Editor's Desk

The July 2021 issue of Thinking Aloud focuses on "COVID-19 Recovery: Contexts and Priorities". The first page article titled "COVID-19 Recovery: Contexts and Priorities in Bangladesh" emphasizes that an effective $recovery\ process\ requires\ a\ better\ understanding\ of\ the$ COVID contexts and setting the priorities right. In the context of Bangladesh, the article highlights that a few areas need to be prioritised to deal with the situation. First, the availability of effective vaccines and the vaccination of mass people is critical for sustained recovery. At the same time, the enforcement of the rules and regulations related to hygiene practices is vital. Second, an assessment is needed to understand the challenges and constraints in implementing the stimulus packages to re-design and re-target these packages. Third, the scopes and allocations of the government's social protection programs for the old and new poor need to be expanded. Fourth, the government should introduce relevant social protection programmes in line with the ongoing labour market challenges, especially in urban areas. Fifth, the economy requires some critical reforms in the policies and programmes in areas of taxation and financial sector. Finally, the current notions. The new reality requires an effective action plan for economic and social recoveries. The third and fourth pages of this issue narrate the synopsis of the 2nd SANEM International Development Conference (SIDC) 2021 on "COVID-19 Recovery: Contexts and Priorities" held virtually from 17 to 19 June 2021. The convener of the conference was Dr Selim Raihan. The conference started with a paper presentation session on trade and macroeconomics, followed by the keynote presentation titled "Coping with Bad Shocks: Lessons from Growth Dynamics", and a paper presentation session focusing on the pandemic impacts on public health. The second day of the conference opened with a special paper presentation session, authored by the students across South Asia, followed by a panel discussion on the pandemic from a gender perspective. Another paper presentation session on trade and macroeconomics, and a panel discussion probing into the pandemic contexts and recovery prospects from South Asian perspective, constituted the rest of the day. The concluding day of the conference hosted two consecutive paper presentation sessions focusing on labour market challenges, and poverty, inequality and development challenges, followed by a panel discussion delving into the COVID-19 recovery process from the developing countries' perspectives. The fourth page illustrates the snapshots from the 2nd SIDC 2021.

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Synopsis of 2nd SANEM International Development Conference (SIDC) 2021

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COVID-19 recovery: Contexts and priorities in Bangladesh

Selim Raihan

Around a year and a half have passed since the onset of the COVID crisis. The Bangladesh economy and the global economy have certainly not been able to go back to the pre-COVID state. Though there have been some signs of recovery in the Bangladesh economy, the recovery process has remained weak, fragile and uncertain. The effective recovery process also requires a better understanding of the COVID contexts and setting the priorities right.

The crisis we have seen in COVID for over a year is not just an economic crisis. There is also a big social crisis. Bangladesh has made great strides in the last few decades, especially in reducing poverty. But during COVID, there has been a high jump in the poverty rate. Surveys conducted by SANEM, and some other research organizations, have found that economic fallback, induced by the COVID disruptions, have increased the number of poor people quite considerably. Many have lost their jobs. Many, losing jobs, have returned to villages from cities, which led to some socio-economic impacts and put the rural labour market under additional pressure. A large part of the economy is informal, and more than 85% of the people in the labour market is in the informal sectors. These informal sectors have been most affected during the COVID period. Many, who had various small businesses, either have closed their businesses or are running their businesses at partial scales.

Many migrant workers have returned to the country, and the prospects of their returning to the destination countries appear to be bleak. New employment opportunities abroad are not encouraging as the destination countries are also struggling for their economic recoveries. At the same time, the domestic labour market sees the addition of a new labour force every year. One critical concern is that the pattern of economic growth in the last decade has not been at par with the objective of large-scale job creation. The problem has become more acute during COVID. There is also a big problem of the high degree of unemployment among the educated youths.

COVID situation is getting worse again. With the imposition of stricter lockdowns, people's livelihoods are facing new challenges. The recovery we have seen in the economy in recent months is likely to be hampered by the new COVID outbreaks throughout the country and globally.

The uncertainty and instability in the global market will continue to affect the export sector and remittances. Until now, the remittances inflow, the formal channels, remained encouraging. However, there are concerns that the total amount of the remittance inflows, if we consider both the formal and informal channels, may not have risen significantly. Also, in the case of the export sector, the recovery process has remained volatile and inconsistent. Nevertheless, just as the recovery of the export sector is crucial for the recovery of the overall economy, the recovery of the domestic economic sectors and their micro, small and medium enterprises is critical too.

The Bangladesh government announced several stimulus packages soon after the onset of the COVID crisis. It is necessary to understand whether these stimulus packages have attained their intended objectives. Some evidence shows that the distribution, management and monitoring of the stimulus packages remained inadequate and weak. SANEM has been conducting quarterly surveys of 500 firms from 15 manufacturing and services sectors since June 2020. It appears from the four rounds of surveys, with the latest one in April 2021, that there is a high degree of heterogeneity among firms and sectors in terms of access to the stimulus packages. Many firms and sectors have been facing several challenges in getting stimulus packages as processes of stimulus packages remained long and entailed many bureaucratic complications. There is a common understanding that readymade garments and large firms have been benefited most from stimulus packages. However, micro, small and medium entrepreneurs have not been able to take advantage. Lack of initiatives, transparency, accountability and efficiency undermined the whole objectives behind the stimulus packages.

Micro, small and medium enterprises play critical roles in the supply chains of different sectors of the economy, and these are severely affected by the COVID epidemic. Therefore, the resonant recovery of these enterprises is crucial for ensuring the strong upswing of the overall economy.

A few areas need priority to deal with the situation. First, the availability of effective vaccines and the vaccination of mass people is critical for sustained recovery. At the same time, the enforcement of the rules and regulations related to hygiene practices is

Second, the government's stimulus packages to revive the economy should be implemented more effectively and expanded if necessary. An assessment is needed to understand the challenges and constraints in implementing the stimulus packages to re-design and re-target these packages. Third, the scopes and allocations of the government's social protection programs for the old and new poor need to be expanded. The government must address the institutional challenges related to the design, allocation and disbursement of social protection programmes.

Fourth, it is necessary to take policies and strategies targeting the labour market. The government should introduce relevant social protection programmes in line with the ongoing labour market challenges, especially in urban areas.

Fifth, the economy requires some critical reforms in the policies and programmes. The country cannot achieve many development goals with a low ratio of tax-to-GDP. The financial sector also needs reforms, especially in the banking sector.

Finally, the current situation demands a departure from the conventional notions. The new reality requires an effective action plan for economic and social recoveries.

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Session 1: **Trade and Macroeconomics I**

The 2nd SANEM International Development Conference (SIDC) 2021 started with a paper presentation session on "Trade and Macroeconomics". The session was chaired by Dr Posh Raj Pandey, Chairman, South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE), Nepal. As the discussant Dr Arpita Mukherjee, Professor, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), India was present.

A total of four papers were presented in the session. The papers were: "Is the global economy on the verge of re-globalization?" by Dr Abdullah Altun, Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Gebze Technical University, Turkey and Dr Halit Yanikkaya, Professor, Department of Economics, Gebze Technical University; "Food loss in trade: A case study of South Asia using the Import Refusal Reports of the United States Food and Drug Administration" by Dr Thadchaigeni Panchalingam, Postdoctoral Scholar, Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health and Longevity Science, University of California, USA and Dr Asanka Wijesinghe, Research Economist, Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS); "A time series analysis of food security with selected macroeconomic variables in Bangladesh: A Vector Autoregressive Approach (VAR)", Mst. Shila Khatun, Student, Department of Economics, Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University (MBSTU), Bangladesh and Dr Md. Nazmus Sadekin, Associate Professor, Department of Economics, MBSTU and "Potential role of compulsory licensing in the post-COVID recovery: contexts, challenges and prospects", Dr Muhammad Zaheer Abbas, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Queensland University of Technology, Australia. The session focused on the emerging trends in global trade and macroeconomy while assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the factors influencing those trends. Based on empirical findings and theoretical interpretations of the available data sets, the researchers made policy recommendations appropriate for specific contexts. The sessions also shed light on the global economy and its trends.

Session 5: Panel Discussion on "COVID-19: Contexts and Priorities -Gender Perspective"

The second day of the conference featured a panel discussion on "COVID-19: Contexts and Priorities – Gender Perspective". The discussion was moderated by Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha, Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, and Research Director, SANEM, Two distinguished panellists including Dr Mona Shrestha Adhikari, Chief Executive Officer, Enterprise for Management, Economic Reform

and Gender Equality (EMERGE), Nepal, and Dr Fahmida Khatun, Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh, spoke during the session. Dr Selim Raihan delivered special remarks in the discussion. He highlighted four key areas that demand special attention in COVID-19 analysis: reviewing the historical and structural context of gender issues, the existing economic policies, social policies, and the institutional context. He pointed out that there is an intra-household distribution challenge. Dr Bidisha emphasised that we are still struggling with COVID-19 and should look into the long-term gender based consequences as well. Dr Mona Shrestha Adhikari observed that during the pandemic women workers were affected in terms of salary and work from home was not a viable option for many. Dr Adhikari noted that while women as a group share similar opportunities and constraints, the extent, articulation and consequences are different for different groups of women - according to their backgrounds, socioeconomic conditions and discriminatory barriers. Dr Fahmida Khatun discussed the long term impacts of child marriages and unwanted pregnancies in terms of loss of human resources and deterioration in health and nutritional outcomes for women and children. Dr Khatun suggested that the key policy measure should be to develop the skill capacity of women to absorb them in the workforce. She further suggested that, relief measures such as waiving interest payments, rent and utility bills for marginal women workers can be an effective means of mitigating the challenges faced by disadvantaged women.

Session 2: Keynote Presentation -**Coping with Bad Shocks: Lessons from Growth Dynamics**

The keynote presentation titled "Coping with Bad Shocks: Lessons from Growth Dynamics" was delivered by Professor Lant Pritchett, RISE Research Director, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford. The session was moderated by Dr Selim Raihan, Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka and Executive Director of SANEM. The session was also attended by eminent economist Profes-

sor Rehman Sobhan. Everything that is true about the OECD countries is not at all true for the growth dynamics typically experienced outside the OECD countries, Professor Lant Pritchett stated. Professor Pritchett elaborated on the dynamics of deals capitalism, discussing the multiple types - open (deal depends on actions of agents but not identities) and closed (deals are available only to specific individuals/organizations - deals depend on identities), ordered (deals done stay done and are predictable) and disordered (unpredictable what deals are available, deals have uncertain time horizon). He discussed fundamental questions on shocks, policy tools addressing shocks, long-run socio-economic implications and other political economic factors influencing growth. Furthermore, he discussed Hausmann's characterisation of the growth process. He suggested that Bangladesh needs to consider reorientation in global trade, consumer preferences and emerging trade links. Professor Pritchett concluded by emphasizing the distinction between probabilistic and radical uncertainty while considering the coping mechanism during the present pandemic. The keynote presentation was followed by an open discussion. Professor Rehman Sobhan shed light on the international political economy scenario and suggested that Bangladesh needs to be connected with the Chinese value chain. Dr Raihan shared his observations on the recovery trajectories in the political economic contexts of OECD and non-OECD countries. He further explained that the differences in recovery trajectories take place due to the differences in deals environment and state capabilities within individual countries.

Session 6: Trade and Macroeconomics II

The second day of the conference hosted another paper presentation session on "Trade and Macroeconomics", which was moderated by Dr Prabir De, Professor, Asean-India Centre (AIC), Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), India. A total of five papers were presented in the session. The papers presented were: "The impact of the pandemic on the business sector in Bangladesh:

Evidence based on a quarterly panel survey" by Dr Selim Raihan, Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, Mahtab Uddin, Lecturer, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka and Md. Tuhin Ahmed, Senior Research Associate, SANEM; "Regional value chains: Opportunities for India and ASEAN post COVID-19?" by Dr Saon Ray, Professor, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), India and Vasundhara Thakur, Research Assistant, ICRIER; "Can electricity consumption track economic fluctuations in Bangladesh?" by Selvia Arshad, Consultant, The World Bank and Dr Robert C. M. Beyer, Senior Economist, The World Bank; "Supporting export competitiveness in Pakistan's industrial sector amid COVID-19" by Syed Shujaat Ahmed, Consultant, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Pakistan, Dr Vagar Ahmed, Joint Executive Director, SDPI, Asif Javed, Project Associate, SDPI and Maaz Javed, Project Associate, SDPI, and "Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement: Initial framework and lessons from existing trade policy of South Asia" by Dr Asanka Wijesinghe, Research Economist, Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka and Chathurrdhika Yogarajah, Research Assistant, Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka. Focusing on the economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the session produced valuable insights on the business sector in Bangladesh and South Asia. Regional value chains in the post COVID world economy, volume of economic activities and related parameters, comparative advantage and bilateral trade mechanisms were discussed in details in the session. The session also generated valuable policy recommendations.

Session 3: **COVID-19 and Public** Health

The paper presentation session on "COVID-19" and Public Health" was chaired by Dr Sabina Faiz Rashid, Professor and Dean, BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Bangladesh. As the discussant was present Dr Rumana Huque, Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka. The papers presented were: "Perception and attitudes towards vaccination against COVID-19: Evidence from Bangladesh"

by Dr Mofakhar Hussain, Adjunct Lecturer, University of Toronto, Dr Shafiun Nahin Shimul, Associate Professor, Institute of Health Economics (IHE), University of Dhaka, Dr Abul Jamil Faisel, Public Health Expert, Dr Syed Abdul Hamid, Professor, IHE, Dr Nasrin Sultana, Professor and Director, IHE, Sirajul Islam, MPhil Researcher, IHE, and Muhammad Ihsan-Ul-Kabir, Research Student, IHE; "Evaluating South Asia's pandemic preparedness" by Chathuni Pabasara, Senior Research Assistant, Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute (LKI), Sri Lanka and Ravindri Paranagama, Research Assistant, LKI; "Impact of alternative Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions strategies for controlling COVID-19 outbreak in Bangladesh: a modelling study", Dr Mofakhar Hussain, Adjunct Lecturer, Institute of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation, University of Toronto, Dr Shafiun Nahin Shimul, Associate Professor, IHE, Dr Abul Jamil Faisel, Public Health Expert, Dr Syed Abdul Hamid, Professor, IHE, Nusrat Jabin, Student, University of Oxford, Dr Nasrin Sultana, Professor and Director, IHE and Abdul Kuddus, PhD Student, James Cook University and "COVID-19 and mental stress among the urban youths of Dhaka city", Sarah Farheen Khan, Programme Assistant, International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD), Bangladesh. The session shed light on the impact of the pandemic on the health system in Bangladesh and across South Asia. It also addressed various aspects of the vaccination drive. The researchers stressed on the need to address the mental health issues experienced by the youth due to the pandemic and the implications of these issues.

Session 7: Panel Discussion on 'COVID-19: Contexts and Recovery-South Asian Perspective"

The panel discussion on "COVID-19 Contexts and Recovery – South Asian Perspective" was graced by two eminent scholars of the region including Professor Rehman Sobhan, Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), and Professor Deepak Nayyar, Emeritus Professor of Economics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. The session was moderated by Dr Selim Raihan. Professor Depak Nayyar focused on the

COVID-19 crisis in South Asia, situating it in its wider global context, considering its social and economic impacts, dimensions and evolving contours, and reflecting on the future in terms of the possibilities and prospects of recovery. Professor Nayyar opined that, the relationship between lives and livelihoods is circular - which could lead to widespread hunger, reduced immunity and lost lives. It is the role of the governments to strike a balance between these two objectives, rather than juxtapose them as conflicting. The response of the people is also a cause of concern - reluctance to wear masks and obey lockdown rules, combined with the difficulty in physical distancing in densely populated South Asia countries are major issues, Professor Nayyar observed. Professor Nayyar concluded that the pandemic nationalism carried out by many governments is misplaced due to its global impact. Professor Rehman Sobhan discussed the strength and weakness of Bangladesh's response to the pandemic, the economic impact of the pandemic across South Asia and the gaps in policies undertaken. He pointed out that in spite of the fact that policies and social and political rhetoric have emphasized the need to stimulate the small and micro industries, the absence of efficient delivery systems to direct finance to the hard-hit sectors and poor business governance has made this difficult. In the absence of universal unemployment insurance schemes or other compensatory interventions, the central problem to imposing lockdowns across South Asian countries has been to ensure that people do not lose their livelihoods, claimed Professor Sobhan.

Session 4: **South Asian Economics Students Group Research Project**

The 4th session of 2nd SIDC 2021 hosted 8 research paper presentations by young scholars from the South Asian Economic Students' Group. Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud, an eminent economist of Bangladesh, graced the session as the Special Guest. Dr Deb Kusum Das, Associate Professor, Ramjas College, University of Delhi, moderated the session. The papers presented were: "The impact of remittance inflows on

consumption in South Asia" by N. T. Anika, S. Uday, S. N. Cheema, T. Jayasundara and Sujaan Aryal; "Disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on female and informal workers: Evidence from South Asia" by M. Ahmadi, M. Amin. S. Gautam, B. Ranasinghe and I. Toshniwal, T. Islam: "Learning losses of undergraduate students in South Asia during COVID-19 and its determinants" by F. Mumtahena, K. Sen, M. I. Sayyed, P. Wijyawardhana, R. Zafari and S. Kafle; "Understanding learning losses due to COVID-19 school-shutdowns" by A. Ratnayake, I. Hasaand, J. Agrawal, J. Yusuf, N. Shameem and S. Khanal; "Biofortification in South Asia: Problems and Policies" by M. A. Islam, B. Ahmedzai, D. Walia, O. Pallege, Y. Shah, Z. Khan; "Comparative advantage and its determinants: A study of the South Asian textile and clothing sector" by S. Chakravarty, Is. Ahmed, A. Akrami, T. A. Azfar, N. Shahi and K. G. Samaraweera; "Assessing the impact of trade disruptions on food security in South Asia: implications for COVID-19" by A. Tiwari, A. Baral, H. Wijeskera, M. Bashir, S. M. Sadat and S. R. Ahmed, and "Silver lining amid the turmoil: Unlocking the potential of RMG cotton RVCs in South Asia under the light of COVID-19 pandemic", by M. A. Aahad, S. Malhotra, M. Javed, A. A. Shah, S. Ranchagoda and M. Koirala. The students presented their analyses of aspects of the South Asian economies, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. They also addressed the challenges to policymaking in the upcoming days. A general consensus on greater regional cooperation across South Asia reverberated across the session. In the open discussion, the students received valuable feedbacks for their research projects.

Session 8: **Labour Market**

The paper presentation session on "Labour Market" was chaired by Dr Sajid Amin Javed, Research Fellow and Founding Head, Policy Solutions Lab, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Pakistan. As the discussant was present Dr Sher Verick, Head, Employment Strategies Unit, International Labour Organization. A total of four papers were presented in the session. The papers were: "Impact of the

COVID-19 pandemic on Bangladesh's labour market" by Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha, Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, Dr Selim Raihan, Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, Md. Biplob Hossain, Independent Researcher and Tanveer Mahmood, Research Associate, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies; "Determinants of youth's informal employment in Sri Lanka: An empirical analysis" by Navaratnam Balamurali, Senior Lecturer, Department of Social Studies, The Open University of Sri Lanka and Dr Priyanga Dunusinghe, Senior Lecturer, Department of Economics, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka; "The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on labour market outcomes in Pakistan" by Dr Zubaria Andlib, Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Federal Urdu University of Arts, Science and Technology, Pakistan and Dr Mesfin G. Genie, Research Fellow, Health Economics Research Unit, University of Aberdeen, UK, and "Informal workers and labour organisations- the interplay: An empirical study from West Bengal, India in the context of COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown" by Tanima Banerjee, Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Adamas University, India and Suraya Roy, PhD Research Scholar, University of Calcutta, India. Researchers discussed the changes in dynamic of the labour market in the context of the pandemic in Bangladesh and South Asia. The papers presented evidence and data on employment trends, informal sector and other key factors in the labour market. The session put emphasis on policy actions addressing youth unemployment and informal workers who are bearing the burnt of the pandemic.

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Session 9: Poverty, Inequality and Development Challenges

The third day of the conference hosted another paper presentation session on "Poverty, Inequality and Development Challenges", chaired by Professor Siddiqur Rahman Osmani, Professor of Development Economics, University of Ulster, UK. As discussant of the session was present Dr Balwant Singh

Mehta, Fellow, IHD, India. The papers were: "Dynamics of new poor in Bangladesh" by Dr Selim Raihan, Professor, Department of Economics, DU and Executive Director, SANEM, Mahtab Uddin, Lecturer, Department of Economics, DU and Research Economist, SANEM and Md. Tuhin Ahmed, Senior Research Associate, SANEM; "Could the COVID-19 crisis affect remittances and labour supply in ASEAN Economies? Macroeconomic conjectures based on the SARS epidemic" by Dr Alberto Posso, Professor of Economics and Director, CID, RMIT University, Australia; "COVID-19 and digital learning in higher education: evidence from India" by Dr Pradeep Kumar Choudhury, Assistant Professor of Economics, JNU, India and Amit Kumar, Research Scholar, JNU, and "Socio-economic vulnerability of household to COVID-19 in Pakistan: A microdata study" by Dr Bushra Yasmin, Associate Professor, Department of Economics, FJWU, Pakistan and Aiman Khan, Student, Department of Economics, FJWU.

Session 10: **Panel Discussion on** "COVID-19 Recovery: Contexts and **Priorities-Developing** Countries' Perspective"

The final session of the conference was a panel discussion on "COVID-19 Recovery: Contexts and Priorities-Developing Countries' Perspective". Professor David Hulme, Professor of Development Studies, University of Manchester, and Dr Martin Rama, Chief Economist, Latin America and the Caribbean

region, The World Bank, attended the session as the panelists. The discussion was mdoerated by Dr Selim Raihan. Contrasting vaccine development with vaccine distribution, Professor Hulme claimed that, on the one hand, vaccine development has been a success story in terms of international linkages, scientific collaboration and effective public-private partnerships. On the other hand, vaccine distribution has been a different story with access to vaccines being extremely low in low-income and lower middle- income countries. Dr Martin Rama presented data on Latin America - the most affected region in terms of health and economy - to build his case on the topic of discussion. Dr Martin Rama noted that there is some hope - from previous evidence - that there is usually a booming economy after a crisis. Improvements in the overall telecommunications infrastructure can bring positive long term results more inclusion in the financial sector, more trade by selling through platforms etc.

Glimpse of 2nd SANEM International Development Conference (SIDC) 17-19 June 2021























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.