Most of the country’s economy is collapsing due to this COVID-19 crisis. This worldwide economic pressure is affecting even the areas that are not affected by the virus. To survive this crisis, we need to find new solutions. Corporates, businesses, governments and people need to ensure that the workflow does not get disrupted and critical situations are under control. The need of the hour, therefore, is that technology & strategic measurements should step up and help close the gaps in remote collaboration, facilitating seamless interface and enabling right outcomes. There is no doubt that the post Covid-19 world will be a much different. The future of work, education and overall life will be different. We need to find adaptive ways for the enterprises to be able to regain the lost productivity from the pandemic loss and to transform companies in managing themselves better for future outbreaks. In the hunt to find the formula of revenue growth, profit growths and cost cuts in every critical emergency. this plenary session was designed to discuss the measures & strategies needed to rebuild and develop a more resilient worldwide economy post-COVID-19.
Panelist- Datuk Dr Rais Hussin Mohamed Ariff
Chairman, Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation &
Former Adviser to Hon. PM

Datuk Dr. Rais Hussin, in his panel session, talked about the noticeable gradual shift to a low-touch economy where things are done more remotely from a very high tough economy where everything was done through physical means. The digital disruption is threatening the non-digital companies; over 50% of the SNPs will be replaced over the next 10 years. He mentioned, according to the McKinsey report in the context of Malaysia, digital adoption could increase their GDP by 400 billion Ringgit by 2025. During the recent Movement Control Order, the gig economy has seen to flourish and sectors like manufacturing and wholesale retail, agriculture, tourism, education and healthcare are now gearing towards digital transformation. The government has taken substantial initiatives like the Industry Forward Policy to facilitate this and embrace the 4IR. However, he highlighted the key challenges in this context, including lack of structured approach towards digitization, budget availability, priorities within the organization over the long-term and availability of a digitally skilled workforce.

Dr. Ariff talked about the necessity of the digital revolution for multidimensional sectors for economic sustainability: “Food security, safety and sovereignty is key in any nation building and rebuilding the economy. In this road to recovery we must also remember the SMEs; in Malaysia more than 34% of the GDP is contributed by the SMEs employing 7 million people. We introduced measures like wage subsidies, soft loans and moratorium of loan repayments to SMEs to survive this pandemic and then prepare to restart the economy fairly quickly. One of the most important policies used by Malaysia oftentimes has been public-private partnership and the pandemic has been no different. We have been working with government, corporate associations and technology providers, continuing to push the digital transformation agenda. 600-800 million jobs will be lost without embracing 4IR even in agriculture for instance there are many agri-tech initiatives that can actually quadruple the yield.

Dr. Ariff believes in stimulating the economy, it is very important that digitization is taken in a holistic approach, especially a human centered digital approach is the way forward.
Panelist- Salman F Rahman, MP  
Co-founder and vice chairman of Beximco Group  
Cabinet minister and serving as the Private Sector Industry and Investment Adviser to Honorable PM of Bangladesh

Salman F Rahman, MP highlighted how Bangladesh has fought against all odds for realizing digitalization and connecting the entire country with a fiber optic backbone and successfully developing the basic infrastructure of digitalization. He believes this has massively helped the workforce, especially the large population of freelancers, in a crisis like this with a stretched lockdown. In a recent World Economic Forum and University of Oxford Survey report revealed that, after India, Bangladesh has the second largest number of freelancers working from home. The next step to recovery, according to him, is focusing on accurate and reliable data collection to summarize and identify actual work done and required. He talked about their current actions taken to create a database of freelancers and collectively working with the ICT sector in providing incentives and venture capital to startups to reap the tremendous growth in the economies which is anchored by the pursuit of digital penetration.

MP Rahman mentioned the areas of digitalization that are the focal point in this present crisis, especially in the remote handling of the health sector through digital platforms and the public and private sector initiatives taken to promote resiliency, including the areas that still need work in preparing for the 4IR and implementation of Artificial Intelligence. He believes Bangladesh has come a long way in this sector with recent spike in export of technological devices like mobile phones and laptops to countries like Turkey and USA and is optimistic that with global cooperation and connectivity of all sectors, Bangladesh will soon reach the much anticipated heights.

Bangladesh being the 2nd largest exporters of garments after China and having that economies of scale and complete vertical integration, MP Rahman presented the massive opportunity in this sector brought by the COVID crisis in the form of replacing the demand for and loss from fashion garment with the huge demand for manufacturing PPEs, Masks and other safety gears. Currently, the government is working on setting up adequate testing facilities under the internationally recognized Bangladesh Accreditation Board to facilitate this scope and make it a significant path to its economic recovery.

“This pandemic has left no alternative to going online now. Digital structuring is very important for rejuvenating the economy and it’s necessary to have the proper digital infrastructure. Bangladesh has the success stories anchored by strong digital infrastructure and a readiness of supporting the private sector. Also we need to combine and connect other sectors such as education, healthcare, agriculture, administrations, even the ones lagging behind in terms of this robust digital transformation. It is not exclusive to other sectors but we need to focus on the building blocks inclusively.”
Panelist- Ambassador Dato' Ku Jaafar Ku Shaari
Secretary General of the D-8 Organization

Ambassador Dato’ Ku Shaari used the example of the Scandinavian economies to highlight the health growth model as key to the prosperity of any economy as Covid-19 has rightly proved that the health component is not independent of economic growth. He mentioned the pandemic has shown the timeliness of the D8’s Health and Social Protection Program, connected to leading global institutes like WHO and the Chatham House, was established with the aim to expand the basic primary healthcare services and enhance health governance and overall quality, explore untapped market opportunities, prevent non-communicable diseases and extend social protection. The pandemic has accelerated the actions and in line with the request from member states D8 is focusing on closely monitoring the global vaccine efforts and collaborating with International bodies to ensure access.

Ambassador Ku Shaari talked about using the D8 as a dialogue platform to share knowledge and information among the health experts and accelerate exchange and cross training of health care professionals among the member states, especially as D8 average of doctor per thousand people is at 0.97 that is lower than the global average, despite the member countries like Iran and Turkey having a higher average individually so he believes it is important to build mechanisms to together ensure a better public health response in all member states collectively.

“We believe that we should build mechanisms to educate more doctors, specialists and journalists to ensure a better public health response in all our member states and so this is our task further and we plan to empower people at large and establish a working group that connects between all the member state ministers of health for recovery. We are also looking at the impact on the economy and working on how we can address the economic impact connecting leaders to come forward with the view to providing something like a facility or funds where we can engage global partners to earn resiliency.”

Ambassador Ku Shaari believes that we must save what can be saved as it is clear that not all jobs and industries can be saved and hence global funds and regional cooperation should be redirected to areas with the highest and most desired outcome supporting greener and more digital business models.
Panelist- M. A. Mannan-Panelist
Planning Minister of Bangladesh Government

M.A. Mannan, MP discussed the important linkages between the issue of pandemic and health, poverty and livelihood in his panel session. Being a low income economy moving into a lower middle income economy and with no prior experience of such a prolonged pandemic for a large population, MP Mannan talked about the challenges faced in gearing for immediate actions to be taken by the government and reorganizing the healthcare system of both urban and rural sides.

He explained that 80% of the working population are from the informal sector surviving on a daily wage basis either in the agricultural sector and off-farm activities with low security of job and safety net, who were then immediately brought into the existing social safety net program providing small scale cash support of around $10 million. He very rightly addressed the fact that the COVID has created a new poor in the system as it has seen to create a new normal. The slow re-opening of the economy, he believes, has definitely been improving this situation however the huge manufacturing sectors remain suffering due to the closing of borders and cancellation of orders and payments, despite the support provided by the government.

“Our interventions need reorganizing health systems as well as supporting and amplifying the social safety net for the informal sector along with ensuring social protection with the support of the global community because this needs a dual approach. Domestically we have to regroup, reshape and recover ourselves as well we have to establish our trade links with our earlier trade partners also we have to go into the export business immediately as early as we can.

It is clear to me that there are two sides of the economy- ancient agricultural side that provides food security and the digital side in the cyber world- these two ends of the economy must be integrated and used for the benefit of the people towards a way forward.”

MP Mannan is highly optimistic that with the support of the global community, Bangladesh will be back on track in no time.
Moderator- Nisan Abdul Kader
Vice President, WAVTEQ, Africa; Sr. FDI Officer & Emerging Markets Specialist

Nisan Abdul Kader addressed the fragility discovered by all economies across the world in these interesting times where the global goal posts shift daily. She believes that while we have been quick to utilize the language of gloom and doom, the human experience story has always been one of resilience of rebuilding. Ms. Kader opened the floor to other esteemed panelists to explore the measures and mechanisms used by leaders in helping economies and people to mitigate the downward pressure of this crisis, especially expediting digitization and digital solutions to accelerate recovery and the lessons learnt from this new normal as a way forward.

Nisan Abdul Kader talked about the overall global ups and downs of the economies imposed by the COVID catastrophe and mentioned that, “The world bank is envisioning a baseline of 5.2 percent contraction in the global GDP in 2020 and almost a 30-40% decline in global foreign direct investment has been estimated which means that not one entity or country is immune to emerging markets and developing countries, many of which face daunting vulnerabilities even though governments have sought to counter the effects of the downturn with fiscal and monetary policies. It has been critical for everyone to strengthen the public’s health systems, address macroeconomic challenges posed by informality and also implement reforms that will support strong and sustainable growth.”

Ms. Kader believes that the health sector should be used as a catalyst for economic prosperity and build linkages between economic prosperity and human capital development and government and private sectors together with international corporations have to together ensure rapid interventions are fair and widespread.
Special Message- Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahhman
Chairperson, BRAC

Dr. Zillur Rahman presented the most important lesson in this time of crisis to be the need for a resilient mindset for all forces of society. As a great number of people had to migrate to the rural areas. Dr. Rahman believes that for the foreseeable future reconstruction of the rural economy would be a key challenge.

“Even before the Covid-19, Bangladesh was facing the challenge of finding new growth drivers and I think this is an opportune time in rethinking agriculture and the rural economy including the non-farm sectors as a whole as the potential site for new growth opportunities. Another challenge I believe is the human capital aspect of it. Due to mobility restrictions, today's youth face great uncertainties about their future as the countries struggle to adapt to new ways of providing quality education. In Bangladesh, the danger of digital divide becoming even more entrenched is quite high as the majority lack access to smart digital solutions.”

The pandemic has forced and challenged economists, community leaders, policy makers, entrepreneurs to rethink and re-understand a wholesome well managed infrastructure as a key prop for our economic future and explore creative innovative solutions in particular community based facilities.
SUPPLEMENTS
(Source: D-8 Organization)

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a major, unprecedented disruption to the existing state-of-affairs. We were faced with a global health crisis combined with an economic downturn which forced all of us to try navigate our way in uncharted waters. Although much has been done, we are not through the crisis yet and the conditions will certainly call for more of our patience, endurance and resilience.

During this crisis, we had time to rethink our priorities, both individually and internationally, and I believe we all understood that in times like this, we need cooperation, solidarity and brotherhood above all. In my capacity as the Secretary-General of D-8, an economic cooperation organization among eight members of the Global South namely Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey- I also felt the grave responsibility of finding new mechanisms to synergize cooperation among the Member States and complement their national efforts. As to why we needed to “think out of the box” and find novel ways of cooperation, we shall first understand why this crisis was like no other.

The 2008 financial crisis, the most recent in our memories, was a unique event on its own. It had catastrophic and long-lasting impacts on the global economy. In the aftermath of the crisis, the global economy contracted by 1.6%; the first global negative growth figure to be reported after the Great Depression. Despite the decade-long recovery, some economies did not surpass their crisis levels hence one cannot downplay the significance of the Great Recession in the course of history.

However, when the 2008 crisis broke, it somehow resembled to former economic bubbles like the “tulip mania” of the 19th century or the dot-com crisis of early 2000s. It was the end result of human greediness and lack of adequate government inspection. Covid-19 however resembled more to “force majeure”. We needed to tackle the health crisis while finding a way to keep the economy moving. Pitiful growth rates combined with ever increasing patient numbers reveal that our performance has not been stellar.

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, the global economy contracted by 1.6%, as I said. Today IMF is expecting that figure to reach as high as negative 5%. The amount of unemployment stemming from these two crises are by no means comparable. Furthermore, the global response—or the lack thereof—are by no means comparable. The USA was responsible for the 2008 crisis. And in line with that responsibility, they took the leadership to rally their resources not only to bail-out their own economy but also led nations to a way out of the crisis. The US balance sheet engrossed into USD 4 trillion at that time and it took them a decade to scale it down. Still yet, the global economy recovered.

However, this time, let alone a global leadership, there had not been even a coordinated response on the regional level. On the contrary, the whole economic climate was disrupted further with a harsh trade war. Last but not least, after the 2008 crisis most sectors of the economy managed to make a comeback. With increased supervision and safeguards, some industries became even more resilient. This time however Covid-19 may mark the end of some industries as we know them.
Despite the gloomy outlook, there have also been some promising developments. It is by the very conditions imposed by the pandemic that we understood that digital transformation is both inevitable and pivotal as to solve many of the unique challenges we faced. This pandemic certainly propelled the creative and entrepreneurial mindsets to develop novel tools. Healthcare apps, remote working tools, leaps in fintech and digital payment, advances in ecommerce are only a few of the innovations inspired by the pandemic conditions. This kind of novelties will gain significant momentum in the near future.

It is with pride that during the midst of this pandemic we have managed to make huge leaps for our D-8 Creative Economic & Financial Center (D-8 CEFC) and accelerate our existing work on the digital payment card-D8P Card-co-developed with KOMEPS FinTech. This is our small contribution to the betterment of our Member States and to the welfare of our citizens. I believe that this kind of initiative will pour in from every corner of the world. We need to provide the right ecosystem for the creative and innovative mindsets.

As for our third and most significant contribution, and an initiative I personally felt compelled to undertake, I would like to introduce the D-8 Health and Social Protection Program (D-8 HSP). It is a rather new initiative but one we take pride in establishing, especially considering the ongoing health crisis which calls for cooperation at all levels.

It is true that the wellbeing and overall health outcome of a country depends on its economy. But in fact the causality is much stronger the other way around. Countries who invest heavily in the health sector prosper. WHO reports that increasing health spending by 1% of national GDP will save over 60 million lives a year, as well as increasing the average global lifespan by 3.7 years by 2030, and boost economic growth by 2%-4%. We should look no further than the Scandinavian economies, champions of health-led growth, to see the truth in this inference.

Taking into account all the obvious merits, health has always been proposed as an area of cooperation among the D-8 Member States but it was not until last year we had the opportunity to build a solid framework of collaboration. This year, with the invaluable efforts of Dr. Ado J. Muhammad- a prominent public health expert from Nigeria we managed to establish our Health Program Office in Abuja and connect it to the leading global institutions such as the World Health Organization and the Chatham House.

The D-8 Health and Social Protection Program (D-8 HSP) has five main medium term goals; (1) to expand basic primary health care service (2) to improve health governance and overall quality (3) to explore untapped market opportunities (4) to prevent non-communicable diseases (5) to extend social protection to the poor. In line with the requests of the Member States, health secretariat will initially focus its attention on closely monitoring the global vaccine efforts and collaborate with international bodies to ensure smooth access of our Member States, acting as a dialogue platform to share knowledge among the health experts in our countries, accelerate exchange and cross training of health care professionals among the Member States. We hope that D-8 HSP’s work will set an example for other regional, interregional and international organizations and inspire them to take solid steps towards stirring cooperation among nations.

mankind has been through tough times and proved its resilience before, on countless tests. We shall recall Surah Al-Inshirah: “So, verily, with every difficulty, there is relief” and remember that this too shall pass with unity, solidarity, hard work and patience. Should we all play our part and take the necessary actions, there is no reason why we should not come out stronger, more united and more resilient at the end of this crisis.

Article by Ambassador Dato’ Ku Jaafar Ku Shaari
Secretary General of the D-8 Organization