

**Keynote Speech by the D-8 Secretary-General on the Role of RCI in achieving UN SDGs
on 4th December, 2019 at IsDB Tent Hall in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia**

Distinguished Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here today, to address this esteemed forum on an issue that bears great significance for the future wellbeing of our countries; that is the **attainment of UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 and the role of regional cooperation** as a means to achieve them.

Allow me to begin my words by reciting Surah Ali 'Imran “...(and) **hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided**”. Solidarity and cooperation are among the core tenets of Islam, Holy Quran urges us not to divide among ourselves but to unite firmly. This grand principle should guide our way whenever we think about cooperation, and regional cooperation, in particular.

Obviously, cooperation and coordination are essential for realizing the UN Sustainable Development Goals. UN SDG Framework is a comprehensive and holistic policy agenda, setting lofty targets in a number of challenging areas. The UNCTAD World Investment Report of 2014 states that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will take between USD 5 to 7 trillion, with an investment gap in developing countries of about USD 2.5 trillion. We are talking about a massive monetary figure here and ladies and gentlemen, we just have 10 years left. This alone shows the dire need for us to cooperate. UN sets South-South cooperation, regional cooperation and triangular cooperation as the main pillars of achieving SDGs and we should follow their suit. Even the strongest of countries is not in a position to achieve SDGs alone, we need to cooperate, synergize, share our resources and align our priorities.

Distinguished Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

More specialized and targeted than international cooperation, regional cooperation aims at bringing countries with similar challenges, similar problems, similar geographical setbacks around the same table. Be it economic growth or rural development, transportation or eradication of hunger and poverty, industrial growth or gender equality, regional organizations

give countries of the same region an opportunity to align their priorities and share their resources, for the greater good.

But there is one caveat: a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. And it is true that in every region there are those who are endowed with better financial resources, better governance and better infrastructure and there are those who lagged behind, comparatively. Within the framework of regional cooperation this gives the regional powers a vast responsibility to care for the others, to listen to their needs, help them build capacity. Only through such inclusive and affirmative policies, regions can prosper and solve regional problems in unity.

When I say that European Union in this sense, is exemplary, I think everyone in the room will agree with me. Before the fifth enlargement of the European Union, the economic and developmental gap among the western and eastern tip of the continent was apparent. Upon joining the union, Eastern countries of Europe enjoyed a flow of resources from the Western countries, be it in the form of **expertise, knowledge, development assistance, aid, investment and trade**. And why did they do it? Out of generosity or their kind hearts? Yes, that might also be among the reasons but the real reason is that, through this guidance and assistance **they unified the continent**. They became a united market and a united regional power with countries of equitable control and say. The differences remain even today, but we cannot ignore the magnitude of achievement. ASEAN is another example. The development gap among the members was vast, but with the official development assistance, investment, trade, financial resources mobilized from the regional powers to others, countries climbed up the economic ladder. And with greater economic strength in the region, **ASEAN evolved into a regional power itself, positioning itself quite strategically in global affairs.**

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This brings me to the role of D-8 in UN SDG agenda, and how our policies, projects and actions serve the targeted goals. Allow me to remind you that **D-8 is not a regional organization, it is an interregional organization that encompass eight members who partnered among themselves and with others at various platforms.** Our Members cooperate under Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), ASEAN, African Union, OIC, Sahara and Sahel Observatory and many more. We have been in existence since 1997 and with all honesty I can say that, we had been working towards UN SDGs even before UN SDGs even existed.

We started out cooperating in trade, for that it transcends boundaries and binds countries of different regions. Over time, with every progress, and with every achievement we expanded our horizons to new areas of cooperation. Today, as D-8 Secretariat has a Health and Social Protection Program in Abuja, Nigeria working towards Good Health and Wellbeing (SDG 3) and Partnership for Goals (SDG 17). As a leading example of South-South cooperation, we have D-8 Technology Transfer and Exchange Network (D-8 TTEN), that serves as a facilitator of technology transfer among the D-8 Member States. We have reached the point to establish a Qualified Special Industrial/Economic Zone that will strengthen the industrial capacity of our Member States while serving Industry Innovation and Infrastructure, SDG 9. We have built concrete partnerships with many of the UN Specialized Agencies, private sector agents and international stakeholders, as a means to attain SDG 17. **We have come along a long way since 1997, adding layers to our partnership, calling different actors on board and expanding our horizon.**

Ladies and Gentlemen, **Rome wasn't built in one day and sure it was not built without finances.** It takes not only time, but also a significant amount of resource mobilization to reach meaningful results, especially in the case of such grand targets as UN SDGs. This brings me to the pivotal role of Multilateral Development Banks, and in particular to Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) in achieving SDGs.

As I mentioned earlier in my speech, we need USD 5-7 trillion to reach UN SDGs and we currently have a USD 2.5 trillion investment gap. Therefore, the responsibility upon the shoulders of these banks are huge. And it is not only the provision of resources but also the amount of expertise these banks have in terms of risk management, impact evaluation and monitoring. Our countries are in dire need of all these services, which IsDB has been providing professionally and meticulously for many years.

I would like to take a moment to praise IsDB's contribution to the economic aspirations of the Global South and thank them for their refreshing vision on promoting innovation, technology and capacity building. In this regard, allow me to elaborate on one specific modality developed by IsDB. This is a cooperation model called "**Reverse Linkage Project**". During our luncheon in February, 2019 when discussing ways to improve cooperation among our members, H.E Professor Hajjar informed me about the Reverse Linkage Project between Bangladesh and Turkey on cotton production. The aim of the project is to develop capacity in Bangladesh, through the expertise of Turkey, to increase and improve cotton production. It involves technology and expertise transfer from Turkey to Bangladesh. In the end, both these countries

enjoy enriched research capacity and joint development of cotton varieties. I was very much impressed for that, **this is exactly how I think, Global South should cooperate.** The number and variety of Reverse Linkage Projects is impressive and I urge all our distinguished participants to have a deeper understanding of them. We can meet in as many commission meetings, council meetings and summits as we like, we can talk to each other about our lofty goals and write pages of documents, but when it comes to **delivering results, we should be precise and targeted.** This kind of projects, together with other modalities of triangular cooperation, set our priorities right and they are the real essence of regional cooperation.

Remarkably, the ISDB's action plan of the RCI policy and strategy attempts to achieve the UNSDGs and to insure sustainable development through fostering regional cooperation that is based on sharing of resources and enhancing cross borders connectivity. In my view, the action plan shows high potentials of success and outstanding results as it provides tailored cooperation projects for each region per se according to its needs, capacities and potentials. The action plan focuses on achieving good coordination and common ground within the region's countries through designing projects that aim at harmonization of policies and regulations especially in the energy sector, investment legislations, and the financial sector through Islamic finance. It also designs projects that insure interoperability within the region especially in the field of transportation and ports management. I believe that this effort exerted by the ISDB team in laying the ground for better coordination among the region's countries will definitely lead to a more solid and fruitful regional cooperation and the realization of cross-border connectivity. The action plan has also some features of inter-regional cooperation especially between the Africa and MENA regions led by some countries which belong to the two regions such as Egypt and Morocco. In this regard, the D-8 is willing and ready to provide a good platform for the ISDB to have more inter- regional cooperation between the regions of Asia, Africa and the MENA regions.

Notably, the four pillars that constitute the action plan are focusing on sustainable development and had put the UNSDGs in the heart of the strategy. This is illustrated in having Man and Nature as the central axis around which the action plan is revolving and that through focusing on human development and climate change. Most of the projects illustrated in the action plan are designed to serve and benefit the people and the nature. For instance, the projects related to education improvement, economic growth through enhancing trade and connectivity, the sharing of resources, the improvement of the health sector, the technology and knowledge transfer, and the digitalization of finance. All these projects are contributing to human

development. On the other hand, the action plan has as well projects that focus on nature and natural resources such as the climate mitigation plans especially in the energy sector, the promotion of climate-smart projects and the enhancing of the countries' resilience against natural disasters. By focusing the design of their projects on Man and Nature, the ISDB's action plan is successfully and genuinely targeting sustainable development, since both Man and Nature constitute together the corner stone of sustainable development.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Distinguished Delegates,

According to the UN Yearbook of International Organizations, there are 25.000 international NGO's and over 5.000 intergovernmental organizations, whose mandate stretches to various areas of politics, economics and development. It is admirable that 193 members of the global household knock on each other's door, sit on the same table for so many occasions in any given year. Yet when it comes to an issue such as reaching the UN SDGs, **we need tremendous amount of concerted effort alongside concrete projects**. In my capacity as the Secretary-General of an interregional development organization and as a long servant of the aspirations of the Global South, allow me to summarize my ideas on how regional organizations can steer our efforts in reaching UN SDGs.

First, we should realize that there are those who hold higher economic power in any regional organization. And it is the **commitment of these regional powers that determine the overall success of any regional organization**. Therefore, we should incentivize these powers to cooperate with others, show them that they will also benefit in return, from the aggregate development of the region.

Second, we should work national ecosystems. No regional or international power can help a county without proper governance, can-do attitude, right mindset and right institutions. So, if we want to make regional cooperation an effective tool for reaching UN SDGs, as the policy-makers, technocrats, academicians and the very least as citizens, **we should work to improve our national ecosystem**.

Third, we should get our priorities right. Some of us has the time and resources-and allow me to say the luxury- to discuss industry 4.0, internet of things, artificial intelligence and climate change. Some others live in abject poverty, without the basic necessities of a decent, humane life. The end goal is that all of us reach that level to discuss a higher global economic agenda.

But first things first. **First, we should deploy all methods of cooperation at our arsenal to fight against poverty, to eradicate hunger, to ensure the wellbeing and good health of our citizens.** Only then, we can have an equitable say in the global state of affairs and global economy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Distinguished Delegates,

The challenges are there, but the opportunities are ubiquitous too. **I look forward to a future where we can reflect back on these days and be impressed of the progress we have achieved, the road we have taken.**

I once again would like to thank H.E. Prof. Hajjar and the Islamic Development Bank for giving me this opportunity.

Thank you for your attention.