

Ensuring food security: Challenging but not unattainable

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

FOOD is a basic necessity of life. Food encompasses (i) cereals, (ii) starchy tubers, (iii) pulses, (iv) nuts and oils, (v) vegetables, (vi) fruits, (vii) milk and milk products, (viii) meat and fish, (ix) eggs, (x) fats and oils, (xi) sugar, (xii) flavourings and stimulants. Foods containing proteins, vitamins, and minerals provide the materials with which the body structure is built. Considering the importance of food in human life, the 1996 World Food Summit in its Rome Declaration on World Food Security "reaffirmed the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger." The Covenant clearly requires that each State party takes whatever steps are necessary to ensure that everyone is free from hunger and as soon as possible can enjoy the right to adequate food. Food security has three components and these are: (i) availability of food, (ii) access to food, and (iii) utilisation of food.

This article discusses food security in Bangladesh in relation to above mentioned three components. Article 15 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has given the responsibility on the State for providing the basic necessities of life including

food for its citizens. So, ensuring each and every citizen's access to the minimum required food which is nutritionally adequate and safe is the obligation of any government of the country.

Food availability, the first component of food security, is often thought of in terms of foodgrain i.e. rice and wheat availability. Since about 80 percent of calories in the Bangladeshi diet come from rice and wheat, this view is understandable. However, availability of other types of food is also important, particularly if Bangladesh households are to diversify their diets and consume adequate amounts of protein, fats and oils, and micro-nutrients. The four components of availability of food in Bangladesh are (i) domestic food production, (ii) commercial imports, (iii) food aid, and (iv) government security stocks.

Out of the four components, domestic food production is the major source of supply at both market and household levels. Bangladesh has more than doubled its foodgrain production since independence in 1971. Foodgrain production in 1971-1972 was 100.46 lakh metric tons which reached 160.80 lakh metric tons in 1985-1986, 190.80 lakh metric tons in 1995-1996 and a record level of 267.58 lakh metric tons in 2000-2001. The increasing trend in foodgrain production could not be

Analysts are of opinion that in the short-run, food insecurity gap may be reduced by increased access of the food-insecure households to government food assistance programmes. The long-term solution to food insecurity would require 'increasing the purchasing power of food-insecure households; improving infrastructure to reduce price variability and marketing margins; strengthening disaster prevention and mitigation, particularly in disaster-prone areas; maintaining quality foodgrain security reserve; strengthening the development role of food-assisted programmes; ensuring proper food utilisation in the poor households involving consumption of a balanced diet with sufficient macro- and micro-nutrients, access to safe food, drinking water and sanitation and promotion of overall health status.'

sustained in 2001-2002 and foodgrain production declined to 259.06 lakh metric tons in that year. In 2002-2003, food grain production stood at 266.95 lakh metric tons which was slightly below the 2000-2001 production level. This is a situation against about two percent annual population growth in the country. So, in the recent years foodgrain production has failed to keep pace with the population growth in the country.

Food aid, another component of food availability, has sharply decreased in recent times. The average yearly food aid was about 16.00 lakh metric tons in the seventies, 12.2 lakh metric tons in the eighties, and 9.3 lakh metric tons in the nineties. The greater need of foodgrain in the Sub-Saharan countries of Africa, and in Afghanistan and the reported self-sufficiency in foodgrain production in Bangladesh led to the sharp decrease in food aid in the recent years. In 2000-2001 and 2001-2002, food aid was 4.91 lakh metric tons and 5.00 lakh metric tons respectively. In 2002-2003, food aid came down to only 2.54 lakh metric tons. This sharp decrease in food aid is a matter of concern for maintaining our food security.

The declining/steady trend in foodgrain production in recent years against about two percent annual population growth and the decrease in food aid have led to the sharp increase in food import in the private sector. In 2000-2001 and 2001-2002, import of foodgrain in the private sector was 10.63 lakh metric tons (wheat 5.34 lakh metric tons and rice 5.29 lakh metric tons) and 12.89 (wheat 11.71 lakh metric tons and rice 1.18 lakh metric tons) respectively. In 2002-2003, import of foodgrain in the private sector shot up to 29.67 lakh metric tons (wheat 14.14 lakh metric tons and rice 15.53 lakh metric tons). If the increasing trend of foodgrain production could be sustained, a huge amount of foreign exchange for importing foodgrain could be saved.

Government procures foodgrain from domestic production mainly to provide price incentives to the growers, and build up security stocks. Internal procurement depends upon a number of factors such as, level of foodgrain security stocks to be maintained by the government, volume of seasonal harvests, targeted programmes for foodgrain distribution under public food distribution system (PFDS) etc. Except for the year 1999, internal foodgrain procurement from 1994 to 2002 varied between 2.04 lakh metric tons and 10.07 lakh metric tons. In the face of bumper production of both rice and wheat in 1999, internal procurement of foodgrain in that year reached the record level of 11.47 lakh metric tons. Government, through internal procurement, food aid and import, when necessary, build food security stocks. In the eighties and early nineties, it was considered "critical" if government food security stocks at any time went below nine lakh metric tons. In the late nineties, the immediate past Awami League government decided to maintain security stocks of foodgrain at a minimum of 10 lakh metric tons at all times. Though this decision still remains in force officially, but in practice the security stocks of foodgrain in the

recent years remained below the minimum level of 10 lakh metric tons. This is primarily because of the present BNP government's decision to replace cereals with cash in food-for-education (FFE) and food-for-work (FFW) programmes, two major components of PFDS. I shall try to analyse the impact of this decision on food security of the rural poor when we discuss food utilisation and nutrition.

Although Bangladesh has attained near self-sufficiency in producing foodgrain (rice and wheat), the production of non-cereal crops mainly, pulses, oil-seeds, fruits and vegetables still remain far below satisfactory level. According to the experts, the unsatisfactory progress in the production of non-foodgrain crops are mainly due to competing demands for land, low level of technological base and almost no support from research and extension.

The production in livestock and fisheries, two other sub-sectors in the country's food security is also far from satisfactory. Livestock are a source of milk, meat and eggs for consumption of balanced food. The available data reveals that the country's cattle population showed an annual growth rate of 0.25 per cent between 1960-90 while the population grew at about 3 per cent annually during the same period. According to the analysts, the recent growth rate is much lower than the annual rates of growth required to meet the increasing demand for livestock products, specifically milk and meat.

Availability of foodgrain or even total food does not in itself guarantee food security for all households. Sufficient access to food, another component of food security, for all people, at all times, as well as proper utilisation of food by individuals, are required. In Bangladesh, per capita foodgrain availability increased from 15.11 oz/day in 1985-86 to 18.42 oz/day in 1999-2000 against a population of 100.2 million and 129.00 million respectively. In 2001-2002, per capita availability of foodgrain has reportedly slightly decreased to 18.17 oz/day. The increase in per capita foodgrain availability compared to the seventies and the eighties does not however imply that food security has been achieved. Millions of poor households lack adequate purchasing power to consume required food, i.e. they lack access to minimum food requirements.

The Preliminary Report of Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES)-2000 (published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics in December-2001) shows that absolute poverty based on intake of 2122 kilo calorie of energy per capita per day was 55.7 per cent in 1985-86 and reduced to 47.8 per cent in 1988-89, for the next two survey periods 1992-92 and 1995-96 it remained the same 47.5 per cent at the national level. In 2000, it slightly reduced to 44.3 per cent. On the other hand, hardcore poverty based on per capita per day intake of 1805 kilo calorie of energy fluctuated during 1985-86 through 1995-96. It was 26.9 per cent in 1985-86, increased to 28.4 per cent in 1988-8, slightly reduced to 28.0 per cent in 1991-92 and further reduced to 25.1 per cent in 1995-96. It came down to 20 per cent in 2000. A United Nations Development Programmes (UNDP) Study of 2003 has revealed that in Bangladesh the population living below the poverty line dropped

from 52 per cent in 1983-84 to about 50 per cent in 1991-92, then fell relatively sharply to about 40 per cent by 2000.

These figures, however, do not separately show the percentage of absolute poverty and hard core poverty. Government document titled "Bangladesh: A National Strategy for Economic Growth, Poverty Reduction and Social Development" published in March-2003 by the Economic Relations Division, Ministry of Finance, has stated that "at least about 45 per cent of the poor population of Bangladesh currently subsist in extreme poverty". A poverty map of Bangladesh recently launched by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and World Food Programme in a workshop in Dhaka has identified the low lying areas of Sylhet, northern charlands, southern coastlines and southern hills as most food insecure areas. The map has shown roughly 50 per cent of the population of the country as generally poor while 27 per cent others as extremely poor not having the capacity to buy required food.

According to the analysts, a number of factors are responsible for this widespread poverty and extreme poverty which denies access to minimum food requirements by such a large number of people. Primarily these are: (i) insufficient government and private investment in physical infrastructure, (ii) unequal land distribution, (iii) little rural non-farm activities, (iv) low wages of labours, particularly of agricultural labours, (v) fall in labour demand in slack seasons, (vi) insufficient social safety net programmes, (vii) high prices of foodstuffs in comparison with the increase in income level of the poor, and (viii) frequent natural disasters like floods, river erosion, droughts etc.

Utilisation of food by individuals including its nutritional value is also an important component of food security. We have seen above that 40 to 45 per cent people of Bangladesh live below poverty line i.e. they do not consume minimum calorie requirements. Malnutrition is endemic in Bangladesh and the level of malnutrition is one of the highest in the world. One of the important objectives for the introduction of PFDS was providing nutritional support. FFW, a very important channel of PFDS, was introduced in 1974 with the immediate objective to create job opportunities in rural areas and at the same time to ensure the supply and availability of sufficient foodgrains in the areas where there was acute shortage of food. The idea was to pay wages to the workers in kind i.e. in foodgrains instead of cash. FFE, another important channel of PFDS, was introduced for distribution of foodgrains to poor school-aged children. In the poor households, the children suffer seriously from food insecurity. Though the available data confirm some improvement in the child nutritional situation, yet the overall level of child malnutrition in Bangladesh remains one of the highest in the developing world.

After coming to power in October, 2001 the present BNP government hastily decided to replace cereals with cash in FFE and FFW programmes "as some irregularities were identified". In a recent workshop on "Transformation of Food for Work into Money for Work" organised by the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief in Dhaka, the participants opined that the conversion

improvement. Cash transfers might result in bigger leakages than in-kind transfers. Moreover, in our male dominated society cash transfer under FFE might not serve the purpose of access to food by the poor school-aged children suffering from malnutrition. Cash might have many alternative uses. An in-depth study on the issue is thus required.

In a least developed and over populated country like Bangladesh, ensuring access to required food by all, at all times, is the most challenging, if not unattainable, task for any government of the country. Analysts are of opinion that in the short-run, food insecurity gap may be reduced by increased access of the food-insecure households to government food assistance programmes. The long-term solution to food insecurity would require 'increasing the purchasing power of food-insecure households; improving infrastructure to reduce price variability and marketing margins; strengthening

disaster prevention and mitigation, particularly in disaster-prone areas; maintaining quality foodgrain security reserve; strengthening the development role of food-assisted programmes; ensuring proper food utilisation in the poor households involving consumption of a balanced diet with sufficient macro- and micro-nutrients, access to safe food, drinking water and sanitation and promotion of overall health status.'

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen in his "Inequality Reexamined" (Oxford University Press, 1992) writes: "Hunger and malnutrition are related both to food intake and to the ability to make nutritive use of that intake. The latter is deeply affected by personal health conditions, and that in turn depends much on communal health care and public health provisions."

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is former Secretary, Ministry of Food.



All health information to keep you up to date

Cholesterol: Talk of the time

A considerable amount of attention has centred these days on 'cholesterol' -- from both the public and physicians. Sometimes health-conscious people are too aware of this; and love to talk about abnormalities of blood fats (cholesterol) even in the social gatherings. It is true that high cholesterol levels are associated with an increased risk of heart disease. The two main fats in the blood are cholesterol and the triglycerides or TGL. They are eaten in the diet, but what is not widely appreciated is that cholesterol is also made naturally in almost every tissue of the body.

Cholesterol is a white waxy stuff which becomes high in the blood when there is an imbalance in the body regulatory system. A healthy body is normally capable of balancing the amount of cholesterol consumed. High cholesterol may be due to genetic defect in the ability of the body to extract cholesterol from the blood or an oversupply of dietary fat and cholesterol. Then again, cholesterol is important in bile formation, steroid hormone production, vitamin D synthesis and in cell membrane structure. So cholesterol is not always bad for everyone especially in early ages.

It is essential for most people to have the following basic investigations if illness related to chest or heart is suspect. These are -- a. pulse/blood pressure/checking neck veins etc; b. blood tests (fasting sugar, including lipid profile, urea and electrolyte); it is better to test the blood in empty stomach; c. chest X-ray; d. ecg, echo-cardiogram; and f. further investigations in some cases. Well, some may need more specialised tests afterwards.

There are many more people around us with much higher risk for heart disease than had been recognised. Heart disease in our country has increased due to generally unhealthy lifestyle (like stress/diet/obesity) and five other risk factors. Those are smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, uncontrolled diabetes and family history. Yet again there is an intimate relationship between smoking and cholesterol. Smoking seems to promote the build-up of cholesterol, make the blood stickier and lowers level of substances in the blood which help defend arteries from clogging.

5 tips for those with high cholesterol-

1. Take reasonable physical exercise including walking; if possible swimming or some other sensible sporting activity.
2. Reduce the amount of beef, mutton and other animal fats. Trim down full cream milk and milk products and cut back on sugar (no 'mishits' until the LDL comes down to '100') as much as possible. Also stop eating brain, liver and kidney. Reduce salt intake, both table and cooking. Take green, leafy vegetables and apples and oranges everyday. Garlic and onion are also not bad.
3. Relax. Stress and worry will ultimately affect the heart. Try to overcome this yourself as much as possible, as at the end of the day you will have to value your heart most.
4. Modifying the diet is a good way to lower cholesterol level; research studies suggest that it can lead to a reduction in cholesterol levels of 10-15 per cent. So many individuals need cholesterol lowering medicines. Consult your family doctor or a cardiologist regarding cholesterol lowering drugs (dose, duration / and about liver function tests). And,
5. One reading of high cholesterol is not enough to act on. Lipid profile test could be repeated.