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ASIA-PACIFIC GOVERNANCE WATCH

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UNPAN-AP
Editorial Department, RCOCI

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Asia-Pacific Governance Watch

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1、Government Policy and Legislation

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Addressing Complex Housing Policy Challenges Should Be a Central Priority for Governments

Access to affordable and decent housing is vital for good health, job opportunities and life satisfaction, but housing remains one of the most complex policy challenges facing societies today. Governments must do more to ensure universal access to affordable, high-quality, environmentally sustainable housing, according to the OECD. The COVID-19 crisis has uncovered how unevenly housing is distributed across population groups, and has worsened the adverse impacts of poor housing conditions, notably on the most vulnerable. Launched in 2018, a wide-ranging OECD

Housing Project has gathered comparative evidence, analysis and policy recommendations to help governments make housing more affordable, more energy-efficient and better adapted to people's needs. "Housing is much more than just a place to live," said OECD Secretary-General Mathias Cormann. "It is the single largest household budget item and a key element in both economic performance and well-being."

"The OECD Housing Policy Toolkit we are presenting today will help policymakers design better housing policies that address the reality of developments in housing markets, such as the affordability challenge, and improve the considerable effect housing policy has across societies," Mr Cormann said. With housing prices in many countries rising dramatically - lodging costs now absorb more than a third of the budget of the poorest 20%, compared with only a quarter of the budget of the top 20% - and public investment at historically low levels, four key priority areas emerge from the Toolkit. First, unlocking additional supply will be key to meeting both current and future housing challenges. More public investment in energy-efficient social housing would ease housing difficulties, especially for households on low or unstable incomes. Building green social housing can also act as a catalyst for the energy transition of the construction industry as a whole. Second, land-use reforms, such as the removal of overly tight building restrictions or minimum parcel size requirements, can reduce obstacles to new residential construction. Decisions on land use and planning must be made based on the needs of whole metropolitan areas rather than via a piecemeal district-by-district approach. Such reforms would put a brake on the strong upward trend in real house prices that has been widespread among OECD countries for the past four decades.

Third, greater flexibility in regulations over landlord-tenant relations, including rent control, can encourage investment in housing. Over the past year, these restrictions have been tightened to protect tenants hit hard by the Covid-19 crisis. Over time, the Toolkit's overview report notes, such measures can discourage the supply of rental housing, ultimately making access to rental more difficult, especially for those on low or unstable incomes. Fourth, application of stringent environmental standards, to achieve agreed greenhouse gas emission reduction targets and upgrade the energy efficiency of the existing housing stock, will be essential. This may put upward pressure on housing construction costs or rental prices, but these investments will translate to lower heating costs and preserve the long-term value of the houses.

The Housing Policy Toolkit includes:
An overview report, Brick by Brick: Building Better Housing Policies, which identifies policy levers that can enhance the efficiency, inclusiveness or sustainability of housing markets. It highlights ways to bring progress across these objectives and also discusses addressing trade-offs that can arise among them.
A Dashboard of Housing Indicators, which gathers indicators allowing policymakers to compare outcomes and policy settings across countries by topic.

A set of Country Snapshots offering national overviews of housing conditions and policies.

Further information on OECD Housing Week, 14-18 June 2021
A central policy objective of the OECD Housing Project is to ensure access to quality housing at affordable cost. Recent progress can be charted with new updates to cross-country indicators in the OECD Affordable Housing Database, covering the housing market, housing conditions and affordability, and public policies to facilitate affordable housing in more than 40 countries worldwide. The update to the Affordable Housing Database will be released Wednesday 16 June. OECD Secretary-General Mathias Cormann will deliver opening remarks to a high-level housing policy roundtable on Wednesday 16 June, beginning at 14:00 CEST (12:00 GMT), followed by a keynote speech by Italy's Minister for Sustainable Infrastructure and Mobility Enrico Giovannini. The first panel, Mobilising the OECD Housing Policy Toolkit to future-proof housing markets, from 14:10 to 15:25, will include a presentation by Luiz de Mello, Director of Policy Studies in the OECD Economics Dept., followed by a panel discussion with various ministerial and high-level speakers.

A second panel, Investing in affordable and social housing to facilitate an inclusive economic recovery, from15:25 to 16:30, will include introductory remarks by Stefano Scarpetta, OECD Director for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, followed by a panel discussion with global housing policy experts. To register for the Housing Policy Roundtable, please go to: https://meetoecd1.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_o8UCtIlzRz618_AvEICeUA For further information on the OECD Housing Project, or to request interviews, contact Lawrence Speer in the OECD Media Office (+33 1 4524 9700). Working with over 100 countries, the OECD is a global policy forum that promotes policies to preserve individual liberty and improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.

From https://www.oecd.org/ 06/14/2021

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ADB, China Everbright Environment Form Strategic Partnership for Ocean Health in Asia

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and China Everbright Environment Group Limited (CEEGL) today signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to cooperate on efforts to promote the circular economy and protect ocean health in Asia. Under the agreement, ADB and CEEGL will jointly promote the development of enhanced solid waste management systems in Asia to encourage public-private partnerships (PPP) in waste collection, transportation, and recycling, and to reduce land-based sources of marine debris and related impacts to marine life, coastal livelihoods, and human health. “The ocean ecosystem faces severe threats from pollution and climate change, demanding urgent and sustainable solutions," said ADB Private Sector Operations Department Deputy Director General Christopher Thieme. "By leveraging ADB and CEEGL's complementary expertise and resources, our partnership will spur advocacy for the circular economy and healthy oceans and disseminate crucial knowledge needed to develop blue economies." "We look forward to cooperating with ADB in reducing marine debris, fostering blue economy collaboration, and promoting the circular economy in the future, as well as taking this opportunity to improve the company's strategic vision for business development," said CEEGL Chairman of the Board Wang Tianyi. "Meanwhile, the company will take the reduction of pollution and carbon intensity in the ocean as a starting point to better support the People's Republic of China's (PRC) pledge to achieve carbon emissions peak and carbon neutrality."

The cooperation will focus on raising awareness on the critical role of solid waste management to ensure ocean health and will document a case study of marine debris reduction through relevant projects. ADB and CEEGL will also collaborate to enhance PPP project preparation templates, to promote PPPs in solid waste management in ADB's developing member countries. CEEGL is the first one-stop integrated environmental solution provider in the PRC with a business presence in more than 200 locations across the PRC as well as overseas markets such as Viet Nam, Germany, and Poland. At the end of 2020, CEEGL secured 458 environmental protection projects, including 161 waste-to-energy projects with a total designed annual household waste processing capacity of 51 million tons and expected on-grid power generation of approximately 16,912 GWh. In 2019, ADB launched the Action Plan for Healthy Oceans and Sustainable Blue Economies to expand financial and technical assistance for ocean health and marine economy projects.

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ADB and Habitat for Humanity: Helping Vulnerable Communities, One Home at a Time

To ease a worsening housing crisis in Asia and the Pacific, ADB has teamed with Habitat for Humanity International to provide housing loans for low-income families in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The collaboration will expand ADB's Microfinance Risk Participation and Guarantee Program to include microloans for housing, home improvement, and water and sanitation. Anshukant Taneja, who heads the program at ADB's private sector operations department, explains how the partnership will deliver decent, affordable shelter for vulnerable communities.

1. How serious is the housing crisis in Asia and what is causing it?
In 2020, an estimated 2.2 billion people lived in cities across Asia Pacific, with one-third, or around 700 million, living in slums and informal settlements that lack basic services like water and sanitation. These marginalized communities living in

poor-quality housing are increasingly vulnerable to climate change. Many factors contribute to this worsening housing crisis, including limited government resources for planned development; rapid urban migration leading to poorly planned, densely populated urban settlements; rising housing-related costs, and increasing unaffordability. These communities do not qualify for existing market-based solutions for housing finance, like mortgage financing. This prevents low-income families from gaining access to decent housing or improving the quality of their existing dwellings.

2. How has the COVID-19 pandemic made housing even more tenuous for the poor?
The pandemic has exacerbated the global housing crisis. Evidence is emerging that overcrowded communities are more exposed to COVID-19 transmission. The related lock-downs and quarantines diminished the income streams of small informal business owners and daily-wage earners. Their modest savings and resources have been allocated to meet more immediate needs, and spending on housing or home improvement has been given an even lower priority.

3. Why have ADB and Habitat for Humanity decided to work together on affordable housing?
Traditional housing financing solutions focus primarily on the construction of new houses, which is well outside the reach of low-income settlers in informal urban communities. However, financing for home improvement, refurbishment from temporary and semi-permanent to resilient housing, and water and sanitation can substantially improve living conditions for vulnerable communities. While microfinance institutions (MFIs) have made efforts to reach this segment, their progress has been hampered by two factors. The first being lack of access to longer-term financing, which can be extended to the micro-borrowers to enhance the "affordability" of the loans. Secondly, there is limited capacity and technical skills among MFIs to develop and deliver appropriate loan products. To fill this financing and technical-capacity gap, ADB and Habitat for Humanity have launched a new initiative. ADB is helping MFIs access financing through its Micro Finance Program, and Habitat for Humanity will work to improve the MFIs' technical expertise through capacity-building and training. The goal is to provide microloans to 20,000 households in the first phase of the program, to improve the construction quality and climate resilience of homes, and to install sanitation and water connections. This initiative will specifically empower women, by targeting them as recipients of 90% of such home improvement loans.

4. What are ADB's and Habitat for Humanity's roles in this collaboration?
ADB will work with its network of partner banks to provide credit enhancement on longer-term loans for selected MFIs. Technical assistance funding will be used for training and to build the MFIs' technical expertise, to deliver affordable home improvement and micro-housing loans. Habitat for Humanity will be responsible for working with MFIs, to assess and enhance their ability to offer such housing microfinance products. This product-design work will help develop a micro-housing

loan prototype tailored for the MFIs' clients. It will also help MFIs develop internal policies and procedures to deliver micro-housing finance as a mainstream product.

5. Where will this be rolled out, and who else is involved?
In its initial phase, the countries being targeted under this partnership are Bangladesh, India, and Indonesia. Work has commenced in India with Annapurna Finance Ltd., one of the largest MFIs in the country. Discussions with prominent MFIs in Indonesia and the Philippines are ongoing, and pilot-testing work is being planned.

6. What is the likely long-term impact of this partnership?
The partnership will deliver a market-validated financing solution to improve living conditions for urban communities and enhance resilience to extreme weather events in rural areas. It builds on the social network and client linkages developed by MFIs, by delivering a bundled financing and capacity-building solution. A decent, affordable home, with access to clean water and sanitation, sets a strong foundation for families' overall health, well-being, and economic opportunities. It empowers women to expand their income opportunities, as homes are often the venue for their micro-enterprises. Increased privacy and access to sanitary conditions, including for menstrual health and hygiene, improves the overall quality of life for women and supports children's education, providing stability and continuity to livelihoods. The partnership will expand coverage to newer markets in its second phase. ADB will also potentially work with the follow-on Micro Build Fund promoted by Habitat For Humanity to help mobilize private capital and build a transaction pipeline. The partnership aims to make a notable contribution to better living conditions for the region's underprivileged, one home at a time.

From https://www.adb.org/ 06/10/2021

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APEC's New Structural Reform Plan to Boost Resilience Against Future Shocks

Structural reform took center stage as ministers and economic officials from 21 APEC member economies convened virtually on Wednesday, chaired by New Zealand Minister of Commerce and Consumer Affairs Dr David Clark, to advance sustainable and resilient recovery from the pandemic by invigorating APEC's structural reform agenda. Ministers and officials say that the Enhanced APEC Agenda for Structural Reform will help member economies prioritize their work for the next five years and chart the way toward strong, sustainable and inclusive economic growth for the region. In his opening remarks at the meeting, Dr Clark underscored the crucial role that structural reform plays in boosting recovery as well as advancing policy development that will improve the institutional and legal environment across APEC.

"This is a critical time to join together, share experience and collaborate as we promote and shape our economic recovery from the pandemic," Dr Clark said. "Implementing the right structural reforms will help ensure that our economies, businesses and all our people can build towards a sustainable and inclusive recovery, and improve resilience for the future," Dr Clark added. He highlighted that structural reform efforts will enable economies to respond to the urgent issues and prepare the region for future economic shocks. "Macroeconomic responses from economies have provided critical buffers during the pandemic for people and businesses while microeconomic policies will improve markets' efficiency and productivity," Dr Clark explained.

Focusing on APEC's priority to increase inclusion and sustainability for recovery, Dr Clark expressed support for tackling climate change that will only exacerbate the future economic, social and environmental costs across the region. "Right now, we have the opportunity to not just replace what we had, but to create a more robust future, by adopting a green recovery," Dr Clark advised. "That is, to be inclusive in the long-term, environmentally sustainable, innovation friendly, and that helps to align and accelerate global investment towards green alternatives. "Collaboration, cooperation and integration are key to economies in laying the foundations for a stronger, healthier world following the disruption caused by COVID-19," Dr Clark concluded. "The structural reform efforts that we put into place will contribute to APEC's overarching goal to promote balanced, inclusive, sustainable, innovative and secure growth."

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CHINA: CPC Issues Guidelines on Strengthening Supervision on Chief Officials at All Levels

The Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee has issued a set of guidelines on strengthening the supervision on chief officials and leadership teams at all levels, in a bid to further strengthen the Party and enhance discipline. Many effective measures have been implemented and experience has been accumulated in this area of work since the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012, yet the oversight on chief officials at all levels remains a weak link, said the guidelines, which were dated late March and made public Tuesday. A focus of such oversight should be political oversight, which scrutinizes the performances of chief officials and leadership teams at all levels in staying loyal to the Party and acting in accordance with the Party's nature and purpose, according to the guidelines. Noting that the oversight on chief officials at all levels should be the top priority, the guidelines said these officials in command should willingly accept such oversight and have the courage to shoulder responsibilities in work. Stressing top-down organizational oversight, the guidelines said chief officials must step up their disciplinary supervision on the chief officials at a lower level of hierarchy. Members of a leadership team should supervise each other and engage in criticism and self-criticism, according to the guidelines.

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New Regulations to Strengthen CPC's Organizational Work: Statement

The regulations on the organizational work of the Communist Party of China (CPC) provide fundamental rules to better the organizational work and strengthen Party organizations in the new era, according to the Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee. The regulations, which were made public recently by the CPC Central Committee, are of great importance to uphold the Party's overall leadership on organizational work and comprehensively improve the work quality, said a statement from the department on Thursday. The regulations have made provisions on topics including the CPC's organization systems, selection and management of cadres, and promotion of talents, said the statement. The regulations stipulate that the organizational work must follow the principles, including "upholding Party's overall leadership," and "selecting officials on the basis of both integrity and ability, with priority given to integrity and on the basis of merit regardless of background." The organization department will promote the study and publicity of the regulations and strengthen the supervision on the implementation of the regulations, said the statement.

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China Considers Tax Law for Domestic Goods to Hainan

Chinese lawmakers are considering a draft law whose newly added details allow tax refunds for goods from the country's inland area to the Hainan free trade port (FTP). Value-added tax and consumption tax should be refunded for goods from China's inland area as per related rules, said the draft law. It was submitted to a regular session of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress for its third reading on Monday. The refund policy aims to avoid a tax imbalance between domestic and imported goods and ensure fair market competition in the FTP. When the FTP starts operation, it will also simplify and combine value-added tax, consumption tax, vehicle purchase tax, urban maintenance and construction tax, and education surcharges, the draft law said. Sales tax will be levied in the process of goods and service retail. The taxation system for the FTP will be further streamlined, according to the draft. The draft also stresses ecological and environmental protection, sustainable development, and the prevention of invasive species.

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China to Advance Major Programs in 14th Five-Year Plan to Harness Key Role of Effective Investment

China will advance the implementation of major programs set out in the Outline of the 14th Five-year Plan, to better tap the key role of effective investment, the State Council's executive meeting chaired by Premier Li Keqiang decided on Wednesday. The major programs span a series of key areas, including scientific and technological advances, infrastructural facilities, environmental protection, people's livelihoods and cultural heritage, among others. Competent departments across the country have made sound preparations and concrete support policies. A great majority of the programs have kicked off. Given the much uncertainty and instability in the environment at home and abroad, the meeting stressed the need to steer clear of massive stimulus, maintain the continuity and stability of macro policies and make them more targeted.

"The major programs identified in the Outline of the 14th Five-year Plan are of strategic, fundamental and pace-setting importance. The government needs to make inputs, and the role of private sector also needs to be better leveraged in the course of implementation," Li said. "We need to see that these major programs serve the purpose of driving sustained and healthy economic and social development." The meeting called for adhering to the law of economics and market principles, and adopting a multi-purpose approach in pushing forward the major programs, to strengthen foundation, increase functions, produce long-term benefits, improve livelihoods and avert risks. Solid preliminary work will be carried out. The programs in the 14th Five-year Plan will be translated into and delivered through specific projects. The projects will be incorporated into sectoral plans on a priority basis and backed with well-informed implementation arrangements.

The projects will be pushed forward year by year in a well-planned manner, to forge a positive cycle among projects planned, projects commenced and projects completed. Timelines will be specified for single major project. Package projects that are great in number and cover wide-ranging sectors will be advanced with clear focuses and in a results-oriented manner. For major programs with high construction challenges and environmental requirements, in-depth work will be carried out on exploration, selection of solutions and feasibility studies. Policy support and the supply of factors of production will be scaled up around the major programs. The investment intensity for this year and the next will be well calibrated and fine-tuned as needed in light of changing circumstances. "Last year, economic growth was mainly driven by tax and fee cuts, and support for market entities.

This year, while effectively tapping the fundamental role of consumption, the key role of effective investment will be better brought out. Efforts will be made to coordinate medium- and long-term development and this year's economic operation, and advance the major programs in an orderly way, to keep the major economic indicators within the proper range," Li said. Reform of government functions will be deepened to improve the approval and verification procedures and cut unnecessary approval requirements, so that projects can get an early start and funds be used most efficiently. The catalytic role of government investment, such as central budgetary investment and local government special-purpose bonds, will be further leveraged. Market entities and private players will be fully mobilized to play their part in the implementation of the major programs.

Supervision and coordination will be strengthened. Local authorities that take solid measures and achieve notable results will receive greater incentives and support, while those who fail to deliver in advancing the projects will be subject to closer supervision. Problems in project development will be addressed promptly. Oversight will be strengthened to ensure project quality. "A good balance between the role of the government and that of the market will be developed. The government is responsible for making the plans while actual implementation needs to rely much on market entities and private players," Li said. "In drafting project plans, we need to leave room for possible adjustments as called for by the evolving situation," he said.

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China Passes Law on Hainan Free Trade Port

China on Thursday passed a law on the Hainan Free Trade Port (FTP), making institutional arrangements for the construction of the Hainan FTP at the national legislative level. Analysts believe that the law will lay a solid legal foundation for the construction operations, ensuring Hainan's opening-up and development based on the rule of law. The law clarifies that the Hainan FTP covers the whole island, and establishes policies and systems in steps or phases to realize the liberalization and facilitation of trade, investment, the cross-border flow of funds, personnel exit and entry, and transportation, and ensure the secure flow of data. Hainan's natural environment is its greatest advantage, and its economic development must not be pursued at the expense of the environment. The law stipulates the strictest ecological and environmental protection system, implementing the one-vote veto system for environmental protection and lifelong accountability for damage to the ecological environment. Last June, China released a master plan to build the island into a globally influential and high-level free trade port by the middle of the century. "The law on Hainan free trade port transforms the decisions and arrangements of the Communist Party of China Central Committee into law.

It is of vital importance to comprehensively deepening reform and advancing law-based governance," said Lyu Wei, a member of the 13th National People's Congress Standing Committee. The world is facing a new round of major changes, with economic globalization encountering greater headwinds. However, China has never slowed its pace in pushing forward opening-up and promoting economic globalization. The enactment of the Hainan FTP law demonstrates China's unswerving determination in broadening opening-up and building an open world economy, said an official with the legislative affairs commission of the NPC Standing Committee. Hainan will establish a legal system based on the FTP law, and build a law-based government and a world-class legal environment, said Shen Xiaoming, Party chief of Hainan. According to the law, Hainan can formulate regulations on the FTP construction in light of specific circumstances and actual needs, which means that Hainan is granted more legislative and reform autonomy. "We are speeding up the local legislation, especially in key areas including bankruptcy, fair competition and commercial deregistration," said Hu Guanghui, deputy director of the Standing Committee of Hainan Provincial People's Congress.

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China Provides Anti-epidemic Assistance to 151 Countries: White Paper

China had already provided or was offering anti-epidemic assistance to 151 countries and 14 international organizations by April 2021, said a white paper released by the State Council Information Office on Thursday. By April, China had donated 50 million U.S. dollars in cash to the World Health Organization, and sent 37 medical expert teams to 34 countries, said the white paper on the practice of the Communist Party of China in respecting and protecting human rights. China also contributed to the UN COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan, the document added, noting that all these efforts support international epidemic prevention and control.

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Chinese Socialist System of Laws Has Taken Shape: White Paper

Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), a Chinese socialist system of laws has taken shape, providing a relatively complete legal system to protect human rights, according to a white paper released Thursday. The white paper on the practice of the CPC in respecting and protecting human rights was released by the State Council Information Office. As of April 2021, there were 277 laws in force in China, including the Constitution and related laws, civil and commercial law, administrative law, economic law, social law, criminal law and procedural law related to litigation and non-litigation, said the white paper.

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China Pledges to Further Enhance Science Literacy of Citizens

China has seen significant improvement in the science literacy of its citizens and has pledged to further enhance progress in this regard, according to a new plan for promoting science literacy of the people by the State Council. By 2025, the proportion of scientifically literate Chinese citizens will exceed 15 percent, with marked progress in the even distribution of scientific literacy in all regions and groups of people nationwide, said the action plan for science literacy of the people (2021-2035). The figure is expected to reach 25 percent by 2035, with significantly narrowed urban-rural gaps and gaps among regions nationwide, said the plan. Science literacy refers to the spirit of scientific aspiration, knowledge of basic science and scientific methods, as well as applying them in analyzing and solving problems. China has continued to improve science education and training, develop facilities for science popularization, and increase investment in this regard, with the proportion of scientifically literate Chinese citizens increasing to 10.56 percent in 2020.

In the next five years, the plan says China will invest major effort in five key projects in the following fields: popularization of sci-tech resources; the promotion of popular science; popular-science infrastructure; the promotion of popular-science ability at the grass-roots level; and international exchanges and cooperation. The new plan lists five priority groups: teenagers; farmers; industrial workers; the elderly; and leading cadres and civil servants. The primary task of improving the science literacy of teenagers lies in upgrading the science literacy of their teachers. China pledges to improve science literacy among teachers at the primary education stage by facilitating their access to new knowledge and teaching skills and cultivating science teachers in rural areas, says the plan. Efforts will also be made to improve science literacy of the elderly by offering seniors more training on smart-device applications and easier social-health services, among others, says the plan. In 2020, there were 264 million people in China aged 60 or above, accounting for 18.7 percent of the total population. It is estimated that by 2035, the number will exceed 400 million, accounting for a quarter of the total.

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How China Has Achieved Long-term Social Stability

In about one month, Guangdong Province, a manufacturing hub in south China, contained a recent resurgence of local COVID-19 infections, once again highlighting Chinese efficiency in tackling the raging virus. The global pandemic is a new test for the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC), the world's largest political party with nearly 92 million members to celebrate its centenary. And the CPC made it. China took the lead in controlling the epidemic and restoring the economy. Since founding the New China, the CPC has led the nation to ride out various major internal and external tests and accomplish tremendous and historic achievements through the arduous and consistent efforts of all ethnic groups. Rapid economic development and long-term social stability are described as two "miracles" that the CPC has realized over the past seven decades.

Before 1978, the country experienced major tests, such as the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea (1950-1953) and the Tangshan earthquake in 1976. Since the reform and opening-up policy began over 40 years ago, China underwent the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the Yangtze River flood in 1998, the SARS epidemic in 2003, and the global financial crisis in 2008, among other hardships. Under the strong leadership of the CPC, China surmounted all these difficulties and obstacles in its development process. Besides eliminating absolute poverty, the country has tried various means to expand employment in recent years amid challenges both at home and abroad. From 2016 to 2020, China created more than 60 million jobs. The guarantee for China's long-term social stability lies in socialism with Chinese characteristics, of which the leadership of the CPC is the defining feature and the biggest strength.

The picture of political and social stability, economic development, and ethnic unity in China are in sharp contrast to aggravating social divisions and political upheavals in some countries due to their systematic ills and selfish partisan interests. Dedicated to serving the people wholeheartedly, the CPC has always put people's interests first, improving people's livelihoods while developing the economy, fighting poverty and epidemics, and sticking to the goal of prosperity for all. The country is to realize the goal of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects this year. Besides income increases, Chinese citizens enjoy other tangible development benefits, such as access to better education, medical care, and a safe environment. For example, a "toilet revolution" in recent years has helped farmers bid farewell to shabby latrines and use flush toilets like city dwellers.

The CPC has attached importance to the relationship between reform, development, and stability. Everyone has an increasingly strong sense of gain, happiness, and security in China. Through endeavors such as advancing rule of law and building a "safe China," China has been widely recognized as one of the safest countries worldwide. Meanwhile, the country's improved social governance on the principle of collaboration, participation, and mutual interests has also contributed significantly to social stability. The world is undergoing changes unseen in a century. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerates this evolution. Under such a complicated and uncertain international situation, the CPC will further advance reform, development, and stability to comprehensively build a modern socialist country. As the CPC upholds and improves Chinese socialism and modernizes the state governance system and capacity, China will continue its miracle of long-term social stability, which is also a significant contribution to global development.

From http://www.news.cn/ 06/28/2021

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JAPAN: Enacting Revised Referendum Law in Constitutional Amendment Push

Japan's parliament passed a bill Friday to amend procedures for a national referendum, in a step toward the possibility of a revision to its war-renouncing Constitution and giving the government more emergency powers. The revision to the national referendum law makes it easier for citizens to vote, allowing them to cast their ballots at places such as train stations and shopping complexes. The bill was passed after around three years of debate between the pro-revision ruling party and the main opposition party. The postwar Constitution, which took effect in 1947, has never been revised, with calls for both maintaining and amending the charter's pacifist Article 9 remaining a focal point. Any proposed revision needs to be approved by a two-thirds majority in both the upper and lower houses before the proposal can be put to a national referendum. The revision also coincides with growing calls for the introduction of an emergency clause to give broad authority to the Cabinet and limit citizens' rights under such circumstances as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Under the current supreme law, Japan's coronavirus state of emergency does not entail a hard lockdown of the kind some other countries have imposed, and largely relies on cooperation with the public and businesses in introducing measures. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party submitted the bill to amend the referendum law in June 2018 under then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, along with its junior coalition partner Komeito and two smaller parties. But, the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan has opposed the bill, citing the need to restrict TV, radio and online commercials, as voting would be influenced by campaigners' funds. The LDP accepted the CDPJ's request to add a clause stipulating that measures on the restrictions will be taken within three years after the revised law comes into force, in exchange for cooperation from the opposition party to pass the bill.

From https://english.kyodonews.net 06/11/2021

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Japan Passes Space Resources Law

Japan’s parliament approved legislation that allows companies to extract and utilize space resources as the head of Russia’s space agency criticized similar national laws on the subject.

The House of Councilors, the upper house of the National Diet of Japan, passed the bill June 15. The lower house, the House of Representatives, approved the bill June 10. The bill has support from the two largest political parties, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and the Constitutional Democratic Party. The bill, formally known as the Law Concerning the Promotion of Business Activities Related to the Exploration and Development of Space Resources, grants Japanese companies permission to prospect for, extract and use various space resources. Companies that wish to do so must first obtain permission from the Japanese government. “We enthusiastically support the passage of Japan’s space resources law and applaud the nonpartisan parliamentary group of diet members for taking a swift action to lead the world in this endeavor,” Takeshi Hakamada, chief executive of ispace, a Tokyo-based lunar lander company, said in a statement.

Japan’s legislation is similar to provisions in the Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act, passed by the U.S. Congress and signed into law by President Obama in 2015. That law grants U.S. companies rights to resources that they extract, but not property rights to celestial bodies, which would run afoul of the Outer Space Treaty. Luxembourg and the United Arab Emirates have since passed similar legislation. All four countries are signatories of the Artemis Accords, which endorses the ability to extract and use space resources. “The Signatories affirm that the extraction of space resources does not inherently constitute national appropriation under Article II of the Outer Space Treaty, and that contracts and other legal instruments relating to space resources should be consistent with that Treaty,” the accords state. Russia has taken a different view. “The matter of regulation of these mining activities is still a very thorny issue,” Dmitry Rogozin, director general of Roscosmos, said during a session of the Global Space Exploration Conference 2021 in St. Petersburg, Russia, June 15.

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South-East Asia

INDONESIA: Tightening Micro Restrictions amid Surge in COVID-19 Cases

The Indonesian government decided to tightened the micro-scale restrictions and extended them from June 22 to July 5 amidst the surge in the COVID-19 transmission, an official said on Monday. Offices located in red zones are allowed to hold a maximum of 25 percent of employees, and those in other zones are permitted to hold a maximum of 50 percent of staff, said Airlangga Hartarto, chief of the COVID-19 Handling and National Economic Recovery Committee and coordinating minister for economic affairs. According to the regulation, public areas such as markets, shopping centers, restaurants and cafes in red zones are allowed to operate until 8:00 p.m. with a maximum of 25 percent of visitors, while groceries, pharmacies, and important sectors can operate fully. Art and culture centers and places of worship in red zones are completely closed, while those in other zones are allowed to operate with a maximum of 25 percent of the visitor capacity.

Amid surging cases, the government is working to ramp up COVID-19 vaccination, aiming to increase the daily number of inoculations of the vaccines to 700,000 in

June and 1 million in July. Health Minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin said the current capacity for inoculating COVID-19 vaccines has reached 716,000 per day, and the number would rise to 1 million daily in early July. Indonesia is facing a rapid increase in the number of COVID-19 cases after the long Eid al-Fitr holiday with the detection of the more contagious "variants of concern" such as Alpha, Beta, and Delta variants. "Currently the government is strengthening efforts to solve upstream problems, and prevent people from getting sick by limiting their movement by 75 to 100 percent," said Sadikin. To solve downstream problems, the government is also supplying more stocks of PPE (personal protective equipment) and medicines as well as increasing the bed capacity at a number of COVID-19 treatment centers. Hartarto said the current hospital bed occupancy rate in 87 districts and cities in 29 provinces stood above 70 percent.

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MYANMAR: Imposing Stay-at-home Order in More Towns Due to COVID-19

Myanmar's Health and Sports Ministry imposed a stay-at-home order in four more towns of Chin state, state-run media reported on Friday. The stay-at-home order, which will be in effect on Saturday, will be applied to Tedim, Falam, Thantlang and Hakha after the towns recently saw increasing number of COVID-19 infections. According to the ministry's figures on Friday, the number of COVID-19 daily infections surged to 212 in the past 24 hours, bringing the tally to 144,157 in total. A total of 132,415 patients have been recovered while the death toll stood at 3,221 as of Friday, the figures showed. Myanmar detected its first two COVID-19 cases on March 23 last year.

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MALAYSIA: Extending Lockdown Measures for 2 More Weeks Citing High COVID-19 Infections

The Malaysian government has decided to extend the current restrictive measures in place by another two weeks till June 28 in a bid to slow the spread of COVID-19, Defense Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob said on Friday. Ismail Sabri, who coordinates the implementation of COVID-19 restrictions in the country, said the decision was made due to the high number of daily fresh infections. "This decision was made after taking into account the number of daily cases which are still high, above 5,000 a day, with an average of new cases as of yesterday (Thursday) at 6,871," he said in a statement. A nationwide lockdown has been effective since June 1, which bans all economic and social activities except essential services, and was supposed to last till June 14. Malaysia reported 6,849 new infections on Friday, bringing the national total to 646,411. Another 84 deaths were reported, bringing the death toll to 3,768.

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Malaysian PM Unveils COVID-19 Exit Plan as Deaths Pass 4,000 Mark

Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin unveiled a COVID-19 exit plan on Tuesday, outlining how the country would navigate its way out of the pandemic as it has been in lockdown since June. In a televised speech, Muhyiddin said the plan would be gradually rolled out in four phases, with the transition to each phase when meeting certain indicators and criteria like daily new cases and vaccination rate, and all sectors of the economy are expected to be open by the end of the year. Muhyiddin said the government's immediate priorities are to ramp up the national immunization plan, stabilize the healthcare system which is under heavy strain, and roll out economic stimulus packages. Malaysia's vaccination program kicked off in February. Some 4.6 million doses have been administered with 1.4 million having received two doses as of Tuesday. He added that while the various anti-COVID-19 restrictions were negatively impacting the economy, it was necessary to impose them to slow the spread of the virus. "It was a very painful situation because the continuous lockdowns badly affected our livelihoods and yet we did not know exactly when and how we are able to get out of the woods. "This plan is a carefully crafted guide based on data and science to enable us all to return to normal daily life or back to normalcy," he said.

A nationwide lockdown is effective in Malaysia, which bans all economic and social activities except essential services. Muhyiddin said the current lockdown is Phase 1 on the government plan, with high single-day new cases, the health system being in a critical situation and a low vaccination rate. The country will move into Phase 2 if fresh daily infections dropped below 4,000 and at least 10 percent of the population fully vaccinated. Phase 2 will see workplaces have up to 80 percent of staff return to work with some additional non-essential sectors being allowed to operate. Transitioning to Phase 3 will require less than 2,000 daily infections and 40 percent of the population fully vaccinated with the healthcare situation, especially use of intensive care beds being stabilized and schools and sports activities being allowed gradually. Phase 4 will be rolled out when fresh infections stay below 500 per day, 60 percent of the population fully vaccinated, and represents the final phase with all social activities, economic activities and even tourism being allowed. Malaysia reported another 5,419 new COVID-19 infections on Tuesday, bringing the national total to 667,876. Another 101 more deaths were reported, bringing the death toll to 4,069.

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THAILAND: To Launch New Phase of Co-Payment Covid-19 Relief

Program

Thailand will launch the third phase of a co-payment program from July as part of the government's relief measures to help those affected by the pandemic, an official said Wednesday. More than 51,000 restaurants, shops, stores and vending stalls nationwide have confirmed to join the program, adding the total number of business players to more than 1.25 million, said Finance Ministry spokesperson Kulaya Tantitemit. Under the scheme, the government will pay half of the price for eligible food and service purchases with a subsidy of up to 150 baht (about 4.8 U.S. dollars) per person per day, capped at 3,000 baht per person, according to the spokesperson. Some 24.14 million people have so far applied to be recipients of the third-phase program, which is expected to benefit up to 31 million people between July and December, Kulaya said. The country rolled out the first phase of the program during October-December last year and the second phase between January and March this year. This came as the government tried to cushion the economic blow from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has knocked the tourism-reliant economy to its weakest in more than two decades. The Southeast Asian country has been battling a sharp surge in infections since April, its worst wave of the COVID-19 outbreak so far, with more than 80 percent of its caseload having been reported during the past 10 weeks. On Wednesday, the country reported 2,331 new cases, raising the total tally to 204,595. The death toll increased by 40 to 1,525.

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VIETNAM: Launches the First Programme on Child Protection Online

Việt Nam has for the first time launched a national programme to protect children online in an attempt to make the internet a healthy and safe place for children to learn, socialise and express themselves. Under Decision No 830 signed by Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính, the national programme on child protection online - the first national-level programme on this issue in Việt Nam - aims to protect the privacy of children and prevent and handle acts of abuse. Specifically, the programme focuses on supplying children with age-appropriate knowledge and skills so that children can self-identify and be able to protect themselves when online. It will also maintain a healthy network environment, develop an ecosystem of Vietnamese applications for children to learn, socialise and express themselves in a safe and creative way. The programme includes initiatives in deploying new technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data to automatically collect and analyse early warnings on content not suitable for children. Websites with the national ".vn" domain and those with IP addresses in Việt Nam will be required to self-categorise content suitable for children's ages. Those who provide online services and applications for children have to self-deploy solutions to protect children and assist parents or caregivers in managing children's use of applications and services.

Network operators and digital platform providers such as Google, Facebook, and Zalo will apply artificial intelligence technology and big data analysis to filter videos and clips with malicious content. Under the programme, businesses will be encouraged to develop information security solutions to protect children on the internet. The programme also integrates online notification channels on issues related to children with the national child protection hotline at 111. This will become the only application on the network environment to reflect and share issues related to children. In addition, the programme includes building and integrating into the educational programme the training of digital skill sets for children by age. Children will be taught a number of skills such as common knowledge of the internet and social networks; information security skills; personal information protection; and how to recognise abuse. The implementation of digital skill sets will be piloted in five cities of Hà Nội, HCM City, Hải Phòng, Đà Nẵng and Cần Thơ. Children can visit the website: http://bvte.vncert.vn to share issues of online abuse and help them express their own voices.

A UNICEF survey of children and young people in Việt Nam showed that one-fifth of the total number of children surveyed said they have been victims of cyberbullying. Reports from the Department of Child Affairs under the Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs showed that after nearly 16 years of operating the hotline 111, the department has received over 4 million calls to discuss issues related to children. There were more than 700,000 cases of child sexual abuse images and videos appearing online in Việt Nam last year. On average, more than 60 per cent of children in the country have access to an internet-connected device. When the programme is implemented, the network to protect children in the online environment will be deployed by inter-agencies of the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Information and Communications, the Department of Child Affairs and legal consulting units. When children call the hotline 111, information will be received and supported in a timely manner. All children who are victims of abuse on the internet will be supported and intervened at the request of children themselves or from their relatives and the community as well. All primary, secondary and high schools will be required to teach knowledge and skills for students to participate in a safe online environment.

From https://vietnamnews.vn 06/07/2021

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Hà Nội Approves Housing Development Programme for 2021-2030

The Hà Nội People's Committee has approved the outline for the capital city's housing development programme for 2021-2030, with vision to 2040. Accordingly, the authorities will conduct surveys and assessments regarding the current situation of commercial housing, social housing, resettlement housing, official residence and private housing in urban and rural areas. It will set goals for housing development and make forecasts on the demand for housing among social welfare beneficiaries. The programme will identify local demand for houses and land areas to build different types of housing in the city and links between housing and urban development, among other things. Hà Nội hopes to build a system of suitable solutions to ensure sustainable, modern, and climate change-adaptive housing development, as a basis for the management and implementation of related projects, investment attraction, and the healthy growth of the real estate sector. Recently, in the report on residential real estate outlook 2021, the SSI experts said that the price trend of Hà Nội's real estate in 2021 will continue thanks to enhancing investment in infrastructure.

The SSI expects that disbursement of the investment will be accelerated in 2021, creating a more positive sentiment for the market. The disbursement of capital from the Ministry of Transport reached VNĐ35.6 trillion in 2020, up 44 per cent year on year and is expected to reach VNĐ46 trillion in 2021, up 28 per cent year on year. Besides putting metro lines into operation, according to SSI, the continuous improvement of the inner city road system and the transportation system to suburban districts will positively affect the land price and push the demand for real estate up, cafef.vn reported. Especially, the Western region of Hà Nội has a series of large infrastructure projects to be completed, including the ring route 3.5 and the transport network connecting Tố Hữu Street with the Mỹ Đình area. In addition, an increase of 45 per cent in steel prices to a record level also continues to push input costs up, leading to the price of new apartments, shophouses, townhouses and villas up. Specifically, the price of steel accounts for about 28 per cent of the construction cost for a new apartment and about 35 per cent for a shophouse, townhouse, or villa. Thus, the increase in the price of steel by 40 per cent has made selling price surge from VNĐ2 billion to VNĐ2.16 billion for a 100-sq.m apartment in the mid-end segment and from VNĐ10 billion to VNĐ11.1 billion for a 100-sq.m townhouse.

With the development of traffic infrastructure and higher steel price, housing prices in Hà Nội are expected to increase due to lower supply in the apartment, shophouses, villas and townhouses. Specifically, according to the Hà Nội Department of Construction, in the first quarter of 2021, Hà Nội had a supply of 5,658 apartments and 1,404 low-rise houses. That supply was 36.8 per cent of that offered in the same period of 2020. According to experts, until the end of 2022, the market may have new supply of housing because the land fund is scarce and implementation of projects slows down due to administrative procedures. Therefore, the prices continue to increase, especially in the West of Hà Nội with strongly developed infrastructure. Now, the housing prices in Hà Nội stand at new levels. For instance, the price of a luxury apartment is at VNĐ40-60 million per sq.m, from VNĐ35-45 million three years ago. The apartment prices in some suburban districts such as Hoài Đức and Gia Lâm have been also pushed up to VNĐ30 million per sq.m. For the low-rise shophouse and villa segment in Hà Đông, Nam Từ Liêm and Mỹ Đình areas, the prices have also increased by about 40-50 per cent from VNĐ180-200 million per sq.m three years ago to VNĐ300 million.

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South Asia

INDIA: Axis Bank Signs Multi-year Agreement with AWS to Accelerate Digital Transformation

Amazon.com's cloud computing major Amazon Web Services (AWS) today announced that India's third-largest private sector bank Axis Bank has selected AWS to accelerate its digital transformation programme and meet the growing demand for its digital banking services. As part of a multi-year agreement, Axis Bank will draw on the breadth and depth of AWS services, including containers, database, and compute, to build a portfolio of new digital financial services for bringing "advanced" banking experiences to customers, including online accounts that can be opened in under six minutes and instant digital payments, thereby helping the bank increase customer satisfaction by 35% and lower costs by 24%, the companies have stated in a press statement. To date, Axis Bank has deployed over 25 "mission-critical" applications on AWS, including a Buy Now Pay Later product and a new loan management system to support it, Account Aggregator, Video-Know Your Customer (V-KYC), and WhatsApp Banking. Axis Bank also plans to migrate 70% of its on-premises data centre infrastructure in the next 24 months to further reduce cost, improve agility, and improve customer experience, they added. "Axis Bank is designing new products, crafting digital journeys, and personalizing its services to address the financial needs of its customers better. We continue to anticipate future trends and make investments ahead of time within our technology stack. We believe AWS will enhance our agility and resilience to manage two key features that define our digital business – rapid scale and high velocity. We aim to transition 70% of our infrastructure and applications on the cloud," Subrat Mohanty, Group Executive, Axis Bank said.

Puneet Chandok, President, Commercial Business, AWS India and South Asia, AISPL, said: "Cloud is transforming the financial industry and we are delighted to help Axis Bank build and grow a suite of digital banking services that evolve with technology changes, introduce new payment modes, and support evolving consumer and business needs in India. By selecting AWS as their preferred cloud provider, Axis Bank gains access to the deepest and broadest suite of cloud services to rapidly innovate and introduce new financial services ranging from easy account opening, digital lending, and instant payments for customers and businesses." According to the company, Axis Bank has over 200 million (20 crores) customers who increasingly demand new and innovative digital banking services, including digital deposits, digital loans, and digital credit cards, to better manage their finances. To serve these consumers' needs and provide new financial services digitally, the company relies on the scalability, resiliency, and agility of AWS to bring new services to market quickly while maintaining a seamless, excellent customer experience. Using Amazon Elastic Kubernetes Service (Amazon EKS), which gives customers the “flexibility” to start, run, and scale Kubernetes applications on AWS or on-premises, Axis Bank built new digital banking products using microservices that support any application architecture, irrespective of scale, load, or complexity. For example, the bank has built fully digital offerings which include its LEAP savings account with a virtual debit card, its Nova online current account, and Olive, its credit card engagement platform, which has serviced more than 3.5 million (35 lakhs) users since its launch less than two months ago. Also, using Amazon DocumentDB, a durable, scalable, highly available, and fully managed document database service, Axis Bank runs secure financial transaction processing across its digital bank accounts. Using Amazon Elastic Compute Cloud (Amazon EC2), a web service that provides secure, resizable compute capacity in the cloud, Axis Bank will scale workloads on-demand to support 10 million (1 crore) daily real-time payments through India’s Unified Payments Interface (UPI), ensuring reliability and consistent performance. Last year, Axis Bank made the decision to deploy all new customer-facing applications on AWS. Today, 15% of the bank’s applications are already on the cloud and the bank aims to take this number to 70% in three years.

Axis Bank said that it believes building a cloud-native, design-centric engineering capability is critical to its success. To achieve this, the bank has dedicated over 800 people to its digital projects built an in-house engineering and design team of more than 130 people, and established a cloud engineering practice centred on agile software development and DevOps principles. Working with AWS Professional Services, a global team of AWS experts who help customers achieve their desired outcomes with the cloud, Axis Bank has set up a cloud centre of excellence to accelerate its cloud migration and set the digital foundation for innovating new services, while meeting strict governance, security, and regulatory compliance requirements.

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: Parliament Approves Bill on Execution of State Budget for 2020

The bill on the execution of the state budget for 2020 was submitted for discussion in the third reading and approved at a meeting of the Azerbaijani parliament, Trend reports on June 8. In accordance with the bill, revenues of the Azerbaijani state budget for 2020 amounted to 24.7 billion manat ($14.5 billion), expenses - 26.4 billion manat ($15.5 billion). The budget deficit amounted to 1.7 billion manat ($1 billion). The free balance on the Single Treasury Account amounted to 1.5 billion manat ($882 million) as of January 1, 2021.

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Azerbaijan's Parliament Adopts New Draft Law on Energy Efficiency

The draft law 'On the rational use of energy resources and energy efficiency' was considered at an extraordinary meeting of the Parliament of Azerbaijan on June 25, Trend reports. This draft law defines the legal, organizational and economic foundations of the state policy in the field of energy efficiency, regulates the activities of state bodies (institutions), individuals and legal entities in this area and the relations arising between them. The document is intended to regulate relations arising in the field of production, storage, transmission, distribution, sale and consumption of energy, and applies to state bodies (institutions), individuals and legal entities operating in this area, including end consumers. After discussions, the bill was put to a vote and adopted in the second reading.

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Azerbaijani Tariff Council Adopts New Decision on Gas Tariffs

A meeting of the Azerbaijani Tariff Council was held on June 30, Trend reports with reference to the council. The appeal of the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) was considered at the meeting and a corresponding decision was made on the regulation of tariffs for natural gas. According to the decision, 1,200 cubic meters per year will be calculated at the current tariff – 0.10 qepik (5 cents) per cubic meter, from 1,200 to 2,500 cubic meters per year - at the rate of 0.20 qepik (11 cents) per cubic meter, over 2,500 per year - 0.25 qepik (15 cents) per cubic meter. This decision will not affect the cost of electricity The reason for reconsidering the gas tariff is an increase in consumption, an expansion of gas supply coverage and an increase in costs as a result of an increase in the number of subscribers by almost 18 percent. Low gas tariff for the population and an increase in consumption from about 1,300 cubic meters to 1,600 cubic meters for each subscriber compared to 2017, when the recent tariff regulation came into force, as well as an increase in total consumption from 2.7 billion cubic meters to 3.7 billion cubic meters increased the loss in gas supply, which is paid off at the expense of the state budget.

An increase in tariffs is required to improve the quality of service, eliminate dependence on the state budget, ensure investment, completely repay the production costs and constantly supply consumers with natural gas. The various options for increasing the tariff were considered during the discussions held at the meeting of the Tariff Council. The proposed models were evaluated taking into account such issues as ensuring the sustainability of energy security in accordance with the economic policy of the country, purposeful and rational use of resources, compliance with the interests of consumers and producers, social orientation, gradual formation of market relations in the field of gas supply, elimination of subsidies from the state budget, prices for natural resources in other countries, etc. The preference was given to a model that meets the interests of the low-income layers of the population upon unanimous decision of the members of the Council. So, using the optimal approach in tariff regulation for about 51 percent (five million people) of subscribers whose gas consumption is up to 1,200 cubic meters (including 1,200 cubic meters) per year, the tariff remained at the same level – 0.10 qepik (0.05 cents) per cubic meter. The tariff has been set at 0.20 qepik (0.11 cents) per cubic meter for the volume of consumed gas from 1,200 to 2,500 cubic meters (including 2,500 cubic meters) and more than 2,500 cubic meters – 0.25 qepik (0.14 cents). The adopted model of tariff growth envisages the preservation of the preferential tariff system for a number of spheres.

The tariff for natural gas which is supplied to the industrial and agricultural areas has not been changed and is kept at the level of 0.20 qepik (0.11 cents). Moreover, to prevent an increase in the price of electricity, the tariff for natural gas which is supplied to the power plants was increased by only 0.1 qepik (0.005 cents) - from 0.12 qepik (0.07 cents) to 0.13 qepik (0.08 cents). To optimize the costs of using the heating system by the citizens of the country, as well as to ensure the sustainability of the heat supply system operating on natural gas, the natural gas tariff for Azeristiliktechizat OJSC, an Azerbaijani heating supply operator, and boiler houses of residential buildings has been reduced from 0.20 qepik (0.11 cents) to 0.13 qepik (0.08 cents). At the same time, to stimulate the transition to environmentally friendly fuel and reduce the cost of public transport using compressed gas, the tariff for gas which is supplied to the gas filling stations selling compressed gas has been reduced from 0.20 qepik (0.11 cents) to 0.13 qepik (0.08 cents). The tariffs were increased by five qepik ($0.03 cents) in other spheres (trade, services, etc.). The decision will come into force on July 1, 2021. The economic restrictions created by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the drop in production volumes of certain consumer goods in the countries, have an impact on the world economy and international markets. Over the past year, the prices for all main food products in world markets have been constantly growing. The rise in prices in the world energy markets accelerates this process. In particular, there is an increase in the world market prices for gas. As a result, gas tariffs have changed in many countries. The utility costs for consumer categories increased.

One cubic meter of gas for the population in Ankara cost about 0.32 qepik (0.18 cents), in Kiev - 32.6 qepik (0.19 cents) in 2020. Now 1 cubic meter of gas is sold for 0.32-0.40 qepik (0.18-0.23 cents) in Ankara while in Kiev - for 0.54 qepik (0.31 cents). The new tariffs in Azerbaijan are lower in comparison with the tariffs of some countries. Thus, 1 cubic meter of gas for the population costs 19.7–29.5 qepik

(0.11-0.17 cents) in Georgia, 9.2–34.2 qepik (0.5-0.20 cents) in Belarus, 11.9–16.5 qepik (0.7-0.9 cents) in Russia. Currently, 1 cubic meter of gas for subscribers not belonging to the "Population" group in Turkey varies on average within 35–49 qepik (0.20-0.28 cents), in Ukraine - 22–26 qepik (0.12-0.15 cents), Belarus - 21.9–78.2 qepik (0.12-0.45 cents), in Russia - 15.3-18.2 qepik (0.8-0.10 cents). As a result of the tariff change, the dependence on the state budget of economic entities engaged in gas production and gas supply will gradually decrease. The free budget funds will be directed to social measures. The control measures will be taken to avoid abuse of tariff regulation. The prices for 247 medicines registered by the state were also approved at the meeting of the Tariff Council. Until now, the "Medicines" section on the website of the Tariff Council includes a full list of 12,689 medicines for which wholesale and retail prices and effective dates have been approved, taking into account their trade name, pharmaceutical form, name of the active substance, dose, trade packaging, packing volume and country of origin. The decision can be found in the "Council Decisions" section on the Tariff Council website.

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GEORGIA: Approving Law on Information Security

The Parliament of Georgia in the third reading approved the law "On Information Security", Trend reports referring to Georgian media. This is a legislative initiative that was presented to parliament back in 2019. Consideration of the bill in all three readings took place in the parliament of the previous convocation and stopped at the voting in the third reading. At the plenary session, the project was supported by 77 votes, two against. Before the vote, the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament Kakha Kuchava said that about ten days ago a meeting with experts was held in connection with the draft law. The embassies were also represented at the meeting, with the help of which the project was developed. Before the vote, the date of entry into force of the law was adjusted and it is December 30, 2021. According to the bill, it is supposed to categorize the subjects of critical information systems. In particular, the subjects of critical information systems are divided into 3 categories. The project also involves the definition of the powers of the Operational and Technical Agency in the process of establishing information security and ensuring cybersecurity. In addition, the project provides for the introduction of administrative sanctions for violation of the requirements envisaged by legislation on information security.

From http://www.uzdaily.com 06/11/2021

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UZBEKISTAN: The Law “On Amendments and Additions to Certain Legislative Acts of the Republic of Uzbekistan” Was Approved

Tashkent, Uzbekistan (UzDaily.com) -- At the sixteenth plenary meeting of the upper house of parliament, the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On amendments and additions to some legislative acts of the Republic of Uzbekistan” was discussed. It was noted that the purpose of the Law is to implement the FATF recommendations into legislation in preparation for the successful second stage of the assessment of the national system of Uzbekistan by the Eurasian Group for Combating Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing. The law introduces amendments and additions to 2 laws in force. First, by amending the Law "On Bank Secrecy", the procedure for providing information constituting bank secrecy is established to the prosecutor’s office, preliminary investigation, inquiry and bodies carrying out operational-search activities, with the approval of the prosecutor in order to ensure the establishment, inventory and confiscation property obtained by criminal means.

It is worth noting that due to the presence of legal gaps in the legislation in this area, the expert appraisers of the Eurasian Group on Combating Money Laundering and the Financing of Terrorism gave an initial assessment of the partial compliance of national legislation with 6 out of 40 FATF recommendations. It is also indicated that Uzbekistan does not fully comply with the requirements of the UN conventions. It is also indicated that Uzbekistan does not fully comply with the requirements of the UN conventions. In addition, by amending the Law "On Bank Secrecy", it is envisaged to obtain information on the availability of bank accounts from the information database of the Central Bank of the Republic of Uzbekistan within the framework of a preliminary investigation and a criminal case. At the same time, the procedure is established for the exchange of information constituting bank secrecy between the prosecutor’s office, preliminary investigation, inquiry and the bodies carrying out operational-search activities, as well as the competent authorities of foreign states.

Secondly, by amending the Law "On Operational-Investigative Activities", the procedure is established for the use of information constituting bank secrets with the approval of the prosecutor by 6 bodies carrying out operational-search activities. In particular, it is established that information constituting a bank secret shall be submitted with the sanction of a prosecutor: firstly, to the bodies of the prosecutor’s office, preliminary investigation and inquiry on the criminal cases in their proceedings in order to establish the circumstances relevant to the case, to ensure the recovery of the damage caused or the seizure of property upon a reasoned decision of the investigator or interrogator; secondly, to the bodies carrying out operational-search activities, in the cases of operational-search proceedings in their proceedings in order to carry out the tasks assigned to them on the basis of a reasoned resolution approved by the head of the body carrying out operational-search activities. The adoption of the Law contributes to: - implementation of the requirements of UN conventions and FATV recommendations into national legislation; - ensuring the successful completion of the second stage of the assessment of the national system of Uzbekistan by the Eurasian Group on Combating Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism; - increasing the investment attractiveness of the republic and improving its position in international ratings. This Law has been approved by the Senators.

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The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Official Statistics" Was Approved

Tashkent, Uzbekistan (UzDaily.com) -- At the sixteenth plenary meeting of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis, the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On official statistics" was considered. It was noted that this Law creates the legal basis for the country’s national statistical system. The current system of statistics has such problems as a low level of transparency and quality of open data, incomplete compliance with international requirements of the mechanism for transmitting information to citizens and the world community. In addition, the Law "On Official Statistics" does not apply to the activities of other ministries and departments for the development of statistical data, it only regulates the activities of state statistics bodies. In order to eliminate these problems, to ensure the breadth and completeness of the established scope and quality requirements, the Law introduces the term “official statistics” instead of the term “state statistics” or “national statistics”. Where government statistics envisage statistics produced by statistical bodies, official statistics cover statistics produced and disseminated by all producers of statistics. This creates a legal framework for the activities of all entities that make up the national statistical system, and an institutional framework for the recognition of official statistics at the international level. It also provides for a national statistical system, rules for interaction between producers of official statistics, providers of administrative data, respondents and users. The state of openness of official statistics for general use, the degree of openness and quality of information, the current mechanisms of its delivery to citizens and the world community are brought in line with international requirements. In general, the changes made play an important role in ensuring reliable statistical reporting, increasing the efficiency of information use, strengthening the country’s authority and investment attractiveness, as well as ensuring openness in management. The law was approved by the senators.

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AUSTRALIA: Belated Law Reform on Workplace Deaths

Federal law reform is coming for families who have lost loved ones at work, almost three years after a parliamentary inquiry into industrial deaths. Changes agreed by Australia's workplace health and safety ministers a fortnight ago will make it easier for regulators to prosecute employers. Safe Work Australia chief executive Michelle

Baxter said there would also be significant increases in penalties. "Those offence provisions, in order to be invoked or relied upon, do not depend upon the death of a person at a workplace," Ms Baxter told a Senate estimates hearing on Wednesday. In 2018, a Senate inquiry examined the prevention, investigation and prosecution of industrial deaths in Australia and issued a detailed report. An independent review led by Marie Boland made 34 recommendations to the federal government in 2019.

Despite delays, Industrial Relations Minister Michaelia Cash said the recommendations were a priority, and jurisdictions were working together to address all of them. "That sends a very clear message to all Australians, but in particular employers and employees, that we take these model laws and the consequences of breaching these model laws very seriously," she said. Labor senator Deborah O'Neill acknowledged family members who lost loved ones and gave evidence to the Senate almost three years ago. "People are watching," she said. "Many of those people who came forward also expressed a concern about the lack of a crime for industrial manslaughter." A national industrial relations regime to make industrial manslaughter an offence has been resisted by the Morrison government, but some states have made the change in response to community concern.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 06/02/2021

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Hard and Early Lockdown Is Best Strategy

Locking down hard and early is the right strategy for dealing with COVID-19 outbreaks in terms of health and jobs, a new study shows. The research published in international journal PLOS One on Saturday found an early eight-week national lockdown in Australia had cost $52 billion, or about three per cent of GDP. But with no suppression measures, the welfare and hospitalisation costs as a percentage of annual GDP would have ranged from 13.1 per cent ($263 billion) to 47.9 per cent ($956 billion). As well, the country could have faced between 12,500 and 30,000 deaths, instead of just under 1000, the study found. "The costs of a much-delayed lockdown were many times greater and included a much greater loss of life," said report co-author, Professor Quentin Grafton from the Australian National University.

"If other high-income countries had imposed effective suppression measures earlier, and especially supervised quarantine for all arrivals, they would have had lower COVID-19 fatalities and economy costs." Lead author, Professor Tom Kompas at the University of Melbourne, said Victoria's current snap lockdown was the correct approach. "Our work shows that what Victoria is currently doing, with its 'circuit-breaker' lockdown is exactly the right thing to do," Professor Kompas said. "An uncontrolled spread of COVID, especially with newer, more aggressive strains, would be disastrous for Australia. "Elimination of community spread in Australia is best for both health and economy outcomes. There is no question about this." The authors noted the UK had lost 128,000 lives to COVID-19 and in 2020 suffered its biggest annual decline (9.9 per cent) in GDP in over three centuries. By comparison, Australia's GDP is now higher than it was just before the pandemic.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 06/05/2021

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Turnbull Urges PM to Back Climate Action

Malcolm Turnbull has labelled opposition to carbon tariffs as naive as Scott Morrison prepares to warn powerful world leaders against the measure. The former prime minister is hopeful growing global pressure will convince the coalition government to make stronger international climate change commitments. Mr Morrison will head to the G7 conference in the United Kingdom later this week opposed to trade measures designed to punish countries without ambitious emissions reduction targets. Mr Turnbull said there was growing momentum for carbon tariffs within the Biden administration, while European nations were strongly committed. He said selling a tariff to voters at home could offer governments an easy political victory through the promise of protecting local jobs and businesses. "If you can impose a tariff which does all those things but at the same time say you are saving the planet, well that sounds much more appealing," he told ABC radio on Monday.

"Politically it is so easy to sell domestically. You'd have to be very naive not to recognise it's coming up in the lift." Mr Turnbull said his successor faced a tough political equation with many inside the coalition influenced by fossil fuel lobbyists and the Rupert Murdoch-owned News Corp opposed to climate action. "He's trying to navigate that craziness as best he can. He's under huge international pressure and it will only increase," he said. "At some point hopefully that will persuade the right wing and the coalition, which holds those parties hostage effectively, to succumb to reality." An internal brawl over energy policy led to Mr Turnbull losing his job as prime minister with conservative forces moving against him. All G7 members including Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and United States have a goal of net zero by 2050. Mr Morrison says it is preferable for Australia to reach net zero emissions by 2050 but other countries want Australia to make stronger commitments. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has raised taxing products from countries with weaker climate action as a mechanism for reducing global emissions.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 06/07/2021

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'Trash to Treasure' in NSW Plastics Plan

Lightweight bags, straws and cutlery will be included in a $356 million NSW government plan to further cull plastic from the waste stream. Green groups have welcomed the long-awaited move but say the government should not wait three years to review the use of other plastics including heavyweight grocery shopping bags and single-use plates and cups. Lightweight plastic bags will be phased out within six months of new laws passing parliament, which is expected to happen by the end of the year. Within 12 months, plastic straws, cutlery and stirrers will also be on the banned list along with styrofoam cups, plates and containers, plastic-stemmed cotton buds and microbeads in products such as handwash and make-up. Environment Minister Matt Kean on Sunday also said "green bins" for food and organic waste will be rolled out to every household across the state.

The plastics plan will cost $356 million over five years. "The single-use items we are phasing-out will stop an estimated 2.7 billion items of plastic litter from ending up in our environment and waterways over the next 20 years," Mr Kean said in a statement. "We can't keep sending our scraps to languish in landfill when there are huge opportunities to turn our trash into treasure." The NSW government has committed to achieving zero emissions from organics in landfill by 2030 and also wants to extract more biogas from waste. NSW aims to cut total waste per capita by 10 per cent, cut litter by 60 per cent and triple the plastic recycling rate by 2030. Exemptions to the rules will be provided for those who rely on single-use plastics for disability or health needs, Mr Kean said.

WWF Australia says the action to keep some of the most problematic plastics out of the ocean and landfill is very welcome. But it can't understand why the government will wait so long to consider banning others including the cheap, heavyweight bags sold at grocery stores, coffee cups and lids. "There are viable, sustainable alternatives to each of these items, so there's no reason to delay action for another three years," WWF's Kate Noble said in a statement. "An estimated 130,000 tonnes of plastic flows into Australia's environment each year." The Australian Food and Grocery Council, meanwhile, said in a statement that it welcomed the plan. It said food and grocery manufacturers were aware of the environmental damage plastics create, and aim to reduce plastics use.

"Balancing the needs to preserve food, reduce food waste and ensure community health and safety by producing high quality food and grocery products while increasing recycled content and improving the end-of-life management of packaging is a complex task," AFGC chief executive Tanya Barden said. "The food and grocery sector supports the plastic action plan, which strikes a balance for all sectors to collaborate and develop a much-needed plastics circular economy." Mr Kean said that on the current trajectory, there would be more plastic in the world's oceans than fish by 2050.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 06/13/2021

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COVID and Climate on Parliament Agenda

Climate, coronavirus and superannuation will be key issues on the agenda for the last fortnight of federal parliament before the winter break. Prime Minister Scott

Morrison won't be present for Tuesday's session, but is expected to dial in from overseas later in the sitting. He's been at the G7 summit in Cornwall and will complete talks in London and Paris with the British and French leaders before heading home. Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack will take the lead for the government, while Labor takes aim at the coalition over a lack of ambition on climate policy, the slow rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine and seeks to block changes to superannuation in the Senate. Energy Minister Angus Taylor plans to force a vote on Tuesday on a Labor motion to disallow a move by the government to expand the remit of Australia's renewable energy agency to include carbon-capture and "blue" hydrogen.

The opposition, which is expected to lose the vote, argues the proposed regulations would give Mr Taylor the power to unilaterally assert that new technologies were low-emissions. Mr Taylor says Labor is seeking to "cosy up to green activists" while threatening 1400 jobs and $192 million of extra funding for ARENA. The G7 leaders sent a strong signal to the world that zero net emissions must be achieved by 2050 and fossil fuels phased out. Mr Morrison says Australia is committed to net zero emissions "as soon as possible, preferably by 2050". Labor leader Anthony Albanese says Mr Morrison is looking "increasingly isolated" on climate policy. Meanwhile, the fate of a package of superannuation reforms remains in doubt. The bill would "staple" members to a single super account that would move with them between jobs, saving multiple sets of fees and insurance premiums.

It would also introduce an annual performance test that would prevent the worst performing funds from taking on new members. The government was forced to strip a provision to give the treasurer veto power over investments by super funds after losing the support of several coalition backbenchers. But Centre Alliance says more is needed to prevent workers being stapled to underperforming funds. Independent senator Rex Patrick is also moving amendments around dangerous occupations and the best financial interests of members. As international travel remains blocked to most Australians, independent MP Zali Steggall will introduce a petition calling for parents to be classified as immediate family members. Under the current laws, parents who are not Australian citizens and live overseas are not eligible for exemptions to travel to Australia. More than 70,500 people have signed the petition, also calling for more compassion in allowing citizens to leave Australia to visit family. Ms Steggall said her office is being inundated with desperate calls for help, particularly from new mothers whose parents are unable to come into Australia to assist them.

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Adoption Laws Under Review

New Zealand’s 66-year-old adoption laws are being reviewed, with public engagement beginning today. Justice Minister Kris Faafoi said the Government is seeking views on options for change to our adoption laws and system. “The Adoption Act has remained largely the same since 1955. We need our adoption laws to reflect the values and needs of contemporary New Zealand,” Kris Faafoi said. “Adoption has significant and lifelong effects on the children involved, so our laws should have the rights of children at their heart. “The Ministry of Justice today released Adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand, a discussion document to assist people in submitting on the review. Public consultation starts today and will run until 31 August. Targeted engagement with specific communities, including people affected by adoption, will run alongside public engagement.

“Feedback and ideas from the public will help the Government develop proposals for changes to adoption laws. “In our Manifesto we committed to reviewing adoption laws and removing discriminatory provisions. This review fulfills that commitment, and will be an opportunity to ensure adequate support and information is available to people before, during and after an adoption. In particular, the Government is seeking views on six key issues, including what is adoption and who is involved, cultural aspects of adoption (including whāngai), how the adoption process works in New Zealand and offshore, the impacts of adoption, and the adoption process works where a child is born by surrogacy. The discussion document, and summary document which has been translated and produced in accessible formats, are available now on the Ministry of Justice website along with information on how to make a submission at: www.justice.govt.nz/adoption-law-reform

“The Government will embark on a second round of engagement after working through submissions and developing a set of policy proposals for reform based on what we hear from people.” Last year the Government referred a separate review of surrogacy to Te Aka Matua o te Ture | the Law Commission. While the review of adoption laws will not include general surrogacy issues, it will consider ways to improve the current adoption process where a child is born by surrogacy. The Ministry of Justice and the Law Commission are working together on the issues of common interest in the adoption and surrogacy reviews.

From https://livenews.co.nz 06/18/2021

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Federal Housing Support Schemes Expanded

An extra 30,000 places are to be released to eligible applicants under the federal government's housing support programs. Housing Minister Michael Sukkar says the First Home Loan Deposit Scheme, New Home Guarantee program and Family Home Guarantee will be expanded from July 1. While home ownership is beyond the reach of an increasing number of Australians, Mr Sukkar says 30,000 buyers have already been helped into the market via government initiatives. The current budget will also support market access for single parents with dependants, subject to the passage of

Family Home Guarantee legislation, he says. From next month, an extra 10,000 guarantees will be made available to eligible single parent families under the scheme to build a new home or purchase an existing one with a deposit of as little as 2 per cent.

"We know how difficult it can be to buy a new home or re-enter the housing market and that saving a deposit is the hardest part of getting into home ownership," Mr Sukkar said in a statement on Saturday. "That's why the Morrison government has established the new Family Home Guarantee, which recognises the challenge of saving for a deposit is that much more difficult when you are a single parent with children." With 30,000 new places being made available in total for applicants to the schemes from 1 July, now was the time to contact a participating bank or mortgage provider and get the process underway, Mr Sukkar said. The New Home Guarantee was launched last October as a temporary expansion of the First Home Loan Deposit Scheme. It will provide an additional 10,000 places for first home buyers seeking to build or buy a new home with a five per cent deposit and a construction commencement timeframe of 12 months. To make sure people can continue to purchase a home, as well as accommodate larger families under the Family Home Guarantee, Mr Sukkar also announced new price caps under the First Home Loan Deposit Scheme.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 06/19/2021

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Net Zero Target in Doubt as Joyce Leads

Scott Morrison may want net zero emissions by 2050 but the incoming deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce has form against the transition to "new energy". Australia has been "taken for a ride" by subsidised wind turbines from China and by environmental activists who argue expanding renewable energy here can cut global emissions, according to Mr Joyce. "What is this insane lemming-like desire to go to renewables going to do to our economy," then-Senator Joyce asked parliament back in 2013. He raged last year against a "sea of wind farms" in regional NSW. "If you want zero emissions, nuclear power does it," he said in February after the prime minister flagged a more ambitious climate policy. Differences on climate and energy will be key factors in the revised coalition agreement yet to be agreed between the two party leaders.

Returned as Nationals leader on Monday, Mr Joyce said he would be guided on climate policy by his party room's view on what is best for regional Australia. "It is not Barnaby policy, it's Nationals' policy, and Nationals' policy is what I will be an advocate for," he told reporters in Canberra. Members have been complaining that the prime minister's pursuit of net zero emissions, preferably by 2050, is not a policy position agreed to by the Nationals party room. Mr Joyce said if the party room believes the best deal for regional Australia is to secure their jobs and industries, and clearly understand the dynamics of an Australian economy "as opposed to a Danish one or a German one", that is the view he would take. Mr Morrison welcomed Mr Joyce as the new Nationals leader and deputy prime minister. "Barnaby and I have a shared passion for ensuring our regions and rural communities thrive," he said.

Finance Minister Simon Birmingham said the government's pursuit of net zero emissions, preferably by 2050, is "crucial" for the economy and tackling climate change. After success with traditional energy resources, the prime minister wants to see Australia play a big role in "new energy", including hydrogen. During last week's trip to Europe for the G7 summit, Mr Morrison concluded hydrogen deals with Germany and Singapore to position Australia as a key exporter. He signed a decarbonisation agreement with Japan, which already invests in hydrogen in Australia's north. And he basked in praised from British Prime Minister Boris Johnson for a net zero emissions plan. Labor has called for Australians to see the terms of the secret deal, when inked by the two governing parties.

Opposition leader Anthony Albanese told parliament Australia is increasingly isolated on climate and energy, since every state and territory government, the National Farmers Federation, major businesses and trading partners have all signed up to net zero emissions. "We're offering net zero by 2050," he said of his party's position. "No qualifications, no weasel words." Asked at a post-spill press conference whether climate policy is problematic for the Nationals, outgoing deputy prime minister Michael McCormack said he did not believe it was. "That'll be a matter for Barnaby," he said.

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Australia Edging Towards National Outbreak

Australia's coronavirus outbreaks have reignited calls for vaccinations to be increased as concern about the highly contagious Delta strain sweeps the country. Cabinet's national security committee met on Monday to discuss the unfolding situation with lockdowns and tighter restrictions emerging around the nation. Prime Minister Scott Morrison will also bring together state and territory leaders for a national cabinet meeting in the early evening. Mr Morrison is expected to push state and territory leaders to make vaccines mandatory for aged care workers. National cabinet will also discuss quarantine, including a ban on accommodating low-risk domestic travellers next door to high-risk international arrivals, which triggered an outbreak in Queensland. As well, they will discuss testing and vaccinating those directly and indirectly working in the system, and introducing post-quarantine testing on day 16 after people emerge from isolation.

Vaccine stocks and the national rollout will be canvassed, along with federal supports available for aged care responses and pandemic disaster leave payments.

COVID-19 task force commander John Frewen said while Pfizer supplies remained constrained, there was ample AstraZeneca doses for people over 60. Lieutenant General Frewen warned the disease would not be eradicated in the near future. "We will have to get more comfortable with the idea that there will be ongoing outbreaks in the COVID space," he told reporters in Canberra on Monday. "But with all of those mitigation measures we can hopefully keep people alive, keep people from getting seriously ill and then as quickly as we can transition back to normal life as quickly as we can. "Vaccination underpins all of that." With Sydney in lockdown, NSW recorded 18 new coronavirus cases and all but one confirmed as linked to existing cases.

The number was down from 30 on Sunday and came from 59,000 tests. Queensland is on the verge of another lockdown in the state's southeast after two new local cases with more than 160 returned mine workers being tested. Masks will be mandatory across large swathes of the state, home visits will be capped at 30 guests and venues will need to adhere to a one person per four square metre rule. In South Australia - which hasn't recorded a new case - beefed up restrictions include masks in high-risk settings and reduced densities in pubs, cafes and restaurants. Western Australia recorded one new case in a woman who briefly came into contact with another person who had visited Sydney. In the Northern Territory, an outbreak linked to a central Australian mine has grown to seven cases, sparking an extension of a snap lockdown until at least Friday.

Labor leader Anthony Albanese continues to slam the federal government for the slow rollout and not taking charge of isolating people entering the country. "This is a race to get people vaccinated, it is a race also to set up national quarantine facilities," he told reporters in Canberra. Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews said it would be appropriate for national cabinet to discuss further limiting passenger arrivals given breaches were leading to lockdowns. "Hotels are made for tourists. They're not purpose-built and they're not much good at keeping things like the Delta variant at bay," he said.

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Mixed Plastic Export Ban Comes into Effect

A ban on sending mixed plastics overseas for recycling has come into effect across Australia. Federal and state governments agreed in 2019 to ban exports of a range of recyclable materials after countries including China and Indonesia stopped taking waste from other nations. Glass has been banned from export since January 1 this year, while mixed plastics will no longer be able to be sent overseas from Thursday. "Mixed plastics are the roughly sorted bundles of bottles and containers packed into shipping containers that we have often seen turned away from foreign ports in recent years due to contamination issues," Environment Minister Sussan Ley said in a statement. "This is about taking responsibility for our waste, creating economic opportunity and helping our environment." Ms Ley said this stage of the ban will end the export of 75,000 tonnes of baled mixed plastic each year.

She said there is already an annual spare capacity of more than 160,000 tonnes at 52 of Australia's plastics-processing facilities. However, Rose Read, chief executive of the National Waste and Recycling Industry Council, said the industry is not ready for the ban. "We're slowly progressing towards that," she told the ABC. "But are we ready for the 1st of July? No." Ms Read said some facilities did not have the capacity to process all of the plastic waste and it could end up in landfill. Ms Ley said major industry parties and state governments have signed up to the timetable. "While there may be a few others who are slow to adjust, the broader industry is firmly behind where we are going," she said. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show 2.5 million tonnes of plastic waste was generated in the 2018/19 financial year, with only nine per cent recycled and 84 per cent sent to landfill. Households created the largest amount of plastic waste at close to half. Unprocessed plastics sorted into single resin or polymer type will be banned from July 1, 2022.

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NEW ZEALAND: Foreign Investment Policy and National Interest Guidance

The New Zealand government welcomes sustainable, productive and inclusive overseas investment. Overseas investment supports job creation, the creation and adoption of new technologies, increases human capital, and grants New Zealand more diverse international connections, including access to global distribution networks and markets. Without foreign investment, New Zealanders' living standards would be lower. At the same time, the Government recognises that foreign investment can pose risks. Foreign investment can take ownership and control of economic activity out of New Zealand and high levels of foreign ownership of sensitive New Zealand assets can conflict with a view that New Zealanders should own or control those assets. It can also, in extreme cases, present opportunities to undermine our national security.

The Overseas Investment Act 2005 (the Act) is New Zealand's principal tool for regulating foreign investment. It seeks to balance the need to support high-quality investment, while ensuring that the government has tools to manage risks. The Act does so by providing an enduring framework for screening foreign investments in sensitive assets to help ensure that they benefit New Zealand and are consistent with New Zealand's national interest. This information is general in nature and is not a substitute for legal advice. Foreign investors should ensure that they understand New Zealand's foreign investment screening regime and ensure they comply with the law, or risk the imposition of significant penalties.

From https://livenews.co.nz 06/08/2021

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Govt Acts to Protect NZers from Harmful Content

New Zealanders will be better protected from harmful or illegal content as a result of work to design a modern, flexible and coherent regulatory framework, Minister of Internal Affairs Jan Tinetti announced today. New Zealand currently has a content regulatory system that is comprised of six different arrangements covering some – but not all – publicly available video, audio, images and text. “Reviewing our content regulatory arrangements is one part of the Government’s work to keep New Zealanders safer online – which includes the Christchurch Call, the amendments to the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act, and the Keep It Real Online campaign and resources,” Jan Tinetti said. “Our existing regulatory system was designed in the early 1990s, without the internet, and focused on traditional newspapers, printed material and free-to-air TV.

It is not fit for purpose, and does not have the flexibility to respond to the ongoing evolution of digital platforms. “That’s why the Government is designing a new modern, flexible and coherent regulatory framework; to minimise the likelihood of unintentionally coming across harmful or illegal content – regardless of the way that content is delivered. “The review will be platform and content neutral in what it covers. This means, I am not reviewing the substance of the content itself – however I am proposing to streamline the regulations to treat content the same way regardless of if it’s posted on a website, shared on Facebook, available on demand, printed in a newspaper, or aired on a TV screen. “The current system is confusing for content providers and consumers – consumers have no single complaints process, and some content providers are regulated by multiple regimes.

“The regulatory framework will balance harm-reduction with protecting democratic freedoms – including freedom of expression, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press. I do not intend to change the threshold for limitations on freedom of expression, and it will remain appropriately high. “Communities, content providers and the Government all have a role to play in reducing harm to individuals, society and institutions, so everyone can have their say on the proposed changes,” Jan Tinetti said. Initial targeted consultation with key regulatory organisations, media groups, government agencies and specialist interest groups will begin shortly, before wider stakeholder and public consultation in early 2022.

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Government Releases Second Set of Child Poverty Targets

The Government has released the second set of official three-year child poverty targets, as required by the Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018. The new targets announced today cover the 2021/22, 2022/23, and 2023/24 financial years and are set at rates required to keep New Zealand on track to meet its longer-term 10 year targets. “Reducing child poverty was a priority for us in the last term, and remains a key priority in this term,” said Prime Minister and Minister for Child Poverty Reduction Jacinda Ardern. “We have made progress, but there is more to do to achieve our bold plan of more than halving child poverty within 10 years. The targets being released today keep us moving towards that goal.” Achieving the new targets for 2023/24 would see the following reductions from the 2017/18 baseline rates of child poverty:

Reduction in the before-housing-costs measure from 16.5 to 10 percent – lifting around 70,000 children out of poverty Reduction in the after-housing-costs measure from 22.8 to 15 percent – lifting around 80,000 children out of poverty Reduction in the number of children experiencing material hardship from 13.3 to 9 percent – lifting around 40,000 children out of hardship “Our plan is based around making progress in three key areas: increasing incomes for families, reducing housing costs and other pressures on low-income households, and changes to support the wider wellbeing of families. “Budget 21, which included main benefit increases of between $32 and $55 per person, is an important part of this. “Since the Government introduced child poverty reduction targets, reductions have been achieved across all nine child poverty measures, and we have already exceeded our first three-year target for the after-housing-cost measure which has lifted 43,300 children out of poverty.

“Achieving our longer term 10 year targets will place New Zealand alongside those countries with the lowest rates of poverty and hardship in the world and contribute to our goal of making New Zealand the best place in the world for children and young people. “We know that COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on already disadvantaged groups, and the long-term economic impact of COVID-19 will make reducing child poverty in the coming years more challenging. “Nevertheless, the new three-year targets maintain our bold ambition and continue our progress towards the 10 year targets,” Jacinda Ardern said.

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Asia-Pacific

Mathias Cormann Takes Office as OECD Secretary-General

Mathias Cormann took office today as the sixth Secretary-General of the OECD. Ministers and senior officials of the Organisation’s 38 Member countries and outgoing Secretary-General Angel Gurría welcomed Mr Cormann in a handover ceremony at the OECD Headquarters in Paris during Part I of the two-part 2021 Meeting of the OECD Council at Ministerial Level (MCM). “I am deeply honoured and humbled by the trust and confidence you have shown in appointing me as your OECD Secretary-General. I am ambitious for the OECD and what it can achieve with Members, for Members, and most importantly, for the people in Member countries. You can count on me to give it my absolute best as we work towards a better future, together.” Mr Cormann said. Mr Cormann, who has been appointed by member governments to serve a five-year term, was Australia’s Finance Minister from 2013-2020 and was Leader of the Government in the Senate from 2017-2020. He also served as Minister for the Public Service in 2018-2019.

Watch a replay of the handover ceremony
The 2021 MCM, chaired by the United States with Korea and Luxembourg as Vice-Chairs, will be held in two editions. Edition 1, from 31 May – 1 June, has gathered Leaders and Ministers from the OECD’s 38 countries virtually under the theme of “Shared Values: Building a Green and Inclusive Future”. Key areas of discussion on Day 1 included the global economic situation, lessons to date from the COVID-19 pandemic and priorities for the recovery. The second edition of the MCM will take place in the autumn and will focus on longer-term issues including the OECD’s future priorities and transforming policy ambitions into deliverable actions that reinforce a shared goal to build a green and inclusive future. A Ministerial statement summarizing outcomes of this week’s meeting will be issued at the close of the Ministerial, alongside a press conference at 15:30 CEST.

From https://www.oecd.org/ 06/01/2021

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Federal Funding Fuels Smart City Transformation

Closing the digital divide requires a bit more than the best of intentions. The pandemic put the issue in perspective, as each gap, chasm or aperture was instantly under the spotlight. Cities like Sacramento, Philadelphia, Houston, and Chattanooga are taking steps to address infrastructure shortfalls, and delivering necessary broadband service to underserved residents. The sheer cost of Smart City initiatives in year’s past proved prohibitive, but with mounting demand on the network – from remote education and a virtual workforce, to the population at large – the federal government stepped in with funding efforts. With the objective of bringing back jobs, plugging holes of the digital divide, and returning economic stability, President Joe Biden signed the American Rescue Plan delivering $1.9 trillion in total relief funding and specifically, $350 billion for eligible state, local, territorial, and Tribal governments.

How does that $350 billion breakdown?
$195.3 billion to States & District of Columbia
$65 billion to Counties

$45.6 billion to Metropolitan Cities
$20 billion to Tribal Governments
$4.5 billion to Territories
$19.5 Non-entitlement Units of Local Government
Where is this money going?

Address K-12 educational obstacles
Support institutions of higher learning
Provide schools and libraries the ability to support teachers and students with Internet service, provide connected devices and additional necessary equipment
Contact tracing, COVID-19 testing and mitigation
Vaccine distribution and communication
Deliver airports with devices, solutions capable of halting the spread of pathogens
Modernization any system, technology or program of any state-based marketplace – such as insurance marketplaces
Data management and other technology needed to extend the public health workfore
Federal transit administration grants
IT Modernization Optimizes Spend

Digital transformation is the goal. A modern network creates the path to success. Recent research from CDW noted, "Digital Transformation often includes gathering new information from the environment and the physical world that wasn't previously available, and then using those insights to inform better business decisions." Governments are gaining (previously unattainable) access to rich data, empowering the ability to enhance services for citizens. The introduction of IoT devices and sensors are ushering locales into the era of the Smart Community, offering the ability to optimize functions like garbage removal, parking, energy flow, traffic, water, lighting, and policing. This new influx of funds opens the door to becoming a fully operational Smart Community, building the three key pillars of creating open digital systems, encouraging private and public partnerships, and planning for the future. As your Smart City initiative plans take shape, a modern, cloud-managed network will be the catalyst for long-term efficiency and effectiveness.

From https://www.extremenetworks.com/ 06/09/2021

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Ministers Unite on COVID-19 Vaccine Steps and Rejuvenating the WTO

APEC Trade Ministers today committed to speeding up the cross-border flow of vaccines and related goods to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. This followed the completion of the APEC Ministers Responsible for Trade Meeting chaired by New Zealand Minister for Trade and Export Growth Damien O'Connor early this morning. "As we face the biggest health and economic crisis of our lifetimes, I was greatly heartened to see how we united to make progress," Minister O'Connor said. "We represent half of global GDP and wanted to use trade as a force for good. “We know nobody is safe until everybody is safe from COVID-19, and we know that our region prospers economically by keeping our markets open to one another rather than closing ourselves off. APEC Trade Ministers today agreed to:

“Act now to speed the flow of vaccines and vaccine-related goods by eliminating trade restrictions that increase the cost of vaccines and the goods that support them;

“A set of guidelines for their Customs authorities to ensure vaccines flow through ports and airports as quickly as possible so they are not sitting idle;

“Remove barriers to freight and logistics services that support trade in vaccines and vaccine-related goods to help fight the pandemic.”

“It is encouraging to see APEC Trade Ministers working together to respond in practical, concrete terms to the COVID pandemic and rebuild our economies,” he said. APEC Trade Ministers re-affirmed their commitment to the rules-based multilateral trading system by rejuvenating the World Trade Organization (WTO) and injecting momentum into a series of trade negotiations with the aim of concluding these by the end of this year. Just before the ministerial statement was agreed, Minister O’Connor announced the winner of the 2021 APEC App Challenge, OneQR from Australia, an app that aims to help people in the region consider safe and prudent options for travel when the time is right.

From https://www.apec.org/ 06/06/2021

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East Asia

CHINA: Deepening Reform of Business Permits to Boost Market Entities

A full-coverage listing-management system will be adopted for enterprise-related business licensing items nationwide starting from July 1, said a State Council circular released Thursday. At the same time, more reforms of the examination-and-approval system will be launched in pilot free trade zones (FTZs), the circular said. A digital-license system for businesses will be available nationwide by the end of 2022, with paper materials no longer needed if the target information can be obtained via the digital-license system. By the end of 2022, a simplified, highly efficient, fair and transparent industry-access rule with a low threshold and strict management will be established in an effort to make administrative operations more convenient and predictable for market entities. A total of 68 enterprise-related business licensing items will be annulled nationwide, with another 14 in pilot FTZs, to eliminate operating obstacles in fields such as foreign investment and trade, engineering construction, transport and logistics, and agency services.

A total of 15 enterprise-related business licensing items will be transformed into record-filing items, with another 15 in pilot FTZs, to grant market access in fields such as trade and circulation, education and training, medical services, food and finance. All enterprise-related business licensing items will be included in the listing for management. The listing will be dynamically adjusted and updated, and announced to the public for the purposes of social supervision. In the first five months, about 135,800 new enterprises were set up in pilot FTZs, up 60.52 percent year on year, and 30 percentage points higher than that of new enterprises set up across the country in the same period, according to the State Administration for Market Regulation.

From http://www.news.cn/ 06/03/2021

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Chinese Premier Stresses Boosting Employment, Business Start-ups

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on Thursday urged efforts to create more opportunities for employment and business start-ups to meet this year's job-creation target. In a written instruction to a teleconference held in Beijing, Li, also a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, noted that the country faces an arduous task in stabilizing and expanding employment. Li asked all regions and departments to strengthen the employment-first policy, and boost employment for key job-hunting groups, including college graduates, veterans and migrant workers. Favorable policies such as tax and fee cuts, as well as inclusive finance, should be properly implemented, Li said.

Support should be given to medium and small firms, individually-owned businesses and other market entities to create more market-based opportunities for employment and business start-ups, he said. Li also underlined developing new employment models and improving vocational-skills training services. Vice premiers Sun Chunlan and Hu Chunhua, who are both members of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, attended the meeting and delivered speeches. Efforts should be prioritized to secure the employment of college graduates, according to the meeting. China aims to create more than 11 million new urban jobs in 2021, according to this year's government work report.

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China to Build Zhejiang into Demonstration Zone for Common Prosperity

China's central authorities on Thursday issued a guideline on building the eastern province of Zhejiang into a demonstration zone for achieving common prosperity. The guideline, jointly released by the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council, rolled out multiple measures to guide the province in setting an example for promoting common prosperity. By 2025, Zhejiang should achieve solid progress in building the demonstration zone, with its per capita gross domestic product (GDP) reaching the level of moderately developed economies, while a social structure with a middle-income population as the majority should be generally developed by then, the guideline said. The province should see greater achievements in high-quality development and basically achieve common prosperity by 2035, it said, adding that Zhejiang should strive to raise its per capita GDP and the income of urban and rural residents to the standard for developed countries. By 2035, Zhejiang's systems and mechanisms for common prosperity should also be more well-developed, according to the guideline. The guideline stressed efforts to improve the quality of development, further reform income allocation and narrow the urban-rural gap, calling for a more livable residential environment.

From http://www.news.cn/ 06/10/2021

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China Lists Key Tasks in Medicine, Healthcare Reform for 2021

China will strive to balance medical resources and build up the public health system in 2021, according to the cabinet's new annual plan for further reforming the medicine and healthcare system. Efforts must be made to accelerate the synergy of reforms relating to medical services, medical insurance and pharmaceuticals, said the document, which was published on the General Office of the State Council's website on Thursday. The country will carry forward the bulk-buying mechanism to further slash medicine prices in 2021. Its tiered system of medical diagnosis and treatment will be refined and the development of healthcare consortiums will be accelerated, according to the document. Disease prevention will be emphasized in the building up of China's public health system. The document called for efforts to boost the capabilities for early warning, risk evaluation and on-the-spot epidemiological investigation. The State Council also made clear which authorities are responsible for each task within the reforms.

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China to Boost New Forms, Models of Foreign Trade to Develop New Competitive Edge

China will accelerate the development of new forms and models of foreign trade to push forward its upgrading and foster new competitive strengths, the State Council's executive meeting chaired by Premier Li Keqiang decided on Tuesday. Recent years have seen rapid development of new forms and models of foreign trade. Such development has propelled the transformation and upgrading of the country's foreign trade as a whole, and played a vital role in stabilizing foreign trade against the COVID-19 pandemic. "New business forms and models, especially cross-border e-commerce, have become a vibrant force driving China's foreign trade. They also represent an important trend in the development of international trade," Li said, "China's cross-border e-commerce has grown by nearly 10 times over the past five years. By both exports and imports, cross-border e-commerce has been expanding much faster than overall foreign trade, and its share in overall foreign trade has gone up significantly."

Policies to support cross-border e-commerce development will be improved. Integrated pilot zones for cross-border e-commerce will be piloted in more areas. The list of goods in cross-border e-commerce retail import will be finetuned. Management of cross-border e-commerce import and export returns and exchanges will be made more convenient. Guidelines on protecting intellectual property rights in cross-border e-commerce will be drafted, to deter counterfeit and substandard goods. The meeting required vigorous efforts to advance the development of overseas warehouses. Traditional foreign trade companies, cross-border e-commerce platforms and logistics firms will be encouraged to participate in developing overseas warehouses and make them more standardized, digitized and intelligent. Such efforts will promote micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises to go global via overseas warehouses, and drive Chinese brands and products from startups and innovation firms to expand international market.

"We will support businesses in establishing overseas warehouses. This is an important way for facilitating Chinese brands going global, and has played an important role in opening overseas retail channels," Li said, "For 'made-in-China' products to go global, it takes new business models and solid steps for steady progress." Market procurement trade will be actively developed. Integrated foreign trade service firms will be guided to improve efficiency and risk control when handling export tax rebate on behalf of manufacturers. Enterprises in integrated bonded areas and pilot free trade zones will be supported to offer bonded repair services. Places with permitting conditions will be supported to develop offshore trade. International cooperation in intellectual property protection, transnational logistics and other areas will be stepped up. "We need to further promote international exchange and cooperation, take an active part in making international rules and standards of new business forms and models of foreign trade and proactively align with the global logistics industry," Li said.

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China Issues White Paper on CPC's Practice in Human Rights Protection

China's State Council Information Office on Thursday issued a white paper on the practice of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in respecting and protecting human rights. The year 2021 marks the centenary of the CPC. Over the past century, the

CPC has invested a huge effort in human rights protection, adding significantly to global human rights progress, said the white paper. For a hundred years, the CPC has always put people first, applying the principle of universality of human rights in the context of the national conditions. It regards the rights to subsistence and development as the primary and basic human rights, and believes that living a life of contentment is the ultimate human right, said the white paper. The CPC promotes the well-rounded development of the individual, and strives to give every person a stronger sense of gain, happiness and security. Its success in pioneering human rights in a socialist country is unique and readily apparent, said the white paper.

The life expectancy of Chinese citizens rose to 77.3 years in 2019, compared with 35 years in 1949, according to the white paper. The CPC ensures the right to subsistence, said the document, noting that China has engaged in a huge program of poverty reduction focusing on development-driven poverty alleviation in rural areas. At the end of 2020, China achieved the goal of eliminating absolute poverty as scheduled. Living standards of the Chinese people have improved, the white paper said. In 2020, China's GDP reached 101.6 trillion yuan (about 15.7 trillion U.S. dollars), and per capita GDP was 72,000 yuan, more than the threshold of 10,000 U.S. dollars for the second year. The CPC has also integrated law-based governance with human rights protection, according to the white paper. Under the leadership of the CPC and based on the Constitution, a Chinese socialist system of laws has taken shape, providing a relatively complete legal system to protect human rights, said the white paper.

As of April 2021, there were 277 laws in force in China, including the Constitution and related laws, civil and commercial law, administrative law, economic law, social law, criminal law and procedural law related to litigation and non-litigation, it added. Human rights progress in China, guided by a people-centered philosophy, has gone beyond the development of Western views on human rights and its practice in protecting human rights, said Lu Guangjin, secretary-general of the China Society for Human Rights Studies, at a press conference Thursday on the white paper. For a hundred years, the CPC has committed itself to peaceful development and common progress. China is firm in its international stance -- to safeguard world peace and seek progress through cooperation, ensuring human rights with the benefits deriving from development, according to the white paper.

China has been an active participant in matters of international human rights, providing a Chinese contribution to global human rights governance and progress, and working with other countries to forge a global community of shared future, according to the white paper. China has sent more than 40,000 military personnel to participate in about 30 UN peacekeeping missions in Sudan, Lebanon, Cambodia, Libya, and other countries and regions, said the white paper. The country now ranks first among the permanent members of the UN Security Council in terms of the number of peacekeepers dispatched, and is the second largest fund contributor to the UN's peacekeeping actions, it added. China has signed 26 international human rights instruments, including six core UN conventions, the white paper showed, adding that China fulfills its obligations prescribed in these human rights conventions, ensures that the formulation, legislation, and any amendments of its laws and policies are consistent with these conventions.

The CPC is leading the people towards the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation and the second centenary goal -- to build China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful by the centenary of the People's Republic of China. At that time, all rights of the Chinese people will be safeguarded at a higher level, and they will have a better sense of dignity, freedom and happiness. China will make a greater contribution to the protection of human rights, enabling the world to develop better and become more prosperous, said the white paper.

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China Supports Reforming Int'l Human Rights Organizations in Fair, Rational, Inclusive Direction: White Paper

China supports the reform of international human rights organizations in a fair, rational and inclusive direction, said a white paper released on Thursday. The white paper on the practice of the Communist Party of China in respecting and protecting human rights was released by the State Council Information Office. In establishing the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), China advocated membership based on equitable geographical distribution, so as to increase the representation of developing countries. China proposes to reverse the present practice of politicizing human rights issues, do away with double standards, refrain from confrontation or minimize its impact, facilitate cooperation, and encourage the UNHRC to review human rights issues in a just, objective, non-selective and universal manner, the white paper said. The country supports the UNHRC in establishing specialized mechanisms for securing safe drinking water, protecting cultural rights, and defending the rights of persons with disabilities, it added. China stands by the necessary reform of the human rights treaty bodies, seeing that they perform their duties within their mandate and engage in dialogue and cooperation with signatory states on the basis of mutual respect, according to the white paper.

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Top Political Advisor Stresses Strengthening Public Communication

China's top political advisor Wang Yang has called for efforts to strengthen public communication of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Wang, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the CPPCC National Committee, made the remarks Thursday when attending a symposium on the topic. Wang said public communication of the CPPCC should be strengthened to make it more targeted, up-to-date and effective. The work of the CPPCC should increase cohesion and expand consensus through consultation based on equality, he said. Wang encouraged the CPPCC members to make self-improvements, popularize the Party's policies, and develop closer ties with the public. He also emphasized the importance of public communication in an innovative way, and the use of the internet and information technology in public communication.

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China Issues White Paper on Its Political Party System

China's State Council Information Office on Friday issued a white paper titled "China's Political Party System: Cooperation and Consultation," elaborating on the distinctive characteristics and strengths of the country's political party system. The system of multiparty cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) is a basic element of China's political framework, the white paper said. In this system, in addition to the CPC, there are eight other political parties: the Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang, the China Democratic League, the China National Democratic Construction Association, the China Association for Promoting Democracy, the Chinese Peasants and Workers Democratic Party, the China Zhi Gong Party, the Jiusan Society, and the Taiwan Democratic Self-Government League. The system also includes prominent individuals without affiliation to any of the political parties.

Following the principles of long-term coexistence, mutual oversight, sincerity, and sharing the rough times and the smooth, the CPC and the other political parties have created a multiparty cooperation system in which the CPC exercises state power and the other parties participate fully in the administration of state affairs under the leadership of the CPC, said the white paper. Calling the system a new model grown out of the soil of China, the white paper said it also learns from other countries and absorbs the fruits of their political achievements. The CPC has worked together with the non-CPC political parties over the years, advancing side by side, withstanding all kinds of tests, and forming a new type of relationship featuring cooperation, unity and harmony, the white paper said. Also, the white paper said the CPC upholds equality, democratic consultation, and sincere cooperation to support other participants in jointly building state power at all levels of people's congresses, governments and judicial organs.

The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) is an important channel and specialized body for socialist consultative democracy and a key component of the state governance system. Since 2013, the eight non-CPC political parties have submitted nearly 3,000 proposals and delivered over 30,000 reports on social conditions and public opinion, said Wang Lianhai, an official with the General Office of the CPPCC National Committee, at a press conference on the white paper. Wang noted that the efforts have made a positive contribution to leveraging the strengths of China's political party system, promoting harmony among all political parties, and serving national development in the new era. Democratic oversight of the CPC exercised by the non-CPC political parties and non-affiliates is an essential requirement in modernizing China's system and capacity for governance, according to the white paper.

China's political party system has distinctive characteristics and strengths, the white paper said. It promotes sound decision-making and implementation, and ensures effective state governance, the white paper said, adding that it can optimize the allocation of political resources and avoid the weakness of the old-fashioned party systems. The document said China's political party system is a structure of enormous strength, creativity and vitality. It embodies the essence of Chinese traditions, reflects the intrinsic requirements of socialism, and conforms to China's realities and its needs in state governance. As a basic component of China's political system, it contributes to China's development, national rejuvenation, and social progress, and is of great benefit to the people's wellbeing, it said. Over the past seven decades and more, China's political party system has grown and matured, providing Chinese ideas to the world in terms of modern party politics, and offering a new model for global political progress, it said.

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China's Political Party System Boosts Socio-economic Development: White Paper

Under China's political party system led by the Communist Party of China (CPC), the non-CPC political parties and public figures without party affiliation have actively contributed advices and efforts to boosting China's social and economic development, a white paper said Friday. The white paper, titled "China's Political Party System: Cooperation and Consultation," was released by the State Council Information Office. Members of the non-CPC political parties and persons without party affiliation, or non-affiliates, have made suggestions on the formulation of state policies and the implementation of major strategies, the white paper said. They have explored new avenues to perform their functions, including launching initiatives, assisting in nonprofit undertakings, and making appeals and suggestions on issues of extensive public concern. They have also increased their association with compatriots from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, and with overseas Chinese, it said.

Non-CPC political parties and non-affiliates have been standing together with the CPC to meet challenges, according to the white paper. For example, since COVID-19 struck, members of non-CPC political parties and non-affiliates have been pooling their wisdom, offering advice, and doing solid work to combat the epidemic, it said.

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China's Political Party System Provides Chinese Ideas to the World: White Paper

Over the past seven decades and more, China's political party system has grown and matured, providing Chinese ideas to the world in terms of modern party politics, and offering a new model for global political progress, a white paper said Friday. The white paper, titled "China's Political Party System: Cooperation and Consultation," was released by the State Council Information Office. The document said China's political party system is a structure of enormous strength, creativity and vitality. It embodies the essence of Chinese traditions, reflects the intrinsic requirements of socialism, and conforms to China's realities and its needs in state governance. As a basic component of China's political system, it contributes to China's development, national rejuvenation, and social progress, and is of great benefit to the people's wellbeing, it said. China will, as always, learn and draw from the positive experiences of other countries, but will not imitate other political party systems mechanically, or impose its own on any other country, the white paper said. China respects the right of other countries to choose a political party system best adapted to their own realities, it said. Based on equality and mutual respect, China is willing to strengthen cooperation and mutual learning with other countries, promote democracy on the international stage, and eventually build a global community of shared future, it said.

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CPC Cooperates with Other Political Parties, People Without Party Affiliation in State Governance: White Paper

The Communist Party of China (CPC) works together in unity with other political parties and people without party affiliation in governing the country, a white paper said Friday. The white paper, titled "China's Political Party System: Cooperation and Consultation," was released by the State Council Information Office. The CPC upholds equality, democratic consultation, and sincere cooperation to support other participants in jointly building state power at all levels of people's congresses, governments and judicial organs, the document said. Members of the eight non-CPC political parties and people without party affiliation account for a certain percentage of the total numbers of deputies to people's congresses, the standing committees of people's congresses, and the special committees of people's congresses at all levels, it said.

Since the first session of the 13th National People's Congress in 2018, about 152,000 members of the non-CPC political parties and people without party affiliation have served as deputies to people's congresses at all levels, according to the white paper. The document added that members of the non-CPC political parties and people without party affiliation also take leading positions in government and judicial organs, with 14 of them currently in leading positions in the Supreme People's Court, the Supreme People's Procuratorate, or ministries, commissions, offices and bureaus directly under the State Council. The State Council and local governments value the role of the non-CPC political parties and people without party affiliation, organizing symposiums to solicit their views and brief them on the latest economic and social developments, it said.

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Revelations of China's Political Party System

Over the decades, a new political party system has emerged in China marked by continuous growth and improvement, making its own contributions to the world's political civilization. On Friday, China released a white paper, titled "China's Political Party System: Cooperation and Consultation," which comprehensively reviews the development of the country's unique political party system, and introduces the system's distinctive characteristics and strengths. The system provides one fundamental revelation: the political party system of one country should be decided by its historical traditions and present national conditions. China's system, incorporating Marxist political party theory with the country's realities, can trace its roots back to China's cultural heritage and democratic revolution since modern times. The development of the party system over the past seven decades and more has shown the world its unique advantages and strong vitality. It has been playing an irreplaceable role in promoting a better and more effective governance of the country.

Former Greek Foreign Affairs Minister George Katrougalos once commented that China's achievements have conveyed a valid message that all progressive parties throughout the world should adapt doctrines to their national environments and the challenges of globalization. Another key revelation is that when various political parties of a country enjoy a relationship model that features cooperation, unity and harmony, they can better serve the fundamental interests of the great majority of their people. In this system, the Communist Party of China (CPC) exercises state power and the eight other parties participate fully in the administration of state affairs under the leadership of the CPC. They carry out cooperation based on the principles of long-term coexistence, mutual oversight, sincerity, and sharing the rough times and the smooth. Hence the operation of the system reflects the shared goals of all, promotes sound decision-making and implementation, and ensures effective state governance.

From fighting the pandemic to reducing poverty and from tackling corruption to pushing forward tough reforms and ecological development, the system has played an irreplaceable role. A report done by Harvard University last year, based on its 13-year survey in China, showed that the Chinese people's overall satisfaction with the central government exceeded 93 percent. Many similar surveys have also found high approval ratings of the Chinese government. In the white paper, China has made it clear that it will, as always, learn from the positive experiences of other countries, but will not imitate other political party systems mechanically, or impose its own on any other country. As previously stated, China respects the right of other countries to choose a political party system best adapted to their own realities. Based on equality and mutual respect, China is willing to strengthen cooperation and mutual learning with other countries, promote democracy on the international stage, and eventually build a community with a shared future for mankind.

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South-East Asia

MALAYSIA: King Calls for Parliament to Reconvene

Malaysia's King Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah on Wednesday called for the country's parliament to reconvene as Malaysia is facing challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic. He said the reconvene of parliament would allow all lawmakers to discuss the measures taken against the COVID-19 pandemic affecting the country and other matters of importance, the National Palace said in a statement. The King also urged that the national immunization program be sped up, to vaccinate at least 80 percent of the country's population. The statement came following a special session of the Conference of Rulers chaired by Sultan Abdullah. Prior to the meeting, Sultan Abdullah had met with 18 political leaders, including those from the opposition, gathering their views on the situation in the country particularly on the COVID-19 situation and the country's economy. A statement issued after the Conference of Rulers on Wednesday said the conference has decided that there is no need to extend the emergency when it expires on Aug. 1. Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy, with nine sultans or rulers, who head their respective state and act as the religious leader, taking turns to serve as king for a five-year term. Malaysia has been under a state of emergency since Jan. 12 as the government seeks concentrated efforts against the pandemic. Parliament sitting and elections are not allowed to take place during the emergency. The country's opposition has since called for parliament to be reconvened to allow discussion and bilateral cooperation on the pandemic response.

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PHILIPPINES: President Duterte Names New Navy Chief

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has named Rear Admiral Adeluis Bordado as the new flag officer in command of the Philippine Navy, the defense department said on Tuesday. Bordado, a member of the Philippine Military Academy Class of 1988, replaced Vice Admiral Giovanni Carlo Bacordo, who will retire on Wednesday. Bordado served as the vice commander of the Philippine Navy before his designation as the navy chief. Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff Gen. Cirilito Sobejana described Bordado as an "accomplished naval officer" with a background in "fields of operations, intelligence, information technology, budget, planning, and education and training." Sobejana said Bordado's designation is timely, noting that the Navy is "vigorously pursuing its modernization program that includes acquisition programs for surface and sub-surface assets." "The wealth of his experience, his well-rounded education and training locally and abroad and his personal attributes make him an excellent choice to lead the Philippine Navy at this time that the AFP faces various internal and external security challenges," Sobejana said.

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VIETNAM: Central Military Commission Appoints New Members for 2020-25 Period

Party General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng, State President Nguyễn Xuân Phúc and Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính were appointed to the Standing Board of the Central Military Commission in the 2020-25 period on Thursday. Three other officials appointed to the board are Senior Lieutenant General Phan Văn Giang, Politburo member, deputy general secretary of the Central Military Commission and Minister of National Defence; General Lương Cường, Politburo member, chairman of the General Department of Politics of the Việt Nam People's Army; Senior Lieutenant General Nguyễn Tân Cương, Politburo member, chief of the General Staff of the Việt Nam People's Army, deputy minister of national defence. The Central Military Commission held their first meeting of the 2020-25 period on Thursday to assign tasks in the first half of this year and discuss missions for the second half. Twenty-five officials were appointed to the Central Military Commission in the 2020-25 period. Party General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng, Secretary of the Central Military Commission, said during the 2015-20 period, the commission always set an example of solidarity, took determination to make changes, had a lot of innovations and directed the entire army to successfully implement Resolution of the 10th Army's Party Committee Congress as well as major military and defence objectives and policies proposed by the 12th Party Congress.

The commission gave consultations to the Party and State on military and national defence, promptly and effectively handled situations, firmly protected the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the Fatherland, he said. The defence industry has made progress. Việt Nam can master the manufacturing of technology and produce a number of modern weapons and pieces of equipment, he said. Regarding defence external affairs, Trọng said positive outcomes in this field contributed to protecting the country from the early days. Field hospitals in South Sudan operate effectively and become trusted addresses of UN officials and employees in the area and local people. On behalf of the Poliburo, Secretariat of the Party Central Committee and the Central Military Commission, the Party chief thanked the commission's officials of the 2015-20 period who have been relieved from duty for their contributions. He urged newly-appointed members of the commission to uphold responsibility and solidarity, and have practical, sharp thinking, stay absolutely loyal to the Fatherland, the Party, the State and the people. They must build a clean, strong, exemplary and typical Army's Party Committee, taking the lead to successfully perform assigned tasks, Trọng said.

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South Asia

INDIA: Former UP Chief Secretary Anup Chandra Pandey Becomes Election Commissioner

The President of India Ram Nath Kovind appointed Anup Chandra Pandey as Election Commissioner on June 8. Pandey, a retired IAS officer of 1984-Batch, has been appointed to the position left vacant by former Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora's retirement on April 12. Pandey's appointment restored the three-member commission to its full strength. The commission will oversee the next set of crucial assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Goa, Manipur and Uttarakhand next year. The three-member top executive panel of the Election Commission of India includes – Chief Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra, Election Commissioners Rajiv Kumar and Anup Chandra Pandey. Earlier in August 2019, Pandey had served as the Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh under Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. Also, he has served as the Infrastructure and Industrial Development Commissioner of the state.

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Punjab Govt Shifts 4 IAS Officers amid Administrative Rejig

The Government of Punjab, on June 30, issued transfer and posting orders for four IAS officers belonging to the 2019 batch in the state.

1. Harpreet Singh has been transferred and posted as Sub Divisional Magistrate, Budhlada.
2. Manisha Rana has been assigned the post of Sub Divisional Magistrate, Sardulgarh.
3. Akash Bansal has been given the charge of Sub Divisional Magistrate, Monak. Also, Bansal has been given the additional charge Sub Divisional Magistrate, Lehragaga.
4. Nirmal Ouseppachan gets the post of Sub Divisional Magistrate, Kotakpura.

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Vineet Pandey to Take Over as Secretary, Deptt. of Posts

Following the orders from the Centre, Vineet Pandey (IPoS 1986-Batch) has been appointed as the Secretary, Department of Posts. Pandey is currently serving as Director General Postal Services (DGPS). He will be taking over the charge from the incumbent officer Pradipta Kumar Bisoi (IPoS 1985-Batch) who will be retiring soon.

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: Appoints New Deputy Minister of Transport

Rovshan Rustamov has been appointed Deputy Minister of Transport, Communications and High Technologies of Azerbaijan, Trend reports citing the ministry. Prior to this appointment, he held the position of Deputy Chairman and Acting Head of Azercosmos OJSC, the Azerbaijani satellite operator.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Federal Pressure After Lockdown Extended

The Morrison government is under renewed pressure over quarantine and the vaccine rollout after Victoria extended its lockdown, with other states on high alert. Melbourne's restrictions will now last until June 10, while conditions in regional Victoria will still ease from Thursday night. Parts of NSW have been drawn into the outbreak after a man with coronavirus travelled through a slew of towns last month. There are also renewed calls for an overhaul of hotel quarantine after a man in Perth became infected by a fellow returned traveller in a room next door. Federal Aged Care Services Minister Richard Colbeck reacted to the lockdown extension during a second day of gruelling Senate estimates hearings in Canberra. "It's unfortunate that they have had to. It's unfortunate the circumstances the Victorians find themselves in," he said on Wednesday.

Labor frontbencher Murray Watt argued serious holes in hotel quarantine and problems with the vaccine rollout showed the federal government was to blame. "Every time this government doesn't do its job there are consequences. People lose their jobs. People get COVID. People can't move around," he told the minister. "When are you going to start doing your job?" Senator Colbeck said he completely rejected the criticism. Respected health adviser Jane Halton, who undertook a major review of quarantine, said recent breaches in hotels were because her recommendations were not being adopted. "I'm disappointed that it certainly appears that we don't have continual adoption of best practice right across the system," she told ABC radio. "To say that I'm disappointed about that I think is the minimum." Ms Halton said it was perplexing it had taken so long to increase capacity at the Howard Springs quarantine camp in the NT and look at facilities in other states.

Talks between the Victorian and federal governments are understood to be progressing on a stand-alone quarantine facility. The Australian Medical Association is calling for urgent quarantine changes after the latest Perth infection, the 21st recorded breach in hotels. Victoria's coronavirus outbreak has grown to 60 cases across more than 350 exposure sites with none of the six new cases in aged care. Federal Finance Minister Simon Birmingham was non-committal on providing more federal support for the state because of the lockdown. "We have said over the course of the last week we would continue to monitor the situation that relates to Victoria and respond accordingly," he said. The federal government is also facing questions about the vaccine rollout to aged care residents and staff, as well as home care workers. The number of aged care workers who are fully vaccinated is unknown and many residents are yet to receive their second doses. More than three months after the rollout began, less than two-thirds of nationwide aged care residents have been fully vaccinated. The number is lower in Victoria where four facilities have been forced into lockdown due to the outbreak.

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Pay Rises Guaranteed for NSW Public Sector

The NSW government has "baked in" 2.5 per cent annual pay rises for the state's public servants over the next four years after attempting to freeze wages to fund fiscal stimulus amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Treasurer Dominic Perrottet said the government would in Tuesday's budget return the annual public servant pay rise cap to 2.5 per cent. It would then meet that cap over the budget's forward estimates. Public servants in NSW last year received a 0.3 per cent pay rise after the NSW government took the matter to the Industrial Relations Commission. The government had attempted to freeze pay rises entirely amid the pandemic but the NSW upper house intervened, forcing the government to retain a 1.5 per cent cap. "We always said when we spoke (last year) that when we could return and increase wages, we would," Mr Perrottet told reporters on Monday.

"We've been able to do it because of the strong foundations we laid, the stimulus, our focus on keeping businesses in business and people in jobs." There are about 400,000 public servants in NSW and their pay rises will cost $2.7 billion over the next four years, the largest of this year's budget measures. But unions say the government's re-elevation of the pay rise cap doesn't go far enough and the cap should be scrapped entirely to maximise wages growth. A paramedic strike scheduled for NSW budget day will go ahead despite Mr Perrottet's announcement, with unions seeking a 4.5 per cent pay rise. On Tuesday, paramedics will only attend call-outs deemed life-threatening. Unions NSW secretary Mark Morey said public sector wages policy in the state was simply returning to its substandard norm.

He called for the government to go beyond 2.5 per cent pay rises and adequately compensate public service workers who last year received a negligible pay rise, despite working on the COVID-19 front line. He also said NSW paramedics were among the worst paid in Australia. "They've re-announced a policy that was atrocious, then went to really terrible and is now back to atrocious," Mr Morey told reporters. "There's no reason to pat themselves on the back. "The RBA governor is calling for wage increases of 3.5 per cent and as the largest employer in Australia, the NSW government has a responsibility to ensure there's wages growth so there's economic and jobs growth." Mr Perrottet said he was disappointed Tuesday's paramedic strike would go ahead and admitted progress on the dispute was lagging. He said an annual 2.5 per cent pay increase was well above the private sector wage growth average, as well as current inflation levels.

But Health Services Union NSW secretary Gerard Hayes said the state was "staring down the barrel of a retention crisis" due to pay levels. "Our paramedics are seeking a very basic pay rise that allows them to do their job with dignity and respect," he said in a statement. The government has spent almost $30 billion in stimulus amid the pandemic. Other budget announcements on Monday included almost $110 million for youth mental health treatment, $8.5 million for refugee support programs and more than $21 million to expand specialist cardiac services.

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NEW ZEALAND: Reports Prove Case for Urgent Water Infrastructure Reform

New analysis of New Zealand’s drinking water, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure provides New Zealanders with a clear picture of the urgent problems we face, and highlights the economic benefits we can unlock by tackling them says

Local Government Minister Nanaia Mahuta. “It is clear the affordability challenges facing our water infrastructure are too great for councils alone. This research underscores the overall benefits of reform by reducing future costs on households, creating new jobs and contributing to regional economies and local industry – all of which build on our economic recovery,” Nanaia Mahuta said. “The reports released today identify investment of between $120bn and $185bn is needed over the next 30 years to ensure New Zealander’s drinking water, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure meets acceptable public health and environmental standards.

“The reports also highlight how the national water infrastructure reforms, would create an extra 5900 – 9300 jobs countrywide between 2022 and 2051,” Nanaia Mahuta said. The analysis was undertaken by the Water Industry Commission for Scotland (WICS). Two further reports by Farrierswier and Beca provide assurance of the WICS approach and its relevance for New Zealand. The Government is working alongside local government and iwi on a proposal to combine the country’s 67 council-owned and managed water service providers into a small number of publicly owned providers. “Together, the reports confirm the need for major reform to upgrade and maintain our water infrastructure, protect our environment, and avoid unaffordable increases to household bills.’’

For example, without reform average household bills in 2051 are forecast to range from $1900 to $13,900. Under reform proposals with five providers those figures range from $800 to $1800. With three providers the range is $800 to $1600. “Our plan means the required upgrade of infrastructure for our most precious natural resource will be much more affordable for New Zealanders than continuing on the current path,” Nanaia Mahuta says. “The case for reform is boosted by an economic impact report also released today. Produced by Deloitte, it shows this mahi will provide for more jobs for people, opportunities for businesses and a net increase in GDP by $14bn to $23bn over 30 years.’’ The WICS analysis draws on detailed information provided by all 67 councils in a nationwide Request for Information (RfI) process which took place between October last year and February 2021. “I want to thank all those councillors, council staff, industry experts and others who have contributed to what is the largest ever project to understand the state of New Zealand’s three waters services. “I expect to announce Cabinet decisions on the way forward for the reforms in the coming months,” Nanaia Mahuta says.

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3、Management, Capacity Building and Innovation

Asia-Pacific

Universal Access to Sustainable Energy Will Remain Elusive

Without Addressing Inequalities

During the last decade, a greater share of the global population gained access to electricity than ever before, but the number of people without electricity in Sub-Saharan Africa actually increased. Unless efforts are scaled up significantly in countries with the largest deficits the world will still fall short of ensuring universal access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy by 2030, according to Tracking SDG 7: The Energy Progress Report released today by the International Energy Agency (IEA) the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), the World Bank, and the World Health Organization (WHO). According to the report, significant progress has been made since 2010 on various aspects of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 7, but progress has been unequal across regions. While more than one billion people gained access to electricity globally over the last decade, COVID's financial impact has made basic electricity services unaffordable for 30 million more people, the majority located in Africa. Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia had the biggest electricity access deficits, with Ethiopia replacing India in the Top 3.

Globally, the number of people without access to electricity declined from 1.2 billion in 2010 to 759 million in 2019. Electrification through decentralized renewable-based solutions in particular gained momentum. The number of people connected to mini grids has more than doubled between 2010 and 2019, growing from 5 to 11 million people. However, under current and planned policies and further affected by the COVID-19 crisis, an estimated 660 million people would still lack access in 2030, most of them in Sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, some 2.6 billion people remained without access to clean cooking in 2019, one third of the global population. Largely stagnant progress since 2010 leads to millions of deaths each year from breathing cooking smoke, and without rapid action to scale up clean cooking the world will fall short of its target by 30 percent come 2030. The state of access in the Sub-Saharan African region is characterized by population growth outpacing gains in the number of people with access, so that 910 million in the region lack access to clean cooking. The top 20 access-deficit countries account for 81 percent of the global population without access to clean fuels and technologies. Of these, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mozambique, Niger, Uganda and Tanzania had less or equal to 5 percent of their populations with access to clean cooking. On a positive note, Indonesia, Cambodia and Myanmar have made gains each year over the report period.

The report examines various ways to bridge the gaps to reach SDG7, chief among them the goal of significantly scaling up renewables — which have proven more resilient than other parts of the energy sector during the COVID-19 crisis. While renewable energy has seen unprecedented growth over the last decade, its share of total final energy consumption remained steady as global energy consumption grew at a similar rate. Renewables are most dynamic in the electricity sector, reaching around 25 percent in 2018, while progress in the heat and transport sectors have been much slower. More than one third of the increase in renewable energy generation in 2018 can be attributed to East Asia — driven by large uptakes of solar and wind energy in China. The largest country-level advances in renewable energy in 2018 were observed in Spain, owing to higher hydropower generation, followed by Indonesia where a rapid uptake of bioenergy for power generation played a substantial role. To significantly increase the share of renewable energy in line with the SDG 7 target, current efforts need to accelerate in all end-use sectors to scale uptake of renewables while containing total energy demand. Energy intensity improvements (a proxy for energy efficiency) are moving further away from the target set under SDG7 for 2030. The rate of global primary energy intensity improvement in 2018 was 1.1 percent compared to 2017, the lowest average annual rate of improvement since 2010. The annual improvement until 2030 will now need to average 3 percent if we are to meet the goal.

Accelerating the pace of progress across all regions and indicators will require stronger political commitment, long-term energy planning, and adequate policy and scale incentives to spur faster uptake of sustainable energy solutions. Although clean energy investments continue to be sourced primarily from the private sector, the public sector remains a major source of financing and is central in leveraging private capital, particularly in developing countries and in a post-COVID context. One of the newest indicators in the report, international public financial flows to developing countries, shows that international financial support continue to be concentrated in a few countries and failing to reach many of those most in need. Flows to developing countries in support of clean and renewable energy reached $14 billion in 2018, with a mere 20 percent going to the least-developed countries, which are the furthest from achieving the various SDG7 targets. An increased emphasis on “leaving no one behind” is required in the years ahead.

Key highlights on SDG7 targets

Access to electricity. Since 2010, more than a billion people have gained access to electricity. As a result, 90 percent of the planet’s population was connected in 2019. Yet 759 million people still live without electricity, with about half of them living in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Despite accelerated progress in recent years, the SDG target of universal access by 2030 appears unlikely to be met, leaving an estimated 660 million without electricity, especially if the COVID-19 pandemic seriously disrupts electrification efforts. Regional disparities continue to persist, and the access deficit is particularly concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa, which accounts for three-quarters of the global deficit. Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Asia and Southeastern Asia are approaching universal access, with more than 98 percent of their population having electricity access, whereas in Sub-Saharan Africa less than half of the population has access. Among the 20 countries with the largest access deficits, Bangladesh, Kenya, and Uganda showed the greatest improvement since 2010, thanks to annual electrification growth rates in excess of 3 percentage points, driven largely by an integrated approach that combined grid, mini grid and on-grid solar electrification.

Clean cooking. The share of the global population without access to clean cooking fuels and technologies was 66 percent in 2019, leaving almost three billion people or one-third of the global population without access. Since 2010, the global access rate to clean cooking solutions grew annually by 1 percent, with gains mostly attributed to progress in the regions of Central and Southern Asia and Eastern and Southeastern Asia. In stark contrast, progress in clean cooking access in Sub-Saharan Africa was slower than population growth, with some countries showing little or no improvements in the clean cooking access rate. For the first time, in 2019, more people without access to clean fuels and technologies reside in Sub-Saharan Africa than in any other region. Close to 900 million people or around 85 percent of the population in the region lack clean cooking access, accounting for 35 percent of the global access deficit. Current trends suggest that unless rapid action is taken to scale up clean cooking, the world will fall short of the universal access target for clean cooking by almost 30 percent, achieving only 72 percent of the population in 2030. Of the top 20 countries with greatest number of people lacking access to clean fuel and technologies for cooking, 10 are located in Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Mozambique, Madagascar, Ghana, Niger), 6 are in Eastern Asia and South-eastern Asia (China, Indonesia, Philippines, Myanmar, Viet Nam, Democratic Republic of Korea) and 4 are in Central Asia and Southern Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan). During the period 2010-2019, the top 5 most populous low- and middle-income countries (China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, and Pakistan) increased their combined access rate by 2 percent where progress in all other LMIC, remained unchanged or stagnant over the same period. To ensure no one is left behind, the political commitment, and financial incentives must be prioritized in all access-deficit countries to achieve the universal target of SDG 7.

Renewables. The COVID-19 crisis resulted in an estimated 7 percent year-on-year expansion of renewable electricity generation, supported by long-term contracts, low marginal costs, priority access to grids, and installation of new renewable capacity. In contrast, renewable energy share for transport and heat declined in 2020. Renewable electricity accounts for almost half of global modern renewable energy consumption and three-quarters of its year-on-year increase, with hydropower being the largest renewable source of electricity globally and for each region. Heat, which is the largest energy end use worldwide, had only a 1.2 percent absolute increase when it came to renewable sources. Coal, gas and oil still meet three-quarters of global heat demand, making it heavily fossil-fuel dependent. The sector needs greater ambition and stronger policy support. Transport has the lowest renewable energy penetration of all sectors, with only 3.4 percent in 2018 being supplied by renewables. While Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest share of renewable sources in its energy supply, it is not modern - 85 percent is traditional uses of biomass. Latin America and the Caribbean have the largest share of modern renewable energy uses, thanks to hydropower for electricity, bioenergy for industrial processes and biofuels for transport.

Energy efficiency. Global primary energy intensity - an important indicator of how heavily the world's economic activity uses energy — improved by 1.1 percent in 2018. This was the lowest average annual rate of improvement since 2010. The annual improvement until 2030 will now need to average 3 percent if we are to meet the SDG 7 goal. Emerging economies in Central, Southern, Eastern and South-eastern Asia saw a rapid increase in economic activity, but the rise in energy supply was mitigated by significant improvements in energy efficiency, resulting in robust, continuous improvements in energy intensity. Between 2010 and 2018, energy intensity in South-eastern Asia grew 3.1 percent. The lowest rates of energy intensity improvement occurred in Western Asia, Northern Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean (0.8 percent) and Sub-Saharan Africa (1.4 percent). Using different metrics to measure intensity in individual sectors, the rate of improvement in energy intensity slowed compared with the period 1990–2010 in all sectors except for transportation, where fuel efficiency standards drove energy intensity improvements.

International Financial Flows. International public financial flows to developing countries in support of clean energy amounted to $14 billion in 2018, a 35 percent decrease from an all-time high of $21.9 billion the year before. Nevertheless, the overall trend in public financial flows has been positive over the past decade, increasing threefold during the period 2010–18 when viewed as a five-year moving average. This trend, however, masks some important distributional discrepancies, with financial commitments concentrated in a few countries and thus failing to reach many of those most in need of international support. The 46 least developed countries (LDCs) received a mere 20 percent of public financial flows over the period 2010–18 and a total of $2.8 billion in 2018—the same level as in 2017 but lower than in 2016 and 2015. International financial flows need to be further scaled up and increasingly target those countries falling furthest behind in reaching SDG 7. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has dramatically increased investors' risk perception and shifted public funding priorities in developing countries, international public financial flows are more critical than ever to leverage the investment levels needed to reach SDG 7.

“On a global path to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050, we can reach key sustainable energy targets by 2030 as we expand renewables in all sectors and increase energy efficiency,” said Fatih Birol, Executive Director of the International Energy Agency. “Greater efforts to mobilise and scale up investment are essential to ensure that energy access progress continues in developing economies. Providing electricity access and clean cooking solutions to those people who are deprived of them today costs around $40 billion a year, equal to around 1% of average annual energy sector investment on a path to net zero by 2050. This fairer and cleaner energy future is achievable if governments work together to step up actions." "Renewable energy has proven itself to be reliable, cost-effective, and resilient during the pandemic, revealing its significant value at the forefront of the energy transition. But progress towards the achievement of climate objectives and SDG7 needs to move at an accelerated pace and equitable manner," said Francesco La Camera, Director-General of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA). "Efforts, including international public financial flows to renewables, must be scaled up to support countries that need the most improvement in clean, affordable, and sustainable energy access, healthcare, and welfare. IRENA will continue to leverage its expertise and partnerships to ensure that the manifold benefits of renewables lead to an inclusive and sustainable economies."

"The 2021 Report will inform the High-level Dialogue on Energy 2021 on the current progress towards SDG 7, four decades after the last high-level event dedicated to energy under the auspices of UN General Assembly. It finds that the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly impacted progress towards ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, having even reversed some progress made so far. At the same time, the situation presents opportunities to integrate SDG 7-related policies in recovery packages and thus to scale up sustainable development," said Stefan Schweinfest, Director of the Statistics Division, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. "The Tracking SDG7 report shows that 90 percent of the global population now has access to electricity, but disparities exacerbated by the pandemic, if left unaddressed, may keep the sustainable energy goal out of reach, jeopardizing other SDGs and the Paris Agreement's objectives," said Mari Pangestu, Managing Director of Development Policy and Partnerships at the World Bank. "Addressing energy access and climate change requires an inclusive energy transition. We must work together to achieve SDG7 so that everyone can access clean, affordable, and sustainable electricity."

"Moving towards scaling up clean and sustainable energy is key to protect human health and to promote healthier populations, particularly in remote and rural areas. Far too many people, often the most vulnerable ones such as women and children, still lack access to clean cooking fuels and technologies, exposing them to dangerous levels of household air pollution. A healthy and green recovery from COVID-19 includes the importance of ensuring a quick transition to clean and sustainable energy," said Dr. Maria Neira, Director of the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Health at the World Health Organization (WHO). This is the seventh edition of this report, formerly known as the Global Tracking Framework (GTF). This year's edition was chaired by the United Nations Statistics Division. The report this year comes at a crucial time as Governments and stakeholders are gearing up for the UN High-level Dialogue on Energy, a summit-level meeting in September 2021 that will examine steps needed to achieve SDG7 by 2030 and mobilize voluntary commitments and actions in the form of Energy Compacts. The report can be downloaded at http://trackingSDG7.esmap.org/.

Funding for the report was provided by the World Bank's Energy Sector Management Assistance Program (ESMAP). The World Bank Group, one of the largest sources of funding and knowledge for developing countries, is taking broad, fast action to help developing countries strengthen their pandemic response. It is supporting public health interventions, working to ensure the flow of critical supplies and equipment, and helping the private sector continue to operate and sustain jobs. The WBG is making available up to $160 billion over a 15-month period ending June 2021 to help more than 100 countries protect the poor and vulnerable, support businesses, and bolster economic recovery. This includes $50 billion of new IDA resources through grants and highly concessional loans and $12 billion for developing countries to finance the purchase and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.

From https://www.worldbank.org/ 06/07/2021

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Air Quality Monitoring Now One of the Fast-Growing Smart City Applications

According to a new research report from the IoT analyst firm, Berg Insight, the installed base of urban air quality monitoring devices reached 73,000 units in 2020 and will grow at a CAGR of 34% to reach 315,000 units in 2025. This number refers to any type of networked outdoor air quality monitoring device that in some way is used for supplementary air quality monitoring purposes in cities and communities. Traditional regulatory monitoring stations and devices intended for personal use only are thus not included. The last five years has seen a rapidly growing commercial availability of increasingly small and low-cost air quality monitoring devices that enable deployments in large numbers at reasonable costs, thereby addressing the shortcomings of traditional monitoring networks which consist of highly advanced and very expensive monitoring stations that typically can be found at few locations in major cities and therefore have very low sensitivity for local variations in air quality.

"Many cities have now finally started to realise the immense value that IoT-enabled and relatively low-cost and small-sized air quality monitors could bring by facilitating substantial improvements in the spatial and temporal resolution of urban air quality data," says, Levi Ostling, smart cities analyst at Berg Insight. During the past year, the interest in air quality monitoring solutions in the smart city context has reached entirely new levels, boosted by news about potential relationships between air pollution and COVID-19 as well as by record-breaking wildfire seasons in the US and Australia. The market for non-regulatory devices is however in a nascent stage and the number of market participants is growing at a day-by-day basis. Companies that have emerged as vendors include for example Environmental Instruments (AQMesh), Airly, Envea, Libelium, Kunak Technologies and Breeze Technologies from Europe; Clarity Movement, Aclima, PurpleAir and Met One from North America; and Aeroqual, Phoenix Robotix (Aurassure), Oizom and Sailhero from Asia-Pacific. The range of devices available in the market span from near reference-grade solutions to very low-cost devices with little to none supporting software and services.

Although advancements are being made, there is still a lack of standards and certifications related to non-regulatory air quality monitoring devices. The level of performance of air quality monitoring solutions is of great importance as air quality data is often used to inform decisions that have direct consequences for people's health and wellbeing. At this stage, cities thus need to be wary in their implementation strategies for these new types of devices. "If too many cities hastily adopt solutions that turn out to be of poor quality, the industry is at risk of inducing a general mistrust in low-cost air quality sensing technology a hurdle that could be difficult to overcome once established" concludes Ostling.

From https://www.iot-now.com/ 06/16/2021

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Government Support to Agriculture Is Low on Innovation, High on Distortions

Agricultural support has continued to grow worldwide in recent years, but is often failing to meet its stated aims of improving food security, livelihoods and environmental sustainability, according to a new report from the OECD. Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation shows that the 54 countries monitored - including all OECD and EU economies, plus 11 key emerging economies – provided on average USD 720 billion of support to agriculture annually over the 2018-20 period. Consumers paid for more than one-third of the annual support, or USD 272 billion, through higher prices, in the form of market price support, while taxpayers paid for the remaining USD 447 billion, through budgetary transfers. Just 6% of all budgetary transfers to the sector, or USD 26 billion per year, was spent on agricultural innovation systems, despite their high social returns. Investments in agricultural innovation, biosecurity and infrastructure accounted for only USD 76 billion, or 17% of support to agriculture, despite their strong potential to boost sustainable productivity growth and improve resilience – key channels for ensuring food security, viable livelihoods and sustainable resource use.

In contrast, half of support to agriculture is market distorting, inequitable and harmful to both the environment and global food security, according to the report. In addition to the USD 272 billion of market price support, this includes USD 66 billion of annual budgetary transfers linked to output or to the unconstrained use of variable inputs, such as energy or fertiliser. "Only one in six dollars of budgetary support to agriculture globally is spent in ways that are effective in promoting sustainable productivity growth and agricultural resilience," said OECD Director for Trade and Agriculture Marion Jansen. "Most support is either ineffective in improving the performance of food systems, or even harmful. As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, governments should make agricultural innovation central to their support for the sector.” The OECD report underlines that much of the support offered today is inefficient at transferring income to farmers; inequitable, as benefits are weighted toward large producers; and environmentally harmful, as it often damages water quality and biodiversity and increases resource use and greenhouse gas emissions. Market price support - and the associated use of border measures - also harms food security at the global level by impeding the efficient allocation of resources, undermining the role of trade in moving food from surplus to deficit regions and contributing to increased price volatility in international food markets.

Further distortions to global markets also come from policies in small number of countries that suppress prices for some or all commodities. This negative price support amounts to USD 104 billion per year transferred away from producers. Food systems around the world face the formidable “triple challenge” of providing safe, nutritious food to a growing world population, providing livelihoods along the food chain, and improving sustainability, by protecting natural resources such as land, water and biodiversity, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The OECD report proposes three reforms to ensure that agricultural policies accelerate progress toward addressing the “triple challenge” faced by food systems and better support sustainable productivity growth and improved resilience:
Phase out price interventions and market distorting producer support.
Target income support to farm households most in need, and where possible incorporate such support into economy-wide social policies and safety-nets.
Re-orient public expenditures towards investments in public goods – in particular innovation systems.

From https://www.oecd.org/ 06/22/2021

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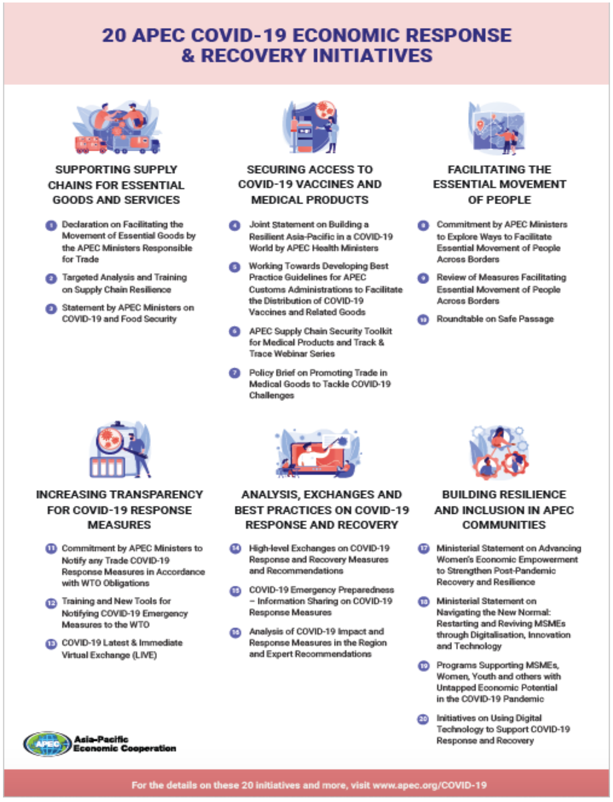
APEC COVID-19 Economic Response & Recovery Initiatives

The APEC Secretariat today launches the **compilation of initiatives** that the forum has undertaken since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to advance the region’s economic recovery and build back better. “APEC is responding with numerous policy measures and tools that address different pain points caused by the health and economic crisis,” says Dr Rebecca Sta Maria, Executive Director of the APEC Secretariat. “These measures show the importance of intensifying cooperation through a multilateral forum like APEC, because no economy can recover alone given how interconnected the region is.”



The initiatives, ranging from high-level commitments such as ministers' declarations and statements to expert analyses and recommendations as well as innovative tools and practical projects, demonstrated member economies' commitment and continued trust in ensuring that trade remains a critical tool to the region's prosperity. "We have worked tirelessly in the past year and we must continue to progress our work especially in the area of vaccines and essential goods and services, structural reform and the resumption of safe and seamless cross-border travel," Dr Sta Maria added. APEC senior officials are convening today, chaired by Vangelis Vitalis of New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, to push forward key work areas on trade and investment, inclusive and sustainable growth, as well as innovation and digitalization. Following the meeting of senior officials, trade ministers from 21 APEC member economies will meet virtually on 5 June chaired by New Zealand's Trade and Export Growth Minister Damien O'Connor. The meeting will focus on trade's vital role in enabling access to vaccines and essential goods and keeping the global trading system flowing smoothly.

From https://www.apec.org/ 06/01/2021

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Pandemic Must Remain Our Highest Priority: Business Leaders to APEC Ministers

APEC trade ministers joined the Asia-Pacific business leaders on Friday to hear from the private sector their views toward the forum's focus on regional economic integration, trade implications resulting from the economic response to COVID-19 and how economies can be made more resilient to future shocks. “Free, fair and open trade has unlocked massive growth across the Asia-Pacific,” said New Zealand’s Minister for Trade and Export Growth, Damien O’Connor who is also the 2021 Chair of the APEC Ministers Responsible for Trade Meeting. “But without the energy of the business community this growth would not have occurred.” Recognizing the severe impact of the pandemic on businesses and industries like tourism, Minister O’Connor pointed to the strategic role of the private sector in advising governments on “how we can work together to defeat COVID-19, how we can sustain our economies through the pandemic and then build economies that are more sustainable, more inclusive.”

The dialogue was held on the eve of the 2021 APEC Ministers Responsible for Trade Meeting, aimed to advance practical ideas in managing the unprecedented health and economic crisis that will boost economic activity and help businesses in the region. “The pandemic must remain our highest priority,” said Rachel Taulelei, 2021 Chair of APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC) in her opening remarks at the dialogue. “We must ensure that trade plays a role in combatting the worst, continuing effects of COVID-19 through open and unrestricted trade in vaccines, essential medical supplies and associated products.” Reiterating the importance of supporting the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the critical role it has to play in the economic recovery. Taulelei asserted that it is impossible to build more sustainable and resilient communities through trade unless “we accord primacy to the role of the WTO and the multilateral system of rules for international trade.”

The business council’s theme for the year is People, Place and Prosperity, putting emphasis on inclusion for all of the people in the region, safeguarding the planet and achieving a prosperous region by building a seamless Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific. Taulelei emphasized that the FTAAP must continue to be at the heart of the APEC vision for a more seamless, dynamic and resilient region. “It is imperative for APEC as a forum to deepen our engagement with the private sector and to reflect the reality on the ground by developing policy measures that are effective and appropriate to boost business opportunities and confidence,” said Dr Rebecca Sta Maria, Executive Director of the APEC Secretariat. Ministers and ABAC members exchanged views on regional economic integration, considering the most critical issues that the WTO should focus on at the upcoming Twelfth Ministerial Conference.

The group also deliberated on the economic response to COVID-19, particularly on maintaining open supply chains and keeping the free flow of essential goods and vaccines, as well as what trade facilitation and digital trade facilitation can do to boost recovery. Preventing and making economies more resilient to future shocks also were highlighted in the discussion, including policies and actions that ensure inclusion and sustainability. “Somehow there never seems to be a right time for bold action to transform the environment in which we do business in the region," Taulelei concluded. "We are now in the worst of the worst of times – and that does require boldness, ambition and commitment."

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Customs at the Forefront of Facilitating COVID-19 Vaccines and Essential Goods

Customs officials from APEC member economies joined forces to support the region's recovery effort by developing a set of best practice guidelines to support the roll out of COVID-19 vaccines in the APEC region. The Best Practice Guidelines for APEC Customs Administrations were endorsed by the APEC Sub-Committee on Customs Procedures (SCCP) ahead of the 2021 APEC Ministers Responsible for Trade Meeting. The guidelines were developed following the 2020 APEC Leaders' Meeting, where the APEC Leaders highlighted the importance of ensuring easy access to COVID-19 vaccines, which is vital to safeguard people's health and well-being. "Customs is one of the critical players in the global supply chain process," said Rebecca Jonassen, who chairs the sub-committee. "As the key gatekeepers protecting our borders, we need to ensure that essential goods like the vaccines can flow through easily without any hold ups."

"Member economies may encounter numerous challenges in the supply chain, including counterfeit and illegal movement of vaccines," added Jonassen, who is also with the New Zealand Customs Service, the agency that proposed the initiative. "Therefore, the rollout across borders of COVID-19 vaccines and related goods, such as test kits, syringes and dry ice, while supporting the rules-based trading system is a relevant and real-time challenge." The guidelines are comprised of a set of operational and practical measures to ensure the region's supply chains are equipped to facilitate the flow of COVID-19 vaccines and related goods. Examples of best practice include establishing a 24-hour contact point to help with questions and responses to delays, ensuring that the vaccine supply chain is uninterrupted while in transit and fast-tracking border clearance for hazardous substances.

"Member economies are coming together with an urgent need to defeat the pandemic," said Dr Rebecca Sta Maria, Executive Director of the APEC Secretariat. "These guidelines will complement the wider ongoing vaccine supply chain commitment and assist economies to consider all available measures to manage the complex and sensitive nature of the vaccine supply chain." Where possible, the guidelines recommend that customs administrations in the region should simplify procedures, utilize online forms and digitalize documents to ensure timely movement and clearance of the vaccines. Another recommendation is to carry out regular border testing, including surface swab testing and testing of border officials involved in the clearance process to ensure the safe transfer of vaccines and related goods and to protect officials and others involved in their distribution. "By implementing these measures, APEC economies will benefit from simpler border processes and help COVID-19 vaccines to reach where they are needed more quickly and efficiently," said Jonassen. "The guidelines will also build supply chain resilience and connectivity, securing against any future supply chain disruptions."

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A Differentiated Approach to Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations and Small Island Developing States

The Fragile and conflict-affected situations (FCAS) and small island developing states (SIDS) Approach, or FSA, represents a new way of doing business for ADB in its most vulnerable developing member countries, which are at risk of falling further behind their regional peers because of the COVID-19 crisis. FCAS and SIDS face unique development challenges such as geographic isolation, small populations, single-industry dependence, and armed conflict. This leaves them exposed to the full brunt of climate change, recessions, and other destabilizing external events. To meet its Strategy 2030 goals of improving prosperity, inclusiveness, and resilience across Asia and the Pacific, ADB requires fresh ways of thinking and operating in FCAS and SIDS. Samuel Tumiwa, Advisor for Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations, talks about the new approach.

Why has ADB developed an FCAS and SIDS approach?

Quite simply, to improve livelihoods for the most vulnerable populations in ADB's most fragile developing member countries (DMCs). There is no one-size-fits all formula in international development. Yet for years, ADB has been using standard ADB processes and procedures in fragile and conflict-affected situations and small-island developing states – FCAS and SIDS. This ignores that these countries require special attention in designing country strategies and executing processes such as procurement, monitoring and evaluation, and safeguards implementation. In the case of FCAS, it is usually social and institutional factors that drive fragility: weak governance, absence of rule of law, social fissures, and armed conflict. SIDS have some of the same problems, but their issues tend to be driven more by environmental and economic factors: climate change, remoteness, small size, and extremely narrow asset bases. These issues leave FCAS and SIDS particularly vulnerable to external shocks like global economic crises or the COVID-19 pandemic. In the past, ADB has had trouble finding consistent success with its projects in these countries. The success rate of ADB projects in FCAS and SIDS is below the success rate of projects in other DMCs. Hence, a new approach is needed – the FCAS and SIDS Approach, or FSA. The FSA is "context-sensitive" in that it reframes ADB support in FCAS and SIDS around specific country contexts. The FSA contains a concrete plan of action to change the way ADB works in these countries. The components of the action plan will be institutionalized throughout ADB. Training staff to work a new way in FCAS and SIDS will be one key to the success of the FSA.

Who are the FCAS and SIDS countries?

Using a methodology harmonized with other multilateral development banks, ADB classifies 11 DMCs as FCAS: Afghanistan, the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, the Marshall Islands, Myanmar, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, and Tuvalu. These countries experience some degree of fragility, defined as a combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, systems, or communities. Countries self-identify as small island developing states. There are 16 SIDS DMCs in ADB: The Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Maldives, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Eight of these are also classified as FCAS, which places them in a uniquely vulnerable category.

What makes this approach different?

The FSA replaces the 2013 Operational Plan for Enhancing ADB’s Effectiveness in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations. Under the new approach, the way ADB prepares its country partnerships strategies, designs its projects, oversees their implementation, and sets and monitors performance targets will be even more tailored to the specific context of each country. ADB introduces several new protocols and tools under the FSA, including fragility and resilience assessment as part of its country programming and project planning; more flexible business processes, procedures, and practices; and context-driven and risk-informed decision making during the implementation of its projects. The fragility and resilience assessment is designed to improve understanding of country contextual risks and will inform country partnership strategies and other country programming. These will consider all risks and factors that affect resilience – such as climate change, poverty, disaster risk management, governance, remoteness, conflict, and inequality ¬– to provide country planners with a multidimensional framework for analyzing risk. Ultimately this will ensure more productive ADB engagement in FCAS and SIDS, improve project results, and improve livelihoods.

How will the FSA be implemented?

The FSA will be implemented through an action plan built on three pillars. Pillar 1 will improve ADB responsiveness by adapting standard ADB processes and procedures to FCAS and SIDS contexts. Pillar 2 focuses on increasing institutional capacity within ADB operational departments and ensuring adequate staffing. Finally, Pillar 3 will enhance understanding of DMC contexts and the specific causes of fragility across FCAS and SIDS. The action plan will be backed by a fresh communications and engagement strategy and underpinned by a strong digital technology component. ADB recognizes that improving development effectiveness and implementing successful projects in FCAS and SIDS contexts requires tailored approaches and differentiated skill sets. The FSA will articulate these approaches and under Pillar 1 will tailor ADB business processes and procedures to be more flexible and responsive in support of ADB planning, programming, and project implementation in FCAS and SIDS. Pillar 2 will ensure that ADB has the staff capacity to adopt these tailored approaches and execute context-driven, risk-informed decision making, while Pillar 3 will expand the knowledge base upon which the FSA is built.

Any examples of how ADB will apply the new approach?
In Afghanistan, ADB's country team, working with the Strategic Development and Climate Change Department, prepared a fragility and resilience assessment to better inform the country partnership strategy, 2021-2025. This assessment focused on deepening ADB's understanding of the constraints faced by the country, and the interaction between such fragility drivers and ADB's interventions. It identified factors that can act as sources of resilience going forward and provided concrete recommendations on how to make ADB's projects more effective and ensure that ADB operations contribute to the country's efforts toward peacebuilding and stability. In Tonga, ADB introduced a context-specific solution using a financing structure and strategic partnerships tailored to promoting private investment in Tonga. ADB Private Sector Operations and the Pacific Department teamed up to design and develop a credit enhancement mechanism to support the credit worthiness of power utilities, where government guarantees cannot be given. The climate-resilience project was bid to the private sector through a transparent tender process. By encouraging new modalities and working with both sovereign and nonsovereign operations, ADB is helping Tonga step into its renewable energy future.

What was the consultation process?
A series of internal and external stakeholder consultations was held as part of the FSA drafting process. The two rounds of consultations held between September 2020 and March 2021 involved more than 40 parties from at least 23 countries and more than 500 participants. Parties included DMCs, bilateral development agencies, civil society organizations, other international organizations, and multilateral development banks. Internal ADB consultations involved all key departments and sectors and thematic groups. The consultations helped make the FSA knowledge-driven, context-sensitive, and adaptable in meeting the needs of the targeted DMC populations.

How will funding resources be mobilized for the implementation of the FSA?
Most DMCs classified FCAS and SIDS are eligible for grants and concessional borrowing. Donors recently provided a replenishment to the Asian Development Fund and Technical Assistance Special Fund of about $4 billion to cover the 4-year period 2021–2024. These funds are an essential funding source for FCAS and SIDS. The current method for allocating grants and concessional loans will be reviewed to explore options to provide increase weighting for countries facing structural fragility and vulnerability into the allocation formula to increase allocations for FCAS and SIDS.

How will the FSA implementation be monitored?
Monitoring implementation of the FSA will ensure that issues are properly addressed as they arise. The FSA results framework is designed to assess the performance and effectiveness of the FSA in facilitating institutional, behavioral, and procedural changes. A broad set of 18 qualitative and quantitative indicators has been developed under the monitoring framework. In addition to the 18 indicators, action trackers will be used to monitor implementation of the action plan. An annual FSA report on FSA achievements, adoption, and performance will be prepared. The FSA report will also include ADB's performances in FCAS DMCs and SIDS, complementing other ADB reports.

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APEC Accelerates Regulatory Convergence for Life-Saving Medical Products and Innovation

APEC member economies through the APEC Life Science Innovation Forum agreed to accelerate regulatory alignment for medical products over the next two decades, in a bid to protect people's safety and make lifesaving medical products available with the endorsement of the Regulatory Harmonization Steering Committee (RHSC) Vision 2030 and Strategic Framework. Established in 2009, the Regulatory Harmonization Steering Committee is a network of regulatory experts from regulatory agencies, industry players and academics across the APEC region. The steering committee identifies their priority work areas in the medical product sectors of pharmaceuticals and medical devices where member economies believe would benefit from regulatory convergence.

"We will work together to accelerate regulatory convergence for medical products in the APEC region so that we can improve the safety of our people, ensure availability of important medical products, save public resources, attract investment, mitigate corruption and improve global standing in every APEC economy," said Dr Michelle Limoli of the United States' Food and Drug Administration and the co-chair of the forum's Regulatory Harmonization Steering Committee (RHSC). The recently endorsed vision and strategic framework will guide the steering committee over the next decade, including to facilitate cooperation among medical product regulatory authorities, build human capacity in regulatory science among medical product regulatory staff and promote a coordinated approach to regulatory convergence and reliance among policymakers in APEC.

"The endorsement of this document comes at a crucial time as members look to incorporate lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and address a new wave of innovative medical products," said Nobumasa Nakashima of Japan Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices Agency, who are also the co-chair of the steering committee.

The steering committee will also work to innovate and incubate new ideas to accelerate regulatory convergence, building on past successes such as the APEC Training Centers of Excellence for Regulatory Science. There are currently 29 of these centers hosted at 20 institutions across nine APEC economies aiming to build skills and capacity for hundreds of regulators each year. The centers promote dialogue with a view toward knowledge sharing in science and best practices.

The impacts of these centers and other work done by the steering committee have been measurable. An annual evaluation exercise shows regulatory requirements for the approval of medical products are becoming more aligned among APEC economies over time. "Regional organizations like APEC play an important role in facilitating discussion, sharing best practices and innovative regulatory approaches to emerging technologies and business models, including in medical and pharmaceutical sector," said Dr Rebecca Sta Maria, Executive Director of the APEC Secretariat. "In this ever-changing environment, especially with a pandemic and crisis, policymaking has to be well-coordinated, coherent and complementary," Dr Sta Maria added. "The only way that governments can do this is by allowing different voices in the room, involving different agencies and different parts of societies at the table." "COVID-19 continues to show us just how important it is for regulatory authorities and industry to collaborate to accelerate regulatory convergence," said Dr Michelle McConnell of the United States Department of Health and Human Services and the chair of the APEC Life Science Innovation Forum. "Good policy environment helps us to achieve healthy society. A healthy society contributes to a healthy economy."

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ADB President Calls for "Bold Action" on Climate Change at 16th Asia Clean Energy Forum

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is ready to play a leading role in helping Asia and the Pacific meet its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement and achieve net-zero emissions by mid-21st century, participants at the Asia Clean Energy Forum (ACEF) 2021 heard today. "Now is the time for bold action," said ADB President Masatsugu Asakawa. "We must commit wholeheartedly to fighting climate change and meeting the emission-reduction goals under the Paris Agreement, while ensuring universal energy access in a region where more than 200 million people still lack access to electricity." This will require major changes in the energy sector including avoiding fossil fuels, switching to low-carbon fuels, deploying more renewable energy, and improving energy efficiency among others, said Mr. Asakawa. ADB plans to step up its climate finance and capacity-building activities to help its developing member countries (DMCs) achieve their NDCs, he added.

Co-hosted by ADB, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Korea Energy Agency (KEA), ACEF runs from 14–18 June. More than 3,000 delegates are expected to join the online event including policy makers, energy and private sector professionals, and civil society organizations from around the world. Under the theme “Accelerating the Low Carbon Transition in Asia and the Pacific,” this year’s event will explore technology road maps to achieve the NDCs, understand the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on the region’s energy systems, and how to foster a green recovery. The event takes place amid ongoing stakeholder consultations on ADB’s new energy policy. Given the profound changes in the region’s energy landscape, ADB is reviewing its energy policy to reflect the changing energy landscape, global climate commitments, and ADB’s Strategy 2030 while ensuring it continues to meet the needs of its DMCs.

Under Strategy 2030, ADB is committed to delivering $80 billion in cumulative climate financing from its own resources by 2030 and for at least 75% of its operations by number of projects to feature climate adaptation and mitigation initiatives. Minister for Asia at the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office Nigel Adams delivered a keynote message on behalf of President Designate for the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference Alok Sharma. USAID Acting Assistant Administrator for Asia Karen Freeman also delivered a keynote message. ADB Vice-President for Knowledge Management and Sustainable Development Bambang Susantono and KEA President and Chief Executive Officer Chang-Seob Kim delivered introductory remarks.

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How ADB Ventures Is Leveraging Innovation to Help Asia Meet the SDGs

ADB Ventures, the Asian Development Bank’s venture platform, supports startups offering impact technology solutions to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific. It raised $60 million for its inaugural fund, and aims to crowd in more than $1 billion of risk capital by 2030. Over the past year, ADB Ventures has been busy working toward those goals, reviewing more than 800 potential investment deals which have led to four equity investments. Suzanne Gaboury, the director general of ADB’s private sector operations department, explains how helping startups to scale can spur development, and lays out the future for ADB Ventures.

1. How can investing in startups help countries in Asia and the Pacific achieve the SDGs and meet climate challenges?

The world is brimming with technology innovations that conserve energy, reduce greenhouse gas, and make communities and economies more resilient to the effects of climate change. The private sector has ample demand for these solutions. Technologies that save energy also save operating costs. Circular economy technologies enable private investments in places that might otherwise lack sufficient infrastructure. New insurance technologies help SMEs manage disaster risk. New financial technologies help rural women access capital to diversify their incomes. Because of this confluence between traditional bottom-line decision making and opportunities for SDG impact, many high-impact technologies have achieved wide implementation in developed markets. The considerable investment needed to address climate action across the Asia Pacific can't all come from development partners and government treasuries. It makes sense to invest risk capital in scaling startups where that investment can catalyze private sector investment in sustainable outcomes at a high multiplier. That is why ADB created a venture arm, ADB Ventures, to support and invest in early-stage technology companies that address urgent development problems in emerging Asia and the Pacific.

2. But uptake in the ADB's developing member countries has been limited.
Why is that? We're typically looking to invest in companies that already have commercial traction in the region that are ready to scale their impact. The first reason is market expansion risk. Asia Pacific markets are diverse and fragmented by geography, culture, public policy. Startups must adapt their technologies and business models market-by-market, often amid limited information and low transparency. Climate innovators often consider it easier to focus on mature markets in other regions, despite exciting market opportunities in the Asia Pacific. The second reason is financial risk. Venture capital portfolios are statistically less likely to focus on climate-friendly investments in cleantech, clean energy, and agriculture. Instead, they tend to be concentrated in developed economies, later-stage deals, and software technologies such as e-commerce. In 2018, only 2% of global VC deals were for cleantech, and only 3% of global VC deals were for agricultural technology.1
ADB Ventures supports startups offering impact technology solutions to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific.

3. How does ADB Ventures address these risks?
Our vision is to crowd in more than $1 billion of risk capital by 2030 towards the Sustainable Development Goals. To get the ball rolling, ADB has raised $60 million for ADB Ventures' inaugural equity fund. We have a target of directing 80% of our investments towards climate impact. 75% of our investments must additionally address gender. Consequently, we concentrate on verticals including cleantech, clean energy, agricultural technologies, inclusive fintech, and health. Our primary function is to invest, and our equity fund can take equity positions up to $4 million first check, with funds typically reserved for follow on investments. We're typically looking to invest in companies that already have commercial traction in the region. In other words, they have validated their business models and value propositions, and they are ready to scale their impact. Once we invest, ADB Ventures can add value through the Asian Development Bank's robust operational processes, safeguards, extensive networks, and considerable experience as a leading development partner in Asia and the Pacific. We believe this is why early-stage companies should want

ADB Ventures in their investment rounds. We can help impactful companies scale faster. We have spent the last year reviewing more than 800 potential investment deals. We have performed intensive due diligence on 47 of those. And all of that work has so far resulted in four equity investments.

4. Can you tell us about these investments?
These are four extraordinary companies. Our first investment was into Euler Motors, which makes light electric vehicles for last-mile commercial logistics. Euler is well-positioned to be a leader in India's sustainable mobility market thanks to its proprietary battery cooling technology, optimized design, integrated vehicle diagnostics, battery management technology, and charging station networks. It has marquee customers like Amazon, Flipkart, and BigBasket. Our second investment, Skycatch, has developed enterprise-grade technology for capturing, processing, and analyzing high-accuracy 3D drone data. By using Skycatch's technology to create 'digital twins' of construction and infrastructure projects, it is possible to save cost and time, cut waste, reduce C02 emissions, and improve safety. Skycatch aims to support 2,000 projects in Asia and the Pacific by 2025. Our vision is to crowd in more than $1 billion of risk capital by 2030 towards the Sustainable Development Goals. To get the ball rolling, ADB has raised $60 million for ADB Ventures' inaugural equity fund. Smart Joules increases the energy efficiency of hospitals, commercial and industrial buildings. But what's really innovative is its "as-a-service" business model. Traditional energy-efficiency equipment is expensive and prices out many potential customers in developing markets. Smart Joules identifies energy-saving opportunities in buildings, retrofits them with modern equipment and sensors, and uses proprietary algorithms to increase energy savings. It installs equipment at its own cost and charges customers based on an affordable recurring subscription fee. Our most recent investment was in a company called Wagely. Wagely is a holistic financial wellness platform that helps low- and middle-income workers in Indonesia to overcome financial shortfalls through on-demand access to earned wages and financial literacy education. Wagely aims to bring its solutions to more than 400,000 low- and middle-income workers by 2025.

5. What other partnerships has ADB Ventures initiated to amplify the development impact of start-ups in Asia?
One of our most valuable tools for connecting with new startups is our partnership with Plug and Play. Through the Plug and Play platform, we can access a global network of tens of thousands of the world's most innovative companies. We also get access to a corporate matching platform that gives us priceless feedback on startups' potential to scale in our region. ADB first partnered with Plug and Play two years ago to help Asia's hotels and resorts invest in sustainability and energy efficiency. Recently we expanded our partnership to work together comprehensively across a range of themes and sectors including sustainability, food and agtech, fintech, smart cities, and sustainable travel. But this partnership is not a one-way street. ADB hopes to contribute value back to Plug and Play by introducing startups from frontier

developing member countries, keeping our door open to Plug and Play's corporate partners, and by finding other opportunities to showcase Plug and Play batch startups to our networks across the region.

6. What does the future hold for ADB Ventures?
These four investments are just the beginning. ADB Ventures plans to make 12 more investments under our inaugural $60 million equity fund. In addition, we will take positions in as many as 35 other companies, using reimbursable grants. Meanwhile, we have begun raising a $100 million debt fund, which we hope to bring online early next year. ADB Ventures has an insatiable hunger to connect with the best, most innovative, most dynamic, and most scalable impact technology startups in the Asia Pacific.

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APEC Fortifies Disaster Risk Management, Strengthens Local Communities

Senior disaster management officials from APEC member economies are intensifying regional cooperation in a bid to build a more resilient disaster risk reduction amidst the current pandemic, climate change and other exposures. "Member economies have gained so much experience in terms of effectively responding to major disasters and dealing with risks on multiple fronts," explained Xiaoning Zhang, co-chair of the APEC Emergency Preparedness Working Group. "However, we need to improve our risk disaster governance to fit the current situation by encouraging risk-informed development strategies, improving disaster risk monitoring and early warning capacity for better risk identification so that we can response more comprehensively," he added. On top of the current COVID-19 pandemic, the region is continuing to experience high losses from a number of various natural events from typhoon, cyclones and floods to earthquakes, landslides, disease epidemics and plagues.

According to recent data presented at the APEC Senior Disaster Management Officials Forum in late May, total damages in the APEC region reached USD 116.9 billion in 2020. These costs have yet to include the amount for COVID-19 pandemic, which will be a complex exercise to uncover. In the forum last month, APEC member economies shared disaster risk reduction policies and measures that are being implemented to manage the pandemic including emergency declarations, mask mandates, new guidelines and protocols for managing evacuation centers as well as new protocols for crossing borders amid travel restrictions. Despite all that, challenges remain high. The region's emergency management capability and capacity has been stretched to unprecedented levels, making the reliance on local communities more important than ever before.

Members are looking at collective investment in resilience measures across the region, including empowering local communities to act during disaster, especially when there are lockdown measures that prevent workers like first responders from travel. In her keynote remarks at the forum, Jenna Rogers of the New Zealand National Emergency Management Emergency highlighted that events such as COVID-19 showcase how vulnerable the region is to these complex hazards. “Complex hazards, both known and unknown, exacerbate risks for the region,” Rogers said. “Therefore, it necessitates collective investment in resilience measures and cooperation across APEC to protect the economies.”

“Disasters are a significant contingent liability for our prosperity, our economic growth and development aspirations at all levels and we need to be smarter at reducing the impacts and costs from these disasters as we are experiencing exacerbated frequency and severity of natural hazards as a result of climate change,” she added. “Disaster reduction is a cross-cutting issue in our economy,” said Koji Suzuki, co-chair of the APEC Emergency Preparedness Working Group. “We must empower our communities, promote a whole-society approach to ensure everyone has a role to play in building disaster resilience.” “It is crucial for member economies to develop joint strategies between government agencies and the private sector, as well as foster more international cooperation to track progress, build trust and share best practices in managing and reducing risks in the region,” Suzuki added.

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East Asia

CHINA: Seeing Progress in Preservation, Innovation of TCM - Report

China has made continuous progress in the preservation, inheritance and innovation of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), enabling it to play a unique role in safeguarding and promoting people's health, according to a report submitted to the country's top legislature. From April to mid-May, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) sent inspection teams to check the enforcement of TCM law, which came into effect on July 1, 2017. Wang Chen, vice chairman of the NPC Standing Committee, presented the report on the law's enforcement for deliberation on Monday. With an annual growth rate of 17.3 percent, the central government has allocated 8.6 billion yuan (1.34 billion U.S. dollars) in subsidies for the inheritance and development of TCM during the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016-2020), read the report. Noting China's improved capacity for providing TCM services, the report said that the number of TCM medical institutions reached 66,000 by 2019, up by 67.4 percent from 2012.

The accessibility of TCM services has been improved, with 98.3 percent of the country's community health centers and 97.1 percent of its township clinics able to provide such services, said the report. The report added that China had 767,000 TCM personnel by the end of 2020, and 0.45 TCM practitioners (or assistants) can be ensured for every 1,000 persons. Highlighting TCM's vital role in China's fight against the COVID-19 epidemic, the report said that 90 percent of the confirmed cases received TCM treatment. China has also been pushing for the open development of TCM, said the report, adding that it has been introduced to 196 countries and regions, and 30 TCM centers have been established overseas.

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Xi Stresses Developing Specialty Industries, Boosting Development Through Innovation

Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, has stressed developing more local specialty industries and achieving better development through innovation. Xi made the remarks on Monday while visiting a company producing Tibetan carpets during an inspection tour of northwest China's Qinghai Province. Xi learned about the production and design of the carpets during his time at the company's workshop and design department. He said the Tibetan carpet has unique features and the locals have combined traditional and modern crafts very well and met the personalized and diversified demands of the market. The Tibetan carpet industry, an industry that suits Qinghai's actual situation, helps people get out of poverty and boost rural vitalization and promotes ethnic unity, Xi noted.

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China to Improve Foreign Exchange Management System: Official

China will deepen the reform of foreign exchange administration and advance the liberalization and facilitation of cross-border trade and investment, said Pan Gongsheng, deputy governor of the People's Bank of China, on Thursday. Pan, who is also head of the State Administration of Foreign Exchange, made the remarks at the 13th Lujiazui Forum that opened Thursday in Shanghai. The country will enhance cross-border trade facilitation under the current account and steadily promote the high-level opening-up of the capital account, said Pan. China will diversify products as well as domestic and foreign participants in the foreign exchange market, and promote cross-border investment reform of private equity funds, Pan said. More efforts will be made to facilitate enterprises' cross-border financing, and support cross-border payments of new trade patterns such as offshore trade and cross-border e-commerce, he added. "In the near future, we will pilot high-level opening-up of foreign exchange management in the Lingang area, a new section of the Shanghai pilot Free Trade Zone, the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area and the Hainan free trade port," said Pan. The operation of Chinese foreign exchange reserves follows market-based principle, and promotes the stability and development of the international financial market, said Pan, adding that the country's forex holdings will take sustainable investment as its long-term goal.

From http://www.news.cn/ 06/10/2021

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China to Ensure Production Safety, Ward Off Accidents

China will spare no effort to ensure production safety, firmly ward off accidents of various kinds, and create a safe and stable atmosphere for the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China, according to a national video and telephone conference on production safety held on Thursday. Efforts should be made to resolutely prevent serious and major accidents, carry out in-depth safety rectification in the fields of the chemical industry and mines, gas pipelines, industrial parks, transportation of hazardous chemicals, road traffic safety, among others, and comprehensively investigate and defuse major risks and hidden dangers of all kinds, the conference said. The conference stressed cracking down on violations of laws and regulations regarding production safety, resolutely preventing the occurrence of extreme violence, and enhancing the emergency response capacity. Vice Premier Liu He, also head of the Work Safety Committee of the State Council, as well as Wang Yong and Zhao Kezhi, both state councilors and vice heads of the committee, were present at Thursday's conference.

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China to Provide Wider Farm Insurance Coverage

A State Council executive meeting Friday decided to provide wider farm insurance to help farmers fend off risks and stabilize income from grain production. The meeting was presided over by Premier Li Keqiang and said 500 counties in 13 major grain production provinces would have insurance for planting rice and wheat. It will cover costs for seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, land, labor, and losses from natural disasters, plant diseases, and insect pests, among others. The insurance for those planting corn will cover losses due to price and output fluctuations. The meeting decided to provide a one-time subsidy to farmers growing major grains to cushion them from sharp price increases of farming supplies and stabilize their income. The total subsidy amount will be around 20 billion yuan (about 3.11 billion U.S. dollars).

The meeting urged financial institutions to cut fees further to help micro and small enterprises and individual business owners lower their costs. Measures including reducing online payment and bank card processing fees for merchants will lighten the burden on enterprises and people by 24 billion yuan, the meeting said. The meeting stressed accelerating the development of affordable rental housing to meet the basic housing needs of migrant workers and university graduates, among others. The meeting also passed a draft revision of China's population and family planning law and decided to submit it to the National People's Congress for deliberation.

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Japan: Farmers Turning to Technology to Overcome Pandemic, Aging

Japanese farmers are turning to digital technologies to grow and sell their products as the coronavirus pandemic depresses sales to restaurants and the graying of Japan's population complicates the drive to raise productivity in the labor-intensive sector. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 last year, an increasing number of farmers and fishermen have drawn attention to their plight through Pocket Marche, an online service that brings together farmers, fishermen and consumers. "A substantial number of farmers lost their sales to restaurants due to the pandemic and flocked to our app to sell their products," said Pocket Marche Inc. CEO Hiroyuki Takahashi. In February last year when Japan was reporting a slow growth rate of coronavirus infections, around 2,000 farmers and fishermen were selling their products to 52,000 registered customers via Pocket Marche's app. As the coronavirus situation worsened, the number of producers using the service grew to around 5,100, with customers rising to 300,000.

From https://newsonjapan.com 06/03/2021

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Japanese Tech to Slash Green Hydrogen Costs by Two Thirds

Japanese energy company Eneos and plant engineer Chiyoda will build a facility that manufactures hydrogen without carbon dioxide emissions at one-third the current cost, a breakthrough in the nation's push toward decarbonization. The plant will use a proprietary electrolysis technology to significantly lower necessary investment, with the aim of bringing down the price of hydrogen to 330 yen, or roughly $3, per kilogram. Eneos and Chiyoda are looking at Australia and other locations as candidates to build the plant in 2030. Hydrogen, which can power automobiles or power plants without generating CO2, is seen by some as vital to decarbonization efforts, but production costs have remained high. Hydrogen costs roughly 1,100 yen per kilogram in the Japanese market, and the government seeks to bring down the figure to 330 yen by 2030 and eventually to 220 yen.

The method developed by Eneos and Chiyoda electrolyzes both water and toluene at the same, instead of through separate processes, to create methylcyclohexane, or

MCH. This simplification of the process slashes facility investment by half. Liquid MCH will be shipped at ambient temperatures to power plants and other facilities, where hydrogen is extracted for energy use. This is far more cost-effective than shipping hydrogen, which involves keeping it at minus 253 C in a special shipping vessel. The partners already have the technology to produce limited quantities of MCH and will now work on boosting capacity by using bigger electrodes to develop 500kw equipment by fiscal 2025.

From https://newsonjapan.com 06/20/2021

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Japan's Face Recognition Technology Confronted by Challenges in Handling Personal Data

In a room of an office building in central Tokyo, photos of people's faces flashed up one after another on computer screens. As security cameras operated around them, several employees checked these photos of real people from all walks of life — company workers, homemakers, senior citizens and young people. The images are also stored on a database. The company estimates photos of an aggregated 5 million people have been saved. Facial photos are not the only data being stored here. Each person's name, birth date, address and images of some official documents also are kept. This massive trove of data came from identity verification information provided as part of online applications submitted for opening accounts at financial institutions and for other services. Online identity verification can be done simply by using a smartphone to photograph one's face and a driver's license or other form of official documentation and sending this data in line with directions displayed on the screen. This technology called eKYC, or electronic Know Your Customer, was authorized in November 2018 for commercial use.

This data on 5 million people is being handled by Liquid, Inc., a company in Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo, that has used eKYC since July 2019. Liquid provides identity confirmation services to about 50 companies including banks, securities companies and mobile phone operators, and stores a portion of the data. "We're entering the age of facial data," a Liquid executive said. "Data featuring a face linked with a name and other information will be a major asset." According to this executive, Liquid has developed a system that issues a warning if it detects a person whose data it holds is trying to open a bank account under another name or engaging in other wrongdoing. Liquid has filed a patent application for this system. If this technology becomes more widely used as planned, this wealth of facial data could be used to detect fraud in an array of industries.

Use of facial data is dogged by concerns about privacy violations. Under the Personal Information Protection Law, facial data is considered part of an individual's personal information, along with their name, birth date and other details. Businesses that acquire this information must inform each individual about the purpose for using these details and gain their consent. Using this information for other purposes is prohibited. Some of Liquid's services display a notification stating that during procedures such as opening a bank account, the process will switch to the Liquid system and be used for developing identity verification and fraud detection systems. Liquid requires users to consent to this. If consented, it is legally possible for collected facial data to be used for Liquid's detection systems. However, some research shows that only 6% of users carefully read the terms and conditions for services offered online. The personal information law merely states a business operator should try to delete data after finishing using it. Some eKYC operators erase data after completing the identity verification process, but the possibility remains that this data will be retained semipermanently.

"It's possible that a user's facial data could spread widely without them being fully aware of it," an official of a company operating eKYC technology warned. "Rules on using this data and its storage period are needed." Facial data is collected from various sources such as security camera footage and smartphone facial recognition features. Such data, provided it is properly handled and used, is effective in preventing crime and making daily activities more convenient. Commercial complexes tap this data extensively to combat shoplifting. During the upcoming Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, it will be used to verify the identity of athletes and Games officials. Japan's face recognition technologies are top-notch and produce few recognition errors. According to market research company Fuji Keizai Co., the facial recognition technology market is expected to grow from ¥2.8 billion in 2019 — the year after eKYC got the green light — to ¥8.6 billion in 2023.

However, changes in this trend are emerging overseas. Last year in the United States, it was revealed that a software company had without permission collected 3 billion images made public on social media and elsewhere. Police authorities, banks, major supermarkets and other entities used this data for facial recognition purposes, which prompted a human rights organization to file a lawsuit demanding the company stop collecting this data. In April, the European Union moved toward restricting the use of facial recognition in public spaces by police and other bodies. Yoichiro Itakura, a lawyer and expert in facial data, said Japan should consider similar steps. "Europe has started crafting a legal framework for facial data," Itakura said. "Japan possesses advanced facial recognition technologies, but how will it handle this face data? The authorities need to quickly discuss this issue and establish rules, including on eKYC."

From https://the-japan-news.com 06/30/2021

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SOUTH KOREA: To Increase R&D Investment in Key Future Technologies

South Korea plans to expand investment in research and development (R&D) of key future technologies, such as system semiconductors, as part of the country's key digital policy projects, a senior government official said Tuesday. Without elaborating on the amount of the investment, First Vice Finance Minister Lee Eog-weon said the country will focus on sharpening its competitive edge in new industries, including artificial intelligence (AI) semiconductors and super high speed computers. South Korea is a powerhouse of memory chips, led by Samsung Electronics Co., the world's largest memory chip maker, and its smaller rival SK hynix Inc. But they have relatively lagged in developing non-memory chips, including system semiconductors. Lee said the government will support the country's chipmakers to help them continue to take the lead in the memory chip segment. The move is part of the government's key digital New Deal initiatives, which call for the country to invest 58.2 trillion won (US$52 billion) to develop key future technologies by 2025. Last month, the government unveiled a plan to provide tax incentives and subsidies to chipmakers to encourage them to spend a combined 510 trillion won by 2030 as the country seeks to become a global powerhouse for both memory and non-memory chips.

From https://en.yna.co.kr 06/15/2021

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South-East Asia

Management of Off-Plan Property to Be Enhanced

The Ministry of Construction has asked localities to enhance the management of sales of off-plan property before June 15. The ministry made the request due to recent reports of legal violations in the development and transactions of off-plan property, causing disputes, creating risks for buyers and harming the real estate market. The construction ministry requested localities to publicise information about off-plan property projects. Such projects eligible for transactions would be integrated into the national public service portal. Provinces and cities must check to ensure compliance with laws about procedures and conditions for transactions of off-plan properties, especially payments and mortgages. The rules for buying and selling off-plan property were included in the Law on Real Estate Business in 2006. Despite this, transactions of off-plan property remain complex, forcing several provinces to urge buyers to be cautious and send warnings about law violations from developers.

The Department of Construction of Quảng Nam Province in mid-May issued a document to better manage the real estate market in the central province. The provincial construction department asked developers of real estate projects to put their developments for sale only when meeting requirements in the Law on Real Estate Business and other legal documents. The northern province of Bắc Giang’s Department of Construction recently announced a list of urban and residential projects which were not eligible for transactions, urging citizens to study projects carefully before purchasing. Early this year, Sơn La Province’s construction department announced 11 commercial housing projects not eligible for capital raising or transactions as of March. A lawyer said the transactions of off-plan properties had not been put under property management, resulting in violations from developers such as using buyers' advance payment for the wrong purposes, especially developers with weak financial capacity, and not following commitments about project quality or progress.

Ministry to inspect stagnant, abandoned projects

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment said it could work with provincial People's Committees to inspect real estate projects suffering stagnant progress or sitting unfinished and abandoned for years. Real estate projects which were left deserted were causing significant waste of land resources. The ministry pointed out several reasons for the stagnation, including slow construction progress of contractors, failure to complete legal documents, facing disputes, shortage of infrastructure system and inconsistencies in overall planning. In Hà Nội, there were a number of stagnant projects, mainly in Hoài Đức, Mê Linh, Nam Từ Liêm and Bắc Từ Liêm districts. Some have been deserted for years, such as Sông Hồng City which was approved in 1994 and AIC new urban area, approved 13 years ago. A report by the municipal People's Committee showed 383 projects in the capital city had signs of violations of the land law, 379 of which were inspected from July 2018. Among them, 35 projects with a total area of 57ha were given 24 months of extension for the deadline to put the land into use. If the developers still failed to put the land into use after the extension, the land would be confiscated without any compensation. Twenty-nine projects with a total area of 1,840ha were proposed to be revoked land and the investment projects cancelled.

From https://vietnamnews.vn 06/12/2021

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Every Citizen to Have QR Code by 2025 to Develop Digital Government

Every citizen in Việt Nam will have a digital identity with a QR Code by 2025 in an effort to promote the development of digital Government. This will enable citizens, enterprises and other organisations to participate in the operation of Government agencies to improve transparency and service quality as well as improving social values. This was a key point in the e-Government development strategy towards building a digital Government in the 2021-25 period approved early this week. The strategy aimed to complete the development targets of e-Government by the end of this year to serve the formation of digital Government by 2025. As mentioned in the strategy, e-Government included online meetings, paperless document processing, contactless administrative procedures and cashless payments. Digital Government was a broader definiton, which included e-Government with safe operation in the digital environment, ability to provide new services, ability to optimise resources and the ability to lead the national digital transformation and effectively handle big issues in socio-economic management and development. Digital Government was developed to let citizens, enterprises and other organisations participate in an appropriate way in the operation of Government agencies and interact to enhance transparency, improve service quality and together handle problems.

In comparision, e-Government set targets of better serve citizens and enterprises. Minister of Information and Communications Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng said that the targets for forming e-Government would be basically completed in 2021 with the focus on enabling the provision of all public services at level 4. Level 4 is the highest level of online public services which allows users to fill and submit forms and pay fees online. By 2025, digital Government would be formed, which would enable the provision of Government services round-the-clock following demand while new services would be provided based on the open database. To promote the formation of the digital Government, the strategy set targets of completing the legal environment, developing the national digital infrastructure, the national digital platform, the national data and national apps together with ensuring network security and safety. Accordingly, policies would be put forward so that Việt Nam could be in the list of the top 50 countries in terms of digital Government development by the United Nations by 2025 and in the top 30 by 2030.

Specifically, the strategy targeted that every citizen would have a digital identity with a QR Code and own a smartphone. Every household would have a digital address and could access broadband internet. Each citizen would have a digital health record, while medical examination and treatment facilities could provide remote examination and treatment and allow cashless payments and electronic prescriptions. Each student would have a digital record of their studies, schools allow cashless payments and provide digital learning materials. Each farmer will have the ability to access, exploit and use the digital platform for agriculture, reducing the dependence on intermediary stages from production to distribution.

From https://vietnamnews.vn 06/19/2021

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PM Chính Hails Success of Launching New National Databases

Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính on Tuesday said launching a national database on population and the citizen identity database was a step forward in the process of transforming national governance. He made a statement while attending a conference to review the national population database project and the citizen identification card project. The conference, held by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), also announced the official operation of the national data system on population and a system for issuing and managing citizen identification from July 1 this year. At the conference, PM Chính said effectively using these databases so people and businesses can reap the benefits was the wish of the Party, the State, society and the people. The system meets the needs of international and regional integration and launching it was an important event that affirmed efforts in accelerating national digital transformation, he said. This was also a large-scale, difficult and complex public investment project, which was effectively carried out and put into use in a short time, he said. The Prime Minister also mentioned the response of the people as showing the two projects were popular, as "many people lined up and stayed up all night to make citizen identification procedures in time".

Over the years, the Party and the State have promoted the use of science and technology to aid sustainable development and international integration. Since the Law on Citizenship was passed in 2014, the MPS has made efforts to actively, creatively and effectively implement the two projects, he said. Although they were independent projects, the MPS directed their integration to avoid waste, saving VNĐ1 trillion (US$43.6 million) of funding that was originally earmarked for the projects. The system has so far collected information of more than 98 million people and issued identification codes to citizens nationwide. This is an important basis to establish citizens' electronic identity, contributing to national digital transformation. From March 1, 2021, up to now, the country has received more than 54 million applications for identity cards. PM Chính said these results contributed to changing citizen management from manual to modern and also reformed population management, saving time, effort and facilities. The success of the two projects was even more meaningful amid the COVID-19 pandemic, he said. He noted that building the system was only the first step of success and bringing it to life and enhancing its effectiveness was the important next step. The PM said the efforts, innovation and determination of all involved in the construction and operation of the national database on population and citizen identity management would be appreciated by people and businesses.

From https://vietnamnews.vn 06/23/2021

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South Asia

INDIA: Gujarat Govt Promotes Anil Pratham & Ajay Tomar to DGP Rank

The Government of Gujarat, on May 31, issued orders to promote IPS officers of 1989-Batch from the Additional Director General of Police (ADGP) to the rank of Director General of Police (DGP). The two officers are – Anil Kumar Pratham, Ajay Kumar Tomar. At present, Anil Kumar Pratham is serving as ADGP, Crime Investigation Department (CID) Crime (Women Cell), Gandhinagar and Ajay Kumar Tomar is serving as Commissioner of Police, Surat City.

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India Ranked Among Top 50 Nations in Global Innovation Index

In the Global Innovation Index 2020 rankings, India jumped four spots and secured ranked 48th rank by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). Amidst the havoc caused by COVID-19 pandemic, the rankings came in as good news for India and also a sign of the wave of growth and development sweeping through the country. In the previous rankings in 2019, India was positioned 52nd in the world and 81st in the rankings of the year 2015. The ascending trends show a remarkable achievement by India to be in a league of highly innovative developed nations all over the globe. The WIPO had also accepted India as one of the leading innovation achievers of 2019 in the central and southern Asian regions, as it has shown a consistent improvement in its innovation ranking for the last five years. The consistent improvement in the global innovation index rankings is owing to the immense knowledge capital, the vibrant startup ecosystem, and the amazing work done by the public & private research organizations. The scientific ministries like the Department of Science and Technology (DST), the Department of Biotechnology and the Department of Space have played a pivotal role in the enriching the national innovation Ecosystem. The NITI Aayog has been working tirelessly to ensure optimization of national efforts in this direction by bringing policy led innovation in different areas such as EVs, biotechnology, Nanotechnology, Space, alternative energy sources, etc. The India Innovation Index, which was released last year by the NITI Aayog, has been widely accepted as the major step in the direction of decentralization of innovation across all the states of India. A constant thrust in monitoring and evaluating India's position in global rankings has be provided by the NITI Aayog, including the global innovation index. India must aim high and double its efforts in improving its ranking in the global innovation index. The call for 'Aatma Nirbhar Bharat' by the Hon'ble Prime Minister could only be realized if India punches above its weight class and compete with global superpowers in developing scientific interventions. It is time that India brings a paradigm shift and aims to be in the top 25 countries in the next global innovation index rankings.

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Achieving More with Less: Technology Spend Priorities of a Post-Pandemic CIO

Today, CIOs at many traditional banks are confronted with a complex situation. On one hand, the pandemic is placing pressure on banks to rapidly cut costs. On the other, CIOs are expected to deliver important digital transformations and mandatory initiatives as banks adapt to the current conditions, including cybersecurity reinforcements or establishing the right infrastructure to allow people to work and collaborate remotely, writes Lien Kokocinski, Partner and Oliver De Decker, Partner, CAPCO. As the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 and its consequences continue, CIOs need to be in a position to adjust the levels of IT spend in response to evolving situations. This may mean reducing expenses in the event of a prolonged crisis or a slower-than-expected economic recovery; or alternatively, increasing spend to allow the organization, its infrastructure and project portfolio to be mobilized quickly to benefit from any recovery. To enable faster and more dynamic IT spend, the CIO must rely on a set of tools and data that creates an accurate and transparent view of the firm's IT landscape and project portfolio, including the cost, value and complexity of each element. Today, most banks do not have that view. In fact, it would be fair to say that within many established financial institutions, the business and IT teams do not sufficiently understand each other. While IT managers are concerned with the cost of their network and servers, business line owners are not focused on these specific elements, but rather want to understand the headline cost of technology as it relates to their products and customers. The CIO accordingly needs to articulate the IT budget in a way that speaks to the business in a transparent fashion. This would allow the CIO to provide clear guidance to the business on questions relating to the cost of launching a new functionality or increasing the scope of a product, or what cost reduction will result from a certain action.

Cost-cutting is another example of where the CIO – and the business – need to have full transparency and understanding regarding immediate gains versus intrinsic value and longer-term impact. When banks need to cut costs, it is the 'change bucket' that usually suffers first, being deemed the softest target. Typically, change projects that heavily impact IT will be stopped, postponed or slowed down to reduce expenditure, and this also impacts the balance between the bank's internal and external workforce. These adjustments need to be made in an intelligent fashion that avoids reducing resilience and hence putting the bank at risk. If CIOs do not have a clear view of return on investment (ROI) across their IT expenditure, this becomes difficult to achieve. However, postponing or slowing down transformational initiatives means that important process improvements or customer experience innovations will not be achieved as planned, which may result in a loss of revenue in the future. Again, the CIO needs an effective solution to analyze the ROI of each investment or project and clearly assess value and impact. The CIO can then make data-backed recommendations on whether to reduce or stop projects that are not vital or sufficiently revenue positive or, conversely, to increase investment in projects that will deliver a sufficient ROI. An effective solution should be built around a multi-dimensional analysis of data for each IT application and project as well as business lines and products (considering elements such as scope, costs, income generated and resource consumption). That analysis can then inform decisions such as whether to discontinue a poorly performing product or business line or, alternatively, to transform it through additional investment.

Overall, this focus on data will enable the CIO to strengthen IT management and address the dual challenge of optimizing and prioritizing IT spend. Here's How CIOs Can Implement A More Flexible Approach To Technology Spend Management And Demonstrate The Value Of The It Function. ENSURE TECHNOLOGY COST TRANSPARENCY – Technology cost transparency (TCT) provides visibility into cost drivers, technology resource consumption and cost information in respect of the balance between business and IT functions. This ensures that any adjustments reflect the most appropriate level of expenditure and offers the ability to forecast demand for technology services and to simulate the impact of change. TCT seeks to establish a mentality that orients technology by service, with defined service levels and clear pricing. It translates IT services, process expenses and resource consumption into business functions and generates understandable metrics to enable key strategic decisions, as well as providing solid governance and a continuous improvement framework. The CIO needs to move from being a cost centre to become a strategic partner within the bank. Strong CIO performance requires IT to be managed as a business, through the application of best practice and benchmarking against the market to clearly demonstrate the value of the IT function. This involves identifying cost reduction opportunities and assessing their potential and feasibility in the context of both BAU and projects, as well as prioritizing projects that offer a quick ROI and establishing a continuous optimization culture among IT managers. CIOs can help direct their banks to make better choices through technologies and contractual models that enable a transition from fixed to variable costs, such as cloud or as-a-service solutions. Reducing the ratio of fixed costs helps to adjust the cost base quickly in case of downturns. Firms need to deploy the right IT skills, at the right time and in the right quantity, to meet market and customer demands. This requires building a flexible technology talent ecosystem and tapping into larger skill pools through partner networks, remote working arrangements, upskilling the existing workforce, as well as continuously reviewing strategic sourcing and partnership strategies to reflect the skills and IT capabilities required to meet business needs.

Agile portfolio operations and Lean governance can maximize value for the business by enhancing operational excellence, ensuring compliance and increasing adaptability to change. The need for transformation has been a constant theme for banks since the financial crisis of 2008, and the pressures arising from continuous regulatory change, increased competition and rapid technology evolution are nothing new. However, the 2020 global pandemic has radically increased these pressures and banks have no choice but to adapt to new working models and changing customer expectations. CIOs have played an important role through the pandemic, ensuring continuity of services. Now, as they are facing significant cost constraints while at the same time looking to accelerate strategic technology projects, CIOs need to evolve from being a cost centre to becoming a valuable business partner to help banks transform their activities and the way they serve their customers. CIOs must position themselves at the centre of the dialogue between the business and IT to ensure that they speak the same language about IT costs and partner effectively to make smart investments, maximize benefits to the bank and increase ROI.

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Creating the Tools to Solve Life's Biggest Challenges

India is a big country with a large population, which sees us facing some equally sizeable challenges. Providing positive life outcomes to such a large populace starts with investing in foundational social capabilities. Improving healthcare and education and building up financial literacy is essential for creating the circumstances for individuals to thrive and help their communities, writes Rahul Sharma, President – Public Sector, AISPL, AWS India and South Asia. Over the past decade, we have increasingly seen business and service providers across India adopt cloud technology to achieve these positive outcomes. But judging by the predictions recently shared by our global Vice President and Chief Technology Officer Werner Vogels, the speed at which cloud technology evolves means we are only at Day One of what's possible. Many of our customers are using our cloud technology for social progress and inclusion, from fast-growing health and education providers to emerging agri-tech businesses, and services for boosting financial and social inclusion. One example is the Wadhwani Initiative for Sustainable Healthcare (WISH) Foundation, whose mission is to improve the health of underprivileged people in India by addressing accessibility, equity, and quality of health services. WISH Foundation uses the cloud to securely store and manage large data sets containing confidential health data. Another example is English Helper, whose reading and comprehension tool, called ReadToMe, uses artificial intelligence to help boost literacy in primary school children in India and around the world. In 2013-14 ReadToMe helped 20,000 students. By the end of 2021, the number will cross 20 million. Also, we see our cloud technology being used to unravel environmental challenges such as air pollution. The UN World Health Organization (WHO) reporting that air pollution is a factor in one in eight deaths worldwide, and now the non-profit technology organisation OpenAQ is using cloud computing to facilitate the sharing of air quality data for communities globally.

In each of these instances, cloud services allow organizations to grow quickly without having to spend money upfront on computer hardware and grow their usage when they need to. That means they can manage huge volumes of data – and customers – that would have been inconceivable just a decade ago and there is plenty more to come. At our global AWS Re:Invent conference, held virtually for the first time last December, Werner Vogels outlined eight predictions that will boost the cloud's ability to tackle the challenges we face, and many of these developments are specifically important for India. For starters, the cloud will be everywhere. Older models of computing were centralised in data centres, but the cloud makes computing available in even the most remote locations, from rural communities and remote wilderness areas through to near-earth orbit! This means the cloud is being brought closer and closer to where it is needed, whether that is in someone's kitchen or on the handlebars of their bike. When combined with high-speed networks we see new capabilities emerge for gathering and analysing data quickly and using it to improve people's lives. A critical building block in the cloud is artificial intelligence (AI), and specifically the machine learning (ML) technology that helps AI become smart quickly. The huge volumes of data we gather today are too large for people to analyze themselves. But, by making cloud-based ML tools more powerful, cost-effective, and easy to use, we put them into the hands of the people who need them. This is proving especially helpful for communities who previously had little access to technology. The rapid spread of easy-to-use cloud data capabilities enable small farm-holders in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa boost the yield of their crops, without having to invest the time and expense of building these tools themselves, and these same outcomes are already being achieved in India. For example, our customer CropIn is helping farmers in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh tackle the adverse effects of climate change and adopt climate-smart agricultural practices faster, while Hyderabad-based Kalgudi's AI-based commerce portal creates intelligent marketplaces that aggregate demand and supply and facilitate transactions with digital assistance.

All of Werner's predictions bode well for the many emerging businesses that are striving to make a big difference in people's lives, and every day we are astounded by the ways in which we see our customers using cloud technology to create outcomes we could have never predicted. While 2020 has been a challenging year, we know that there are still many more challenges ahead, and we look forward to helping our customers to solve them in the most effective and efficient ways possible. If there is one prediction that I would like to make for this year, it is that the imagination and skill of our customers and their dedication to solving the challenges we all face will never cease to astonish us.

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Technology Empowering Power Distribution in Madhya Pradesh

Vishesh GarhpaleSince the onset of the COVID pandemic, it became clear that discoms need to wrap off manual processes and shift to digital, deliberated Vishesh Garhpale, Managing Director, Madhya Pradesh Madhya Kshetra Vidyut Vitaran Corporation Ltd., while addressing the Digital Governance Cloud and AI Summit on the theme 'Empowering Energy & Utilities'. Speaking on recovery from the COVID crisis, he said, "We immediately started WhatsApp chatbots for complaint redressal and customer service. Also, during this time we saw a lot of our customer care executives getting infected. So to keep the call centres running we immediately floated tenders to set up an AI-based call centre so that we will be able to answer calls without manual interference." On data management, he said, "Discoms have a lot of data but they do not have a good analytical tool. So we need an analysis of this data so that with minimum efforts and inputs, maximum output can be achieved. We have started an AI-based vigilance app and which is coming in as a helpful tool… We are looking forward to having an advanced tool, either AI-based or machine learning, wherein we can better forecast our demands." Further, meter data management software is being developed. It is cloud-based software, added Garhpale. Lauding the authority's efforts, he said, "I proudly announce that we have our own data centre and we host all our applications from the centre." The data centre has been recently updated and it is estimated that for a few more years the data can be managed from the centre and then cloud adoption will be the possible option for further processing of that huge data. There is clearly mentioned in the tender document that if the data centre is not able to cater to the needs then the cloud will be adopted, he added.

"Though we have a great team of software engineers who are developing almost all the applications in-house, we are looking forward to private firms to further improve our capacity. Also, we have started the implementation of the e-office system, developed by the National Informatics Centre, for business continuity during the lockdown," Garhpale said. Moreover, there are a few systems for substation monitoring like meter data acquisition systems in all our feeders, we have SCADA in major cities and we are further implementing RT-DAS and SS-DAS for substation monitoring. So, real-time monitoring is being done… We are also looking forward to implementing smart meters. Indore already has two lakh smart meters, however, we are planning smart metering in all R-APDRP towns, he added. Calling Madhya Pradesh the 'flag-bearer' in adopting new technologies for development, Vinit Mishra closed the Garhpale's address.

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Transforming Villages Through 'Model Gaon' in NCR

'Model Gaon', an innovative concept to make the village self-sufficient, is becoming popular around the National Capital Region (NCR). Volunteers of Model Gaon are educating the villagers to become self-reliant in Noida and nearby regions by roaming around in the villages, writes Puja Banerjee of Elets News Network (ENN). Model Gaon is the brainchild of a senior IAS officer of Uttar Pradesh, Dr. Heera Lal, currently serving as the Additional Mission Director of National Health Mission, to create awareness about transforming villages into model gaon. The aim of this mission is to reach more than one lakh villages in Uttar Pradesh and create awareness about inclusive and sustainable development of villages that is financially viable, socially equitable and eco- friendly. Dr. Heera Lal said, "Under the mission, 25 point agenda is being worked out which includes encouraging villagers about cleanliness, increasing education rate, promoting yoga, suggesting ways to increase income, building solar villages, connecting everyone with fast internet, making villages self-reliant, preventing malnutrition and growing plantations." The concept was started from the state capital and is gaining momentum. Villagers around the National Capital Region (NCR) have found it interesting and worth implementing. Explaining how volunteers are working in NCR, Saurabh Lall, Chief Executive Officer of Model Gaon says, "Our team is trying to involve villagers in defining and understanding local issues of development and creating a village manifesto, which will help in setting an agenda for development in villages. They will then empower rural communities by identifying and developing socially active changemakers, who will lead the transformation of their villages into model gaon." The road to self-reliant India passes through the villages, so it is very important to develop the villages. This dream can be realised by turning agriculture into agribusiness and developing villages. Model Gaon is aiming to establish an agenda of development in villages and villagers through a village manifesto and to develop changemakers who will work towards all round development of villages.

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Indore & Surat Won Smart Cities Award 2020, Uttar Pradesh Tops Among States

Indore (Madhya Pradesh) and Surat (Gujarat) jointly won the Smart City Awards 2020 for overall development, whereas, Uttar Pradesh topped among the states followed by Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, on June 25 as the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) released a list of awardees under Smart City Awards 2020. As per MoHUA, there were 11 categories for the awards – Social Aspects, Governance, Culture, Urban Environment, Sanitation, Economy, Built Environment, Water, Urban Mobility, Innovative Idea Award, and COVID Innovation Award. Cities including – Surat, Indore, Ahmedabad, Pune, Vijayawada, Rajkot, Visakhapatnam, Pimpri-Chinchwad, and Vadodara were given 4-star rating under Climate-Smart Cities Assessment Framework. Whereas Chandigarh bagged the award among Union Territories and Indore conferred the 'Innovative Idea Award'. Ahmedabad won the 'Smart Cities Leadership Award', followed by Varanasi and Ranchi in the second and third positions respectively. Considering the Governance aspect, Vadodara, Thane and Bhubaneswar were ranked as the top three cities in the country.

Category-wise winner smart cities
1. Social Aspects
Tirupati – Health Benchmark for Municipal Schools
Bhubaneshwar – Socially Smart Bhubaneswar
Tumakuru – Digital Library Solution
2. Governance
Vadodara – GIS
Thane – Digi Thane
Bhubaneswar – ME app
3. Culture
Indore – Conservation of Heritage
Chandigarh – Capitol Complex, Heritage Project
Gwalior – Digital Museum
4. Urban Environment
Bhopal – Clean energy

Chennai – Restoration of water bodies
Tirupati – Renewable Energy Generation
5. Sanitation
Tirupati – Bioremediation & Bio-Mining
Indore – Municipal Waste Management System
Surat – Conservation through Treated Wastewater
6. Economy
Indore – Carbon Credit Financing Mechanism
Tirupati – Boost Local Identity & Economy through Design Studio
Agra – Micro Skill Development Centre
7. Built Environment
Indore – Chappan Dukan
Surat – Canal Corridor
8. Water
Dehradun – Smart Water Metering Water ATM
Varanasi – Eco-Restoration of Assi River
Surat – Integrated and Sustainable Water Supply System
9. Urban Mobility
Aurangabad – Majhi Smart Buses
Surat – Dynamic Scheduling Buses
Ahmedabad – Man-less parking system and automatic ticket dispensing machines AMDA Park
Also Read: Smart Cities Mission Brings Together Diverse Government Schemes on Affordable Housing Under One Roof
10. Innovative Idea Award
Indore – Carbon Credit Financing Mechanism
11. Covid Innovation Award
Kalyan-Dombivali and Varanasi
As per the Ministry, as many as 5,924 projects worth Rs 1,78,500 crore of the total proposed projects under the Smart Cities Mission have been tendered so far. Whereas, work orders for 5,236 projects worth Rs 1,46,125 crore have been issued.

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: Innovative Economy Building Directly Linked to Education System – Minister

The establishment of an innovative economy in Azerbaijan is directly linked to the education system, the country's Economy Minister Mikayil Jabbarov said on Twitter, Trend reports on June 2. "We exchanged views with Minister of Education Emin Amrullayev on deepening integration between economy and education," Jabbarov said. "Azerbaijan’s higher education institutions, vocational schools, lyceums, schools and kindergartens establish a basis for the transition to innovative economy," added the minister.

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Azerbaijan, UAE Discuss Co-op in Field of High Technologies

Azerbaijan and the United Arab Emirates discussed the issues of cooperation in the field of innovations and high technologies, as well as in the space industry, Trend reports on June 23 referring to Azerbaijani Minister of Transport, Communications and High Technologies Rashad Nabiyev's message on Twitter. The discussions were held during the meeting between Nabiyev and UAE Minister of Economy, Abdulla Bin Touq Al Marri, who is on an official visit to Baku.

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Pandemic Leads to Unprecedented IT Industry Energy Consumption – Study

The coronavirus pandemic has led to an unprecedented increase in energy consumption in the information and communication technology industry. Information and communication technologies account for 3-4% of global carbon emissions, roughly double that of the aviation sector, according to a study by international consulting company Boston Consulting Group (BCG), Trend reports citing TASS. According to the study, an unprecedented global demand for digital communications, fueled by the massive shift to remote work formats in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, has led the information and communications technology industry to consume more energy than ever before. Today the information and communication technologies sector accounts for 3 to 4% of global CO2 emissions, roughly double the emissions generated by the much more closely monitored aviation sector, the study said. With a 60% increase in global data consumption expected in 2021, the industry could account for up to 14% of global CO2 emissions by 2040, unless significant steps are taken to reduce the sector's environmental impact.

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KYRGYZSTAN: Planning to Introduce 5G Technologies by End of 2023

Kyrgyzstan plans to introduce 5G technologies by the end of 2023, Deputy Minister of Digital Development Asel Kenenbaeva told at a press conference at Kabar, Trend reports. She said that today the issue of launching is being worked out, work is underway with mobile operators, a working group has been created, and a communication development strategy has been developed. Kenenbaeva also said that it is planned to build telecommunications links up to 600 km by 2023.

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UZBEKISTAN: Advantages and Opportunities of Blockchain Technology for the Provision of Public Services Considered

On 8 June 2021, a joint project of the Agency for Public Services under the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Uzbekistan and UNDP in Uzbekistan "Improving the provision of public services and increasing the level of governance in rural areas of Uzbekistan", funded by the European Union, began its work on the topic "Advantages and opportunities of blockchain technology for the provision of public services in the Republic of Uzbekistan." The current situation in connection with the pandemic caused by Covid-19 and other global crises and their consequences has given new impetus to governments to introduce new digital technologies. Globally, Blockchain technology has become a strategic tool for innovation and productivity growth in the public sector, as blockchain is considered a tool for public efficiency, performance, innovation and growth. In particular, technology has the potential to transform the public sector by reducing bureaucracy, improving data exchange and interaction between the institution, citizens and other stakeholders, and by increasing transparency and reducing fraud and corruption.

These advantages are related to three main properties of blockchain technology: (1) decentralization and distribution for storage and integrity; (2) irreversibility and immutability of each transaction; and (3) exclusion of intermediaries to ensure efficiency and effectiveness. The aim of the seminar is to explore the possibilities of transforming public services and government by addressing the following issues: 1. Why is blockchain technology an interesting technology for the public sector? 2. What opportunities and benefits does blockchain technology offer to the public sector? 3. What risks can arise when using blockchain to provide government services? During the seminar, invited international experts shared their best practices in the application of blockchain technology, as well as the possibilities of introducing this technology into the public sector of Uzbekistan. In particular, Tatiana Zalan, Professor of Management at the American University of Dubai, spoke about new developments, future prospects and opportunities for the public sector using blockchain technology.

Enrico Ferro, Head of Business Model Innovation at LINKS Foundation, in his presentation highlighted the main advantages and problems of blockchain technology, as well as possible risks when using it. Zoran Giordanoski (Ph.D.), Senior Research Fellow at UNU-EGOV presented the legal and regulatory uncertainties of blockchain technology. Ivo Hyuninck, Innovation Advisor to the Chief Information Officer of the City of The Hague, introduced the participants to the use of blockchain technology in Holland. Renske Stumpel, EU Counselor in the Municipality of Groningen, Netherlands presented the BLING ecosystem, which is based on digital transformation and the application of blockchain technology in government. Eric Zweigzne, Vice President for Product Innovation at Convergence.tech, a blockchain-focused company, spoke about the introduction of blockchain technology into the civil registration system of Uzbekistan. Sumaya Ben Dhau (Ph.D.), UNDP international consultant working on the implementation of blockchain technology in Uzbekistan, made a presentation on the possibilities of this technology in transforming the provision of public services.

Blockchain technology can be used in existing systems to eliminate inefficiencies and improve the reliability of public service delivery, as well as to streamline processes and increase government and public sector transparency and accountability. Moreover, blockchain can provide continuous and timely recording of information in real time, while making it impossible to make changes. All of this reduces the likelihood of fraud and error, thereby increasing accuracy and simplifying internal processes. Since 2020, in cooperation with a leading Canadian technology company, within the framework of the Joint Project, the possibility of integrating blockchain technology into the civil registration system of Uzbekistan is being developed. This will be the first real information system in Uzbekistan based on blockchain technology for the provision of public services. All registry office services throughout the country will be provided online, quickly, without bureaucracy and queues. Thus, it will increase the quality and efficiency of public service delivery in Uzbekistan and, in particular, will benefit more than 15 million citizens living in rural areas and vulnerable groups such as women, youth, the elderly and people with disabilities from remote regions of the republic.

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Uzbekistan Reintroduces Mandatory COVID-19 Testing for All Persons Entering Country

Uzbekistan has reintroduced mandatory COVID-19 PCR tests for everyone entering the country, Trend reports referring to the Ministry of Health of Uzbekistan. It is reported that the Service for Sanitary and Epidemiological Welfare and Public Health of Uzbekistan introduces a system of mandatory testing for all persons entering Uzbekistan through border checkpoints using the polymerase chain reaction method. The Ministry of Health also clarified that within seven days after entering Uzbekistan, a repeated PCR test will be required. In addition, according to the decision of the Republican Commission to Combat COVID-19, quarantine measures will be strengthened in public transport, airports and railway stations in Uzbekistan June 23. Citizens without medical masks will not be allowed on public transport (buses and subway). Bus drivers and conductors, as well as metro controllers will ensure control over observance of the mask regime in transport. At the final stops, vehicles will be disinfected. Also, measures will be taken to strengthen control over the observance of sanitary and epidemiological standards at railway stations and airports. As of June 22, a total of 107,266 cases of COVID-19 were detected in Uzbekistan. Some 103,074 patients recovered, while 722 died. It is noted that during the period from January through February, the number of cases per day in the country remained at 50, while in April and May it exceeded 300-400 cases. In early June, this figure began to decline, but in recent days it has increased again.

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Non-governmental Educational Organizations Receive State Support

A presidential resolution "On measures for state support of non-state educational organizations and creation of additional conditions for youth in the educational process" was adopted. According to the resolution, from 1 July 2021 to 1 January 2024, non-governmental educational organizations operating in the buildings and structures of colleges and technical schools of the system of ministries and departments (except for the cities of Tashkent and Samarkand): - are exempt from rent (excluding storage and utilities costs); - have the right to sell products (works and services) of their own production, obtained as a result of the educational process, with the use of incentives (value added tax and income tax) provided for educational organizations. In free time from classes, including during the summer holidays, the following state property objects are leased to non-state educational organizations: - vacant areas of state secondary general and higher educational institutions for the organization of out-of-school educational courses, as well as courses for the training and retraining of personnel; - computer classes of state secondary and vocational educational institutions located in rural areas for organizing computer literacy courses for the population. Also, by 1 January 2024, part of the cost of salaries for teachers attracted by non-governmental educational organizations to work on courses on computer literacy of the population will be compensated in the amount of up to 6 times the base calculated value per month, at the expense of the relevant local budgets. To organize activities for teaching foreign languages in rural areas, entrepreneurs will be allocated a one-time subsidy of up to 50 million soums. Starting from 1 October 2021, the amount of salaries and other income of taxpayers allocated to membership fees for joining the membership of relevant international organizations, as well as to non-governmental educational organizations for retraining and advanced training, is exempt from personal income tax.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Being Left Behind on Renewable

Australia is not doing enough to reduce carbon emissions and risks being left behind as other countries race to embrace renewable energy. These are the stark findings of a new report scrutinising the performance of countries around the world. The annual global status report from international network REN21 found 165 countries had renewable targets in place across key sectors of their economies. Australia was not one of them. The report emphasised the need for governments to prioritise renewable energy through binding sectoral targets, robust policies and strict regulations. Australia's primary mechanism to support renewable energy development lapsed in 2019 and was never replaced. Kane Thornton from the Clean Energy Council said states and territories were left doing the heavy lifting on emission reductions.

He said the report was yet another reminder that urgent action was required within the next decade for Australia to reach net zero emissions by 2050. "Renewable energy can deliver strong economic growth while reducing Australia's carbon footprint and delivering on Australia's international commitments," Mr Thornton said. "The clean energy industry has been the single biggest contributor to Australia's emissions reductions over the past decade and has proven its ability to meet and beat any target put in front of it." Australia ranked 14th in total renewable power capacity at 50 gigawatts. The Clean Energy Council estimates renewable energy projects in the development pipeline could generate another 47 gigawatts. "The current pipeline of renewable energy projects could secure nearly 80,000 full-time equivalent jobs," Mr Thorton said.

"Our sector is ready to deliver career pathways that provide clean, low-cost energy the future workforce can truly aspire to." The report found renewable energy made up about 10 per cent of Australia's energy consumption, ranking the country 12th out of the world's 20 largest economies. Australia lagged behind Brazil, Canada, Turkey, the United States, Argentina and India. But aside from India, Australia was ahead of all other G20 member nations within the Asia-Pacific region. Australia also led the region in the use of renewable energy in mining. "Renewables are the way for Australia to harness the opportunity for an electrified future, and there are considerable advantages for our economy if we get it right," Mr Thornton said. "Australia has exceptional potential to do well in a world of ambitious climate change mitigation - but only if we plan, prepare and invest in the emerging low and zero emissions opportunities that are before us."

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Govt Offshores at Cost of NSW Jobs: Study

NSW forgoes "thousands of jobs" by offshoring major transport contracts for trains, trams, ferries and buses, a new report has found. The report, produced by The

McKell Institute, analysed six NSW government transport contracts which resulted in offshore construction in places including South Korea, Spain, China, Indonesia and Germany. It found that if wider economic benefits to the community were considered in the contract tender process, four of the six projects would have been domestically awarded, creating more than 4000 jobs. Almost $500 million in extra payroll and income taxes would also be collected. The McKell Institute executive director Michael Buckland said the government should do more to account for the benefits of local production. Additionally, the report found that savings accrued from overseas production were negated by average project budget blowouts of more than 40 per cent.

"We consider wider economic benefits when making decisions about major infrastructure projects. It makes no sense to ignore them for significant procurement contracts," Mr Buckland said in a statement. "In many cases offshoring contracts drives economic value and jobs overseas. "Though gains from trade are real and significant, they pale in comparison to the benefits we gain domestically from using local producers." The report recommended NSW government agencies publish wider economic benefits "as part of a holistic cost-benefit analysis" when making decisions about procurement contracts which exceed $1 billion. The NSW government does not currently take this step. It also encouraged the government to establish an "international sourcing comparator" to promote procurement contract transparency. Unions NSW secretary Mark Morey called for more onshore projects.

"Not only are NSW taxpayers missing out on the economic benefits tied to local production but they are footing the bill for costly mistakes made by foreign producers," Mr Morey said in a statement. The Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union NSW & ACT (AMWU) echoed Mr Morey's remarks, calling on the NSW government to end the offshoring of transport infrastructure projects and invest in local workers. "We urgently need to review and revise the state government's procurement process to put these broader economic and social benefits at the heart of the procurement system," AMWU state secretary Cory Wright said. "When we build locally, we not only get a quality product, we create secure jobs and training opportunities for the next generation of apprentices." Federal Labor industry spokesman Ed Husic told reporters rebuilding manufacturing back home should be a priority. "The aim of the game now is sovereign capability - making sure Australia is a country that can make things, rebuilding manufacturing," he said on Friday.

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NEW ZEALAND: Government Water Reforms to Build Economic Resilience and Save Ratepayers Money

The Government is proposing to establish four publicly-owned entities to take responsibility of drinking water, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure across

New Zealand, saving ratepayers thousands of dollars and better ensuring the $120 to $185 billion investment in services can be made. “The data shows the case for change is compelling. Without these changes DIA modelling shows that even at the more conservative end of estimates, the average household bill for water services could be as high as $1900 to $9000 by 2051, which would be unaffordable for many communities,” Local Government Minister Nanaia Mahuta said. “Under our proposal for four providers those figures range from $800 to $1,640, saving households thousands of dollars. “It’s estimated New Zealand will need to invest between $120 billion and $185 billion to maintain safe, sustainable and environmentally appropriate drinking water, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure over the next 30 years, costs that most local councils simply can’t shoulder on their own.

“The Government has considered the evidence and proposes that four large water entities will create an affordable system that ensures secure delivery of safe drinking water and resilient wastewater and stormwater systems. “We have seen the effects of a system in crisis: fatalities from bacteria in drinking water, broken sewer pipes, poorly treated wastewater running into streams and rivers, no-swim notices at the beaches, regular boil-water notices, and lead contamination,” said Nanaia Mahuta. Nanaia Mahuta also released information showing how the reforms will affect each council and the projected costs for their communities with and without three waters reform. “As we undertake our economic recovery, these four entities will ensure the upgrade of infrastructure for our most precious natural resource, which will not only help reign in increasing costs for households but provide local jobs while contributing to regional economies,” Nanaia Mahuta said.

The reforms are indicated to grow New Zealand’s GDP by $14 billion to $23 billion over the next 30 years and generate 5,850 to 9,260 full-time equivalent jobs. “Without this change, communities are going to either face very large bills for water services; or infrastructure will continue to degrade with ongoing health and environmental consequences. Both of these outcomes are unacceptable,” said Nanaia Mahuta. At present, 67 councils provide most of the country’s three waters services, a system that is in too many cases ineffective, inefficient, and not fit for purpose. “Underinvestment, including deferred maintenance and renewals expenditure, has left a legacy of impending costs and poor services for future generations,” said Nanaia Mahuta. Today’s comprehensive release is part of a package of proposed reforms including the recent establishment of Taumata Arowai, the new water services regulator, and the planned introduction of economic regulation.

It includes the proposed boundaries of the four water providers, further details on the proposed water services entities, including governance arrangements, the role of iwi, and how they would be regulated. “The Government will continue to work with the sector, iwi and industry on some of the details to give these transformational reforms the best chance of success. We will be making further announcements in the coming weeks, including a three waters reform support package for councils and their communities,'' Nanaia Mahuta said. "Now that Councils have received this data they can now assess the impact of these proposed reforms. We now need to ensure that ratepayers and households understand the beneficial health, environmental and cost impacts so we can move forward with greater confidence," said Nanaia Mahuta.

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Upgrade to Funding Tool for Community Maternity Services

Changes to how community midwives are paid, will better recognise the time and travel required in more remote parts of New Zealand – and the service provided to mothers and whānau with complex needs. "The Primary Maternity Services Notice has been upgraded, to better fund care for women and whānau in rural areas, and those with complex clinical or social needs," says Associate Minister of Health Dr Ayesha Verrall. The Notice sets out how self-employed primary maternity care providers are paid, and remunerates midwives for services provided from the beginning of pregnancy until six weeks after the baby is born. "Budget 2020 included $85 million over four years to boost primary maternity care for these women. The changes to the Notice enable that funding to be delivered," says Ayesha Verrall.

"I am committed to strengthening the maternity system, and improving the support available to our maternity care providers and the communities they serve. "The 2007 Notice was outdated and provided no compensation for the additional time and travel required of some maternity care providers. This created an unsustainable business model in rural and highly deprived communities, and barriers to access. "With the 2021 Notice, we will have a more flexible funding mechanism. The updated Notice will introduce rural practice, travel, and additional care payments, to more equitably fund travel and provision of maternity care. "This will help improve the sustainability of community-based primary maternity services. "And it is part of this Government's commitment to lay the foundations for a better future. Because investing in a good start in life for our tamariki is one of the most important ways we can support the long-term wellbeing of New Zealanders," says Ayesha Verrall.

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Asia-Pacific

New World Bank Report Covering 10,000 Cities Shows Shape of Urban Growth Underpins Livability and Sustainable Growth

A first-of-its-kind World Bank analysis, of the shape and growth of nearly 10,000 cities between 1990 and 2015, finds that the most successful urban areas are those that connect their growth to economic demand and then support this with comprehensive plans, policies and investments that help avoid uncontrolled sprawl. The new report, Pancakes to Pyramids – City Form for Sustainable Growth, analyzes the dynamic, two-way relationship between a city’s economic growth and the floor space available to residents and businesses. It finds that a city is most likely to be its best version when its shape is driven by economic fundamentals and a conducive policy environment – namely, a robust job market, flexible building regulations, dependable public transit and access to essential services, public spaces, and cultural amenities. Ultimately, getting livable space right, hinges on how a city manages its growth as populations and incomes increase, factoring in three dimensions of expansion – horizontal, vertical or within existing spaces (known as infill), the report finds. This will be key as cities, on the frontlines of the COVID-19 crisis, begin planning for a long-term, resilient, and inclusive recovery.

“Cities are at the frontier of development; they are where people go to chase their dreams of a better life for themselves and their families,” said Juergen Voegele, Vice President for Sustainable Development, World Bank. “This report helps us understand why a city grows outward, inward or up. As we support countries with their COVID-19 recovery efforts, this will also help us reflect on what makes a city livable and remind us that well-planned urban growth is good for both people and planet.” In the average Sub-Saharan African city, 60 percent of the population lives in slums—a much larger share than the 34 percent average in cities in developing countries. The lack of floor space takes a severe toll on livability—with major consequences in times of pandemics like COVID-19. Many South Asian cities face similar issues. Horizontal growth is inevitable for most cities. People will continue to migrate to urban areas for opportunities and a better quality of life, so it is crucial for cities to plan for this trend. As urban populations grow, one way to create more space per inhabitant is by building up instead of out. This could also help reduce crowding, discourage long commutes, draw more people to public transit and drive down greenhouse gas emissions. But building tall, or accommodating more people in a city, is dependent on economic demand and the business environment as it requires better technology, large investments, and higher returns on capital.

“Understanding the multiple drivers of city growth—a precondition for livable density in cities—can help city leaders focus on the right policy actions,” said Somik Lall, co-author of the report. "If managed well, cities that take a more pyramid-like shape can provide an impetus to accelerate sustainable development by getting people out of cars, cutting commute times, and limiting greenhouse gas emissions.” Today, around 55 percent of the world lives in urban areas. By 2050, this number is projected to surpass two-thirds of the global population, with much of the new urbanization happening in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. While such growth signals opportunities and better livelihoods for millions of people, it also puts immense strain on cities, especially in countries that contend with low incomes and weak institutional and fiscal capabilities. By describing how economic productivity shapes decisions by households and firms to locate in cities, and how the quantity and spatial distribution of urban floor space respond to these changes in demand, the report aims to help decision makers sort through competing legal and regulatory approaches, evaluate their investments in infrastructure, and mobilize finance for durable urban investments, particularly for essential services such as transport, water provision, solid waste management, and sewage removal and treatment.

From https://www.worldbank.org/ 06/02/2021

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OECD and Global Executives Engage with the Blue Dot Network to Develop Certification for Quality Infrastructure Investment

The OECD, together with governments of the US, Australia and Japan, has commenced consultations on the development of the Blue Dot Network certification process. The Blue Dot Network seeks to help bridge the global infrastructure investment gap by establishing a globally recognised symbol of market-driven, transparent and sustainable infrastructure projects. To achieve this, the Blue Dot Network aims to support and attract investment into quality infrastructure through the establishment of a voluntary, private-sector-focused and government-supported certification scheme for infrastructure projects. “As we “Build Back Better” after the COVID-19 pandemic, sustainable, quality infrastructure that meets Blue Dot Network standards will help ensure a sustainable global economic recovery," said Ambassador Marcia Bernicat, Acting Undersecretary for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment, US Department of State. We know that there is strong support for such a global certification framework, because an OECD survey of prospective members of the Executive Consultation Group showed, that an overwhelming 96% of respondents agreed that such a framework would help drive quality infrastructure investment.

Indeed, initial findings from this report show that survey respondents overwhelmingly supported a framework to assist investors in identifying projects that have positive sustainability features and therefore represent lower-risk investments. “This initiative helps achieve many of the OECD’s core objectives – from environmental protection to ensuring responsible business conduct, high quality infrastructure governance, anti-corruption, gender equality, sustainable finance as well as economic and social progress,” OECD Secretary-General Mathias Cormann said. “We are also home to many of the key international standards in these areas, including the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, the OECD Recommendation on Public Procurement, and the Anti-Bribery Convention. We have experience promoting policies on quality infrastructure investment through our regional programmes, including in Southeast Asia.” Over 150 global executives, covering 96 OECD and non-OECD countries, responsible for approximately USD 12 trillion of the world’s assets under management, have participated in the launch of an OECD-led Executive Consultation Group to provide high-level guidance for the Blue Dot Network.

The launch of this group coincides with the release of results of a new OECD report that documents demand from both the private sector and civil society for a global certification framework that promotes quality infrastructure investment and streamlines international infrastructure standards. “The Blue Dot Network will promote, facilitate and streamline the application of international standards and best practices, and thereby ensure a level playing field and contribute to building trust around quality infrastructure investments,” Mathias Cormann said. The OECD, at the request of the governments of the United States, Australia and Japan, will provide technical support for the Blue Dot Network by building an evidence-base, mobilising a multi-stakeholder partnership and designing the certification framework. As many governments look to stimulate their economies in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Blue Dot Network could provide a timely tool for enabling the quality infrastructure investment that will support a stronger, sustainable, cleaner, and more inclusive recovery.

In particular, the report found that the Blue Dot Network could potentially:
overcome key obstacles inhibiting infrastructure investment through strengthening transparency and ensuring alignment with best-in-class international standards
simplify the integration of sustainability considerations in infrastructure development and investment
build greater confidence around the value and integrity of Environment Social and Governance data
introduce greater efficiency in the infrastructure investment process
foster greater infrastructure investment in low- and middle-income countries
“If we are to optimise the recovery from the pandemic, reach global net zero by 2050 and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we must find better ways to bridge the infrastructure gap,” said Petter Matthews, Executive Director CoST and Executive Director Engineers Against Poverty. “The Blue Dot Network will help us raise standards and has the potential to make a major contribution in this endeavour.’’
For more information, journalists should contact the OECD Media Office (tel. + 33 1 45 24 97 00).

From https://www.oecd.org/ 06/07/2021

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Global Recovery Strong but Uneven as Many Developing Countries Struggle with the Pandemic’s Lasting Effects

The global economy is expected to expand 5.6% in 2021, the fastest post-recession pace in 80 years, largely on strong rebounds from a few major economies. However, many emerging market and developing economies continue to struggle with the

COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, the World Bank says in its June 2021 Global Economic Prospects. Despite the recovery, global output will be about 2% below pre-pandemic projections by the end of this year. Per capita income losses will not be unwound by 2022 for about two-thirds of emerging market and developing economies. Among low-income economies, where vaccination has lagged, the effects of the pandemic have reversed poverty reduction gains and aggravated insecurity and other long-standing challenges.

“While there are welcome signs of global recovery, the pandemic continues to inflict poverty and inequality on people in developing countries around the world,” said World Bank Group President David Malpass. “Globally coordinated efforts are essential to accelerate vaccine distribution and debt relief, particularly for low-income countries. As the health crisis eases, policymakers will need to address the pandemic’s lasting effects and take steps to spur green, resilient, and inclusive growth while safeguarding macroeconomic stability.” Among major economies, U.S. growth is projected to reach 6.8% this year, reflecting large-scale fiscal support and the easing of pandemic restrictions. Growth in other advanced economies is also firming, but to a lesser extent. Among emerging markets and developing economies, China is anticipated to rebound to 8.5% this year, reflecting the release of pent-up demand.

Emerging market and developing economies as a group are forecast to expand 6% this year, supported by higher demand and elevated commodity prices. However, the recovery in many countries is being held back by a resurgence of COVID-19 cases and lagging vaccination progress, as well as the withdrawal of policy support in some instances. Excluding China, the rebound in this group of countries is anticipated to be a more modest 4.4%. The recovery among emerging market and developing economies is forecast to moderate to 4.7% in 2022. Even so, gains in this group of economies are not sufficient to recoup losses experienced during the 2020 recession, and output in 2022 is expected to be 4.1% below pre-pandemic projections. Per capita income in many emerging market and developing economies is also expected to remain below pre-pandemic levels, and losses are anticipated to worsen deprivations associated with health, education and living standards. Major drivers of growth had been expected to lose momentum even before the COVID-19 crisis, and the trend is likely to be amplified by the scarring effects of the pandemic.

Growth in low-income economies this year is anticipated to be the slowest in the past 20 years other than 2020, partly reflecting the very slow pace of vaccination. Low-income economies are forecast to expand by 2.9% in 2021 before picking up to 4.7% in 2022. The group’s output level in 2022 is projected to be 4.9% lower than pre-pandemic projections. An analytical section of the Global Economic Prospects report examines how lowering trade costs such as cumbersome logistics and border procedures could help bolster the recovery among emerging market and developing economies by facilitating trade. Despite a decline over the past 15 years, trade costs remain almost one-half higher in these countries than in advanced economies, in large part due to higher shipping and logistics costs. Efforts to streamline trade processes and clearance requirements, to enable better transport infrastructure and governance, encourage greater information sharing, and strengthen competition in domestic logistics, retail, and wholesale trade could yield considerable cost savings.

“Linkages through trade and global value chains have been a vital engine of economic advancement for developing economies and lifted many people out of poverty. However, at current trends, global trade growth is set to slow down over the next decade,” World Bank Group Vice President for Equitable Growth and Financial Institutions Indermit Gill said. “As developing economies recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, cutting trade costs can create an environment conducive to re-engaging in global supply chains and reigniting trade growth.” Another section of the report provides an analysis of the rebound in global inflation that has accompanied recovering economic activity. The 2020 global recession brought about the smallest inflation decline and the fastest subsequent inflation upturn of the last five global recessions. While global inflation is likely to continue to rise over the remainder of this year, inflation is expected to remain within target ranges in most inflation-targeting countries. In those emerging market and developing economies where inflation rises above target, a monetary policy response may not be warranted provided it is temporary and inflation expectations remain well-anchored.

“Higher global inflation may complicate the policy choices of emerging market and developing economies in coming months as some of these economies still rely on expansionary support measures to ensure a durable recovery,” World Bank Prospects Group Director Ayhan Kose said. “Unless risks from record-high debt are addressed, these economies remain vulnerable to financial market stress should investor risk sentiment deteriorate as a result of inflation pressures in advanced economies.” Rising food prices and accelerating aggregate inflation may also compound challenges associated with food insecurity in low-income countries. Policymakers in these countries should ensure that rising inflation rates do not lead to a de-anchoring of inflation expectations and resist subsidies or price controls to avoid putting upward pressure on global food prices. Instead, policies focusing on scaling up social safety net programs, improving logistics and climate resilience of local food supply would be more helpful.

Regional Outlooks:
East Asia and Pacific: Growth in the region is projected to accelerate by 7.7% in 2021 and 5.3% in 2022. For more, see regional overview. Europe and Central Asia: The regional economy is forecast to grow by 3.9% this year and 3.9% next year. For more, see regional overview. Latin America and the Caribbean: Regional economic activity is expected to grow by 5.2% in 2021 and 2.9%. For more, see regional overview. Middle East and North Africa: Economic activity in the Middle East and North Africa is forecast to advance by 2.4% this year and 3.5% next year. For more,

see regional overview. South Asia: Economic activity in the region is projected to expand by 6.8% in 2021 and 6.8% in 2022. For more, see regional overview. Sub-Saharan Africa: Economic activity in the region is on course to rise by 2.8% in 2021 and 3.3% in 2022. For more, see regional overview.

From https://www.worldbank.org/ 06/08/2021

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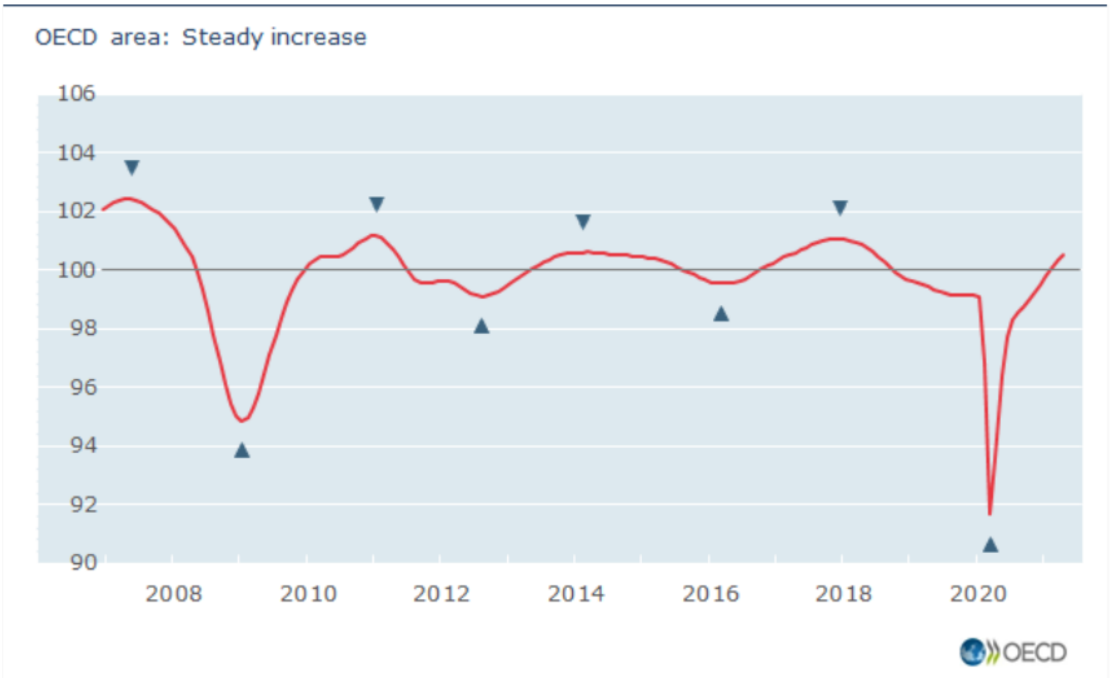
CLIs Continue to Increase at a Steady Pace

The OECD Composite leading indicators (CLIs), designed to anticipate turning points in economic activity relative to trend, continue to point to a steady expansion in the OECD area as a whole. For all major OECD economies, the CLIs now point to a steady expansion. The CLIs have continued to increase steadily in the United States, Japan, Canada and in the euro area as a whole, including Germany and Italy. Although remaining below trend,the CLIs for the United Kingdom and France nowalsosignal a steady expansion. Among major emerging economies, the CLIs continue to increase at a steady pace in Russia and China (industrial sector) whereas the pace of expansion of the CLI for India continues to moderate. The CLI for Brazil continues to point to slowing growth. Despite the gradual lifting of COVID-19 containment measures in some countries and the progress of vaccination campaigns, persisting uncertainties might result in higher than usual fluctuations in the CLI and its components. As such, the CLIs should be interpreted with care and their magnitude should be regarded as an indication of the strength of the signal rather than as a measure of the degree of growth in economic activity.



From https://www.oecd.org/ 06/09/2021

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Do Smart Cities Make Us Smarter — Philosophical Discussion on Over-Dependence on Smart-Phones in Our Cities

In the recent decades, the term "smart city" has become more and more popular among researchers across a number of disciplines such as town planning, environmental studies, transport engineering and computer science. Most of the attention has been given to the application of technology into making our city more adaptable, sustainable and comfortable. However, we would like to raise a small question here amidst this wave of enthusiasm: Is smart city making us smarter, healthier and more active in other non-technological social aspects? Research attention given to topics with a pretext of "smart" has been growing in the last decade within higher education institutions as well as the society as a whole. Researching on any aspect with a pretext of "smart" is appealing these days because it is easy to get funding due to relatively clearly-defined deliverables of research outcomes in terms of technological advancement to be achieved from the study. On the other hand, how ordinary people should adapt to these fast moving "smart city" development so as to make our society more livable and amiable is a relatively less appealing topic as the deliverables are more difficult to define and measure. Hence, this aspect is usually relegated to a lower priority in most research agendas. In this paper, our objective is not to refute the importance of smart city concept.

This paper is not an empirical analysis on the drawback of some smart city applications. We fully understand and appreciate the importance of smart city technologies to the various needs of urban development in any city. We wish, however, to raise the concern that smart city is developed to make human beings a more livable environment, but at the end, it is also human behaviour that determines how "livable" a society can be. In this paper, we will focus on the issues pertaining to the growing popularity of smart-phones which have become an indispensable part of our life in the development of smart cities. In this presentation, we would like to point out that while development of technological advancement for the sake of building smart cities is important and inevitable, more attention should also be given to the social responsibility of the general citizens in using these smart phones for the purpose of enjoying smart city outcomes. If smart cites are to be designed to make us smarter, we should be able to behave and live in a smarter way than before. By focusing on the use of smart phones in our cities, we would like to show that in reality, due to over-indulgence in these smart cities applications, the outcome could be the opposite, until we have learned to live in the smart way.

From https://link.springer.com/ 06/09/2021

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What a $1 Trillion Infrastructure Bill Could Mean for Smart Cities

Investments in intelligent transportation technology can have significant benefits for cities and residents. For years, the United States' infrastructure has failed to earn a grade of higher than C-. However, there is good news to report. With a potentially trillion-dollar infrastructure bill on the table, cities across America stand to be empowered to make significant modernization improvements that will raise the national infrastructure grade. The drafted American Jobs Plan includes major spending in public transit infrastructure, roadways and safety, electric vehicles, passenger rail, and digital infrastructure — all critical pillars of efficient, connected smart cities. The plan is broad and far-reaching, which raises a question: As federal funds become available, where should cities start? With many agencies and stakeholders involved, modernization efforts can seem overwhelming. Ideally, cities should look to leverage existing technology as the foundation for a smart city initiative. Technology fitting that description includes IP-enabled devices typically installed already across metropolitan areas. These are relatively low-cost and can pave the way for cities to transition to smart infrastructure, especially when coupled with vehicle data. How is this anonymous vehicle data captured? Through artificial intelligence and machine learning video analytics.

Actionable Data Can Improve Cities' Infrastructure

When we think of vehicle recognition technology, ticketing and tolls typically spring to mind. However, thanks to enhanced data capture technology, AI-powered data analysis and data sharing capabilities, this technology can serve as a central hub that powers a host of services, not only public safety applications. Today, whether located on a bridge, a building or a pole, sensors generating video streams can be turned into multipurpose roadway monitoring devices. As vehicles travel through a city, these sensors seamlessly capture anonymitized information along with vehicle make, model, body type and direction of travel. When AI is applied to the information gathered, actionable intelligence can be derived for a host of benefits. With advanced vehicle recognition technology, city officials can fuel decision-making across multiple agency-specific infrastructure initiatives, including roadway planning and optimization, citizen safety, parking management, and environmental improvement.

How Smart Cities Can Benefit from Vehicle Data

As these use cases are integrated into smart city design, they create limitless opportunities for more efficient government services, job creation, revenue realization and improved quality of life.

Let's take a closer look.

1. Intelligent Traffic Monitoring: A staggering 43 percent of public roadways are in poor or mediocre condition, a number that has remained stagnant over the years. It is a pressing challenge that urban planners must address. Typically, they do this by outsourcing traffic studies to third parties who evaluate road performance and calculate how efficiently traffic is moving. But these point-in-time studies do not factor in evolving traffic conditions. When intelligent roadway technology is deployed

around a city's transportation network, planners can conduct these studies independently and continuously. They can monitor traffic flow over time, analyze vehicle congestion patterns and gauge average estimated vehicle tonnage by area — all from a single hub. Using these insights, they can make real-time, data-driven decisions about how best to manage traffic flow and inform future roadway improvements, such as resurfacing and the placement of roundabouts and lights.

2. Green Transportation: Advanced vehicle recognition technology can be a key enabler of many of the environmental targets outlined in the Biden administration's plan. Sensors connected to AI and machine learning algorithms can determine vehicle emission levels based on the specifications of each vehicle on the roads. They can also gauge air pollution, greenhouse gas and fuel efficiency scores by location. This powerful data can be used to design policy and infrastructure that reduces air pollution and promotes sustainable transit alternatives. These innovations also help cities meet the White House's goal of winning the electric vehicle market. Smart city planners can analyze the real-world movement of EVs, including hot spots and charging behavior. With these insights, they can determine the optimal placement and hours of operation for charging stations, or where to establish "green corridors" exclusively for EVs.

3. Smart Parking: Smart parking is a critical part of any smart city framework. It can help close revenue gaps, optimize parking management and enforcement practices, and improve the visitor experience. Real-time intelligence derived from sensors located in parking areas can identify vehicles as they enter a location and set in motion any number of smart parking actions. Parking managers and law enforcement can verify prepaid and monthly parking, match vehicles to whitelists or blacklists, and streamline the fragmented workflows and systems involved in permit issuance, payments, reporting, citations and more. Data captured by these systems can also be used to optimize occupancy planning and management.

4. Improved Public Safety: A central goal of the American Jobs Plan is to fix all roadways "with safety, resilience, and all users in mind." To achieve this, the plan proposed $20 billion to fund state and local "vision zero" plans and other improvements to reduce crashes and fatalities. Advanced vehicle recognition systems can be quickly put to work to achieve these goals, placing lifesaving data into the hands of city officials in real time. The technology can detect and alert authorities of unsafe roadway conditions, such as hazardous weather, dangerous speeders and wrong-way drivers. If a vehicle is the subject of a criminal investigation or connected to an Amber Alert or Silver Alert, it can be quickly located and intercepted by law enforcement.

Building Smart Cities That Make the Grade

We are at a critical juncture. The American Jobs Plan provides the resources to help America make the infrastructure grade. However, our infrastructure is more interconnected than ever before, and we must utilize new approaches and technologies to make progress toward greener and smarter cities. As transportation and safety evolve as fundamental, must-have components of smart cities, roadway intelligence derived from vehicle recognition technology can be the jumping-off point for cities looking to build safer, greener, more resilient infrastructure.

From https://statetechmagazine.com/ 06/10/2021

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COVID-19 Pandemic Highlights Urgent Need to Scale Up Investment in Lifelong Learning for All, Says OECD

Countries must step up their efforts to enable people to continue learning throughout their lives to navigate a rapidly changing world of work shaped by globalisation and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new OECD report. OECD Skills Outlook 2021: Learning for Life says that public policies should play a key role in facilitating effective and inclusive lifelong learning, but much remains to be done. It will be crucial to invest part of the resources devoted to the recovery to lifelong learning programmes, involving all key stakeholders and with a focus on vulnerable groups, particularly young people, the NEET (neither in employment, education or training) and those whose jobs are most at risk of transformation, says the report. "It's essential that lifelong learning becomes a reality for everyone since the crisis has further accelerated the transformation in our economy and skills needs. Today, too many adults do not participate in workplace learning and the pandemic has further reduced their opportunities to do so," said OECD Secretary-General Mathias Cormann, launching the report in Paris. "In the recovery efforts, skills will make the difference between staying ahead of the curve or falling behind in a world in constant flux. Countries need to invest part of the resources devoted to the recovery to lifelong learning programmes, involving all key stakeholders and with a specific focus on vulnerable groups – including young people, women and workers whose jobs are most at risk of transformation."

Even before the pandemic, only two out of ten low-educated adults took part in formal or on-the-job training, compared to six out of ten high-educated adults. Participation in adult learning also differs greatly across countries: fewer than 25% of adults in Greece, Italy, Mexico and Turkey report participating in adult learning, compared to over 55% in Denmark, Finland, New Zealand, Norway and Sweden. The pandemic may also affect the learning attitude of children and youth. The disruptions to regular schooling led many children to progress less than expected in skill development. In the short term, the pandemic could lead to increases in early school leavers. In the medium and long term, lower engagement could result in the current generation of students failing to develop positive learning attitudes, at a time of profound structural changes that will require individuals to upgrade their skills throughout their life, warns the report. Furthermore, the report identifies potential cause of gender inequality in training opportunities. Up to 28% of "inactive but motivated” women mention family obligations as a barrier to participating in training, compared to only 8% of men. The gender gap widens when children appear in the family.

To enable more people to continue learning and updating their skills, the report says countries should focus on three key issues:
Place learners at the centre of learning: diversified learning opportunities can enhance the quality of education and training. Policy design must be inclusive, affordable, accessible and adaptable. Skills for a lifetime: lifelong learning rests on strong foundation skills, such as literacy and numeracy, the willingness to learn, and a habit of learning. Policies should harness the power of technology while also considering the effects technology can have on existing skills inequalities and the creation of new ones. Strong co-ordination for high quality, inclusive learning: policies should build strong co-ordination, knowledge management and information sharing to bring lifelong learning to the required scale. Policies should aim at improving recognition, validation and accreditation procedures to enhance the visibility and transferability of the skills taught in these programmes. The report is available at https://www.oecd.org/education/oecd-skills-outlook-e11c1c2d-en.htm. For more information, journalists should contact Francesca Borgonovi of the OECD’s Centre for Skills or the OECD Media Office (tel. + 33 1 45 24 97 00). Working with over 100 countries, the OECD is a global policy forum that promotes policies to preserve individual liberty and improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world

From https://www.oecd.org/ 06/15/2021

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World Bank, IMF Launch High-Level Advisory Group on Sustainable and Inclusive Recovery and Growth

In the face of two crises – COVID-19 and climate change – the World Bank Group and International Monetary Fund launched a High-Level Advisory Group (HLAG) on Sustainable and Inclusive Recovery and Growth today to help secure a strong recovery and set a path for green, resilient, and inclusive development over the coming decade. The HLAG will be jointly led by Mari Pangestu, Managing Director for Development Policy and Partnerships, World Bank; Ceyla Pazarbasioglu, Director, Strategy, Policy and Review Department, International Monetary Fund; and Lord Nicholas Stern of the London School of Economics. It aims to advance understanding of key policy and institutional issues that will inform a response to multiple interconnected challenges – the two crises, which are exacerbating poverty and inequality, as well as structural weaknesses that existed before the pandemic. Comprised of experts from research institutions, private sector, and governments, in addition to senior staff of the World Bank Group and IMF, the HLAG will propose ideas and frameworks for strategic and practical national and global action. These would contribute towards a sustainable and inclusive recovery, as well as setting the agenda for a sustained transformation based on new perspectives and models of growth and development.

“The poor and most vulnerable have been hit hardest by COVID-19, as well as climate change, and other challenges. I look forward to this High-Level Advisory Group offering new ideas for impactful action, both at country-level and globally, to foster green, resilient and inclusive development and help developing countries get back on track to reduce poverty and inequality,” said David Malpass, President, World Bank Group. “The world faces two huge crises – the pandemic, and the climate emergency – that demand radical and coordinated action. Through policy analysis and practical proposals, the High-Level Advisory Group will play a key role in this effort, and I look forward to this important collaboration,” said Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director, International Monetary Fund. Over the next eighteen months, the HLAG will marshal the combined and complementary policy experience and analytical strengths of its members to set out practical proposals in two phases:
First, focus on the immediate challenge of a sustainable and inclusive recovery to inform the processes and meetings in 2021 leading up to the G20 Summit in Rome (October) and the COP26 in Glasgow (November)
Second, deepen the analyses and formulation of actions for sustained transformation in 2022.
HLAG experts include:

Philippe Aghion, Centennial Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics and Political Science, at the Collège de France, and at INSEAD; Montek Ahluwalia, former Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission of India; Masood Ahmed, President, Center for Global Development; Timothy Besley, School Professor of Economics and Political Science and Sir W. Arthur Lewis Professor of Development Economics, London School of Economics and Political Science; Amar Bhattacharya, Senior Fellow, Center for Sustainable Development; Laurence Boone, Chief Economist and Head of the Economics Department, OECD; Ottmar Edenhofer, Professor of the Economics of Climate Change, Technical University of Berlin and Director of the Potsdam Institute of Climate Impact Research; Gita Gopinath, Economic Counsellor and Director of the Research Department at the IMF; Homi Kharas, Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution; Eliana La Ferrara, Fondazione Romeo ed Enrica Invernizzi Chair in Development Economics, Bocconi University; Joaquim Levy, Director for Economic Strategy and Market Relations at Banco Safra S.A., and former Finance Minister, Brazil; Zhu Min, former Deputy Managing Director, IMF; Maria Ramos, Chair, AngloGold Ashanti Limited and former CEO of Absa Group Limited; Carmen Reinhart, Vice President of Development Economics and World Bank Group Chief Economist; Andres Velasco, Professor of Public Policy and Dean, School of Public Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank Group has committed over $125 billion to fight the health, economic, and social impacts of the pandemic, the fastest and largest crisis response in its history. The financing is helping more than 100 countries strengthen pandemic preparedness, protect the poor and jobs, and jump start a climate-friendly recovery. The Bank is also providing $12 billion to help low- and middle-income countries purchase and distribute COVID-19 vaccines, tests, and treatments. On climate change, the World Bank Group is the largest multilateral financier of climate action in developing countries, having provided $83bn in finance for climate from 2016-2020. The IMF has been at the forefront of the international response to the pandemic, and recently published a $50 billion roadmap to accelerate the equitable distribution of health tools to help end the health crisis that has devastated lives and livelihoods. Since the start of the pandemic, the Fund has approved over $109 billion in financing to 84 countries of which 52 are low-income countries. The Fund has also provided capacity development to 160 countries during this period. In addition, debt relief under the IMF's Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust CCRT has been extended to 29 of the Fund's poorest and most vulnerable members reaching almost $700 million for eligible debt service falling due to the IMF through October 15, 2021.

From https://www.worldbank.org/ 06/15/2021

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Are We Overselling "Smart Cities"?

Headlines can't get enough of smart cities, but are they worth the enormous trade-offs for our digital rights? We've all seen the sleek and modern renderings of future "smart cities" adorning tech websites and magazine features. These images are architectural visions, made up of undulating skyscrapers, rooftop parks and self-driving cars running on trafficless roads. Sometimes there are even flying saucers, or giant drones, gliding through the clear, pollutant-free skies. Headlines can't seem to get enough of these "smart cities". They are presented as the catch-all solution to the unsustainability of dense, smoggy urban centres, thanks to built-in digital technologies maximising the efficiency of everything from bins to streetlamps. But can so-called smart cities live up to the hype — especially given the enormous trade offs they present to our digital rights? Cities are problematic. Inconceivable numbers of people across the world inhabit them: take São Paulo, Brazil, with its population of 21 million, or Delhi, India, with its 28 million. Crowding is endemic, air pollution kills millions every year, and cities are, in turn, destroying the environment: urban areas consume two thirds of the world's energy and generate over 70 per cent of global CO2 emissions.

Smart cities entail a multitude of what were, until recently, futuristic fantasies: self-driving cars, bins that can send emails, and even talking toasters
Regularly pitched as the answer to these intractable problems are "smart cities". Smart cities entail a multitude of what were, until recently, futuristic fantasies: self-driving cars, bins that can send emails, and even talking toasters. The idea is that, through automation, we can make life more efficient, cutting back on energy

waste — think motion-activated streetlights or smart gas meters in your home — and gathering greater insight into people’s behaviours in order to optimise society across the board. But there are predictable dark sides to this vision. Many digital rights activists have dubbed smart cities “surveillance cities” due to the staggering amount of data collection they involve. “When everything you do in an environment is collected, measured, and stored — what does that mean for your freedoms, personal expression, and sense of personal safety?” asks Tarun Wadhwa, author of Identified: The Digital Transformation of Who We Are. “In Shenzen, for example, if a person jaywalks on certain streets they will be identified with facial recognition and then receive a ticket to their WeChat account and may also have their face shown on a billboard nearby,” says Wadhwa. “That seems like an extremely high price to pay in the form of social shaming and removing layers of our justice system in order to achieve a small gain, more orderly street passings.” Who could get their hands on the data collected is also a critical issue.

Companies that place cameras and sensors on Wi-Fi kiosks, trash cans and streetlights will gain what had been unattainable insights about the behaviour of individuals
“The smart city is also a dream come true for companies eager to increase the scale and scope of data they collect about the public,” says Ben Green, author of The Smart Enough City. “Companies that place cameras and sensors on Wi-Fi kiosks, trash cans and streetlights will gain what had been unattainable insights about the behaviour of individuals.” Not only that, but the risks of cyberattacks and hacking are growing in tow with the expansion of these “smart” solutions. A s for the rewards we expect to reap from smart cities: these are not shared equally across a society. As is often the case, it is marginalised groups that are most susceptible to the failures of supposedly “smart” technology. “They [digital technologies] exacerbate the existing tensions and power structures in a powerful way — technology can automate oppression and encode the worst impulses or fears of a society,” explains Wadhwa. As it stands, poor areas are already subject to greater surveillance than wealthier ones. This means that those who are already disadvantaged by our society are disproportionately bearing the burdens of this brave new world.

This means that those who are already disadvantaged by our society are disproportionately bearing the burdens of this brave new world
But even if we put aside the many — and serious — drawbacks of expanding surveillance infrastructure, data collection and algorithmic decision-making, can smart technologies achieve what we need them to do? Or is the truly “smart city” a mere pipe dream? “Smart city efforts are never able to accomplish the lofty goals set out for them,” says Green. “The technology is almost always over-hyped and over-sold as being able to solve incredibly complex social and institutional challenges.” As is typical when technology is marketed as a silver bullet to society’s problems, people repeatedly overlook technology’s many limitations. Green has witnessed this phenomenon firsthand. “As I worked on various efforts to use

technology to improve urban policy and urban life, I found that the biggest challenges were political and institutional, rather than technological," he says. "Across policy areas ranging from mobility to civic engagement to policing, I saw how projects conceived of existing problems as technology problems, and in turn overemphasised the role of technology in producing social reform."

As commentators have noted again and again, technology is simply no substitute for good governance. "Use technology where appropriate, but prioritise the social impacts of reform," Green advises. Despite the accompanying concerns, many decision-makers are powering full-steam ahead with developing "smarter" cities. For many local politicians, implementing a new smart technology is an automatic boost to their public image. So, as smart technologies infiltrate more and more of our daily lives, how can we prevent them from overstepping the line? For many local politicians, implementing a new smart technology is an automatic boost to their public image. "Public resistance is the primary tool at our immediate disposal for combatting smart cities," says Green. "These efforts have led to new laws that ban or oversee surveillance technologies as well as some projects being abandoned altogether." "We also need broader regulation to curb the power of tech companies and provide greater privacy protections."

From https://medium.com/ 06/16/2021

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Improving Mental Health Care Key to COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a sharp increase in mental ill-health issues, especially among the young, unemployed and those facing financial insecurity. Countries should provide adequate support to those affected, while urgently scaling up investment and quality of care to reduce the high social and economic costs of mental ill-health, according to a new OECD report. A New Benchmark for Mental Health Sytems: Tackling the Social and Economic Costs of Mental Ill-Health says that mental health care has long been neglected and under-funded, and unmet need for care is still high in OECD countries. Even before the onset of the pandemic, an estimated one in two people experienced a mental health condition at some point in their lifetime, and one in five were living with mental ill-health at any given time. Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, levels of mental distress have increased sharply, especially among young people, with prevalence of anxiety and depression even doubling in some countries.

Mental ill-health drives economic costs equal to more than 4.2% of GDP, some of which are the direct costs of treatment, but more than a third of which are related to lower employment rates and reduced productivity. These costs can be avoided, at least in part, according to the report. OECD governments make person-centred care a priority in mental health strategies, but nearly 20% of people with a mental health condition reported they were not treated with courtesy and respect during a hospital stay. Only eight countries routinely collect information about people's experiences of, and outcomes from, mental health care. Availability of accessible and high-quality mental health services is improving, but 67% of people who wanted mental health care reported they had difficulties getting it. People with serious mental health conditions still have a much lower life expectancy than the population average. A key part of good mental health system governance and leadership is acknowledgement of the issues, says the report. However, while the level of spending on mental health care has increased in OECD countries over the past decade, the share of total health spending dedicated to mental health has not increased and has even declined in some countries.

Countries are making their mental health systems more innovative and future-focused using new approaches to mental health support such as apps and telemedicine, but it is also essential to have a sustainable workforce and a strong data infrastructure to track and improve performance. In both these areas countries are falling short: 11 OECD countries have only one or fewer psychologists per 10 000 population, while all countries struggle to collect a complete set of mental health performance indicators. Countries must invest more in developing stronger and more widely available data on the key dimensions of mental health performance to drive faster and more meaningful improvements, says the report. The report is available at https://www.oecd.org/health/a-new-benchmark-for-mental-health-systems-4ed890f6-en.htm. For further information on this issue, please visit https://oecd.org/coronavirus/en/#spotlight. For more information, journalists should contact Spencer Wilson of the OECD Media Office (tel. + 33 1 45 24 97 00). Working with over 100 countries, the OECD is a global policy forum that promotes policies to preserve individual liberty and improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.

From https://www.oecd.org/ 06/18/2021

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Are Smart Cities at Risk from Hackers?

From traffic lights to bins, across the world, internet-connected technology is being integrated across all manner of everyday city infrastructure. Smart city technology can provide cities with real-time information which can be analysed to offer insights into how people interact with the city. These insights can be used to make cities operate more efficiently and ensure that cities are responding to the changing needs of their citizens. However, like any internet-connected device, smart city infrastructure runs the risk of being targeted by bad actors who wish to disrupt the operation of city life. This blog post explores the extent to which smart cities are vulnerable to attack by hackers and considers the steps that can be taken to prevent them from being compromised by nefarious actors.

Connected and vulnerable

It’s an unfortunate fact of our increasingly more connected lives that as we connect more devices to the internet, we provide hackers with more opportunities to access our devices, compromise our networks, and gain access to personal information. In recent years, as we have added more Internet of Things (IoT) devices to our home networks, such as smart lightbulbs and thermostats, there is a chance we may be weakening the overall security of our networks. Experts have warned that these small IoT devices may not have the necessary level of sophisticated defences required to protect them from attack. Naturally, as these devices normally perform relatively inconsequential tasks (such as turning on a lamp) and don’t tend to host a great deal of personal data, many consumers do not consider the danger they could pose if compromised. Research has found that hackers may be able to gain access to entire home networks through hacking a single IoT device. This can enable hackers to access other connected devices, such as a phone, which holds a large amount of personal data. This can allow hackers to steal personal data, covertly spy on unknowing users, and gain access to email/social media/bank accounts. Therefore, as more small-scale infrastructure is connected to the internet, hackers will have more opportunities to take advantage of devices with lax security. In the context of smart cities, these vulnerabilities may be able to gain access to systems that operate critical city infrastructure.

Smart city vulnerabilities

A key component of the development of smart cities is the fostering of a network of interconnected devices which cover a wide variety of city activities and functions. Through collecting and analysing this data, cities will be able to improve the way they operate in real-time and better respond to the needs of citizens. As such, smart city technology will have to be integrated into systems as simple as a streetlight and as complex as the public transit system. As previously discussed, IoT devices have varying levels of protection against hackers, and this is no different in the context of the smart city. Research conducted by UC Berkley found that small smart city infrastructure, such as CCTV systems and traffic lights, were more vulnerable to attack than more significant infrastructure, such as smart waste and water management systems. Vulnerabilities at any point of a network can allow hackers to gain access and potentially to compromise a more critical part of city infrastructure.

Recently published guidance from the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) indicated that smart cities are a target for hackers, and warned that if systems are compromised there may be “destructive impacts”. For example, if a hacker can gain access to a smart traffic management system, they may be able to take the system offline and create traffic gridlock across a city. This would cause mass disruption and prevent people from moving around, which could result in threats to public safety. As a result, ensuring smart cities are protected from bad actors will be crucial as more city infrastructure is integrated into smart internet-connected systems.

Protecting the smart city

Although smart cities will undoubtedly be a target for hackers, several actions can be taken to protect them from attack, and mitigations can be put in place to protect the wider smart city network if a single device is compromised. Ensuring that smart cities are designed with security at their core is vital. Adding on security at a later date will be ineffective and experts believe a "bolt-on" approach may pose more of a security risk. Guidance from the NCSC sets out the importance of understanding who is supplying the infrastructure and being aware that some companies may have links to foreign governments who may wish to gain access to UK systems for nefarious purposes.

Key steps that the NSCS advice should be taken to protect the smart city include:

Understanding the goal of the smart city and potential unforeseen impacts.

Examining the threats posed to the smart city.

Setting out the governance of smart city cybersecurity and ensuring staff have the correct skills.

Understanding the role of suppliers in the delivery of smart city infrastructure and cybersecurity.

Being aware of relevant legal and regulatory requirements (particularly surrounding data protection).

Final thoughts

The development of smart cities may provide opportunities to create cities that are more efficient and responsive to the needs of citizens. Unfortunately, as more infrastructure is connected to the internet, hackers are provided with more opportunities to disrupt systems and harvest personal data. The levels of disruption and data will undoubtedly make smart cities an attractive target for bad actors. Therefore, to reap the benefits of the smart city, it will be vital that security is at the core of the development of the smart city, and that local authorities ensure they have a clear understanding of who is responsible for cybersecurity.

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World Bank Group Increases Support for Climate Action in Developing Countries

New Climate Change Action Plan will increase high-impact support to deliver climate results, targeted towards reducing the trajectory of emissions and strengthening adaptation and resilience in developing countries. The World Bank Group today announced its new Climate Change Action Plan that aims to deliver record levels of climate finance to developing countries, reduce emissions, strengthen adaptation, and align financial flows with the goals of the Paris Agreement. The Action Plan for 2021-25 broadens World Bank Group efforts from investing in "green" projects to helping countries fully integrate their climate and development goals. The Plan also comes as countries seek sustainable pathways out of the disruption caused by the

COVID-19 pandemic. “Our new Action Plan will identify and prioritize action on the most impactful mitigation and adaptation opportunities, and we will drive our climate finance accordingly. This means helping the largest emitters flatten the emissions curve and helping countries achieve successful adaptation and resilience to climate change,” said World Bank Group President David Malpass. “We will be delivering climate finance at record levels and seeking solutions that achieve the most impact.”

Key highlights of the Action Plan include:
Providing major increases in climate finance. The World Bank is already the largest multilateral provider of climate finance for developing countries. The Plan includes a commitment to increase delivery to an average of 35% of total World Bank Group financing for climate over the duration of the Plan. At least 50% percent of International Development Association (IDA) and International Bank for Reconstruction and Developing (IBRD) climate finance will support adaptation. Identifying and prioritizing opportunities for high-impact climate action to inform future World Bank Group climate engagements and investments. A new core diagnostic tool, the Country Climate and Development Report (CCDR), will help countries align climate action and development efforts and absorb new climate-related technologies as they emerge. Boosting support to countries for implementing and updating their Nationally Determined Contributions and Long-Term Strategies pursuant to the Paris Agreement; and adjusting incentives by reducing subsidies for and increasing taxation of greenhouse gas emissions.

Catalyzing and mobilizing private capital for climate action; stepped up efforts to develop carbon credit markets, green bonds and loan markets in countries; and support for global public goods in the poorest countries through IDA funds as well as other sources. Prioritizing action in key systems—energy; agriculture, food, water, and land; cities; transport; and manufacturing—that must be transformed to address climate change, achieve a resilient and low-carbon future, and support the protection of natural capital and biodiversity. The Action Plan will place a strong emphasis on supporting a “just transition” out of coal. Aligning all World Bank Group financing flows with the objectives of the Paris Agreement to support countries’ climate commitments. The World Bank – comprising of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and International Development Association (IDA) – will align all new operations starting July 1, 2023. For the World Bank Group’s private sector development arms, IFC and MIGA, 85 percent of Board approved real sector operations will be aligned starting July 1, 2023, and 100 percent of these operations starting July 1, 2025, two fiscal years later. The World Bank Group will regularly update its Board on the implementation of the Action Plan. The new Action Plan builds on the World Bank Group’s achievements under its first Climate Change Action Plan, which delivered over $83 billion in climate finance over five years, including a record $21.4 billion in 2020.

From https://www.worldbank.org/ 06/22/2021

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How to Secure Smart Cities Through Decentralized Digital Identities

At the recent G7 meeting in Cornwall, there was a consensus among democratic nations to offer viable alternatives to autocrats and autocratic governments. One of the areas where such an alternative can be clearly demonstrated is in smart cities. There, technologies advanced by autocrats are already establishing an alarming foundation for digital authoritarianism. For example, China is already setting the rules and industrial standards in facial recognition systems, as well as communication protocols for interconnected Internet of Things (IoT) devices. Chinese technology groups, such as Huawei, ZTE Corporation, Alibaba, and others are exporting “safe city” and “smart city” packages to scores of countries around the world, including Europe. Serbia’s capital Belgrade has installed a surveillance camera system that can monitor peoples’ behavior, recognize their faces, identify number plates, and assess whether “suspicious” activity is taking place.

As 5G networks and IoT systems become the new communication and data layer of future cities, the question of who has control of and access to these networks, as well as the data they carry, acquires strategic significance. Beyond the obvious human rights threats, such as singling out persons for real-time surveillance, there are huge potential security risks too. Authoritarian regimes can gain access to data via back doors, or in extreme cases, activate a “kill switch” that would debilitate a city’s operations, triggering civil unrest. In exchange for operational efficiency, smart city surveillance systems pose the threat of controlling and coercing societies towards accepting illiberal authoritarianism while exposing themselves to security threats by foreign powers. If that’s what autocrats have to offer, how should democracies respond?

Democracies should infuse the digital infrastructures of the future with democratic values and protect individual freedoms and liberties. In other words, they must ensure that the industrial standards and communication protocols of smart cities prevent citizen surveillance and security breaches “by design.” To do this, democracies must begin rethinking digital identities. A “digital identity” is the entity created each time someone registers an account in order to access a digital service by a Provider (e.g. a bank, a social media site, the government, etc.). Presently, each individual has multiple digital identities, with various account names and passwords, all stored in the various Service Providers’ infrastructures. This poses at least two major problems: first, data is siloed; second, data is exposed to security breaches whenever the centralized infrastructures of the Service Providers, which physically store and manage the digital identities, are hacked. Digital identities are applicable to non-humans too: robots, drones, or other smart devices (such as smart meters and sensors) also need to access services in order to connect to the IoT.

A “decentralized” digital identity framework reverses the relationship of any user with multiple digital identities scattered over many service providers by putting users at the center. The user creates a unique digital identity that is owned by them. They then ask and receive credentials that prove their identity from various issuers, such as their government, university, or employer. For example, a university can send a credential proving that the user holds a specific degree. These credentials are issued using a unique public and private key and are verified using a public blockchain, creating the “decentralization” aspect of the new framework. Rather than a central authority managing the user’s identity, a decentralized, blockchain-based ledger would act as the trusted source of truth. The credentials themselves do not need to be stored on the blockchain. They can be stored in a “digital wallet”, i.e. a private data storage accessed only by the unique, personal, digital identity of the user. This data wallet can be hosted and secured anywhere (for example, in the user’s own computer or a cloud service). Each time the user needs to interact with a digital service, they do not need to expose all their personal data. For example, if the service requires that the user be above a certain age, the blockchain can verify this in a trusted interaction without the need to supply additional proof, such as a copy of a passport or a driver’s licence. By separating and decentralizing sensitive personal data from centralized digital services we not only protect privacy but also vastly improve data security. There is no longer a central “honey pot” of personal data for hackers to break into. Just like humans, smart devices can also have their digital identities decentralized and verified via a public blockchain.

Decentralized digital identity frameworks could be the key to avoiding an Orwellian dystopia for the smart cities of the future and to establishing a liberal, democratic alternative to the authoritarian model, protecting privacy and enhancing security. A grand coalition of democratic governments, cloud providers, mobile network operators, chip and IoT component manufacturers, academic researchers, and entrepreneurs is necessary to establish the standards for commercial, decentralized identity frameworks.

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A Green Economic Reset Will Deliver an Inclusive, Lasting Recovery for Asia and the Pacific

As Asia and the Pacific looks to emerge from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, countries in the region need to decide how to rebuild their shattered economies and reverse major setbacks to poverty reduction and other development goals. Governments have spent trillions of dollars to offset the immediate economic impacts of the pandemic but a full recovery still remains a long way off and ensuring all groups benefit from future growth is a critical challenge for policy makers. Women, the young, and informal workers have suffered disproportionately, while poverty reduction gains of the past three to four years have been undone. There is a growing body of opinion that governments must use the worst global crisis since World War II to reset their economies on a green growth path that can lock in and expand development gains for all citizens, while protecting the environment, slowing climate change, and reducing the threat of future pandemics. “We have to find investment opportunities that serve multiple outcomes and allow us to meet the recovery targets, the economic goals of our countries, but also the long-term aspirations on how to address climate change and other development goals,” said Preety Bhandari, Director of the Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management Division in the Asian Development Bank’s (ADB) Sustainable Development and Climate Change Department.

Gains from green growth

Green-led growth goes well beyond the expanded use of renewable energy, to include any economic intervention that supports sustainable jobs and development while preserving and protecting natural resources. For example, restoring forestland and mangroves, building low-carbon transport solutions like cycleways, and creating sustainable community-based tourism opportunities can create large numbers of jobs, while protecting the environment. Major studies illustrate the huge gains that pursuing a green path will bring in contrast to fossil-fuel led growth. The Global Commission on the Economy and Climate has estimated that countries’ taking strong climate actions between 2018 and 2030 could, by 2030, generate over 65 million new low-carbon jobs, deliver at least $26 trillion in net global economic benefits, and avoid 700,000 premature deaths from air pollution. Another study found that every $1 million spent on renewable energy creates around 7.5 full time jobs and every $1 million spent on energy efficiency creates 7.7 jobs, well above the 2.7 jobs generated from the same amount of investment in fossil fuels. Costs for shifting away from a fossil fuel-driven economic model are compelling. In its World Energy Outlook for 2020, the International Energy Agency, noted that the cost of electricity generated from solar power is now the cheapest in history, and is significantly lower than the cost of coal and gas-fired power in most countries.4 In addition, prices for battery storage and electric vehicles over the past decade have fallen markedly.

Finding finance

Putting economies on a low-carbon growth path, and meeting the Sustainable Development Goal targets by 2030, requires vast resources with annual investment needs for Asia and the Pacific estimated at $1.5 trillion from 2016 to 2030. Financing these enormous requirements is something developing countries cannot do on their own. Seeking private sector support for infrastructure finance and other needs has become a central part of the growth strategy of developing economies, and there is fast-growing private sector interest in investing in projects and financial instruments which provide environmental, social, and financial benefits. Green finance involves investments targeted at environmental and climate improvements, and includes products like green loans and green bonds. Impact bonds, meanwhile help connect private capital to social programs that finance the delivery of social services, such as health and education. One striking example of how these bonds can deliver major benefits, was the issuance of the Educate Girls Development Impact Bond in India, which helped improve education outcomes for marginalized school-age girls. Global issuance of these products is booming, with over $30 trillion, or one third of all global assets now under management, guided by environmental, social and governance considerations. Asia has played an important role in the rise of green finance, contributing about 20% of all green bonds issued in 2020, with Japan and the People's Republic of China now accounting for about a fifth of all global green bonds.

Working with partners

The onset of the pandemic, however, has increased risk perception around infrastructure projects, so ADB and other multilateral institutions have been working with developing member countries to find ways to de-risk and incentivize private support for green projects. One of the most significant financing vehicles for this purpose is the ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility which was set up in 2019 to help scale up green infrastructure investments in Southeast Asia. Up to $1 billion in loans as well as technical assistance from cofinancing partners, including ADB, is made available to help governments identify and prepare commercially viable projects and to cover upfront capital costs to make them attractive to private capital investors. ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility: Up to $1 billion in loans as well as technical assistance from cofinancing partners

ADB also uses a wide range of other financing tools to attract cofinancing support from private investors for its green projects, and is actively involved in both issuing and investing in green finance products. In 2020, it committed its first ever loan to support a private sector company recycling plastic waste from the ocean and other sources, and it also acted as an anchor investor for Georgia's first ever green bond which raised funds to help rehabilitate water supply systems in the capital Tbilisi and neighboring areas. Boosting the private sector's role in helping countries meet the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 will require clearer laws and regulations for green finance and projects, and more effective carbon pricing, including scaled up carbon taxes. Such actions will lead to more green investments from multinational companies and help countries in the region meet increasingly high environmental standards for imported goods in key markets like the European Union.

Strategies for recovery

There is no one size fits all formula for an effective recovery, but countries looking for long term gains will need to promote skills development, particularly the reskilling of the unemployed, and greater adoption of new digital technologies across industries. They will also need to focus stimulus packages and support for sectors that can drive new job opportunities while preserving the environment, including sustainable agriculture and tourism, clean energy, low- carbon transport and recycling. None of these outcomes will be achieved automatically. Many countries in Asia and the Pacific with finances heavily squeezed by COVID-19 have little scope for spending on long-term development – green or otherwise - and will require substantial support from private, public and multilateral partners. A number are continuing to fund polluting state-owned enterprises and to provide subsidies for fossil fuels. One study in 2020 which examined, 17 stimulus packages totaling around $3.5 trillion globally, found that governments have largely ignored the broader sustainability impact of their stimulus measures. However, others are showing a new way forward by pursuing green growth opportunities as they simultaneously battle the pandemic. The Republic of Korea and Japan both provided economic stimulus packages with green components in 2020, while the People's Republic of China has established a $12.6 billion National Green Development Fund to invest in green projects and firms that can help put the economy on a greener path...

A failure by countries to meet their climate commitments will see the world economy suffer $23 trillion in economic losses by midcentury. The stakes for the region and the world couldn't be higher. A failure by countries to meet their commitments to keep global temperatures from rising more than 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels will see the world economy suffer $23 trillion in economic losses by midcentury from natural disasters and the spread of disease, according to a report from Swiss Re, one of the world's largest providers of insurance to other insurance companies.12 Another recent study notes that insufficient action on climate change could push an additional 100 million people around the world into poverty by 2030. "The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into stark focus the already critical issues of poverty, inequality, the environment, and the changing climate and the design of recovery interventions will be crucial, as decisions made now will create systems, institutions, and assets, and define development directions that will last well into the future," said Preety Bhandari. "It is vital that economic stimulus measures are cognizant of long-term, sustainable, and inclusive solutions that put us on a sustainable recovery pathway."

From https://www.adb.org/ 06/03/2021

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Empowering Nations for a Digital Society

ADB Vice-President Bruce Gosper joined a panel discussion on "How can Digital and Data Drive Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery" on 6 May 2021. The panel discussed issues covering the social impacts of the digital divide and what roles and responsibilities do technology leaders have in helping shape the future of Asia and rest of the world. Below are excerpts of his answers.

Question: For economies in Asia which are performing, and also equally economies that are suffering, what steps should we take to create the empowerment that reduces the (digital) divide. What policies are needed and how do we lobby for the marginalized group to be more included?
Vice-President Gosper: ADB has rolled out around $30 billion in loans, in grants, and

technical assistance with a workforce that's now spread across six continents, and frankly we couldn't have done that without the connectivity our IT team has given us. The way we've been able to connect a dispersed workforce, developed more than 50 new digital products, and do our business to get assistance to people simply wouldn't have been possible 5 or 10 years ago. So, the environment we're in is quite a different one.

Three things to note: One is the pockets of poverty are significantly deepened by the pandemic. We're dealing with a challenging environment in which many countries have faced significant setbacks over the past period. And so we're working from a more difficult situation, and in a sense many challenges that we faced pre-pandemic — digitalization and supply chain shifts, demographic, climate, and gender — they've all been compressed together. In fact, the environment for response to that has become more challenging. On the other hand, some of us have pointed out there are some bright signals, that we have plenty of tools, which if applied rightly, by a government working with business, we can do some good things. We've certainly seen a surge in e-commerce. We've seen deployment of many technological solutions. We've seen the proliferation of new business models, and often done by SMEs as much as big business. And those are all promising signs for where we go from here.

I think we've done quite a bit of work and looking across the region we see where the employment opportunities will be in the period ahead. And digitalization will actually empower opportunities in those sorts of sectors. If you look at tourism, which is a massive employer, across the region, there's no doubt that its recovery will depend on new skill sets, particularly around health and hygiene, but also the movement of people. So there's an enormous amount of work to do there. Some of the vulnerabilities in supply chains have been shown by the pandemic. In the first 6 months particularly, it took an enormous effort to address that. So we need more efficient, different levels of automation, more levels of 4.0 technology. For garment manufacturers, again a big employer, the prospect of doing things in a more sustainable way that allows customization of product and smart factories is really an important opportunity. In electronics, we are seeing those supply chain shifts. But if we want to be more than an enabler of jobs in the low-end simple assembly or packaging, and we want people to move up the value chain and get better jobs and all the way that flows through into the broader economies, we've got to think about whether we have the human skills that are necessary to do that, and how we actually support that skill development. And then, of course, the digital trade which is a $1.7 trillion economy. It can double over the next 3 or 4 years, but there's so much work to do in connectivity and skills development to enable SMEs to be part of this, in tracing out IT business process outsourcing (BPO) road maps, all these sorts of things. So, there are plenty of challenges and some significant setbacks, but the response to the pandemic has given us some real pointers to what we need to do and in what sectors.

Question: What is interoperability and how should governments collaborate, since we do not have an global agency for tech or data?
Vice-President Gosper: We don't have one single agency for this. And we probably won't have one single agency that deals with the digital agenda or data flows and the likes. There are bits and pieces, and it's a bit like a patchwork frankly. There's an awful lot happening, and developing countries are involved in some of them. You look at the work within the World Trade Organization (WTO) on e-commerce rules, for instance, so that's a negotiation that's got around about 80% of the global economy actively represented. You look at the way digital economy agreements are rolling out. The most advanced, even more advanced than the Trans-Pacific Partnership, is probably the Australia-Singapore Digital Economy Agreement which addresses data protection source code, digital identities, rules around AI, e-certification, all these sorts of things which actually are important enablers for our economies, not just at the border, but right across the economy. But it is a patchwork, and like most areas of global governance, they're not fixed by one institution, or one process. It is a patchwork which has to be knitted together by people who actually actively work to have multilateral frameworks that protect the weakest that enable growth for all and that spread the benefits that have transparent and fair regulation, which provides opportunity.

So it has to be a global endeavor, it has to be one that's led multilaterally and by institutions like the G20, by the multilateral development banks, by organizations like the WTO and the World Intellectual Property Organization and others. And this is the big area of global governance to be addressed over the next decade or two, and it will take a lot of work, and there will be a lot of different pieces that have to fall into place. But it's quite an important piece of work. In conclusion, it's not cheap to digitalize. It requires significant resources and one of the things the ADB has launched in the last few days has been the Asia Pacific Tax Hub, which is all about ensuring the smallest and weakest economies can actually get on a sustainable revenue path, so that they can actually fund these sorts of developments and it's a critically important thing for the region.

From https://www.adb.org/ 06/16/2021

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East Asia

CHINA: Economy Improves, Businesses Back to Normal

China's economy improved and businesses gradually got back to normal in 2020 despite COVID-19 hits, Hou Kai, auditor general of the National Audit Office, said on Monday. Entrusted by the State Council, Hou delivered an audit report on the enforcement of the central government's 2020 budget and other fiscal revenue and expenditure at the ongoing session of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. China reduced the burden on market entities by over 2.6 trillion yuan (about 406.48 billion U.S. dollars) in 2020, Hou said, adding that 11.86 million new urban jobs were created and more than 9.6 million people were relocated from inhospitable areas. According to a random inspection of the over 231.43 billion yuan of fiscal funds of 43 central departments and their 439 subordinate units, the enforcement of the central government's 2020 budget and investment plans was good overall, said Hou. In recent years, China has intensified its efforts to rectify problems pointed out by the audit, and this has produced notable results, Hou noted.

From http://www.news.cn/ 06/07/2021

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Digital Economy Thrives in China's Western Regions: Report

The rural e-commerce industry boomed in China's western regions in 2020, according to an industrial report. Last year, areas in the west led the growth in the number of new entrepreneurs on e-commerce platform Taobao for the first time in its history, said the report, co-released by Alibaba and an institute under Zhongnan University of Economics and Law. A total of nine western provincial-level regions ranked among the country's top ten that saw the greatest increase in online shop founders, with their year-on-year growth passing 200 percent. Northwest China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region led the gains with its growth of up to 420 percent, followed by two western provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou, the report said. The report also showed that the e-commerce industrial cluster is speeding up its expansion to western China. Taobao villages and townships gained strong momentum in these areas. The number of Taobao villages there soared from 19 to 71 in 2020, up by 274 percent year on year. While spurring the development of key industries, e-commerce will effectively bridge the gap of western regions with central and eastern parts of the country, said Pan Helin, an expert in economics at Zhongnan University of Economics and Law.

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Development Resilience Consolidates Steady Recovery of Chinese Economy

The Chinese economy continued sound recovery momentum in May, driven by its development resilience, with major indicators sending encouraging signs across the board. The country saw steady industrial growth, buoyant retail sales expansion, a booming service industry, and a continuous decrease in urban unemployment, among others, during the period, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on Wednesday. Value-added industrial output measuring factory activities went up by 8.8 percent year on year in May as production demand continued to recover. The figure was up by 13.6 percent from the level in 2019, bringing the average growth for the past two years to 6.6 percent. The manufacturing sector reported robust recovery this year, with the two-year average investment growth rate at 0.6 percent in the first five months, reversing the contraction trend in the January-April period, according to the NBS. In May, the purchasing managers' index for China's manufacturing sector came in at 51, remaining in the expansion zone for the 15th consecutive month, previous NBS data showed.

China's high-tech manufacturing sector is gaining steam on the backdrop of the country's innovation-driven strategy, said NBS spokesperson Fu Linghui. Last month, the sector's output expanded by 17.5 percent, with an average two-year growth of 13.1 percent. The country has a sound industrial foundation and an integrated industrial system for long-term development, said Fu, adding that the dividend of its population size is transforming into advantages in intellectual capital. Retail sales of consumer goods maintained stable expansion in May, up by 12.4 percent year on year and reporting a 0.81-percent monthly increase. Retail sales also logged a two-year average growth of 4.5 percent, said the NBS. Online consumption remained a bright spot, with online retail sales rising by 24.7 percent year on year in the January-May period, registering an average two-year growth of 14.2 percent. China's service industry also gained stronger vitality last month. The service production index logged a 6.6-percent average two-year growth, 0.4 percentage points faster than April.

The index measuring the business activity of services related to long-distance travel exceeded 65 percent, and those for sectors such as catering and entertainment were over 58 percent. During the May Day holiday, the number of domestic tourists exceeded that before the COVID-19 outbreak, generating revenue over 70 percent of the pre-epidemic level, NBS data showed. Fu noted that the future recovery of consumption has a solid foundation, stressing employment expansion and residents' income increase, sound epidemic prevention and control efforts in the country, and the implementation of a series of consumption promotion policies. China's surveyed urban unemployment rate stood at 5 percent in May, 0.9 percentage points lower than the same period last year. Compared with the April level, the May figure was 0.1 percentage point lower, said the NBS. Wednesday's data also showed China's fixed-asset investment went up by 15.4 percent year on year in the first five months. On a month-on-month basis, the investment rose 0.17 percent in May.

In general, China's economy continued the trend of steady rise, with the speed of economic recovery in line with expectations, said Wen Bin, a chief analyst at China Minsheng Bank. While the economic data in May pointed to the continued recovery of China's economy, Fu cautioned that there are still uncertainties, including the different levels of recovery among economies in the world, rapid price hikes of international commodities, and unbalanced recovery domestically. The country will continue epidemic prevention and control measures, implement macro policies scientifically and effectively, and further deepen opening-up to consolidate the foundation for economic recovery and keep the economy operating within a proper range, Fu said.

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China Rolls Out Fee Cuts to Boost Real Economy

Chinese authorities have rolled out fresh measures to cut fees on transactions and payment services as part of efforts to ease the burdens on market entities and boost the real economy. Based on surveys of nearly 50,000 small, micro and individual businesses, four government agencies, including the central bank and the top economic planner, introduced 12 fee-cut policies on basic payment services. The policies, covering areas including bank account services and RMB transactions, will take effect on September 30. In addition, the People's Bank of China and the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission unveiled measures to reduce cross-bank cash withdrawal fees on automated teller machines (ATMs) to facilitate the use of cash. According to preliminary estimates, the implementation of the fee reduction measures is expected to reduce the annual fee expenditure for market players and the public by about 24 billion yuan (about 3.71 billion U.S. dollars), of which more than 66.67 percent will benefit small, micro and individual businesses. The move will help reduce capital circulation costs, further optimize the business environment, and promote the quality and expansion of consumption, playing a positive role in boosting the high-quality development of the national economy, according to the four government agencies.

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China to Improve Infrastructure of Elderly Care, Childcare Services

China will further improve the infrastructure conditions of elderly care and childcare services, the country's top economic planner said Friday. By 2025, more efforts will be made to promote standardization in the construction of facilities, enhance the ability to support those most in need, and increase the supply of inclusive services, according to the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). The NDRC, together with two other government bodies, jointly released an implementation plan on boosting senior care and childcare services. The country will build a standardized home-based elderly care service network in communities, build or renovate state-run senior care service institutions, and support medical institutions to combine elderly care with medical treatments. China will also build a batch of childcare service institutions, expand the supply of inclusive services, and explore new modes such as shared service platforms for family childcare, said the plan. China will support couples that wish to have a third child. Implementing the policy and its relevant supporting measures will help improve China's population structure, actively respond to the aging population, and preserve the country's human resource advantages.

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China's Industrial Profits Grow Steadily as Demand, Business Performance Improve

China's major industrial companies saw their profits maintain steady expansion in the first five months of the year amid recovering market demand and improving business performances, official data showed on Sunday. Industrial firms with an annual business turnover of at least 20 million yuan (about 3.09 million U.S. dollars) raked in around 3.42 trillion yuan in total profits during the period, soaring 83.4 percent year on year, data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) shows. Compared with the 2019 level, profits of major industrial firms rose 48 percent in the first five months. The expansion put average January-May growth in 2020 and 2021 at 21.7 percent, NBS data shows. In May alone, the profits of major industrial firms climbed 36.4 percent from a year earlier to 829.92 billion yuan.

Of all 41 industrial sectors, nearly 70 percent registered yearly profit increases in May, and 80 percent saw profits surpass 2019 levels, according to NBS senior statistician Zhu Hong. Specifically, the raw materials manufacturing sector maintained a robust profit increase last month, and the pharmaceutical manufacturing sector logged accelerated profit growth, Zhu noted. Boosted by rising market demand and price rises for bulk commodities, sectors related to metal smelting and processing, raw chemical materials and product manufacturing, as well as oil and coal, posted fast profit expansions in May, according to Zhu. The pharmaceutical manufacturing industry also saw strong growth, driven by demand for pandemic-related medical supplies such as COVID-19 vaccines and testing kits. The sector's profits soared 85.7 percent over a year earlier, jumping by 23.6 percentage points from April.

Moreover, the business operations of major industrial companies continued to improve last month, with increasing profitability, declining costs and decreasing debt-to-asset ratios, NBS data shows. "In general, China's industrial firms continued their recovery momentum in May, but the recovery is still not on solid footing, given the companies' unbalanced profitability," said Zhu. In the next stage, China will step up efforts to return commodity prices to supply and demand fundamentals, stimulate the vitality of market entities, and sustain the stable growth of industrial firms, Zhu added.

From http://www.news.cn/ 06/27/2021

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JAPAN: Eyes Regional Revitalization with Transfer of 10,000 Workers

The Japanese government on Wednesday pledged to promote regional revitalization by preparing a list of 10,000 workers interested in moving to rural areas and working at local firms. By compiling the list of potential workers at local companies and promoting teleworking from rural areas, the government hopes to "rectify" the Tokyo-centric economy and population to help revive regional areas, according to a draft of its annual economic policy guideline presented at a government panel meeting. The chance to move to a rural area has been attracting greater attention in Japan, with more people working from home amid the coronavirus pandemic and the high number of infections reported in the populous Tokyo metropolitan area. There have been moves among major Japanese companies to relocate their headquarters to regions away from the Tokyo area, including staffing firm Pasona Group Inc and entertainment agency Amuse Inc.

The government plans to expand the existing list of people interested in moving to rural areas prepared by the Regional Economy Vitalization Corporation of Japan, a public-private investment fund, according to the policy blueprint. The government is also set to "start discussions soon" to set up a new agency in charge of issues surrounding children such as child poverty, abuse and bullying -- a policy Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga has shown an eagerness to promote. An "administrative organization" is needed to comprehensively deal with the challenges related to children, and to eliminate the sectionalism of policies, the draft said. To curb declines in the country's birthrate, a package of supportive measures will be compiled by the end of this year, with numerical goals set for each policy, it added. As for the fiscal 2022 budget, the draft policy guideline said Suga's signature policies in four fields -- regional revitalization, children, green society and digitalization -- will receive "priority in the distribution of resources."

To achieve the country's goal of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, the government upheld the principle of making it a "top priority" to promote as much renewable energy as possible, while trying to minimize the burden on people caused by such efforts, according to the draft. The government maintained its stance to proceed with the restarting of nuclear power plants, while reducing its reliance on nuclear power as much as possible. In Japan, many plants remain offline under stricter safety regulations implemented following the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster triggered by a massive earthquake and tsunami. The blueprint also said the government "sticks" to its target of bringing its primary balance -- tax revenue minus expenses other than debt-servicing costs -- into the black by fiscal 2025. The draft said the government will "examine" the impact of the virus on Japan's economy and finances by March, and based on the results, "reaffirm" the target year for achieving a surplus. Along with the government's annual economic growth strategy focusing on enhancing domestic development and the production of cutting-edge semiconductors, the draft guideline is expected to be approved by the Cabinet later this month.

From https://japantoday.com 06/10/2021

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Japan to Focus on Greener Society, Digital for Pandemic Recovery

Japan's cabinet approved Friday its annual economic policy guideline with the focus on promoting a greener society and digitalization to be the driving forces of a sustained post-coronavirus economic recovery. With the first policy blueprint under Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, who took office in September, the government will "intensively promote investment" in four priority areas that also cover child-related issues and regional revitalization, while continuing to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve its goal of carbon neutrality by 2050, the government adopted the principle of making it a "top priority" to promote as much renewable energy as possible, while trying to minimize the burden on people caused by such efforts. Through measures such as Japan's 2 trillion yen ($18 billion) fund to support green technology development and carbon pricing, the government will encourage the private sector to run innovative projects, and try to attract from across the world "environment investments" estimated to be worth 3,000 trillion yen.

On the digitalization front, the government vowed to build up "public and private infrastructure in the digital era in the next five years" through such steps as offering administrative services online and providing more opportunities for workers and students to acquire IT expertise. Among other envisaged plans is to set up a new administrative organization to comprehensively deal with challenges surrounding children such as child poverty, abuse and bullying, although the plan lacks a specific timing for its launch. By arranging a better environment for children and their parents through the new agency, the government expects more women taking care of families to enter the labor market. It also aims to curb a decline in the country's birthrate, which could further exacerbate a serious labor shortage amid the graying of the population.

As for steps against the pandemic, the guideline referred to the goal of completing the vaccination against COVID-19 of all eligible people in Japan who wish to receive shots in October or November. The goal is vital for Suga, who will be looking to win public support ahead of a general election that must be held by November, as he has faced criticism over the nation's slow vaccine rollout. In preparation for another virus outbreak in the future, the government pledged to take legislative measures so that it could secure enough beds and health care staff for patients and that procedures to approve new drugs and vaccines could progress more smoothly. The government will reflect the policy blueprint in drafting the state budget for fiscal 2022, for which Japan's ministries and agencies are set to submit their requests by the end of August.

The guideline says the government "sticks" to its target of bringing its primary balance -- tax revenue minus expenses other than debt-servicing costs -- into the black by fiscal 2025.

But it suggests that the target year for achieving a surplus could be delayed, as the government will "examine" the fallout from the pandemic on Japan's economy and finances within fiscal 2021 through March, and "reaffirm" the goal based on the review. The guideline also mentioned the government's pledge to host the Tokyo Olympics starting July 23 and the subsequent Paralympics in a "safe and secure" manner. The move follows support expressed Sunday by leaders of Group of Seven industrialized nations for Japan to hold the major sporting event at their summit in Cornwall, southwestern England. In a separate growth strategy, also approved by the cabinet on Friday, the government said it aims to enhance domestic development and production of cutting-edge semiconductors amid a global chip crunch, in an effort to reduce the country's dependence on foreign manufacturers and to ensure a steady supply.

From https://japantoday.com 06/19/2021

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Japan 2020 Population at 126.22 Mil., Drops Out of Top 10 in World

Japan's population including foreign residents fell 0.7 percent from 2015 to 126,226,568 as of Oct. 1, 2020, dropping out of the world's top 10 in size for the first time since 1950, the latest census and U.N. estimates showed Friday. The data adds pressure on Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's government to try to slow the population decline in the world's third-largest economy. With a rapidly graying society, the number of newborns in 2020 fell to a record low of 840,832, partly due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. The preliminary data released by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications showed the population dropped by around 868,000 from 2015, when it marked its first decline -- of 0.8 percent -- since the census began in 1920. The population is measured every five years. In the latest data, the margin of decline slightly narrowed due to an increase in non-Japanese residents to an estimated 2,556,183. Japan, which comprised 1.6 percent of the global population, fell one place to 11th in the world ranking topped by China, according to the United Nations.

Among the top 20 countries, Japan was the only nation whose population declined between 2015 and 2020, the U.N. data showed. Of the 47 prefectures in Japan, 38 saw their population fall, with 33 of them recording an accelerated rate of decline, led by a drop of 6.2 percent in Akita, northeastern Japan. Tokyo and its neighboring prefectures of Saitama, Chiba and Kanagawa, bucked the trend and together recorded a population increase of 808,000. Tokyo registered a rise of 4.1 percent, the biggest among the 47 prefectures. Other metropolitan areas including Aichi, Osaka and Fukuoka as well as Okinawa also saw population increases. The number of households increased 4.2 percent to 55.72 million, the census showed. The average number of members per household fell to 2.27 from 2.38 in the 2015 survey, the lowest since comparable data became available in 1970 as more elderly people lived alone. The number of babies born in 2020 hit the lowest level since the health ministry started taking such surveys in 1899. The figure was down 24,407 from the previous year when the number dipped below 900,000 for the first time.

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SOUTH KOREA: Pandemic-Driven Online Activities Bring About Explosive Cyber Attacks

Reports of ransomware attacks in South Korea have surged in the past year, shutting down hospitals to shopping malls as the coronavirus pandemic led to increased online activities. On Thursday, a major plastic surgery hospital in southern Seoul posted on its website that its servers had been breached by a ransomware attack and that hackers appear to have stolen personal data of its patients, the latest in a series of reported ransomware attacks here -- a tactic used by cyber criminals to breach businesses' systems and hold their data hostage or lock up their systems until a ransom is paid. The number of ransomware attack reports here stood at 127 last year, more than tripling from 39 in 2019, according to the Ministry of Science and ICT. As of Friday this year, there have been 65 cases this year. Ransomware attacks have been aimed at various businesses. Last month, food delivery company Super Hero's operations were paralyzed for hours after a ransomware attack, impacting 15,000 delivery workers nationwide. In November last year, local fashion and retail giant E-Land Group was breached by hackers, forcing 23 of its 50 branches of NC Department Store and NewCore Outlet to halt their operations.

Cyber security attacks have increased in not only number but also in profile as the pandemic has made online activities essential. As companies increase reliance on remote work during the pandemic, ransomware attacks have become a greater threat as they can cripple their entire work system, said Kim Seung-joo, a cyber security professor at Korea University. That has led more companies to pay out the ransom, which encourages even more ransomware attacks. "It's a vicious cycle," said Kim, urging investment into cyber security to ward off the threat in the first place. The attacks are part of a broader global trend. Romanian cybersecurity firm BitDefender said in a recent report that global ransomware attacks grew 485 percent last year from 2019. Recent notable attacks include a hack last month into Colonial Pipeline, a major oil pipeline operator in the United States, which forced the company to pay US$4.4 million in ransom. South Korea expects ransomware attacks to continue and the ICT ministry last month set up a 24-hour monitoring team to support companies targeted by the attacks. The government currently provides support to companies that have been targeted by the attacks, such as restoring their systems.

From https://en.yna.co.kr 06/05/2021

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Korea Revokes Approvals for 1,700 Communication Equipment, Devices

South Korea's Ministry of Science and ICT said Thursday it has revoked approvals for around 1,700 pieces of network equipment and communications devices manufactured by a nearly 400 companies, including China's Huawei and Korea's Samsung Electronics. The decision affected a total of 1,696 pieces of equipment from 378 companies that were found to have test records certified by an entity not approved by the Korean government. Under the country's radio wave law, communications equipment need to undergo conformity assessments that evaluate their impact on other equipment and the human body, in order to manufacture, sell or import them. The ministry said that companies had submitted test reports that appeared to have been issued by the US office of the global testing and certification organization Bay Area Compliance Laboratories but were in fact from its Chinese offices.

Korea only acknowledges test results from the US-based BACL through an agreement with the United States, and does not recognize tests by the organization's Chinese offices, the ministry said. The products include Huawei's Long Term Evolution network equipment that were supplied to Korean mobile carrier LG U+ and Samsung's wireless speakers. Others are closed circuit TV camera maker Hangzhou Hikvision Digital Technology and drone maker SZ DJI Technology from China. The ministry embarked on its investigation last year, and held a public hearing that was attended by officials from the relevant firms in November. In the hearing, the companies argued the problem was caused by a lack of understanding of the rules and they never intended to, or tried to, fabricate test records. Following the withdrawal, the companies have been told to prove conformity of the products already sold to their customers, while recalling unsold products.

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Nuclear Research Institute Breached in Suspected Cyberattack

South Korea's science ministry said Friday it is investigating a potential hack into a state-run nuclear research institute after its internal network was breached last month. A Ministry of Science and ICT official said the Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute's network was breached multiple times between May 14-31. The ministry said the institute has since taken security measures, such as halting its virtual private network and blocking the attacker's internet protocol address. Lawmaker Ha Tae-keung of the main opposition People Power Party said in a Facebook post earlier in the day that the institute was the target of a cyberattack on May 14 by a hacker group suspected to be associated with a North Korean intelligence agency. The science ministry said in a statement that it is currently examining the extent of the hacking incident and the source of the attack.

From https://en.yna.co.kr 06/18/2021

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Nearly 80 Pct of S. Korean Consumers Increase Online Shopping amid Pandemic

Nearly 8 out of 10 South Korean consumers have increased their online shopping during the coronavirus pandemic, a poll showed Monday. The survey of 1,000 local consumers, taken by the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry, showed 78.4 percent of the respondents saying their online purchases have risen since the outbreak of COVID-19. About 71 percent of them said they have purchased more foodstuffs and beverages online, followed by dining out and other food services (30.9 percent), kitchen and daily goods (30 percent), and clothing 28 percent. Fifty-eight percent replied that their online purchases have advanced due to the convenience of delivery, with some 57 percent answering they wanted to avoid crowded stores. Approximately 94 percent of those polled said they stay home longer now than before the coronavirus outbreak. Nearly 61 percent of them said they have increased shopping, followed by watching movies (54 percent), playing games (34.6 percent) and cooking (34.5 percent).

The survey also showed some 47 percent of the respondents replying that they have resorted to online gifting more since the outbreak of the new coronavirus. Meanwhile, a separate report showed the number of deliveries in the South Korean capital of Seoul surged about 27 percent in 2020 from a year earlier due to the coronavirus pandemic. The delivery volume in Seoul increased 26.9 percent on-year last year, with that for hand sanitizers, masks and other daily and health-related goods spiking 52 percent, according to the report by the city government. In contrast, the delivery volume for products related to childbirth and infant care sank 19 percent on-year due to the capital's low birthrate. South Korea reported its first COVID-19 case in late January, with the total caseload amounting to 151,506 and its death toll reaching 2,004 as of Monday.

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Hundreds of 5G Users File Joint Lawsuit Over Disappointing Network Services

Hundreds of 5G mobile users filed a joint lawsuit Wednesday against the country's three major mobile carriers -- SK Telecom Co., KT Corp. and LG Uplus Corp. -- over disappointing quality of the latest generation networks, according to their legal representative. Around 520 people are taking part in the joint lawsuit, which argues that carriers have offered incomplete 5G services, leading to poor network quality, Kim Jin-wook, an attorney at law firm Joowon, said. "The action seeks compensation (from carriers) for failing to meet their obligations," Kim said. "We plan to file further legal action in stages with more users." In 2019, South Korea first commercialized 5G networks and carriers faced consumer ire for disappointing network speeds. Carriers had initially advertised that 5G's theoretical speeds could be 20 times faster than 4G LTE, but a government report found that 5G was around four times faster than the previous generation network. As of end-April, the country had over 15 million 5G users, accounting for 21 percent of total mobile users, compared with around 51 million 4G users.

From http://www.koreaherald.com 06/30/2021

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South-East Asia

PHILIPPINES: Tourism Contributed 5.4 Pct to Economy in 2020

Tourism industries contributed a mere 5.4 percent to the Philippine economy in 2020 following the COVID-19 lockdown that barred foreign tourists and shut down domestic tourism, the Philippines Statistics Authority (PSA) said on Wednesday. As measured by the share of tourism direct gross value added (TDGVA) to the gross domestic product, the PSA said the TDGVA amounted to 973.31 billion pesos (about 20.2 billion U.S. dollars) in 2020, lower by 61.2 percent compared with the 2.51 trillion pesos (about 52 billion U.S. dollars) in 2019. TDGVA serves as the indicator to measure the value-added of different industries in relation to tourism activities of both inbound and domestic visitors. "All forms of tourism expenditures posted downturns in 2020," PSA Head Dennis Mapa said in a statement. Mapa said inbound tourism expenditure declined by 77.9 percent, while domestic tourism expenditure was 82.3 percent, and outbound tourism expenditure was 73.2 percent. Internal tourism expenditure, comprising inbound and domestic tourism expenditure, decreased by 81.6 percent, he added. Mapa said employment in tourism characteristic industries declined in 2020. He added employment in tourism characteristic industries was estimated at 4.68 million in 2020, lower by 18.1 percent compared with 5.72 million in 2019. Mapa said the share of employment in tourism industries to total employment in the country was recorded at 11.9 percent. According to PSA data, tourism industries contributed 12.3 percent to the Philippine economy in 2018 and 12.8 percent in 2019.

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SINGAPORE: Population Grows 1.1 Pct Per Year in 2010-2020

Singapore's total population grew by around 1.1 percent per year in the period of 2010-2020, according to the Census of Population 2020 Statistical Release 1 that was issued by the Department of Statistics on Wednesday. The report says that Singapore's total population grew from 5.08 million to 5.69 million over this period, while the citizen population grew from 3.23 million to 3.52 million, and the permanent resident population decreased from 0.54 million to 0.52 million. Meanwhile, the ethnic composition of Singapore's resident population, which comprises citizens and permanent residents, remained stable in 2020, with 74.3 percent Chinese, 13.5 percent Malays, 9 percent Indians and 3.2 percent others. Also according to the report, Singapore's female residents generally had fewer children in 2020 compared to a decade ago. The average number of children born to resident ever-married females aged 40-49 years decreased from 2.02 per female in 2010 to 1.76 per female in 2020. "Higher educated females had fewer children on average than those with lower educational qualifications," it said. The Census of Population 2020 Statistical Release 1 is the first of two statistical publications on the Census 2020 findings.

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Singapore to Keep Work-from-Home as Default Arrangement

Singapore's Ministry of Health (MOH) announced on Friday that work-from-home will continue to remain the default arrangement for employees, despite the city-state's starting a further reopening to Phase 3 (Heightened Alert) next Monday. The ministry said that Singapore must control transmission risks by reducing overall interaction within workplaces, and in public places including public transport, as the country transitions through Phase 3 (Heightened Alert) in the coming weeks. MOH said that Singapore's Multi-Ministry Taskforce had earlier announced a calibrated reopening to Phase 3 (Heightened Alert) starting with Stage 1 on June 14, and a further reopening with Stage 2 on June 21. Since the start of Stage 1, Singapore has seen a small and persistent number of unlinked cases which have the potential to spark larger clusters. "Due to the persistence of such undetected community transmission cases, we are calibrating our reopening plans," it said. From next Monday, higher-risk activities such as dining-in at the food and beverage establishments and indoor mask-off sports or exercise will only be allowed to resume in group sizes of up to two persons, instead of up to five persons as previously announced, according to the ministry.

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THAILAND: Targets Fully Reopening in 120 Days to Reboot Economy

Thailand aimed to fully reopen to foreign visitors in 120 days and give at least one shot of vaccine to about 50 million people by October to revive the economy, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha said Wednesday. Tourism destinations that are ready could reopen to fully vaccinated foreign visitors without quarantine requirements before the broader reopening, with Phuket as a pilot, Prayut said in a televised address. The country plans to administer an average of around 10 million doses of vaccine a month from July, and by early October about 50 million people will receive at least one shot, he said. Although the decision may risk an increase in infections, he said, "when we take into consideration of the economic needs of people, the time has now come for us to take that calculated risk. The priorities for our country must now advance to the next level." Battered by the pandemic, Thailand recorded its worst economic recession in more than two decades last year, with its key growth driver, the tourism sector, remaining hobbled. The country has been battling a sharp surge in infections since April, its worst wave of the COVID-19 outbreak so far, with more than 80 percent of its caseload having been reported during the past 10 weeks. On Wednesday, the country reported 2,331 new cases, raising the total tally to 204,595. The death toll increased by 40 to 1,525.

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Thailand to Issue e-Voucher to Stimulate Domestic Consumption

Thai people may apply as recipients to the government's Ying Chai Ying Dai (the more use, the more benefit) e-voucher campaign on Monday, government spokesman Anucha Burapachaisri said on Saturday. The Ying Chai Ying Dai e-voucher campaign, designed to stimulate domestic consumption among Thais aged 18 years and older, opens for application online from the upcoming Monday and will be effective throughout the third quarter of this year, the government spokesman said. About 4 million Thais are eligible to apply for the e-voucher campaign, which is designed to add some 28 billion baht (about 890 million U.S. dollars) in cash flow nationwide, Anucha said. Each eligible recipient will receive a maximum of 7,000 baht (about 222 U.S. dollars) in grant from the government's e-voucher system throughout the campaign period, or a maximum of 5,000 baht (about 159 U.S. dollars) daily. The recipient may use it for the purchase of goods or services at restaurants, department stores, retail stores, convenience stores and service shops, which may join in the campaign nationwide, but cannot turn such government grant into cash, he said. Those who are entitled to the government's co-payment campaign, state welfare cards or other economic relief aid are not eligible to apply for the e-voucher campaign, he said.

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VIETNAM: HCM City Adjusts School Enrollment Plan Due to Pandemic

HCM CTIY - Many districts in HCM City are adjusting the enrollment period, simplifying procedures, and increasing the use of technology for the upcoming academic year. Head of Education and Training Department of Gò Vấp District

Nguyễn Thanh Thuỷ told Sài Gòn Giải Phóng (Liberated Sài Gòn) newspaper that the district's school enrollment plan is expected to be adjusted in the next few days, depending on the epidemic situation. Parents are advised to bring original paperwork when submitting their children's admission documents. Admission officers will then store images of these documents and return them. In Tân Bình District, the head of Education and Training Department, Trần Khắc Duy, said that primary schools are responsible for handing over student records to secondary schools within the same division. From June 21 to 4pm on June 25, parents will register for online enrollment on the website of the district's Department of Education and Training. For first grade enrollment, Tân Bình District announced its plan in the beginning of May. Between June 15 and 20, all schools are required to work with the ward People's Committee and inform students and their parents of important dates.

The ward People's Committee between June 29 and 30 is expected to send letters to families with children entering the first grade. From July 1 to 8, parents can register online at the portal of the Department of Education and Training. The list of students entering the first grade will be announced by primary schools on July 31. Huy added that after the social distancing period ends on June 15, the district will consider adjusting the enrollment time, depending on the current situation. "June is usually the time when all wards in Tân Phú District review relocation of new and old residents. But due to the influence of the epidemic, this task is unnecessary this time," deputy head of Tân Phú District Department of Education and Training, Trần Trọng Khiêm, said. In District 3, head of Education and Training Department Phạm Đăng Khoa said that educational institutions in the district will strengthen epidemic measures such as having parents coming to school at different times and implementing regulations on safe distancing.

Online registration

In Tân Phú District, the 2021 - 2022 school year is the second consecutive academic year that schools are allowing online registration. After reviewing the list of 5-year-old kindergarten children and 6-year-old children preparing to enter the first grade, the ward will send notices and help parents submit necessary documents. Previously, parents directly went to schools to submit the application. But now they can do it at the ward office. After July 1, the ward will hand over all documents to educational institutions according to the division plan of the district enrollment steering committee. At the same time, the ward People's Committee will provide parents with 5 or 6-year-old children with an admission letter, together with a link and barcode for easier online registration. Based on the enrollment registration list, the educational institution will allocate classes and publicly post the class list on the first day of school. Parents do not need to visit schools for registration or other tasks. If parents have difficulties with online registration, they can contact their locality for support.

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HCM City Aims to Complete in Dozens of Transport Projects in 2021

HCM CITY HCM City People's Committee has issued a plan for transport infrastructure development for the 2021-2030 period. By 2030, the city targets building an additional 652km of roads, 212km of railways and bus rapid transit, 365km of inland waterways, 81 bridge projects, 15 major intersections, and seven projects under the smart city programme. In addition, the city expects to complete investment plans for highways and national highways connecting the city with provinces in the Southern Key Economic Zone. By the end of this year, the city expects to complete four main roads in Thủ Thiêm New Urban Area, the Thủ Thiêm 2 Bridge, and the Đồng Văn Cống road expansion project. In addition, the city will complete the upgrading of provincial road No 9, an overpass at the Eastern bus station, and the Vàm Sát 2 Bridge in Cần Giờ District. Total expected capital to implement all of these projects in 2021 is VNĐ137 trillion (US$6 billion), including about VNĐ63 trillion from the state budget, and VNĐ74 trillion from other sources.

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Việt Nam to Conduct Largest-Ever Vaccination Campaign with All Data to Go Online

Việt Nam is about to launch the largest-ever vaccination campaign with around 150 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to be injected, Health Minister Nguyễn Thành Long has said. Addressing a conference on the implementation of the national COVID-19 vaccination campaign on Tuesday, Long said that eight storage facilities will be installed, with one in the High Command of Hà Nội, and seven in military regions across the nation. All vaccine storage facilities must meet Good Storage Practices (GSP) standards to ensure vaccine quality, he said. About 15,000 vaccination stations have assigned sufficient human resources and accounts to update and publicise the vaccination process, the number of used doses and the number of people vaccinated, he added. During the campaign, all vaccination stations will be strictly supervised by an online control system, with information on the numbers of people getting injections as well as vaccine doses inoculated to be publicised. “Each person will receive a message informing them about the vaccination and inviting them to get vaccinated. After they register for the vaccination, they will receive another message about vaccination time and place,” Long said. “When people arrive at the vaccination place, they will show their QR codes of health declaration and undergo a medical check. Those who meet medical requirements will be injected and confirmed “vaccinated” on the smartphone app that they installed,” Long said, the online vaccination management would facilitate the management of “vaccine passports” in the future.

For those without smartphones, they will receive a text message with detailed information about the vaccination, Long said. Long said that to realise such plan, it was necessary to speed up the implementation of e-health records and vaccination registration via smartphone app and text message. When people received the messages, they should reply so that as soon as vaccines are available, they could be invited to get them. After receiving a vaccine dose, people will receive a message every two hours to monitor their post-vaccination health. The national steering committee on vaccination would work around the clock to oversee and direct the vaccination drive. Deputy Minister of Information and Communication Nguyễn Huy Dũng said that the ministry and companies were making efforts to complete an IT vaccination system. "As soon as the detailed scheme of the vaccination drive is finalised, we will have a trial version three days later which the Health Minister will examine. We will need another three days after that to complete the final version," Dũng said. By Tuesday afternoon, nearly 1.65 million COVID-19 vaccine doses have been administered in Việt Nam and 63,636 people across the country received two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine, according to health authority's announcement on Wednesday morning.

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Telemedicine Services Save Lives at Grassroots-Level Hospitals

Online consultations offered by doctors at Huế Central Hospital helped save the life of a critically ill, pregnant woman at the Việt Nam - Cuba Friendship Hospital in Đồng Hới City in the central province of Quảng Bình Province last September. The 30-year-old woman was at high risk for preterm delivery and had a vascular occlusion, but thanks to the online diagnosis and treatment advice from doctors at Huế Central Hospital, physicians at the Việt Nam - Cuba Friendship Hospital were able to save her and the child. In recent years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of patients at grassroots-level hospitals have benefited from telehealth services provided by doctors at higher-level hospitals. In the same province, the Quảng Bình provincial General Hospital recently successfully operated on a 32-year-old patient who was at risk of a ruptured pneumothorax after receiving online advice from surgical experts at Việt Đức Friendship Hospital. In another case, Hà Nội-based Bạch Mai Hospital gave advice to Hòa Bình Provincial General Hospital to save the life of a patient with anaphylaxis.

With telehealth services, people at home can receive consultations from doctors through smart electronic devices. This has helped reduce patient congestion at central-level hospitals. Dr Nguyễn Lân Hiếu, director of Hà Nội Medical University Hospital, said thanks to the telehealth system, people across the country in smaller cities and towns now had access to higher quality medical services. In the same spirit, the HCM City Hospital of Dermatology and Venereology is offering remote medical examinations and treatment for patients via Zalo, a popular Vietnamese social network, at the number 0908051200. Online consultation services are provided from 8am - 11am and 1pm to 4pm from Monday to Friday by experienced doctors who are heads of departments and divisions. Depending on the patient's condition, the doctor will advise on self-care with non-prescription drugs and topical products, or patients will be asked to visit the nearest medical clinic or the HCM City Hospital of Dermatology and Venereology if they need to buy prescription drugs.

Telehealth trends

A number of medical facilities across the country have had to be under strict lockdown at various times because of Covid-19 cases that have occurred at the facilities. People with symptoms such as cough, fever, fatigue, shortness of breath and loss of sense of smell or taste can now receive a quick consultation video visit with doctors without going to hospitals, reducing the risks faced by medical staff. A shift to telehealth services that take advantage of advanced technology and digital data will be a trend in the future, experts have said. The Hà Nội Hospital of Obstetrics and Gynecology's Remote Medical Examination and Treatment Centre provides one telehealth session a week with 37 lower-level medical hospitals. Nguyễn Duy Ánh, director of the Hà Nội Hospital of Obstetrics and Gynecology, said that remote consultations by leading doctors in obstetrics and gynaecology helped reduce maternal and newborn mortality rates since "many cases are diagnosed too late by lower level hospitals, missing the golden time for emergency care".

Doctors at the Mộc Châu General Hospital said the hospital since last year had participated in remote online consultations via a telehealth system with the Hà Nội Medical University Hospital. Director Hiếu of Hà Nội Medical University Hospital said the hospital had organised two remote examination and treatment sessions a week. "About eight to 10 seriously ill patients are seen online each session. After five months of implementation, the hospital has organised 40 working sessions." Director Ánh of Hà Nội Hospital of Obstetrics and Gynecology said that telehealth services would remain an effective treatment model even after the pandemic is over. "It will become a new trend in the future." Director Hiếu said there should be specific guidance from State agencies to implement telehealth services. There are currently no instructions on how to pay for medical examination and treatment with health insurance cards, expenses for doctors taking part in remote consultations, or transmission costs.

Telehealth project

The Ministry of Health in April opened a centre for telehealth diagnosis and consultation services at Thống Nhất Hospital in HCM City in April as part of a remote medical examination and treatment project for the 2020-2025 period. The hospital is one of 34 central level hospitals selected to give professional assistance to hospitals at the grassroots level. The goal of the project, begun in June last year, is for all patients to be managed, consulted, examined and treated by doctors from the commune to central levels. Nguyễn Trường Sơn, deputy minister of Health, said there were 1,500 establishments nationwide connected to central hospitals with provincial hospitals and commune health stations. The project reduced overloading at central-level hospitals and has improved the quality of healthcare at grassroot-level hospitals. During the recent COVID wave, online consultations helped health experts support the treatment of COVID-patients timely. As many 22 lower-level hospitals had registered to connect to the telehealth system. The health sector had set a goal to expand the remote health care network to more than 14,000 health facilities across the country to achieve universal health coverage and to connect the network with other countries. Việt Nam has 1,400 public hospitals and 275 private medical facilities, 30,000 general clinics and 11,500 commune and ward health stations, according to the ministry.

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Many Provinces and Cities Ask for 5G Coverage

Many provinces have requested the Ministry of Information and Communications to direct corporations to urgently assess the demand, feasibility, and investment efficiency to deploy 5G coverage in their provinces. The Việt Nam Telecommunications Authority (VNTA) said enterprises including Viettel, VNPT, MobiFone had officially tested commercial 5G services from November last year. However, based on the needs of the market, telecom businesses are focusing on coverage in big cities such as Hà Nội and HCM City which have dense populations and the highest percentage of people having 5G terminals nationwide and some localities with industrial parks such as Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang. The 5G trial plan depended on the strategy and production and business plan of each enterprise, said VNTA. This is not the first time that provinces and cities have petitioned for 5G coverage. The department of information and communications of many provinces such as Phú Thọ, Đắk Lắk and Bình Phước last year also asked the ministry to direct telecom corporations to urgently approve and direct provincial departments to develop 5G networks in industrial parks and residential areas. VNTA said that on the basis of test results and proposals of enterprises, the Ministry of Information and Communications would study and grant licences to enterprises to deploy 5G mobile network. It is expected that priority will be given to deployment in industrial parks, high-tech parks, and concentrated information technology parks to deploy breakthrough innovative digital technologies. The authority also suggested that the departments of information and communications actively co-ordinate with mobile businesses in the area and the authority to identify areas that need to be prioritised for infrastructure investment to develop 5G to develop plans for telecommunications infrastructure development in the area to ensure feasibility. This would direct and guide mobile businesses to prioritise infrastructure investment to provide mobile services using 5G technology.

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South Asia

INDIA: Provide Power Connections to Farmers Expeditiously

During a DISCOMS' performance review meeting, the Chief Minister of Rajasthan Ashok Gehlot, on May 30, asked the state's power distribution companies (DISCOMS) to expeditiously provide agricultural power connections to more farmers to aid the country's agriculture sector. The CM asked the DISCOMS to prepare special plans for the cause. Highlighting the importance of farmers and the agriculture sector, CM Gehlot deliberated that the agriculture sector has kept the economy from falling during the critical time of the COVID pandemic outbreak. For this, farmers should be encouraged and supported. According to an official release, the CM had asked the officials to release pending connections as early as possible. He said that the power demands will surge as the new crop season will begin after the monsoon. The CM also directed the officials to redress complaints of consumers as quickly as possible.

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Achieving SDG 11.1 in India

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) especially the goal of making cities safe, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable (SDG-11) firmly places urbanisation at the forefront of the national transformation agenda. This recognition goes beyond viewing urbanisation only as a demographic phenomenon, but rather as a transformative process capable of galvanizing momentum for the holistic development of the country, writes Hitesh Vaidya, Director, National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA). SDG 11 consists of 10 sub-goals and 15 indicators to achieve a sustainable future for cities. Among SDG 11's ten targets, target 11.1 specifically aims to 'ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums', an objective closely aligned with the transformative paradigm of the Government of India. Housing, which is at the centre of the SDG 11, is one of the most important priorities in rapidly urbanizing countries. There is a growing urgency to provide safe and affordable housing with basic services, and to reduce poverty. According to the UN-Habitat 2016 survey, it is estimated that 880 million people around the world are residing in slums and only 13 per cent of the cities around the world have affordable housing. Affordability is not just meeting the expenses for housing but also making infrastructure and services, transport, and proximity to school or workplace, available to the residents. Safe and affordable housing in a city is critical for sustainable development.

Sustainable development which is defined as meeting the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, seeks to maintain a balance between economic growth, protection of the environment and social well-being Indian cities are facing a scarcity of safe and affordable housing due to rising urbanisation, rural-urban migration, archaic land regulations for the construction of new housing units, and expanding urban peripheries are leading to housing shortages. Safe and affordable housing contributes to the sustainable development of cities by providing an economically viable, socially cohesive, and environmentally feasible shelter for all. It should include proximity to transit corridors to allow the use of public transport, incorporation of local architecture and local culture into housing design, and eco-friendly construction of houses. This should be supported by a strong regulatory enabling environment that minimizes the urban sprawl and improves the living conditions in the informal settlements. There is a need to encourage innovative financing models to make affordable housing possible. Improving the housing situation has always been a focus of the Government of India's plans and policies. Investing in housing and construction makes clear economic sense. Increasing the final expenditure on the construction sector (which includes housing construction) by one unit, would generate additional income in the economy by almost five times as much. If we examine housing specifically, every additional rupee invested in the housing sector will add almost three rupees to the country's GDP.

India has been actively engaged in addressing the twin challenges of housing and urban development. A number of initiatives have been taken in the last two decades by the Government of India to promote human settlements as inclusive entities to adequately address the requirements of all citizens. This includes initiatives for direct intervention for housing delivery to the most disadvantaged sections of the society in urban areas, facilitating improved credit availability for the weaker sections with appropriate in-built interest subsidy component, involvement of all the stakeholders in the housing delivery process, promoting skill upgradation for improving the income earning capability of the weaker section population, etc. The first and seventh five-year plans focused on urban poverty alleviation programmes which explicitly recognized housing as a policy concern. The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) from 2005-2014 was another intervention attempting to improve the housing situation in India by focusing on improved infrastructural facilities and housing conditions for the urban poor. The national scheme Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY-Urban) launched in 2015 has been one of the most significant interventions towards improving the affordable housing situation in the country. The scheme has been formulated to overcome the housing shortages in Indian cities and towns. The PMAY has brought a paradigm shift in the housing policy and practice in India. It focuses on the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) approach in financing the construction and development of housing, envisages a better quality of life for the urban poor, with a strong focus on providing ownership of houses to the women, and providing adequate physical and social infrastructure.

Broadly, the PMAY scheme covers the three main aspects of sustainable development. The scheme is divided into four components: in-situ slum redevelopment; credit-linked subsidy scheme; affordable housing in partnership with the public or private sector; and beneficiary-led individual house construction. The four components of the scheme offer greater flexibility to the states in addressing the housing needs of the urban population. The scheme also focuses on housing construction and technologies, which aims to identify and mainstream the innovative construction technologies from across the globe for the housing construction sector that is sustainable, eco-friendly, and disaster-resilient. The provision of subsidies to the EWS/LIG/MIG beneficiaries for purchase, construction and enhancement of houses, an unprecedented initiative of the scheme, makes PMAY both economically viable and socially inclusive for the housing sector. India’s approach to achieving SDG 11.1 is led by Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. Considerable progress has been made in providing the requisite resources for affordable housing, such as through the PMAY and recently launched Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHCs). In addition, advancements in sustainable and integrated building construction are also evidenced in the development of the “Approaches to Sustainability” chapter in the National Building Code.

Plus, the steady pace at which many states have adopted the Energy Conservation Building Code (ECBC) primarily for commercial building codes points to progress. However, there is limited evidence of systemic efforts to merge considerations of affordability and environmental sustainability in the housing sector. The NITI Aayog has identified two indicators to measure the outcome of SDG 11.1 in India. These are: houses completed under PMAY as a percentage of net demand assessment for houses; and percentage of urban households living in slums. However, there are several challenges that come in the way of providing safe and affordable housing. The institutional and technical capacities of the urban local body officials are weak to absorb the innovative approaches in housing construction and technologies. The preparation and implementation of housing development plans face financial constraints due to weak financing instruments and a lack of revenue-raising capacities of the urban local bodies. The progress of PMAY cannot be achieved only by building houses but there is a need to envision innovative approaches and alternatives that can meet the demand for housing with a higher quality of life for all.

Policymakers have created robust mechanisms such as 3Cs (Convergence, Communication, and Community Engagement) to provide and accelerate backwards and forward linkages as growth in the housing sector would significantly stimulate other sectors as well. NIUA is contributing to SDG 11.1 through its ongoing projects and partnerships. Seven projects contributing to the housing and slum sector: Heritage Conservation Plan for Ahmedabad (HCPA), Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR), City Investment To Innovate, Integrate and Sustain (CITIIS), Master Plan Delhi-2041 (MPD-2041), Sustainable, Healthy, Learning Cities and Neighborhoods (SHLC), Scale and Nature of Deprivation among Children in Urban India (SNDC), Climate Smart Cities Assessment Framework (CSCAF) and Child-Friendly Smart Cities (CFSC). The projects address complex affordability and informal housing issues in Indian cities. Additionally, they focus on climate-responsive, safe and affordable housing for the rapidly growing urban population, especially, the urban poor. NIUA is committed to supporting states and cities through extensive research and policy advisories, data solutions, technology, and capacity building to align with the SDGs and initiate a renewed discourse for future directions on improving the housing sector in India.

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Affordable Housing: The Art of City Integration

Poor people who migrate to the cities to earn better, seek abode in slums. While these slums are illegal establishments, for the poor it is the location that matters – close to their workplace. The poor choose to save their income, sacrificing the quality of life, and a share of the same is remitted back home, writes Dr Renu Khosla, Director, Centre for Urban and Regional Excellence. One in five persons lives in slums, in jhuggis (temporary housing), sharing taps and toilets. These areas have poor quality water supply, inadequate drainage, and poor waste management. As per Census 2011, India has 65.5 million slum dwellers in 2613 large and small cities. The informal settlement and organic nature of slums make delivering city services complicated. Also, as the land under slums is un-owned and deemed 'illegal', there is extreme local reluctance to invest for its improvement. An effective solution to this is affordable housing with the provision of quality basic services to all. These houses may be kept open to own or to rent, as many seasonal migrants may not wish to own a house. People choose to buy, build or rent according to their family's needs and resources. As urban land values have risen, land in the inner city areas for large scale social housing has become unavailable. The high land values have made land lucrative as an instrument of public finance rather than a basic need. Consequently, housing for the poor can only be delivered at the periphery of cities. Considering sustainable urban development, cities must focus on living spaces, clean piped water in taps, toilets connected to trunk sanitation systems and access to government schools and health care systems. This principle has formed the basis of SDG 11 – Building Sustainable Cities and Communities. The peri-urban housing is often far from the workplaces. Therefore, it makes commuting to work a costly affair. As a result, daily wage workers are unable to reach labour mandis in time to find work and end up earning less. For women, the job market shrinks as there are fewer jobs they can deliver in these far-off locations. So instead of a 'good' house with secure tenure that is supposed to create wealth for the family, far away housing imposes many new costs to the poor. Unsurprisingly, many poor people shift back to slums.

During the implementation of the beneficiary-led, in-situ housing project in Tajganj area of Agra city, the Centre for Urban and Regional Excellence (CURE), began to work with communities, the city and the contractors on localizing housing designs to family needs. Room walls were rearranged to allow more light or better space utilization, working corners were created near windows for women seamstress, rainwater harvesting systems were connected to toilets, etc. Retail customization is not always possible, practical or even permitted by local governments, who lack the capacity to work with communities. In the resettlement colony of Savda Ghevra, New Delhi planned on a sites and services model, CURE curated the core house – a house with pillars, beams and shared outer walls to be infilled by the family as per need. Families were able to create space for businesses or toilets or add features to improve indoor air quality. However, all the secure tenure and pucca house, formalization and a registered address could not take away the fact that Savda Ghevra was 40 kilometres from the city's core and that for nearly a decade it was without access to good public transport, labour markets, roads, piped water supply was delivered after 14 years, the sewer system is still being contracted. Poverty deepened among nearly 8500 households post-relocation and many children with basic education dropped out of school. Moreover, women lost work and found none in the nearby areas that matched their skills. It took nearly five years for the families to stabilize and begin to earn better, but they are still not eligible for formal housing finance. Is affordable housing affordable for the city? Can ecosystem approach deliver improvements? Clearly affordable housing that comes at the city's fringes has costs for poor families. But how affordable is it for the cities? When cities move houses to the edge, cities must also move up to these edges – extending the connecting basic, social and transportation services, without which the benefits of good housing may not flow.

Sprawl is expensive while compact is cost-effective. The cost to shift every slum household into social housing at the city's edge is ginormous, nearly Rs 6,73,565 crore is a one-time investment. No city or State will ever have much money to invest all at once or even in parts over time. On the other hand, if each city prepares sites with integrated infrastructure and leave the house building to the poor, all this money will be recovered in just over seven years through Rs 94,046 crore annual additional tax collections and income increases. While social housing is a desirable goal in achieving SDG 11, location and good quality infrastructure is the key to sustainable and inclusive cities. It is best to follow the wisdom of the people who have always built their own housing, incrementally, as per need and when they have the money, and to widen these options by: 1. Curating spaces with good quality infrastructure that enable poor people to build their own houses. These sites could be developed with private sector initiatives, involving small private entrepreneurs. Backyard housing is picking up in many African and South American cities as a viable option to create distributed housing in very small units for rental purposes, that are close to job markets. However, they need regulation, formalization without adding to the cost and access to quality services. 2. Majority of people belonging to this poor sect of society are masons, plumbers, carpenters etc. They can be enabled to build their own houses in formal spaces by lowering the entry-level requirements and costs, and by improving access to low-cost formal housing finance. Despite many schemes, the poor are still unable to provide the complete documentation that makes them eligible for loans. Hence, changes are needed to be made in the urban planning and building norms to enable such housing.

3. Each poor family with a formal house can rent rooms to migrant workers, if possible. With adequate rent regulation and oversight, it could help increase the supply of good quality housing and enhance incomes for the owner. The model was recommended to the first-ever in-situ housing project approved under the Rajiv Avas Yojna in Bhubaneswar. 4. Community groups can develop a good quality and low-cost housing at a scale provided that the local government help them with access to land, finance and infrastructure and recognize the importance of community-driven solutions. Affordable, safe and adequate housing is significant for the poor. It needs to be mandated at right locations and local integration will make it an effective solution.

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Cybersecurity Remains the Biggest Barrier to Cloud Adoption

A Fortinet 2021 Cloud Security Report survey conducted by Security Insiders found that cloud security concerns among cybersecurity professionals remain high as the adoption of public cloud computing continues to surge in the wake of the pandemic and the resulting massive shift to remote work. Organisations continue to rapidly migrate workloads from data centres to the cloud, and the trend has been accelerating during the recent Covid pandemic. The report indicates that 33 per cent of organisations are running more than half of their workloads in the cloud today, and that number is set to rise to 56 per cent in the next 12–18 months. Multi-cloud adoption is very much the norm as organisations were found to be operating in an expanded and diverse digital landscape. 71 per cent of organisations are pursuing a hybrid or multi-cloud strategy as the cloud is the preferred choice for integration of multiple services, scalability, or business continuity reasons. 76 per cent of organisations are using two or more cloud providers and hybrid still accounts for more than one-third of the deployments. Among the key barriers to faster cloud adoption, survey participants mentioned lack of visibility (53 per cent), lack of control (46 per cent), lack of staff resources or expertise (39 per cent), and high cost (35 per cent) as the most significant negative factors. Misconfiguration of cloud security remains the biggest security risk according to 67 per cent of cybersecurity professionals in the survey. This is followed by exfiltration of sensitive data (59 per cent) and tying at 49 per cent are unauthorised access and insecure interfaces/APIs. Multi-cloud environments add complexity and security challenges as organisations are most concerned with data protection (58 per cent) followed by a lack of security skills (57 per cent) and understanding how different solutions fit together (52 per cent). 78 per cent of surveyed cybersecurity professionals would find it very helpful to extremely helpful to have a single cloud security platform offering a single dashboard while allowing for configuration of policies to protect data consistently and comprehensively across the cloud.

When asked how organisations source their cloud security, the vast majority said they prefer cloud-native security (74 per cent). This is followed by third-party cloud security solutions (48 per cent) and managed service providers delivering security services (34 per cent). Finally, organisations choose between cloud security solutions offered by independent third-party providers and the cloud-native security solutions offered by the cloud platform based on the cost of the security solution (60 per cent), followed by low solution complexity (59 per cent) and ease of use (52 per cent). Rajesh Maurya, Regional Vice President, India & SAARC at Fortinet, said, “Organisations are grappling with a diverse set of tools that deliver disparate controls and highly variable security posture, specific to each cloud platform. Deeply integrated, cloud-native solutions can bridge this complexity by providing visibility, protection and control through consistent policies that span the diverse array of multi-cloud and hybrid cloud environments. A common security framework not only delivers a uniform security posture, but it also simplifies cyber defence, compliance reporting and data sharing. With this approach, organisations can freely adopt whichever cloud platform that suits their particular needs, confident that their data and applications will be safe, resilient and secure.”

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Centre Launches 6 Tech Platforms to Develop Globally Manufacturing in India

In a development-centric move, the Minister of Heavy Industries and Public Enterprises Prakash Javadekar, on July 2, inaugurated six Technology Innovation Platforms which will focus on the development of technologies for globally competitive manufacturing in India. The inauguration was done through virtual conferencing. The Minister said that these newly launched platforms are gifts to the nation during the celebration of ‘Azadika Amrut Mahotsav-Celebration of 75 Years of Independence’ and will help in bringing all India’s technical resources and the concerned Industry onto one platform to kick start and facilitate identification of technology problems faced by Indian Industry and crowdsource solutions for the same. The move will facilitate the development of the key ‘mother manufacturing technologies’ indigenously through ‘Grand Challenges’ on the platforms to help achieve the vision of an Aatmanirbhar Bharat and developing a globally competitive manufacturing sector in India, added Javadekar. The Six Technology Platforms launched have been developed by IIT Madras, Central Manufacturing Technology Institute (CMTI), International Centre for Automotive Technology (iCAT), Automotive Research Association of India (ARAI), BHEL and HMT in association with IISc Banglore. The platforms have been so designed to focus on the development of technologies to make India a hub for globally competitive manufacturing. These platforms will facilitate industry (including OEMs, Tier 1 Tier 2 & Tier 3 companies &

Raw Material Manufacturers), start-ups, domain experts/professionals, research and development institutions and academia (colleges and universities), to provide technology solutions, suggestions, expert opinions, etc. on issues involving manufacturing technologies. Moreover, it will facilitate the exchange of knowledge with respect to R&D and other technological aspects. Over 39,000 students, experts, institutes, industries and labs have already registered on these platforms.

The following are the links to register on the six technology platforms:
https://aspire.icat.in
https://sanrachna.bhel.in/
https://technovuus.araiindia.com/
https://techport.hmtmachinetools.com
https://kite.iitm.ac.in/
https://drishti.cmti.res.in/

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India Ranks 10 in Cybersecurity Globally: UN's ITU Global Security Agenda Report

India enters the list of top 10 countries in the United Nation's International Telecommunications Union (ITU) Global Cybersecurity Agenda (GCA). Ranking way ahead of China (at 33rd position) and Pakistan at (79th position), India jumped up to secure the 10th position in the list from the previous 47th position. The list is topped by the United States and followed by the United Kingdom. As reported by a national daily, according to India's National Cyber Security Coordinator (NCSC) Rajesh Pant, It is great news for India. It shows acknowledgement of multiple initiatives that have been taken by the government along with CERT (Cyber Emergency Response Team). Highlighting the efforts by the country to enhance the cybersecurity of the nation, Pant said, a national cybersecurity strategy has been tabled in the cabinet and the approval is awaited on the same. Also, a recently operationalised trusted source policy is considered an effective move as it asks all the telecom companies to declare where they source their equipment. Further, he admired Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Independence Day speech through which he acknowledged the significance of cybersecurity in the current and upcoming era. The ITU, a specialised agency under the UN, reported that the ranking is based on four pillars: legal measures, technical measures, capacity building measures and organisational measures. The latest report is the fourth one in the series.

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SRI LANKA: E-Learning for Continuing University Education

In response to the ongoing concerns in relation to the COVID – 19 virus, the Sri

Lankan government has encouraged all Universities, Campuses, Higher Education Institutes to promote e-learning to ensure uninterrupted university education during this prevailing situation. This timely and valuable decision should be highly appreciated because e-learning has the power to move towards more effective and efficient teaching and learning process in any situation, if we use it correctly with a clear understanding. However, in the Sri Lankan higher education sector, E-learning is still at the initial stage. Therefore, to help you to understand more on the e-learning environment, I decided to share the meaning of e-learning and to inform you on how to make e-learning a success. What is e-learning? E-learning is a very broad, inclusive term for learning which occurs through the medium of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Different terms are used to describe learning through ICT and these terms provide different/varying meanings – they are not synonyms. Commonly used terms are;

Digital teaching and learning (DTL),

Virtual learning communities (VLC),

Technology enhanced learning (TEL),

Mobile learning, web-based learning,

Online learning, distributed learning,

Computer assisted instruction (also called computer-based training or internet-based learning),

Computer mediated communication,

Virtual classrooms,

I-campus

Computer-driven interactive communication.

The term electronic learning represents as "e-learning". However, due to these inconsistencies of terms and their meanings, there are diverse and conflicting definitions of e-learning. This makes it difficult to find a single definition of e-learning. As studied by researchers, it is a risk in adopting an inclusive definition of e-learning because e-learning definition connects its different elements and features, which can obstruct the understanding of the concept. Therefore, following definitions can be selected as an appropriate definition of e-learning based on technological and teaching/learning perspectives.

The Commonwealth of Learning who empowers individuals through learning that leads to economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation, defines e-learning as "using information and communication technologies (or ICT) to expand access to education and to enhance and transform teaching and learning". E-learning is part of a teaching and learning continuum that starts with face-to-face teaching in support of the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) at one end and fully online distance learning at the other end. As we move along the continuum from fully face-to-face teaching, technology is used to replace the face-to-face elements. Initially, this has very little impact on how teaching is organized and how learning occurs because the technology is used primarily to enhance the face-to-face teaching. But as we move further along the continuum, the nature of teaching and how it is organized is increasingly affected by the use of ICT. In a blended learning environment, fewer face-to-face sessions are held as technology is used increasingly to deliver teaching and to facilitate learning. And the nature of the face-to-face sessions changes. Instead of coming to class to listen to a teacher, students come to discuss, and to work and collaborate in small groups. Once we reach the right end of the continuum there is no longer any face-to-face teaching and we have fully online learning in which all teaching is technology-mediated. During this interim crisis period, fully online teaching and learning is expected to continue with a collaborative and constructivist perspective. The educational institutes around the world are shifting towards to more constructivist approaches because they understood that the new ways of teaching and learning are required to meet the needs of a new generation of learners i.e. digital natives. Sri Lanka also understood the importance of new pedagogy to move towards student-centered and activity-based teaching and modern assessment. By doing this, students will benefit from modern pedagogical and assessment methods via online.

How to make e-learning sustain and success? Most of higher education institutes in Sri Lanka use their own Learning Management Systems (LMS) as an e-learning method which mostly apply as a supplementary tool to the face-to-face education. During the closure of universities in the light of the rapidly changing situation due to the ongoing Covid – 19 outbreaks in Sri Lanka, the University Grants Commission requested that the use of e-learning for continuing university education to students wherever possible. Therefore, continuing education through fully online mode could be a newer experience for universities, their academics as well as students. Hence, higher education institutes should use strategic dimensions to formulate and implement coherent internal and external processes in order to optimize the learning potential of integrating e-learning into their programs and courses. During this interim crisis period, we cannot expect that all universities have fulfilled the following strategic dimensions but after the prevailing situation in the country returns to normalcy, to face into any situation in near future all universities or higher education institutes should revisit and refine their strategic planning processes and plans for e-learning systematically through building the capacity of universities to drive, sustain and scale up their e-learning practices. Otherwise, due to the sudden requirement e-learning would continue somehow based on capacity of individual departments or faculties but that has limited sustainability and scalability within and across programs in the university. Therefore, it is important to adhere to the following strategic dimensions by each university for building the e-leaning capacity and thereby making e-learning success. These strategic dimensions were identified from previous research on e-learning/blended learning implementation.

1. A clear vision should be grounded in the institution’s philosophies for learning and teaching in e-learning environments. Therefore, the universities should design a shared institutional vision by anticipating the ultimate goal and outcomes they want

to achieve from institutional, student, as well as academic staff perspectives.

2.Universities should empower students to be future-ready with 21st century skills like collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity and computational thinking, it’s becoming increasingly important to equip students with the technology skills they’ll need to thrive in a digital economy. Skills like cloud computing, artificial intelligence, machine learning, productivity and more are already in demand in organizations around the world, yet jobs remain unfilled, and the talent gap persists and is set to widen. Therefore, universities can no longer be places for gaining content knowledge through the transmission of PowerPoint presentations; the curriculum should therefore develop higher-order thinking and 21st century competencies at the program and course levels. As an appropriate approach to meet these curricular outcomes, e-learning must therefore be pedagogically appropriate.

3. Academic staff has a crucial role for the successful implementation of e-learning. Although academics are experts in their respective fields, they may not have the expertise and experience to plan for and implement e-learning in their courses. Hence, the introduction of e-learning challenges academic staff to rethink their roles in a technology-enhanced learning environment. Therefore, universities should definitely provide continuing professional development for e-learning.

4. Although today’s students can be branded as “Digital Natives”, it has to be accepted that not all university students own digital devices that support e-learning. However, to support such university students, a couple of years back the Sri Lankan government has introduced laptop loan scheme. This is a special offer that provides an interest free bank loan of Rs. 75,000 to all government university students to purchase a computer of their choice. On the other hand, students mostly use technology for the purposes of entertainment and communication. They lacked experience of using technology for learning, generating and constructing knowledge. Therefore, providing learning support such as technical support and educational guidance to use technological tools strategically for their learning is essential.

5. The integration of e-learning into current learning and teaching practices in higher education requires establishing an appropriate plan for technological infrastructure, facilities, and technical and service support. Lack of knowledge of pedagogy, lack of understanding of how technology and content influence and constrain one another, and how teaching and learning change when particular technologies are used are all perceived to have a strong influence on academics’ technology integration. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has instructed the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRCSL) to provide free Internet facilities for all undergraduates in State universities, who had registered for e-learning. This is timely important decision, so students may without interruption continue with their education. Not only during the crisis period but in everyday life, providing equity of access to IT/ICT, supplying rural broadband services, establishing National broadband policy, and decreasing cost of access to internet and other technologies are important to upscale e-learning opportunities.

6. National and institutional level policies are essential for organizational change and development. Universities should formulate an e-learning master plan and corresponding policies, specific guidelines and mechanisms to promote academics staff to engage in e-learning. This will help each university to promote and motivate their all academic staff members to use e-learning equally and equity, otherwise those who have capacity and self-interested on e-learning will only engage with it and other academics may eliminate from e-learning.

7. In terms of e-learning, university should build up two types of partnership: internal and external. Internal partnership encompasses inter-faculty collaboration for working together with the technology and teaching to promote and support e-learning. External partnership includes public and private sector collaboration to access and explore different learning technologies and shape the direction of future e-learning practices in universities with industry experts.

8. E-learning practices have to informed and driven by research and evaluation because revisions and modifications are always mandatory for the quality improvement of learning and teaching in universities. As informed by previous research, pilot projects need to be conducted to test possibilities and potentials before moving to large-scale implementation of e-learning is deliberated. This kind of pilot projects may help universities to identify and address potential problems and evaluate academic staff and students' reactions to a new initiative before moving to its large-scale implementation. However, due to the urgency of current situation in Sri Lanka we should continue e-learning without thinking whether we did the pilot project or not. After the prevailing situation in the country returns to normalcy, we should consider this as a pilot project to identify issues and academics and students' reactions. So that we will be able to implement successful e-learning program in near future under any circumstances. The above mentioned strategic dimensions allow universities or higher education institutes to reflect upon their existing e-learning strategies, identify gaps in these strategies with respect to their vision for how e-learning may enhance learning and teaching and possibly develop new strategies or revise existing ones to address these gaps. There is no argument that e-learning is the best solution for education in the prevailing situation in the country due to COVID-19. Therefore, we should take this situation as a lesson to go forward with e-earning.

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: Among Countries Rapidly Expanding Contactless Fare Payment System – Visa

Azerbaijan is among the countries that are rapidly expanding the contactless fare payment system in transport, Cristina Doros, Visa regional manager for the Caucasus region, said. Doros made the remark at the ceremony of launching a contactless fare payment system by using payment bank cards in partnership with Azerbaijan Railways, the Central Bank of Azerbaijan, and the International Bank of Azerbaijan, Trend reports on June 2. “When passenger traffic has started to grow but is still behind the level before the COVID-19 pandemic began, cities and transport operators worldwide are looking for ways to provide residents with safe, reliable and efficient transport services,” the regional manager said. The use of contactless payment in transport has grown by 187 percent worldwide. Visa is currently developing and expanding contactless payment solutions in partnership with 500 cities. "We are proud that Azerbaijan is among the countries expanding the contactless fare payment system," the regional manager added. Earlier, Doros stressed that one of the most important trends in the payment industry for the organization is the projects aimed at developing the scope of application of contactless payments. “During the COVID-19 crisis, contactless payments have become especially relevant as this technology allows to speed up the payment process,” the regional manager added.

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Azerbaijan Managed to Achieve Huge Growth in Non-Cash Payments – CBA

It was possible to achieve huge growth in non-cash payments within the state program to expand digital payments in Azerbaijan for 2018-2020, Director General of the Central Bank of Azerbaijan (CBA) Farid Osmanov said. Osmanov made the remark at the ceremony of launching a contactless fare payment system by using payment bank cards in partnership with Azerbaijan Railways, the Central Bank of Azerbaijan and the International Bank of Azerbaijan, Trend reports on June 2. “The number of payment cards increased by 44 percent, which amounted to 10.1 million cards while the number of contactless cards increased by 5.5 times and amounted to 4.6 million cards,” the director-general said. The ongoing dynamic increase in the number of contactless cards in the market will accelerate the efficient and rapid introduction of contactless payments on the railways. Osmanov stressed that the main strategic goal in the digitalization of payment services for the Central Bank of Azerbaijan is the global transformation of the cashless economy in Azerbaijan by creating convenient payment solutions for consumers. Earlier, Osmanov stressed that the work on the roadmap for open banking in Azerbaijan was planned to be completed in May 2021.

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Central Bank of Azerbaijan Expanding Digital Solutions from Instant Payment System

Azerbaijan is expanding the infrastructure capabilities of the instant payment system, which was commissioned by the Central Bank of the country (CBA) in October last year, Trend reports referring to the CBA. Within the framework of measures taken in this direction, for the first time in Azerbaijan on the basis of the principles of ‘open banking’ in the system of instant payments, functions have been created for online registration and withdrawal of funds from bank accounts owned by clients, as well as for obtaining information about the balance. According to the CBA, presently the clients of Yapi Kredi Bank Azerbaycan, Unibank, AFB Bank and Azer-Turk Bank are able to use the functionality of the system for current and payment card accounts, and clients of Premium Bank, Gunay Bank, Muganbank, Naxcivanbank, Bank Avrasiya, Bank Respublika, Turanbank and Bank BTB - for current accounts. At the same time, customers can make payments 24/7 instantly using the AniPay mobile app. At present, 19 banks, the State Treasury Agency of the Ministry of Finance of Azerbaijan and Azerpost LLC are integrated into this platform. Work continues on expanding the coverage of the system, increasing the range of digital solutions provided to users, and non-cash payments using the QR code payment solution.

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New Status of Azercosmos to Boost Azerbaijan's Space Industry Development – Minister

The new status of Azercosmos OJSC will give impetus to the development of Azerbaijan’s space industry, cooperation in the international arena, both with private and state enterprises, Azerbaijani Minister of Transport, Communications and High Technologies Rashad Nabiyev said. Nabiyev made the remark during the Global Space Exploration Conference (GLEX-2021), organized by the Russian Roscosmos State Corporation for Space Activities in cooperation with the International Astronautical Federation through the assistance of the Saint Petersburg Committee for Tourism Development, Trend reports on June 15. “The ministry pays special attention to the issue of changing the status of Azerbaijan's Azercosmos satellite operator, its transformation into a space agency,” the minister added. Nabiyev stressed that Azerbaijan was able to render competitive space services through the participation of specialists in the scientific, educational and industrial spheres. "I believe that this will expand innovations and attract investments in the space industry,” the minister said. “Our country creates new services in the space industry, as well as facilitates their appearance into the regional markets." “Azerbaijan supports new participants in this sphere through legal and financial support,” Nabiyev said. "Azerbaijan is ready to share its experience in the field of astronautics with other countries within the international cooperation,” the minister said. “The global conference to be held in 2023 in Azerbaijan will give impetus to the development of cooperation and space diplomacy,” Nabiyev said. “We are waiting for all participants at the International Astronautical Congress in Baku in 2023," the minister added.

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KAZAKHSTAN: Proposing to Create E-Commerce Support Fund Within SCO

Kazakhstan has put forward a proposal to create an e-commerce support fund within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Minister of Trade and Integration of Kazakhstan Bakhyt Sultanov said, Trend reports. Sultanov made the remark at the SCO Economic Forum with the participation of the heads of delegations of the SCO member states. During the meeting, the Kazakh side also proposed to intensify work on modernization and expansion of digital infrastructure, acceleration of digital transformations for cross-border e-commerce, using digital platforms to expand access to trade finance and data exchange, the minister said. “It is necessary to create an appropriate infrastructure within the SCO, closely interact in the digital sphere in order to ensure technological compatibility,” Sultanov said. “The fund, which is proposed to be created, would provide the necessary support to growing platforms and assistance in opening points of delivery of goods in the territory of the participating countries,” the minister added.

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UZBEKISTAN: How Central Asia Can Ensure It Doesn’t Miss Out on a Digital Future

On April 9, Kazakhstanis received disappointing news that one of their favorite chess players, the national and world champion Dinara Saduakassova, had to withdraw from an online chess tournament due to poor internet connectivity. In a video posted online, Dinara lamented that, during the game, she was more worried about the connection than the match. Although chess may not seem like a life or death concern, there are a myriad of other, more critical opportunities that tens of millions of people across Central Asia are missing out on because of poor internet connectivity. These include jobs, education, collaboration, innovation, and civic participation, among others. Meaningful digital connectivity, that is, connectivity that is available, accessible, relevant, affordable, safe, trusted, and user-empowering, is a necessity in today’s world —and increasingly, a human right. Studies show that countries with robust connectivity infrastructure can mitigate up to 50 percent of the negative economic impacts resulting from pandemics. Moreover, just a 10 percent increase in broadband connectivity can add at least 1 percent to economic growth, and a 1 percent increase in internet connectivity can boost exports by 4.3 percent.

Unfortunately, Central Asia still has a long way to go to ensuring good connectivity and enabling economies and people to benefit from digital development. Nearly half the population in Central Asia is not digitally connected, and many of the unconnected live in rural and remote areas. In fact, three out of the five countries in

Central Asia are below the global average in terms of the number of individuals using the internet. But lack of access is not the only problem. An internet connection in Central Asia is expensive, and of poor quality. The low quality of connectivity is a problem even in Kazakhstan, as Dinara Saduakassova can attest, even though it has the highest internet penetration in the region. All of the Central Asian countries are near the bottom of the global ranking on the average time taken to download a 5GB film or a three-hour full HD (1080p) educational lecture on YouTube. Among Central Asian countries, the Kyrgyz Republic scored highest and yet reached only 146th place globally, 12 minutes ahead of Kazakhstan.

Governments in Central Asia have demonstrated that they can move fast when necessary. For example, Uzbekistan almost doubled its fiber-optic infrastructure from 36,600 kilometers in 2019 to 68,600 km in 2020, and simplified permits for the construction and launch of cell towers, thus enabling an accelerated rollout of mobile networks. And there are many more examples across the region, from improving access to digital government services to setting up call centers and hotlines and launching channels and information platforms—all of these changes prompted by the need to swiftly respond to the recent pandemic. Nevertheless, the governments of Central Asia still need to address the root causes of the region's poor connectivity. To connect the remaining half of its population to the internet by 2030, it is estimated that countries need to invest at least $6 billion. This will require unwavering political will and an unprecedented multi-stakeholder effort, including a massive influx of private investment for infrastructure deployment and public sector efforts in digital skills development and policy reforms.

So how do we get to meaningful connectivity for all? First, Central Asian countries need to develop open and competitive telecom markets. They can do this by modernizing the institutional, legal, and regulatory frameworks, bringing them all up to international best practice standards. In this context, it is equally important that the countries remove restrictions on access to all wholesale and retail internet services (including to international gateways) and simplify the burdensome licensing procedures. Second, the telecom sector needs to be transformed from a state-dominated model to one driven by the private sector: the region must attract private investments to cover the infrastructure needs, particularly in rural and remote areas. Those areas are often commercially unprofitable for private operators. What can be done in such cases is to encourage infrastructure sharing, apply state-aid mechanisms (e.g., award competitive subsidies), and design public-private partnership models.

It is also essential to strengthen the regulatory authority of the telecom sector by granting it the necessary authority to ensure a level playing field among market participants. In addition, the incumbent telecom state-owned enterprises could be "unbundled" to focus on the wholesale infrastructure markets and reach every corner of the country, while stepping out of the retail markets to let the private sector deploy the “last mile” connectivity and focus on customer service innovations. Third, governments in Central Asia need to develop a digital ecosystem. This includes investments in increasing access to digital devices, enhancing local content, and developing the digital skills of the population. To reap the full spectrum of benefits offered by the digital world, Central Asian countries will need to build capacities for remote work and boost cybersecurity and data protection for citizens and businesses alike. The World Bank will continue to support Central Asian governments in these efforts, including through our ongoing Digital Central Asia-South Asia program (Digital CASA), which is helping to bring reliable and affordable internet services to the region, link small and medium-sized businesses as well as workers to the regional and global digital economy, create more and better jobs, and catalyze innovations in the delivery of public and private services. Central Asian countries could seize the moment to ensure inclusive and meaningful digital access for all. This will do a lot more than just help Dinara’s chess game, as it will help speed up economic recovery, create jobs, and promote much-needed growth throughout the region. Lilia Burunciuc World Bank Regional Director for Central Asia.

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Uzbekistan Improves Its Position in the World Ranking of Internet Speed

Over the year, Uzbekistan increased the speed of wired Internet by 1.5 times, and the speed of mobile Internet by four positions. The Irish company Ookla has published data from the Speedtest.net service according to the monthly Speedtest Global Index, which contains data on the speed of mobile and wired Internet in the world at the end of May 2021. Uzbekistan again showed growth in the speed of mobile and fixed Internet. Over the past year, the speed of the fixed Internet in Uzbekistan has increased by more than 1.5 times (an increase of 53.2%) from 26.45 Mbps in May 2020 to 40.54 Mbps (Download) in May 2021. In terms of the speed of mobile Internet, Uzbekistan also improved its position compared to May 2020, rising immediately by 4 positions up. Over the past year, the speed of mobile Internet, according to the Speedtest.net service, has grown from 11.26 Mbps in May 2020 to 18.56 Mbps (Download) in May 2021. The growth was 64.8% over the year.

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Uzbekistan Carries Out a Large-Scale and Complex Work on the Implementation of IT Technologies

In recent years, large-scale and comprehensive work has been done in Uzbekistan to introduce IT technologies. This was stated by the director of the Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan (ISMI) Eldor Aripov during his speech at the CIS international expert forum on information security on 29 June 2021 in Tashkent. It was noted that in 2020, by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Strategy "Digital Uzbekistan - 2030" was approved and is being consistently implemented, which involves a number of breakthrough measures for the country. In accordance with the document, a wide range of long-term issues related to the introduction of digital technologies in the field of telecommunications, public services, the real sector of the economy, healthcare, the state cadastre, etc. are being resolved.

So, according to the director of the ISMI, the implementation of 1,627 projects for the digital transformation of regions and industries has been determined for the next three years. At the same time, today the level of high-speed Internet connection coverage of preschool educational institutions and healthcare facilities has been brought to 100%. In 2021, it is planned to provide access to the network of all schools, as well as makhalla gatherings of citizens (about 10 thousand gatherings). The development of a network of base stations for mobile communications, according to Eldor Aripov, made it possible to create conditions for the provision of services (to increase the coverage) of mobile communications to 98% of the country's population, including high-speed communications to 90%. From 2017 to 2020, Internet speed increased 3.5 times. In 2020, within the framework of the One Million Programmers project, over 120 thousand students were trained. During 2020-2022, it is planned to attract investments in the amount of 498.1 million dollars in the field of information technology and communications.

"The republic is implementing more than 260 projects aimed at the consistent implementation of elements of the digital economy and e-government, as well as digitalization of the banking sector. The system of instant payments for business entities and entrepreneurs was launched 24/7," concluded the head of the ISMI. We remind you that the forum is held by the Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan with the support of the Ministry for the Development of Information Technologies and Communications of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the CIS Executive Committee. More than 50 representatives of the states of Central Asia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Russia and Moldova take part in it, including specialists from international organizations and leading analytical centers, heads of relevant ministries and departments. Among them are high representatives of the CIS, including the Chairman of the Executive Committee - Executive Secretary of the CIS Sergey Lebedev, General Director of the Executive Committee of the CIS Regional Commonwealth in the field of communications Nurudin Mukhitdinov, Head of the CIS Anti-Terrorist Center Andrey Novikov.

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From the New Academic Year, Educational Loans to Be Provided on Preferential Terms

From the new academic year, educational loans will be provided on preferential terms for a period of 7 years at the base rate of the Central Bank. This was announced by the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The head of Uzbekistan noted that the rate on educational loans will be 14% per annum this year. Mirziyoyev said that also the funds allocated for the repayment of educational loans will be exempt from income tax. “We will create a new support system for talented youth who are unable to study at the university on a contract basis. As you know, today parents take educational loans for 3 years at a rate of 22-28 percent in order to educate a child at a university,” the President said. “But it is burdensome for everyone, especially for families living in remote and hard-to-reach areas. Taking this into account, starting from the new academic year, educational loans will be provided on preferential terms for a period of 7 years at the base rate of the Central Bank, that is, at a rate of 14 percent this year,” he added. “For children from families included in the “iron notebook”, a procedure for paying a contract from budget funds for first-year education will be introduced,” Shavkat Mirziyoyev said.

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Youth Technoparks Are Being Created in Uzbekistan

Youth technology parks will be created in Uzbekistan. This was announced by the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev. “By the end of this year, youth technoparks will be commissioned in Karakalpakstan, Andijan, Samarkand, Syrdarya and Navoi,” he said. He added that next year, similar technology parks will be built in Bukhara, Jizzak, Kashkadarya, Namangan, Fergana, Khorezm and Surkhandarya. “We will also create a transparent system for selecting start-up ideas for young people, and next year we will allocate 100 billion soums from the budget to finance the best projects,” he said. “Khokims of the regions will hold competitions for youth start-up projects “First Step to Business”and will allocate grants from the local budget to at least three winners from each district. The average amount of one grant will be 50 million soums,” the head of Uzbekistan added.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: House Prices Rise, Approvals at New Record

House prices continued to surge across the nation in May with values up by more than one per cent in every capital city. The CoreLogic home value index rose 2.2 per cent in May, just shy of a staggering 2.8 per cent surge in March. The index now stand 10.6 per cent higher than a year ago. Building approvals for new private sector houses also rose by a further 4.6 per cent in April to 15,063 - a new record high - the

Australian Bureau of Statistics said. "Since the introduction of HomeBuilder in June 2020, private house approvals have risen 84 per cent," ABS officer Daniel Rossi said. CoreLogic research director Tim Lawless said home price growth spanned geography and housing types. "Such a synchronised upswing is an absolute rarity across Australia's diverse array of housing markets," he said.

Across the capital cities, the monthly change in dwelling values ranged from a 1.1 per cent rise in Perth through to a 3.2 per cent jump in Hobart. Across the non-capital city regions, conditions were more diverse with regional NSW leading monthly gains, up 2.5 per cent, while values in regional Western Australia had the weakest result, down 0.1 per cent. Mr Lawless said the combination of improving economic conditions and low interest rates was continuing to support consumer confidence, which in turn created persistently strong demand for housing. "At the same time, advertised supply remains well below average," he said. "This imbalance between demand and supply is continuing to create urgency amongst buyers, contributing to the upwards pressure on housing prices." The ABS data showed while approvals for private detached houses remained strong, the more volatile "approvals excluding houses" component tumbled 28.6 per cent. As such, overall building approvals fell 8.6 per cent to 21,482 for the month.

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Strongest Recovery in 50 Years: Frydenberg

Josh Frydenberg says the Australian economy has enjoyed its strongest performance in over 50 years since sinking into a recession last year, but warned against complacency. Speaking to journalists after the latest national accounts showed the economy grew by a stronger-than-expected 1.8 per cent in the March quarter, the treasurer said the lockdown in his home state of Victoria is a reminder that the global economy remains in a pandemic. "Challenges remain. We cannot be complacent," Mr Frydenberg said. The economy has now grown 1.1 per cent over the past year, meaning it has recovered to its pre-pandemic levels. "Coming out of the COVID-19-induced recession, GDP has grown by 8.7 per cent - that is the strongest growth since 1968," Mr Frydenberg said.

"Most encouragingly of all, the economic recovery is increasingly driven by the private sector, even though economic support more than halved over the March quarter." The Australian Bureau of Statistics said private investment contributed 0.9 percentage points to growth, with machinery and equipment investment recording its strongest quarter since December 2009. Dwelling investment increased for the third consecutive quarter and was consistent with the recent surge in building approvals as households took advantage of the government's HomeBuilder grants scheme. The HomeBuilder scheme ended in March. Household spending added 0.7 percentage points to growth in the quarter. Spending on services rose 2.4 per cent as

COVID-19 restrictions continued to ease around Australia, while spending on goods declined 0.5 per cent but remained above pre-pandemic levels.

Deloitte Access Economics partner Kristian Kolding said Australia is in rare company. "Only five other countries can boast an economy that's larger now than before the pandemic. And we achieved that goal while keeping COVID numbers lower than almost anywhere in the world," he said. But BIS Oxford Economics chief economist Sarah Hunter said although the outlook is positive, the ongoing outbreak and lockdown in Victoria highlights the risk still present. "The recovery will not be on completely solid ground until the pandemic is sustainably under control - this outcome is contingent on the continued roll out of the vaccine both domestically and globally," she said. Shadow treasurer Jim Chalmers agreed. "Australians can't bank on a first-rate recovery when their government is in the bottom-third of nations rolling out vaccines," Dr Chalmers said.

"Australia won't achieve stronger growth without fewer lockdowns, and we won't have fewer lockdowns until we finally fix the failures with vaccines and quarantine." Just hours before the data release, Reserve Bank head of economic analysis Brad Jones also issued a note of caution in an address to the Minerals Week Australia-Asia Investment Outlook conference in Canberra. "Here in Australia, it would seem premature to completely rule out the possibility of an overhang of cautious behaviour by households and firms, as seen internationally following previous shocks like the Great Depression and the GFC," Dr Jones said. Even so, he said the fact many Australian household and business balance sheets were in better condition than before the pandemic suggests the domestic economy could follow a quite different trajectory to past disasters.

"This is consistent with our central scenario for the Australian economy and the surprising strength in the domestic recovery to date," he said. The RBA left the cash rate at a record low 0.1 per cent at Tuesday's monthly board meeting, reiterating it did not expect to lift interest rates until at least 2024.

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House Prices Score Lofty Gains in 2020/21

Australian residential property prices rose 13.5 per cent over the 2020/21 financial year, the highest annual growth rate since 2004 and when the market was unwinding from the housing boom of the early 2000s. The CoreLogic home value index rose 1.9 per cent in June, with prices rising in all capital cities, led by a three per cent gain in Hobart. Over the year, house prices rose 15.6 per cent, compared to units that increased by 6.8 per cent. Darwin posted the highest annual rate in dwelling values, increasing by 21 per cent, followed by a 19.6 per cent rise in Hobart. CoreLogic head of research Eliza Owen said there were plenty of factors driving the housing market through the first six months of 2021 and before the recent uncertainty of growing COVID-19 cases emerged across the country. Continued low mortgage rates, falling unemployment, elevated consumer confidence, the accumulation of savings through the COVID restrictions last year and relatively low advertised housing stock all fuelled strong demand conditions.

"However, there are some markets where performance is starting to ease more notably," Ms Owen said. Across the capital cities, there is a loss of momentum across Perth and Darwin, while softer growth rates are also emerging at the high end of the market. "This easing in the pace of growth at the top end of the market is another clear signs of a shift in momentum," Ms Owen said. "The rest of the market tends to follow movements at the high end, and this is the first time in nine months that the high-tier growth rate has not accelerated."

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Manufacturing Expansion Fastest Since 1992

Australia's manufacturing sector is growing at its fastest pace in almost 30 years, despite the headwinds from COVID-19 outbreaks and associated lockdowns. The Australian Industry Group performance of manufacturing index rose a further 1.4 points in June to 63.2, the highest monthly result since the index commenced in 1992. "The 2020/21 financial year closed on a high note for Australia's manufacturing sector," Ai Group chief executive Innes Willox said. A record pace of expansion was evident across the food and beverages, machinery and equipment, building materials and chemicals sectors. "Production, employment and sales exports were all higher than in May although the rate of acceleration generally eased," Mr Willox said. "Exports of manufactured goods surged in June and new orders were also higher, pointing to the likelihood of further expansion in the months ahead."

The Australian Bureau of Statistics is preparing to release the latest international trade and job vacancy figures. Economists expect the trade balance for goods and services to balloon to a record $10.5 billion surplus in May, buoyed by commodity exports, particularly iron ore shipments to China. The previous record surplus was $9.7 billion in March 2020. Economists are also expecting other data to show house prices rose a further two per cent in June, which may leave Australia's financial regulators a little anxious as demand for home loans continue to build. Property data analysts CoreLogic will release its well-regarded home value index for June. In May, its index rose by 2.2 per cent nationally, lifting the annual rate to 10.6 per cent. The Reserve Bank of Australia has consistently said it is not its role to target house prices, only to ensure lending standards do not deteriorate.

At a meeting of the Council of Financial Regulators last month, the central bank agreed overall lending standards in Australia remained sound. The council is made up of the RBA, Treasury, the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission. Figures released by the RBA on Wednesday showed housing credit grew by 0.6 per cent in May, the largest rise since June 2017. However, the growth was largely made up by owner-occupier loans, rather than what are considered riskier investor home loans.

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NEW ZEALAND: Economy Grows Driven by Households, Construction and Business Investment

The Government's efforts to secure the recovery have been reflected in the robust rebound of GDP figures released today which show the economy remains resilient despite the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Grant Robertson said. GDP increased 1.6 percent in the first three months of 2021. The Treasury had forecast a modest decline of 0.2 percent in May's Budget and economic commentators using more recent data had forecast a less than 1 percent rise. Internationally, the OECD average was 0.3 percent. "New Zealanders' confidence in the recovery saw a boost in retail spending on big ticket items, eating out and holiday accommodation, offsetting the COVID-related loss of overseas tourists in what is traditionally a busy time of year for the industry," Grant Robertson said.

"Activity in the construction sector picked up to return to near record levels, while there were solid growth in wholesale trade, business services and manufacturing. Rising business confidence translated into higher investment, with a 15 percent increase in investment on plant, machinery and equipment during the quarter. The higher COVID-19 alert levels during the quarter only had a limited impact on the economy, thanks to the Government's quick response to provide cashflow and confidence. "Our economic recovery plan has kept people in jobs and supported business while ongoing targeted stimulus investment alongside strong exports of our products is putting money in households' pockets. Quarterly activity in March was greater than it was in the December 2019 quarter." The economy was 2.4 percent above where it was in the March quarter last year.

"New Zealand continues to outperform the countries we compare ourselves to on this measure," Grant Robertson said. Australia rose by 1.1 percent, the United States by 0.4 percent, and Canada by 0.3 percent, while Japan declined by 1.5 percent and the United Kingdom by 6.1 percent. "There is still a lot of uncertainty around how COVID is affecting different parts of the economy. The global economy is recovering but the ongoing impact of COVID-19 means the environment will remain volatile for some time. "Our economy remains robust despite ongoing uncertainty about the pandemic. We will continue to work with sectors which are still facing the impacts of COVID-19 to secure their recovery and rebuild. The Government will keep its focus on keeping New Zealanders safe, accelerating the recovery and dealing with long-standing issues such as climate change, housing and child wellbeing," Grant Robertson said.

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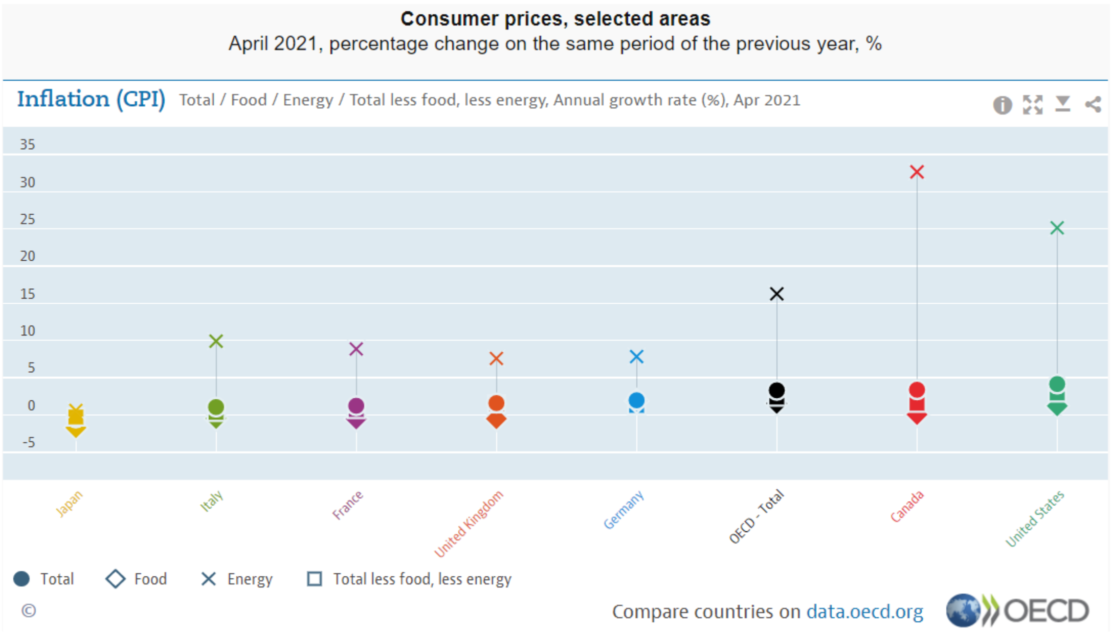
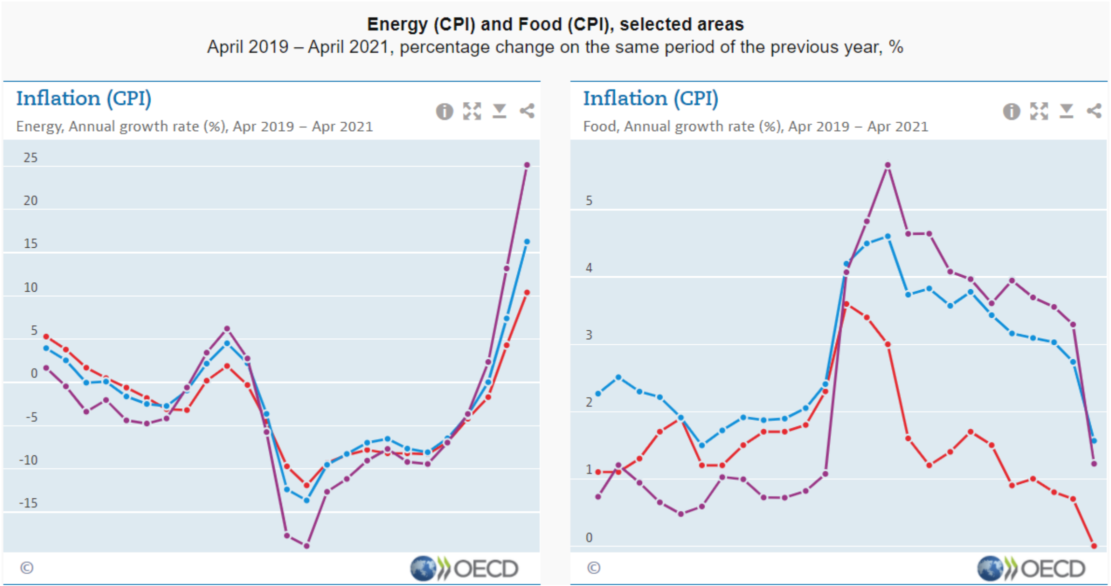
Asia-Pacific

Energy Prices Push OECD Inflation to 3.3% in April 2021, the Highest Rate Since October 2008

Annual inflation in the OECD area increased to 3.3% in April 2021, compared with 2.4% in March. Annual energy prices rose sharply by 16.3% in April, the highest rate since September 2008, compared with 7.4% in March. Nevertheless, food price inflation slowed to 1.6%, compared with 2.7% in March. Developments in energy and food prices are largely related to base year effects and to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic a year ago. OECD annual inflation excluding food and energy also increased significantly to 2.4% in April, compared with 1.8% in March, but varied widely across countries.





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Statement from OECD Secretary-General Mathias Cormann on the Outcome of the G7 Finance Ministers' Meeting

OECD Secretary-General Mathias Cormann welcomed today's ground-breaking agreement by G7 Finance Ministers on key elements of international tax reform designed to address the tax challenges of the digitalisation and the globalisation of the economy. "Governments around the world need to be able to raise the necessary revenue to fund the essential public services and support that their populations require and expect, in a way that is efficient, least distorting and also fair and equitable", said Mr. Cormann. "The combined effect of the globalisation and the digitalisation of our economies has caused distortions and inequities which can only be effectively addressed through a multilaterally agreed solution. "Today's consensus among the G7 Finance Ministers, including on a minimum level of global taxation, is a landmark step toward the global consensus necessary to reform the international tax system. "There is important work left to do. But this decision adds important momentum to the coming discussions among the 139 member countries and jurisdictions of the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework on BEPS, where we continue to seek a final agreement ensuring that multinational companies pay their fair share everywhere." Working with over 100 countries, the OECD is a global policy forum that promotes policies to improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.

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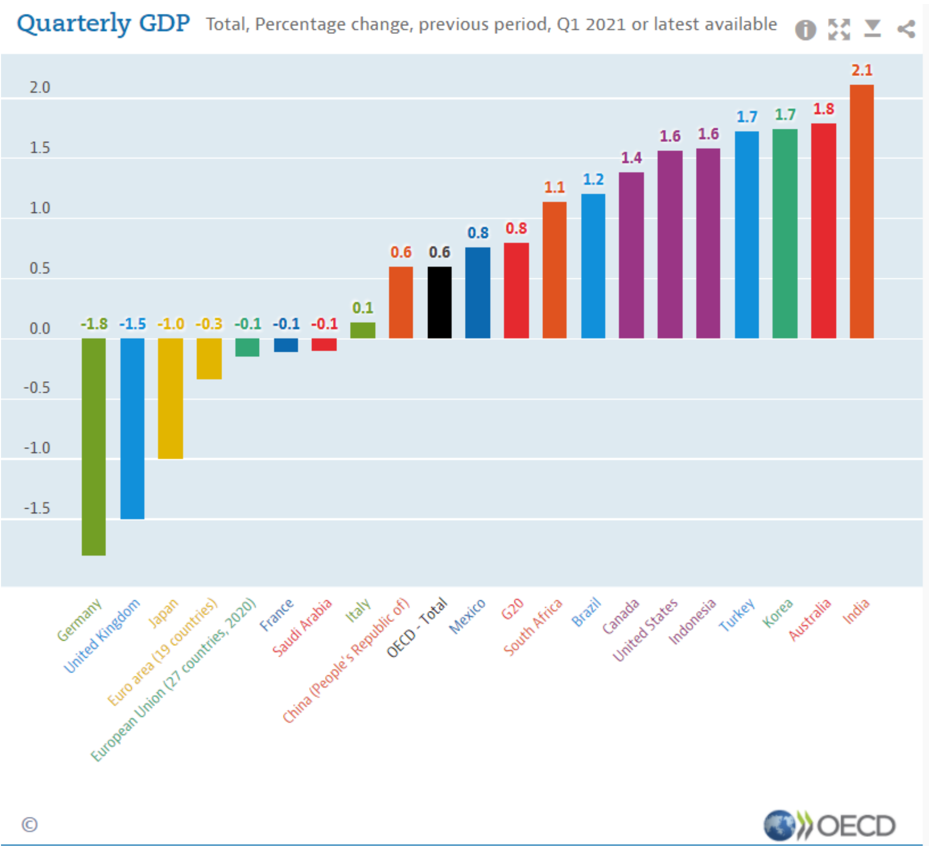
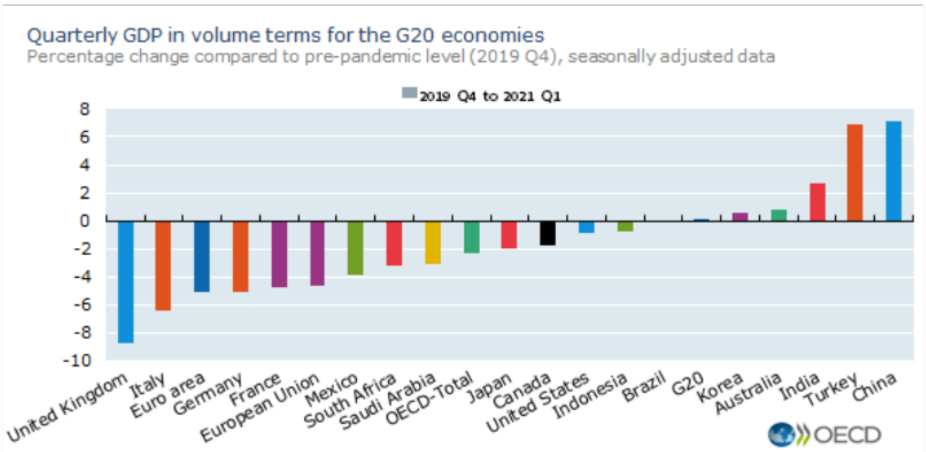
G20 GDP Returns to Pre-Pandemic Level in the First Quarter of 2021, but with Large Differences Across Countries

Gross domestic product (GDP) of the G20 area returned to pre-pandemic level in the first quarter of 2021, growing by 0.8% compared with the fourth quarter of 2020. However, this figure conceals large differences across countries. Among the G20 economies, India, Turkey and China, whose GDP was already above pre-pandemic levels in the previous quarter, continued their recovery, by 2.1%, 1.7% and 0.6%, respectively (after 9.3%, 1.7% and 2.6% in the previous quarter). GDP in Australia, Korea and Brazil also returned to pre-pandemic levels in the first quarter of 2021, with GDP growing by 1.8%, 1.7% and 1.2%, respectively.

For the remaining G20 economies, GDP is still lagging behind pre-pandemic levels, with countries recording diverging developments in the first quarter of 2021. While GDP growth accelerated in the United States (to 1.6%, after 1.1% in the fourth quarter of 2020) and Italy (to 0.1%, following a contraction of 1.8%), growth slowed in Indonesia (to 1.6%, after 2.3%), Canada (to 1.4%, after 2.2%), South Africa (to 1.1%, after 1.4%) and Mexico (to 0.8%, after 3.2%). Growth even turned negative in Germany (minus 1.8%, after 0.5% growth), the United Kingdom (minus 1.5%, after 1.3% growth), Japan (minus 1.0%, after 2.8% growth) and Saudi Arabia (minus 0.1%, after 2.5% growth). In France, GDP continued to contract for the second consecutive quarter, although at a slower pace (minus 0.1%, after minus 1.5%). Overall, the United Kingdom and Italy recorded the largest gaps to pre-pandemic GDP levels, at minus 8.7% and minus 6.4%, respectively, but also Germany, France, the euro area and the European Union still recorded gaps of more than 4.0%. Year-on-year GDP growth of the G20 area rebounded to 3.4% in the first quarter of 2021, following a contraction of (minus) 0.7% in the previous quarter. Among G20 economies, China, which was affected by COVID-19 at an earlier stage than other countries, recorded the highest annual growth (18.3%), while the United Kingdom recorded the largest annual fall (minus 6.1%).



Source: [OECD Quarterly National Accounts Database]



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Critical Reforms Needed to Reduce Inflation and Accelerate the Recovery, Says New World Bank Report

While the government took measures to protect the economy against a much deeper recession, it would be essential to set policy foundations for a strong recovery, according to the latest World Bank Nigeria Development Update (NDU). The NDU, titled "Resilience through Reforms", notes that in 2020 the Nigerian economy experienced a shallower contraction of -1.8% than had been projected at the beginning of the pandemic (-3.2%). Although the economy started to grow again, prices are increasing rapidly, severely impacting Nigerian households. As of April 2021, the inflation rate was the highest in four years. Food prices accounted for over 60% of the total increase in inflation. Rising prices have pushed an estimated 7 million Nigerians below the poverty line in 2020 alone. The report acknowledges notable government's policy reforms aimed at mitigating the impact of the crisis and supporting the recovery; including steps taken towards reducing gasoline subsidies and adjusting electricity tariffs towards more cost-reflective levels, both aimed at expanding the fiscal space for pro-poor spending. In addition, the report highlights that both the Federal and State governments cut nonessential spending and redirected resources towards the COVID-19 response. At the same time, public-sector transparency has improved, in particular around the operations of the oil and gas sector.

The report however, notes that despite the more favorable external environment, with recovering oil prices and growth in advanced economies, a failure to sustain and deepen reforms would threaten both macroeconomic sustainability and policy credibility, thereby limiting the government's ability to address gaps in human and physical capital which is needed to attract private investment. "Nigeria faces interlinked challenges in relation to inflation, limited job opportunities, and insecurity", said Shubham Chaudhuri, the World Bank Country Director for Nigeria. "While the government has made efforts to reduce the effect of these by advancing long-delayed policy reforms, it is clear that these reforms will have to be sustained and deepened for Nigeria to realize its development potential."

This edition of the Nigeria Development Update proposes near-term policy option organized around three priority objectives:
Reduce inflation by implementing policies that support macroeconomic stability, inclusive growth, and job creation;
Protect poor households from the impacts of inflation;
Facilitate access to financing for small and medium enterprises in key sectors to mitigate the effects of inflation and accelerate the recovery.
"Given the urgency to reduce inflation amidst the pandemic, a policy consensus and expedite reform implementation on exchange-rate management, monetary policy, trade policy, fiscal policy, and social protection would help save lives, protect livelihoods, and ensure a faster and sustained recovery" said Marco Hernandez, the World Bank Lead Economist for Nigeria and co-author of the report. In addition to assessing Nigeria's economic situation, this edition of the NDU also discusses how the COVID-19 crisis has affected employment; how inflation is exacerbating poverty in Nigeria; how reforming the power sector can ignite economic growth; and how Nigeria can mobilize revenues in a time of crisis.

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Financing to Support Reforms for Inclusive Growth and Development

The World Bank Board today approved the second in a series of three single-tranche Inclusive Growth Development Policy Operations (IGDPO) to support key reforms for enabling inclusive growth in Liberia. The financing, amounting to $40 million, comes in the form of an International Development Association (IDA) concessional credit of $20 million and an IDA grant of $20 million to be disbursed as budget support. The underlying reforms being supported seek to remove distortions in selected sectors, strengthen public sector transparency, and promote economic and social inclusion. “The continued implementation of critical policy reforms in sectors such as energy and agriculture helps create a conducive environment for transformative investments being made in these sectors by the Government, with support from development partners,” said Dr. Khwima Nthara, World Bank Liberia Country Manager.

Building on reforms supported under the first reform program approved last year, the key reforms under this second program are expected to help increase agriculture productivity by promoting farmers’ access to certified seeds; reduce power theft and commercial losses at the Liberia Electricity Corporation (LEC) by making electricity affordable for the small consumers with the reduction in electricity tariffs for poor households from $0.385/kWh to $0.22/kWh in May 2021; streamline and increase the transparency of tax waivers and in turn, improve revenues to enhance the provision of public services, especially for poor households; strengthen the oversight and transparency of State-owned Enterprises (SOEs); promote financial inclusion through the amendment of the Payments Act and introduction of digital credit; and finally, create an efficient, transparent and sustainable Social Safety Net System. “Strengthening Domestic Revenue Mobilization, through reduction of duty waivers and tax holidays, is critical to expanding fiscal space for increased public investment that is domestically financed,” said Mamadou Ndione, World Bank Senior Economist and Task Team Leader of the IGDPO program.

The reform programs being supported are aligned with the Liberia’s Pro-poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development and the World Bank’s Country Partnership Framework. *The International Development Association (IDA) is the World Bank’s fund for the poorest. Established in 1960, it provides grants and low to zero-interest loans for projects and programs that boost economic growth, reduce poverty, and improve poor people’s lives. IDA is one of the largest sources of assistance for the world’s 76 poorest countries, 39 of which are in Africa. IDA resources help effect positive change in the lives of the 1.6 billion people living in the countries that are eligible for its assistance. Since its inception, IDA has supported development work in 113 countries. Annual commitments are constantly on the rise and have averaged $21 billion over the past three years, with about 61% going to Africa.

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ADB Sells $5.5 Billion Dual Tranche 3- and 7-Year Global Benchmark Bonds

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) returned to the US dollar bond market with the pricing of a 3-year global benchmark bond worth $4 billion and a 7-year global benchmark bond worth $1.5 billion, proceeds of which will be part of ADB's ordinary capital resources. "We are delighted with the strong support from our investors across regions in our dual tranche 3- and 7-year outing," said ADB Treasurer Pierre Van Peteghem. "With an orderbook of over $12 billion, we raised over $5 billion across the two maturities. Once again, this provides us with additional resources to assist our developing member countries in Asia and the Pacific." The 3-year bond, with a coupon rate of 0.375% per annum payable semi-annually and a maturity date of 11 June 2024, was priced at 99.94% to yield 9.75 basis points over the 0.25% United States (US) Treasury notes due May 2024. The 7-year bond, with a coupon rate of 1.25% per annum payable semi-annually and a maturity date of 9 June 2028, was priced at 99.414% to yield 8.8 basis points over the 1.25% US Treasury notes due May 2028.

The transaction was lead-managed by Barclays, Citi, JP Morgan, and TD Securities. A syndicate group was also formed consisting of CIBC, Daiwa, ING, and Scotiabank. Both tranches achieved wide primary market distribution. On the 3-year issue, 22% of the bonds were placed in Asia; 35% in Europe, Middle East, and Africa; and 43% in the Americas. By investor type, 51% of the bonds went to central banks and official institutions, 32% to banks, and 17% to fund managers and other types of investors. On the 7-year issue, 42% of the bonds were placed in Asia; 42% in Europe, Middle East, and Africa; and 16% in the Americas. By investor type, 67% of the bonds went to central banks and official institutions, 18% to banks, and 15% to fund managers and other types of investors. ADB plans to raise $34 billion-$36 billion from the capital markets in 2021.

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Additional Financing Support by the Green Climate Fund to Help Strengthen Climate Resilience in Central Asia

The World Bank, as an accredited entity for the Green Climate Fund (GCF), approved today additional financing totaling $19 million for the Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Program for Aral Sea Basin (CAMP4ASB) project, the first to be funded by GCF in Central Asia. Implemented by the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), the Committee for Environmental Protection of Tajikistan, and the Ministry of Agriculture of Uzbekistan, the additional financing will support climate change adaptation and mitigation practices among the most vulnerable rural populations in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. To this end, the project will fund a range of activities, such as crop diversification, better water resource management, rehabilitation of degraded lands, and expansion of renewable energy sources, among others. To ensure sustainability and ownership of these sub-projects, the beneficiaries will be required to make at least a 10 percent contribution. The project expects to reach 205,000 individuals, with women making up at least 40 per cent. The additional financing will also enhance regionally coordinated access to improved climate change knowledge services for policymakers, local communities, and civil society organizations in Central Asia. Over $1 million will go towards sustaining CAMP4ASB's regional activities, including the flagship annual Central Asia Climate Change Conference and the Central Asian Climate Information Platform (CACIP). Launched in June 2021, the CACIP helps stakeholders across the region access, analyze, and visualize climate change related data and use them for awareness raising, assessment, and decision-making. Since its inception CAMP4ASB has been recognized as the key regional platform on climate change issues in Central Asia.

"This support package will allow to expand the World Bank's partnership with the Executive Committee of IFAS, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It will scale up the project's successful regional initiatives and climate investments that focus on sustainable livelihoods, generate lessons and experience for enhanced climate action in Central Asia," said World Bank Regional Director for Central Asia Lilia Burunciuc. "This funding will ensure that green growth and climate-smart development are at the forefront of economic recovery following the COVID-19 crisis." Launched in August 2016, the CAMP4ASB program has worked to equip and ultimately enable countries in Central Asia to address climate challenges through better access to improved climate change knowledge services, investments, and capacity-building of key stakeholders. The project has supported climate-smart agriculture investments benefitting more than 15,000 people and supporting the creation of 4,300 new jobs. Over 6,500 farmers and other project beneficiaries have participated in capacity-building and awareness-raising activities and events. Among project beneficiaries are the specialists of state institutions and academia working in the areas of hydrological modeling, early warning, updating curricula at universities, etc.

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East Asia

CHINA: Central Bank Emphasizes Supply Chain Finance Development

China will promote the standardized development of supply chain finance, effectively broaden the financing channels for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and ensure more funds flow to the real economy, according to the central bank. Wang Xin, head of the research bureau at the People's Bank of China, said the country still faces some difficulties in developing supply chain finance. Information sharing is yet to be realized among financial institutions, major enterprises, government departments and third-party institutions, the standardization and transparency of accounts receivable financing need to be further improved and risks of fraudulent transactions still exist, Wang said at the just-concluded China Finance 40 Qujiang Forum. In the next step, efforts should be made to improve the supply chain billing platform, establish a credit mechanism and prevent risks of supply chain finance, he said. Chinese authorities issued a guideline in September last year, putting forward a slew of policy requirements and measures to regulate the development and innovation of supply chain finance, construct the supporting infrastructure, improve the policy supporting system, and prevent risks.

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China Allocates More Funds to Boost Inclusive Finance in 2021

China has allocated a special fund of 9.22 billion yuan (1.43 billion U.S. dollars) to develop inclusive finance for 2021, up 31.2 percent from the level in 2020, the Ministry of Finance (MOF) announced in a statement. The move aims to support entrepreneurship and innovation and encourage local governments to promote small and micro financing, the statement added. Inclusive finance includes affordable, convenient and safe financial services for farmers, small businesses, those on low incomes, the disabled and the elderly. So far, more than 36 million micro and small businesses and self-employed individuals have got access to inclusive loans, said Yi Gang, governor of the People's Bank of China, the country's central bank. The central bank will continue to help foster inclusive finance after it has increased financial support for micro and small businesses and self-employed individuals in recent years, Yi said at the 13th Lujiazui Forum in Shanghai last Thursday.

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China Further Improves External Debt Structure

China's outstanding foreign debt stood at around 2.53 trillion U.S. dollars at the end of March, data from the country's forex regulator shows. The balance was 125.8 billion dollars higher than that at the end of 2020, up 5 percent, according to the State Administration of Foreign Exchange (SAFE). China's external debt structure further improved in the first quarter of the year, said SAFE spokesperson Wang Chunying. Foreign investors continue to increase their holdings of yuan-denominated bonds, which reflects the achievements of domestic bond market opening-up and investors' confidence in China's economic development, Wang said.

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Central Bank Pledges Flexible, Precise Implementation of Monetary Policy

China will implement its monetary policy in a flexible and precise way and strike a balance between economic recovery and risk prevention, the central bank has said. In a statement released after a quarterly meeting of its monetary policy committee, the People's Bank of China (PBOC) has pledged efforts to keep the economy running within an appropriate range and ensure that it reaches a higher level of equilibrium during the course of the recovery. The prudent monetary policy should stay flexible, precise, reasonable and moderate, said the PBOC, stressing to keep macro leverage ratio basically stable and liquidity at a reasonable and ample level. The PBOC will strengthen efforts to facilitate inclusive finance and guide financial institutions to increase support for sectors such as innovation, small and micro enterprises, as well as green development.

The central bank said it will also deepen market-oriented reform of exchange rates, increase the yuan's flexibility while keeping the currency's exchange rate basically stable at a reasonable and balanced level. Work will be done to establish a mechanism that allows the financial system to effectively support the real economy, promote high-level two-way financial opening and improve the country's management and risk control capabilities, said the statement. The PBOC will set up tools to boost coal emission reduction and improve the green financial system to help achieve the carbon peak and carbon neutrality targets, it said.

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China's Central Bank Conducts 30 Bln Yuan of Reverse Repos

China's central bank Wednesday conducted 30 billion yuan (about 4.64 billion U.S. dollars) of reverse repos to maintain stable liquidity at the end of the half year. The interest rate for the seven-day reverse repos was set at 2.2 percent, according to a statement on the website of the People's Bank of China. A reverse repo is a process in which the central bank purchases securities from commercial banks through bidding, with an agreement to sell them back in the future.

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JAPAN: BOJ Will Not Hesitate to Ease Further If Needed, Says Deputy Governor

The Bank of Japan will not hesitate to ease monetary policy further if needed, its deputy governor Masayoshi Amamiya said, warning that the country's budding economic recovery remains vulnerable to damage from the coronavirus pandemic. The central bank will also consider extending a September deadline for its pandemic-relief programs after scrutinizing economic and financial conditions, he said. "Japan's economy is headed for a recovery. But consumers will likely remain cautious about spending as curbs to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic continues," Amamiya said in an online seminar on Tuesday. "We'll extend the (relief program) if needed. Depending on the situation, we also won't hesitate taking additional monetary easing steps as needed," he added. On climate change, Amamiya said it was an issue that has a huge impact on Japan's economy and financial system. "We will consider what we can do as a central bank within our mandate of achieving price and financial stability," he said. The BOJ last year ramped up asset purchases and put in place a loan program aimed at channeling money to cash-strapped small firms to cushion the blow from the health crisis. With the pandemic still weighing on Japan's recovery, BOJ officials have signaled their readiness to extend the program and reach a decision either at its rate review next week or in July.

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BOJ to Launch New Scheme for Fighting Climate Change

The Bank of Japan unveiled a plan on Friday to boost funding for fighting climate change, in a surprise move underscoring the importance of the issue for central banks. The BOJ also maintained its massive monetary stimulus to support the country's economic recovery and extended a deadline for asset-buying and loan programs introduced last year to channel funds to pandemic-hit firms. Japan's central bank said it expects to launch the climate change scheme by the end of this year, and will release a preliminary outline of its plan at its next policy-setting meeting in July. "Climate change issues could exert an extremely large impact on economic activity, prices and financial conditions from a medium- to long-term perspective," the BOJ said in a statement. "Supporting private sector efforts from a central bank's standpoint will contribute to stabilizing the economy in the long run," it said. Under the scheme, the central bank said it will provide funds to financial institutions that increase loans and investment for activities aimed at combatting climate change. While details of the new scheme have yet to be announced, the BOJ said it will be modeled after a similar program that offers cheap loans to financial institutions that boost lending in areas considered to be growth industries.

After the two-day meeting, the BOJ also kept its target for short-term interest rates at -0.1% and for long-term yields around 0%, as widely expected, and extended by six months the September deadline for its asset-buying and loan programs. Japan's economy shrank an annualized 3.9% in the first quarter and is seen making only a modest rebound, if any, in the current quarter as anti-virus measures weigh on consumption. Core consumer prices in May rose 0.1% from a year earlier, marking the first year-on-year increase since March 2020 but remaining far distant from the BOJ's 2% goal. BOJ officials have recently signaled their readiness to put more emphasis on addressing economic and financial challenges posed by climate change. "The BOJ probably wanted to move in tandem with the government, which recently flagged steps to promote green in its policy blueprint," said Naomi Muguruma, senior market economist at Mitsubishi UFJ Morgan Stanley Securities. "The BOJ is also jumping on the band-wagon of the rising tide among central banks towards linking monetary policy to climate change," she said.

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Japan's FY 2020 Tax Revenue Tops Record 60 Tril. Yen Despite Virus

Japan's tax revenue topped 60 trillion yen ($540 billion), a record high, in fiscal 2020 on the back of solid corporate performances especially by manufacturers despite the coronavirus pandemic, government sources said Wednesday. Tax revenue in the year through March surpassed the previous record of 60.36 trillion yen in fiscal 2018, the sources said. The fiscal 2020 tax revenue was estimated at 55.13 trillion yen in December when the government drew up the third supplementary budget for fiscal 2020.

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SOUTH KOREA: State-Led R&D Expenditures Near 24 Tln Won in 2020

South Korea spent nearly 24 trillion won (US$21.26 billion) on state-led research and development (R&D) projects last year, up 16 percent from the previous year, the science ministry said Monday. The country's R&D expenditures last year amounted to 23.88 trillion won, up 15.8 percent from the previous year and the fastest rise in 15 years, according to the Ministry of Science and ICT. State-led R&D spending has increased by 7.2 percent on average annually from 2017 to 2020 under the current administration, compared with the average 4 percent rise per year under the previous administration from 2013 to 2017. By R&D sector, the country last year spent 4.2 trillion won, or 18.6 percent of the total, on machinery, followed by 2.4 trillion won, or 10.6 percent, on information and telecommunications, and 2.2 trillion won, or 9.9 percent, on electrical and electronic technology. State-run research institutes' R&D projects were given 8.7 trillion won, or 36.3 percent of the total R&D expenditures, while universities received 5.8 trillion won, or 24.1 percent. The government provided 6.2 trillion won, or 25.9 percent of the total, to companies last year, with small and midsized companies receiving 5.8 trillion won, compared with 400 billion won given to large companies. The ministry added that the number of principal researchers in science and technology fields last year rose 5.3 percent on-year to 46,937.

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Moon Calls for Volatile Cryptocurrency Watch as Fever Affects the Young

President Moon Jae-in has asked the government to keep an eye on the cryptocurrency market, especially as the craze has centered around young investors. Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum relayed the president's stance on the matter in response to a question posed during a parliamentary inspection session on the government on Wednesday. Kim said Moon underlined the need for close inspection of the highly volatile virtual coin market to prevent big losses incurred by young investors. When asked by main opposition People Power Party Representative Lee Joo-hwan whether Moon gave any instruction regarding policy, the prime minister said there was no such order. Kim said, since taking office last month, he has focused on efforts to stabilize the cryptocurrency market and to secure the transparency of transactions. He added the government will work toward securing the market's stability by September.

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S. Korea to Invest Over 200 Bln Won in 6G Tech by 2025

South Korea said Wednesday it will invest 220 billion won (US$195 million) to develop and standardize sixth generation (6G) network technology by 2025 and conduct joint research with the United States to strengthen competitiveness in the global race for the future technology. The network technology, which is expected to reach theoretical speeds up to 50 times faster than 5G and have a tenth of its latency, is currently in early stages of development, with commercialization expected as early as 2028. The Ministry of Science and ICT said it has earmarked around 200 billion won until 2025 to develop core 6G technology, such as integrating satellite networks and terrestrial networks to power telecommunications for future flying vehicles and drones, as well as in disaster situations. The country has already set out a plan to launch 14 low Earth orbit satellites by 2031 to test the technology.

South Korea's Institute of Information & Communications Technology Planning & Evaluation has also signed a memorandum of understanding with the United States' National Science Foundation to conduct joint research in 6G technologies. The joint research agreement comes after a summit between the two countries last month that agreed to strengthen cooperation in emerging technologies, including 6G. The ministry said it is also pursuing research in the sector with the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology and Finland's University of Oulu. The investment is the latest in South Korea's efforts to maintain its edge in telecommunications technology after becoming the first country in the world to commercialize 5G networks in April 2019.

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South-East Asia

INDONESIA: World Bank Approves 800 Mln USD Loan for Investment Reforms

The World Bank's Board of Executive Directors has approved funding of 800 million U.S. dollars to support Indonesia's reforms on investment and trade as well as efforts to help accelerate the country's economic recovery and transformation. The new funding focuses specifically on foreign direct investment, more highly skilled professionals in the manpower market, and private investment in the field of renewable energy. The World Bank's Country Director for Indonesia and Timor-Leste Satu Kahkonen said on Wednesday that the funding would support the Indonesian government's plan to carry out reforms so as to attract investment and to sharpen the economic competitive edges. The reforms intended to have the potential to boost the economic sectors with higher added value, and help with the economic recovery in the post-pandemic time, Kahkonen was quoted by Antara news agency as saying.

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CAMBODIA: World Bank Approves 200 Mln USD Credit for COVID-19 Responses

The World Bank has approved a 200-million-U.S. dollar credit to Cambodia, giving the kingdom a boost to combat the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and to begin its journey toward economic recovery, said its press statement Friday. The credit will help Cambodia deal with the COVID-19 crisis by providing timely and targeted relief to affected people, facilitating robust recovery through structural reforms, and building resilience against future economic shocks, the statement said. Cambodia is facing an unprecedented economic and social crisis. In 2020 its economy contracted for the first time in 30 years, by 3.1 percent, and is in now in the midst of its worst COVID-19 outbreak since the pandemic began, it said. The sectors most impacted by the crisis, including garments, tourism, and construction, are also those which account for much of the employment in the country, the statement said. It added that in the absence of significant mitigation measures, the pandemic could result in sharp rises in unemployment and poverty, with the number of people falling into poverty expected to swell by nearly 1 million. "There is a clear need in Cambodia to provide quick-disbursing resources in support of a comprehensive, government-led program that will protect the poorest from the impacts of the crisis and assist with the country's economic and social recovery," said Inguna Dobraja, World Bank country manager for Cambodia.

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MALAYSIA: Records 19.57 Bln USD Approved Investments in Q1

Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA) said Wednesday that the country's approved investment in the manufacturing, services and primary sectors in the first quarter surged 95.6 percent despite the unprecedented economic challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The approved investment rose to 80.6 billion ringgit (about 19.57 billion U.S. dollars) from 41.2 billion ringgit a year ago, involving 993 projects and are expected to generate 32,557 job opportunities, the MIDA said in a statement. According to the MIDA, the total approved foreign direct investments (FDI) in the manufacturing, services and primary sectors jumped 383.4 percent to 54.9 billion ringgit in the first quarter, from 11.4 billion ringgit a year ago. Meanwhile, domestic direct investments made up the rest of 25.7 billion ringgit, contributing 31.9 percent to the total approved investments in all the three sectors. Overall, the manufacturing sector led the investments for the first quarter, with total approved investments soaring 126.8 percent year on year to 58.8 billion ringgit. FDI accounted for 88.9 percent of the total approved investments in the manufacturing sector.

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PHILIPPINES: Remittances Reach 2.5 Bln USD in April

Personal remittances from overseas Filipinos reached 2.574 billion U.S. dollars in April 2021, higher by 13.1 percent than the amount recorded in April 2020, Philippine central bank data showed. This brings the cumulative personal remittances for the first four months this year to 11.028 billion U.S. dollars, representing a 5.1 percent growth year-on-year compared to the same period in 2020, the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) said in a statement released on Tuesday. The BSP said the U.S. registered the highest share of overall remittances at 40.3 percent for the first four months, followed by Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Britain, the United Arab Emirates, among others. The personal remittances remains a major source of the country's foreign exchange inflows, with the 2020 level representing 9.2 percent of the gross domestic product and 8.5 percent of the gross national income, according to the BSP.

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World Bank Approves 400-Mln-USD Loan to Philippines

The World Bank on Friday approved a 400- million-U.S. dollars loan to support reforms that will assist the Philippine government in achieving a resilient financial sector and help ensure a more inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The bank said the Philippines First Financial Sector Reform Development Policy Financing loan is the first of two programs supporting three reform areas, including strengthening financial sector stability, integrity, and resilience. The loan will also expand financial inclusion for individuals and firms and promote disaster risk finance that protects national budgets and businesses and the lives and livelihoods of families from the impacts of disasters, the bank added. "The health crisis, the economic impact of containment measures, and the global slowdown have increased the urgency for reforms, not only to ensure financial sector stability or financial inclusion, but also to support economic recovery and minimize the impact of future shocks particularly on poor and vulnerable segments of the population," Ndiame Diop, World Bank Country Director for Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand, said in a statement.

In addition to providing timely financial resources to support government financing needs, Diop said the financial sector reforms supported under this loan "will help meet the immediate needs of individuals and micro, small and medium enterprises under strain." The bank said the new lending is a development policy loan (DPL) which provides quick-disbursing assistance to countries undertaking reforms. DPLs typically support policy and institutional changes needed to create an environment conducive to sustained and equitable growth, as the borrower countries' development agenda defines. Among the policy reforms supported by this DPL to enhance the stability, integrity, and resilience of the financial sector are measures addressing legal, regulatory and supervisory issues to improve prudential supervision of banks by the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, bringing insurance legislation in the Philippines in line with global standards, and ensuring long-term availability of credit to small and medium enterprises.

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THAILAND: Approving 16-Billion-Usd Loan Plan for Covid-19 Response

Thailand's House of Representatives on Thursday approved the government's plan of borrowing up to 500 billion baht (about 16 billion U.S. dollars) to support its COVID-19 response measures amid the worst wave of the coronavirus outbreak so far. The additional fund to be acquired by the Ministry of Finance and wrapped up by the end of September 2022 was given a retroactive approval with a vote of 270 to 196. The plan was announced last month in a royal gazette, which said the new debt would be raised in loans or via sales of other securities. Calling it "the last resort" with which the government could continue to address the pandemic situation, Finance Minister Arkhom Termpittayapaisith said the fund would be spent under the government's expenditure discipline and transparency. According to the finance minister, the fund will include 300 billion baht for relief measures for people affected by the pandemic, 170 billion baht for economic and social recovery measures and 30 billion baht for purchase of medical equipment and COVID-19 vaccines. Thailand is now struggling to overcome its third wave of COVID-19 outbreak, which since early April has seen a more than sixfold jump in case tally as well as a surge in death toll. (1 U.S. dollar equals 31.15 Thai baht)

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VIETNAM: Government Plans to Borrow VNĐ1.7 Quadrillion in 2021-23

The Vietnamese Government plans to borrow more than VNĐ1.7 quadrillion (US$73.2 billion) in the 2021-23 period to meet the capital demand for socio-economic development, according to the public debt management plan for the next three years approved late last week. The borrowing aimed to ensure a balance for the State budget and promote socio-economic development at an appropriate level of cost risk. Of the sum, around VNĐ1.6 quadrillion would be borrowed for the central budget while VNĐ134.4 trillion would be for refinancing. The plan also aimed to tightly control debt indicators to ensure budget safety and accelerating the development of the domestic capital market. The Ministry of Finance asked the Government to be active in issuing bonds, restructuring debt portfolio and developing the Government bond market. In addition, the ministry must arrange resources for debt payment to prevent overdue debts which might affect the Government's international commitments. The Government would limit the issuance of new guarantees for enterprise loans with the increasing rate of the total outstanding Government-backed loans not exceeding the growth rate of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).

Regarding the borrowing of local governments, the deficit level would be capped at about 0.2 per cent of GDP. The increasing rate of short-term foreign commercial loans of enterprises and credit institutions would be controlled at less than 18-20 per cent per year and below $6.35-7 billion for medium and long term loans to ensure the country's foreign debt within the allowable limit. In 2021, the Government would borrow more than VNĐ624.2 trillion, around 84 per cent of which were from domestic lenders and the rest from foreign sources. Of the figure, VNĐ318.87 trillion would be spent in offsetting overspending, VNĐ260.9 trillion for repaying debts and VNĐ44.4 trillion for refinancing. This year, the Government must repay debts worth VNĐ394.5 trillion. Compared to GDP which was worth VNĐ6.3 quadrillion in 2020, the amount of debt the Government must repay this year was equivalent to 6 per cent. Meanwhile, GDP growth rate was at just 2.91 per cent last year due to the impacts of COVID-19.

Local governments would have to borrow VNĐ28.79 trillion and pay debts worth

VNĐ6.6 trillion, including VNĐ2.66 trillion in interest, this year. The Government asked the Ministry of Finance to develop the public debt management plan for the 2021-25 period, together with a public debt strategy for 2021-30 and a project to improve the credit rating to 2025 with a vision to 2030 as well as a project to promote the application of information technology in public debt management for approval. The focus must be placed on promoting the development of the domestic capital market and the Government bond market towards diversifying products and investors with priority given to long-term investors and attracting the participation of foreign investors in the domestic debt market. The State Bank of Việt Nam must keep a close watch on foreign loans of enterprises to ensure they are within the allowable limit. The central bank was urged to work with the Ministry of Finance to develop the legal framework and tools for managing foreign debts appropriate to the economic development requirements in the context that Việt Nam becomes a middle-income country.

The ratio of public debt to GDP of Việt Nam decreased from 63.7 per cent in 2016 to 55.3 per cent in 2020, within the National Assembly's set ceiling of 65 per cent, meaning that the pressure from public debts eased significantly during the past five years. The budget deficit was estimated at VNĐ248.5 quadrillion in 2020, or less than four per cent of GDP. For the 2016-20 period, budget deficit averaged 3.6 per cent of GDP. In 2020, the Government issued bonds worth VNĐ333 trillion to offset overspending and pay debts, mostly medium and long term loans. No bonds with terms of less than five years were issued last year. The maturity terms of Government bonds issued in 2020 were 3.5 times longer than 2011, from an average of 3.9 years to 13.94 years. On average, the maturity terms of Government bonds as of the end of 2020 averaged 8.42 years, five times longer than the end of 2011. Besides, Việt Nam did not borrow any new loans from international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank in 2020, which contributed to consolidating the credit rating of Việt Nam. Moody's Investors Service in March affirmed the Government of Việt Nam's long-term issuer and senior unsecured ratings at Ba3 and changed the outlook to positive from negative. In April, Fitch Ratings revised Việt Nam's outlook to positive from stable and affirmed the long-term foreign-currency issuer default rating at 'BB'. S&P in May 2020 retained Việt Nam's sovereign credit rating at BB with a stable outlook.

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Việt Nam Records $1.35b Trade Deficit in First Half of June

Việt Nam reported a trade deficit of US$1.35 billion in the first half of June as exports reached only $12.3 billion – down nearly $2 billion compared to the latter half of May, the General Department of Customs has announced. Among items posting the strongest turnover decline included computers, electronics and parts with $1.06 billion, down $800 million; machinery and equipment with $1.1 billion, down $260 million and telephones and components with $1.96 billion, down $50 million. Since the beginning of this year to mid-June, the nation's trade value surpassed $288.6 billion. Of the sum, over $143.3 billion came from exports, up 30 per cent year-on-year while the remainder of $145.3 billion was from imports, up 36 per cent. That resulted in a trade deficit of $1.96 billion, the department said. According to trade experts, the above-mentioned trade deficit was not a worrisome figure as enterprises ramped up their imports of input materials to meet their production demands. Deputy head of the Import-Export Department under the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MoIT) Trần Thanh Hải agreed. He said at the MoIT's regular press meeting for the second quarter in Hà Nội last week that the import of production materials currently accounted for a high proportion, especially in garment and footwear sectors, thus pushing up the import value, affecting the trade balance.

The COVID-19 resurgence in late April had certain impacts on many production industries which had started to recover such as electronics and mobile phones. However, exporting enterprises which already had orders still had to import raw materials and accessories for production. Thus, an import increase should be considered a good sign rather than a cause for concern, Hải said. According to the MoIT, exports are set to increase by about 21.7 per cent by year-end compared to the year's respective targets of 4-5 per cent. To this end, the ministry would continue to give priority to promoting trade connections between Vietnamese enterprises and foreign partners, and the introduction of made-in-Việt Nam goods to domestic and international consumers. Particularly, it would continue working to promote overseas shipments, diversify both export and import markets, optimise opportunities generated by free trade agreements, and remove barriers to enter new markets. Last year, the country's trade surplus hit a record high of $9.9 billion, the highest level seen in the past four years.

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South Asia

SRI LANKA: Central Bank Requests Banks to Carry Out Essential Banking Services Adhering to Guidelines

Sri Lanka's Central Bank requests banks to carry out essential banking services, strictly adhering to guidelines issued in providing banking services under the ongoing travel restrictions. Accordingly, all licensed banks shall make necessary arrangements to provide uninterrupted banking services complying with the following: (i) Opening of bank branches only to provide essential services such as trade financing, treasury operations, clearing activities, payment of pensions/salaries, responding to other urgent requests/inquiries of customers, etc.; (ii) The number of staff permitted to report to work in branches of licensed banks shall not exceed 15 per branch; (iii) Staff shall report to work on a roster basis, or the branches shall only be opened on specified days taking note of specific requirements of customers of each branch; and (iv) Branch Managers shall obtain prior approval of the nearest Police Station for the travel of the relevant staff by producing a request letter containing relevant information.

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Orient Finance Records Threefold Increase in Net Operating Income

Orient Finance PLC reported a profit before tax of LKR 193 Mn for the 2020-21 financial year, reflecting a year-over-year growth of 144 per cent. The company's net operating income also increased 148 per cent from LKR 0.47 Bn to LKR 1.17 Bn during the year under review. This performance was despite the Company foregoing LKR 243 Mn in interest income for the 2020-21 financial year as a result of concessions granted by the CBSL due to COVID. "The Covid – 19 pandemic continues to pose complex and interconnected challenges to all industries across the country. In today's challenging economic times, focusing on customers and understanding their needs has become the cornerstone of success for Orient Finance. Our timely response to challenges, leadership of our CEO and management team, the dedication of our staff and digitalization initiatives largely contributed to our consistent performance even during such trying times. We hope to sustain our strategic efforts and provide the best returns for our customers, employees and most importantly our shareholders," said Anil Tittawella, Chairman of Orient Finance PLC. Orient Finance's net assets per share increased from LKR 12.84 to LKR 13.67 while its share price increased from LKR 6.10 to LKR 13.90 when compared to last year. In February 2020, in order to meet the capital adequacy requirements, the Company issued 35,183,526 ordinary voting shares in the proportion of 01 new ordinary voting shares for every 05 ordinary voting shares in the capital of the Company raising LKR 506,642,774. "Due to the prevailing situation and the decline in economic activity we will continue to realign our business strategies to move forward as we navigate the new normal ushered in by the pandemic. We must remain true to our customers and support them in difficult times. We have guided our front-line staff to have regular communication with our customers to identify their actual requirements, share knowledge and overall, make customers feel valued and important. Our performance this year reflects our focus on providing win-win solutions to our customers for a long-term mutual gain. Furthermore, we firmly believe that as a member of Janashakthi Group our growth strategies will be further strengthened enabling us to maintain this growth momentum," said K.M.M. Jabir, Director and Chief Executive Officer of Orient Finance PLC.

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CSE Reports Highest Quarterly Earnings Surpassing LKR 100bn

Milestone

The CSE witnessed another landmark, as reported earnings crossed the LKR 100bn mark for the first time in the history of the CSE during the first quarter of the calendar year 2021. The growth is a monumental 189% YoY growth compared to the corresponding quarter the previous year. Recording its best quarterly earnings performance in history of over LKR 109bn, the total reported earnings tally for the past 6 months reached LKR 195 Bn and LKR 285bn on a TTM basis. It is commendable to note that the growth momentum comes despite the period being stricken by waves of COVID induced lockdowns, which severely impacted mobility and overall economic activity. The growth is in testament to the favorable climate for local companies during the post-lockdown period backed by import protectionism, economic stimulus and USD depreciation which proved to benefit the local industries and export segments whilst pent-up demand helped play a further role in strengthening the earnings performance. The earnings momentum continued from its depressed state during the first wave of COVID-19, to record a 462% growth c.f. 2Q 2020 and a 28% growth from 4Q 2020, the quarter that was affected by the second wave of COVID-19. A deeper analysis of earnings reveals the thesis that corporates are becoming better equipped to handle lockdowns as it makes its transition into the new normal, whilst the opening up of the economy provides an instant boost following an extended lockdown period.

A brief segmental analysis is as follows:
HOLDING STRONG: The banking sector continued its recovery, remaining highly undervalued
The Banking sector earnings shot up by 70% YoY (+33% QoQ in 1Q2021/4QFY21) amidst lower impairment provisioning compared to last year and slight margin improvement after bottoming out during 4Q2020.
RIDING THE WAVE: Import restrictions and the recovery in mobility drive strong earnings for the capital goods sector
Capital Goods sector earnings were up +214% YoY in 1Q2021/4QFY21 and up by +63% QoQ basis, on the back of import protectionism, USD depreciation and revival in overall activity levels as the country adjusted to a new normal
A CONSUMER RECOVERY: Consumer driven conglomerates saw a strong boost backed by mobility
Food Beverage & Tobacco saw phenomenal earnings growth of +827% YoY, displaying properties of giffen goods as the country switched back to basics, whilst the palm oil price spike continued to benefit CARS in 4Q’21
THE TOP PERFORMER: A strong sustained growth backed by a favorable post-COVID landscape for the material sector
The Materials sector earnings improved significantly (+267% YoY) remaining broadly around the Q4 earnings mark (+21% QoQ) to record a growth of over 160% on a TTM Basis to be the best performing sector of the CSE*
THE CLEAR WINNER: Built to thrive during a health crisis, the healthcare sector

earnings grew by 532% (YoY)
Health Care Equipment & Services sector earnings improved significantly +532% YoY and +22% QoQ due to the surge in demand in the healthcare sector
A SUSTAINABLE GROWTH: Increased consumption patterns drove telecom earnings up 36% (YoY)

Telecommunication sector earnings surged 36% YoY in 1Q2021/4QFY21 on the back of improved data consumption, cost saving initiatives and reduced operational expenses.
EXPLOITING THE TIMES: A COVID-induced growth, with the transportation sector hitting the jackpot during travel restrictions
Transportation sector earnings spiked +998% YoY to LKR 4bn on the back of the extraordinary earnings boost witnessed by EXPO, however on a QoQ basis, earnings dropped 12%.
BOUNCING BACK: A strong recovery drives Q1 earnings of the retail sector up by 612% (YoY)
The Retailing sector witnessed a phenomenal growth in earnings by +612% YoY (+29% QoQ) driven by the strong pent-up demand which continued to be seen in 1Q2021/4QFY21 as mobility recovered to near normalcy.
NON-IMPACTED SEGMENT: An unwavering growth, that remained strong despite the lockdowns
The Utilities Sector earnings grew 99% YoY in line with its seasonality despite falling 67% QoQ in 1Q2021/4QFY21 due to unfavorable weather conditions compared to 4Q'20.

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Risks for Sri Lankan Banks May Rise on End of Restriction on ISB Investments

The end of the suspension on Sri Lankan banks' investments in international sovereign bonds (ISBs) issued by the Sri Lanka sovereign (CCC) has the potential to increase banks' exposure to sovereign and foreign-currency funding and liquidity risks, says Fitch Ratings. Banks' credit profiles are already significantly exposed to the sovereign, with Fitch-rated Sri Lankan banks having about a third of their combined assets exposed to the central government at end-2020. In addition, they face foreign-currency risks, including through their US dollar-denominated ISB investments (see Sri Lankan Banks Dashboard: 1Q21 published 9 March 2021. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) on 16 June 2021 revoked the previous indefinite suspension on investments in ISBs by banks. Sri Lankan banks had invested heavily in ISBs, which prompted the CBSL to halt investments in ISBs by banks from December 2020, due to concerns about the pressure on the domestic foreign-exchange market through dollar outflows. The CBSL now permits banks to purchase ISBs in the secondary market, provided this investment is funded by fresh overseas borrowings. The directive requires banks to adopt risk mitigation measures to bridge maturity mismatches that could arise. Fitch expects Sri Lankan banks to continue to face difficulties in accessing foreign-currency funding due to the sovereign's low credit rating. Foreign-currency borrowings declined to LKR881 billion by end-1Q21, from LKR984 billion at end-2019, accounting for 5.8% of sector assets. Refinancing needs remain high as short-term loans made up around 63% of the banking system's external debt at end-2020.

The latest directive stipulates that fresh offshore borrowings sourced to buy foreign-currency government securities have to be invested in both ISBs and Sri Lanka Development Bonds (SLDBs) in equal proportion, and as such would also contribute to increased investments in SLDBs by banks. Banks are the main investors in SLDBs, but their holdings of these securities declined 15% in 2020 to LKR448 billion. Take-up in SLDBs by banks has been less than the higher-yielding ISBs, which are listed and more widely held. There are no limits on banks' subscription to SLDB issuances. Fitch-rated Sri Lankan banks' investments in ISBs and SLDBs accounted for 6.4% of their assets at end-2020. The extent of incremental investments in ISBs and SLDBs by banks remains to be seen, but Fitch expects the banks to add only a limited amount of ISBs and SLDBs. This is due to the lower appetite of some banks to add to their exposure to foreign-currency government securities and potential funding access challenges. The risks to banks from their holdings of foreign-currency government securities are exacerbated by recent measures that have reduced minimum buffers, such as a reduction in the risk weights on foreign-currency claims on the government held by banks to 10% in 2021 from 20%, and cut in the loss-given-default rates to 10% from 20% when computing expected losses in 2021. The 'CCC' rating on Sri Lanka reflects the sovereign's challenging foreign-currency external debt repayment burden over the medium term, low foreign-exchange reserves, and high and rising government debt that gives rise to sustainability risks. Sri Lankan banks' ratings continue to remain constrained by the sovereign credit profile.

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Support Measures Ease Pressure on Sri Lankan Banks' Credit Profiles

Sri Lankan banks' performance in 2020 and 1Q21 exceeded Fitch Ratings' initial expectations, thanks to stimulus and regulatory relief measures. However, we believe risks to the banks' performance and operating environment remain, due to pressures stemming from Covid-19 and the sovereign credit profile. Sri Lankan banks' loan growth in 2020 dipped below historical averages due to subdued private credit demand and reduced appetite for new lending. We expect moderately higher loan growth in 2021 as private credit demand picks up, alongside a possible resumption in economic activity combined with increased state borrowings. Asset quality remains a key risk as regulatory relief measures are unwound. This should see credit costs in 2021 at least as high as in 2020, but overall profitability could rise from further deposit repricing and the likely pick-up in lending. State banks' capital buffers have come under pressure from rapid loan growth, while private banks' remained broadly intact on the back of a faster pace of earnings retention and capital-raising by some banks. Banks' funding profiles remained largely unchanged, although the share of foreign-currency funding in total funding continued to decline, to 21% by end-1Q21 (2019: 23%). We expect foreign-currency funding in terms of both access and pricing to remain challenged in 2021.

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: Digital Banks to Become Key Components of Any Developing Financial System – ABA

Digital banks, providing remote access to all services without physical contact, will be a key component of any evolving financial system, Tamerlan Rustamov, Head of the expert group 'On Payment Systems and Digital Banking' of the Azerbaijan Banks Association (ABA), told Trend. According to Rustamov, in Azerbaijan, as in countries with developed financial systems, the use of mobile platforms in the banking system is inevitable. Besides, deepening of the process of building digital platforms in mobile banking will ensure that products and services that meet customer needs are delivered through a single platform. "It's necessary to ensure the creation of a horizontally integrated chain of products and services through mobile banking. The richness of digital services must be ensured by redefining the service chain provided by banks through mobile banking. This will have a direct impact on the process of expanding the use of value-added services compared to mobile banking," he added. Rustamov noted that at the same time, banks should focus on the wishes and needs of the client.

"Namely this factor ensures the improvement of users' digital payment habits by attracting a new segment of customers. The focus should be on the use of advanced information technologies, including artificial intelligence, open banking technologies that will deepen the platform, enrich the service chain, and provide products that meet customer needs in advance," the ABA's representative said. He stressed that the achievements in the application of innovative technologies and solutions must be supported. "The process of integrating mobile banking services into the instant payment system operated by the Central Bank of Azerbaijan should be accelerated, and the introduction of tokenization services should be expanded. These innovations should be aimed at strengthening direct access to financial services by increasing the efficiency and security of digital payments," he further noted. The above factors, according to Rustamov, will ensure focus on the desires and needs of customers, the use of a horizontal service chain, advanced information technologies and innovative solutions, the introduction of new services along with traditional banking products and services on a single platform, as well as the expansion of the client segment. "In order to increase the level of security, it's needed to establish a set of mandatory requirements for financial institutions by adopting a regulatory legal document in the field of electronic and mobile banking," Rustamov said.

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Azerbaijan's Central Bank to Increase Population's Financial Literacy

The Central Bank of Azerbaijan (CBA), the financial market regulator, considers its priority task to increase the security of transactions and prevent cases of fraud in the process of cashless payments, Trend reports via CBA's Twitter publication. Since 2013, the Central Bank has been collecting and analyzing information on fraudulent transactions with payment cards belonging to non-resident organizations in the internal network of payment services on a quarterly basis, the publication said. Also, in accordance with the 'Rules for the Issue and Use of Payment Cards' approved by the CBA Board, issuing banks and organizations involved in the processing of payment card data promptly detect and prevent suspicious transactions with their use. "The timely prevention of threats is facilitated by the availability of software for effective risk management, real-time monitoring to detect suspicious transactions with payment cards, the existence of internal procedures to prevent the illegal disclosure of confidential information that identifies card users, and the minimum provisions of these rules," the bank publication says. The financial market regulator also noted it periodically sends out recommendations to banks to prevent cases of fraudulent transactions with payment cards, guidelines for the provision of electronic banking services, and their security. "At the same time, seminars and training are regularly organized on the safe use of payment cards among various groups of the population, increasing financial literacy, providing the necessary knowledge about digital payments and preventing fraud," the CBA publicized.

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Azerbaijani State Committee to Put State Property Up for Auction

The State Committee on Property Issues under the Ministry of Economy of Azerbaijan will put up for auction 31 state property objects on July 27, 2021. In particular, 20 small state-owned enterprises and unfinished objects, and 11 vehicles will be put up for auction. The source said that interested participants can visit the website for the provision of property services of the State Property Service of Azerbaijan on the day of the auction, as well as observe it without registration online. All those wishing to partake in the auction on the official website of the committee (emlak.gov.az) or on the privatization portal (privatization.az) must, after registering, pay a deposit of 10 percent of the initial auction price of the object, thereby obtaining the status of the customer. On the day of the auction, bidding can be joined by selecting the section 'Electronic auction' on the e-services portal (e-emdk.gov.az).

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: No Decision on Stage Three Tax Cuts

It is still not clear whether a federal Labor government would repeal the already legislated, so-called stage three tax cuts that are due in 2024, even among its leadership. he legislated cuts lower the 32.5 per cent and 37 per cent marginal tax rates to 30 per cent and flatten the tax structure for people earning between $45,000 and $200,000. hey were bundled together with other tax changes that passed parliament in 2019. abor leader Anthony Albanese said the tax package was passed by parliament in 2019 when the government promised a budget surplus that year and every year into the future. nstead, there is "red ink as far as the eye can see" and now there is a trillion dollars worth of government debt. We'll make our announcements well before the election," Mr Albanese told Sky News' Sunday Agenda program.

"We have been absolutely right to not make a decision in 2019 about what the economy would look like 2024." Deputy Labor leader Richard Marles also insists a decision hasn't been made, but has again appeared less willing to reject them. "I've said our instinct in respect of tax has been we don't want to get in the way of a tax cut," he told ABC's Insiders program. "The answer which we've been really clear on consistently is that we will make that decision in good and proper time before the next election - the term of government which will actually see that tax cut come into play."

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Global Tax Plan a Good Move, Turnbull Says

Former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull believes an agreement by the world's major advanced countries to stop multinationals from avoiding tax in the countries where they make a profit is a good move. A meeting of G7 finance ministers in the UK on the weekend agreed to a plan that would see big global companies pay a 15 per cent tax rate in the countries where they operate. The plan will be later this year taken to the G20, a broader international forum of which Australia is a member. Mr Turnbull says a global agreement is a vitally important measure to address havens where tax rates are either zero or low. "This is a very good move," he told ABC radio on Monday.

"We have a vested interest in other countries cooperating to make sure that tax can't be avoided." Prime Minister Scott Morrison will attend this week's G7 conference of leaders from Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and the United States as an observer.

Mr Turnbull said under his leadership Australia made changes to prevent big tech companies from profit shifting. "Facebook, for example, should pay tax on its profits in Australia, in Australia not in Ireland or Singapore," Mr Turnbull said. This also happens with Australian resources companies, some of which have used trading hubs in Singapore and elsewhere to shift profits into low tax jurisdictions. The agreement has again highlighted how high Australia's tax rate is for big business at 30 per cent. Under Mr Turnbull, the government attempted to reduce it to 25 per cent but was thwarted in the Senate, with the lower rate only applying to businesses with an annual turnover of $50 million. "Australia's corporate tax rate is high relative to others," Mr Turnbull said. "The critical thing for us is to have a competitive tax rate."

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Money Too Tight to Mention for Many

On its knees just a year ago, Australia's economy has roared back to life with the promise of growth, jobs and higher wages. On paper, it's enough to inspire a national sigh of relief. But not all that glitters is gold. For an alarming number of householders, making ends meet again won't happen quickly. The dream of home ownership remains elusive, savings have taken a nasty hit, winter power bills are biting and petrol - now that most are out of lockdown - is again a noticeable expense. The pain is being felt by small business owners too, especially in the absence of support from the JobKeeper wage subsidy that ended in March. Analysis by CreditorWatch has found business external administrations rose 24 per cent over the past three months and defaults increased by nine per cent.

"We've been saying for some time we won't be able to get a true picture of the economic health of the nation until federal government stimulus measures, such as JobKeeper, have ended and their impact has stopped artificially propping up some businesses," according to CreditorWatch CEO Patrick Coghlan. "Early signs ... suggest there will be a shake-out of poorly-performing businesses over the coming two quarters." With an extra three per cent increase in May, according to the latest CoreLogic data, Sydney home prices have skyrocketed 9.3 per cent for the quarter and beyond reach for a whole new tier of buyers. Brisbane registered a two per cent jump for the month, Melbourne 1.8 per cent, Adelaide 1.9, Perth 1.1 and Hobart a whopping 3.2 per cent. Many consigned to the rental market are finding the going steep too.

Last month's Anglicare Rental Affordability Snapshot found just 1.16 per cent (859) of

74,000 private nationwide listings within the means of a minimum wage earner. Fewer still were affordable for those on aged (386) and disability (236) pensions while only three met the budget of someone on JobSeeker. For those who can manage to stump up the rent, it may be to the detriment of their nest eggs. Comparison site Finder's latest Consumer Sentiment Tracker shows Australians on average had $29,369 in savings in May 2021, down from $36,416 in April. Finder's RBA Cash Rate Survey shows 27 of 40 experts agree that consumer saving will continue to decrease further throughout the next quarter, as consumer spending returns to normal.

Its poll of 1000 householders in May found 85 per cent of them will take specific action to save money on energy costs this winter. Switching off lights (56 per cent), wearing extra clothes (49 per cent), shutting off off unused appliances (48 per cent) and only heating rooms in use (40 per cent) were the four most popular tactics. Petrol stress is also on the rise. In June, the percentage of motorists saying fuel costs were among the most stressful expenses hit 14 per cent, the highest level since pre-pandemic March 2020. Separate research by Compare Club suggests 80 per cent of Australians are cutting back on spending to cover bills. Half are likely to avoid going out for dinner, while 35 per cent are putting off paying debts or saving.

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Kids' Mental Health Gets NSW Budget Boost

More than $100 million has been promised in the NSW budget to establish specialist mental health treatment teams for kids and teenagers across the state. Some 25 'Safeguards' teams will be staffed with skilled child and adolescent mental health clinicians, to provide community based support to kids in acute mental health distress and their families. The budget, to be handed down on Tuesday, includes $109.5 million over the next four years to set up the program in every local health district. "This is a game changer in addressing mental health for children and teenagers," Minister for Mental Health Bronnie Taylor said on Monday. "It's all about bringing the right care at the right time and in the right place to children, adolescents and their loved ones." The clinicians will work with patients for six to eight weeks, providing support at home and school, before transitioning them into longer term mental health community-based support. The government has also announced an additional $8.5 million for refugee and migrant support programs. The funding, to be spent over three years, will enable the continuation of programs to help newcomers find work, pursue education, access support services and create community connections. It comes as a $3 million program to lure migrants to settle in regional NSW launches on Monday.

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Living Longer Impacts on Budget, Economy

Australia faces a major challenge of an ageing population, made worse by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, Josh Frydenberg has warned. Releasing the 2021 Intergenerational Report, the treasurer said the economy will be smaller and the population will be older than it otherwise would have been with flow-on implications for economic and fiscal outcomes. The report shows Australia faces 40 years of budget deficits, relatively high levels of debt and slower economic growth than had been previously experienced. "The fact that we are living longer is to be welcomed but the impacts on our economy and our budget are profound," Mr Frydenberg said, launching the report at a Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) event on Monday. The five-yearly IGR provides a guide to how the economy will look over the next 40 years and what it means for the budget.

It is the fifth in the series, which was first introduced by former Liberal treasurer Peter Costello in 2002. Deloitte Access Economics economist Chris Richardson said the new IGR should start some overdue national conversations. "Australians don't spend enough time thinking about the future," Mr Richardson told AAP. "And when we do, we focus on squabbles over slices of the pie, rather than over the size of the pie. We can and should do better than that." CEDA chief executive Melinda Cilento agreed the report shows Australia can't afford another lost decade of policy reform. She said Australia must tackle the costs of climate change, the reliance on income tax, boost productivity and fund essential services like health and aged care to manage the impacts of our ageing population. "Now is the time to take serious action to address these challenges," Ms Cilento said.

Mr Frydenberg expects the economy to grow by an average annual rate of 2.6 per cent from 2020/21 to 2060/61, 0.4 percentage points lower than the past 40 years. Australia's population is expected to grow to 38.8 million by 2060/61. In the last IGR released by former Liberal treasurer Joe Hockey in 2015, the population was projected to hit almost 40 million by 2054/55. "This is the first time there has been a downward revision of the long-term population projections in an Intergenerational Report," Mr Frydenberg said. As such, he said the composition of the migration program when borders reopen has to be well targeted and skills focused so it can supplement the stock of working-age people and slow the transition to an older population. He said economic growth will continue to be highly dependent on productivity gains and a vital ingredient in lifting long term living standards and wages.

Earlier the treasurer pledged on ABC radio to fully fund the NDIS, while noting health and education spending were also at record highs. "We want to continue to pursue reforms that encourage more investment by business, improve the provision of skills across the country and also ensure a more flexible workplace," he said. But Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese says the government has given up on reform and doesn't even try to pretend to deliver it. "It's given up on a future agenda. This is a government where productivity was going backwards for two quarters in a row before the pandemic. We had a productivity recession," he told Sky News. Australian Industry Group chief executive Innes Willox also pointed out that most of the challenges identified in the report pre-date COVID.

"Hopefully the need for action to maintain the COVID recovery will spur governments, businesses and the community more broadly to act more decisively on the numerous issues that have been clear for many years," Mr Willox said.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 06/28/2021

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NEW ZEALAND: Budget 2021 Invests to Reduce Reoffending

The Government is delivering on its commitment to reduce reoffending and keep our communities safer with a significant investment in Te Pae Oranga (Iwi Community Panels), Police Minister Poto Williams announced today. Te Pae Oranga transform the way communities and Police work together to provide alternative pathways within the criminal justice system. “We know that prosecutions for low level offending can have a detrimental impact on the individual but also on their whānau. Te Pae Oranga uses tikanga and kaupapa Māori and restorative justice practices but is available to people of all ethnicities, from all walks of life. Victims are also encouraged to take part. “The Government is expanding its investment in Te Pae Oranga, so more New Zealanders can access the support services they need and turn their lives around.

“The programme provides an alternative resolution path, where community leaders support participants to account for their offending and help them to make a plan to put things right. Those plans include restorative actions that participants must complete and conditions they must follow. “By understanding ‘what works for Māori, works for everyone,’ Te Pae Oranga is a key enabler of a more humane criminal justice system through delivering tikanga Māori restorative justice services focussed on accountability, education, and preventing reoffending. “We know Te Pae Oranga can have a positive impact on the lives of individuals. An evaluation published in 2019 showed the programme reduced harm from reoffending by 22 percent. This Government is committed to supporting initiatives such as Te Pae Oranga that will have a meaningful impact on an individual and strengthen its commitment to the Māori Crown Relationship,” Poto Williams said.

There are currently 16 existing panels, with a further two in place by June 2021. With today’s investment, this will increase to 30 panels over the next four years. This includes the establishment of nine new Rangatahi (youth) panels. Budget 2021 includes $70 million in new operating funding. This funding will ensure that the panels are available to individuals across New Zealand. In addition, it will provide certainty to both Police and Iwi providers, ensuring that this important mahi can continue. To date Te Pae Oranga has been funded through funding through the Effective Justice Fund and Police baseline, which has allowed Police to partner with Iwi Māori to deliver the panels. “What is distinctive about this investment is that the majority of the funding will be directed by Police straight to Iwi and Maori services providers, strengthening not only our Justice system but investing in the development of services where they are needed most,” Poto Williams said.

“The investment will also fund approximately 35 full time equivalent positions within Police which will support and enable the Programme. Funding has also been allocated to explore future referral pathways into the programme from Ara Poutama Aotearoa and the Judiciary.” Following discussions with Iwi over the next two years, Police will confirm the location of the new panel locations, targeting communities and areas in greatest need.

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CHINA: Major Internet Firms Post Robust Revenue, Profit Growth

China's major internet companies reported double-digit growth in business revenues and profits in the first four months of the year, official data shows. The business revenues of major internet companies totaled 467.6 billion yuan (about 73.28 billion U.S. dollars) in the January-April period, up 27.8 percent year on year, according to the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT). The companies raked in 44.51 billion yuan in operating profits, climbing 27 percent from the same period a year earlier. Spending on research and development in major internet companies maintained rapid growth during the period, up 19.3 percent year on year. The growth rate was 14 percentage points higher than the 2020 level.

From http://www.news.cn/ 06/03/2021

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Huawei Opens New Cybersecurity Transparency Center in China

Chinese telecom giant Huawei opened its largest global cybersecurity and privacy protection transparency center on Wednesday in the southern Chinese city of Dongguan. The Dongguan center, Huawei's seventh such center in the world, will provide a platform for industry stakeholders to share expertise in cyber governance and technical solutions. It is considered by analysts as part of the company's broader efforts to engage with customers, suppliers, standards organizations, and other stakeholders to jointly strengthen cybersecurity across the industry. "Cybersecurity is more important than ever," said Ken Hu, Huawei's rotating chairman, at the opening ceremony of the center. "As industry stakeholders, we need to work together, share best practices, and build our collective capabilities in governance, standards, technology, and verification."

From http://www.news.cn/ 06/09/2021

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China Introduces Facilitation Measures for Shipping, Freight Companies

China's National Immigration Administration has rolled out 16 new measures for shipping and freight companies as part of efforts to further optimize the business environment at ports. The measures are mainly aimed at streamlining administrative procedures for foreign cargo vessels, and Chinese freight vehicles and drivers frequently crossing land borders, the administration said Friday, pledging to offer international shipping vessels around-the-clock customs clearance support across Chinese ports. The measures will save international vessels an average berthing time of 1.5 hours in Chinese ports, and reduce more than 10 percent of time spent in customs clearance for freight vehicles on land borders, the administration said.

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China Looking to Embrace Smart, Digital Manufacturing Sector

Boasting high efficiency, low cost and most comprehensive industrial chains, China has long been positioned as the "world's factory." The country is now heading for the next goal: cultivate an upgraded manufacturing sector that is not only big but also robust and smart. The latest data has revealed this changing landscape. The industrial output of high-tech manufacturers rose 17.5 percent year on year in May, 4.8 percentage points higher than the growth rate in April. The output of tech-driven products such as new energy vehicles, industrial robots and integrated circuits soared 166.3 percent, 50.1 percent and 37.6 percent, respectively. Such progress indicates that China, which used to be a follower in technological advancement, is leveraging its cutting-edge technologies to upgrade high-energy intensity and high-polluting sectors and build up new pillar industries.

Those familiar with China's industrial development have perhaps noticed that ideas like "digitalization," "smart factories," and "industrial internet" have been written into China's development plans, with specific goals set. China's large manufacturing firms with an annual business turnover of at least 20 million yuan (about 3.1 million

U.S. dollars) will have all introduced digitalization by 2035, said a draft issued by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT). According to the draft, the technology and the market competitiveness of China's intelligent manufacturing equipment and industrial software will see significant improvement by 2025. Sectors boosted by frontier technologies are expected to play a crucial role. In the country's policy blueprint for the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-2025), the value added by China's strategic emerging industries such as biological technologies, new materials and environmental protection will account for more than 17 percent of the total GDP.

The achievement of China's manufacturing sector paints a rosy future for reaching these goals. By the end of March, the numerical control rate of key processes in Chinese enterprises reached 52.1 percent and the penetration rate of digital research and development (R&D) and design tools came in at 73 percent. Over 70 million industrial equipment has been connected by industrial internet platforms, MIIT data showed. Different regions of China have found their distinctive advantages in the shift to high-end manufacturing. For example, central China's Hubei Province is pushing for the rapid growth of integrated circuit and intelligent manufacturing, Hunan Province enhanced expertise in construction machinery and rail transportation, while joint efforts have been made to boost biomedicine in the Yangtze River Delta. From the perspective of the entire nation, strong manufacturing capabilities have enabled the Chinese people to realize dreams such as Mars exploration, deep-sea research and high-speed trains that could hardly be imagined decades ago. China's successful launch of three astronauts to its own space station last week is another example.

To further facilitate the high-quality development of the manufacturing sector, the Chinese government has ramped up supportive measures to lower companies' financial burden and offer more incentives. China raised the extra tax deduction on the R&D expenses of manufacturing firms starting Jan. 1 this year. The move is expected to reduce corporate taxes by another 80 billion yuan this year, on top of the 360 billion yuan tax cuts last year. Moreover, special attention has been given to small and medium-sized manufacturers, a key part underpinning China's manufacturing vitality. The country also plans to allocate more than 10 billion yuan from its central budget for cultivating "little giants," or companies that own core technologies, strong innovation capabilities, large market shares and high profitability.

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Professional Organization a New and Growing Business

Sorting out overstuffed wardrobes and corners packed with shoe boxes, Hu Yuling's job is to help her troubled customers regain peace and comfort at home. "There are always too many items in urban homes, much more than needed," said Hu. She said she had one customer who was obsessed with clothes -- owning more than 800 pieces -- and another client who was disoriented by their 100 hoodies. She once sorted through dozens of shoes that had been jumbled up and piled in the kitchen. The Beijing-based interior designer has found that her new service as a professional organizer is in booming demand. These two professions, in her view, are interconnected. Her experience as a professional organizer improves her design capability, and her design background allows her to organize with an aesthetic eye. "While organizing, we usually come up with beneficial home design suggestions for our clients," said Hu.

Professional organization has become a growing business in first-tier Chinese cities. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security officially added the occupation to the category of housekeeping services in January this year. "Hospitals and government agencies also employ us to carry out professional organization, not just individual households," said Han Yi'en, 32, a professional organizer who founded 1N Reorganization in 2015. The service and training agency has nurtured more than 1,000 individuals over the last six years, turning former kindergarten teachers, homemakers, psychologists and designers into professional organizers. Han said that professional organization now has many new business directions, such as general organization, store organization, community environment organization, and solutions for the disabled and the elderly.

She said that the improvement of people's lives has driven up new business. "What professional organization does is to balance the relationship between people, items and space," she said. "People who feel frustrated when organizing their items are likely to suffer from interpersonal problems." Han remembers once helping a senior couple organize a 12.5-square-meter room in downtown Shanghai. It took 21 of her staff seven days to sort out the items in the messy room and create a little more living space for the elderly couple. For professional organizer Piao Jinhua, 37, the most challenging part of the job is communicating with clients and guiding them to discard their old items. The professional organization sector in China is still in its infancy and has not yet established a complete training and industry supervision system. Professional organizers are looking forward to the healthy and sustainable development of this new business.

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China's Food Industry Sees Steady Growth in Production, Sales

China's food industry reported stable expansion in terms of production and sales in the first five months of 2021, data from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) showed. The value-added industrial output of food manufacturers rose 10.7 percent year on year in the January-May period, and that of agricultural byproduct processors went up 10.9 percent, according to MIIT. In the first five months, retail sales of the food industry witnessed robust growth, with that of grain, oil and food up 9.5 percent year on year to 661.63 billion yuan (about 102.19 billion U.S. dollars). Retail sales in the beverage sector surged 29.2 percent year on year to 107.35 billion yuan, while sales in the tobacco and alcohol sector registered a 35.4 percent yearly increase to 187.72 billion yuan, MIIT data showed. In the first four months of the year, food enterprises with annual revenues of more than 20 million yuan raked in profits of 208.24 billion yuan, up 29 percent year on year.

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JAPAN: Company Develops No-Contact Touch Panels for Hospitals

The pandemic caused by the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) has given many a chance to revaluate their daily practices in terms of responsibility and hygiene with countermeasures consisting of social distancing and the remote handling of everything from business to chores, but certain routine actions such as touching publicly shared handles, rails, and buttons are practically unavoidable. An idea that seems to be gaining traction in Japan for post-pandemic use is the implementation of "no-touch touch screens" which eliminate the need for direct contact when navigating screens and panels. One Japanese automotive parts manufacturer recently developed such panels using what they call "Floating Pictogram Technology" to allow users to operate button-based Japanese toilets by simply hovering their finger of the desired button on a panel.

Hospitable technology maker Almex has followed suit, having successfully developed "Contactless Frame" touch panels for use in hospitals, where they may be needed most. Although touch panels that are touched by a large number of users are frequently disinfected by each facility to ensure maximum hygiene, there is still a possibility of transmission of germs and viruses via them. After demonstration experiments were successfully conducted at Sanseikai Shinyurigaoka General Hospital and Koshikai Toyooka First Hospital, the non-contact frame (which function at a distance up to 30mm) will be mass produced and available for purchase to hospitals and other facilities by Almex. As a first step, Almex will produce fittings for the APS-3300 touch panel, which they say has the most contact among touch panels, for hospitals where nosocomial infection control is urgently needed, and will sequentially develop products compatible with other medical-related equipment.

From https://japantoday.com 06/12/2021

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SOUTH KOREA: Tech Companies to Strengthen Cooperation for AI Server Chips

South Korean cloud data center operators have formed ties with local companies that specialize in chips used in servers in a move to cope with growing semiconductor demand and uncertainty in global supply chains, the ICT ministry said Tuesday. The Ministry of Science and ICT said five data center companies -- Naver Cloud, Douzone Bizon, Kakao Enterprise, NHN and KT -- and the Artificial Intelligence Industry Cluster Agency signed a memorandum of understanding with local server chip companies SK Telecom, Rebellions, FuriosaAI, and the Electronics and Telecommunications Research Institute to expand the use of locally developed artificial intelligence (AI) semiconductors in data centers. AI semiconductors have recently grown in demand from data center operators, which require the chips to efficiently process copious amounts of data.

The ICT ministry expects the global market for AI chips used in servers to reach US$34.7 billion by 2030 from $3.5 billion last year. Under the latest agreement, the companies will also cooperate in developing the chips, as well as pursue establishing a semiconductor testbed at an AI industrial complex in Gwangju, 329 kilometers south of Seoul. The ministry said it will support the companies' move and that it hopes it will strengthen the country's semiconductor industry amid the recent global chip shortage. SK Telecom, South Korea's leading wireless carrier, launched its AI chip for data center operations, the SAPEON X220, in November last year. Separately, FusiosaAI, a startup that aims to launch its first semiconductor in the third quarter this year, drew 80 billion won (US$70.6 million) in additional funding Tuesday from investors, including Naver.

From https://en.yna.co.kr 06/01/2021

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SK Telecom to Wrap Up Testing of 5G-Powered Traffic System in Seoul

SK Telecom Co., a major South Korean telecom operator, said Tuesday it will wrap up the testing of a next-generation traffic system in Seoul by the end of this month as it seeks to accelerate efforts to develop self-driving technology based on its high-speed 5G network. The telecom operator has been testing the traffic system, named the Cooperative-Intelligent Transport System (C-ITS), with the Seoul metropolitan government since early 2019 and has installed 1,735 5G sensors across the city's major roads spanning 151 kilometers to monitor traffic data. SK Telecom said it plans to complete development of a platform next year that will provide the data collected from the system to navigation companies. Through the data collected from the sensors, SK Telecom said it has sent an average of 43 million notifications a day of pedestrian information to vehicles. SK Telecom said it has also created a high-precision map that is able to provide traffic information by installing 5G advanced driver assistance systems on 1,600 buses and 100 taxis that move about the city. The technology is able to recognize road traffic information in real time, in which the data is analyzed by artificial intelligence technology to power self-driving vehicles.

From https://en.yna.co.kr 06/08/2021

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KT Teams Up with Amazon Web Services in AI, Cloud Tech

KT Corp., a South Korean telecom giant, said Wednesday it has partnered with global cloud service operator Amazon Web Services Inc. (AWS) in a move to bolster its push to develop artificial intelligence (AI) and cloud technologies. The two companies agreed to pursue joint research in AI and cloud technologies as well as collaboration in media businesses, KT said in a statement. The telecom operator said it plans to launch a contact center service that combines its AI-based contact center service and AWS' cloud call center service. The two companies will also collaborate to release an enterprise service that connects KT's cloud services with those from AWS. The telecom operator said that the move is expected to help its clients use AWS cloud solutions when expanding to overseas markets, while foreign companies that use AWS services will also be able to employ KT's cloud technology when entering South Korea. KT has recently stepped up its efforts in AI and cloud technology. The company will establish an AI research institute with KAIST, South Korea's top science and technology university, by the end of this year.

From https://en.yna.co.kr 06/09/2021

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S. Korea to Further Nurture Nearly 90,000 Talents in Software Sector by 2025

South Korea's top economic policymaker said Wednesday the country plans to further nurture 89,000 talented people in the software sector by 2025 to help smaller firms having difficulty in hiring software professionals. The number is three times higher than the around 25,000 professionals that software firms want to recruit, according to Finance Minister Hong Nam-ki. The total number of software experts will rise to around 413,000 by 2025 when combined with about 324,000 experts who are currently trained under state support programs. Smaller and venture firms are having trouble recruiting software developers and web experts as labor supply falls short of demand amid an accelerating transition to the digitalized economy. The government has campaigned for nurturing innovative growth and developing the software industry in an effort to help prop up the sagging economy, hit by the pandemic.

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Datastreams Suggests Blockchain-Based Trading of Big Data

South Korean big data firm DataStreams said Thursday that it has presented a system for brokerless trading and circulation of big data using a blockchain solution.

Ahn Hyun-joo, head of the firm’s product services department, and his two co-authors presented the research paper at a conference organized by the Korea Society of Management Information Systems on June 18. In their study, the trio offered a way to use blockchain technology to build an exchange platform for big data, enabling direct transactions between sellers and buyers without the involvement of intermediaries. As the importance of big data grows across industries for market insights and more detailed and accurate business strategies, the government has since 2019 designated a total of 16 platforms for big data trading. Yet, due to concerns over security and some legal issues, there has hardly been any actual trading of data on those platforms, DataStreams explained. Ahn and the authors suggested the use of blockchain technologies to prevent tampering and forgery of the data and to verify ownership information. “A trading platform entrusted by various stakeholders in big data trading would spur the development of the local big data industry and extension of a data economy, leading to the emergence of new services and new jobs,” Ahn said.

From http://www.koreaherald.com 06/24/2021

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S. Korea Eyes Smooth Transition of 52-Hour Workweek Scheme for Smaller Firms

South Korea's top economic policymaker said Thursday the government plans to provide support to smaller firms, including assignments of foreign workers, as it seeks to make a soft landing for such companies implementing the 52-hour workweek. Starting July 1, the country will expand the shortened workweek scheme to companies with five to 49 workers without a grace period. Since July 2018, the country has enforced the 52-hour workweek system in a phase-in manner. The shorter workweek was devised to cap the average working hours at 52 on a weekly basis in Asia's fourth-largest economy, well known for long working hours. Finance Minister Hong Nam-ki said the government will focus on making a smooth transition to the workweek scheme for smaller firms as soon as possible. "The government plans to first dispatch foreign workers to firms that have difficulties in hiring, such as companies located in provinces," Hong said at a government meeting on the economy. The country also plans to provide up to 1.2 million won (US$1,050) per month for up to two years to smaller firms that maintain employment after hiring new employees. Meanwhile, Hong said the government will unveil a set of measures to nurture the country's shipping industry next week. The country is working on strategies to rebuild the country's shipping industry as the sector is recovering from industrywide slumps.

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Samsung Offers 6G Vision, Private Network

Through its first event to introduce an array of 5th generation network technologies late Tuesday, Samsung Electronics has put its emphasis on preemptive investments in 6G to cement its position in the global network industry. Samsung is increasing its efforts on the 6th generation of wireless connections, to bring hyper-connected experiences to users, the tech giant announced during the virtual event streamed live from Seoul to the world. Called “Samsung Networks: Redefined,” the show was streamed live from Seoul at 11 p.m., Korean time. It was the first event to be hosted by Samsung’s network business. The virtual event was held ahead of Mobile World Congress 2021, an offline event slated for June 28 in Barcelona, Spain. Last year’s congress was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Samsung decided to hold its own event separately to showcase its latest network technologies.

On 6G, Samsung said it recently explored the potential of the terahertz spectrum application for 6G wireless communications, demonstrating an end-to-end 140GHz wireless link using a fully digital beamforming solution, it said. “Samsung is preparing to bring about innovation to support extended reality, mobile hologram and digital replicas in the 6G era,” a company official explained. Samsung’s first presentation of its vision for the networks business drew attention amid its ongoing competition with stronger rivals like Huawei, Nokia and Ericsson. As of the end of 2020, Samsung was estimated to rank fourth with an 8.5 percent share in the global network equipment market, according to data by market researcher TrendForce. Samsung also highlighted the virtualization of the entire network system as its differentiating point from the competitors.

Virtualization of an entire network, which replaces hardware components with software, will bring greater efficiency, scalability and flexibility in network management, and make upgrades easier as they can be done through software implementations, it said. Calling it “vRAN,” Samsung has virtualized all elements of a baseband unit through years of research efforts. Samsung’s fully virtualized 5G RAN solution takes all of the radio network functions that can be provided by software, and breaks them down into a virtualized central unit and distributed unit, as well as a range of radio units. Samsung deployed the industry’s first fully virtualized commercial 5G RAN to US mobile carrier Verizon early this year. Samsung’s private network solution, which was introduced through a short clip of a smart factory system in the company’s headquarters in Suwon, Gyeonggi Province, caught the audience’s attention. Samsung emphasized, “It has the capability to build reliable and secure private networks” among other things.

Network security has been a sensitive issue in the telecom equipment market. The US government had taken issue with the security risks of using Huawei equipment, citing them as part of its reasons for banning the Chinese network system. On Tuesday, the tech giant also unveiled three new 5G chipsets and one antenna radio solution. “We are delighted to discuss the infinite possibilities of wireless technology, as we continue our 5G journey, and pave the way toward the next phase of 5G,” said

Cheun Kyung-whoon, president and head of the networks business at Samsung. Samsung Networks has successfully delivered 5G network equipment to over 4 million stations around the world, the president mentioned. The company focused on driving next-generation networks through advancing virtualization, and leading 5G radio innovation by embedding the company’s latest in-house chipsets into its radios, he said.

From http://www.koreaherald.com 06/25/2021

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South-East Asia

SINGAPORE: Selects 24 Private Healthcare Institutions to Provide Sinovac Vaccine

Singapore's Ministry of Health (MOH) has selected 24 private healthcare institutions to be licensed providers of the Sinovac-CoronaVac vaccine under the Special Access Route (SAR), MOH said here Wednesday. These providers will draw from MOH's existing stock, and can administer the vaccine to Singapore citizens, permanent residents and persons holding long-term passes who wish to take the Sinovac-CoronaVac vaccine, MOH said in a press release. MOH said these vaccines are being provided for the providers at no cost, individuals should take note that the providers should not charge them for the vaccine cost. Those interested may contact the providers directly from June 18 for more details on how they may receive the vaccine. The first batch of Sinovac vaccine purchased by Singapore arrived in February, and MOH said earlier this month that Sinovac can be administered in Singapore under the special access route after it was approved for emergency use by the World Health Organization (WHO). As the Sinovac-CoronaVac COVID-19 vaccine remains unregistered and is not authorized by the Health Sciences Authority (HSA) for use under the Pandemic Special Access Route in Singapore, it is to be provided only under the SAR framework, and hence will not be covered under the Vaccine Injury Financial Assistance Programme (VIFAP) meant for the national vaccination program, according to MOH. Individuals who nevertheless wish to receive Sinovac-CoronaVac vaccinations under the SAR framework should discuss with their doctors in the selected private healthcare institutions the risks and benefits of using the Sinovac-CoronaVac vaccine, and jointly make an informed decision, MOH said. On Wednesday, Singapore reported 19 new cases of locally transmitted COVID-19 infection and five imported cases, bringing the total to 62,339.

From http://www.xinhuanet.com/ 06/17/2021

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VIETNAM: Local E-Commerce Enters 'Golden Age' During Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has helped e-commerce platforms in Việt Nam achieve impressive growth of 18 per cent, pushing the market size to US$11.8 billion. According to a report on Việt Nam's digital advertising market released on June 1, new users of e-commerce platforms grew 41 per cent during the pandemic. The report by Adsota Company and strategic partner SOL Premier said up to 91 per cent of users will continue using these e-commerce platforms after the pandemic ends. Đặng Phú Vinh, manager of Adsota, told Việt Nam News: "With such growth, e-commerce now accounts for 5.5 per cent of the total retail sales of goods, services and consumption in Việt Nam." The country is becoming the leading market for e-commerce in Southeast Asia. Industry experts said consumer habits and behaviour changed to adapt to trading online, and businesses and service providers have to understand and find ways to personalise their consumer experience in the "new normal". CEO of Adsota, Trần Quốc Toản, said many large businesses and organisations have succeeded in doing so. He mentioned Lazada with its application of influencer marketing to attract buyers, the Ministry of Health with music videos that attract a record number of viewers, Daikin with its rapid digital transformation and PizzaHome with innovative products.

Vũ Thị Thu Hà, deputy director of Planning and E-commerce of Daikin Vietnam, said: "Knowing customers' demand in the pandemic, Daikin quickly built Daikin Eshop to create an online dealer system to help them order products at the nearest dealer with less physical contact." The firm also launched a convenient "digital manual" for air conditioning maintenance and repair to better serve customers. Hà told Việt Nam News that with the move to digital business activities and customer services at the right time, Daikin Vietnam has clearly demonstrated its agility in catching up with trends and grasping customer psychology. She added: "Thanks to that we received positive feedback from consumers and could optimise digital transformation in the coming years." Focusing on customers, Phan Lê Khôi, marketing director of Bitexco Joint Stock Company – one of the biggest realty developers in Viêt Nam, said Bitexco divided their consumers into groups to use different ways of communication based on the product, utility and characteristic of the customer. Khôi said Bitexco's The Manor products were priced at VNĐ30 billion (US$1.29 million) per villa, which should not be occupied by one or two end users, but a group of users or a multi-generational family with various demands, so a traditional sales programme could not mee their needs.

Instead, the firm combined different manners of media, events, PR and promotions on both online and offline platforms to serve each group. Khôi said the new method helped the firm increase sales. According to the report by Adsota, published every year since 2013 on the local digital market in Việt Nam, as social distancing has forced people to minimise outdoor activities, customers have looked for alternative sources of entertainment and interaction online. Livestreaming has emerged as a popular form of entertainment because of its ability to transform content and high interactivity. It said 69 per cent of survey respondents said they watched more streaming content at home than they did before the pandemic. At the same time, in just half a month since the social distancing order, all livestream metrics on Facebook Gaming have increased significantly. In detail, total views increased 81.37 per cent reaching 119.7 million viewers, with the interaction and access ratios increasing by 79.6 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively. Data from 7Saturday's Report shows that up to 90 per cent of Vietnamese shoppers trust influencer reviews, while only 33 per cent trust advertisements from brands.

The pandemic also had a great impact on the influencer community thanks to the diversity of fields and the ability to deliver ingenious content. Influencer marketing has become the choice of many industries, typically FMCG, technology, beauty and e-commerce while the variety of costs made them also suitable for lots of different sized businesses. The report estimated costs for influencers in Việt Nam range from VNĐ500,000 and VNĐ1.5 million per post for less famous influencers, and up to VNĐ45 million to VNĐ100 million for the famous ones. The report also said the pandemic made consumers' price sensitivity no longer a leading factor in purchasing decisions, mentioning consumers tend to save more, but at the same time instead of choosing cheap products, they are interested in products with good quality and health benefits. It also found that items with strong spending included essential items, especially food, internet services, housing and utilities, and healthcare. Contrary to this upward trend, spending on beauty and entertainment products/services plummeted due to strict social distancing measures.

From https://vietnamnews.vn 06/07/2021

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HCM City to Spend $3.3m to Support Small Traders at Traditional Markets Affected by Pandemic

HCM City is considering a financial support package worth more than VNĐ76 billion (US$3.31 million) from the State budget to support small traders at traditional markets affected by the pandemic. According to the city's Department and Industry and Trade, it would be disbursed from now to the end of the year. The department has proposed that the Department of Planning and Investment petition the People's Committee to ask the People's Council to approve the package. The amount of support would be equivalent to 50 per cent of the maximum market fee payable to market management stipulated in the city's Decision 24. Based on the area of the shop, traders at grade-one markets (14 markets) would receive VNĐ100,000 per sq.m per month, grade-two markets (52 markets) VNĐ70,000 per sq.m per month, and grade-three markets (168 markets) VNĐ50,000 per sq.m per month. According to the Department of Industry and Trade, small traders at traditional markets are facing many difficulties as purchasing power has dropped significantly. Nearly 60,000 shop owners at traditional markets would benefit from the package. To be eligible, beneficiaries must have fulfilled their financial obligations to the market manager and their tax obligations to the State, and have a tax identification number.

A small trader at Bà Chiểu market in Bình Thạnh District, who declined to be named, said the level of support was not much, but it was encouraging for small traders (such as clothing, fabrics, fashion, and shoes) who have seen sharp drop in the number of shoppers at traditional markets. In February, city authorities ordered traditional markets to reduce their rent for traders by 50 per cent for six months. According to many shopkeepers, sales at traditional markets last year fell by 60-80 per cent from previous years. Bến Thành Market, one of the city's oldest markets and a major tourist site, has only a few dozen visitors during weekends compared to thousands during normal times. Most of its 3,000 stalls, which sell food, garments, footwear and handcrafts, are closed. Most shops that sell Vietnamese handicrafts and fried seafood, favoured by both foreign and local visitors, have been closed since March last year. The same situation has occurred in other wholesale markets in the city, including An Đông in District 5, Bình Tây in District 6 and Soái Kình Lâm in Chợ Lớn (Big Market) in District 5. Stall owners used to hire at least three salespeople, but have had to let many go since they cannot afford to pay them. Many of them have had to shut their shops due to lack of business. Taxes are one of the biggest concerns of small businesses, which pay an average of VNĐ4-6 million a month. Stall owners want the city to reduce or waive taxes for six months, saying it would be of greater help in reducing their financial burden and would help them stay open.

From https://vietnamnews.vn/ 06/16/2021

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VietQR Launched to Promote Digital Transformation in Banking Sector

Việt Nam National Payment Corporation (NAPAS) and 14 banks on Tuesday officially announced VietQR brand identity and Napas247 Quick Money Transfer Service by QR code. Accordingly, VietQR is a common brand identity for QR code payment and transfer services processed through the network of NAPAS and member banks, payment intermediaries and partners both inside and outside the country. VietQR complies with EMV Co's QR payment standard and those set by the State Bank of Việt Nam for QR codes. Speaking at the launching ceremony which took place online, Nguyễn Đăng Hùng, NAPAS's deputy general director said: "VietQR aims to create a common standard, ensure the interoperability and synchronisation of payment infrastructure via QR Code in Việt Nam, which is the basis for expanding international payment links." This has been one of the key tasks of the banking sector in its digital transformation plan to 2025 with a vision to 2030 to promote non-cash payment and national financial inclusion. The Napas247 Quick Money Transfer Service allows customers to transfer money from their account to another at other banks in the NAPAS network 24 hours a day, with a maximum of VNĐ500 million (US$21,800) by scanning their personal QR code.

The payment QR code of each individual has encrypted payment information including account number, bank code, amount, payment content, order information and other relevant information. Recipients can easily get a personal QR code once they have a bank account by creating a QR code on the mobile banking app of the first 14 participating banks, accounting for 70 per cent of transactions Napas247 Quick Transfer or created on VietQR.net website. Vũ Thành Trung, Director of Digital Banking at MBBank – one of 14 participating banks – said MB has been a pioneer in implementing Napas247 by QR code. This aims to bring new experiences and minimise risks for customers. “MB targets to serve all customers segments from individuals to businesses, especially shop owners who have not used technology regularly and often use cash. After registering the bank account on MBBank app, customers could easily create their own VietQR code. The bank has offered free money transfer fee for customers using MBBank app,” he added. The launch would help promote the digital transformation process and non-cash payment of people who still prefer traditional payment methods.

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South Asia

INDIA: Kylas, an Enterprise-grade SaaS CRM for SMBs Priced at $99, Launches in India

Kylas, a new age enterprise-grade Customer Relationship Management (CRM) product, has been launched in India. Kylas is an agile, easy to use and customizable SaaS product that is uniquely positioned to help small and medium businesses streamline their sales efforts, engage with customers effectively and grow faster. During the last one year, SMBs in India have been severely impacted by the uncertainties of start-stop lockdowns, unreliable cashflows and disrupted supply chains. Covid-19 has forced SMBs to accelerate digital adoption and ensure business continuity in this challenging environment. Kylas was launched with a vision to make a high-quality CRM software accessible to small businesses with differentiated pricing of USD 99 (INR 7499) per month with unlimited features, unlimited users, and no hidden costs so that the SMBs can focus on reviving their businesses without the additional burden of increase in technology costs. Kylas comes built-in with a host of productivity and collaboration features to improve sales team productivity. It seamlessly integrates with commonly used lead generation platforms such as– Facebook, Whatsapp, IndiaMART, Shiksha.com and many more to accelerate the end-to-end customer journey of Indian SMBs. Additionally, Kylas is launching a unique ‘SMB Upskilling Program’ with an aim to educate, enable and advise growing businesses about their digital transformation roadmap and operations.

This is a special 4-week program, during which SMBs will learn about using technology and platforms for business continuity & resilience, marketing (including digital and social media), lead generation and overall digital transformation. The program will be led and conducted by the leadership team and subject matter experts at Kylas. Ketan Sabnis, CEO and Founder, Kylas, said, "While large enterprises have the resources and wherewithal to undergo rapid digital transformation, SMBs face various challenges such as lack of accessibility to technology, cost constraints and shortage of talent with relevant digital skills. To bridge this gap and to help SMBs to digitize their end-to-end customer journey, we have built Kylas: The Honest CRM. It has been designed keeping in mind the needs of the SMBs and we believe that our customers can benefit from its enterprise-grade CRM capabilities at an all-inclusive value-pricing. Additionally, our customer service, SMB upskilling initiative and our future product roadmap will further strengthen the key value propositions of Kylas." As a startup, Kylas resonates with the 'Make in India' goals of empowering SMBs in the country with high-quality digital technologies. Over 150 businesses have signed up for Kylas in the past few weeks leading up to the commercial launch. Kylas draws on the learnings and legacy of its predecessor, Sell.do (co-founded by Ketan Sabnis), India's award-winning end-to-end CRM solution for the Real Estate sector, with over 600+ clients across key global markets.

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Energy & Climate Concerns in India's Buildings Sector

India's growing urban population has also led to the burgeoning growth of the construction sector to meet the increasing demand for residential and commercial buildings in the last decade. An analysis of urban GDP growth to 2035 estimates that 17 of the 20 fastest-growing cities in the world would be in India[1]. At the same time, 2018 estimates indicate that 70 per cent of the country's building stock that will be there in 2030 is yet to be built[2]. Raina Singh and T Shravani, Climate Centre for Cities (C-Cube), National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) write about the key role of the buildings sector in meeting India's climate action targets. Considering the abovementioned estimates, similar trends may be expected in the residential and affordable housing sector as well, in view of the various policy and fiscal incentives that have been rolled out in the last few years. The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), a scheme aiming for 'Housing for all' by 2022, has set up a target of constructing one crore houses in urban areas. As of December 2018, about 65 lakh houses had been sanctioned by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), Government of India. The scheme also recorded a rise of 70 per cent in housing construction between 2017 and 2018. In India, buildings account for over 40 per cent of the country's total energy consumption, 20 per cent of the raw material use, 20 per cent of water use, and 20 per cent of land use in cities. They are also responsible for 40 per cent of total carbon emissions, 30 per cent of solid waste generation, and 20 per cent of water effluents[3]. The buildings sector, therefore, have a critical role to play in India's actions towards addressing climate risks and achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Currently, India's 'Green Buildings', though growing consistently, constitute only five per cent of the building market4. However, current evidence shows promising potential in the reduction of energy consumption and emissions through appropriate policies and implementation procedures in place. For instance, through the use of efficient lighting, space cooling methods, ventilation, refrigeration, and appliances, it is possible to save 30-70 per cent of energy consumed at the building level. A study by McKinsey indicates that the national power demand can be reduced by as much as 25 per cent in 2030 by improving the energy efficiency of buildings and operations5. Estimates by the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE) suggest that existing buildings also have the potential to save 30-50 per cent of their energy through retrofit measures for improved efficiency6. In view of the unique opportunity to lock in low-carbon and resilient urban growth, various initiatives for improving energy efficiency and implementing 'green' measures have been introduced in the residential and commercial buildings sector at the national and state levels in the last few years. The National Mission on Sustainable Habitat (NMSH), National Mission on Enhanced Energy Efficiency (NMEEE) now renamed ROSHANEE, and the Energy Conservation Building Code (ECBC/ ENS both for commercial and residential) provide guidance on building design and construction practices and institutional and fiscal measures to facilitate implementation. The recently launched updated guidelines for PMAY (U)7propose setting up a technology sub-mission to facilitate the adoption of modern, innovative and green technologies and building material for the development of green and resilient buildings. They also provide for the inclusion of rainwater harvesting and solar energy systems in affordable housing projects. Besides, the India Cooling Action Plan, launched by India's Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, provides a 20-year perspective and outlines actions needed to provide access to sustainable space cooling in buildings. This becomes extremely relevant with the expected increase in cooling requirement and related energy demand in buildings in light of the projected climate variability and change scenarios for the Indian sub-continent. In addition, various rating systems including GRIHA, LEED, GEM and EDGE8, among others, are available to help assess and manage energy and resource efficiency at the building level. While a large share of green rating is currently taking place for institutional and commercial buildings, there is a growing interest and availability of rating systems specifically for the residential sector.

The ClimateSmart Cities Assessment Framework (CSCAF), launched by MoHUA in 2019 under the Smart Cities Mission, addresses green buildings as one of its key thematic verticals. The Framework serves as a tool for cities to track their performance towards green, sustainable and resilient urban development, and also provide a roadmap to progress on the same. With 28 indicators under five thematic areas – Energy and Green Buildings; Urban Planning, Green Cover & Biodiversity; Mobility and Air Quality; Water Management; and Waste Management. The CSCAF is currently being implemented in 126 cities across the country. The indicators on green buildings focus on the promotion and adoption of green buildings through the implementation of compliance procedures, penalty/reward schemes and stakeholder cooperation for the promotion of new and existing green and energy-efficient buildings. This would include integrating NBC 2016, ECBC 2017 and ENS 2018 provisions in the general development control regulations (GDCRs) and building bye-laws. The other measures include institutionalizing a green building cell at the ULB level for knowledge dissemination, and a functioning highlevel green building committee acting as a strategic advisory and promotional/penalty schemes available for code compliance, pre-certification, certification of green buildings. It may be noted that many of these measures have been already incorporated at the state level. As the next step, there is a need to translate these measures into specific targets and actions by adopting them at the city level for effective implementation. Undertaking appropriate capacity building, awareness and knowledge dissemination with the involvement of various stakeholders in the system is equally important. As Indian cities address their present challenges and prepare for future urbanization prospects, the buildings sector will play a pivotal role in the pathway for green and sustainable growth. Studies suggest if all the buildings in urban areas were made to adopt green building measures, the country can save over 8,400 megawatts of power, which is enough to light 550,000 homes a year9. Implementing appropriate interventions for efficient use of building materials, energy and water will not only help in achieving resource efficiency and savings locally but also go a long way in meeting multiple India's targets and commitments towards sustainable development goals and climate action.

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Punjab State Power Corporation's Digital Collection Touches New Record of Rs 19,630 Crores

Punjab State Power Corporation Ltd (PSPCL) has collected around Rs19,630 crores digitally from 143 lakh digital transactions. Due to a number of easy-to-use digital platforms offered by PSPCL, more than 75% of the collection is now being received digitally, A Venu Prasad, CMD, PSPCL has said. "Citizen's confidence in effective digital payments has evolved in such a way that from just around Rs 2000 crores from 43 lakh digital transactions during FY 2016-17, we have now received around Rs 19,630 crores from 143 lakh digital transactions in FY 2020-21, a whopping jump in digital collections. Such attainment is a matter of pride for the state when Punjab is usually considered a farming economy," Venu Prasad informed. He added that PSPCL is on the toppers' list in digital collection segment, which he asserted "speaks" volumes about the PSPCL's commitment towards offering the "state-of-the-art" easy-to-use digital touchpoints to consumers of the state. Providing the details of E-payment history, Venu Prasad said that the digital payment facility was started in the year 2008 in Punjab for electricity bills. "During 2017, Punjab envisioned the digital evolution and started the facilities of electricity bill payments through enhanced, innovative, and citizen-friendly digital modes in a big way. PSPCL initiated cost-effective, convenient-to-use, and smooth digital bill payment platforms through Bharat Bill Pay (BBPS) like BHIM, SBI Pay, PNB, HDFC Payzapp, Paytm, PhonePe, Just Dial, Google Pay, Amazon, Umang, etc." He also added, "PSPCL has offered all available digital modes of present-day like Net Banking, credit cards, debit cards, Rupay Card, UPI, mobile wallets, RTGS/NEFT, POS machines for the facilitation of power consumers of Punjab by providing round the clock seamless services." To encourage more consumers to move to digital modes "happily" with the least financial costs, Venu Prasad informed that PSPCL has undertaken awareness campaigns about digital modes and offers. "Every stratum of citizens have shown remarkable enthusiasm and consumers are now free from long queues at cash counters. Citizens are saving huge direct and indirect costs, which were earlier being incurred in offline modes."

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SRI LANKA: Pressure on Corporate Ratings from Finance Subsidiaries' Growth

Sri Lankan rated corporates with financial-service (FS) subsidiaries face a rise in Fitch-adjusted debt and potential rating pressure due to the subsidiaries' medium-term asset growth in the current weak operating environment, Fitch Ratings says. Fitch's corporate rating criteria deconsolidates the FS subsidiary from the parent in calculating the parent's credit metrics. However, for FS operations that are considered strategic to the corporate parent, we assume a hypothetical capital infusion from the parent into the FS subsidiary when calculating the parent's Fitch-adjusted leverage. The capital infusion's size is based on our assessment of the subsidiary's self-sustaining capital structure, considering its asset-quality and funding risks, and its reported debt/tangible equity ratio. Therefore, faster asset growth in FS subsidiaries than our expectations, or subsidiaries' capital buffers eroding faster due to higher operating or credit costs amid a weak operating environment, could increase the implied capital infusion required from the parent. We assumed around 10% average annual asset growth for the FS subsidiaries of Singer (Sri Lanka) PLC (AA(lka)/Stable), Abans PLC (AA(lka)/Stable) and Dialog Axiata PLC (AAA(lka)/Stable). Singer would potentially be the most affected if its FS subsidiary, Singer Finance (Lanka) PLC's (SFP: A+(lka)/Stable) asset growth materially exceeds our expectations in light of its large asset base compared with the parent's operating scale. Abans' balance sheet is already stretched on account of a real-estate project and any increased burden from the FS subsidiary, Abans Finance PLC (AFP: A(lka)/Rating Watch Evolving), could pressure the parent's rating. However, Abans' leverage should ease if its plan to sell AFP materialises. We do not foresee rating pressure on Dialog from its FS subsidiary, Dialog Finance PLC (DFP: AA(lka)/Stable), due to the parent's high rating headroom.

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: State Always Supports Business Entities – Minister

The Azerbaijani state always supports business entities, Minister of Economy of Azerbaijan Mikayil Jabbarov said, Trend reports. Jabbarov made the remark at an international scientific conference of masters and doctoral students in the field of economics and management. According to the minister, during the difficult period of the COVID-19 pandemic for the whole world, the state has provided support to entrepreneurs in the amount of up to 1 billion manat ($588.2 million). “Entrepreneurs engaged in informal activities are gradually moving to formal ones. It is quite natural that transfers from the private sector prevail in a number of funds created over the past two years. This is another indicator of the development of the business environment in Azerbaijan," Jabbarov said. The minister added that the formation of a sustainable economy in all countries goes through the formation of qualified personnel. Jabbarov also noted that Azerbaijan faces the task of ensuring economic growth, developing a favorable environment between the state and entrepreneurs.

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State Property Privatized in Azerbaijan Through Auction

The State Committee on Property Issues under the Azerbaijani Ministry of Economy held a new auction on June 8, 2021, Trend reports referring to a source in the committee. According to the source, during the auction, 4 state properties, including small state enterprises and unfinished facilities located in Oghuz, Yardimli and Barda districts of Azerbaijan have been privatized. Besides, the state-owned package of shares in Ali Bayramli Aqrotemir company, which is located in the Shirvan district, was also privatized at the auction. The source said that interested participants can visit the website for the provision of property services of the State Property Service of Azerbaijan on the day of the auction, as well as observe it without registration online. All those wishing to partake in the auction on the official website of the committee (emlak.gov.az) or on the privatization portal (privatization.az) must, after registering, pay a deposit of 10 percent of the initial auction price of the object, thereby obtaining the status of the customer. On the day of the auction, bidding can be joined by selecting the section ‘Electronic auction’ on the e-services portal (e-emdk.gov.az).

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Timing for Women's Agricultural Entrepreneurship Dev't Project in Azerbaijan Disclosed

A project on the development of women's entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector in Azerbaijan will continue for 2 years, the Deputy Chairman of the Agency for Agrarian Lending and Development under the Ministry of Agriculture Leyla Mammadova said. Mammadova made the remark at the 'National Business Agenda for Women and the Formation of Coalitions' event, Trend reports on June 30. According to her, in each region of Azerbaijan about 500 women farmers are involved in the project being implemented jointly with the Agency for Agrarian Lending and Development and UN Food and Agriculture Organization. "Within the framework of the project, training of women entrepreneurs will be held," added the official.

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UZBEKISTAN: To Modernize Its Electricity Sector, with World Bank Support

From the new academic year, educational loans will be provided on preferential terms for a period of 7 years at the base rate of the Central Bank. This was announced by the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The head of Uzbekistan noted that the rate on educational loans will be 14% per annum this year. Mirziyoyev said that also the funds allocated for the repayment of educational loans will be exempt from income tax. "We will create a new support system for talented youth who are unable to study at the university on a contract basis. As you know, today parents take educational loans for 3 years at a rate of 22-28 percent in order to educate a child at a university," the President said. "But it is burdensome for everyone, especially for families living in remote and hard-to-reach areas. Taking this into account, starting from the new academic year, educational loans will be provided on preferential terms for a period of 7 years at the base rate of the Central Bank, that is, at a rate of 14 percent this year," he added. "For children from families included in the "iron notebook", a procedure for paying a contract from budget funds for first-year education will be introduced," Shavkat Mirziyoyev said.

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The Topic of Protecting Private Life Is Becoming Relevant with the Growth of Automation of Numerous Processes Related to the Existence of a Person

The topic of protecting privacy is being updated with the growth of automation of numerous processes related to the existence of a person. This opinion was expressed by the director of the National Center for the Protection of Personal Data of the Republic of Moldova Raducan Eduard during the CIS international expert forum on information security. According to him, the development of technologies, communication systems, information systems, a huge number of personal data accounting systems, a high level of development of social networks and other forms of communication in the virtual space without the accompanying provision of minimum security requirements lead to unauthorized and uncontrolled access to personal data, which imposes the need to develop normative acts providing for specific actions to ensure the protection of the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals. According to the Moldovan expert, one of the priorities is “protection of personal data” and explaining to the public the concept of “private life”, including the importance of the advantages and benefits of protecting fundamental rights and freedoms in the field of personal data processing. It is of the utmost importance that the public understands the importance of protecting individuals when processing personal data. Increasing people’s perception and awareness of the importance of personal data protection will also affect the enhancement of corporate competitiveness, economic, social and cultural development of the country.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Services Sector Grows Fastest in 18 Years

Australia's services industry is growing at its fastest pace in almost 18 years as the sector extends its recovery from the doldrums of last year's coronavirus-induced recession. The Australian Industry Group performance of services index rose by 0.2 points to 61.2 in May, its highest monthly result since October 2003. Ai Group chief executive Innes Willox said there was particular strength in logistics, business and property, and retail trade and hospitality services. "Across the services sector, sales and employment grew impressively and input costs, wages and selling prices continue to rise at a steady clip," Mr Willox said. The data was complied before the latest COVID-19 lockdown in Victoria. "Although new orders for services grew strongly in May, close attention will now be on the impacts of the latest cluster of cases and the Victorian lockdown on business sentiment in the weeks ahead," Mr Willox said.

Other figures due to be released on Monday will show whether upbeat demand for workers more broadly continued in May. ANZ will release its latest monthly job advertisement report. Job ads rose a further 4.7 per cent in April to a 12-year peak and were 27.8 per cent higher than their pre-pandemic level. Another strong reading will back Treasury secretary Steven Kennedy's hopes that people who have lost their jobs as a result of the JobKeeper wage subsidy ending will quickly find employment in coming weeks. Addressing a Senate hearing last week, Dr Kennedy estimated that some 56,000 people lost jobs in the four weeks following the JobKeeper scheme ending in March. Back in March, he had predicted that up to 150,000 people could lose their jobs.

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Small Banks, New Entrants Face Scrutiny

How small banks have responded to the royal commission and COVID-19 will come under the spotlight at a federal parliamentary committee hearing on Thursday. The economics committee will hear from Bank of Queensland, Beyond Bank, HSBC Australia and ING Australia. As well, for the first time newer banking players Volt and Judo Bank will give evidence about their operations. The small bank sector has not faced the committee since late 2019. Liberal MP and committee chair Tim Wilson said customer-owned and foreign banks operating in Australia were not exempt from scrutiny. He wants them held to account in the same way as the four major banks. "The committee's scrutiny will include the banks' progress in implementing the recommendations of the Hayne royal commission into misconduct in the banking, superannuation and the financial services industry," Mr Wilson said. The banks are also expected to be asked about their COVID-19 pandemic response. Mr Wilson said neobanks such as Volt and Judo Bank have the potential to boost competition in the banking sector. Neobanks operate solely online, ordinarily through a smartphone app, and do not have the backing of one of the big four banks. "They have a long way to go and face many challenges, as we have seen with the acquisition of 86:400 and the closure of Xinja," Mr Wilson said. The inquiry will also hear from the Australian Banking Association.

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Tax Cuts for Low Earners, Small Business

Low income earners and small business will be the main beneficiaries of tax changes that come into operation from July 1 and the start of the new financial year. The low and middle income tax offset was extended for another year in the May budget that will provide a tax break from up to $1080 when 2021/22 tax returns are lodged next year. "This is more money to spend in local businesses, giving them the confidence to take on an extra worker, offer an extra shift or buy a new piece of equipment," Treasurer Josh Frydenberg and Finance Minister Simon Birmingham said in a joint statement. For businesses with an annual turnover below $50 billion their tax rate will fall to 25 per cent from 26 per cent, the last in a series of incremental reductions. Bigger businesses will still be paying a tax rate of 30 per cent. The turnover threshold for access to a range of small business tax concessions is also rising to $50 billion from $10 billion.

The May budget also announced the temporary loss carry-back regime will be extended by a further year. OTHER JULY 1 INITIATIVES: TAX - Changes to the Research and Development Tax Incentive, that include tax offsets and a rise in the eligibility cap to $150 million from $100 million a year - Tax relief for small brewers and distillers through the excise remission scheme up to an annual cap of $350,000 - Granny flat arrangements will be exempt from capital gains tax HOUSING - Support for first home buyers and single parent families with the release of an additional 30,000 places to eligible applicants under the First Home Loan Deposit Scheme, the New Home Guarantee program, and the Family HomeGuarantee SUPERANNUATION - The government will require superannuation products to meet an annual objective performance test with funds that fail the test required to inform members, while persistently underperforming products will be prevented from taking on new members

- Self-managed superannuation funds to be made more flexible with the maximum number of allowable members increased from four to six - The temporary reduction in superannuation minimum drawdown rates extended to the 2021/22 financial year HAYNE ROYAL COMMISSION RESPONSES - A new independent body, the Financial Regulator Assessment Authority, will be established to review and report on the effectiveness and capability of the Australian Securities and Investments Commission and the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority - Regulation to lower compliance costs - New measures to prohibit the deduction of ongoing advice fees from MySuper products and to increase the transparency of fees to members - Royal commission recommendation that individuals be 'stapled' to a single super account will start on November 1

OTHERS - Automatic mutual recognition of occupational tradie and skilled worker licences comes into effect across NSW, Victoria, ACT and NT that allows workers - including plumbers, builders and architects - to operate across jurisdictions - Extension of the Junior Minerals Exploration Incentive by four years to incentivise new investment in small minerals exploration companies undertaking greenfields minerals exploration in Australia - Changes to the Franchising Code of Conduct, including a better balance of rights for franchisors and franchisees and improve access to justice though additional, more efficient dispute resolution processes - Improving payment times for suppliers in government contract supply chains. Large businesses with contracts valued above $4 million required to pay their suppliers with subcontracts of up to $1 million within 20 calendar days, or pay interest

- Further rollout of Open Banking that will allow more Australians to be able to securely access and share their banking data to access better value products and services - Providers of debt management services will be required to hold an Australian credit licence and meet ongoing obligations imposed on licensees.

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NEW ZEALAND: New Stock Exchange to Help Grow Small Businesses

A new share trading market, designed as a gateway to the NZX for small-to-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), has been granted a licence by the Government. Commerce and Consumer Affairs Minister, David Clark said Catalist Markets Ltd will provide a simpler and more affordable ‘stepping stone’ for SMEs to raise capital. “This is a big win for kiwi businesses and it ties in well with the Government’s focus on securing an economic recovery in the wake of COVID-19. Through Catalist, SMEs looking to grow into larger enterprises have a new means of getting there. “It’s also fantastic news for consumers, who will have fresh investment opportunities, and greater choice when it comes to diversifying their portfolios,” David Clark said. Small Business Minister Stuart Nash said many early-stage companies would benefit from raising capital but cannot afford the initial and ongoing costs of listing on traditional exchanges.

“For businesses wanting to grow, the alternative to listing is to raise money privately. This can be difficult in New Zealand due to limited access to pools of capital, across both equity and debt markets,” Mr Nash said. “Supporting SMEs to grow and thrive is a key element in our five point economic plan, with the overall objective of encouraging productive, sustainable, and inclusive economic growth. “Providing another avenue for SMEs to access capital is particularly important in the current economic climate, as we rebuild the economy following the impacts of COVID-19,” Stuart Nash said. For affordability, products listed on the exchange will only trade during periodic auctions, rather than continuously as on the NZX. This is intended to reduce costs for issuers and provide more accessible pathway for companies looking to grow. The Catalist market will open for trading on 21 June 2021.

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Dairy Sector – Australia Deal Sets the Benchmark for a Credible NZ-UK FTA

Following the UK’s agreement to eliminate tariffs on Australian dairy products over 5 years, the Dairy Companies Association of New Zealand (DCANZ) is urging the UK and New Zealand Governments to move forward with a deal that ensures New Zealand dairy exporters are no worse off. “In a short number of years, Australian dairy products will have the same tariff-free access to the UK market that EU dairy products have enjoyed for nearly half a century,” says DCANZ Chairman Malcolm Bailey. “It is critical that the New Zealand-UK agreement achieves complete tariff elimination for New Zealand dairy products within the same timeframe”. The UK is the world’s second-largest dairy importer, and its dairy imports are dominated by EU product which is accorded duty-free access.

The choice of New Zealand dairy products has largely been taken off the table for British dairy importers by trade barriers. Outside of limited quota volumes, New

Zealand butter and cheese tariffs equivalent to 45% of the product value. Even within the current quotas, which were reduced significantly in size post-Brexit, New Zealand exporters face tariffs equivalent to 5% for cheese and 17% for butter. DCANZ assesses the UK-Australia agreement endpoint of duty-free dairy trade after a five-year transition as being what should be expected. It is notable that the UK dairy market has been fully liberalised for imports from the world's largest dairy exporter (the EU) for a long period of time. In addition to a timely transition to tariff-free trade, the NZ-UK FTA should deliver an ambitious degree of opening of the UK market for New Zealand products from entry into force, which reflects New Zealand's role in global dairy trade. "New Zealand should accept no less from its FTA with the UK than the access already accorded to other dairy exporters," says Bailey.

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