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Thinking Aloud

Editor's Desk

The August 2020 issue of Thinking Aloud focuses on "COVID-19 Crisis and South Asian Responses through Stimulus Packages". The first page article titled "An anatomy of stimulus package in Bangladesh" emphasises that while Bangladesh's stimulus package, in proportion to GDP, is much higher than those of South Asian and Southeast Asian countries, large stimulus packages are likely to be ineffective if they are associated with poor execution, unplanned allocation of funds, and weak accountability. The article highlights that all these three issues are extremely important for the effective implementation of the stimulus packages in Bangladesh. The second and third pages of this issue present three more articles. The article titled "Sri Lanka's economic recovery: COVID-19 and beyond" assesses the elevated challenges faced by Sri Lanka on the economic front, despite relatively successful handling of the health hazard. The article concludes that a robust fiscal and debt sustainability path will be required to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on Sri Lankan economy. The article on "Stimulus package in Pakistan in the context of COVID-19" discusses Pakistan's response to the pandemic, the challenges hindering such response, and the policy recommendations to mitigate the challenges. Lack of data on marginal communities, lack of health expenditure and resulting deficiency in public health infrastructure, and lack of strong and autonomous local administrations are the major challenges faced by the country during the ongoing pandemic. The article titled "Decoding India's 'Atma Nirbhar' fiscal stimulus package: Hits and misses" discusses specifically the 'Atma Nirbhar' package announced as part of the stimulus packages announced in India to recover from the recessionary effects of COVID-19. The article analyses the package in details and points out the necessity of direct cash transfer for the revival of the economy along with expenditure for healthcare infrastructure which has been absent in the abovementioned package. The fourth page mentions the upcoming SANEM International Conference in October and presents summaries of the SANEM events occurred in July 2020.

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Editor:
Selim Raihan

Associate Editors:
Eshrat Sharmin
Omar Raad Chowdhury

Coordinator:
Sk. Ashibur Rahman

An anatomy of stimulus package in Bangladesh

Selim Raihan

The economic crisis induced by COVID-19 is taking a massive toll on the economic and social spheres in Bangladesh. Forecasts by different international organisations suggest that the crisis is likely to drastically reduce the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate. Since the onset of the crisis in March 2020, all major economic activities in the country have been badly hit. With the global economy going into a deep recession, exports from Bangladesh have fallen down in an unprecedented manner. The remittances, despite some temporary surges, are also feared to be badly hit in the coming days. On the social front, poverty and employment situations in the country have become grave. The crisis is feared to have a long-lasting dent on the development trajectory of the country.

To combat the economic and social crises and to ensure recovery of the economy, the government has announced 19 stimulus packages accounting for around 3.7% of the country's GDP. The major stimulus measures, taken so far, are as follows: (i) BDT 50 billion for export-oriented industries to pay the wage bill for three months. This comes as 2-year loans to factory owners at 2% interest. (ii) BDT 300 billion for banks to provide working capital loan facilities to the affected industries. While, these loans are at an interest rate of 9%, half of it to be borne by the borrower and half by the government as a subsidy. (iii) BDT 200 billion for banks to provide working capital loan facilities to small (cottage industries) and medium enterprises. While, these loans are at an interest rate of 9%, 4% to be borne by the borrower and 5% by the government as a subsidy. (iv) A refinance scheme of BDT 50 billion for the agriculture sector. The Bangladesh Bank will charge interest 1% from banks and banks will charge 4% from customers. The loan will be repayable within 18 months including 6 months grace period. (v) Under Back-to-Back LC arrangement, the Export Development Fund of the Bangladesh Bank is increased from USD 3.5 billion to USD 5 billion to facilitate further import of raw materials. The interest rate is fixed at 2%. (vi) BDT 50 billion pre-shipment credit refinance scheme by the Bangladesh Bank for local products and the export sector, under which the Bangladesh Bank will charge interest 3% from banks and banks will charge 6% from customers. In addition, there have been some policy measures by the Bangladesh bank to increase cash flow in the economy. Also, the budget 2020-21 provides some support measures for returnee migrants. There have been some social safety net programmes to address the growing poverty and vulnerability of the population.

In the context of the developing countries from Asia, Bangladesh's stimulus package, in proportion to GDP, is much higher than those of South Asian and Southeast Asian countries. It should, however, be noted that large stimulus packages are likely to be ineffective if they are associated with poor execution, unplanned allocation of funds, and weak accountability. All these three issues are extremely important for the effective implementation of the stimulus packages in Bangladesh.

The financing of large stimulus packages in Bangladesh may appear to be a big challenge. The major part of the stimulus package in Bangladesh is credit-based where the government is providing interest rate subsidy. A rough calculation suggests that the amount of this interest rate subsidy will be in the range of 0.2-0.4% of the GDP. Therefore, the burden of the government in financing the stimulus package is expected to be much lower than the total face value (3.7% of GDP) of the stimulus package.

The operationalisation of the stimulus package, however, seems to remain as a big problem. The operationalisation procedure involves identification and selection of the affected firms, disbursing credit through the banking channel, and monitoring of the overall process. All these steps, no doubt, suffer from serious institutional challenges in Bangladesh.

Identification and selection of the affected firms have been problematic in Bangladesh. While firms are self-selecting themselves for seeking the benefit of the stimulus package, there has been no formal or systematic process through which any rapid assessment can be made on the needs of the affected firms. In the absence of such assessment process, many eligible firms may be denied the support. In contrast, powerful firms, with strong lobbying and useful political links, despite that many of them may not need of the stimulus package, may dominate the scenario. In this case, the whole objective of the stimulus package will be lost.

The next challenge is the disbursement of the credit to the selected firms through the banking channel in the form of subsidised loans. The banking sector is already under tremendous pressure due to the high non-performing loans and poor governance. The formal procedural issues in the banking sector may also discourage many eligible firms to avail the benefit. This is true for the firms from the non-readymade garment sectors and in particular for the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). MSMEs are facing numerous challenges in accessing the stimulus package. There is a need for a dedicated window of facilities for the MSMEs sector.

Experiences so far indicate that while many RMG firms have been successful to avail the benefit of the stimulus packages, many non-RMG firms have not been. That is why disbursing the BDT 300 billion stimulus package to affected industries, apart from the RMG, and BDT 200 billion for MSMEs has been very slow. While the RMG sector has been efficient in exhausting the BDT 50 billion stimulus package allocated for them, the RMG lobby has also been successful in convincing the policymakers to allocate more funds for them from the BDT 300 billion stimulus package (which is meant for the non-export sectors). This lobbying pressure is likely to escalate in the future as progress in the disbursement of funds for other affected industries and MSMEs continues to be limited. This scenario reflects the RMG-bias in the policymaking process. Therefore, there is a need for a re-orientation of the policies to reflect the challenges faced by many other sectors in the economy.

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

Sri Lanka's economic recovery: COVID-19 and beyond

Dushni Weerakoon

The COVID-19 is subjecting economies around the world to a simultaneous supply and demand shock of unprecedented proportions. Quarantine and social distancing are disrupting supply chains, while loss of incomes, jobs, and uncertainties are squeezing demand. In turn, weak demand feeds back into supply as firms suffer from low cash flows and liquidity. More job and income losses are set to depress consumer demand further.

In this feedback loop, developing countries are struggling to provide adequate fiscal and monetary stimulus packages to deal with additional spending on health and provide economic relief to households and businesses. For many, the initial conditions and policy tools available are rather limited, and those developing countries with higher initial public debt levels need to be particularly concerned. However, the scale of the crisis is such, that countries have no option but to take extraordinary measures to mitigate both the health and economic risks with the limited tools in hand.

Sri Lanka is one such country that faces elevated challenges on the economic front, despite relatively successful handling of the health hazard. Thanks in part to a well-developed public health system, its strategy of contact tracing and quarantine, backed by strong political leadership, has worked. The total patient count as of mid-July 2020 remains under 3,000 with only 11 recorded deaths.

The success on the health front means that the country is also more advantageously placed to ease lockdown measures and resume a degree of normalcy fairly early. However, sectors like tourism that stand to benefit from an early lifting of travel restrictions, etc. are not reaping the rewards owing to a 'second wave' of repatriated overseas Sri Lankans with high COVID-19 infection rates. Thus, a concerted resumption of economic activities is still some way off.

In the interim, relief measures and stimulus efforts are being extended to prevent a collapse of businesses and employment so that there is something to build from in the recovery phase. Of necessity, such measures are rather limited in scope. The COVID-19 struck at a time when Sri Lanka's initial economic conditions were at a low point. GDP growth in 2019 recorded its lowest (2.3%) in 18 years, with a fiscal deficit and public debt at a high 6.8% and 87% of GDP respectively, with record foreign debt settlements of USD 4 billion per annum due over the period 2019-2022. A terrorist attack that claimed more than 250 lives in April 2019 had already derailed the country's tourism industry; COVID-19 added further pressures by closing the lid on foreign earnings, including remittances.

In these straitened circumstances, fiscal support has been rather minimal. In any event, fiscal space was squeezed by a large tax relief package – estimated to trim about 20-25% of existing revenues – delivered following presidential elections in November 2019. Aside from some additional health spending, a direct cash transfer to the vulnerable and tax deferrals and exemptions have barely reached 1% of GDP. Instead, the government is leaning heavily on monetary policy through sharp cuts to policy interest rates, liquidity injections through cuts to bank statutory reserve requirements, debt moratoriums and refinance schemes, and monetary financing of fiscal expenditures.

In the immediate mitigation phase, leaning mostly on a monetary stimulus may work. When economies stay under lockdown, fiscal multiplier effects are muted. On the other hand, liquidity injections can have an expanded immediate impact, on the assumption that complementary policies to keep businesses afloat are in place. In the recovery phase, as the COVID-19-induced supply shock morphs into a demand shock as people's livelihoods and incomes plummet, boosting public spending to counteract a slump becomes important. By putting money in people's hands, fiscal multiplier effects are stronger than monetary stimulus efforts owing to the latter's weaker transmission mechanisms.

Though the impact of monetary stimulus measures in the early phases may help to combat deflationary conditions, the possibility of a build-up of inflationary pressures in the medium term is very real. Additionally, to the extent that money creation finances an excess of domestic consumption over supply, it forms asset and real estate bubbles that generate bouts of market instability and boom-bust cycles. It also spills over into more imports of consumer goods, a widening trade deficit, and downward pressure on the exchange rate.

To mitigate these immediate risks, Sri Lanka has imposed temporary curbs on a range of imports as well as on some capital outflows. But in the longer term, the external sector pressures will need to be addressed directly to avoid futile and expensive measures to avoid currency devaluations, imported inflation, and higher debt burdens.

Thus, COVID-19 presents both an economic challenge and an opportunity for Sri Lanka. Tax cuts meant to encourage spending and investment to boost growth mean larger fiscal deficits, adding to public debt levels. Low interest rate policies help to maintain demand and keep government borrowing costs down. But these must be seen as emergency measures necessary to combat the immediate deflationary shock.

If a viable path to restoring medium term fiscal balance is clearly articulated and implemented, then the current emergency measures can be a bridge to longer term recovery. Sri Lanka's ongoing discussions with bilateral lenders like China and India and multilateral institutions like the IMF for debt relief measures can strengthen this process.

With parliamentary elections due on August 2020 expected to deliver stable governing arrangements, renewed business confidence can kick-in private investments to drive growth. Indeed, Sri Lanka's low growth base makes possible a V-shaped recovery – with prudent macroeconomic policies, such attractive short-term numbers can be converted to a sustained medium term economic recovery. A robust fiscal and debt sustainability path will go a long way to help by-pass these risks, and mitigate the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic without major run long costs for the Sri Lankan economy.

Dr. Dushni Weerakoon, Executive Director and Head of Macroeconomic Policy Research, Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS).

Stimulus package in Pakistan in the context of COVID-19

Mobeen Ali Khan and Vaqar Ahmed

Pakistan continues to take policy action to mitigate the negative macroeconomic and social impacts of COVID-19. Moderate restrictions in movement and economic activity along with what the government refers to as a 'smart lockdown' so far has helped in containing the disease. More than 75 percent of COVID-19 cases have recovered (by mid-July) with the number of daily cases reduced to a manageable one fourth of what they were at the start of June 2020.

According to the International Monetary Fund, the GDP will contract by 2 percent in the fiscal year 2020. A slowdown in the international trade has also negatively impacted the vulnerable segments. Pakistan's exports have been reduced by approximately 54 percent due to order deferrals and cancellations. A survey by the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority ascertained that 95 percent enterprises experienced reduction in operations while 89 percent reported cash flow issues.

Profound socioeconomic impacts of these developments are inevitable. A research conducted by Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) predicts a loss of approximately 15.5 million jobs in a lockdown with moderate restrictions and an increase in poverty to 99 million people (44.2 percent poverty rate) if the level of impact is medium.

Pakistan's fiscal stimulus package is valued at PKR 1.2 trillion, which is almost 1.6 percent of GDP. Among other things, the fiscal package emphasises upon health and disaster response (PKR 195 billion), support for exporters through accelerated tax refunds (PKR 150 billion) and a large proportion of the package will go to the support for low-income through the expansion of the social safety net programme (Ehsaas) and support to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (PKR 325 billion).

The construction sector has also been incentivized with major tax relief in an effort to curb unemployment especially for day labourers and encourage growth in forty industries that are associated with this sector.

To complement fiscal policies, the State Bank of Pakistan has cut policy rate by 625 basis points to 7 percent to ensure liquidity and stability of the private enterprises and targeted support to distressed markets and MSMEs with subsidized loans and a credit risk sharing facility. The credit risk sharing facility involves the government bearing up to 40 percent of the initial losses occurred to banks. Currently, this facility has a limit of PKR 40 billion that can be expanded over time.

Some additional regulatory measures to facilitate the import of medical equipment and medicine includes relaxing the limit on advance import payments and allowing banks to approve an electronic import form (EIF) for the import of equipment donated by development partners and other foreign entities.

Even when the global outlook of remittances remained bleak, Pakistan experienced an increase in remittances in June 2020 by almost 42 percent over the previous month of May 2020. To further build resilience, Pakistan has successfully obtained a debt moratorium on approximately 12 billion USD of principal debt repayments and debt servicing till December 2020.

Three main challenges severely hindered Pakistan's response to COVID-19. Firstly, statistical bodies and the National Socio-Economic Register lack data on the marginalized communities, making the delivery of social safety nets more difficult to address exclusion. Secondly, health expenditure on average was only 0.72 percent of GDP for the last 10 years translating to wide gaps in public health infrastructure and basic sanitation facilities. This was amplified by scarcities in personal protective equipment (PPE), masks and other gears necessary to respond to COVID-19. The local production of PPE and ventilators has only recently started. Thirdly, a lack of strong and autonomous local administrations resulted in a rather slow response at the local level during the months of May and June. This coupled with inequitable access to broadband connectivity resulted in further delays on relaying information to the federal tier on shortages in food or medical supplies. This aura of uncertainty and panic formed the basis of public unrest in many localities.

Some early signs show that the government policies of smart lockdown and fiscal stimulus are going in the right direction. Only time will tell if the economy can be insulated from future rounds of COVID-19.

As the global economies open up, there are signs of pick-up in demand seen in agriculture, textile, and garment sectors. The farmers are also benefiting from the additional PKR 100 billion injection and low input prices of urea, electricity, pesticides etc. The central bank's measures to extend repayment of principle amount of borrowers by 1 year has resulted in additional liquidity.

According to UNESCAP, Pakistan needs a stimulus package that is worth at least 7 percent of GDP to mitigate the full effects of COVID-19. To achieve this Pakistan needs to discover ways to increase its domestic resource mobilisation through innovative use of technology and data and rationalising regulatory compliance costs in turn encouraging the informal sector to join the formal economy.

The importance of closing the digital divide is now more crucial than ever. Digitalising the social safety net programmes can help augment the government's efforts in boosting aggregate demand. In this regard expediting the implementation of the 'Digital Pakistan' programme is of utmost importance.

The local and external concessional sources of financing government expenditures need to be explored in the medium term. Also, the debt management strategy needs strengthening to restore confidence of foreign investors wishing to invest in Pakistani debt instruments.

On the road to recovery it is imperative that federal and provincial governments try and ease the regulatory burden on businesses and significantly reduce the cost of doing business in Pakistan. This is a key demand by investors willing to invest in Pakistan, especially from Chinese enterprises.

Finally, regional cooperation needs to be revitalized in the South Asia sub region. Exchange of experiences and research is vital in promoting regional alliances in the spheres of transport, information and communications technology, people to people connectivity and addressing shared vulnerabilities such as health, food security and disaster risk reduction.

Mobeen Ali Khan, Project Assistant, and Dr. Vaqar Ahmed, Joint Executive Director, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Pakistan.

Decoding India's "Atma Nirbhar" fiscal stimulus package: Hits and misses

Sovik Mukherjee

India came up with the "Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan" package, a whopping INR 20970 billion, adding roughly up to 10 percent of India's GDP to help India's held up economy to recover from the recessionary effects of the lockdown imposed to slow down the spread of COVID-19.

It needs to be pointed out that, of this announced amount, only 35 percent is a fresh offer as it is already counted in the first slice of the financial stimulus worth INR 1700 billion, some already proposed outlay in Budget 2020 and the support amounting to roughly INR 8016.03 billion that Reserve Bank of India has given prior to the announcement of this package. So, here the focus is on the additional INR 11000 - 12000 billion that has been pumped in, apart from the already existing ones. In a big push to revive the COVID-hit Indian economy with the package, some of the highlights are as follows.

Firstly, a collateral free loan programme for the 4.5 million Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), backed by a Credit Guarantee Fund of INR 3000 billion, and some other policies like the creation of an equity corpus fund of amount INR 100 million and an offer of INR 200 million worth of subordinate debt are being proposed. Secondly, the government will provide a credit guarantee for Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs) investing in debt instruments of MSMEs, Housing Finance Companies (HFCs) and Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) of around INR 300 billion. Thirdly, tax deduction at source (TDS) and tax collection at source (TCS) rates have been cut down by 25 percent for the coming year, while statutory provident fund (PF) payments have gone down from 12 percent to 10 percent for both the employers and the employees for the period of June to August. Fourthly, granting of INR 900 billion to power distribution companies to solve their cash flow problem is a welcomed move. Fifthly, a fund worth INR 1000 billion has been designated for the farm entrepreneurs for setting up and managing cold chain storages, irrigation facilities, post-harvest infrastructure, etc. followed up by an emergency INR 300 billion working capital for farmers to be disbursed through National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development. Sixthly, an additional INR 400 billion has been allocated for Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in view of raising the wage rates and generating employment under this scheme. Seventhly, free food-grain supplies have been provided to the migrants who are not covered under any of the beneficiary schemes like MGNREGS. In this context, the "One Nation One Ration Card" scheme will help the migrants to draw out their ration from any shop in any state as they keep on moving.

For the states, the relief package has mandated a higher fiscal deficit limit of 5 percent than the permitted 3 percent but only 0.5 percent can be raised unconditionally from the center. Some other notable highlights include, 2 percent interest waiver on Mudra Shishu loans, special credit facility worth INR 50 billion for street vendors, and INR 700 billion as part of the credit-linked subsidy scheme under the PM-Awas Yojana aimed at providing homes for the migrant labourers and the urban poor at an affordable rent. For creation of social infrastructure, government proposes a viability gap funding (VGF) of 30 percent of INR 81 billion instead of the 20 percent existing norm to give a boost to the private investors. All these are steps in the right direction but questions remain.

To start off, decoding the fine print of the package is a challenge as fiscal and monetary policies have been entwined for the first time ever in any country. Government expenditure comes under the ambit of fiscal policy where credit easing and liquidity infusion comes under monetary policy. These two are very different and can never be added in the manner that is being conducted now in India. Prof. Panagariya has rightly criticised the policy by referring to it as "adding apples and oranges" to derive the INR 20,00 billion. As pointed out by Barclays and CARE ratings, this package is only going to cost the government 1 percent to 1.5 percent of GDP (out of its treasury), rest being RBI's infusion, government guarantees and other non-fiscal (or monetary) measures. Hence, there is simply no clarification on the quantum of fiscal deficit being expanded in India on account of this stimulus package. Rolling out random numbers for capturing media headlines will not fill in any need.

Coming to the MSME part, one has to be very careful while reading between the lines. First, as it reads, the government stands as a guarantor for the INR 3010 billion of collateral-free loans to MSMEs hit by the pandemic. However, this is meant for only those businesses satisfying a two-point criteria — already had an outstanding loan of INR 250 million or had a turnover of less than INR 1 billion. I would like to emphasise again that in no way it means that the government is pumping in INR 3000 billion into India's MSME sector and this action covers only 7.5 percent of the roughly 64 million MSMEs that we have. Then, what about the rest? The package does not have an answer.

Given that we have mechanisms like Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and Jan Dhan, Aadhaar and Mobile (JAM), India today can process direct cash transfers to hundreds of millions quickly and efficiently. Unfortunately, in the "Atma Nirbhar" package there is no direct cash transfer coming out from the government treasury for the revival of the economy (consistent with the concept of universal basic income) to the bottom half of the population (or even to distressed firms in emergency situations) as is being emphasised by noted economists like Prof. Abhijit Banerjee and Prof. Raghuram Rajan, among others. Last, but not the least, the blue print of the package does not talk about spending an extra penny for the health sector and the development of healthcare infrastructure — presently, the most important and the most neglected domain. If the rise in the numbers getting affected from COVID-19 is not controlled — all the policies, plans and the benefits of the lockdown in containing the spread of COVID-19 will become meaningless.

Sovik Mukherjee, Assistant Professor of Economics, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata, India.

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SANEM Netizen Forum: Episode 8

The 8th episode of SANEM Netizen Forum on COVID-19 Pandemic was attended by 50 participants on July 11, 2020. Dr. Selim Raihan presented the keynote presentation in the forum. While discussing the usage of the foreign reserve, he referred to the previously undertaken and discontinued initiative of Sovereign Bond as an option. He remarked the importance of being cautious while considering that option. Dr. Raihan also opined that MSMEs should be financed through microfinance institutions. The forum members agreed that the reverse migration trend induced by the economic hardships in urban areas entails the emergence of new socio-economic challenges in the rural areas. Prioritizing employment of repatriating immigrant workers, focusing on utilizing the demographic dividend, attracting the FDIs deflecting from China, the necessity of a database on the poor and vulnerable populace and austerity measures in terms of cutting salaries of top officials of government and private institutions, along with other pertinent issues of the pandemic were discussed in the forum. It was suggested by some members that depreciation of BDT may bring some relief for exporters.

SANEM Shongzog on COVID-19 and the challenges of labour market

The sixth episode of SANEM Shongzog, titled "Covid-19 and the Challenges of Labour Market in Bangladesh", was held on July 18, 2020. The episode was hosted by Mr. Mahtab Uddin. Dr. Sayema Haque Bidisha presented the keynote paper at the Shongzog. It was chaired by Professor Shamsul Alam, Member (Senior Secretary), General Economics Division, Planning Commission, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Mr. Tuomo Poutiainen, Country Director of ILO Bangladesh was the special guest. The distinguished panelists were Dr. Ahsan H. Mansur, Executive Director, Policy Research Institute, Dr. Imran Matin, Executive Director, BIGD and Dr. Selim Raihan. Around 60 researchers, economists, academicians, development practitioners, journalists, and students joined the Shongzog. Dr. Bidisha explained, in the context of the ongoing pandemic, the key challenges of generating wage employment through stimulating private investment are: domestic financing, global recession, fall in export demand, and business confidence. Among other recommendations, she proposed relaxing conditionality and interest rate on loans of micro and small enterprises in particular and separate loan schemes for returning migrants, women entrepreneurs, and youth. Dr. Selim Raihan recommended that the government should form a Labour and Employment Commission.

SANEM-ActionAid webinar on Youth Budget Framework

To introduce the novel concept of youth budget framework to the country's policymakers, researchers, academicians, bureaucrats and relevant stakeholders, South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM) in partnership with ActionAid Bangladesh held a webinar titled "Youth Budget Framework: An Appraisal", on July 25, 2020. The Chief Guest of the program was Mr. M. A. Mannan, MP, Honourable Minister, Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Mr. Nahim Razzaq, Member of Parliament and Convener, Young Bangla - National Youth Platform was present as the Special Guest in the program. The webinar was chaired by Ms. Farah Kabir, Country Director, ActionAid Bangladesh and moderated by Dr. Selim Raihan, Executive Director, SANEM and Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka. The presentation was delivered by Ms. Eshrat Sharmin, Senior Research Associate, SANEM. The webinar hosted an expert panel which included Mr. Md. Belayet Hossain Talukdar, Additional Secretary, Secondary and Higher Education Division, Ministry of Education, Mr. Md. Nazibul Islam, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Dr. Fahmida Khatun, Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue, Dr. Md. Omar Faruque, Joint Secretary, Technical and Madrasah Education Division, Ministry of Education, Ms. Most. Ferdousi Begum, Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Ms. Khadiza Nazneen, Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Social Welfare and Dr. Abu Eusuf, Professor, Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka. Conducted over the video conferencing app Zoom, the webinar was streamed live on SANEM's Facebook page. More than 50 participants joined the webinar. The fundamental ideas of Youth Budget Framework, its significance, and the necessity of implementing such a framework in the context of Bangaldesh, were discussed in details in the webinar.

SANEM Shongzog on COVID-19 and social protection programmes

The 7th episode of SANEM Shongzog, titled "COVID-19 and Social Protection Programmes in Bangladesh" was held on July 29, 2020. Dr. Selim Raihan, Executive Director, SANEM was the moderator and Mr. Tommo Hozumi, UNICEF Country Representative in Bangladesh was the special guest in the webinar. The keynote presentation was delivered by Dr. Bazlul Haque Khondker, Chairman, SANEM. The expert panel included Mr. Md. Azizul Alam, Additional Secretary, Finance Division, Ministry of Finance, Government of People's Republic of Bangladesh, Dr. Sayema Haque Bidisha, Research Director, SANEM and Ms. Aneeka Rahman, Senior Social Protection Economist, World Bank. The webinar was conducted over the video conferencing app ZOOM and also streamed live on SANEM's facebook page. Dr. Khondker presented a brief assessment of the social protection system in Bangladesh and recommended preparing a robust database using NHD/IMS/NID/other relevant digital indicators, increasing coverage (universal child grant and old age allowance), aligning demography/location with Social Protection spending, introducing contributory pension, expanding G2P payment to 100%, improving monitoring and evaluation and setting a time bound implementation plan for National Social Security Strategy.

Dr. Selim Raihan speaks at webinar organized by BUP Economics Club

Dr. Selim Raihan delivered a lecture at EconTalk 2020 titled "Labour Market Dynamics in the Post Pandemic World: Global and National Perspective", organized by the Economics Club of Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUPEC). The event focused on the changing dynamics of the labour market due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

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Events

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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.

SANEM Publications: Flat K-5, House 1/B, Road 35, Gulshan-2, Dhaka-1212, Bangladesh, Phone: +88-02-58813075, E-mail: sanemnet@yahoo.com, Web: www.sanemnet.org