



Plenary Session: “The Future of Development Partnership in Asia”

Speakers:

Charles Whiteley, Ambassador & Head of Delegation, Delegation of the EU to Bangladesh

Gregory Simons, Associate Professor, Department of Communication Science, Turiba University, Sweden

Kazi Faisal Bin Seraj, Country Representative, The Asia Foundation, Bangladesh

Stefan Liller, Resident Representative, UNDP-Bangladesh

Wu Lin, Associate Professor, Institute of Asian Studies, China Foreign Affairs University, China

Peter Grk, Secretary General, Bled Strategic Forum, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Slovenia (Moderator)

Peter Grk, “For this presentation, so you know in the last three days of conversations, we went through different areas of cooperation and also confrontation when it comes to Asia. We all agree that Asia is the future. We all agree that a big geopolitical play is going down in Asia. We have a lot of different players exerting their influence through various instruments and tools. So, we discussed security, we discussed economy, we discussed geopolitical ramifications, and now, you know, the time has come to discuss also a little bit about development and how development is transforming the Asian continent. As it was already said before me, I have five really interesting fabulous speakers with me who are going to shed a little bit of light on how development partnerships and development cooperation are shaping Asia of the future. I would like this to be, as it is titled, a conversation, so I hope there are no prepared speeches. And of course, you know, we are going to leave enough time, I hope around half an hour, for your questions, which I hope there are going to be many. So, let's start. I would like to start with Kazi Faisal Bin Seraj, who is a country representative of Asia Foundation here in Bangladesh. Mr. Kazi, you have been involved with the development cooperation for a long, long time here in Asia. You've seen everything. You have rich experience. So, walk us through a little bit regarding your lessons learned in terms of development cooperation in Asia. What was done well? What was something that can be improved? What are your lessons learned when it comes to forging development partnerships in Asia? Please, the floor is yours.”

Kazi Faisal Bin Seraj, “Thank you very much, esteemed colleagues and distinguished guests. Good afternoon to all of you, and thank you for gathering here today at the Bay of Bengal conversation. So, it gives me an immense pleasure to speak in front of you about various issues related to development and emergence of certain factors and how we can navigate in the future and how we also a glimpse of how we navigated in the past. So, I also represent a development

professional category of group of people, and also I'm a citizen of global South where many countries have recently made significant strides in economic growth, basic health support, and poverty reduction. But I would also like to emphasize why continued support from our development partners are essential. I would like to start by acknowledging a common dilemma that we often surface in many developing countries, and some of these questions you may have heard. For example, is it acceptable to talk about human rights when a country is grappling with the urgent need for economic growth? Is it appropriate to promote freedom of speech when our primary focus should be on poverty reduction? Should we ask for accountability and transparency when we are in dire need of critical infrastructure development? These are challenging questions and many things that, right, these are the right questions to ask, but it also underlines the complex landscape of development. For example, in Bangladesh, with this high poverty rate, we have also encountered these dilemmas, making it seemingly tempting to prioritize economic growth over other aspects. So I think this is the point I wanted to start here because I think where development partners can play a big role is exactly in this kind of emerging questions and critical thinking, encouraging developing nations to fulfill their economic ambitions while not compromised with human rights, accountability, and transparency, and freedom of speech should dictate the new era of development participation in countries that are emerging like Bangladesh, for specifically Bangladesh's journey toward graduating from the category of least developed countries is a remarkable story of determination, resilience, and hope among its people. It reflects our collective commitments to addressing the pressing issues of poverty. As we celebrate our economic achievements, it is vital to remember why we should not compromise on our democratic commitments while pursuing economic growth. Let us be reminded that democracy is not merely a political system, but a cornerstone of social cohesion and equitable development. It empowers

citizens, encourages participation, and ensures that benefits of growth are shared by all. So even if we have to do an economic argument without democratic system, how can we actually have an equitable growth? A vibrant democracy is not only compatible with our economic goals, it's essential to achieving them. History has shown that nations neglecting democratic principles often face instability, corruption, and inequality. Developing nations in their pursuit of prosperity must not then overlook the importance of democratic institutions. Once again, highlight is the institutions' neutrality for justice and you name it many other issues. And that's where development partners can play a pivotal role in supporting our democratic processes by providing technical assistance, for example, for electoral reform, strengthening civil society organizations, and promoting rule of law. On the point of civil society organizations, Bangladesh has historically been blessed with a lot of civil society organizations and leaders who supported and make us resilient towards total collapse. But at the same time, in the name of economic growth, maybe some of the CSOs who work on more on the right side of the issues have been sidelined intentionally or unintentionally. But we can see the ramification of that now, and we see their absence as quite critical. Equally vital in our development journey is the need for accountability and transparency. These are not empty bubs but fundamental principles undermining sustainable economic growth. Corruption, opacity, and lack of accountability can derail development efforts. Donor countries can assist us in enhancing transparency by sharing best practices, supporting anti-corruption initiatives, and helping us build the capacity to track and prioritizing accountability and transparency and also build capacity to track and manage resources efficiently. Institutions again come back prioritizing accountability and transparency are essential for attracting investment and fostering an environment where businesses can thrive ultimately leading again to job creation and poverty reduction. So, there is an economic case for democratic institutions building again. Once

again, Highlight is the institution's neutral, for justice and, you name it, many other issues. And that's where development partners can play a pivotal role in supporting our democratic processes by providing technical assistance. For example, for electoral reform, strengthening civil society organizations, and promoting rule of law. On the point of civil society organizations, Bangladesh has historically been blessed with a lot of civil society organizations and leaders who supported and make us resilient towards total collapse. But at the same time, in the name of economic growth, maybe some of the CSOs who work on more on the right side of the issues have been sidelined intentionally or unintentionally. But we can see the ramifications of that now. And we see their absence as quite critical. Equally vital in our development journey is the need for accountability and transparency. These are not empty bulbs but fundamental principles undermining sustainable economic growth. Corruption, opacity, and lack of accountability can derail development efforts. Donor countries can assist us in enhancing transparency by sharing best practices, supporting anti-corruption initiatives, and helping us build the capacity to track and prioritize accountability and transparency, and also build capacity to track and manage resources efficiently. Institutions, again, come back, prioritizing accountability and transparency are essential for attracting investment and fostering an environment where businesses can thrive, ultimately leading again to job creation and poverty reduction. So there is an economic case for democratic institutions building again. Now let's move our focus to a couple of persistent issues where we would like to have our development partners continuing their support. And this is where our development partners have been very, very gracious and supportive from the birth of the nation. Firstly, Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to its geographic location and topography. Rising sea levels, cyclones, and extreme weather events pose grave threats. This highlights the urgent need of climate change adaptation and mitigation approaches, and we must work together to secure funding for

initiatives that strengthen our resilience, protect our communities, and reduce our carbon footprint. Secondly, our development partners have a continued and vital role to play in supporting gender equality initiatives. They can help us in promoting women's access to education and healthcare, addressing gender-based violence, and creating an environment where women can fully participate in their labor force and entrepreneurial endeavors. By investing in gender-responsive programs and policies, we can harness the potential of half of our population leading to more prosperous and equitable development. Now as we transition to middle-income status, we need our development partners to evolve with us. We must shift from traditional donor-recipient relationships to true partnership based on shared values and objectives. This is particularly important when it comes to private sector development, technology and innovation, and regional integration. While critical needs are there for large infrastructure, I would like to emphasize particularly on infrastructures and institutions that will help Bangladesh attract foreign investments. There are, because of geopolitical issue, I think it cannot be only considered as challenge but it can be also considered as an opportunity to seek diversified resources from diversified sources for the economic growth of the country. Bangladesh's shift to a middle-income country calls for a focus on economic diversification. Development partners can support initiatives that promote innovation, entrepreneurship, and the growth of industries beyond the traditional sectors like textile and agriculture. This can help create higher value jobs and reduce economic vulnerabilities. For now, let, in conclusion, let us unite and work together to ensure that Bangladesh can achieve its democratic aspirations while reducing poverty, fostering sustainable economic growth, and building a brighter, more climate-resilient future for all its citizens. Together we can make a lasting impact on the future of development partnership in Asia. Thank you for your attention.”

Peter Grk, Thank you very much, Mr. Faisal. I think you painted quite a big picture with many colors of development cooperation in Asia, in Bangladesh, and you raised also some perfect questions which I hope we are going to be able to answer here at this table. So let me now turn to Mr. Charles Whitley, who is ambassador of the EU here in Bangladesh. We all know Charles that basically EU is the biggest development donor in the world. I mean, I know that but I think a lot of people around the world don't know that, but this is something which EU is a role of strategic communication where you know I think European Union can do much better but as Mr. Faisal raised all these questions and I saw you nodding in terms of creating shared values partnership and he also you know raised questions about should we promote economic, I mean human rights, freedom of speech and so on when we on the other hand have a dire situation when it comes to economic growth, jobs and so on and so on. How is the European Union dealing with these questions here in Bangladesh but also you know in Asia?"

Charles Whiteley, "Thank you. Thanks, Peter. Yes, I was nodding towards the end of the speech because I found that a very important point. First of all, I don't like speakers that quibble with the framing of the question in the discussion but I do find the term development partner quite archaic and we don't tend to call ourselves a development partner anymore because we are a partner of Bangladesh. Bangladesh is developing very quickly and Bangladesh can find the solutions to the challenges that it faces as it transitions towards a middle-income country, leaves least developed country status behind and so on. And I say that also because the EU is learning in terms of its partnerships around the world to work for its interests. So, it's not just charitable giving as a donor and recipient relationship, it's about us advancing our own interests and a mutually beneficial relationship. So, Bangladesh is like an incubating example of this approach from the European Union, I would say. Because we have our, of course, development funds and as you rightly say the

EU is one of the largest, the largest development assistance provider in the world and the largest humanitarian assistance provider in the world, but the way we've tailored those funds now is drastically different to when I was first posted in Bangladesh in 2005 to 2009. In those days we had had very classic development assistance, education, health, ultra-poor programs, and there's still a lot of that. But when you look at our three priorities for 2021 to 2027, it's green transition so renewable energy and supporting the transition in Bangladesh, the aspiration to reach 40% of generation of electricity from clean energy by 2041. It's human development in all its aspects, that's the second priority, and the third priority is governance and rule of law and human rights. And that's an intrinsic part of our relationship with every government around the world where we have a relationship. All our bilateral agreements in Asia and around the world have a human rights clause and a democracy clause and all governments around the world, including Bangladesh, have signed up to these agreements. So we feel there's a basis to have a discussion on the values, the shared values that we aspire to in the relationship as part and parcel of our assistance and engagement as partners and beyond the engagement through those three priorities, there are many other areas where we're developing our relationship with Bangladesh. So, we're about to launch negotiations on a partnership and cooperation agreement. This is a new generation agreement that we have with a few countries around the world and it's far more sophisticated than the kind of agreement we have in place with Bangladesh now which dates to 2001 and which is really predicated on development assistance. Trade is a huge priority for us, we see the growth rates in Bangladesh, we see that, and again it's a psychological point but an important one, we get thanked time and again for having extended duty-free and quota-free access to our market to Bangladesh as if we don't benefit from it. We do benefit from it because we get good quality low price garments delivered to the European market that keeps prices low for our consumers. So again, the

psychology is not we're the great beneficiary of Bangladesh or the great benefactor of Bangladesh, we are a partner and we benefit from the relationship. Similarly, our companies, every week now I get phone calls from companies who want access to the Bangladesh market. They say we see a growing market, a growing consumer population, and we want part of that action. And that means daily engagement with the government of Bangladesh to get some of the red tape that inhibits trade with Bangladesh removed and allows European business to come in and operate in a functional way in Bangladesh. So, I think there's a lot to be excited about in the relationship, it's a political relationship too. When we had our first political dialogue last year, in days gone by we would have talked again about development assistance and parochial issues, we talked about Iran, we talked about China, we talked about Indo-Pacific strategies, what is Bangladesh's perspective on all these things and we didn't talk as if we were teaching lessons as European Union, we were saying we'd love to hear what you feel about the region and how we as European Union slot into your image of the Indo-Pacific, where do we have a role, we're not a big military power but we are a big economic power. So, I think all these things are healthy and it's actually a microcosm of what we're doing in Asia in a bigger context. We have a regional program with Asia that covers many of the countries here and again the three priorities for this 7-year period for the entirety of the Asia region are regional integration because we think we have a, if not a, we're not a role model in regional integration. But we have a vast experience of bringing 27 disparate countries together, but we encourage such processes in this region. We have EU interests as number two in terms of our priorities for Asia and the third one, which is quite telling, migration, forced displacement, and mobility. And that's often a very fraught discussion also with Bangladesh because illegal migration to Europe is a very hot political topic. I think you'll all have seen the kind of rise of certain populist parties in some of our countries driven partly by fears about illegal migration coupled though with

a positive agenda to encourage managed or legal migration to our shores. So here in Bangladesh, it's no different. We're developing a talent partnership to encourage legal migration but we're also working with the Bangladesh government to try to address the dangerous illegal migration that's happening across the Mediterranean and through land via Libya to Europe. So I'll stop there, that's a few ideas from my side.”

Peter Grk, “Thank you very much, Charles. Yeah, you can applaud. Thank you very much for this overview of EU's involvement in Bangladesh and also in wider Indo-Pacific. Let me now turn to Wu Lin, who is coming from China. She's an associate professor at China Foreign Affairs University. Wu Lin, you heard what European Union is prioritizing in the Indo-Pacific region also specifically in Bangladesh, namely, you know, green transition, climate change, and so migration and so on and so on. Where is China in all that in developing partnerships with other Asian nations? I know that you have constructed or created also a development strategy, so tell me a little bit more or tell us how our Chinese position regarding these partnerships.”

Wu Lin, “Thank you, thank you Peter. It's really a great honor for CGS to invite me to Bangladesh, this is the first time I come to Bangladesh to participate in the second Bay of Bengal conversation. I know the first Bay of Bengal conversation has no Chinese to participate, but my friends from South Asia told me they really hope to hear the voice from China, so I'm really happy to be here. I noticed all the panelists are very senior in this development corporation in the stakeholders right, so I'm really happy to share with all the audience from the Chinese perspective. Before I introduce China's new development strategy, I would like to first to share my views, especially my age, Chinese, to development. I was born in the 1980s in China, as you know in 1978 China put forward the reform and opening up, then China has entered the period of high-speed development. In the '90s, you know China's Shenzhen Special Economic Zone has developed the other regions of

China, opening up isn't that big. So after we enter into the new century, every region of China has put openness as the prerequisite of development. In 1997, you know the Southeast Asia financial crisis, it speeded up the economic integration of China and East Asia, right? And in 2001 China entered into WTO, then after that China's progress has been speeded up. So this is the history, myself I feel deeply about the developments has brought to this country, to the daily life of people, and to the ideas of the ordinary Chinese people. Then we know 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the global financial crisis, then G20 breaks. So after that, China's development has been closely connected with the whole globe, not just Asia. Just now I talk about China and the region, right? The region has integrated but after 2008, China has been connected with the whole world, with the whole world. So, so that's why the Belt and Road Initiative was proposed in 2013, and it has to be in this background. So, Chinese economic development has sped up, and we all know openness is very essential to all the countries. That's why we put forward the infrastructure, bigger markets, and also beneficial to or based on the Belt and Road Initiative. In 2021, hit by the pandemic, we know globalization has gone backward and some countries have sought to protectionism and "nation-first" policies. So, power competition has to be the new popular issue now. The Ukraine-Russia conflict makes the traditional security the new focus. So what about development? I think many times this issue has become the byproduct of major power competition. So, I think today when we talk about development issues, we should first go back to the basic consensus, that is, development is still the priority of most people in the world. So, the society, the international society, the developing country and developed country, and international multilateral organizations should sit together to figure out what we should do. So, sorry to talk about a lot about my view about development. Then go back to China's Xi Jinping, he put forward a GDI, this Global Development Initiative, in September 2021. The key arguments of this initiative are to ask all the

nations to focus on development and to focus on the United Nations 2030 agenda, right, and also to insist action-oriented to put more resources and to cooperate in poverty reduction, food security, vaccine, and also financing cooperation, climate change, and also digital economy connectivity, etc. So we know after 2021, the initiative was put forward, actions have already started. So, in 2022, after the initiative was put forward for one year, China has hosted a conversation meeting in global development and also put forward 32 practical measures. Then this year, a progress report shows that till now, half of about a dozen of the projects has been completed and the other projects have been implemented positively. So till now, the projects have come to 100, more than 40 developing countries have benefited from that. And also, Chinese government has arranged many human resources training programs, providing 20,000 training quotas to cover all the initially 18 countries. So I would like to draw some lessons from it. I think four points are very important for the effective development partnership. First one, we should build a partnership. We know China and United Nations developing institutions have cooperated a lot. They have promoted many practical projects and also established a GDI Friends Group. This is a kind of a platform, new platform. This is an establishment of the partnership. The second one is to expand the capital support to these countries. For China, they have two important financial platforms. One is Global Development and South-South Corporation Fund, the other one is China-United Nations Peace and Development Fund. These two funds have played an important role to promote this kind of GDI Pro-inaction. So the third point of lesson I think is to promote capability building. You know, people always talk about sustainability, sustainability, and I think the major problem for this is to help these developed countries to build that management right first. We have to do a lot of training programs. We can cooperate with UNDP, with many stakeholders, to help these developed countries to know how to manage their debts, how to make their debts sustainable. I think this is

very, very important. And fourth one, I think is human-centered. We should put a lot of projects, pragmatical projects, to make them make their daily life better, to improve their happiness, yeah. So, I think these four lessons are very important. Besides that, I will also like to highlight that China also promotes the AIIB, this new bank, this new financial institution has cooperated very deeply with the traditional multilateral development institutions and it has provided a lot of finance to the developing countries to support their infrastructure and also other projects. So, I think for now, all the stakeholders should build a united, equal, balanced, beneficial to all, this kind of global development partnership to realize more resilient, green, and healthy global development, yeah.”

Peter Grk, “Thank you very much, Wu Lin, to take us down the road of Chinese take on development. I saw a lot of people writing, so I think they will have questions for you in the Q&A. And now I'm going to turn to another professor, Gregory Simmons, who is from TBA University. Gregory, we heard Charles, he was saying EU, you know, it's not a role model, but EU has experience in regional cooperation with developments inside of European continent, European Union, and so on and so on. In your opinion, are we good Europe or European Union in selling our knowledge or in exerting our strategic priorities and influence in the Indo-Pacific region? Where do you see that there is room for improvement when it comes to activities of EU here in this region?”

Gregory Simons, “Thank you. Okay, so I will embrace my traditional role as being an antagonist in this and to give a more gloomy perspective and not so upbeat take. I mean, in short, there are many problems with EU as a role model and to impose its influence in regions and this is for a number of different reasons. The first one we can have a look at is, for example, the economic situation of the EU currently. I mean, five years ago, the combined EU economies GDP was about 5% more than the United States, today it is considerably less and that has taken place within the

context of a number of crises and I mean, even Van Dael has said there's a de-industrialization of Europe taking place now and one can certainly see signs of that. Not, I mean, I see it in Sweden in a very marked way. So, you have these economic issues which are not going to go away in a hurry. So, I mean, this is the one side. I mean, increasingly there's argumentation that the EU does not have strategic independence, rather, if we look at it, there might be some tactical or operational level debates on how something should be done but when it comes to strategic issues, it tends to defer to US geostrategic imperatives. And we can have a look at within this context, the pressure being put on EU countries in their relation to the trade with China and the Belt Road, for example. I mean, there are also historical issues and I mean Burrell has brought these issues perfectly in a clear ton deaf manner. I mean he illustrated that firstly by referring to Europe as the garden, which I mean is this area, the jungle. I mean it's rather insulting especially if you're going to be intending to build relations with this region and I mean he only managed to better that with his presentation to a South American conference where he I mean he's still alive. So this is something impressive in itself, but what he did say was that Latin America together with Europe should build a new order like the Conquistadors, and yes, well, I mean, it's not so diplomatic, shall we say. Um, so I mean, this comes down to the issue of these morals and values which we are talking about. I mean, one can have a look, especially with this whole different pillars which the EU rhetorically adheres to: democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights. I mean, what we saw during the coronavirus pandemic was an absolute whitewashing of different laws and constitutions. For example, in Germany, it's a constitutional right of German citizens to protest, and this was taken away without debate. So one can have a look, one can also look historically. I mean, Britain is not really reflecting how it got hold of Hong Kong, I mean, pushing drugs and annexing that territory, not to mention the fact what happened not in this region, in Bengal, in 1943, the famine

which claimed millions of lives. It's not in a position to lecture the rest of the world historically or contemporarily. And if we look now, I mean, this is a time when countries, and this is what this region is looking at, that it's necessary to be a subject of events that are unfolding rather than an object of events because strategic independence now is more important than anything else, especially when you got great power rivalry which chews up medium and small powers, it does not have any regard for them. So with that little ray of sunshine, I will end here.”

Peter Grk, “Thank you very much, Gregory, giving us a little bit different outlook on EU-Asia relations. But I'm sure that Charles will have a couple of minutes to comment on that. But before that, let me turn to the last speaker and not the least, Stefan Liller, who is a resident representative of UNDP here in Bangladesh. Stefan, we heard a lot now, we heard the Chinese perspective, we heard the EU perspective. Give us a little bit of UN perspective, and you working basically in the country on the ground, how do you see development in Indo-Pacific? Is this something which, you know, from the words of different speakers, it seems that a lot of things have been done or they are doing. Are they successful? Is the development partnership in Indo-Pacific working, or where do you see room for improvement in getting all the donors on the same page? Thanks.”

Stefan Liller, “Okay, thank you so much, and it's a great pleasure to be on this panel and with all of you here today. So let me try, I mean, that's not an easy little topic that you're putting out, it's quite, you have five minutes, so I'll try that, but I'll try it and bring it in the United Nations perspective and also in the perspective of Bangladesh. So, UNDP, the UN Development Program, we're on the ground physically in 140 countries, we're covering 170 countries, and we are the development arm of the United Nations system. So I want to share a little bit so we're on the same page how the UN works because all of you are members of the UN. So whether it's China or the UK or Sweden or Russia, we're all members of the UN, and our focus, of course, is within the

framework of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs and the international conventions and agreements that countries in the world have signed up to. So those are kind of our guiding stars for all the work we're doing. Then, as UNDP, we're focusing within that on a number of different areas that we lay out every five years in our strategic plans, and those issues we work on in all the countries in Asia Pacific but also in the other regions. So those are around poverty reduction, governance, resilience building, environment, energy, and gender, and we also do that through the digitalization agenda, strategic innovation, and development finance. So, these are kind of the issues that we work on within the framework, and when we engage with countries such as Bangladesh, there is a methodology to that. First, the whole UN system in the country does an assessment on the needs and opportunities of areas where to focus and where to support the government. So that's quite an extensive consultation. There's an analytical paper, there's discussions, but also with private sector, with academia, with think tanks, and so on, and you identify a number of areas where you are going to work together. In that case, for Bangladesh, there are five areas, and UNDP then picks a couple of those areas. In our case, three areas, and then develop a program together with the government that's then approved by our executive board. And our executive board in New York, it was instituted by the General Assembly, and there's representation of all countries on that board. It's a rotational membership, and right now, for example, Bangladesh is on the executive board. So, Bangladesh not only looks at its own development, of course, participate, but they oversee can contribute to how we work in other countries around the world. So that kind of defines the different topics we work on in country. Then, of course, we have regional strategies that also touch on a number of these issues. In Bangladesh, we have quite a long history since independence together with a number of other agencies, and as several colleagues have touched upon, and also Charles, how this kind of relationship and how the partnership and how the focus of our work has changed

during these 15 years. So maybe initially it was about service delivery, it was about setting up institutions and strengthening those. But then over time, this partnership evolves and transforms, but it's always very much in the focus of what Bangladesh wants and the vision that Bangladesh has for its own development, its own aspiration, and that's what we come in to support as a partner in a dialogue. So I think that's also, and that looks very different, you know? Before serving in Bangladesh, I was in Uruguay, it's a high-income country, but we are still there, we're still working, but of course, a complete set of different priorities. I also think it's important to reflect a little bit around this issue around developing countries. I mean, from my point of view, all countries are developing countries. It's just that we are on a different level of maybe socioeconomic indicators and so, but we're all striving against a goal that's continuously moving. And I think also we have to reflect about what is a development partner, what is development cooperation, how does that work even in a relationship that we have as the UN, as UNDP with Bangladesh? It's changing not only on the focus what we do, but how we do things with Bangladesh. So right now, for example, Bangladesh receives support from a number of development partners around the world, and we do a lot of technical support. But Bangladesh, at the same time, contributes. So not only does Bangladesh, for example, provide core funding, unearmarked funding to UNDP and a number of other agencies, Bangladesh also sits on a number of important UN bodies. They are a driving force in discussion on climate change and loss and damage, and things that are being learned in Bangladesh, whether it's on digitalization or climate change adaptation, is now also being exported. So sometimes when we talk about development partners, it's like someone giving to another, but it's not like that. You can both give and receive at the same time. And I think that's also important as Bangladesh comes to graduating from LDC status because there will be less and less traditional donor funding.

If you wish more and more of Bangladesh's own funding and even the development programs and even the work that the UN does in the country will be funded and will be focused in a different way as the country progresses. So just the first little intervention.”

Peter Grk, “Thank you. Maybe just Stefan, sub-question. Looking through the lens of development, do you see that over the years, the development assistance or partnership between the donors became more coherent, more comprehensive in terms of that they're not diverging in different directions, but they are actually first listening to what Bangladesh or countries in the Indo-Pacific want and secondly that they are also cooperating among each other when it comes to development projects in the countries?”

Stefan Liller, “I mean, I think that's very difficult to generalize around that. I mean, because this looks different in each and every country. I've had been fortunate and worked in all the regions around the world, and this set-up, how things are coordinated, how things come together in each country looks different because I think a lot of countries come in with their own priorities. So you have bilateral partners, you have multilateral partners, you have banks, you have neighbors. So it's a big mix. So it looks different in every country, but it's also changing over time. The less a country is depending on development fund from abroad, they're more assertive and more in charge they have to be themselves. So, for example, Uruguay doesn't have any development cooperation. So, all the programs and stuff are funded either by their own tax money or by multilateral bank funding that they take and then get support from different partners to implement together with vertical funds promoting public goods. So, it's very difficult to generalize how this works because in a country where there's no development funding, the government coordinates everything. Where there's a lot of development partners, even in the UN system here and in the larger development

cooperation partner system here, there's multiple different mechanisms of sharing information or aligning around priorities or working together or catalyzing each other's work. But it's very difficult to generalize for a number of different countries because every single context is specific.”

Peter Grk, “Thank you, Stefan. Maybe to turn to Charles for a moment, like Mr. Faisal said, there's always this EU dilemma or not a dilemma, but it's always this question: should we do human rights, good governance, freedom of speech in parallel with economic recovery, job creation, and so on and so on? Because, and this is the question, because we know that there are governments, a lot of them around the world, but also probably in Asia, who of course don't want to commit to these things in terms of good governance, in terms of promoting human rights, and you know, European Union is one of the beacons of these values being promoted. How do you ensure the cooperation of governments when it comes to these questions? Thanks.

Charles Whiteley, “Thanks, Peter. Just to begin with, I'm not sufficiently thin-skinned to need to respond to everything that Professor Simmons said. He's perfectly entitled to his view. I don't agree with what he said about my top boss, but I'm... He made many points that I don't think we have time to go into and actually take away from the main topic of conversation. I think the model that the EU tries to pursue is one of cooperation. You see in Bangladesh itself how different partners of Bangladesh are addressing different concerns, issues in their relations with Bangladesh. The EU takes very much a cooperative approach generally. I think here, sometimes people say, "Well, you're imposing Western values in countries like Bangladesh." You are lecturing, you are expecting the unrealistic. What I would say to that is that everything we do in Bangladesh is, by and large, agreed with Bangladesh. So, first of all, when I mentioned the priorities we have for our development assistance, the human rights and good governance, and rule of law priority, which leads to many different UN projects here, including with UNDP and UN partners, is agreed with

Bangladesh. Every project that we do is passed by the NGO Affairs Bureau. We're doing five projects related to the elections now, which are quite sensitive, involve voter education and scrutinizing of candidates for the upcoming election. That's agreed by Bangladesh. Similarly, with our trade arrangements, so as you know, as Bangladesh graduates, it is aspiring to join GSP plus, and we are entitled, just as any state or group of states, is entitled to set the conditions for the trade that we do with other nations. GSP plus is very clear. If you want to access the EU market on duty-free and quota-free terms for many of your products, you have to ratify and implement 32 international conventions on green environments, on labor standards, on human rights. None of that is imposed, and we have a national action plan on the labor sector of Bangladesh, 47 pages long, agreed with Bangladesh again, not imposed but seen as part of a genuine attempt by Bangladesh industry and government to improve standards in the industry because they know access to the EU market. It will in the future be contingent upon it. So I don't recognize the idea that we're somehow hovering around imposing things on any country in Asia or elsewhere. In contrast to some partners, I mean, we do have a global sanctions regime that is imposed on countries that commit severe violations of human rights. Others have a different approach to sanctions, maybe the threshold is lower and so forth. I think the partnership is there and the economic advancement is there, but for us, the two going hand in hand from our own experience. We have problems in Europe in terms of governance, in terms of rule of law that are, you know, we're trying to work our way through as 27 within our borders because all member states recognize in the EU that if you don't have good governance and rule of law, if you allow corruption to flourish, ultimately, and, you know, there are economic problems as Professor Simon's pointed out. But if you don't accompany your attempts to generate economic growth with good governance, then in my to my mind you are, you will not optimize the potential of your economy. And I think

others recognize that fact as well, so it's a partnership, not a dictatorship is how I would characterize our relationship.

Peter Grk, “Partnership not dictatorship. I like that. Okay, we have 20 minutes now to the end of the panel and since I think you have quite a lot of questions, I would like to involve you as soon as possible. You have one, two mics in front of you, so just stand behind the mics and I will give you time to ask and post the question. Please introduce yourselves and where are you coming from and then ask a question to our panelists. First here in the middle, sir, it's you.”

Question One, “Hello, thank you, Assalam alaikum. I'm Sajib from Eastern University. In the morning session, Mr. Simon Coffee mentioned that high costing in infrastructure development projects pulls us from behind. For me, development is unsustainable. See, we are lacking in human development. We are seeing poor people are surrounded by hardship and rich are becoming richer day by day. My question is why it is hard to gain overall development.?”

Peter Grk, Thank you very much for your question. Um, please, sir, here.”

Question two, “Thank you very much to all of the panelists. It's been very interesting. I wanted to make a quick observation that during the period of the Millennium Development Goals, there was a huge uplift in global development. There was a huge growth in East Asia in particular, and about 800 million people were lifted out of poverty. So, my question in particular is to Wu Lin, representing the biggest country in East Asia, which was the biggest example of that left during that period. What are the lessons from East Asia in terms of economic development? And isn't it true that actually aid didn't play much of a role in that, that it was more economic development strategies and government and business partnerships that allowed the development of East Asia

and the lifting of hundreds of millions of people out of poverty? Are there lessons in that for Bangladesh?”

Peter Grk, “Thank you much, sir. We go here.”

Question Three, “Yes, thank you. So, I thought that what Professor Simmons said was really interesting. And in that regard, I would like to ask about EU's involvement with Bangladesh. The Honorable Ambassador Whitley said that one of the three priorities EU has is human rights. However, in Bangladesh, human rights is sort of a critical situation at the moment, with a lot of laws and practices that go against human rights. So, what do you think and the approach that you is currently taking, which is a partnership with the government, is the right approach to solve this human rights problem that is present in Bangladesh? And another issue that you mentioned is that the cheap garments that Bangladesh produces for the EU is one of the reasons that it's a partnership. But the cheap garments are mostly cheap because of the poor labor rights and the low costs of the labor, as you can see in the Rana Plaza incident and the current situation as well. The situation has not improved as much. So, do you think what approaches the EU can take to actually improve the situation in present? Thank you.”

Peter Grk, “Thank you very much for your question. We go now first here, sir, then it's you. Yeah, it's you.”

Question Four, “Thank you. Myself Sompa Akter, currently pursuing my bachelor's degree from Dhaka University. So, I have two very specific questions on the basis of your discussion. So, my first question is, how do geopolitical shifts and global economic trends impact development initiatives in Asia? And in this context, I have another question, that is, how can environmental

sustainability be integrated into development strategies in a rapidly growing and urbanizing Asia?
That's it. Thank you."

Peter Grk, "Thank you very much. Good question. Yes, as Charles said, please."

Charles Whiteley, "Yes, thank you, Mr. Peter. You did moderate very well and interaction also was very interesting. I really enjoyed this session. Thank you to all the panelists and all of you have spoken very well, covered every aspect. So, especially my question, it goes to everyone but especially if I mention, it goes to Stephen Liller and then the EU representative, and especially Asian Foundation, my friend Fel B, I think so. You have also covered all the aspects, including democracy, human rights, good governance, rule of law, rule of justice. All of you try to cover, including our quota system and your governments and blah, blah, blah, everything. But nowadays, a concept we are finding here that human rights, though so far we came to know it relates to my friend on the other side he was just covering and he was questioning, so I don't go to that part that is also very important. But development, as you said, it is always related to people's perception, then people's freedom of expression, the common way we know fundamental rights, all those things. Now, the conception is going on that development. Democracy is a new concept, giving highest emphasis on development. Democracy, what once General Aayu has used to give the East then East Pakistan, though it had no relation with the people at the grassroots level, but later on it fails. So what do you think? That developmental democracy and the democracy we understand by human rights and freedom of expression and all other aspects is having difference. If having difference, then how the development democracy can work better than the traditional one? Thank you very much."

Peter Grk, "Thank you very much, sir. Anybody else? Okay, if there is nobody else, let's turn back to our speakers. We are going to go in reverse order as we started. So, Gregory, you have—no, no,

Stefan was asked one of the questions, but I will allow all the speakers to comment on the questions if you have something to add or to comment. If not, Gregory, we can move on.”

Gregory Simons, “No problem. Okay, well, I mean, we raised a number of prickly questions here, so and of course you picked up on them in the audience. A lot of these things are based on ideology versus pragmatism if we break it down into that. But I would say that if you look at the EU, it positions itself in the international relations arena as an actor based on conditionality, which has been borne out. But the problem is, I mean, it's not democratic or equal when you offer help which is based on conditions because if those conditions are not met, the help is withdrawn or not given. So, I would say that that is rather transactional and it's asymmetric. And I think the biggest problem in this regard is that the EU is no longer the sole one on the block. You've got the Belt and Road Initiative and you've got the BRICS expansion. So, one needs to learn to adapt to the rapidly changing geopolitical and geo-economic environment. And so, I mean, these ideas, I mean, you can say, "Okay, we have problems at home but we want to export this." I suppose you call it ideological messianism. It's no longer being so accepted by other countries anymore, especially when they see what is happening in Europe.”

Peter Grk, “Thank you, Gregory. No, definitely, EU needs to adapt but I think it shouldn't adapt when it comes to values on which it stands. Wu Lin, I think some of the questions were posed to you, so please.”

Wu Lin, “Thank you for the question. Is economic development of East Asia does it have some lessons to South Asia to Bangladesh, right? I have three points to say. The first one is crisis. Yeah, we know East Asian people, we face a lot of crises in the last three decades. So, the first lesson I think we should seize the opportunities brought by crises. To say that specifically in 1997, right? I just said that financial crisis in Southeast Asia. At that time, many Southeast Asian countries have

been damaged by the financial crisis—Thailand, and also Singapore, right? Malaysia and at that time China did one thing: to stick on the policy not to devalue RMB. And actually, it damaged ourselves, but it protects the regional economies. So, after that, we know this has provided a chance for the economic, for the regional cooperation between China and ASEAN, right? So, we established the Temp Plus Three with Japan, Korea, and ASEAN countries, and we also established the Chai Initiative to build a capital pool, right, for the emergency. So, that's the beginning of regional cooperation and also the economic development, regional development, in East Asia. So, crisis, the financial crisis, right, but it brings about the opportunities for the whole region. So, I think the same now, we also face the crisis. Right, many crises. So, for South Asian countries, I think we should seize the opportunities the crisis has provided us to find a joint way to cope with these things. Second point I would like to say is the connectivity. ASEAN is at challenge. Major countries support the central Asian countries. They support their agency to promote regional initiatives. So, the big countries and the regional countries, they collaborate with each other. The third point is that of strategic autonomy. The regional countries should not pick sides. They should put regional integration as their common goal. So, these three points, I think, are relevant to what we face now in South Asia and also Bangladesh because Bangladesh is a country very keen on strategic autonomy, nonalignment, and also supports initiatives like BIMSTEC, this kind of sub-regional cooperation. I think we should play a big role in this kind of cooperation. Yeah, yeah, thank you.”

Peter Grk, “Thank you, Wu Lin. Mr. Faisal, your three minutes.”

Kazi Faisal Bin Seraj, “So, let me answer the development democracy. So, not too long ago, I was working in Myanmar where I also heard a term called "bees way into socialism." What does that mean? Maybe the originator of the phrase knows better, but how do I read it? It's because I'm

not really socialism, but if you give me some leeway, I can turn it into my own way and serve it to you. So, I need capital, I need investment, but if you're really not into socialism, I can give you some leggings. So, now, the development democracy, again, it's not development democracy, most probably. It's not founded, as far as I know. I haven't found it. I'm a student of economics. I never heard it in any economics book or theory before. Maybe once it develops and gets into empirically tested and gets into theory, I can adhere to that. But till then, we need to wait. But again, how do I read it? Okay, I need to cut corners in democracy and excuse, the biggest excuse can I give is development. The biggest way I can say that, "Okay, your priority is, I hear your priority of freedom of speech, but hold the thought and let me do this mega project first." So, I think there are many ways you can explain that, but the way I read it, it's giving a, or maybe it's a way of earning legitimacy with some friends who also believe in that particular culture or loaded intonation attached to that. So, thank you very much."

Peter Grk, "Thank you very much, Mr. Faisal, for this. Stefan? Yeah."

Stefan Liller, "Okay, just a couple of very brief reflections. I think one of the first questions was also something about infrastructure, hard infrastructure, and of course, development is infrastructure to some extent, be roads, bridges, ports, and so on. But it's the soft infrastructure, the investment in people, is equally or sometimes more important. So, you have to find that balance because you have to invest in people, education, health, social security, and what have you. So, that combination to make things work is very important. I think also in terms of democracy and human rights, we've discussed that there are different models of democracy, of different interpretations around the world. Different countries are, some have more experience, some are newer democracies and are experimenting with how this works. Human rights, I think it's much more easy because there are international conventions that countries have actually signed up for.

So, it's kind of spelled out, it's almost like a legal instrument. So, it's not so much interpretation in terms of that. And I think as UNDP, we are supporting countries across the world doing this together with the larger UN family. For example, you know about the Universal Periodic Review where countries submit information that's reviewed by other countries. There's all these different mechanisms around special rapporteur that are coming. They're always invited by the countries, but the idea is, of course, that they help the countries see the blind spot and see how they can improve and go forward. And then, of course, we do a lot of programming. We do a lot of work directly in terms of building democratic institutions. So, UNDP, we have worked for decades working with the parliament. We were part of setting up the National Human Rights Commission. We continue working on that, and all this is work in progress. We work with the Governance Innovation Unit of the Prime Minister's Office. So, this is work in progress. I don't think anybody has any country has come to the finish line, so I think that's important to work on in many different ways on that. And in terms of environmental sustainability, I think the only actual agenda development agenda that's agreed, that's Agenda 2030, then there can be other priorities under that. Countries can have different, but that's the only agenda that's agreed among all the countries of the world. So, I think it's important that if sometimes we lose track, we go back under that one. I don't know if that agenda would be approved if it came up for today for discussion, but I think it's the best we have and it's kind of the North Star that we need to align because if we take all those different aspects into consideration, then we will get a sustainable development for each of the countries. So, thank you.”

Peter Grk, “Thank you very much, Stefan, for this. And Charles, you have the last word.”

Charles Whiteley, “Thank you very much. Thank you to the gentlemen for the questions. I think by saying we have a partnership with the government, I wasn't trying to imply that everything is

fine and dandy. Stefan says everywhere human rights are a work in progress and there are setbacks and advancements. But what we have done, and it's critical to partner with the government on human rights because, of course, the government is the institution that's supposed to protect human rights. And I think the point you made about the labor sector and the low cost of labor and Rana Plaza is a perfect example of a partnership. So, since Rana Plaza, we've put millions into decent work programs. The safety record of factories has undoubtedly improved. We have the 47-page National Labor Plan of Action, which is definitely a work in progress. There's still a lot of work to be done. We have a monitoring team coming in in November to talk to the government to learn where things have advanced and where there are still challenges. So, what I think, in partnership terms, what I mean by that is policy engagement with the government but also civil society. That's critical, and we fund a lot of civil society here, and there are challenges in that area, as you'll know. But we don't just talk policy; we also bring in funding. And I think it's important to fuse those things together. In the end, though, it's down to political will from the government and allowing space for civil society and allowing human rights to flourish. So, we can only act as a partner and hope that that materializes. Thanks a lot.”

Peter Grk, “Thank you very much, Charles. In a way of summing it up because we heard a lot of things being put on the table, and as we know, development as a word is a big word and it encompasses everything. But if we want to find some points from this debate, I think the first point is definitely that the development partnerships are changing or have changed significantly in this new global reality. We can see that now it's much more partnership, as a partnership where countries who receive development aid or assistance are involved in the process from the beginning. They are listened to and they can state what their priorities are. But they need to be, of course, inside of the, as Stefan said, Agenda 2030. Second point is that, you know, it's very hard

to generalize. Each country is a country for itself, and we need, although a coherent approach, we also need country-specific approaches in terms of getting the best possible results. And the third thing is, and I think here is agreement with everybody, that human rights promotion of good governance, rule of law need to be part of the development partnership which we are forging in the Indo-Pacific. So, with this, concluding this round table, I hope you enjoyed it and we finished on time, so I think Zillur is going to be happy. Thank you very much.”