

What more can we do to reduce hunger and malnutrition

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parts of Bangladesh to look at various diseases. The study revealed that the richer upazilas were doing worse in dealing with diseases. So the issue of food security is something that goes beyond income poverty and one has to look at social behaviour as well as the types of nutrition intake to understand the problem of food insecurity. These factors are more relevant because when the new HIAF data will be published, it will show that poverty per head has come down. But at the same time vulnerability of the poor will have increased because job structures are changing. People are getting less poor but more vulnerable. And one of the things we found in our study is there was a deliberate underfeeding of women in these richer upazilas so that they have smaller babies. Now they are smaller, because they don't want them to preserve. Now if people have that attitude then the smaller babies will be a source of malnutrition in future.

Iqramul Ahsan, Senior Programme Adviser, EU



My comments will be my personal observations, not the official version of my organisation. Today's roundtable is yet to discuss what more we can do to reduce hunger and malnutrition. We can coordinate different policies and institutions to work towards fighting malnutrition and hunger. For example, the agricultural policy did not take care of milk production. This happened because the agriculture policy was not coordinated with livestock, fisheries or poultry sub-sectors. It only focused on the crop sector. This is why coordination of policies is so important. Coordination among various institutions is also important to have coherent and harmonized policies to address the food insecurity problem.

Imrul Kayes Muniruzzaman, Director, Social Empowerment, RDRS



Today's discussion has identified the root causes of poverty and hunger and we have also spotted a lot of policy options and programmes to address the causes of food insecurity. But somehow all this exercises do not reach the poor for their benefit. So rather than reinventing the causes of poverty and hunger, we need more discussion on how much effort we have to put in to ensure the existing policies and options are implemented properly.

Md Mohiuddin, Director, Field Operations and Emergencies, Save the Children, (USA)



From the discussion notes, I have sorted out three major issues for discussions. First, increased rice and cereal production cannot be the indicator of food security unless the issue of access to food is addressed. The poor's access to food should not be ensured through dole-outs or relief. It should be ensured by increasing their purchasing power. The lack of intake of food rich in micro-nutrient does not depend solely on food production; it also depends on lack of awareness and food habit. So we have to emphasise this point. On the other hand, production of food rich in micro-nutrient also needs to be increased.

I agree with the discussant who

mentioned that food insecurity is a multidimensional issue. Population growth is one of the aspects. Although the government has achieved a tremendous success in population control, population growth of the unskilled labourer households is quite high. These unskilled people cannot contribute anything to the national economy by doing any productive job. So we should explore how we can control population growth of that particular group. We should also address the issue of proper distribution of resources and wealth.

Md Ruhul Amin, Director, Research, Food Policy and Monitoring Unit (FPMU)



I have some comments on Dr. Atiur's presentation. People go hungry not because of unavailability of food grains. In fact, food production has gone up from 15 million metric tons to 25 million metric tons. So there is no dearth of food. Secondly, Atiur mentioned that food price falls during the harvesting time and increases before the harvest. But such fluctuations do not occur any more. This is because the food ministry supports the farmers at the time of harvest. But sometimes the government cannot procure food because of the market forces. Even then the farmers get good prices just after harvest. For example, food prices remained buoyant in the last harvesting season. Through conscious policy the government did not let food grain prices to increase for the last few months or last two years. But it has maintained a price stabilization policy. For example, now a day one kilogram of potato is costlier than one kilogram of rice. This means there is a stabilisation of grain prices.

As Atiur mentioned it, Monga is not a phenomenon that happens from time to time, it is a continuous phenomenon. In Rangpur area, Monga occurs in the months of Ashwin and Kartik. During those two months, other areas of the country also face some problems. Monga is not a problem of food production, it is a problem related to the people's economic access to food. So we should not say we can reduce Monga by distributing food through different channels. We should rather think of uplifting the economic condition of these Monga-hit people through wage earning activities. For example, last year the food ministry had a budget for open market sales of 300,000 metric tons of rice. But because of price stabilisation, the ministry could not sell even 20,000 metric tons under the OMS. So it indicates that food situation is stable in the country. What we can do is creating economic activities for the hungry people so that they can buy food.

Dr. Syed Izzat Rasul, Senior Adviser, Health and Nutrition, Concern



We know that Monga is a seasonal or annual phenomenon, and we know the location and the population affected by this. But so far only some special periodic programmes have been taken to tackle it. But nothing has been done to avoid the famine-like situation by creating income generation activities throughout the year.

The other point is: What are we doing to reduce migration of the people from the Monga areas during the lean period? Are we creating any job opportunities for them in their localities during the lean periods so that the people will not have to migrate to the cities?

Tapash Kumar Bishwas, ITRI: I would like to know from Dr Atiur Rahman how he identified the factors of food security as he mentioned in his paper and whether he also identified the relative contributions of these factors to food security. If we know the relative contributions of different factors to food security then we can prioritise our actions and formulate specific

programmes. Usha Mishra, Senior Adviser, Strategic Planning & Policy Advocacy, WFP



Today's discussion has spent a lot of time discussing Monga. Perhaps everyone will agree that among all the developmental challenges we have been facing in Bangladesh, Monga has come up as one of the important challenge. But we must not forget that there are other people who are food insecure and who are invisible across the country. It is a great start that the government is going ahead with the help of partners like PPRC and the Planning Commission to come up

and more television channels and newspapers are appearing. But we don't see much change in media contents, which are mostly dominated by entertainment programmes of commercial value. So policymakers have to think about how responsible the behaviour of media is.

Masami Tamura, Counsellor for Economic Cooperation and Development Affairs, Embassy of Japan in Dhaka



Fertiliser plays a very important role in food production in Bangladesh. There is a restriction on fertiliser import by the industries ministry. I urge the food min-



concern for all what will happen to food situation after 60 years from now.

Bangladesh today produces more food compared to two decades ago, yet about half the households is still far from being food secure. Bangladesh has some 50 million to 60 million food insecure population, the third largest in number after China and India.

Though the food security situation in Bangladesh has improved significantly, the current records say many people are suffering from chronic food insecurity and become stunted with reduced mental and physical capacity. Nearly half the children are under-

government has started a Risk Disaster Reduction Programme. Under this project, around Tk 50 crore -- Tk 10,000 to Tk 20,000 a family -- has been distributed throughout Bangladesh. Although this is just a drop in the ocean, I feel the government alone cannot deliver the services as its activities become politicised. So to really eliminate hunger or Monga, what is needed is a joint effort of the NGOs, government, the private sector.

Political will is the key to any strategy for sustainable food security and elimination of hunger and malnutrition. We cannot be complacent with the current state of and trends in food production and nutrition. We have to face the ground realities and challenges to attain our desired freedom from hunger in near future.

With our current commitment to reduce poverty, the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management is well placed to continue its role as an actor in achieving the MDG hunger goal by 2015.

I believe that if the government and international agencies, civil society, research organisations, private sector, and individuals commit resources and actions, it is possible to change behaviors and

EC and USAID supported project called National Food Policy Capacity Strengthening for inter-ministerial policy coordination and intervention.

I would also like to mention that Bangladesh needs to cover a wider population under safety net programmes. Compared to other South Asian countries, Bangladesh lacks behind in safety net expenditure adequacy index.

The safety net programme has to be targeted, and the policymakers have to think about how to improve its effectiveness, how to reach resources to the people who really need them and how to depoliticise the whole process of reaching the programmes to the ultra-poor.

Mahfuz Anam, Editor, The Daily Star: I suggest setting up of an organization -- it can be a government-NGO collaboration -- that has the authority and clear objectives to work in the Monga-hit areas. The government will allocate funds to this organization and the persons heading this organization will be accountable for their actions. This organization can have a clear target of tackling the Monga situation may be in five years.

Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, Executive Chairman, PPRC: We should not be looking forward to setting up another organization as Mr Anam has suggested but a comprehensive action plan to which all stakeholders such as the NGOs, media, the WFP should contribute. In the wake of the Monga season last year, some concrete initiatives have been taken. The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) is coordinating an inter-ministerial committee to draw up a comprehensive plan before this year's Monga. The action plan also touches on some aspects which go beyond the traditional thinking of introducing safety net programmes which is important in the Monga zone but more important is the improvement of physical protection of land. Nilphamari was a Monga-affected zone but it has graduated from the status. Lalmonirhat is also graduating from Monga through physical protection of land.

Dr Atiur Rahman, Chairman, Unnayan Shamannay: Community empowerment approach should be adopted to deal with the Monga problems. Such efforts are being taken in Nilphamari where the community groups are so powerful that the doctors attend to diarrhea patients in time of need and the Krishi Bank distributes credit without any hassle.

Comprehensive and integrated approach should also be taken. In Rangpur, agriculture department supervisors have organised women in villages and asked them to raise poultry and fishery and grow vegetables. Such multiple approach to livelihood has tremendously improved the Monga situation in Mithapukur. The challenge is to learn from such success stories and formulate policies.

A male participant: although Bangladesh economy grown and poverty has been reduced, vulnerability of the poor is still high in Bangladesh. We have started designing plans to reduce their vulnerability by letting the local people in the Union Parishad take the lead. Monga is today a localized problem and more localized solutions through the local authorities are needed to fight it. Centralised programme will not help to reduce Monga.

Yolande Wright, Environment and Livelihood Adviser, DFID



It is a shocking thing that 94 percent of Bangladeshis cannot afford optimum food. We are extremely concerned about Monga, which needs to be tackled through community approach. There are pockets of areas where a lot of good works are being done to address Monga. But these good practices are not being replicated in other places. I suggest that whenever there is another roundtable, the participants should focus on pragmatic and practical implementation issues rather describing the problem again.

I want to assure you that the government will actively consider the recommendations presented at the roundtable for our common interest to eliminate hunger and malnutrition. Usha Mishra, Senior Adviser, Strategic Planning & Policy Advocacy, WFP: Policy level coordination is very important for food security and there are existing committees such as the SPNC, FAO,

Peter Duncan Jones, First Secretary (Development), USAID



More commitments need to be made to address the issues of food security. There are islands of excellence in dealing with the issues, but the same thing is not happening in other areas.

Ciro Fiorillo, Chief Technical Adviser, FAO



An action plan has been finalized for the PRSP and work on finalization of a food policy is going on. These show policymakers are committed to enforce and support an action plan. Coordination is an important issue here and the SPMU project being implemented by FAO to establish a food policy working group will establish inter-ministerial coordination.

Imrul Kayes Muniruzzaman, Director, Social Empowerment, RDRS: One of the discussants mentioned that microfinance programme is not reaching the hardcore poor. But some NGOs, especially in the food insecure areas, have started special microfinance operation for the hardcore poor. The World Bank has allocated a special fund for the specially designed programme. Although it is not at a very large scale operation, it is at least focusing on those areas which are especially vulnerable to natural disasters and where malnutrition and poverty are acute.

Emamul Haque, Head, Advocacy Unit, WFP-Dhaka



While working with journalists in the field of food security, food productivity and hunger issues, we have observed that there is a lack of understanding among our journalists.

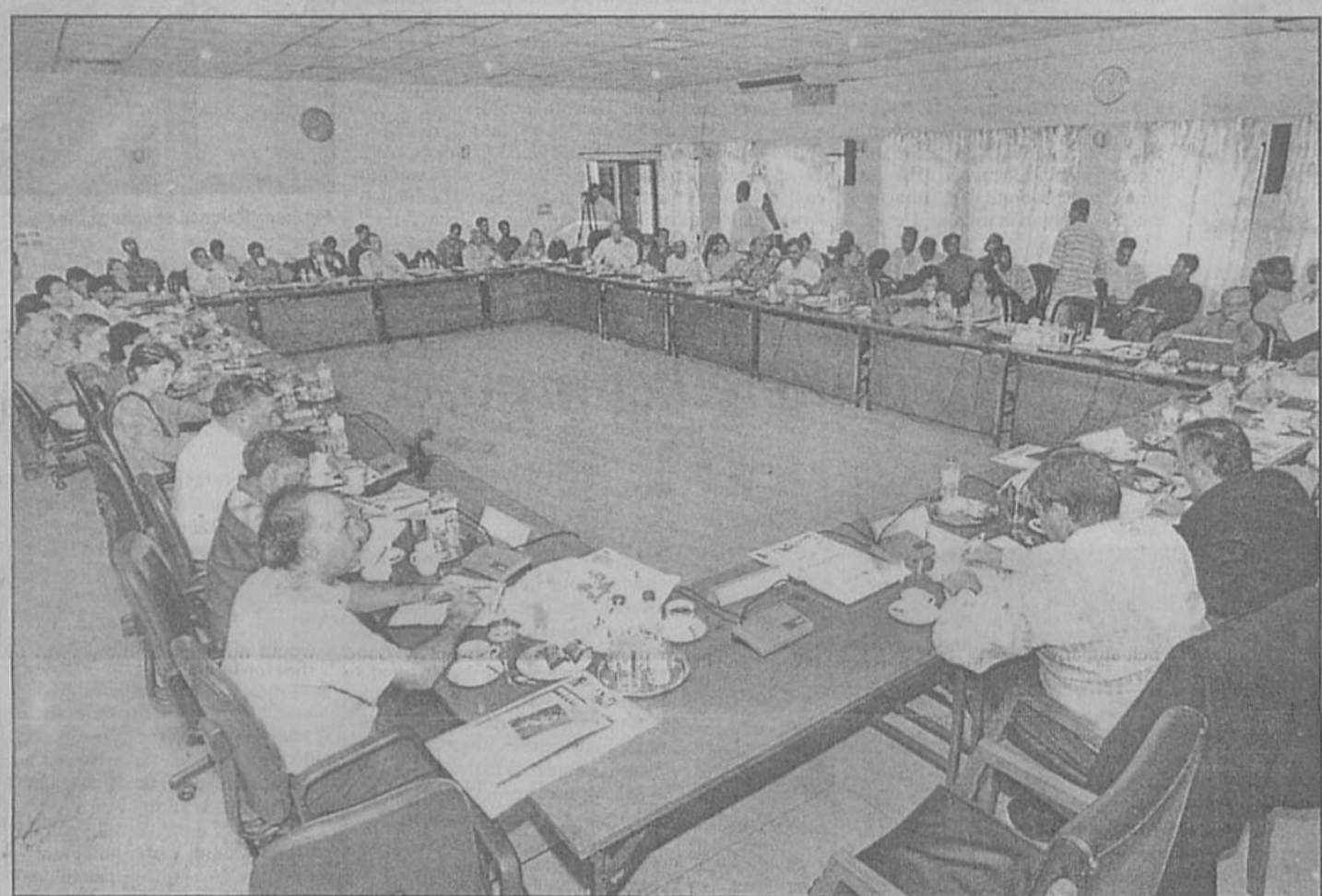
Journalists have also pointed out that the researchers often come up with the findings which are very technical and difficult to understand. So, the newspapers should act for knowledge building of journalists and the researchers should come up with simpler versions of their findings so that the media professionals can grasp them easily.

Douglas Broderick, Country Representative, WFP-Dhaka, Bangladesh Country Representative, WFP: Perhaps we need to look into more practical and concrete solutions down the road. There were suggestions for private sector participation in ensuring food security. This needs to be looked by a group to engage the private sector in the humanitarian sector.

Representatives from the World Bank mentioned about more creative approach to food security interventions and I agree with the view. The WFP has a drought insurance programme and a hunger programme is coming up. Perhaps all the agencies, NGOs, the UN agencies in cooperation with the government should come up with such new ideas in another forum.

The minister mention about intervention with cash in the Monga areas and stressed the need for a policy in this regard. Such interventions have to be looked at close to find out what are the best mechanisms to combine cash with food security when to use cash intervention and how cash intervention can be cleverly and creatively combined with food aid.

I can suggest that the same group can come up with some ideas about the most effective mechanism of coordination between different agencies and departments in policymaking.



with an integrated approach to Monga eradication. We have been talking about the structural chronic reasons of Monga and I think Monga is basically a superimposition of transitory causes over chronic food insecurity. So chronic food insecurity causes are still underlying there. But that should not make us undermine the extent of the larger hunger and food insecurity.

Mahfuz Anam, Editor, The Daily Star



I think we should concentrate on chronic food insecurity rather than seasonal phenomenon.

Prof Golam Rahman, Department of Journalism, Dhaka University



While aiming to get rid of the hunger and malnutrition and all other relevant problems, one needs to understand the role of communication and media -- how they can be used to get rid of the problems. When talking about malnutrition, or lack of policy coordination, we need to understand people's behaviour to determine how to change their life, give them sufficient food or how to change their food habit. But in the food security strategy, this point is not properly addressed. At the same time, people's media exposure is increasing

istry to request the industries ministry to liberalise fertiliser import.

Inshan-E-Touhid, Atma-Pratikriti Journal: The policymaking in Bangladesh is a problematic area. Some sugar mills are incurring losses due to wrong government policy. So syndicates are controlling the market and making money. It is also very important for farmers to know how to use fertiliser and pesticides properly for good crops.

Sohana Shafique, Analysis and Reporting Officer, Helen Keller International: The Nutritional Surveillance Project, which was started in 1990, collects data every two months and this allows us to see the trend of malnutrition in the country over the past 15 years. The recent data shows although there has been a decline in malnutrition but the rate of decline is not equal for all divisions. For example, in the coastal regions like Barisal the decline is very low. These areas need to be identified for intervention.

If we want to achieve the millennium development goal (MDG), we need to focus on the children under five. The school feeding programme should focus on education attainment. We also need to focus on food security of this age group. The data of food consumption shows we have a very less diverse diet with low consumption of fruits and vegetables. The national level data shows production of fruits and vegetables is also very low. So we should think of ways to increase production and consumption of fruits and vegetables to improve nutritional status.

M. Qaiser Khan, Lead Human Development Specialist, World Bank: The issue of quality education should be considered while talking about reduction of poverty and malnutrition. Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf, Minister for Food and Disaster Management

Although Bangladesh has come a long way in fighting hunger and malnutrition, still it is difficult to answer what more can be done to reduce these two malaises. Certainly, the problems are not insurmountable, but difficult. It is difficult because we have a huge population of about 140 million and at the same time our cultivable land is decreasing. If the trend continues, Bangladesh may not have any agricultural land left by 2065 or 2070. So it is a great

weight. This situation makes Bangladesh a country with a severe nutritional problem.

It is a common knowledge for development actors including politicians that the majority of households with nutritional stress are located in the vulnerable areas. The northern chars on the banks of Brahmaputra, Jamuna and the Ganges, the haor basin areas, the coastal belts and the Chittagong Hill Tracts are the pockets of malnutrition.

The major causes of hunger and food insecurity as identified by food security practitioners are: little diversification of sources of income and wage, low agriculture wage rate in lean seasons, river erosion, flooding and water logging, non-existence of vulnerability and risk coping mechanisms, declining social safety network, social exclusion of the disadvantaged and disabled, high prevalence of children and maternal malnutrition, lack of nutritional education, poor public health facilities and poor human development status.

While economic poverty is an overall denominator of food insecurity, the additional stress intensifiers are social exclusion and adverse geographic location. The crucial issues of effectiveness in providing safety net and ensuring price stabilisation are also important in case of scaling-up of safety net or eradicating hunger.

Talking about Monga, I find that newspapers start writing sweeping reports on it from October with headlines that people are starving. For the last three to four years, I have been visiting the greater Rangpur area where Monga is prevalent. Although Monga has been there for ages, no government has taken any concrete steps to eradicate it. What the governments do is to intervene seasonally every year and distribute food.

Two years ago, the government distributed 46,000 tons of rice just in two months in greater Rangpur. Every year we distribute a minimum of 25,000 tons of rice during the Monga season. But this is not the answer to the problem. Because of the government intervention, when the lean season comes people wait for the relief. Thus they lose their own initiatives for income generating activities. So it is high time that strategies should be devised to solve the problem permanently.

Although small in scale, the