-14 May 2025.

### Objectives

- To discuss the trade union perspective on the importance and challenges of implementing effective social dialogue in South Asia;
- To strengthen the role of SARTUC affiliates in social dialogue processes in South Asia;
- To exchange and share the best practices for advancing workers’ rights through social dialogue at the union or country level;
- To develop actionable strategies and an action plan for advancing social dialogue at the regional level through enhanced solidarity among SARTUC affiliates.

### Day 1 (Tuesday): 13 May 2025

#### Opening and welcome address



**Brother Harbhajan Singh Siddhu, President SARTUC; General Secretary, HMS, India**

**Brother Harbhajan Singh Siddhu**, welcomed all affiliates and senior leaders to the regional consultation programme, where he recalled the discussion from the ITUC-AP RGC meeting in Nepal, where priorities for SARTUC were discussed.

Furthermore, he expressed the context of South Asian trade unions and workers, highlighting the



serious attack on workers' rights, government inaction, breakdowns in social dialogue, and escalating anti-worker reforms, particularly India's four new labour codes that weaken protections and restrict freedom of association. Moreover, he explained SARTUC's five priority areas: climate change, social protection, informal economy, equality, and migration, and expressed ongoing efforts to work with regional employer networks like SAFE to protect labour rights, including migrant workers.

### **Brother Laxman Basnet, General Secretary, SARTUC**

**Brother Laxman Basnet**, welcomed all the participants and trade union leaders to the regional consultation. He explained the agenda and the discussion for the two days on social dialogue, reflecting the current state of workers in South Asia, questioning the absence of meaningful government or political support, and the challenges in defending workers' rights. He stated that unions must unite internally before engaging in national and community-level dialogue. Lastly, he urged for regional solidarity and building alliances within SARTUC affiliates for the protection of workers' rights in the current context of South Asia, and trade unions are important to strengthening social protection through collective actions in the region.

### **Brother Leslie Devendra, Vice President, SARTUC; General Secretary, SLNSS and a Senior Leader from the Host country, Sri Lanka**

**Brother Leslie** welcomed delegates to Sri Lanka. He highlighted the disproportionate climate change burden on the Global South and the corruption hindering the transition to renewable energy. Moreover, he described the fragile conditions of informal sector workers who lack retirement and social protections and criticised the misuse of pension funds, and warned of increasing labour migration and exploitation due to the weak regulation of recruitment agents. Finally, he expected the regional discussion on social dialogue would strengthen the understanding and finalise the regional strategies for strong social dialogue from the trade union perspective to work collectively at the regional level.

### **First Session**

#### **Rethinking Social Dialogue: Social Dialogue beyond Traditional Perspective in South Asia**

**Mr. Hari Sharma**, Political Analyst and Labour Expert



**Mr. Hari Sharma** expressed in his presentation that the traditional models of social dialogue are not able to resolve the workers' agenda in the changing world of work. To remain significant and impactful, trade unions must think beyond the conventional frameworks of social dialogue mechanisms and start inclusive dialogues with a broader range of social partners/groups. The new process shall actively engage with women, youth, indigenous communities, and other marginalised groups whose voices have long been



underrepresented in the world of work. Moreover, he emphasised to include the informal in the area of social dialogue. Therefore, the changing world of work is expecting an innovative approach that holds diverse political and social actors, fostering a more inclusive and credible process. Furthermore, he suggested that the trade unions have to expand alliances and networks and reaching out to new stakeholders is not just strategic but also important for the future of social justice and decent work in South Asia.

Additionally, the resource person emphasised how political polarisation and fragmentation have eroded solidarity in trade unions in South Asian. According to him, historically, workers and peasants formed a strong political base, but capitalist development has often ignored informal workers and social classes. He argued that workers are not only defined by class but also by cultural and social identities, which require broader alliances beyond the traditional labour movement.

Importantly, he stressed the importance of inclusivity, recognising multiple identities within the workforce; such as gender, caste, ethnicity, and migrant status, and starting partnerships with diverse social groups. Social dialogue is more than collective bargaining; it is about connecting social diversity, listening to one another, and building trust. Solidarity should extend horizontally to indigenous peoples, women, youth, sexual minorities, and other marginalised communities. He urged trade unions to move beyond urban, male-dominated structures, adapt to rural and informal realities, and rethink categories of classification to address the needs of landless, informal, and socially excluded workers. The goal is to restore credibility and relevance by engaging communities in ways that acknowledge equality while respecting differences.

According to him, democracy is an umbrella framework that demands acceptance of diversity, open conversation, and alternative voices. Trade unions must proactively reach out to students, women's groups, and youth, and develop strategies to engage them. Restoring relevance requires persistent dialogue, solidarity based on equality, and collaboration across social movements. While protecting rights through law remains essential, unions must also cultivate new forms of social solidarity to meet contemporary challenges. He concluded that social dialogue begins with self-recognition and leadership engagement, ultimately forging a collective path forward in South Asia's changing political and social landscape.

During the **Q&A session**, Brother Mahendra thanked Mr. Hari Sharma for his insightful reflections on South Asia's complex realities shaped by decades of experience, recalling India's 1980s technology-driven "us versus them" divide now favouring "them" and highlighting JTUCC as a model of solidarity through collective voice. Sister Sonia found the discussion thought-provoking, emphasising the urgent need for unions to move beyond traditional tools like collective bargaining and tripartism to address new challenges posed by the informal, platform economy, and divided workforces along religious and social lines. Brother Laxman questioned the lack of political support for labour in South Asia, urging unions to first build unity internally and nationally before

engaging in meaningful social dialogue, stressing solidarity and outreach beyond comfort zones. Brother Leslie called for unions to modernise their approach to engage younger, digitally-oriented workers, stating that old slogans no longer resonate and that new attitudes towards employers and members are essential for effective social dialogue. Brother Harbhajan Singh Siddhu outlined the negative impacts of India's 1991 liberalisation policies on employment and labour rights and dismissed the value of unions in the democratic process. Responding to these, Mr. Hari Sharma stressed the importance of unions continuing traditional work while urgently engaging unorganised and marginalised groups to build broader social and political power, and urged unions to adapt, restore relevance, and maintain continuous dialogue to strengthen social solidarity.

### Panel Discussion

#### Social Dialogue in Bangladesh: Country-level challenges, lessons, solutions, and good practices

**Moderator: Mr. Hari Sharma**, Political Analyst and Labour Expert

**Panellists: Brother Shakil Akhter Chowdhury**, Deputy General Secretary – SARTUC; General Secretary –ITUC-BC/BLF, Bangladesh

**Brother Shahidullah Badal**, Acting General Secretary – BMSF, Bangladesh

**Brother MD. Jahangir Alam Chowdhury**, General Secretary – BSSF, Bangladesh



**Brother Shakil** clarified that social dialogue is important for keeping workers' demands through the collective bargaining between employers and workers, traditionally bipartite and rarely involving government. However, in the context of Bangladesh, such dialogues are becoming weak and rarely happen, especially in the formal sector like RMG, where less than 1 per cent of workers engaged in healthy bargaining last year. Moreover, he highlighted that the dominance of informal work, the absence of strong unions, and huge migrant workforces are the key challenges for effective social dialogue. While attending biartite or/and tripartite dialogues, trade unions have to be equipped with data and knowledge on recent policies, mostly economic policies. He stressed the strengthening of the Tripartite Consultative Committee and advocated for frequent meetings to raise workers' voices.

**Brother Jahangir** shared that social dialogue is relatively new to trade unions in Bangladesh, although the concept has always existed. He expressed that the ITUC Congress discussed on the issues of “new social contract,” where he expanded the idea of social dialogue as well. Moreover, he acknowledged that the fragmentation of the two main federations based on political position is



weakening the trade union movement and questioning the union's ability to protect workers' rights. Furthermore, he expressed the issues over the informal sector's struggles and the burden of microcredit on workers, emphasising the importance of platforms like SARTUC to expand understanding and commitment to social dialogue. Finally, he expressed hope that this meeting would strengthen their capacity to advocate effectively.

**Brother Badal** stressed that social dialogue in Bangladesh is weak due to the fragmentation of trade unions and low unionisation rates. He argued that participation committees cannot replace strong unions because they lack the independence and genuine representation of workers. He expressed the example of the garment sector, where the ineffective state of most unions or many being “yellow” (pro-employer) or inactive on paper. He highlighted a recent tripartite agreement on 18 workers' demands that has seen minimal implementation, highlighting the challenge of government-appointed “worker representatives” who do not truly represent workers' interests. Finally, he stressed that the unity and strength among trade unions are indispensable for meaningful collective bargaining and social dialogue.

### **Q&A Session**

In the Q&A session, Moderator Mr. Hari Sharma emphasised that collective bargaining is an essential, non-negotiable right crucial for union relevance and societal respect, urging unions to continuously engage, diversify membership, and maintain broad social representation to strengthen their bargaining power and legitimacy. Brother Rajmani requested information about the role of labour departments in facilitating social dialogue and sought clarity on legal guidelines instructing workplace dialogue, questioning who initiates and institutionalises these processes. Brother Laxman Basnet called for solidarity with Indian trade unions planning a strike on May 30, encouraging all to support the collective declaration and uphold the principle that “an attack on one is an attack on all.” Answering to queries, Brother Shakil clarified that collective bargaining is a legally defined right specific to trade unions at the enterprise level, whereas social dialogue involves a broader range of actors, including government and civil society; he stressed that for dialogue to succeed, workers' representatives must be recognised as equal partners, or negotiations risk failure. Brother Badal defined the formal dispute resolution process, which begins with employers' associations, proceeds to government intervention, and ultimately involves the courts, reflecting the established legal framework.

### **Day 2 (Wednesday): 14 May 2025**

#### **Social Dialogue as a Crucial Tool for Advancing Decent Work and Ensuring a Fair Distribution of Labour Income (Online)**

**Ms. Yuki Otsuji**, DWT-Delhi and ACTRAV, ACTRAV Specialist for South Asia, highlighted the important role of social dialogue in advancing decent work and ensuring fair income distribution. She highlighted the importance of ILO's core conventions, particularly Conventions 87 and 98 on freedom of association and collective bargaining, while mentioning the challenges



of ratification and implementation in South Asia. She explained that while many countries have social dialogue mechanisms, these are often irregular, poorly institutionalised, and lacking inclusiveness, particularly for women, informal workers, migrant workers, and other marginalised groups. Moreover, she stressed the need for trust-building among social partners, stronger technical capacity for unions, and more inclusive approaches to represent unorganised and platform economy workers. She also stressed the importance of enabling conditions such as strong, independent workers' and employers' organisations, respect for fundamental rights, joint capacity-building, and recognition of social partners as equals in policy-making. She concluded by affirming ACTRAV's commitment to support unions in South Asia to strengthen social dialogue and strengthen the voices of underrepresented workers.

### **Q&A Session**

**Brother Laxman Basnet** thanked Sister Yuki for her comprehensive presentation with highlighting the perspective of ACTRAV to South Asian trade unions. In the Q&A session, **Brother Shakil** asked about plans to enhance trade union capacity for effective participation in social dialogue. **Brother Harbhajan Singh Sidhu** raised concerns about governments in South Asia violating ILO conventions despite formal commitments, and **Brother Ashok Singh** expressed frustration over the limited responsiveness of ILO leadership to workers' concerns and called for stronger action. In reply to these queries and comments, she responded that ACTRAV is planning national and regional training on International Labour Standards (ILS) and labour law reforms, with a focus on technical and evidence-based negotiation skills. Moreover, she stressed the need for practical, targeted capacity-building rather than repetitive workshops. Additionally, she acknowledged the challenge, expressing that violations occur even in ratified countries, and suggested exploring bipartite or sectorial dialogue mechanisms as alternatives when tripartite processes are undermined. She emphasised ACTRAV's efforts to push governments through supervisory mechanisms, but the need for practical alternatives is important. Finally, she assured that ACTRAV remains open to feedback and committed to working closely with unions, starting from feasible, smaller steps to strengthen workers' positions in South Asia.

### **Panel Discussion**

#### **Social Dialogue in Sri Lanka: Country-level challenges, lessons, solutions, and good practices**

**Moderator: Brother Mahendra Sharma**, Advisor, SARTUC

**Panellists: Brother Leslie Devendra**, Vice President, SARTUC; General Secretary, SLNSS

**Brother Rajamany Siniaah**, Vice President, CWC

**Brother SP Vijekumaran**, NTUF

#### **Brother Leslie, SLNSS**

Brother Leslie explained briefly the Sri Lankan context from a historical to a current perspective to connect towards a new political context where Sri Lanka is bound to the conditions from the IMF for the formation of economic policies. The IMF has imposed strict requirements, including a new labour code that drastically undermines workers' rights, and Sri Lanka will be imposed by

the loans and dependency. The new labour codes weaken the workers' rights, such as removing the eight-hour workday, allowing up to 16-hour workdays, and weakening protections against unfair dismissal by giving employers the power to refuse reinstatement of terminated workers. Moreover, he expressed that around 66 per cent of the workers lack social protection, mostly due to informality and outsourcing. He doubted about the government's ability to fulfil promises given



the binding IMF conditions, including a probable 35 per cent electricity bill hike as a loan prerequisite. Despite these challenges, Brother Leslie expressed some hope in social dialogue mechanisms. He noted that the union's independence from political parties has strengthened its voice and helped it grow. With long-standing cooperation with the Employers' Federation of Ceylon, the union has successfully signed 67 collective agreements, maintaining industrial peace and using strikes only as a last resort. He emphasised that social dialogue differs from collective bargaining by strengthening cooperation rather than argumentative relations. He expressed a key example during the COVID-19 crisis, when the country faced widespread closures and job losses,

social dialogue proved effective: employers initially proposed laying off 50,000 workers, but through genuine dialogue, they agreed to retain those workers with 50 per cent salary while trade unions believed it as a win-win situation with a historic success for social dialogue in Sri Lanka.

### **Brother Rajamany, CWC**

Brother Rajamany reflected on the longstanding struggles of the Indian-origin plantation community in Sri Lanka. The CWC has traditionally engaged with governments through political involvement, but now faces ongoing challenges, including labour reforms, political instability, the economic crisis, and COVID-19's aftermath. Furthermore, he highlighted that the new government is open to discussing labour reforms where unions continue to push for concrete agreements. Social security schemes exist but are often incomplete or lack clear implementation guidelines that prompting the CWC to advocate for finalised through union-consulted policies. Further, he emphasised that social dialogue must extend beyond workplaces to build public solidarity. Collective bargaining has been practised since 1967 but now has grown more difficult in post-privatisation age with wages remaining low and negotiations largely managed by the Wages Board. Additionally, he spoke on the plantation employment where it has shifted from traditional supervisor-based systems to a "block" system where families receive only a fraction of market rates and are excluded from labour protection mechanisms. The CWC is campaigning to formalise these workers under labour laws by seeking international support. Likewise, migrant workers lack union rights and are based on the expanded foreign employment structures. Finally, he expressed



concern over the government's slow progress, mentioning that even influential unions like the CWC are currently out of political power.

### **Brother SP Vijekumaran, NTUF**

Brother Vijekumaran highlighted the introduction of social dialogue in the plantation sector about 15–16 years ago, with government-led training aimed at fostering dispute resolution without strikes. However, despite a sound concept, implementation has been weak due to management's secrecy, lack of transparency, and top-down decision-making centralised in Colombo. Further, he expressed that the political intervention has further weakened collective bargaining, leading to short-term six-month contracts under the “block-out” system that deprives workers of legal protections and benefits. Additionally, he expressed that the plantation workers has shrunk from over a million a few years back to around 150,000 because educated youth reject the unfair work culture. He further criticised the current policies that exposed the recent worker deaths. Companies are not willing to agree to long-term contracts, while NTUF proposes long-term, 30-year agreements to secure livelihoods and allow multi-crop planting. Additionally, he stated that legal reforms remain unapproved despite presidential support. He further called for stronger ILO involvement and emphasised that genuine social dialogue requires mutual preparedness from both employers and unions to change management practices and legal frameworks to re-establish the sector and attract younger workers.

In the Q&A session, Brother Mahendra Sharma acknowledged the insights provided by the panellists. Brother Shakil asked how IMF–World Bank–ILO commitments on social justice could be leveraged through social dialogue to protect workers, questioning why such international commitments are not enforced. The speakers responded that while these institutions claim to promote social dialogue, they push liberal economic policies that limit subsidies, allowing only minimal social support, and aim to keep governments out of direct business activities.

### **Panel Discussion**

#### **Social Dialogue in India: Country-level challenges, lessons, solutions, and good practices**

**Moderator: Dr. Manoranjan Pegu**, Country Program Director, Solidarity Center, Sri Lanka

**Panellists: Ms. Champa Verma**, Deputy General Secretary, SARTUC; HMS

**Ms. Umanagendramani Makaraju**, Women's Secretary, SARTUC; INTUC

**Ms. Sonia George**, Chair, Technical Committee for Programme, SARTUC; Vice President, SEWA

### **Sister Sonia (SEWA)**

Sister Sonia George explained briefly on the condition of the current state of social dialogue in India, observing that the last Indian Labour Conference took place a decade ago and that no meaningful tripartite engagement has occurred since. Moreover, she explained that the politically aligned or employer-friendly unions have been closely working with the government of India. She further emphasised that the enactment of the four labour codes after the consolidation of 40 labour

laws has weakened the workers' rights. The four labour codes have weakened the provisions of equal pay, maternity benefits, and strong collective bargaining that were guaranteed earlier and also, the strikers are restricted till the notice period (60 days) and considered as a threat of criminalisation. Additionally, she stated that these changes affect informal and precarious workers, mostly women workers who already struggle with high unemployment, wage disparities, and a



lack of legal protections. She argued that the weakening of bargaining spaces forces unions to rethink strategies, mostly in sectors where the majority of workers are self-employed, home-based, or in gig/platform work. Finally, she urged for more inclusive, non-traditional social dialogue models, providing

examples from SEWA's "My Fair Home" campaign for domestic workers that prioritise the voices of women and informal sector workers when formal tripartite systems fail.

### **Sister Uma (INTUC)**

Sister Uma expressed the voice and struggles of women in informal sectors who are still invisible in the policy implementation despite their contributions to the Indian economy. She further stressed the lack of social protection schemes such as access to maternity leave, paid childcare, sanitation facilities, and safe transport. Unfortunately, raising gender-specific workplace problems in the trade unions' setting can invite intimidation or job loss, and there is very little participation of women in the collective bargaining process. For her, issues of women in the workplace are often overlooked by employers and the government, but very small things to management could be important issues to women workers at the workplace. Coming from a railway background, she highlighted the railway sector as an example, where women workers often face unsafe night shifts, inadequate restrooms, and harassment, while contract and daily-wage workers in small establishments face job insecurity and denial of basic rights. Importantly, she argued that the union representatives need to be equipped with sharper negotiation skills with cultural awareness and strategies that safeguard livelihoods without compromising enterprise sustainability.

### **Sister Champa (HMS)**

Sister Champa expressed the collective efforts of India's ten central trade unions, which organised a joint collective platform against regressive labour reforms and policies that weakened the workers' rights in India. She underscored that while the unification of 145 labour laws into four



codes was presented as a simplification but it has weakened protections and enforcement. The four labour codes are more favourable to employers. She further said, the implementation of laws and policies in India is very weak; however, they seem progressive on paper. Additionally, she claimed that HMS works through a multi-level approach: organising at the grassroots, providing leadership training (especially for women and youth), engaging in sector-specific advocacy, and mobilising for collective actions such as strikes and mass rallies when dialogue channels close. Moreover, she expressed the need for unity among fragmented unions, as divisions only weaken the labour movement and bargaining capacity. Importantly, she believed that the importance should be given to vulnerable groups such as domestic workers, construction labourers, agricultural workers, and scheme workers. Finally, she expressed that the unresolved national issues should be taken to the international platforms like the ILO. According to her, global solidarity and advocacy can be the crucial tools for change if national governments fail to listen to the trade unions' movements or workers' rights issues.

### **Q&A session**

In the Q&A session, Brother Shakil raised issues about gender policies, labour governance, and ratification of ILO C189 and C190, and women's issues in the informal sector. In reply to this, sister Champa said that policies and laws exist, but implementation is poor; inspections are rare and often influenced by employers. Furthermore, the moderator explained that inspection systems are ineffective for the vast informal sector due to limited resources and scope, and penalties are too low to deter violations. Finally, Sister Sonia expressed that while laws may exist, they are mostly designed for the formal sector, leaving the realities of informal workers unaddressed.

### **Panel Discussion**

#### **Social Dialogue in Maldives and Nepal: Country-level challenges, lessons, solutions, and good practices**

**Moderator:** Mr. Hari Sharma, Political Analyst and Labour Expert, Nepal

**Panellists:** Brother Mauroof Zakir, President, MTUC, Maldives

Brother Yogendra Kunwar, President, NTUC/ITUC-NAC, Nepal

Brother Jagat Simkhada, President – ANTUF/JTUCC, Nepal

**Mr. Hari Sharma** moderated the session by highlighting the importance of discussing the current state of collective bargaining, social dialogue, and labour issues in the Maldives and Nepal. He emphasised that the session aims to foster a collective understanding of the challenges and opportunities these countries face in advancing social dialogue.



**Brother Mauroof** from MTUC, the Maldives, began by recognising the intensive discussions held over the past days on social dialogue and its importance. He emphasised that meaningful and inclusive conversations involving employers, workers, and the government are the core of social dialogue, but he noted significant challenges such as governmental bias, weak worker representation, and a lack of trust among stakeholders. He outlined recent developments in the Maldives' labour landscape, including the 2008 Constitution, the formation of the first workers' associations between 2008 and 2010, and the enactment of the first industrial relations law in 2023, which mandated the creation of a National Labour Advisory Council and

a national tripartite wage board responsible for establishing a minimum wage. Furthermore, he highlighted the challenges the Maldives faces with institutional instability, as the labour portfolio frequently shifts between ministries, resulting in inconsistent capacity and knowledge gaps within government representatives involved in tripartite bodies. Likewise, he shared his personal experience of being elected to parliament in 2024, but subsequently being denied a seat on the national tripartite advisory board due to his political status, reflecting government resistance to strong worker representation. Despite these hurdles, he underscored the importance of technical support from the ILO to build government and employer understanding of social dialogue, emphasising the Maldives' vulnerability to industrial disputes and the need for a cooperative approach.

**Brother Jagata Simkhada**, president, JTUCC/ANTUF, Nepal, explained an overview of Nepal's labour challenges and legislative context. He stated the gaps in the Labour Act, 2017 (2074), particularly the exclusion of banking and financial employees and the judicial ruling overlooking the banking sector from trade union activities, which undermine labour rights. The removal of service charges in the hospitality sector, which was a longstanding trade union issue, is explained as the political and institutional obstacles that trade unions in Nepal faced. Additionally, he highlighted that a large number of workers (over 80 per cent) are based in the informal sector, making social dialogue difficult to implement. Political instability with frequent government changes hampers consistent labour law reform and enforcement. Moreover, he also emphasised the thin lines between formal and informal employment due to widespread outsourcing without contracts, which excludes many workers from social dialogue and awareness of rights. Despite challenges, he stated positive aspects in sectors like tea gardens, construction, and transportation, where dialogue mechanisms exist. He called for stronger institutionalisation of tripartite committees at national and local levels, integration of informal workers into social security



schemes, and using technologies to enhance worker participation. Finally, he concluded by underscoring the need for legal reforms, international support, and trade union solidarity to overcome political and structural obstacles.

**Brother Yogendera Kunwar**, president, ITUC-NAC/NTUC, Nepal, emphasised social dialogue as a core democratic process supporting decent work, rather than simply a legal or technical procedure. He explained provisions in Nepal's constitution, labour laws, and policies that support collective bargaining and social security, but expressed concern about weak implementation due to poor labour administration and inspection systems. Interestingly, he shared the successful example of the merger of five rural development banks into a single entity was achieved through continuous social dialogue among unions, employers, and Nepal Rastra Bank, saving approximately 1,500 jobs and demonstrating effective multi-stakeholder collaboration. Additionally, he stated that Nepal is committed to ratifying ILO conventions, having already ratified key conventions on collective bargaining (C98) and tripartite consultation (C144), with plans to ratify the freedom of association convention (C87) by 2025. Lastly, he expressed that stronger enforcement and administration are necessary for meaningful progress with policy and structural mechanisms in place.

### **Q&A Highlights**

In the Q&A session, Brother Mauroof clarified that the Maldives currently has only one national trade union centre, as specified by their industrial act. Other participants acknowledged the diverse experiences but agreed on the need for stronger, more inclusive social dialogue frameworks and the challenges posed by the political climate across the region.

### **Committee for finalising SARTUC's Future Course of Action**

Executive Board members, led by President Brother Harbhajan Singh Siddhu and General Secretary Brother Laxman Basnet, agreed on the need for a dedicated committee to determine SARTUC's future direction. The General Secretary, SARTUC, proposed a small, manageable group with one representative from each country, responsible for refining the action plan and reporting progress at the next meeting. The President endorsed this, emphasising that while SARTUC must listen to all affiliates, an excessively large committee would find it hard to operate effectively. He also explained the difficulties unions face in South Asia, pointing out that governments' reliance on loans from global financial institutions often results in the liberalisation of labour laws, longer working hours, and the erosion of hard-won workers' rights.

A key point of debate was gender inclusion. Sister Sonia strongly objected to the absence of women in the proposed committee, arguing that SARTUC cannot credibly advocate for equality without representation in its own structures. Sister Uma, the Women's Secretary, supported these concerns, expressing questioning over her role as Women's Secretary, SARTUC. Other leaders, including Brother Shakil and Sister Champa, supported ensuring gender balance, with proposals



to include women's committee chairs and at least one female representative from each country where possible. While some worried a larger committee would become unmanageable, there was consensus that women's voices alongside youth must be part of shaping SARTUC's agenda.

The discussion also touched on the role of the technical committee, which, as clarified by the President, exists to advise on the practical use of programme funding and to examine proposals before they reach the Executive Committee. Sister Sonia suggested broadening funding sources beyond global unions to include local opportunities, while ensuring technical committee members are involved early in programme design.

In conclusion, two proposals remained on the table: one person per country for a smaller, more efficient body, or one representative from each affiliate for broader representation. The final agreement led toward the inclusion of the Women's Secretary, while keeping the committee operationally manageable and small, consisting of one member from each SARTUC-affiliated country.

#### **Committee for finalising for the future course of action of SARTUC**

- **Brother Shakil Akhter Chowdhury** from Bangladesh
- **Brother Ashok Kumar Singh** from India.
- **Brother Leslie Devendra** from Sri Lanka.
- **Brother Jagat Simkhada** from Nepal.
- **Brother Mauroof Zakir** from the Maldives.
- **Pakistan** (they will be in the next meeting).
- **Sister Umanagendramani Makaraju**, Women's Secretary, SARTUC.

#### **Discussed and Agreed Points**

- **Committee Structure:** Committee to be small for functionality, tentatively one representative from each country.
- **Representation and Gender Parity:** Gender parity to be ensured, with the inclusion of the Women's Secretary, SARTUC.
- **Technical Committee Role:** Clarified as advisory for programme planning, funding identification and utilisation, proposal screening to be consulted on proposals before the Executive Committee.
- **Funding Sources:** Explore both global and local funding sources to support SARTUC's priorities; concern over dependency on global unions; agreed to consider diversified funding approaches; to assist in identifying and approaching potential donors.



## Closing

### **Brother Harbhajan Singh Siddhu, President, SARTUC; General Secretary, HMS, India**

Brother Harbhajan Singh Siddhu extended sincere thanks to all the Executive Board Members and leaders from SARTUC affiliates for their active engagement and valuable contributions throughout the regional consultation. Moreover, he expressed that the discussions had been rigorous and productive, concluding in the finalisation of five-point priorities for SARTUC to work on in future. The President invited Brother Mauroof to organise a programme in the Maldives and extend an invitation to SARTUC leaders, emphasising the spirit of collaboration. Finally, he also extended his gratitude to resource persons, particularly Mr. Hari Sharma, Brother Mahendra Sharma, and Brother Manoranjan Pegu, for their significant roles in facilitating the sessions.

### **Laxman Basnet, General Secretary, SARTUC**

Brother Laxman Basnet acknowledged the patience and commitment of all delegates and participants over the two-day regional consultation, highlighting the important shift in focus from a single agenda on migration to a broader social justice framework comprising five key agendas. He emphasised that SARTUC has now moved into the mainstream trade union movement, engaging directly with governments and union leadership at high levels. Furthermore, he encouraged members to strengthen their unions by increasing inclusivity, particularly among women, youth, and marginalised groups such as the LGBTQI+ community, to enhance their negotiating power.

Additionally, he welcomed the involvement of the new regional director of ACTRAV and underscored the enhanced opportunities for technical and financial support from the ILO and other international organisations. Importantly, he urged participants to influence modern communication tools for advocacy, stating that collective action can now be effective through digital means without large-scale demonstrations. Moreover, he concluded by thanking the Maldives for offering to host the next annual meeting, stressing that with determination and imagination, significant progress is achievable in the coming year. Importantly, he thanked all the participants for their inputs and active engagement throughout the programme, and most importantly, the gratitude to the resource person, Mr. Hari Sharma, political analyst and labour expert, for the inspiring and encouraging session to work differently for the expansion of social dialogue in the changing world of work. Finally, he acknowledged moderators, Brother Mahendra Sharma and Brother Manoranjan Pegu, for their invaluable contributions in facilitating the sessions.



## List of Participants

1. Mr. Harbhajan Singh Sidhu, President – SARTUC; General Secretary- HMS, India
2. Mr. Shakil Akhter Chowdhury, Deputy General Secretary, SARTUC; General Secretary – ITUC-BC/BLF, Bangladesh
3. Mr. Shahidullah Badal, Acting General Secretary, BMSF, Bangladesh
4. Mr. MD. Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, General Secretary, BSSF, Bangladesh
5. Mr. Ashok Kumar Singh, Vice President, SARTUC; INTUC, India
6. Ms. Champa Verma, Deputy General Secretary, SARTUC; HMS, India
7. Ms. Umanagendramani Makaraju, Women’s Secretary, SARTUC; INTUC, India
8. Ms. Sonia George, Chair, Technical Committee for Programme, SARTUC; Vice President, SEWA, India
9. Mr. Mauroof Zakir, President, MTUC, Maldives
10. Mr. Yogendra Kunwar, President, NTUC/ITUC-NAC, Nepal
11. Mr. Jagat Simkhada, President, ANTUF/JTUCC, Nepal
12. Mr. Leslie Devendra, Vice President, SARTUC; General Secretary – SLNSS, Sri Lanka
13. Mr. Suresh Vadivel, President, NTUF, Sri Lanka
14. Mr. Rajamany Siniaah, Vice President, CWC, Sri Lanka
15. Ms. Kanishta Michael, Member, SARTUC Youth Committee; CWC, Sri Lanka
16. Mr. SP Vijekumaran, NTUF, Sri Lanka
17. Ms. W.M.D. Kumari, Vice President, NTUF, Sri Lanka
18. Ms. S. Kanchana, NTUF, Sri Lanka
19. Ms. Pramodini Weerasekera, ILO, Sri Lanka
20. Mr. Hari Sharma, Political Analyst and Labour Expert, Nepal
21. Dr. Manoranjan Pegu, Country Program Director, Solidarity Center, Sri Lanka
22. Mr. Mahendra Sharma, Advisor- SARTUC
23. Mr. Laxman Bahadur Basnet, General Secretary- SARTUC
24. Ms. Sweanta Lama, Executive Officer- SARTUC
25. Mr. Kishor Bikram Shah, Programme Officer- SARTUC



**Agenda**

**Advancing Social Dialogue and Empowering Solidarity for Trade Unions in South Asia**

| <b>Day 1 (Tuesday): 13 May 2025</b>   |   |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| 14:00 - 14:30                         | <b>Opening</b><br>Opening and welcome address: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Mr Harbhajan Singh Siddhu</b>, President SARTUC</li> <li>2. <b>Mr Laxman Basnet</b>, General Secretary, SARTUC</li> <li>3. <b>Senior Leader from the Host country, Sri Lanka</b></li> </ol> |   |
| 14:30 – 15:30                         | <b>Rethinking Social Dialogue: Social Dialogue beyond Traditional Perspective in South Asia</b>   | <b>Mr. Hari Sharma</b> ,<br>Political Analyst and<br>Labour Expert                                    |
| 15:30 - 15:45                         | <b>Tea/Coffee Break</b>   |   |
| 15:45 - 16:30                         | <b>Social Dialogue in Bangladesh: Country-level challenges, lessons, solutions, and good practices</b><br><br><b>Speakers</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol>  | <b>Moderator:</b><br><b>Mr. Hari Sharma</b> ,<br>Political Analyst and<br>Labour Expert               |
| <b>End of Day 1</b>                   |   |   |
| <b>Day 2 (Wednesday): 14 May 2025</b> |   |   |
| 9:00 - 9:30                           | <b>Registration</b>   |   |
| 9:30 – 10:30                          | <b>Social dialogue as a crucial tool for advancing decent work and ensuring a fair distribution of labour income</b>  | <b>Ms. Yuki Otsuji</b> , DWT-Delhi and ACTRAV,<br>ACTRAV Specialist for South Asia                    |
| 10:30 - 11:15                         | <b>Social Dialogue in Sri Lanka: Country-level challenges, lessons, solutions, and good practices</b><br><br><b>Speakers</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. SLNSS</li> <li>2. NTUF</li> <li>3. CWC</li> </ol>  | <b>Moderator:</b><br><b>Mr. Manorajan Pegu</b> ,<br>Country Program<br>Director, Solidarity<br>Center |
| 11:15 - 11:30                         | <b>Tea/Coffee Break</b>   |   |
| 11:30 - 12:15                         | <b>Social Dialogue in India: Country-level challenges, lessons, solutions, and good practices</b><br><br><b>Speakers</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. INTUC</li> <li>2. HMS</li> <li>3. SEWA</li> </ol>  | <b>Moderator:</b><br><b>Mr. Mahendra Sharma</b> ,<br>Advisor,<br>SARTUC                               |



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| 12:15 – 13:00   | <b>Social Dialogue in Nepal: Country-level challenges, lessons, solutions, and good practices</b><br><br><b>Speakers</b><br>1. GEFONT<br>2. NTUC<br>3. ANTUF   | <b>Moderator:</b><br><b>Mr. Hari Sharma,</b><br>Political Analyst and<br>Labour Expert |
| 13:00 – 14:00   | <b>Lunch Break</b>   |  |
| 14:00 - 14:45   | <b>Social Dialogue in Maldives and Pakistan: Country-level challenges, lessons, solutions, and good practices</b><br><br><b>Speakers</b><br>1. PUWF<br>2. MTUC | <b>Moderator:</b><br><b>Mr. Mahendra Sharma,</b><br>Advisor,<br>SARTUC                 |
| 14:45 - 15:00   | Closing and Vote of thanks by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>The President,</b> SARTUC</li><li>• <b>General Secretary,</b> SARTUC</li></ul>       |  |
| <b>End of the Regional Consultation with Tea/Coffee</b> |  |  |