

Editor's Desk

The May 2020 issue of *Thinking Aloud* focuses on "COVID-19 Crisis: Economic and Social Challenges". The first page article titled "The Political Economy of the Stimulus Package for COVID-19 Induced Economic Crisis in Bangladesh" emphasizes that the success of the stimulus package in Bangladesh depends on three things – financing, management, and monitoring. Without proper monitoring of the use and management of stimulus package funds, its purpose will be severely hampered. This requires the immediate formation of a national monitoring committee comprising representatives from government agencies, NGOs, civil society, the business community, and labor organizations. The second and third pages of this issue present three articles. The article titled "COVID-19 and New Realisms" briefly discusses some of the realities of COVID-19 – failure of the health system, upsurge in global poverty and the unemployment rate, and uncoordinated global leadership. It points out that an immediate coordinated effort is needed to save the lives of millions of citizens around. The article on "How Ready is Bangladesh to Support the Agriculture Sector amid Coronavirus?" states that, though appreciable, the mere announcement of stimulus package for the agriculture sector is not enough to save the sector from being pushed hard. The effective implementation of the stimulus will be required to mitigate the impact of coronavirus on the agriculture sector. The article titled "Domestic Violence towards Women during the COVID-19 Crisis" highlights the dimensions of domestic violence during the COVID-19 crisis and how the lack of a gendered perspective in solving the crisis is worsening the situation for survivors. The fourth page writes about the SANEM Netizen Forum and the policies suggested by SANEM to combat the COVID-19 crisis.

Inside this issue

The political economy of the stimulus package for COVID-19 induced economic crisis in Bangladesh

COVID-19 and new realisms

How ready is Bangladesh to support the agriculture sector amid coronavirus?

Domestic violence towards women during the COVID-19 crisis

SANEM events

Editor:

Selim Raihan

Associate Editors:

Zubayer Hossen
Shoaib Ahamad
Omar Raad Chowdhury

Coordinator:

Sk. Ashibur Rahman

The political economy of the stimulus package for COVID-19 induced economic crisis in Bangladesh

Selim Raihan

The economic crisis caused by COVID-19 is deepening in Bangladesh over time. The level of crisis is unprecedented at both the national and global levels. It is now inevitable that the global economy will fall into a deep recession. If the economic crisis in Bangladesh is prolonged, there is also a big risk of social crisis. The health crisis in Bangladesh is also huge. We are already observing worrisome health-related impacts in Bangladesh. The number of coronavirus infected people is increasing at an alarming rate and at the same time, the number of deaths is also on the rise.

Although there is much debate about the country's economic growth rate during this crisis, there is no doubt that all the drivers of Bangladesh's economy have been severely affected during this economic crisis. These include the export sector – especially the garment industry, remittances, domestic industries and services, agriculture, poultry, fisheries, and especially small and medium enterprises. This crisis is also having a huge impact on the poor and vulnerable people in the country. SANEM's ongoing research shows that the crisis could lead to a large jump in the poverty rate in Bangladesh, and that the success of poverty reduction in Bangladesh over the past decades could be lost due to the crisis. However, the depth of impact of the ongoing crisis on the economy of Bangladesh will depend on the duration and the spread of the crisis. Nevertheless, considering the dynamics of the

crisis so far, it is obvious that this crisis is going to leave a big mark on the economic growth and social achievement of Bangladesh.

In the context of the ongoing economic crisis, the government of Bangladesh has announced a stimulus package which is a big amount and the amount may increase further in the coming days. However, the success of this stimulus package depends on three things – financing, management and monitoring.

In terms of financing this stimulus package there are four options. The first is that all the unnecessary expenditures of the government, for example various unnecessary development plans and unnecessary projects in the budget, need to be suspended or cancelled immediately. The money saved from it must be utilized for the stimulus package.

The second is to borrow from international organizations like the World Bank and the IMF. We know that Bangladesh, as per World Bank's classification, has graduated from the low income to lower-middle income country status, and due to this Bangladesh has lost the privilege of accessing loans from World Bank and IMF at a lower interest rate. But in such a

crisis time, Bangladesh must try to negotiate with the World Bank and the IMF to find out how to get loans at low interest and easy terms. We do not want any stringent conditions from the World Bank and IMF now.

The third way may not be very pleasant. However, the government will still borrow from the banking sector. We know that despite the current fragile state of the banking sector the government has already borrowed money more than what was planned for the whole financial year. However, if government borrows further from the banking sector, it should be done judiciously with sufficient caution.

If the above mentioned three options are exhausted, then the fourth option and the last resort will be to print money. Printing money without expansion of real sector has the risk of pushing up prices. There may be incentives to print money to finance unnecessary public projects. Therefore, if the government decides to print money, this has to be dealt carefully.

"The success of this stimulus package depends on three things – financing, management and monitoring. Without proper monitoring of the use and management of stimulus package funds, its purpose will be severely hampered. This requires the immediate formation of a national monitoring committee comprising representatives from government agencies, NGOs, civil society, the business community, and labor organizations."

In an environment of weak regulation and lack of independence of central bank there is a high risk that without a proper handling printing money may backfire.

A proper management of stimulus package is very important. It is important to note that Bangladesh does not have any past experience of implementing such a huge amount of stimulus packages. The type of crisis we are observing now due to COVID-19 is very different from the crises Bangladesh faced in the past, like cyclones or floods, and handled effectively. Therefore, in this crisis, when such a huge amount of money is being injected into the economy, the success of the stimulus package will depend largely on the management of this package by the government. There are two aspects to the stimulus

package. One is to provide assistance to the affected industries and the other is to address the food safety problem of the poor and vulnerable people. In both cases there is a need for efficient supervision – who will get the money and how. It is important to note that there are many shortcomings of our bureaucracy, and especially the lack of the efficiency of government management. We can't avoid these problems now. It is important to note that when there is a question of disbursement of huge amount of money of the stimulus package, there will be people to take unfair advantages of it. We have already seen some of signs of these kind of unfair practices. Therefore, it is important to ensure transparency and accountability in the implementation of the stimulus package. Finally, without proper monitoring of the use and management of stimulus package funds, its purpose will be severely hampered. This requires the immediate formation of a national monitoring committee comprising representatives from government agencies, NGOs, civil society, the business community, and labor organizations.

Dr. Selim Raihan, Executive Director, SANEM.
Email: selim.raihan@gmail.com

COVID-19 and new realisms

Bazlul Haque Khondker

We are in the fifth month with COVID-19. Within five months or 130 days, it has become most fearful name in every household in every country. It has infected around 30 million global citizens and killed more than 2 million. Although numbers of fatalities as a proportion of total population are small, fear of contagious has stalled the global economic activities. Assessed impacts are already large but expected to reach exorbitant height in coming months. Some of realities of COVID-19 are striking – (i) health system has failed or (been failing) envisaging that health spending is not adequate; (ii) gains in global poverty reduction was not robust at all forcing millions of non-poor into the new poor league; (iii) spike in unemployment rate is huge exposing the weaknesses of the labor market system; and (iv) uncoordinated global leadership suggesting bankruptcy in political institutions.

Above realities may be reinforced and intensified unless quick and measurable actions are designed and implemented in a coordinated manner. The aim of this article is to briefly discuss the above realities and suggests some strategic actions.

Except few exceptions, health system across the world was caught off-guard to tackle the onslaught of COVID-19. This is despite some positive trends in global health spending. According to WHO (2019), within first two years of SDG, global spending on health increase to US\$ 7.8 trillion in 2017, or about 10 per cent of GDP and \$1,080 per capita –from US\$ 7.6 trillion in 2016. But spending is highly lop-sided with high income countries account for about 80 per cent of the global spending. Public spending represents about 60 per cent of global spending on health which grew at 4.3 per cent a year between 2000 and 2017. This growth has been decelerating in recent years, from 4.9 per cent a year growth in 2000–2010 to 3.4 per cent in 2010–2017. So, what went wrong? Perhaps more spending is needed on the health sector. But most importantly, global leaders read the virus incorrectly, ignored advices of the health experts resulted in unprecedented surge in cases in shortest possible time completely overwhelmed the health system.

‘COVID-19 fallout could push half a billion people into poverty in developing countries’ – this was the title of a study recently commissioned by UN-Wider (April 8, 2020). UNU-WIDER warns that ‘the economic fallout from the global pandemic could increase global poverty by as much as half a billion people, or 8 per cent of the total human population. This would be the first time that poverty has increased globally in thirty years, since 1990.’ Equally disturbing is that the virus has already disproportionately impacted the poor in wealthy countries, where the most known cases are concentrated. So, what is problem with poverty count? It was a number game all along – using low poverty lines to claim victories – knowing that they are walking on a very thin thread. So, the poverty debacle was not surprising!

ILO (March 7, 2020) estimated that as many as 25 million people could become unemployed, with a loss of workers’ income of as much as USD 3.4 trillion. At the same time, ILO also acknowledge that it is already becoming clear that these numbers may underestimate the magnitude of the

impact. ILO further qualifies that ‘COVID-19 pandemic has mercilessly exposed the deep fault-lines in our labor markets. Only one in five people are eligible for unemployment benefits, job losses imply catastrophe for millions of families.’ Millions of informal workers in developing world are equally vulnerable. So, why were job losses high in a shortest possible time? Large segments of the jobs are insecure with little protection where employers are unwilling to take responsibility of their workers even for 4 weeks!

Global citizen witnessed lack of global leadership and coordination. Global citizens were accustomed to see US leadership in a crisis like COVID-19. But this time there was no leadership rather chaos and confusion. As a result, strong and coordinated commitments from G7 and G20 countries are still missing. Rise of inward-looking nationalist policies have severely weakened the fabric of G7 and G20. World is in a grave danger. Immediate bold and coordinated actions are needed to save lives of million citizens around. The priorities include:

- Political leaders need to pay heed to the advices of the experts/doctors to address health risks. The failure of the health system to a large extent was the fault of political system by ignoring their advices. Despite current improvement in health expenditure at the global level, it is still very unequal across countries. Moreover, access to poor is very limited to health system and they are disproportionately impacted by health risks. Thus, there is an urgency to reduce health expenditure inequality across and within nationals through more investment as well as introducing universal health insurance ensuring access of the poorest.

- Provision of food and cash transfers to millions of new poor and vulnerable population to avoid large scale hunger and famine is call of the day. Digital financial services powered G2P payment system can be a way out to reach the poor and vulnerable during COVID-19 crisis. This also calls for a fresh look into the necessity of establishing a robust social protection system around the world with strong commitment and endorsement by national governments. Accordingly, Kidd and Sibun (2020), suggested that “a universal crisis requires a universal approach to social security”.

- Government needs to find out ways to work with entrepreneurs/industries along with technical support from ILO to safe guard the job of millions vulnerable and unprotected workers. Setting or expanding systems to enrol workers into unemployment insurance schemes with varying level of contributions could be an option. This also call for a serious attempt by the national governments to pursue the decent work agenda.

- The world needs jump start to return to normalcy. A coordinated effort is needed with strong resource commitment. OECD (2016) reported that net ODA, at 0.3 per cent of donor gross national income (GNI) fell short of the commitment by many donors to achieve the target of 0.7 per cent of ODA/GNI. Only 6 European donors have met 0.7 per cent commitment. G7 and G20 leaders must sit with other leaders as well as listen to the voice of global citizens to design stimulus packages with firm commitment on funding.

*Dr. Bazlul Haque Khondker, Chairman, SANEM.
Email: bazlul.khondker@gmail.com*

How ready is Bangladesh to support the agriculture sector amid coronavirus?

Zubayer Hossen

Bangladesh has been under a lockdown situation since March 26 to contain the spread of novel coronavirus. Though the Government of Bangladesh is recently thinking of easing the lockdown and many garment factories in the capital Dhaka and the port city of Chattogram resumed their operations amid a nationwide extended lockdown, it seems to take time to restore the normal life. Nevertheless, the coronavirus-sparked shutdown has dragged the economy into a vulnerable situation through sharp declines in domestic demand, lower business travel, trade and production linkages, supply disruptions, and health effects. The uncertain nature of this epidemic has made things more complicated. The situation is taking a new turn every day and making everything fragile. During this catastrophe, the potential negative impact of coronavirus on agriculture has emerged as a serious concern for Bangladesh. As the virus continues to spread, concerns grow about the agriculture sector since it threatens the proper functioning of the sector.

Bangladesh is predominantly an agricultural country. The agriculture sector, for decades, has been a driving force for accelerating the overall economic development of the country. In Bangladesh, most of the working-age people are employed in the agriculture sector. Although the share of agriculture in total employment has seen a drop by 7 percentage points in 2016 compared to that in 2010, approximately 41 per cent of total employed people work in the agriculture sector. It provides livelihoods to more than 24 million people and remains the backbone of the nation. Agriculture is a major source of employment for women. Of the total employed women, about 60 per cent work in the agriculture sector. The country also heavily depends on this sector for feeding its people. The agricultural system plays a significant role in the economy to ensure long-term food security for the people.

The measures adopted by Bangladesh to slow down the current pandemic may place strain on the capacity of the agriculture sector to continue meeting food demand and providing incomes for the agricultural workers and producers. In the middle of the coronavirus outbreak, the agriculture sector in Bangladesh faces several demand-side and supply-side challenges. During this crisis, ensuring the continued functioning of the agricultural activities will be critical in securing food supply and avoid a food crisis. There is a genuine concern that the logistical challenges within supply chains for a longer period may disrupt food production and supply. In particular, restrictions of movement and labor shortages may have a serious impact on labor-intensive crop production and processing. High-value and perishable commodities, for instance, fresh fruit, vegetables, meat, fish, milk and flowers, are likely to be most affected by this. However, the scarcity of laborers and diesel has already started to hamper the agricultural activities across the country during the harvesting season of the boro rice, potato, onion, and maize. Further, restriction on movement is

preventing farmers from carrying their produce to cold storage, accessing the local markets, and selling their produce. As a result, farmers are apprehending financial losses. Even though the farmers are not getting expected prices, the economy may still see an upsurge in prices of agricultural goods followed by increased price volatility and destabilized local market due to panic-buying and food stockpiling by consumers.

The ongoing health crisis and the subsequent contraction in economic activities have resulted in a rise in temporary unemployment in the country. The agriculture sector is projected to see job destruction like other sectors, especially at the base of the supply chain. Women and youth are likely to feel the impact more strongly, as they are particularly exposed to socioeconomic vulnerability. While the agriculture sector plays a vital role in the national economy, the reality is that many agricultural workers and their families experience the highest incidence of working poverty and suffer from food insecurity. This crisis is supposed to affect the workers and producers in the agriculture sector and increase the depth of poverty among those who were already poor and pushed more people into poverty.

The agriculture sector in Bangladesh is likely to be severely affected by the present crisis. Many lives will be wrecked and food security will be in danger unless timely measures are taken. Thus, the situation demands to put the highest priority on agriculture. The pertinent question is how prepared Bangladesh is to support the agriculture sector. Nonetheless, Bangladesh does not seem to be well equipped. Until now, for the sector, the most visible effort from the Government of Bangladesh has been the announcement of the stimulus package of BDT 50 billion. The amount has been proposed to provide financial assistance to farmers in rural areas and boost agricultural production facing the fallout of coronavirus. The money will be disbursed from the fund to farmers at a maximum of 4 per cent interest. Though appreciable, the mere announcement of stimulus package for the agriculture sector is not enough to save the sector from being pushed hard. The effective implementation of the stimulus will be required to mitigate the impact of coronavirus on the agriculture sector. Ensuring transparency and accountability will be key to the efficient implementation of the stimulus package.

Along with the stimulus package, well-organized efforts addressing the demand-side and supply-side issues in the agriculture sector will be needed. The immediate policy actions will be desirable for (i) keeping food supply chains functioning well since it is crucial for food security; (ii) ensuring the access of farmers to private markets and government procurement; (iii) providing targeted help for farmers, e.g. small poultry and dairy farmers to get access to agricultural inputs, as the supply chain of agricultural inputs has been disrupted by the ongoing lockdown; and (iv) including the agricultural workers and farmers, in particular, landless and small farmers in the government's assistance package or social protection programs.

Zubayer Hossen, Research Economist, SANEM.
Email: zubayerhossen14@gmail.com

Domestic violence towards women during the COVID-19 crisis

Eshrat Sharmin

Domestic violence happens mostly by the husband and other household members, making it hard to identify and harder to prove. As a result, these survivors are the least visible in the society. Domestic violence can be verbal, financial, emotional, physical, or sexual in form. Domestic violence spikes when households are placed under the increased security, health, financial and resource related stress, living in confined conditions. Studies have shown that, historically domestic violence intensifies in crisis contexts. For example, the great recession, 2008 recession, Zika and Ebola outbreak etc. placed women at greater risk of domestic violence. In crisis settings, more than 70% of women have experienced gender based violence (GBV). Moreover, if gendered perspective such as, GBV is unaddressed in disaster preparedness, recovery plans, and humanitarian assistance, women's vulnerability increases. Presently, while everyone's attention is on the pandemic caused by COVID-19, survivors of domestic violence are being neglected. Many countries are taking strict measures, i.e. lockdowns, curfews, and closure of public spaces and services to prevent the spread of the contagion. Many of these unprecedented measures are increasing domestic violence as well as reducing survivor's access to support. Incidents have been reported where the survivors were threatened to be locked-out of the house in this health hazard. In general, lockdown is preventing women from going to their typical hide-outs, namely parents' house, or seeking help in case of danger. Organizations dealing with domestic violence are often informed over the phone, but being in such constant proximity with an abuser is turning seeking help into a dangerous act. Moreover, access to mobile phone is unavailable to the most vulnerable cohort, women from low-income or rural households.

Domestic violence has as much as tripled in some social distancing practicing countries. There is a surge in this "shadow pandemic" across the world, as Italy, Spain, UK, Cyprus, France, Singapore, USA, Australia, and Brazil saw 13.6%, 18%, 25%, 30%, 30%, 33%, 35%, 40%, and 40% increases in reports respectively. Regardless of the global spike in GBV, the number of women trying to access shelters have been stagnant. However, experts expect the number of individual cases not to escalate or even drop in developing countries. The decrease in reports does not refer to corresponding decrease in GBV incidents, rather than additional barriers to report. This contradictory pattern was witnessed during the 2008 recession, after 9/11, Hurricane Sandy and Katrina as well. For instance, presently, South African GBV command centre has received only 4% GBV related calls and Italy experienced 80% decrease in calls compared to the same time last year. Similarly, Jordan shows a 68% decrease in cases compared to prior crisis period, whereas 88% of perpetrators were husbands in 2019.

As expected, lockdown due to the recent pandemic is reinforcing the setup for domestic violence in South Asian nations. Nationally representative data regarding domestic violence during the COVID-19 crisis is not yet available in this region. Therefore, the information provided by the news organizations, women's rights activists, law enforcement agencies

and mental health professionals in these countries have to be inspected. A similar pattern was reported by the aforementioned sources in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and India. According to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), between January and March, the number of domestic violence cases surged from 29 to 42 in Bangladesh. Manusher Jonno Foundation reported that, more than 300 incidences of domestic violence occurred during March in only three districts of the country. During such crises, women face additional burden of household chores along with the lack of contraceptive, which increase the risk of domestic violence. Furthermore, few Bangladeshi men share the domestic workload. Therefore, the possibility of forced unsafe intercourse, and consequential unwanted pregnancy and STDs are rising due to the tired females and excess time disposed to the males. However, marital rape is legal according to the laws in Bangladesh. Despite having specific legislation in place, such as the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010, the implementation remains mostly ineffective. Social norms in the country perpetuate domestic violence by undermining its severity and framing the topic as luxury or "private matter". Unsurprisingly, according to Violence Against Woman Survey (2015), 72.6% of ever-married women in Bangladesh faced intimate partner violence (IPV) at least once in their lifetime, only 27.3% of them informed someone else, and only 1.1% sought help from police. Controlling behaviour was the most common, followed by physical and other forms of violence. Again, lockdown will extend the controlling behaviour and emotional abuse exponentially.

Government of Bangladesh is yet to incorporate gendered perspective and steps to stop domestic violence in the stimulus packages of COVID-19. For example, domestic violence prevention services should be classified as "essential" and massive media campaigning including helplines needs to be introduced in the television, print and social media. However, a cautious evaluation is required towards helpline as the major intervention for domestic violence during crisis period. France has started a "red dot" campaign where any women detected with a red dot on their hand will be treated as a domestic violence survivor by the grocery shop employees, pharmacists, doctors and other first responders. Simple ways to seek help should be introduced in Bangladesh as well, such as, use of code word towards the first responders. Local authorities should turn vacant buildings to emergency accommodation where victims could quarantine safely. The abused survivors should be provided with free medical treatment, counselling, and legal aid. Organisations serving women need assistance to work more efficiently. Access to information is crucial when it comes to domestic violence, as lack of such may result in lack of identification or confusion regarding assistance seeking processes. Therefore, provision of contraceptives, menstrual hygiene supplies along with information regarding domestic violence in dignity kits as part of emergency response can lower incidences of domestic violence. Finally, more sex-disaggregated data is necessary to understand how the situation regarding domestic violence is unfolding in this crisis period.

Eshrat Sharmin, Research Associate, SANEM.
Email: sharminishrat4@gmail.com

SANEM Netizen Forum: Episode 1

The first episode of Netizen Forum was held on April 3, 2020, at 4 PM where 22 participants from diverse fields attended. Focusing on the economic impacts of the pandemic, experts pointed out that, with a 0.25% increase in the income threshold for the poverty line, the poor population of the country increases to almost 70 million. SANEM team opined that in the current situation, the fiscal deficit might have to be increased, as social security programs have to be prioritized. The forum called for a special focus on the integration of repatriating immigrants in the national economy.

SANEM Netizen Forum: Episode 2

The second episode of the forum was held on April 10, 2020, at 4 pm where 26 participants were present. Experts from SANEM explained the necessity of expansionary fiscal policy to tackle the upcoming economic challenges. The forum called for cooperation among government, NGOs, and local initiatives for distribution of relief package and suggested that involvement of business associations and mobile banking services to ensure optimum efficiency. Participants discussed the imminent crisis in Boro paddy harvesting and necessity of inter-ministry collaboration for the crisis aversion, the impact of the pandemic on the RMG sector, the necessity to increase provisions in the stimulus package for other export-oriented sectors and impact on the mega projects. The forum proposed strengthening the diplomatic negotiations on behalf of the migrant labors who lost their jobs due to COVID-19.

SANEM's reaction to the GoB's financial package

SANEM welcomed financial package proposed by the Government of Bangladesh to address the crisis caused by COVID-19 in a press release issued on April 6, 2020. Dr. Raihan raised four issues of concern in the context of the upcoming national budget: 1) The financial package requires a large allocation to the health sector, which can be financed by canceling comparatively less important expenditures. 2) To effectively arrange the financial package, the tax-management and banking sector need some urgent and long-neglected reforms. 3) It must be ensured that certain influential sectors and groups do not monopolize the benefits of this financial package. 4) Increasing the size and coverage of the existing social security programs, creating new programs with an emphasis on the informal sector is crucial.

SANEM's suggestions for the agricultural sector

In a press release issued on April 12, 2020, Dr. Raihan welcomed the government's announcement of Tk 5,000cr stimulus package for agriculture sector. He suggested three steps to make the package more effective: 1) In compliance with health regulations, the supply-chain of agricultural materials has to be re-initiated by collaboration among the Ministry of Agriculture,

SANEM Netizen Forum on COVID-19

As part of its social actions to contribute in fighting the pandemic, SANEM has launched the 'SANEM Netizen Forum on COVID-19 Pandemic'. This forum connects the SANEM Team with the academicians, researchers, policymakers, development practitioners, and students. Conducting online discussions once a week through SKYPE, the forum aims to contrive policy pathways and community actions for tackling the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moderated by Dr. Selim Raihan, the forum has met four times in four episodes over the last month.

SANEM proposes two-year recovery plan

Dr. Selim Raihan proposed a two-year Recovery Plan for Bangladesh to tackle the economic challenges of COVID-19 Pandemic in a press release issued on April 2, 2020. Delaying the beginning of the 8th Five Year Plan by 2 years till 2022, the two-year plan aims to take the economy back to the December 2019 state. The plan would include devising detailed fiscal stimulus package and monetary policy to support all the export-oriented and domestic sectors, extending the coverage of the social protection program, undertaking 'politically feasible' policy reforms in the areas of trade, tax, and banking sectors and explore ways for generating resources from both domestic and external sources to support the fiscal stimulus. The plan also called for suspending Bangladesh's LDC graduation target by at least 3 more years and raise voice at the global level to push the SDGs target from 2030 to 2035.

SANEM's suggestions to ensure food security

In a press release issued on April 8, 2020, pointing out that a slight increase in the income threshold for poverty line increases the number of poor people in Bangladesh close to 7 crores, Dr. Raihan suggested four steps to ensure food security: 1) Following the government's list of the poor people under existing social security programs, quick distribution of essential food items at the local level. 2) Rapid creation of a new list to include previously excluded poor and vulnerable population. 3) Cooperation among the administration, representatives from local government and the parliament, volunteers, NGOs, and CSOs to create and update lists, distribute food, and prevent irregularities throughout the process. 4) Initiatives by businesses and business associations to ensure food security for their employees.

the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Transport and the Ministry of the Home Affairs. 2) To ensure the optimum cultivation of Boro paddy across the country, similar inter-ministry collaboration is required for establishing safe passage for agricultural sector employees. 3) Rather than a 5% interest rate, loans for farmers should be interest-free.

SANEM Netizen Forum: Episode 3

The third episode of the forum took place on April 17, 2020, at 4 pm and it was attended by 42 participants. Dr. Raihan discussed three aspects of the stimulus package announced by the Government of Bangladesh- financing, distribution, and monitoring. He briefed the forum about SANEM's proposals on financing and opined that to tackle global recession SAARC member countries should increase regional trade. Proposals regarding increment of subsidy and tax-waiver for small industries, agricultural supply chain, and economic assistance for lower and lower-middle income families were discussed in detail. The forum also proposed setting up two separate hotlines for reporting domestic violence and supporting people in need.

SANEM Netizen Forum: Episode 4

The fourth episode of the Netizen Forum was conducted with 27 participants on April 25, 2020, at 2.30 pm. Participants discussed the decline in oil price and its effect in the domestic market. Experts emphasized the necessity of mechanization in agriculture. To assist farmers, SANEM team proposed increasing government procurement of crops from farmers and called for zero-interest loan instead of the 5% interest rate for farmers, insisting that transparency must be ensured in disbursement of these loans. Participants also pointed out the necessity of policies for the gig economy and service sector employees. They expressed their concern for educated and skilled youth as they might struggle in availing jobs in the post-crisis period. The forum called for providing rent subsidy for the poor. Participants from abroad shared their experience of the pandemic and respective economic policies undertaken with the forum.

SANEM's suggestions to optimize stimulus

In a press release issued on April 16, 2020, Dr. Raihan opined that the success of the stimulus package depends on the management of such package and Bangladesh does not have such experience. Dr. Raihan identified four potential sources of financing for the stimulus package: Suspending relatively unnecessary government expenditures, borrowing from the development partners and local banking sector, and as a last resort, printing money. For ensuring transparency and accountability in the distribution of the stimulus package, SANEM proposed a national monitoring committee with representatives of the relevant government organizations, NGOs, CSOs, private sector, and labor organizations. The stimulus package should provide support for disadvantaged industries, deal with food shortages and other problems of the poor and vulnerable people.

e-version: <http://sanemnet.org/thinking-aloud/>