

## Towards Food Security

**What is meant by food security? Undoubtedly, access of each individual member of a household to adequate food (individual food security) to be ensured presupposes access of the household to adequate food, given the household composition (household level food security); and food security for all households to be ensured presupposes availability of sufficient food for all citizens of the country (national level food security).**

If large numbers of people in a country are constrained to eat less than adequate food, the most basic of the basic needs of each individual, there is a fundamental development challenge that the country faces in addition to the moral and ethical quagmire that such large-scale deprivation entails. The longer the challenge remains unresolved, the more entrenched it may become, adversely impacting on the nation-building process on a continuous basis. In Bangladesh since Liberation in 1971, the goal of poverty alleviation and ensuring food security for all has been stated in successive plans and policy pronouncements. But the problem is still pervasive and deep-seated as ever, if not more so.

**Food and Food Security**

What is food? In Bangladesh, the common perception is that food essentially means food-grains, mainly rice. This is the staple food in this country, and the large majority of the population traditionally derives most of the nutrients by consuming rice. More recently wheat is also consumed by some people, but usually not by choice. Fish is the most important source of animal protein for Bangladesh's population. Cattle and poultry meats are however consumed occasionally by the poor majority, although routinely by the rich minority. Vegetables are not ordinarily considered to be 'food' proper, but as items to be fried or curried and mixed with rice to make rice more consumable. But in nutrient terms, the usually desirable food basket consists of different food items (grains including pulses, vegetables and fruits, milk and milk products, oils, sugar, fish, meat) to be consumed in such a combination as would provide different nutrients (carbohydrates, proteins, fats) in a balanced manner. But, a question arises as to whether an individual needs all the different types of foods because many people who are pure vegetarians live fully healthy, active and productive lives.

It is a common practice to measure poverty and undernourishment in a country with reference to a daily calorie-intake level (the total calorified value of carbohydrates, proteins and fats consumed from various food sources) worked out on the basis of food habits, physical characteristics, age and sex distribution and activity profile of the people concerned. The approach essentially implies standardisation of the

'consumer person' in terms of calorie-intake level, taking into account the above mentioned and other relevant characteristics.

But this approach of using a reference total daily calorie-intake figure per person has well known limitations, arising from, for example, inter-individual differences in metabolic functioning in converting foods consumed into nutrients as well as from intra-individual variations over time in this regard. Also, as the same total calorific value can be derived from consuming different food baskets consisting of different quantities of different food items including all vegetarian meals, a further complication may arise as to which basket is suitable for which individual for the best possible results. Does food habit play a key role regarding who needs what food?

However, the average daily per person calorie-intake figures, usually provided by Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), for different countries are a useful starting point for poverty and nutrition analyses, particularly in countries like Bangladesh where poverty is so pervasive and deprivation so visible. For Bangladesh, currently absolute poverty and hard-core poverty lines are respectively defined with reference to 2122 Kcal and 1805 Kcal per person per day.

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When one talks about food security, one is really talking about people whose access to food is inadequate in terms of quantity, quality or both due to inadequacy or lack of access to the means of food production and/or to productive employment and also about those who may be currently food secure but can suddenly face food shortages due to a small disruption in the production or the distribution system or in employment prospects due to natural or human-made causes.

They include landless agricultural labourers, artisans, small and marginal farmers, fishermen, and rural non-farm and urban informal workers. The rich and resourceful people not only can manage their own affairs but in fact accentuate economic difficulties and food insecurity of the poor and the economically weak by appropriating to themselves unduly large shares of available economic contexts of the country. It is indeed a long-term problem; and when one talks about the future, the long-term starts with the immediate and then proceeds into the future. An appropriate overall approach must, therefore, be to recognise the immediate situation and construct the strategic, sustainable pathway with reference to possible future scenarios projected by taking into account in an integrated fashion the pre-

sent realities and future prospects in respect of not only the food economy but also larger social and economic dy-

namic. And one cannot even begin to do that without reference to an overall framework to guide the integration of the approaches to the various components of the process. In this context, the obvious starting point seems to be to specify the overall vision in terms of sustainable human development, which involves socio-economic aspects on the one hand and environmental considerations on the other. In terms of goals, broadly speaking, the key ones are poverty alleviation, ensuring food security, sustained economic growth, and environmental protection and enhancement. Towards constructing the proposed strategic, sustainable development pathway all the goals need to be pursued simultaneously through politi-

cal, social, market, procedural (ethics, equity) and 'safety nets' (for most vulnerable) processes. Policies and programmes need to be geared to that end.

In Bangladesh, a critical factor underlying both socio-economic and environmental aspects is the widespread and deep-seated social inequity. The poor and the disadvantaged constitute the large majority who have very limited access to both the means of production and employment (purchasing power) and are by and large excluded from participation in governance. They also suffer from limited human capability in terms of education, training and health. This all pervasive inequity in the country is in fact the root cause of poverty; hence, sustained poverty alleviation and, consequently, sustainable human development, is not possible unless the promotion of equity encompasses various aspects such as social, economic, and governance is a systemic concomitant in the strategy.

On the other hand, the power elite, who constitute a small minority, are highly privileged in terms of not only human ca-

pability and access to the means of production and employment, but also in terms of being in leadership positions in various spheres – political, social, economic – of the management of the affairs of the state. Moreover, inequity prevailing in Bangladesh is not only all pervasive and glaring but also increasing, especially given the dynamics of the on-going market-centered paradigm. The environment is degraded principally by the rich through large-scale exploitation of natural resources and pollution of air and water through their production, consumption, and transportation activities. The poor also contribute to the process of environmental degradation by encroaching upon the environment (by way of, for example, over-use of limited land resources, cutting down of trees, over-fishing, etc.) for eking out a living. In Bangladesh, the environment has severely degraded in terms of deforestation, soil quality decline, land erosion, salinity intrusion, siltation of river beds, loss of biodiversity, loss of wetlands and fish habitats, water and air pollution, and arsenic contamination of ground water. Natural resource base being the ultimate arbiter of economic growth, environmental degradation needs to be arrested and reversed for the present generation to optimise economic growth without jeopardizing the abilities of future generations to pursue similar growth goals. That is, not only inter-generational but also inter-generational equity must be taken into consideration. The process of environmental degradation in Bangladesh continues unabated, although awareness about the need to arrest and reverse the process has been increasing in the country both within and outside government circles and efforts to that end are intensifying in terms of policy planning and action programmes.

I have elsewhere explained that there are two critical gaps in the free market-oriented development strategy that Bangladesh has been pursuing vigorously since 1991. The reform programmes include the stabilisation and structural adjustment (privatisation, deregula-

tion, globalisation) package, emphasis on social sectors (education, training, health, gender issues), reforms aimed at establishing good and effective governance (administrative reforms, institutionalisation of democracy, improvement of transparency and rule of law, removal of corruption), focus on environmental protection and enhancement, and 'safety nets' for the most vulnerable. But, poverty alleviation has not been incorporated in the strategy as a direct goal. It is supposed to be achieved via the so-called, often inconsequential 'trickle down' effects.

However, there are certain anti-poverty oriented programmes being implemented in the country. But these are mostly in the nature of temporary measures or tied to rudimentary economic activities. Hence, their impact has been limited and often transient. The issue of inequity which is as noted earlier is all-pervasive and glaring and increasing, that is the root cause of poverty, is not addressed up front, although emphasis on social sectors aimed at improving the capability of the people at large is a measure to that end. Given that the problem is not only acute but is accentuating further in the wake of free market reforms, more direct assault on it is necessary, as the reform process is pursued, by way of steps towards appropriately improving the access of the poor and the disadvantaged to social, economic and governance opportunities.

It has been mentioned earlier that poverty has been persisting at about the same level of 48 per cent since 1989/90. Economic growth also has not accelerated; an average annual growth rate of 4.8 per cent has been achieved during the 1990s, which is about the same as that achieved in the 1980s or 1970s. The relatively higher average economic growth rate of 5.5 per cent during 1995/96-1998/99 compared to the first half of the decade (4.1 per cent) has been due to the much larger contribution of agriculture during 1995/96-1998/99 (growing at an annual average rate of 4.4 per cent) compared to the earlier period (about 1.0 per cent). The higher agricultural growth rate during 1995/96-1998/99 has been, among other things, importantly due to the support (in terms of subsidies and support prices) provided to the agriculture sector by the government despite the fact that reform conditionalities are against such support.

Two other points need to be noted. A precipitous tariff reduction in the early 1990s in fulfillment of aid conditionalities, with the process also continuing since then, has created severe adverse market conditions for the domestic production vis-à-vis foreign competition. In so reducing tariff rates, the ground realities were totally ignored; and no time and support were allowed to domestic production to acquire a capacity to withstand the onslaught. The pace and pattern of tariff reduction should have been designed keeping the prevailing realities in focus. Obviously that was not done. It is now necessary to seek ways of putting things in order for the economy to acquire the necessary strength to make appreciable headway in the face of stiff foreign competition. The other point is that the pervasive corruption and the debilitating bureaucratic hindrances have continued to jeopardize the crucially necessary reforms in governance and financial management.

Clearly, therefore, the overall strategy needs to be readjusted in the light of the realities on the ground. That is, poverty alleviation should be included in the strategy as a direct goal and equity incorporated as an overarching process concomitant. Tariff and economic support/incentive structures need to be properly revisited and reorientated and corruption and bureaucratic hindrances need to be addressed with full political commitment. The strategy will, then, become conducive to a harmonious progress of the society, implying that peace, stability, social equity, and environmental enhancement can all be simultaneously promoted. Indeed, such a conducive macro framework is needed for the policies and activities concerning various aspects of the economy and society implemented in various spaces (local, national, international) to add up to produce the best possible results in relation to the key national goals just listed. Ad-hocism and piecemeal approaches have failed to make much headway, and so have strategies that have not incorporated the dynamics of the prevailing social, economic, governance and environmental conditions. There are of course a number of key constraints to be addressed in constructing such a pathway. These I wish to discuss, suggesting ways of overcoming them, in a future column.

## Lest We Forget ...

by Qazi Khaliquzzaman Ahmad

## The Approach towards Ensuring Food Security for All

The food problem in Bangladesh is not a new phenomenon. It has existed over the past decades and centuries. The problem at present is so pervasive that it will be a very tough act to eliminate it, even to substantially alleviate it over the next 5 or 10 years. In reality, given the nature and magnitude of the problem, it cannot be addressed properly in isolation from larger social and economic contexts of the country. It is indeed a long-term problem; and when one talks about the future, the long-term starts with the immediate and then proceeds into the future. An appropriate overall approach must, therefore, be to recognise the immediate situation and construct the strategic, sustainable pathway with reference to possible future scenarios projected by taking into account in an integrated fashion the pre-

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## South Africa after Apartheid

Gemini News Service correspondent Gavin Evans returns to South Africa to see how his old friends from the days of struggle against apartheid have fared under majority rule. He writes from Cape Town.

*'Some among the forces of good have become villains, thieves, corrupt officials who undermine what we stood for. But that's in the nature of the transition. There are a lot of things which detract, but the central thrust gives me hope – it's in the right direction.'*

## Survivors of the struggle



Mkhusei Jack: 'No revenge'  
Brett Myrdal: 'I still cry'  
Murphy Morobe: 'Abnormal existence'  
Janet Cherry: 'Absence of fear'

However, he is cautiously optimistic about his country's future. 'Some among the forces of good have become villains, thieves, corrupt officials who undermine what we stood for, but that's in the nature of the transition. There are a lot of things which detract, but the central thrust gives me hope – it's in the right direction.'

In Port Elizabeth I spent a week with Mkhusei Jack, whom I had first met 16 years earlier, when he emerged from one of nine cells of political detention totalling six years.

The son of a domestic worker, he was 12 before he owned his first pair of shoes, but his charisma saw him emerging as

president of the regional youth congress, leader of a consumer boycott committee and a major mover in the UDF. For this he was tortured and survived several assassination attempts.

I had an abnormal existence from my early teens. I would never think beyond a week and nothing prepared me for what freedom meant. The activist's life had its own freedom that a normal life denies you. That's the irony: in freedom there is also denial. Freedom opens up your vistas, but responsibility constricts your horizons.

He struggles to break past patterns, still rising at 4.30 am – a 'function of prison routine' – but now uses it for two hours a day in the gym. He relaxes by hiking in the veld but worries about his inability to unwind emotionally.

'Maybe it's a survival mechanism, taught by the struggle. It tempers your store of emotion so you come across as rather cold and unfeeling,' he muses.

This 43-year-old, recently-divorced father of two laughs reflectively. 'I fear that one day I'll be 90 and all of the things I wanted to cry about will come back, and I'll be sitting alone on that stoep (verandah) and I'll be in tears.'

'I don't benefit from seeking revenge,' he explains. 'A good heart is also a way of celebrating your victory. I celebrate it when I see the people I fought with and the people who tortured me working together.'

When the ANC was unbanned he married my sister and they relocated to Sussen University where he completed an economics degree before returning to enter business.

His turning point was 1990: I'd lived under intense paranoia and I remember thinking I wouldn't be prepared to have a child while the ANC was

banned, so it was an enormous effort to rediscover personal freedom and an absence of fear. My quality of life improved dramatically. I felt stable for the first time in years and it was a great relief to find I could think independently again.'

He was offered a colonel's posting in the new army, and toyed with it 'for the crazy reason that I wanted recognition.' Instead, he found meaning in life through fatherhood and a job transforming migrant workers' hostels into flats, and has since moved on to his 'dream job', co-ordinating the environmental Table Mountain Fund and setting up biodiversity projects in the Cape Town area.

But his past still haunts him: 'If I think of the people I loved in exile who didn't come back or ended up with nothing, I still cry. Very few skinned the political cream. The others were destitute or became criminals, alcoholics, junkies, and it makes me sad.'

How did he cope? 'Back to the sea. There's nothing more exciting than slipping into that sensation of waves pouring overhead. If I can get a good surf on the weekend my week is made.'

Finally, I shared dinner in Hout bay with another old comrade, Alan Roberts. Raised as one of nine children of a 'coloured' community matriarch in Mafikeng, he had 'no politics beyond a hatred of whites' until 1975 when he was 'beaten to a pulp' by the police for leading a strike, after which he joined the ANC in Botswana.

We met in Cape Town in the early 1980s and we later shared

extreme difficulties adapting, with an enormous need to find people who'd understand what I'd been through.'

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How did he cope? 'Back to the sea. There's nothing more exciting than slipping into that sensation of waves pouring overhead. If I can get a good surf on the weekend my week is made.'

Today, at 47, he says he is 'doing it right' with his baby daughter, Emma, and sees a bright future for her.

To which our mutual friend Brett Myrdal added: 'My hope is that the next generation will grow up free from apartheid psychosis. That's an enormous hope.'

The author is a writer and freelance journalist currently based in London.

There are no edges on the human body, thus declared a TV commercial of a big multinational company. 'Round off the edges, what does this introduction mean? He is a bit edgy today indicates a definite mood of the day.'

A cultivated mind has no edges – the projection of the personality is balanced. It is not the same as professional competence; a personality is more than the sum of the parts. It is the overall effect which establishes the first impression about a person, a piece of art, a scenery, a snatch of wafting music, or the advent of the dawn with the singing of the birds.

Look around a tennis ball. Why it looks the same from any position or angle, from any dimension (3-D, length, breadth and thickness, or three planes 90 degrees away from one another)? That is a metaphysical question, which calls into play introspection for grasping the philosophical background. It is an interesting mental exercise.

Consider the property of a sphere, and a 'triangular' personality. The latter three edges, prominent traits or sharp qualities (good or bad, weak or strong), easily detectable at the first opportunity. What is a balanced personality? It is a life-time question for self-analysis.

Let us turn to politics, the most heated topic in Dhaka. Sharp politics has edges, as a project or undertaking, in the first raw stage. What is good politics without edges (constant provocation)? One is the leap after two decades in political prison; became the head of the nation; made his adversaries his allies, and left the stage quietly – his job done. Smooth. Retiring from a scene needs a lifetime of practice.

How to retire quietly and pleasantly (specifically in politics) at the right time is an uncommon trait, and rarely seen. Jyoti Basu wished to retire, but was persuaded to continue, after two decades, even at the ripe age of 86. Lee Kwan of Singapore, quietly brought up his nation to

international level (quiet efficiency, visible at a distance, but not at the site). How these top personalities handled their charisma is worth studying by the scholars and researchers.

Here is a significant quote from Jyoti Basu, the veteran political leader, on the resignation issue of three cabinet ministers of the BJP-led government in New Delhi against certain allegations. 'If this be their morality, what can be done?' Time is not only a healer, but also a beacon. Impatient leadership has its pitfalls, because the decision-making might involve millions adversely.

This brings into focus another side of the 'edge' and 'sharpness' question. 'His conscience is blunted,' means the moral sensitiveness has been blunted and is not sharp enough (as a knife is sharpened from time to time to remove the bluntness) to the litmus-tests of daily life. It is common to come across persons with eroded moral and religious sensitiveness. Pride and prejudices are minor examples of sharp edges; as also various complexes (inferiority, superiority, and others).

A polarized action has edge in some particular direction or trend; for example a review of a national situation may be political, social, economic, or religious. The greatest good for the greatest number is an oft-quoted aphorism before the implementation of a national policy.

Erosion of moral, aesthetic, cultural, social, and religious values is one impact of the current information age, when more information is available at more points more easily and cheaply, overloading the input with considerable garbage, and thus disturbing or distracting from the one true sense of direction.

Democracy is said to be a pronounced leveller, but the huge valley of common denominator has many peaks of affluence and artificial props which rankle many pedestrian minds, disturbed by sharp edges which should not be there.



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