

# What more can we do to reduce hunger and malnutrition

The Daily Star and the World Food Programme (WFP) organized a roundtable on food security and hunger on Wednesday 10 May 2006. The roundtable agreed that food insecurity is a matter of high concern for Bangladesh as 28 million ultra poor live under 1,800 calories a day. The problem has its rural-urban dimension as most of the ultra poor live in villages, a gender dimension as women are specially vulnerable in a food insecure situation and a population dimension as regions with more ultra poor are more exposed to food insecurity problem.

Bangladesh has the third largest number of the world's hungry people after India and China. The country has recorded good improvements in nutrition during the 1990s, but the progress remains too slow to meet the MDG (Millennium Development Goals) goals. Malnutrition remains a major problem in Bangladesh. It is a multidimensional problem that goes beyond the issue of food production. Improving food security, tackling malnutrition, reducing disparities in income and education, reducing gender disparities and improving protection against inevitable shocks are the key elements in Bangladesh to fight against hunger.

To fight the situation, good governance is a must to reach agricultural subsidy to the marginal farmers and to reduce transaction cost of food movement. Special micro-credit for food consumption should be introduced for the poor during and after any natural disaster. There is a strong need for pro-poor and pro-women institutional reforms and favorable macroeconomic environment. The demand-side issues of food security include physical, social and economic access to food. The concept of entitlement is important because there can be starvation or famine even when there is no dearth of food supply. The health factor leading to malnutrition and loss of income has to be addressed through higher budgetary allocations. Moreover, the government's various policies and institutions need to be coordinated properly to attack the multidimensional problem of food insecurity. Special focus should be given to women and children for their nutritional improvement.

**Transcriptions:**

Mahfuz Anam, Editor, The Daily Star: Bangladesh has made a lot of progress in food productivity but there is absolutely no reason for complacency. It still has a far too large population that does not get its required level of calorie and the particular vulnerable groups go hungry. So, on the one hand, we have achieved a lot, but on the other, we still have to go a long way. The media, particularly The Daily Star, strongly feel the need for partnering with relevant organisations for contribution to the task of higher food productivity. This is why we have partnered with the World Food Programme for this roundtable.

Douglas Broderick, Country Representative, WFP-Dhaka



This roundtable is the result of a very important partnership. Newspapers are increasingly covering global food security issues, which are very important for all of us. With the partnership with The Daily Star, we hope to project the issue of food security to a greater audience.

Worldwide there are 700 million people who are not adequately nourished. In Bangladesh, there are roughly 28 million ultra poor surviving almost below 1,800 calories a day. The World Food Programme (WFP) wants to tackle

this situation and looks forward to your contributions to help us draw up a plan for the future.



John McHarris, Adviser, WFP-Dhaka

I want to identify who are the food-insecure and hungry people in Bangladesh. The magnitude of the problem can be felt from the fact that about 28 million people in Bangladesh are extreme poor or food insecure. This obviously represents a very large group. More often than not, the extreme poor are invisible even in their own communities, living on other people's lands, having no one to speak for themselves and no one to assist them on their rights. This unfortunate people can be more identifiable if their socio-economic and demographic characteristics are properly discussed.

From literature it can be said that there seems to be a rural and an urban dimension of the problem as roughly 37 per cent of the ultra-poor lives in rural areas and roughly 19 per cent in urban areas.

The problem also presents a gender dimension as women are especially vulnerable due to poor access to education, economic opportunities and social services. Women of childbearing ages are particularly vulnerable to chronic energy deficiency due to a combi-

nation of extreme poverty, lifelong gender discrimination and nutritional deprivation.

Households that lack access to productive assets, depend on irregular income, or are more dependent on casual labour are vulnerable to food insecurity. Daily labours, casual fishermen and beggars who are socially marginalized fall in this category. Sometimes such food-insecure people are geographically concentrated. The Chittagong Hill Tracts provides a good example where one finds certain minority groups and tribal groups that are socially marginalised.

These food-insecure people can also be identified by their geographic distribution. The Food Security Atlas, which WFP's Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping Unit has produced, is an useful reference and a visual aid to describe the geographic distribution of extreme poverty and food insecurity in Bangladesh.

Some general statements about the regional distribution of food insecurity can be made using the available data and information. Regions which have greater density of the ultra-poor population are more exposed to the food insecurity problem. The northwest, west, north-central and north-east, south along the coastal belt and also the Chittagong Hill Tracts fall under this category. One of the interesting aspects of the geographic distribution is around the centre of the country you generally find less prevalence of extreme poverty.

The north-west and some other regions are more exposed to natural disasters. The north-central char areas have a weak ecosystem and poor quality land. The far west of the country is the draught zone where rainfall is unreliable. The Sylhet Haor basin is extremely low-lying and for as much as half the year much of that area remains under water. And in the coastal zone there are areas exposed to hazards such as flooding and cyclones. The Chittagong Hill Tracts is affected with the social marginalisation problem.

However, the existing literature is a bit unclear about the geographic distribution and patterns of malnutrition. From the work that the WFP and the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics have done, we can talk about two broad geographic clusters where high levels of child malnutrition are expected. These areas include the coastal belts stretching from Jhalakathi to Bhola to Noakhali and down to Cox's Bazar. And the second general cluster where one can expect to find higher levels of child malnutrition is in the north of the country bordering India, stretching from Kurigram down to Sherpur, Netokona, Sunamganj and Mymensingh.

Dr Atiur Rahman, Chairman, Unnayan Shamannay



It is a constitutional obligation for the government to take care of the hardcore poor. Article 15 of the constitution said: "It shall be a fundamental responsibility of the state to attain, through planned economic growth, a constant increase of productive forces and a steady improvement in the material and cultural standard of living of the people, with a view to securing to its citizens -- a) the provision of the basic necessities of life, including food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care."

Worldwide more than one billion people do not have enough food although global food production is sufficient to make a world free from hunger. This is why Professor Amartya Sen had said:

"So much of production, so much of deprivation -- this is such a contradiction."

The situation indicates the level of deprivation and the right to food is a fundamental human right. This is why the government has to create an enabling environment to ensure adequate food for all.

The first of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) -- to eliminate extreme poverty and hunger by 2015 -- has been adopted in the poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP) of Bangladesh. In terms of direct calorie intake (DCI), about 44 per cent of the population remains hungry in Bangladesh. The poor of the northern districts are still under persisting threat of Monga (a near famine situation), particularly in September-November. Monga deserves to be especially addressed in terms of food security.

**Hunger and food insecurity in Bangladesh**

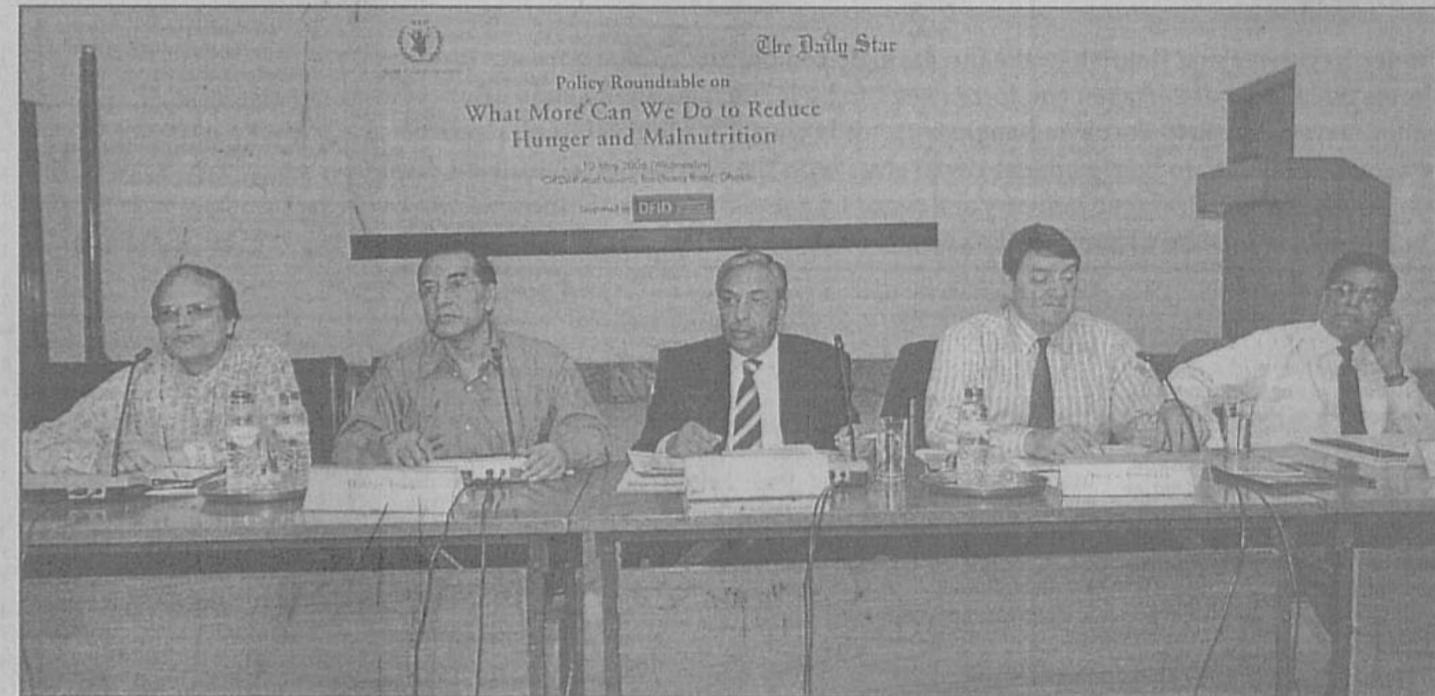
The total number of food-insecure people remained almost the same over the last 15 years although the total population increased by about 30 million during the same period. The number of food-insecure and vulnerable people increased over the last decade although there were successive bumper harvests in the second half of the 1990s. Acute mal-distribution of food exists within the households as mothers and young children are particularly vulnerable to hunger.

Food deprivation: About 38 per cent of urban and 44 per cent of rural children suffered from growth stunting in 2004. Again, 42 per cent of urban and 49 per cent of rural children had lower weight for their age in 2004. The overall percentage of children suffering from stunting, wasting and underweight were recorded to be about 43, 13 and 48 percents respectively. There is a geographic dimension to the problem as the growth stunting and underweight are the highest in Barisal and Chittagong divisions while they are the lowest in Khulna. Causes of hunger and food insecurity: Poverty is the most important common source of food insecurity. The poor and the poorest of the poor, who do not have income to meet the minimum calorie requirement, remain food insecure. Low domestic food production can increase food insecurity in low-income countries which have limited capacity to import food. These countries have low export earning, high external debt service obligations and limited international borrowing capacity. In Bangladesh, inflation is one of the main causes of food insecurity. When food prices go up, the poorest of the poor suffer most.

Food production, availability, income and food prices go through an annual cycle as more food is available at low prices during harvesting. But food availability decreases and prices soar before the harvest of main crops. Such transient insecurity may lead to chronic food insecurity depending on its severity and frequency. Hence, if a household suffers two successive drought years and is forced to sell some of its assets to survive, it may dip into chronic food insecurity from transient insecurity.

Food insecurity is referred more to demand failure as its origin brought about by losses in employment, production, adverse movements of the terms of trade or other forms of entitlement failure. So the demand dimension is important here as supply may not alone ensure food security. Six structural aspects are widely recognised that may make individuals suffer from entitlement failure: 1) low labour productivity, 2) adverse terms of trade, 3) limited market access, 4) poor asset possession, 5) restricted borrowing capacity, and 6) the absence of safety net provision of transfers.

Other sources of demand failure particularly in Bangladesh are seasonal and disguised unemployment, unpaid labour, and inadequacy of safety net programmes in food insecure areas. Such inadequate programmes cannot create food demand among the vulner-



ble groups. Such a situation can happen even when there is a lot of food available.

Cultural factors can also deprive household members like the women and children from getting an equitable share in available food within a household. This may be dubbed as intra-house food insecurity. Low and non-earning old age family members are also exposed to lower than required calorie intake due mainly to their lower or zero productivity and lesser dignity and importance in a household.

Continuous food price hike, often due to bad politics, lack of competition due to syndication and absence of laws and institutions protecting consumer's rights often make the poor food insecure. This represents a governance issue. Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP): The PRSP has suggested policy agenda for fiscal year 2005-07 to eliminate hunger and food insecurity. It has stressed ensuring continuous and low-cost food supply through productivity gains and increasing purchasing power of the poor through employment generation in agriculture. These policies are in paper but it is not sure how much of them will be implemented.

Policy options for eliminating hunger and food insecurity: Good governance has to be ensured to reach agricultural subsidy to the marginal farmers and to reduce transaction cost of food movement. Special micro-credit for food consumption should be introduced for the poor during and after any natural disaster.

Even 10 per cent of the rural people do not get agriculture credit by Krishi Bank, which is enjoyed by local touts and middlemen. It also calls for intervention in the monga areas.

Policy options: Hunger and food deprivation need to be addressed from multidimensional aspects, not only from the traditional transfer programmes, productivity gains and employment generating growth targets. There is a strong need for pro-poor and pro-women institutional reforms, favourable macroeconomic environment, good governance and proper and adequate government interventions.

Dr Quazi Mesbahuddin Ahmed, Member (GED), Planning Commission



The issue of food security, one of the several conditions for a population to be healthy, active and well-nourished, needs to be reviewed very frequently. It is a multidimensional and multi-sectoral issue. However, there is a general tendency of equating food security with agriculture sector growth.

From the supply side, food security is not only about raising agricultural output; it is about harnessing pro-poor growth potentials. Empirical researches also provide stark evidence of the benefits of agricultural productivity in reducing poverty. Despite production constraints and low productivity, the rise in cereal output in Bangladesh has benefited the farmers in general.

The demand-side issues of food security include physical, social and economic access to food. The access issues have always been linked with growth and distribution of personal income. The concept of entitlement is important here because there can be starvation or famine even when there is no dearth of food supply.

Beyond the availability of and access to food, there is the issue of food utilization, which is the nutrition aspect of the problem. The

latest UNICEF report card on nutrition talks about under-nutrition that indicates a state of hunger and repeated susceptibility to infectious diseases including underweight for age, low-height for age (stunted) and low-weight for height (wasted). Under-nutrition is also caused by deficiency of vitamins and minerals.

In Bangladesh, between 1996 and 2005 about 8 million children under five were found to be underweight. In percentage terms, this is one of the highest in the world. Data available from the Bangladesh Health and Demographic Survey for 2004 also indicate that improvement in child nutrition in the recent past has not taken place.

Researches on rice price, agricultural wages and nutritional status in Bangladesh would tend to conclude that real wages of agricultural labourers, nutritional status of children and infant mortality did improve during the 1980s and the 1990s. But these variables have stagnated since 2001. These conclusions are tentative because one would need further scientific analyses of food and agricultural policies. One of the pertinent questions is: what is the 'optimum amount' of food imports including imports under aid for Bangladesh that would not depress the growth of the crop sector?

Food security includes a whole range of complicated issues -- population growth, potentials for medium to long term agricultural growth, variables that would impinge on agriculture growth, the present nutritional status, government's budgetary allocation not only for the agriculture sector but also for the health sector in general and for nutritional programmes in particular etc. Food security is also about coordination of policies and their implementation.

In Bangladesh, the PRSP has dealt with food security issue by detailing how coordination of all strategies has to be done to embark on the fastest route to poverty reduction. It also deals with the coordination of programmes following these strategies. The document has suggested an institutional arrangement for implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the plans undertaken.

One deals with poverty reduction through pro-poor growth and employment generation. Problems of food supply, making people economically capable of buying food and ensuring safe food are all very important issues that have not been overlooked in the PRSP.

The PRSP Policy Matrix on Food Security includes 5 strategic goals: (i) Creating an enabling framework for food security, (ii) Assuring low-cost food supply, (iii) Smoothing fluctuations in food consumption, (iv) Increasing purchasing power and entitlement of the poor and (v) Ensuring better food utilisation and more nutritious food to all, particularly the poor. These goals have their targets based on actions to be taken during and even beyond the PRSP period. One would expect that the government would approve the National Food Policy including its detailed Action Plan as early as possible. This would facilitate a transparent environment in which to operate on issues of food security.

Chantell Witten, Country Director, HKI



The Helen Keller International or HKI made an in-depth analysis of nutritional status using data from 1998 to 2003, covering about 300,000 households. Child growth

stunting was used as a proxy indicator of chronic malnutrition and poverty status. The sample population was divided into five groups in terms of economic status -- the poorest living on \$4 a month and the richest \$31.

The study found child stunting decreases with income growth. But a significantly high number of children about 30 per cent -- are stunted even in the richest group.

Gender equity and maternal education play an important role in checking child nutrition. The nutrition gap between boys and girls has been increasing over the past two years with the girls being marginalised.

The HKI uses an indicator called nutrition sufficiency ratio (NSR) to assess whether the amount of money spent by a household on food can afford an optimal diet or not. Optimal diet includes calories as well as micronutrient intakes. When this nutrition sufficiency ratio is 1, it signifies a family makes adequate spending on optimal diet. So the closer a family is to 1 the better the diet.

The nutrition sufficiency ratio across Bangladesh reveals that only 4 per cent of the population can afford an optimal diet. That means 96 per cent of the population cannot have adequate calorie intake or micronutrient intake.

Looking at the food intake of the children between 6 months and 5 years, it can be said that with increase in income children's food intake increases too. It is also found that only 10 per cent of the children's food basket contains quality food.

Total expenditure on food: The households having inadequate resources spend a very large percentage of their money on food and very little on other essential services like healthcare and education. In the second lowest population sample group, 47 per cent of income is still spent on food, which shows the absolute poverty margin is very great for that group. The quality of food varies only about 10-11 per cent across the five groups.

The impact of diarrhoea is equal among the five income groups. This highlights that environmental hazards, poor hygiene, water and sanitation need to be addressed as diseases and food intake patterns interplay and contribute to malnutrition.

The higher income group has more resources for and access to healthcare. The poorer households may not have the time to go to healthcare centres and wait there in line as they are too busy trying to meet their basic needs.

So the conclusion is we need to look at all the issues of access to food. We also need to improve environment, find ways of helping households make the best utilisation of their resources, and make services available to them. This needs a holistic, integrated approach instead of only just looking at food import or production.

Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, Executive Chairman, PPRC



Hunger is one of the priority targets in MDGs and PRSP. There are four types of indicators through which one can understand hunger.

The first indicator is income poverty, which also is a measure for extreme poverty. The PRSP has shown the trends in extreme poverty.

The second indicator is not about the overall income poverty or extreme poverty but about the subset of that problem caused by seasonal poverty. Monga or a near famine situation in recent times has become a most popular understanding of this problem of seasonal poverty.

The third indicator is child malnutrition through which one

can try to grapple with the issue of hunger.

There is also a fourth indicator, which is about people's own assessment of hunger, their understanding of why they are hungry. So we can try to assess trends over time in terms of income poverty, in terms of child malnutrition, in terms of seasonal poverty and in terms of people's own assessment of hunger.

While discussing hunger one will obviously look at the extreme poverty situation. Bangladesh has two estimates for the percentage of population who are in extreme poverty -- 33 per cent and 20 per cent -- based on different assumptions drawn from the same data of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Instead of focusing on the differences of figures, what needs to be highlighted is that extreme poverty is a major problem. Talking about the progress in poverty reduction, it is true that poverty is declining by one percentage point a year. But 20 per cent of the population still lives in extreme poverty and 40 per cent in poverty.

Now there exists seasonal poverty, which in recent times has attracted attention of the policymakers. Seasonal poverty has undergone a major change over time. It was a much widespread phenomenon, covering a much larger part of Bangladesh in 1990. It is now concentrated in the ecologically vulnerable northern districts, which is also the traditionally famine belt.

But it is important that the government currently considers 12 districts as falling under the monga belt although it is essentially 5 or 6 northern districts where monga is a major problem. Our policy initiatives have to focus on these specific northern districts.

Child malnutrition is also a major issue in considering hunger although it is declining by 3 per cent a year and has to be seen as a problem over and above the problem of poverty. Child malnutrition is not just a reflection of poverty as the richest segments of the sample households also exhibit malnutrition. It involves the issue of hygiene in community context.

Agricultural policy also has a great implication for food security.

We can segregate how people understand and assess their state of hunger and this will give an idea of how the hungry households graduate from poverty.

If we can categorise the hungry people, the absolutely hungry will fall under category one. Bangladesh has made substantial improvement in this category as just 1.9 per cent of people falls under this category. The next category is for the diet poor.

Talking of nutritional insecurity, it is a weakness of our policy thinking that we have not prioritized agricultural sufficiently. It is a tragedy that Bangladesh is not focussed on milk production as a very important part of its agriculture policy. Policymakers were more interested in rice production so that the urban and rural poor remain quiet. But if nutritional security has to be at the centre of policy thinking, then we have no option but to rethink our entire attitude towards agricultural policy. Even if you improve your income child malnutrition will not disappear unless you can address micro-nutrient issue. So we need a big policy shift to make nutritional security our number one concern.

**OPEN DISCUSSION**

Qaiser M. Khan, Lead Human Development Specialist, World Bank



I want to mention about a study (what study) we have done in two