

SEARCHING WAYS FORWARD FOR BANGLADESH IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC



Food and Nutrition Security in Post-pandemic Bangladesh

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Introduction

Satyendranath Dutta, a renowned poet of Bengal, wrote a famous poem extolling resilience of Bangalees one line of which reads “monontorey morina amara, mari niye ghor kori” (famine can not destroy us and we cohabit with pandemic). Now that a mari in the form of Covid-19 pandemic is already here and a second wave has already engulfed many countries, including Bangladesh, a monnontar or famine like situation may arise here, if adequate preventive measures are not taken right now. Food security may be under a major threat, particularly when the country has been aspiring to graduate to a low middle income country in a year’s time.



A proper food and nutrition security (FNS) system involves at least three essential elements. First, availability of food, by and large, from domestic sources; second, unhindered access to food, either direct as in case of the farmers or indirect by means of sustaining the purchasing power through employment and income; and thirdly, food has to provide adequate nutrition, which may be compromised due to low quality or unsafe food as well as inadequate amount of or low access to food. A fourth element is often added to the concept of food security, which is stability of availability of and access to food. The important questions involved in the case of Bangladesh are as to where does Bangladesh stand vis-à-vis the required measures for proper FNS and how the pandemic has adversely affected the measures in question, or/and may affect them in the days to come or even in the aftermath of the pandemic. To understand these issues, we need to take a look at the availability of, access to and utilization for nutrition in Bangladesh. We begin with some stylized facts, issues and weaknesses of the Bangladesh food and nutrition security system.

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Bangladesh FNS system

- a. Bangladesh has by and large become self-sufficient in production of rice, the staple food; but despite certain increase of production, the country does not sufficiently produce many other necessary food crops or food, such as lentils which is a major source of plant protein, vegetables, oil seeds for edible oil, sugar and spice crops.
- b. Of late, major improvement has taken place in the productions of fish from aquaculture (though capture fishery has seen major declines), poultry meat and eggs as well as milk. However, it is difficult to ascertain the degree of the positive changes due to lack of proper official data.
- c. Much of the rice output growth had been due to dry period boro rice production, which is dependent highly on ground water irrigation that creates pressure on the ground water reserve, particularly due to highly inefficient technology of flooding rice lands, on the one hand, and little inclination for or attention so far to large scale introduction of well-known water-saving technologies, on the other. There is hardly any incentive for the farmers for such a switch.



- d. Labor is becoming scarce while mechanization has happened mainly in case of irrigation and ploughing and to some extent in threshing of paddy. This is, however, not the case for other crops. Thus millions of agricultural laborers are dependent on crop harvest employment while many of them also migrate seasonally in search of employment. This was particularly seen during the last harvest of boro in the haor areas of the country when mechanical harvesters were required to be brought in from outside the areas concerned for problems of movement of labour due to lockdowns. However, continued large scale post-pandemic mechanization of rice harvest may create social problems as millions of agricultural manual laborers may become unemployed.
- e. The agricultural marketing system and the supply chain are wasteful and highly inefficient which favor mainly the marketing intermediaries at the cost of the economic interests of the farmers providing them little incentives for large scale yield and output increase. The weaknesses of the supply chain became especially evident when the pandemic hit in March this year and subsequently lockdowns were declared. Many farmers were left with unsold and rotting crops in their fields and poultry farmers had to destroy unsold eggs and chicks.
- f. Bangladesh has made some major progress in improving nutrition, particularly of children. Stunting and the rate of underweight of the children have fallen substantially. Yet, 45 percent of the households had low dietary diversity (eating 6 or less of food groups out of 12) due to limited crop diversity as mentioned earlier as well as lack of sufficient income for purchasing food. A major important factor behind acceptable dietary diversity is women's agency, particularly education and decision making power. If cropping diversity and consequent dietary diversity improve, Bangladesh's nutritional profile will be far better than at present. The Covid 19 is an added burden as it adversely affected the situation because many people reportedly lost their employment and income resulting in the reduction of access to sufficient food during the pandemic. The situation may yet continue for quite some time as the second wave is already upon us. Besides, there is a strong feeling these days that women's progress achieved over the past few decades may be reversed or slowed down because of the pandemic. The result is obvious: a major threat to improvement of nutrition may remain even in the post-pandemic period.
- g. Apart from the above mentioned problems, producing food including food grains as well access to foods, may yet face another big challenge due to climate change. Covid or no Covid, the problems due to climate change would continue to exist for many years to come. The space



here does not allow us to go into the details, but suffice it to say that unless adequate measures in terms of policy and actions are taken whole-heartedly by the government and the people together, there will be major shortfalls in food production, if not widespread hunger, due to both climate change and climatic shocks in the form of various disasters, such as floods and flash flood, drought, sea-level rise and salinity increase, cyclonic storms as well as fall in human productivity due to major health impairment and rising mortality.

Strategic directions for the future

Bangladesh's annual growth rate has faltered from the past year, which was about 8 per cent. The pandemic has already led to the loss of employment and income for many and thus their food and nutrition security are under a major threat. For the FNS to be maintained, and improved further, in the post-pandemic period, the systemic and structural weaknesses have to be appropriately managed. In that case, scientific evidence and technology must be the major weapons.

However, the people's whole-hearted cooperation would be crucial in meeting the challenge, which means they have to be provided with enough economic and other incentives. One particular problem that needs to be attended to right now is the that of overuse and wastage of water and consequent creeping water shortage. Science and technology for conservation of water exist and are well-known. Yet this has not happened due to lack of appropriate incentives to farmers and a sense of complacency on part of the policy makers. It may be noted that in some countries, water futures market already exists to manage the shortage that they are facing.

A major structural solution is to develop a fair agricultural marketing and supply chain system so that farmers get fair compensation for their production efforts. Besides, the climate impact issues would require to be addressed effectively, which is missing at the moment. The war against nature, be it COVID or climate change, has to be on its terms, following the laws of nature. Moreover, there is no scope for compromising over the social issues, such as women's agency, for the outcome is not simply beneficial to only women, but to the whole society and over future generations.