

Editor's Desk

The January 2021 issue of Thinking Aloud focuses on "COVID-19 and Development Priorities". The first page article titled "Setting the development priorities right in 2021 in Bangladesh" emphasizes that the concerns related to poverty, inequality and employment in Bangladesh suggest that no reason is there to remain complacent now and in the days to come. The apparent economic and social effects of COVID-19 can be deceiving. The ground-level pictures can be very different from the macro pictures. In such a crisis, the expected positive spill-over effects of macro variables may remain weak for long. The broken or suppressed supply chains and social networks in the economy may take a long time to heal to generate employment and reduce poverty and inequality. The article suggests to change the focus of the current discourse on the development priorities from the narrow GDP growth rate to broader development issues, undertaking a comprehensive and pragmatic recovery plan of the economy and executing reform in critical economic domains. The second and third pages of this issue present three more articles. The article titled "Understanding food poverty and food vulnerability in Bangladesh" discusses how food vulnerability analysis emphasizes the importance of incorporating the new food poor into related programs of the government in Bangladesh. The article explains that, with the poor households spending much larger amount on food items than on non-food items, it is often more appropriate to look at food poverty of households instead of poverty in the context of developing countries. The article titled "Reflection of youth and gender issues in the Eighth Five Year Plan" narrates that the 8FYP's dealing of the challenges faced by the youths and females would be crucial for any attempts aimed at sustainable recovery in the pandemic context. The article reiterates that increasing public expenditure in education, health, and social safety net, strengthening institutional capacity, and implementing the Five Year Plans will be the way forward to achieve the broader development goals. The article titled "In looking into the effects of COVID-19 on India's air pollution targets" critically analyzes India's air pollution targets in the unlock phase of the lockdown. The article stresses that controlling for vehicular pollution or industrial emissions alone, as noticed during the lockdown, will not be enough to control air pollution levels in the long run if the government continues to follow the developmental policies which indirectly contribute to an increase in air pollution levels. The fourth page draws attention to the events that took place in the month of December 2020 and the forthcoming Bay of Bengal Economic Forum 2021 conference. As 2020 comes to an end, SANEM and the editor's desk wishes its well-wishers and readers a "Happy New Year"!

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Setting the development priorities right in 2021 in Bangladesh

Selim Raihan

As COVID-19, throughout 2020, has exerted a deep dent on the development trajectories of Bangladesh, the country must set its development priorities right in 2021. Bangladesh aims to achieve the stiff Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, and it aspires to become an upper-middle-income country by 2031. However, to meet these development targets, Bangladesh had been confronting many development challenges even before the onset of COVID-19. The slow progress in the structural transformation of the economy, the lack of export diversification, the high degree of informality in the labour market, the slow pace of formal job creation, the weak status of physical and social infrastructure, the slow poverty reduction, and rising inequality remained the critical challenges. The COVID-19 has aggravated many of these development challenges.

Looking back to 2020, COVID-19, in particular, has aggravated PIE - the three key development priorities - poverty (P), inequality (I) and employment (E). There is ample evidence that the poverty rate in Bangladesh has gone up significantly in 2020. Many new poor people may not be able to get out of poverty quickly due to various factors. For many new and old poor people, poverty may remain as a long-standing phenomenon. Therefore, poverty will continue to be the foremost development challenge in 2021 as the economy is yet to recover from the shocks, supply-chains of various economic activities are not fully operational, and the social protection programmes are insufficient to address the sufferings of the poor. There are also reasons to believe that COVID-19 has worsened the inequality situation in Bangladesh. In addition to the conventional factors, such as income opportunities, wealth, land-ownership, and corruption which aggravate inequality, COVID-19 has stimulated new avenues of inequality like the digital divide. Furthermore, job losses are yet to be fully recovered, and people are either engaged in inferior jobs or are low paid.

Concerns related to PIE (poverty, inequality and employment) suggest that no reason is there to remain complacent now and in the days to come. The apparent economic and social effects of COVID-19 can be deceiving. The macro-level picture of robust growth in remittances earnings, positive growth in exports, and the steep increase in the foreign exchange reserves can give rise to improper expectations of early and quick economic recovery. In recent months, the negative import growth has also contributed to the piling of foreign exchange reserves. The negative import growth is not conducive for investment and business expansion - much needed for economic recovery in the days to come. Also, the ground-level pictures of PIE can be very different from these macro pictures. In such a crisis, the expected positive spill-over effects of macro variables may remain weak for long. The broken or suppressed supply chains and social networks in the economy may take a long time to heal and to generate

employment and reduce poverty and inequality.

Therefore, while the current focus of the discourse is more on economic recovery, the social recovery may take a long time. The gravity of social losses might be much higher than that of losses measured through economic indicators. The adjustment cost of recovery can also be huge. The crisis has forced poor-households to sacrifice prospects of better health, better education and a better life for current survival. There will be long-term intergenerational effects of these trade-offs. Also, when schools and educational facilities have remained closed for months, it is possible that students from distressed backgrounds will face a higher burden, and many of them will be out of the education system permanently. At the firm level, many micro and small enterprises have been struggling for their survival. There are also new challenges emerging from post-COVID health complications. Even though most of the COVID affected patients recover, many face various post-COVID health complications for which they need extra medical care. The already stressed health sector needs major overhauling to address these challenges.

What should be the development priorities in 2021? First, the current discourse on the development priorities needs to change its focus from the narrow GDP growth rate to broader development issues, i.e. poverty, employment and inequality. Inability to effectively addressing these three critical development challenges will make the economic and social recoveries weak and fragile. Therefore, there is a need for significant expansion of the allocation and coverage of social protection programmes. Furthermore, the urgency to effectively sort out the institutional challenges in social protection programmes to reach out to poor people is more than ever. In this context, a comprehensive understanding of the economic and social losses due to the pandemic is warranted. Therefore, the usefulness of credible and timely data cannot be overemphasised.

Second, the Eighth Five Year Plan needs to be complemented by a comprehensive and pragmatic recovery plan of the economy. There is a necessity to align stimulus packages with the recovery plan. Many micro-small and medium enterprises and many vulnerable sectors are feared to remain out of support through stimulus packages. Therefore, there is a need for a thorough reviewing of the challenges and constraints in implementing the stimulus packages. This review can help re-designing and re-targeting the stimulus packages.

Third, the COVID-19 crisis time has given the policymakers the much-warranted opportunity to undertake reform in critical economic domains. No doubt, these reforms should aim at reducing the cost of doing business, simplifying regulations, and faster and cost-effective implementation of the mega projects and the SEZs, thus establishing a favourable environment for the domestic private investment and the foreign direct investment.

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Understanding food poverty and food vulnerability in Bangladesh

Sayema Haque Bidisha

There is no denying the fact that, over time Bangladesh has performed quite impressively in terms of alleviating poverty. Based on the upper poverty line, from as high as 56.7% headcount rate during early '90s, poverty has gradually declined to 48.9% in 2010 and then dropped to 24.3% in 2016. This reduction in headcount rates can be observed in both urban and rural areas with urban poverty reduced from 42.8% in 1991-92 to 18.6% in 2016 and rural poverty from 58.8% to 26.4% in corresponding years. However, concern still remains on the distributional aspects of growth as well as on the rate of poverty alleviation. While understanding the poverty scenario of the country, we should, however, keep in mind that, households of lower-income strata spend more on food than on non-food. According to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2016 of Bangladesh, households at the bottom five percent of the distribution spend 62.5% of their expenditure on food items where food consumption constitutes only about 33.7% of expenditure of those at the top five percent of the distribution. It is therefore crucial to analyze food poverty separately from overall poverty.

Food poverty can be defined as a situation when a household cannot afford the minimum resources necessary to have a nutritionally sufficient diet on a daily basis. In the context of Bangladesh, food poverty is conventionally calculated on the basis of the cost of consumption of a certain bundle of food items which meets the bare necessity of daily nutritional of 2,122 kilocalories per person. The food poverty lines calculated in this manner are distinct for each of the stratum. Based on such a food poverty line, as high as 35.49% of households are found to be food poor with rural food poverty being 38.25% and the corresponding figure for the urban dwellers is 29.17% (author's own calculations, based on HIES 2016). Therefore, more than one-third households are unable to meet even minimum caloric requirement and among these households, 11.07% are found to be chronically food poor- conceptually it implies that even in the absence of any shock or unforeseeable event, these households will not be able to upgrade themselves from food poverty and will remain food poor in near future. The remaining 24.42% of households, on the other hand are transient food poor who might be able to graduate from food poverty in the next period. Certain household demographics e.g. number of young children and number of elderly members in the household substantially increases the incidence of food poverty with households with heads being employer instead of daily labourer or self-employer, have lower incidences of food poverty.

While examining food poverty, it must, however, be kept in mind that, traditional poverty measure (e.g. Foster, Greer and Thornbeck or FGT approach) which is an ex-post concept, might not be a comprehensive estimate for longer term welfare of households. In this connection, vulnerability to food poverty captures the

probability that the food consumption of a household will lie below the predetermined (food) poverty threshold in near future due to the presence of shocks, uncertainty or other unforeseen events. Against the backdrop of COVID-19, in particular, such an ex-ante concept can be considered as a crucial policy tool for analyzing the state of welfare of households especially at the bottom of the distribution. With more than 85% people employed in informal employment, this pandemic has a strong bearing on the livelihood of millions and therefore it is quite likely that in addition to those who were food poor before the pandemic, a sizable proportion of previously food non-poor households will not also be able to meet minimum level of food consumption. In this connection, with the help of a vulnerability index which utilizes the variability of idiosyncratic error term of a Feasible Generalized Least Square model, it can be shown that, in the presence of economic shock like COVID-19, in addition to the existing food poor households, another 9.03% of previously food non-poor might find themselves unable to meet the minimum nutritional requirement. Besides, around a quarter of households can be considered as highly food vulnerable and according to our index of vulnerability, these households would be unable to get out of food poverty in near future. Based on such analysis, certain household demographics e.g. presence of young children and elderly members in the household substantially increases the incidence of food poverty, with households with heads being an employer instead of daily labourer or self-employer have lower incidences of food poverty.

With the poor households spending much larger amount on food items than on non-food items especially in developing countries, it is often more appropriate to look at food poverty of households instead of poverty per se. Our food vulnerability analysis in this connection further emphasizes the importance of incorporating the new food poor into related programs of the government. In this connection, preparing a digital database against NIDs with the help of BBS, local administration and relevant ministries is essential. Besides, against the backdrop of this pandemic understanding food poverty and food vulnerability can be of particular importance for identifying and targeting households with different degrees of food consumption deficiency for government's social safety net programs and COVID-19 incentive packages. For example, for the chronic poor and highly vulnerable households, cash/in kind transfer in the short run to smoothen their consumption variability might be more appropriate. On the other hand, strategies towards small scale employment generation might be more appropriate for the transient poor and vulnerable non-poor households. In addition, combating urban food poverty requires targeting the food poor at slum areas in particular- small scale and targeted employment based safety net schemes can be introduced in such areas.

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Reflection of youth and gender issues in the Eighth Five Year Plan

Eshrat Sharmin

The 8FYP (eighth five-year plan) will play a key role over the next five years to achieve broader development goals, such as, eliminating extreme poverty by 2031 and implementing the Perspective Plan 2041. The 8FYP will be launched in 2020 in the backdrop of an unprecedented economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis has challenged many socio-economic achievements, ranging from poverty reduction to improvements in education and gender parity. Apart from exposing and sharpening the pre-existing challenges in the economic and social sectors, the pandemic has created new sets of challenges as well. On the other hand, the comparatively young population of the nation has presented the country different sets of challenges and simultaneously several mitigation mechanisms regarding the pandemic. The nation has been experiencing a demographic window of opportunity, which will diminish within the next two decades. While investing more in human capital development will be crucial for utilizing demographic dividend, failure to comprehend and address the specific sets of pandemic-related challenges faced by the youth will compromise broader development goals. Furthermore, the gender aspect of this conversation is equally crucial in the context of Bangladesh. Thus, in the wake of the pandemic, the 8FYP's dealing of the challenges faced by the youths and females, would be crucial for any attempt aimed at sustainable recovery. Key sectors to reflect on regarding youth and gender issues in the upcoming Eighth Five Year Plan are education, employment and income, health, poverty and social safety net, and gender.

Due to the lockdown and subsequent shut down of educational institutions, for almost a year now, there is a halt across various levels of education. The pandemic has necessitated the education sector to hastily adopt out of ordinary measures such as distant learning, forming a barrier in the process, for students from poor families, as distant learning requires a certain level of economic capacity. It is mentionable that according to HIES 2016, 23.9% of the students' families were already below the poverty line before the crisis. Therefore, the learning gap has not been homogenous, and the process of distant learning has further widened the existing disparity across regions and income groups. This may perpetuate an intergenerational learning gap by creating a division in quality of education between the "lockdown generation", as termed by UNICEF, and others. Hence, expectations from the 8FYP include reducing the dropout rate stemmed from the pandemic, addressing pre-existing inequality that causes such outcome, ensuring quality in the educational outcome, special attention on TVET, redesigning the curriculum, and last but not least, increasing effective government spending on education.

Before COVID-19, almost 30% of the youth population was NEET (not in employment, education or training) and the youth unemployment rate was 10.7%. At the beginning of 2020, most of the 13 million migrants were low-skilled or semi-skilled and around 41% of the migrants were youth. Migrant workers might experience a fall in income by 25%, according to a World Bank report. According to the same projection, the unemployment rate may rise to

25% in Bangladesh due to the pandemic. According to LFS 2016, around 89.2% of employed youths works in the informal sector; who might experience an income loss of three months as World Bank reports. Hence, ensuring employment and income of SME entrepreneurs, ensuring employment and income for those employed in the informal sector, improving outward migration process, special focus on NEET, and increasing female labor force participation should be addressed in the Eighth Five Year Plan.

The pandemic has shown the crucial importance of public spending in the health sector. In FY2019-20, MoHFW was allocated 100.54 Billion BDT for ADP while the target in the 7FYP was around 96 billion BDT. However, before 2020, MoHFW spent consistently less than projected in FYPs for ADP. Higher out-of-pocket expenditure due to lower public health expenditure leaves most of the population, including the youth vulnerable to shocks related to health expenditures. In consideration of the youth's interest, the country has space for improvement in sexual and reproductive health right (SRHR), increasing public expenditure in health, developing institutional capacity, ensuring safe and affordable vaccine for all, developing strategies to deal with future pandemics, and lifecycle-based disease prevention has to be prioritized in the Eighth Five Year Plan.

According to SANEM's estimation, with a negative income shock of 25%, the overall poverty rate will climb to 40.9% due to the pandemic. Although Bangladesh spends around 2% of GDP (on average) on social protection, the allocation has been now increased to 3.01% of GDP in FY2020-2021 in response to COVID-19 (MoF, 2020). However, a large share of the spending goes in financing the pension scheme. To address the rising vulnerability and poverty, the policymakers must rethink the necessity of stronger social protection programmes. The pandemic has reiterated the importance of fully implementing the long-awaited National Social Security Strategy (NSSS). Introducing unemployment insurance programmes, expanding the existing stipend programs to prevent dropout, child marriage, and child labour, reducing inclusion and exclusion errors, increasing average transfer amount along with coverage, and rolling out the National Household Database (NHD) are the crucial issues that need to be prioritized in the Eighth Five Year Plan.

Female educational attainment in terms of tertiary education, vocational education and STEM has been stagnant for the past decade, which may further decrease during the pandemic. Child marriage is likely to increase due to the pandemic related shutdowns and economic shock. The pre-COVID stagnation in female labour force participation rate may now start to decline as well. The gendered digital divide has widened during this pandemic. Ending gender-based violence, child marriage, ensuring SRHR program in remote regions with risk of early pregnancies, increasing female participation in labour force, and full implementation of CEDAW can be a way forward to gender equality during the Eighth Five Year Plan implementation period.

Finally, increasing public expenditure in education, health, and social safety net, strengthening institutional capacity, and implementing the Five Year Plans will be the way forward to achieve sustainable development and the broader development goals.

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In looking into the effects of COVID-19 on India's air pollution targets

Sovik Mukherjee

According to the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) Secretary-General, since lockdown measures were implemented worldwide to contain the spread of COVID-19, WMO estimates for November 2020 indicate a reduction in annual global emissions of CO₂ between 4.2% and 7.5% on account of a dramatic reduction in transport and manufacturing activities. However, on the global scale, an emissions reduction of this magnitude will not cause atmospheric CO₂ to go down. CO₂ will continue to go up, though at a slightly reduced pace (0.08 - 0.23 ppm per year lower) as per WMO's Greenhouse Gas Bulletin for November. Given 68 days of uninterrupted nationwide lockdown between March 25 2020 – May 31 2020, followed by an unlock phase, the question is where does India stand?

As per the Central Pollution Control Board database (CPCB), five Indian cities, viz, New Delhi, Gurgaon, Ghaziabad, Greater Noida and Noida ranked among the top 10 cities in the world in terms of PM_{2.5} concentrations had registered an amazing air quality index (AQI) upturn during the lockdown period (recorded till May 31 2020), clocking an average of 115 $\mu\text{mol}/\text{m}^2$ falling from the 180 - 200 $\mu\text{mol}/\text{m}^2$ mark coupled with significant fall in noise pollution levels. In nearly all the big Indian cities, especially in Kolkata, similar drops in nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) levels were noticed, highlighting the scale of India's lockdown. Another study by researchers from Respirer Living Sciences and Carbon Copy came out with their results after analysing average air quality during all the four lockdown phases in India (i.e. between March 25 2020, and June 8 2020) as well as concentrations of PM_{2.5}, PM₁₀, NO₂, carbon monoxide (CO), ozone (O₃) and Benzene for Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bengaluru as part of their ongoing National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) Tracker project to scrutinise the implementation of the NCAP. The trends established that the unprecedented lockdown measures resulted in these four cities achieving 95% of their 2024 NCAP targets in a short span of 74 days from March 25 to June 8. Moreover, the four cities managed to improve their 2024 NCAP target by around 30%, with Kolkata improving their target by over 50% during the lockdown. The lockdown has given us an option to explore the likelihood of permanently moving to cleaner non-fossil fuel-based sources and follow the rules for future emissions, which could last beyond the Coronavirus crisis. But the question is — has India managed to check the air pollution levels in the unlock phase?

The answer to the question asked in the preceding section is “No” — why? The causal link between air pollution and COVID-19 cases is yet to be conclusively established but long term exposure will certainly make people more vulnerable to lung infections, warn scientists as the skies over large parts of North India, including Delhi, is turning smoky and the air quality has again started to deteriorate rapidly. As Central Pollution Control Board reports, with life coming back to normal, there has been a constant deterioration in air

quality across all metro cities in India between August and December. PM_{2.5} concentration levels in Delhi in the third week of December had averaged around 387 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, almost 12 times higher than WHO's safe limits followed by Noida at 385 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ and Gurgaon at 360 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. During the same time, the PM₁₀ levels had hovered in the range of 450-460 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in Delhi. Kolkata recorded a “very poor” average air quality index (AQI) of 338 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ as on December 25, 2020, while in Mumbai it was 255 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. The exposure to COVID-19 crisis turns out to be an eye-opener for India to rethink and redesign the national policy focusing on making the economic recovery “greener” or “pro-environmental”. As a basis for this, implementing necessary environmental laws (like the greater use of new renewables, control on deforestation, prevention of encroachment in bio-diverse areas for the sake of development which might alter the nitrogen and carbon cycle affecting air quality and ecosystem's ability to purify air etc.) are the needs of the hour.

However, the opposite has happened so far. What complicates matters further is the Central Government's development drive to triumph over the economic dent left by the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, coal has and will continue to become more and more expensive relative to the new renewables and 51% of the country's coal power costs more to run than building new renewables going by Carbon Tracker's March' 2020 Report. Now comes the real mind-blower. By 2030, it will be cheaper to build new renewables based sources of power than to generate power using coal everywhere but our Central Government's vague stance on the coal thermal power and the new renewables tradeoff issue doesn't help matters. Also, amid this pandemic, clearances have been given by the Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change (MoEF&CC) for 47 large infrastructure and developmental projects, including, building highways, railway tracks and hydroelectricity in eco-sensitive areas of 11 states — the Karnataka State Wildlife Board cleared the Hubballi-Ankola Railway Track cutting through the eco-sensitive areas of the Western Ghats in Karnataka and passing through the Kaali Tiger Reserve and the Bedthi Conservation Reserve, highway through the Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary (Goa), permission for the Etalin hydropower project in Dibang Valley (Arunachal Pradesh), a proposal for coal mining in Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve (Assam), among others which might disturb the ecosystem's ability to purify air and the consequential harmful impact on the air quality. Hence, it is clear that controlling for vehicular pollution or industrial emissions (as during the lockdown) alone will not be enough to control air pollution levels in the long run if the government continues to follow an anti-environmental developmental pattern leading to a severe imbalance in the ecosystem; thus, indirectly contributing to an increase in air pollution levels. So, we are confronted with a fundamental question — is India missing an opportunity of rebuilding the economy to make it more resilient?

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Bay of Bengal Economic Forum 2021

To facilitate an informed discussion regarding regional cooperation between the seven member countries of the BIMSTEC, SANEM is set to arrange a web-conference titled "Bay of Bengal Economic Forum 2021" on "Post-COVID Challenges in the Bay of Bengal Region" during 8-11 February 2021. The conference will be co-organized by the ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), RIS, India; South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE), Nepal; Indian Studies Center (ISC) of Chulalongkorn University, Thailand; Centre for Economic and Social Development (CESD), Myanmar; and Centre for International Relations and Public Policy at the Horizon College of Business and Technology, Sri Lanka.

Bay of Bengal Economic Forum 2021 Post-COVID Challenges in the Bay of Bengal Region

8-11 February 2021

Call for Papers

Last Date for Submission of Extended Abstracts: 15 January 2021

Live on Zoom, Facebook and YouTube



SANEM-ActionAid webinar



SANEM, in partnership with ActionAid Bangladesh, arranged a webinar on "Reflection of Youth and Gender Issues in Five Year Plans in Light of the Pandemic" on 5 December 2020. The webinar was moderated by Dr. Sayema Haque Bidisha, Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka and Research Director, SANEM and chaired by Ms. Farah Kabir, Country Director, ActionAid Bangladesh. The Honourable Minister of the Ministry of Planning, Mr. M. A. Mannan graced the event as the Chief Guest. The webinar's distinguished panel included: Dr. Selim Raihan, Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka and Executive Director, SANEM; Engr. Md. Jahangir Alam, Director (Planning and Development), Directorate of Technical Education, Ministry of Education; Ms. Nobonita Chowdhury, Director, Gender, Justice & Diversity (GJD) and Preventing Violence Against Women Initiative, BRAC; Mr. Md. Sayed Ali, Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Youth and Sports; and Ms. Maliha M Quadir, Founder and Managing Director, Shohoz Limited. In her keynote presentation, Ms. Eshrat Sharmin, Senior Research Associate of SANEM, discussed the expectations from the 8th Five Year Plan regarding youth and gender issues. During the webinar, Dr. Bidisha expressed concerns over the high rate of youth unemployment, NEET and the exacerbating digital divide in the education sector. Mr. Mannan, MP, assured that the government is working diligently to improve the quality and accessibility of technical education across the country.

Dr. Selim Raihan spoke at the Asian Confluence webinar



A webinar titled "Bangladesh-India Relations: New Dimensions and Opportunities" organized by the Asian Confluence was held on 15 December 2020. The Asian Confluence, India released a report on the challenges and opportunities related to connectivity, trade and investment, agriculture, energy cooperation, border infrastructure, Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) basin, tourism, public health-care and traditional medicine between Bangladesh and India. Executive Director of SANEM, Dr. Selim Raihan was present as a panelist in the discussion that followed the report release.

Dr. Selim Raihan attended the workshop on macro-econometric model requirement

Executive Director of SANEM, Dr. Selim Raihan was invited to speak during the technical session of the virtual workshop on Macro-econometric Model Requirement, organized by the Finance Division of the Bangladesh Secretariat on 28 December 2020. During the inaugural session, Mr. Md. Azizul Alam, Additional Secretary (Macroeconomics), Finance Division, and Mr. Abdur Rouf Talukdar, Finance Secretary, delivered the introductory remarks. Dr. Sayera Younus, General Manager, Bangladesh Bank, and Mr. Md. Ekhlasar Rahman, Additional Secretary (Macroeconomics), Finance Division were also present during the workshop.

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Dr. Sayema Haque Bidisha spoke at webinar of North South University

Dr. Sayema Haque Bidisha was a panelist in a webinar titled "Socio-economic impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on women of Bangladesh", organized by The Department of Economics, School of Business and Economics, North South University, on December 12, 2020. This webinar was focused on the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic on women in Bangladesh caused by COVID-19. Experts from various sectors presented their analysis and insights in the webinar.

Dr. Selim Raihan spoke at the webinar on Bangladesh-Philippines economic ties

A webinar on 'Bangladesh-Philippines Economic Ties: Growing Together' was organized by the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI), Manila, the Bangladesh Philippines Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BPCCI), Dhaka, and the Embassy of Bangladesh in the Philippines on 7 December 2020. Executive Director of SANEM, Dr. Selim Raihan delivered a presentation on the opportunities of trade and investment for Bangladesh with the ASEAN countries.

Dr. Selim Raihan attended the webinar on RCEP

Executive Director of SANEM, Dr. Selim Raihan spoke at a webinar titled 'RCEP: Challenges and Options for Bangladesh' by the South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG) and the School of Business and Economics (SBE) of North South University on 10 December 2020. The event was chaired by the Vice-Chancellor of North South University, Prof Atiqul Islam and moderated by SIPG senior fellow and former foreign secretary Shahidul Haque. During the webinar, Dr. Raihan spoke about the importance of signing bilateral trade deals and free trade agreements for Bangladesh.