

Editor's Desk

We are happy to present the July 2024 issue of *Thinking Aloud*. The first page article, "The New World Order, Global Challenges and BIMSTEC" analyses the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in the context of global challenges and the emerging "New World Order". BIMSTEC, comprising seven countries around the Bay of Bengal (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand), holds significant promise in addressing contemporary challenges through meaningful regional cooperation. The article argues that the changing global order and emerging global challenges require BIMSTEC to take a fresh approach to regional cooperation amid these new dimensions. By promoting cooperation, building resilience, and advancing sustainable development in the Bay of Bengal region, BIMSTEC can contribute to global progress. Its effectiveness, however, hinges on collective commitment, practical initiatives, and adaptability to the ever-evolving challenges of our world. The second, third, and fourth pages of this issue present three more articles. The second article titled "Some insights from the Labour Force Survey 2022" points out the key insights and underlying intuitions regarding the LFS 2022. Furthermore, the article argues that, in the context of labor market statistics, it is extremely crucial to have timely availability of data on the labor market, preferably on an annual basis. The third article titled, "Reflections on Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2022" highlights that the rise in income inequality in Bangladesh indicates that fruits of economic progress have not been evenly distributed. There is a need for effective policymaking emphasizing equitable growth so that the gains from economic development are broadly shared. The fourth article titled, "Some takeaways from the Food Security Assessment and FIES Survey 2023" examines the food security scenario in Bangladesh. This assessment unveils some pressing multidimensional issues related to dynamics of food security, poverty, inequality, regional disparity, sectoral income-generating capacities, public health, and overall standard of living. The fourth page showcases the events of June 2024.

The New World Order, Global Challenges and BIMSTEC

Selim Raihan

The 6th BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) summit is likely to take place in September this year in Bangkok. The changing global order and emerging global challenges require BIMSTEC to take a fresh approach to regional cooperation amid these new dimensions.

The concept of the New World Order refers to an evolving geopolitical landscape characterized by shifting power dynamics, technological advancements, and interconnectedness. In this context, global challenges have become increasingly complex and interrelated. Ensuring peace and stability in an ever-more multipolar world remains a critical imperative. Conflicts, terrorism, and cyber threats transcend national borders, necessitating collaborative efforts among nations. Moreover, rapid advancements in artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and digital infrastructure offer immense opportunities but also raise ethical, security, and regulatory challenges. The urgent need to address climate change, protect biodiversity, and promote sustainable development requires global cooperation. Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and resource scarcity impact all nations, including those within the BIMSTEC region. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has starkly highlighted the vulnerability of health systems worldwide. Preparedness, equitable vaccine distribution, and effective pandemic response coordination are vital components of a resilient health infrastructure, though many BIMSTEC countries lack a resilient health infrastructure. Despite progress, poverty persists in many regions, particularly within BIMSTEC countries. Bridging economic disparities and achieving inclusive growth are essential not only for global stability but also for regional well-being. Additionally, several BIMSTEC nations grapple with macroeconomic instability, which undermines efforts to reduce poverty and enhance resilience. BIMSTEC, comprising seven countries around the Bay of Bengal (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand), holds significant promise in addressing contemporary challenges through meaningful regional cooperation. Its geographical contiguity and historical linkages create a unique platform for collaboration, bridging South Asia and Southeast Asia. BIMSTEC's priority areas focus on trade, investment, connectivity, and cooperation to enhance economic ties, reduce poverty, and promote sustainable development in the region. Recognizing the threat of terrorism and transnational organized crime, BIMSTEC member states can collaborate through joint efforts and information sharing. The organization emphasizes connectivity in its various forms—physical, digital, and people-to-people. By enhancing transport links, energy grids, digital infrastructure, and technological cooperation BIMSTEC has the potential to foster economic growth and resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of regional health cooperation. BIMSTEC can strengthen health systems, share best practices, and enhance preparedness. Additionally, most BIMSTEC countries face climate vulnerabilities, with some experiencing acute challenges. Collaborative efforts within the organization can effectively address climate change, disaster risk reduction, and sustainable resource management.

However, despite numerous promises and its 27 years of existence, BIMSTEC's progress toward deeper regional integration remains limited. What factors hinder BIMSTEC's progress?

One crucial factor limiting BIMSTEC's advancement is the deficit in political commitment from the leaders of member countries. Concerns arise because larger countries have not consistently demonstrated strong political commitment to carry the agenda forward. Simultaneously, smaller countries have not prioritized BIMSTEC on their agenda. A telling example is that BIMSTEC took 25 years to develop a formal Charter, delaying its institutionalization and decision-making processes. Furthermore, translating commitments into action necessitates sustained efforts. BIMSTEC must prioritize project implementation and diligently monitor outcomes.

Developing a common security framework is crucial. Addressing non-traditional security threats (such as cyber threats and climate-induced migration) is essential. BIMSTEC should engage civil society, academia, and private sectors for a holistic approach. Gender mainstreaming and youth involvement are vital.

Enhancing trade facilitation, reducing non-tariff barriers, and promoting investment will boost economic integration in the BIMSTEC region. Despite improvements in physical connectivity and trade volume, intra-regional trade within BIMSTEC remains low (around 7%). While this is higher than SAARC nations, it lags significantly behind ASEAN (approximately 25%). The region faces a substantial infrastructure investment gap (around \$120 billion annually), hindering seamless economic collaboration.

Despite signing a framework agreement in 2004, BIMSTEC has not yet achieved a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Member countries have entered into multiple bilateral and multilateral trade agreements with other nations, resulting in fragmented trade arrangements. However, growing skepticism about the free trade agreement among larger players within BIMSTEC casts a shadow over the progress of the BIMSTEC FTA. In the past, disputes over the sensitive list, reluctance to open up the economy, and various non-tariff issues have undermined the prospects of an FTA. Additionally, bilateral tensions between member states (such as Bangladesh and Myanmar) impact BIMSTEC's overall effectiveness. Notably, Thailand and Myanmar sometimes prioritize ASEAN over BIMSTEC due to ASEAN's more advanced integration forum.

The BIMSTEC Secretariat operates with limited financial resources. Inadequate funding hampers its capacity to implement projects, organize events, and facilitate cooperation among member countries. Without sufficient financial backing, the Secretariat struggles to drive meaningful initiatives. The Secretariat also faces a shortage of skilled personnel which hinders the Secretariat's overall efficiency. Inadequate resources impact the Secretariat's visibility on the regional and global stage. Advocacy efforts, outreach, and communication suffer due to resource limitations, hindering its ability to promote BIMSTEC's goals effectively.

While BIMSTEC holds significant potential, it encounters obstacles in enhancing people-to-people interactions among member countries. To address this, initiatives such as educating youth about BIMSTEC's importance, investing in cross-border infrastructure, and facilitating digital connectivity can foster stronger ties. By promoting understanding and trust, BIMSTEC can bolster regional cooperation.

In conclusion, BIMSTEC, as a regional entity, has the potential to play a significant role in shaping the New World Order. By promoting cooperation, building resilience, and advancing sustainable development in the Bay of Bengal region, BIMSTEC can contribute to global progress. Its effectiveness hinges on collective commitment, practical initiatives, and adaptability to the ever-evolving challenges of our world.

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Some Insights from the Labour Force Survey 2022

Sayema Haque Bidisha

In the context of Bangladesh, despite impressive progresses in terms of different socioeconomic indicators, there remain challenges in some areas and the labor market is argued to be one of those. Besides, especially in the context of high inflationary pressure and contractionary policies of the Central Bank, understanding the labor market scenario is extremely important.

In this connection, one of the most important indicators of the labor market is certainly that of participation rate. According to the Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2022, though there has not been notable change in the overall participation rate with the rates of males having similar trend over the years (around 80%), the female participation rate (FLFPR) shows an increase from 36.3% in 2016/17 to 42.8% in 2022. This rise in participation rate of females though impressive, needs to be analyzed in detail as the area-wise LFPR shows that, the rate has increased in rural areas (from 38.6% in 2016/17 to as high as 51% in 2022) with a fall from 31% (2016/17) to 23.7% (2022) in urban areas. This fall in FLFPR in urban areas can partly be attributable to the negative impact of COVID-19 on the urban labor market with the majority of Bangladeshi women work force being in the informal sector (according to the LFS 2022 female informal employment is 96.6%), it is likely that these women have been hardly hit during the pandemic. In addition, evidence have shown that, there has been a gradual fall in the proportionate involvement of women in the ready-made garments (RMG) sector, primarily due to increased automation. This trend has expected to have continued in recent years too, affecting women's participation in non-agricultural urban based activities in recent years. The other side of the FLFPR is the rise in the participation rate in rural areas, especially in recent years (a 12.4 percentage point rise between 2016/17 and 2022). With as high as 74% women engaged in agriculture, one most convincing explanation of rise in FLFP in rural areas can be related to a rise in women's role as an unpaid family worker in rural areas due to a gradual rise in labor migration (both internal as well as international) of males. While analyzing the trend and pattern of FLFPR, we however must keep in mind that this participation includes both paid (wage employment and self-employment) and unpaid work (unpaid family work). According to the LFS of 2022, as high as 12.5% of women are found to be engaged in unremunerated works (commonly known as family labors) conducted under the ownership of other household members. Therefore, despite an increase in the participation rate in recent years, women's involvement in the labor market is still being significantly determined by their traditional role involving home-based production process, rather than for marketed paid activities or of profit based entrepreneurial work.

One note-worthy point in the context of labor market is the sector-wise distribution of employment. For the last decade or so, though the participation in the agriculture sector has shown a declining trend, the LFS 2022 data revealed that as high as 45.4% labor force are engaged in agriculture, a rise from 40.6% in 2016/17. This rise has been contrasted by a moderate fall in both industry as well as service sector employment where the former has experienced a fall from 20.4% to 17% and the latter has shown a decline from 39% to 37.4% within the same time period. One important aspect of this distribution of sectoral employment is the sharp rise of women's participation in the agriculture sector (74.1% in 2022 from 59.7% in 2016/17) accompanied with a fall in industry (8.7% from 16.9%) as well as in service sector employ-

ment (17.2% from 23.5%). In the context of male employment, in both agriculture as well as industrial employment there has been a moderate decline from 32.2% to 29.7% for the former and from 22% to 21.5% for the latter, with a slight increase in service sector employment (from 45.8% to 48.8%). Therefore, the sectoral participation of labor force reflects greater concentration of women in informal and relatively low-skilled and low-paid (even unpaid) rural-based agriculture sector work, with only a moderate rise in participation for men in non-agriculture sector. Such a pattern indicates that the fruits of structural transformation have not been effectively contributed to the labor market as a whole, with the women lagging behind men.

One of the most important indicators of labor market is that of unemployment rate and according to the labour force survey 2022, there has been a fall in unemployment rate to 3.53% - where the rate was 4.2% in 2016/17. This fall has been observed in both rural and urban areas with the overall unemployment rate of the former for 2022 was found to be 3.32% and the rate for the latter being 4.19%. This trend in unemployment should however be analyzed in light of the conventional way employment/unemployment is defined- according to the conventional definition, a person is employed if he/she has worked at least one hour in a seven-day period prior to the survey. Therefore, it is crucial to have alternative definitions of unemployment (often termed as under employment) -based on hours of employment, desire for additional work etc. for future policy formulation.

While analyzing labor market data, one crucial information which we need to examine is that of labor market profile of youths. Given that the country is going through a demographic transition, with the youths (15-29 years old) constituting 36.7% of total labor force (LFS 2022), it is important that our policy focus is given towards utilizing this youth bulge of the labor force. However, according to the 2022 labor force survey data, the rate of unemployment of the youths (8%) is much higher than the national average (3.53%). Besides, as high as 22% youths are found to be NEET (youths not in employment, education and training) with the male NEET being 16.2% and female NEET is 27.1%. With this large proportion of youth not being in the main-stream labor market activities and another significant proportion being unemployed, one of the most crucial challenges of the labor market is to effectively utilize our favorable demographic profile.

In the context of labor market statistics, it is extremely crucial to have timely availability of data of the labor market, preferably on an annual basis. Besides, in order to deal with the challenges of the labor market, it is essential to invest in skill and education while focusing more on the quality of education. With increased automation of industries and importance of 4IR related technologies, greater concentration is needed in updating the existing curriculum of training programs, providing skill training for the trainers, introducing 4IR related sophisticated skills in education and training, and more importantly to deal with the challenges of skill mismatch. It is however needless to mention that, the TVET programs must be in the core of the strategies while dealing with the challenges of the labor market. To remove the bottlenecks in boosting female employment, the prime focus must be given towards dealing with certain inherent constraints like child marriage, safety and security in the public sphere, along with policy interventions towards dealing with the challenges related to gender centric norms.

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Reflection on Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2022

Md. Abdul Aahad

The Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2022, conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, is a nationally representative survey providing detailed data on income, expenditure, and consumption. This survey is crucial as it forms the basis for official statistics on poverty and monetary welfare, offering significant insights into the country's socio-economic characteristics. In HIES 2022, 14,400 households from 720 PSUs were surveyed using the Enumeration Area from the Population and Housing Census 2022.

With the updated methodology, HIES 2022 remains a prime instrument for understanding the challenges and opportunities within the country's economy. According to the survey results, HIES 2022 has found tremendous improvements in the living standards and socio-economic status of households in Bangladesh. The HIES 2022 survey shows that average monthly household incomes significantly improved from TK 15,988 in 2016 to TK 32,422 in 2022. However, these figures would require critical analysis of the broad context and implications for a casual commentary. On the surface, there appears to be an improvement in economic standards. But the reality is much more complex and nuanced, particularly with the high inflation brought on by COVID-19 and the Ukraine-Russia war. These developments have markedly impacted the cost of living, with inflationary pressures threatening to erode the real purchasing power of households even as nominal income levels continue to improve.

Inflation has been exceptionally high for necessities such as food, housing, and utility services, which have a high weight in the consumption basket of low-income families. For instance, although per-capita average consumption increased from TK 15,420 in 2016 to TK 30,603 in 2022, the expenditure on food and beverages stayed at 45.76% of total consumption. This suggests that a great deal of an increase in income goes into basic needs, meaning it is not saved or invested in other ways that could increase long-term security for households. Moreover, shares of expenditures on housing and house rent decreased marginally to 10.25% in 2022 from 12.43% in 2016, which could be suggestive of higher living costs being absorbed by an increased income stream but not necessarily reflecting a better quality of life.

There also seems to be a move towards more discretionary spending as non-food expenditures grew to 54.2% of the total household expenditure in 2022 from 50.31% in 2016. That trend, however, may be one where needs are being met rather than that which raises living standards. For instance, the expenditure on transport in the year 2022 increased to 5.3%, up from 4.6% in the rural area, an indication of an increment in the cost of transportation, an increase that might relate to fuel costs. Equally, education expenses rose to 1.8% across the nation, an indication of a possible rise in the level of educational cost or more focus being placed on educational investments despite economic pressures. The fact that this expenditure is proposed to rise to 4.8% in the rural segment in 2022 from the previous 4.7% reinforces the argument that households are spending more on the services sector, which might not have been recorded earlier or have had increased

costs. Included under this category are those for healthcare, which have probably experienced an increase in spending due to the impact of the pandemic, raising the financial burden families are subject to in maintaining health and well-being.

Further, a higher level of income inequality noted throughout the period reconfirms that all benefits of overall economic growth did not percolate down at the same rate to all the households. The Gini national coefficient measuring income inequality was seen to rise from 0.482 in 2016 to 0.499 in 2022. It indicates a widening gap as the benefits of economic growth accrue more and more to higher-income groups. As such, the top 10% of households now appropriate 40.92% of total income as against 38.09% in 2016, the bottom 5% registering a marginal increase in their share of income from 0.23% to 0.37%. Such a drastic contrast stems from an economy in which wealth creation is not proportionally distributed among people and where a significant population enjoys little. It stood further pronounced in urban areas, where it was at 0.539 for the Gini in 2022, compared to 0.498 in 2016. The top 10% of urban households had 45.23% of the total income, while their rural counterparts had 34.95%. This further accentuates the unequal economic gains in that while urban areas benefit most from economic growth, rural households are left to struggle hard to support themselves. In addition, the bottom decile of the urban regions increased only slightly to 1.45% in 2022 from 1.17% in 2016, which shows that the alleviation of urban poverty is slight, and the situation remains serious.

Moreover, the average per capita daily protein intake is 72.56 grams in 2022 compared to 63.8 grams in 2016, thus showing enhanced nutritional standards over the period but not uniformly distributed. Rural households show less protein intake at 71.9 grams compared to urban households at 74.02 grams, which perpetuates a series of disparities in access to nutritious food. A part of this more comprehensive unequal access to resources – an absolutely critical factor in the perpetuation of poverty and inequality – is a result of this nutritional disparity.

To conclude, while the average income and consumption figures revealed from HIES 2022 data are substantially better, these improvements must be considered in a broader context. As a result of rapidly rising inflation rates and increased living costs, many of these improvements have likely been countered for poorer households. In addition, the rise in income inequality indicates that economic fruits have not been evenly distributed and that high-income and urban households have managed to gather the maximum benefits. Even as it represents an improvement, it also requires policies that specifically address inflation, lessen the income disparities, and ensure that economic growth translates to real, sustainable improvement in the living standards of all households within Bangladesh. Data calls for an all-around approach in monetary policy that emphasizes equitable growth so that the gains from economic development are broadly shared. This includes investment in rural development, increased social safety nets, and, most importantly, uprooting the causes of income inequality. Only through these measures will the full potential of economic growth be realized for the whole population of Bangladesh.

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Some Takeaways from the Food Security Assessment and FIES Survey 2023

Mohammad Asaduzzaman

For the first time in Bangladesh, the Food Security Assessment and Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) Survey 2023 is conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). It is a nationally representative survey hoping to provide evidence-based data and information on food security, nutrition statistics, socioeconomic characteristics, and coping strategies. The overall sample size was 29,760 dwelling households over 1488 Primary Sampling Units (PSUs) across eight administrative divisions covering rural, urban, and city corporation areas in each division. It primarily focuses on bridging the data gap for the food and nutrition sector as stressed in SDG 02, and providing essential data for agriculture-related sectors, a national priority of the 7th Five-Year Plan. FIES assessment, being the principal component of the survey, reveals some striking findings about food security, and nutrition scenarios in Bangladesh. It is reported that as a percentage of households 'severe insecurity' and 'moderate or severe insecurity' are the highest in rural areas with 0.92% and 23.89% respectively followed by the urban and city corporation areas. At the national level, these are reported as 0.82% and 21.92%. At the divisional level, the three most 'moderately or severely insecure' regions are Rangpur Division with 29.53% followed by Mymensingh and Sylhet with 28.10% and 27.42% respectively. The least 'moderately or severely insecure' regions are Dhaka (17.05%) and Chittagong (19.04). Sylhet also tops the list for 'severe insecurity' with 1.37% followed by, interestingly, Chittagong with 1.11%. Households with Remittance and Industry as a main source of income experienced the least 'moderate or severe insecurity' with 18.91% and 19.09% respectively while the agrarian households faced the highest insecurity amounting to 26.13%. It also coincides with the fact that divisions, such as Rangpur, Mymensingh, etc., with the most insecurity, also receive considerably lower remittances. Moreover, households with Kutcha dwellings, open water bodies as a source of drinking water, and lying in the 'poorest' and 'poorer' income quintiles seem to experience the highest 'moderate or severe insecurity'. At the national level, 25.5% of the households had to borrow to meet their basic food needs, though the borrowing percentage in the rural areas is slightly higher than the national estimate.

Looking into the household and population characteristics, the national average for household size is 4.09 which is roughly the same for rural and urban areas except the city corporations (3.88). However, the percentage of nuclear families (2-3 members) is concentrated more in the city corporation areas with a 5.77% increase from that of rural areas. The traditional large and combined families are remarkably on the decline with only 1.12%, which was once one of the dominant features of rural agrarian families. It is evident from the national level estimates that nuclear (2-3 members) and moderate (4-5 members) families have gradually become the mainstream with 34.29% and 47.50% respectively. Secondly, the contrast in the tenureship of the households in the city corporation areas between 'owned' and 'rented' types is significant with a

46.22% difference where most of the households are rented (72.07%). On the other hand, in rural areas as high as 93.89% of households are owned. This phenomenon can be linked to the nature of work, income-generating sectors and their locations, and the steady internal migration into the cities where most of the industrial and service-oriented activities occur. It makes sense if we consider the main sources of household income. The industrial and service-oriented activities are mostly concentrated in the city corporation areas with 18.02% and 74.56% whereas, in the rural areas, it is merely 6.34% and moderately 40.06%, respectively. Even in the urban areas, the extent of household income from industry is only 8.37%. The industrial expansion in terms of the income-generating sector is lagging significantly compared to that of agriculture or service.

Another interesting finding from the electricity consumption is that the share of solar power in the rural, urban, and city corporation areas is meager at 1.43%, 1.34%, and 0.19%, respectively, whereas most of the power consumption comes from the national grid. This underscores the necessity of the expansion of off-grid solar power systems across regions to develop self-sufficiency, improve energy security, cut down the ever-increasing grid expansion and management costs, and finally, mitigate the load-shedding crisis.

In the last two decades, Bangladesh has improved in many macroeconomic areas tremendously, namely GDP growth, BOP accounts, foreign reserves, export earnings, employment generation, remittances, etc., however, this assessment unveils some very pressing multidimensional issues related to poverty, inequality, regional disparity, sectoral income-generating capacities, and, above all, dynamics of food security, public health, and overall standard of living. To overcome these hurdles, very specific policy tools and robust implementation measures need to be administered with concerted efforts coordinating all the relevant ministries and stakeholders. Attention should be prioritized to the Rangpur and Mymensingh divisions as their performance in most of the parameters is almost dismal. The coverage of Social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) should be extended to the most vulnerable groups on a priority basis.

Furthermore, since this FIES Survey was conducted in June 2023, it would be more befitting if the survey could incorporate the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity status as well as the responses and coping mechanisms of households facing ongoing inflationary shocks. It also lacks crucial insights related to the current status of coverage of Social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) in the 'severe insecurity' and 'moderate or severe insecurity' groups across domains. It needs to be investigated further to reflect the gendered and youth perspectives in the food security and nutrition spectrum to maintain the necessary inclusivity criteria.

To conclude, this survey marks a crucial step towards evidence-based policymaking and intervention practices and bridging the excruciating data gap in the underlying sectors. We hope that by overcoming the existing limitations the FIES Survey will provide us with more revealing insights and policy indications in the future.

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SANEM's post budget reflection 2024-25

South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM) held a press conference to share its observations on the proposed national budget for FY 2024-25 on June 8, 2024, at the BRAC Centre, Dhaka. The event was chaired by Dr Selim Raihan, Executive Director of SANEM, with Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha, Research Director, delivering the presentation. Led by Dr Selim Raihan and Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha, SANEM team for budget analysis included: Ms Israt Hossain, Senior Research Associate; Ms Eshrat Sharmin, Senior Research Associate; Ms Afia Mubasshira Tiasha, Senior Research Associate; Ms Khandakar Iffah, Research Associate; Ms Shafa Tasneem, Research Associate and Ms Nafisa Zaman, Research Assistant. In his opening remarks, Dr Selim Raihan outlined three fundamental questions for the budget: understanding the economic crisis, evaluating the sufficiency of proposed measures, and identifying necessary actions. In her presentation, Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha emphasised the primary challenges facing the economy, including high inflation, declining foreign exchange reserves, currency depreciation, and stagnation in private sector investment. She also emphasized the need for more funding for the TCB and urban poor initiatives. Dr Raihan criticised the effectiveness of current monetary policies in controlling inflation and highlighted the importance of adopting these policies in a timely manner. He also questioned the budget's measures for private sector investment and emphasized the need for coordination in financial and monetary policies. He condemned the 15% tax on whitening black money and called for strict measures against corruption and the circulation of black money. Dr Raihan and Dr Bidisha both stressed the need for economic reform and a specific roadmap to strengthen the economy. They highlighted the importance of diversifying investments and addressing structural issues in the financial and banking sectors. SANEM further suggested reducing VAT, expanding the direct tax net, and increasing the tax-free income limit. SANEM also recommended long-term planning and investments in labour-intensive industries, along with increased support for small, cottage, and medium industries. Later, a Q/A session with the journalists was held.

SANEM and World Bank hosted the Fifth North America Discussion Forum 2024

The Fifth SANEM-World Bank North America Discussion Forum (SNADF) took place on May 31, 2024, at the World Bank's premises in Washington DC. The event gathered experts, scholars, and policymakers to discuss key economic issues and development strategies in South Asia. Dr Franziska Ohnsorge, Chief Economist for the South Asia Region, World Bank, opened the event. This was followed by a panel discussion on "Job Creation in South Asia," moderated by Dr Martin Raiser, Vice President for the South Asia Region, World Bank. Panelists included Dr Richard Rogerson from Princeton University, Roberta Gatti, Chief Economist for the Middle East and North Africa Region, World Bank, and Dr Selim Raihan, Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka and Executive Director of SANEM. The forum featured paper sessions on labour productivity, labour market shocks, and human capital, covering topics such as foreign investment, COVID-19's impact on employment, industrial policy, and minimum wage effects. Mr Mahtab Uddin, Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka and Research Economist, SANEM presented a paper on COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact on the Rural Non-Farm Employment in Bangladesh in the conference. A fireside chat on "Better Jobs for South Asia" included insights from Ms Nicole Klingen, South Asia Regional Director for Human Development, World Bank, and Dr Federica Saliola, Manager of Jobs Group, World Bank. Dr Selim Raihan concluded the event with closing remarks, emphasizing the importance of continued research and collaboration.

Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha was a speaker at YPF post-budget webinar

The Youth Policy Forum (YPF) hosted a post-budget dialogue webinar on June 24, 2024. Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha, Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka and Research Director, SANEM was a speaker at the webinar. Moderated by Dr Syed Akhtar Mahmood, former Lead Private Sector Specialist, World Bank Group, the webinar also featured insights from Dr Atiur Rahman, Former Governor, Bangladesh Bank, and Barrister Nihad Kabir, Former President, Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI).

SANEM Political Economy Centre launches comprehensive lecture series

SANEM Political Economy Centre successfully inaugurated the first session of its Comprehensive Lecture Series on Political Economy on June 3, 2024, at the SANEM Conference Room. Dr Mirza M. Hassan, Senior Research Fellow at BIGD, delivered a lecture on the Limited Access Order (LAO) theory and its relevance to Bangladesh. The hybrid event drew around 60 participants. This series aims to bridge the gap between academic theory and practical policy implementation, enhancing understanding of political economy concepts among students, academics, and policymakers. Dr Hassan's lecture provided valuable insights into the dynamics of limited and open access orders in societies. SANEM's objective is to stimulate intellectual discourse on political economy, contributing to Bangladesh's economic and political development. The series will feature interactive sessions to engage participants and promote collaboration.

Dr Selim Raihan presented at the IFPRI-IPS workshop in Sri Lanka

Dr Selim Raihan, Professor of Economics at the University of Dhaka and Executive Director of SANEM, delivered a presentation at the workshop on "Prioritizing Public Expenditure Towards Inclusive Agricultural Transformation in South Asia" on June 13, 2024, in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The workshop was organized by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS). Dr Raihan was a speaker in a technical session titled "Public Expenditure in Agriculture and Its Implications for Rural Poverty, Household Incomes, and Other Development Indicators." Experts from India, Nepal and Sri Lanka were also present as speakers in the workshop. Mr Janaka Dharmakeerthi, Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture, Government of Sri Lanka was the chief guest of the event and Mr Shiva Raj Adhikari, Member, National Planning Commission, Government of Nepal was present as the special guest. Dr. Raihan's participation and presentation at this workshop reflect SANEM's ongoing commitment to addressing key economic challenges and promoting sustainable development through informed policy-making.

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SANEM is a non-profit research organization registered with the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies and Firms in Bangladesh. Launched in January 2007 in Dhaka, it is a network of economists and policy makers in South Asia with a special emphasis on economic modeling. The organization seeks to produce objective, high quality, country- and South Asian region-specific policy and thematic research. SANEM contributes in governments' policy-making by providing research supports both at individual and organizational capacities. SANEM has maintained strong research collaboration with global, regional and local think-tanks, research and development organizations, universities and individual researchers.

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