

খাদ্য অধিকার বাংলাদেশ
RIGHT TO FOOD BANGLADESH



Civic Engagement Alliance

Election Manifesto of the Political Parties and Right to Food Act



RECOMMENDATIONS

- » Enact the Right to Food Act to ensure access to adequate food at affordable prices.
- » Include the issue of Right to Food Act in election manifesto.
- » Prioritise women and children in formulating Right to Food Act as they suffer more from malnutrition and anemia.
- » Promote diversity in food production.
- » Create mass awareness about adequate nutrition intake and healthy food habits.
- » Reintroduce food card/ration system to ensure food security for the poor and the ultra-poor population.
- » Increase accountability at every stage of government projects related to food security.
- » The impact of climate change on food production needs to be considered seriously.
- » Introduce upgraded technology in food production process.

Right to Food Bangladesh Network, ICCO Cooperation and Prothom Alo jointly organised a roundtable titled "Election Manifesto of the Political Parties and Right to Food Act". Here we publish a summary of the discussion.

Abdul Qayyum, Associate Editor, Prothom Alo

Prior to our national election, we would like to draw the attention of our political parties to include the demand for the enactment of the Right to Food Act in their election manifestos. Such a law would prevent deprivation of food and ensure the right to adequate food and nutrition. Most of the parties have already finalised their manifestos. So, we would recommend the candidates to include the matter of Right to Food Act in their campaigns. The idea that everyone has a right to get access to adequate food and nutrition needs acceptance and implementation through activities. To ensure the best possible outcome, we need to draw mass attention and create awareness with support from the policymakers.

Tessa Schmelzer, Country Representative, ICCO Cooperation

ICCO Cooperation is an international INGO and it has been working in Bangladesh since 1971. Since 2016, ICCO Cooperation has been implementing the Civic Engagement Alliance (CEA) programme in ten countries. The central objective of the programme is to count a limited and decreasing political space for CSOs and strengthen advocacy capacity of the CSOs.

In Bangladesh, the CEA programme has three pathways. The goal of today's roundtable is to focus on the second pathway: the right to adequate food and nutrition implemented by ICCO consortium and Civil Society Alliance for Scale up Nutrition (CSA for Sun). As an organisation, ICCO is working hard to establish and create food security for the marginalised people of Bangladesh. Recently, we have been awarded a European Union project called Sustained Opportunities for Nutrition Governance (SONGO) which focuses on nutrition governance in the northern parts of Bangladesh. We believe that with such initiatives, we can play a better role in establishing the right to food for the poor and the marginalised people.

Dr Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad, Chairman, Right to Food Bangladesh Network and PKSF

Food is a basic need and therefore it is increasingly important to focus on issues related to it. Bearing this in mind, in 2015, we established Khaddo Odhikar (Right to Food) Bangladesh, which works on food security.

As a country, we can attain self-sufficiency in food production and consumption. At the individual or family level the situation may not be the same. Lack of means to produce agricultural products and lack of purchasing ability are two significant reasons behind the inability of people to attain self-sufficiency in food production. We have to take necessary steps to increase overall production in order to maintain our self-sufficiency in the food sector. We must also take into consideration the impact of climate change, a major problem at this point.

Under the project Right to Food Bangladesh, we are campaigning for creating awareness among people. The government has already passed an act concerning adulteration of food. We are discussing with the government about the proposal of the Right to Food Act. Our neighbouring countries like India, Thailand, Cambodia and Nepal have already promulgated such laws. In 2015, at the South Asia Right to Food Conference, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared that such a law will be enacted in Bangladesh. We hope that the ruling party includes the matter in their manifesto. We hope all the parties focus more on crucial issues like food, education and health in their election campaign instead of on candidates.

Mohsin Ali, General Secretary, Right to Food Bangladesh Network

Bangladesh is on the way to become a middle-income country. The country has made significant progress in the agriculture, service and several other sectors. The rate of poverty has declined. Social development indicators show an increase in children's attendance in primary schools, equality of male and female participants at the secondary education level, and a lower death rate of newborn children and their mothers.

In July 2017, according to BBS, the poverty rate of the country was 24.3 percent, comprising of more than 4 crore people. According to the estimation of the Department of General Economics Division of the Planning Commission, in 2018, the poverty rate is 21.8 percent, comprising of 3 crore and 55 lakh people. This includes 11.13 percent of the ultra-poor people. Though the poverty rate has declined in the last five to seven years, the total number of ultra-poor or poor people has not reduced significantly. The current number of ultra-poor people is 1 crore 80 lakh.

The relationship between poverty and food is very clear. Those who cannot earn money to buy 1805 kilocalories of food can be classified as ultra-poor people. Those who cannot afford the daily standard of 2122 kilocalories of food are classified as poor. According to a report by FAO, in 2017, the number of people suffering from malnutrition increased to 7 lakh in the last ten years. When a child is malnourished in the mother's womb, it continues to remain malnourished after birth and consequently, suffers from problems such as inadequate height, underweight,

etc. Inadequate food consumption also hampers children's mental and physical growth. These children continue to lag behind in other vital aspects of life such as education and work.

Discrimination between the rich and the poor of the country is another concern. According to the government, 10 percent of people own 38 percent of the total wealth in the country while the poor own less than one percent. Given the current scenario, we can achieve middle-income status in statistics but we cannot achieve it in reality. Our constitution supports the fact that ensuring nutrition and health for the mass is a key responsibility of the state.

There is a lack of noteworthy government programmes towards the development of the marginalised community of the country. There is also a lack of transparency and accountability at several levels. Agricultural development, food safety, water wastage, and poor food habits—all these issues—should be taken into account to properly enact the law of Right to Food. The government has a significant role to play in this regard.

ABM Mostafa Amin, Member Secretary, Jatiya Oikya Prokriya

Since our liberation war, food production in the country has quadrupled whilst the population has doubled. We have made progress concerning food production but we have not explored our potential efficiently. Usage of modern technologies in agriculture might also ease the procedures of food production.

All political parties have food safety included in their manifestos. However, in reality, such manifestos are not focused on. Other pressure groups and the civil society should also act more proactively to ensure food security. They should go to the villages and work at the field level to change the food habits of the masses.

Several developed countries use food card/ration card system. Such a system should be reintroduced in our country through efficient management and reduced corruption to meet the mass demand for food. Different social organisations and NGOs should play a significant role in this aspect.

Production under state management, production under personal ownership and cooperative production are the three forms of production mentioned in our constitution. To ensure food and nutrition for the population at large, we have to go for and prioritise cooperative production. Many developed countries distribute their food through the cooperative system which would be more effective for our country as well.

Abul Kalam Azad, Head of Programs, ICCO Cooperation

ICCO Cooperation has been working in Bangladesh to ensure justice and dignity for all and sustainable livelihoods for the people of the country. Under Civic Engagement Alliance (CEA) programme, through collaborations with the civil society, political parties, private sector and the government, we are carrying out

lobbying and advocacy activities to ensure land rights, women's rights, water body rights, food and nutrition rights, rights to increase economic ability of smallholder farmers and rights of persons with disabilities. Currently, we are implementing about 18 projects in different parts of Bangladesh, addressing major concerns like food security and sustainable consumption, economic empowerment, responsible business, disaster risk reduction (DRR) and emergency response. We are working with innovative technologies to tackle increase of salinity in the south and using geo-data to fight late blight disease in potatoes in Bangladesh. Besides, we are also making efforts to adopt clean cooking technology by using fuel efficient stoves and promoting organic fertiliser with Biochar. Introducing climate adaptive technology might increase our production capacity. To ensure food security, special emphasis should be given upon the char areas and climate-affected areas in Bangladesh.

To ensure the right to food, we need to emphasise upon nutritious food production, consumption, storage, and distribution channel development. We believe enactment of laws acknowledging the right to food would ensure the rights of the ultra-poor and the malnourished who are living with the uncertainty of obtaining food. Proper laws will ensure the accountability of the state. It would also provide a platform for the ultra-poor to raise their voice. Thus, in collaboration with CSOs we will have better scope to work towards food and nutrition security for the marginalised communities.

Susanta Kumar Das, Politburo Member, Workers Party of Bangladesh

Right to adequate food and nutrition is a global issue. We have already finalised our party manifesto for the election and enactment of the Right to Food law is the first demand in it.

There are two types of statistics. Propaganda statistics show the positive side whilst real statistics reveal the actual scenario. There are 4.5 million women workers in our garments sector who earn meagre wages. Though the government has declared a minimum wage of BDT 8,000 per month, it is not sufficient for the marginalised people to meet the required standard of 1800 kilocalories through food consumption.

In our public universities, students residing in university dormitories do not have the ability to consume more than 1500 kilocalories. We view these students as privileged but in reality, the burden of their education costs impedes their requirement of proper nutrition.

According to statistics, the number of people in our country, between 14-40 years of age, is 6 crore and 20 lakh. Among them, 1 crore 20 lakh people are unemployed. However, in reality, this figure is higher. Only 12.1 percent of the population is formally employed in the country. Around 88 percent of people work in the informal sector, working with irregular income. Ensuring food security or adequate nutrition is almost impossible for them. Also, there needs to be focus on women since almost 50 percent of women do not receive adequate amount of food.

Immediate actions required include prioritising laws in relation to ample provisions of appropriate nutrition for all. In addition, I believe that the state should create more employment opportunities in all industries, regardless of the level of demand for work.

Rural people, in general, have access to fresh vegetables and other required foods. But out-of-reach areas and slums are in need of major help in the nutrition sector. Ration cards are helpful for such families, but due to corruption many such families usually do not even get 50 percent of their allotted provisions.

Arshad Siddiqui, Lobby and Advocacy Expert, ICCO Cooperation

I had the privilege of speaking to an association of fishermen in Saghata Thana. They told me that they had no problems with the supply of food; yet they cooked twice a week only due to a lack of hygienic food. If we only concentrate on the quantity of food and not the quality, we will not be able to advance in the areas related to proper nutrition.

In urban areas, a sufficient amount of food is available but the state of the overall nutrition system is questionable. Even branded grocery stores do not always have quality food items. The Consumers Association of Bangladesh is the main organisation in charge of regulating consumers' rights. When infringements occur, they penalise criminals with only monetary punishments. Both the urban and rural regions are prone to problems related to the nutrition sector.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which Bangladesh has been a part of since 1998, is a treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. With over 160 countries being a part of this treaty, many members have followed guidelines of the ICESCR to protect and preserve their respective nutrition systems. Food sovereignty framework laws exist in 19 countries, 10 of which have already integrated them into their court systems while 9 are in the process of doing so. Food has been given the tag of a constitutional right in 23 countries and is also considered a major human right according to the Bangladesh constitution and 40 other members of the ICESCR.

Zonayed Saki, Chief Coordinator, Gonosonhoti Andolon

Malnutrition is a global epidemic and Bangladesh is not exempt from it. Political parties have their own ways of countering obstacles but nourishment hurdles still exist on a large scale. Though the capacity of food production is increasing, the food demands are still not being met fully.

One of the major problems in Bangladesh is that the land scarcity is higher than the total population. There are other countries facing similar hurdles but they have provided top-class solutions. Bangladesh needs to learn from such examples as it is a matter of proper management. It is the responsibility of those in power to work with what we have and produce the needed results.

Poverty in our country has decreased but at the same time, 44 percent of women in our country suffer from anemia. Underweight (32 percent) and stunted (36 percent) children do not indicate a good nutrition system. Right to food, the required amount of vitamins and water are vital. How the sections of people who are being deprived of it can be protected is a major concern.

Market prices are set by the government for certain food items but many farmers are forced to sell their products below the levels set by market forces and respective administrations. Two paths may be taken in order to reach a solution: (1) formation of cooperatives and (2) implementation of administrative control at the Union level.

The latter may pave the way for small-time vendors to carve out a place for themselves in the market. These people who can take the market forward are not being trusted with adequate responsibilities. Instead, a few brokers and those who do not have much idea about market forces are given the duty of controlling the market prices. This is a hindrance to the development of our farming sector.

Incentives for producers as well as convenient market prices are needed for a coherent nutrition system. We need to see farmers as a beneficial market. I firmly believe that policies corresponding to the manner in which buyers and sellers are related, with regard to farmers, should be implemented nationally. Minorities are also being neglected and an effective nutrition system cannot be established without a democratic mindset in the country.

Rokonuzzaman Rokon, Joint General Secretary, Jasod Central Committee

Many countries around the world are fighting malnutrition. Currently, several organisations deal with the nutrition system. However, whether they are run professionally is another matter altogether. The government must monitor such institutions and make sure that they are run appropriately.

The Test Relief (TR) Program's main objective is to create employment opportunities for the rural people, wage labourers and unemployed people, through the implementation of small rehabilitation projects which include providing 8kg of rice/wheat to every person working 7 hours a day. This programme needs to be protected by relevant authorities. I hope that in the future all political parties will include "better nutrition" in their manifestos and updated laws will be passed in the Parliament.

MM Akash, Professor, University of Dhaka

New laws in relation to nutrition would allow members of low-income families to come forward and make their voices heard. Poor people do not always have the resources needed to fight court cases. Such laws would not only assist them in fulfilling their needs but would also give the government the means to execute those laws.

The inclusion of particular food items, such as eggs, rice, milk and lentils, is required. Eighty percent of the country's total food energy comes from rice, while the remaining 20 percent is derived from other food items. We also need to implement laws regarding the provision of minimum protein levels, which would require changes in the supply chain.

According to forecasts for the 2018-19 session, we will be producing 117,000 tonnes and importing more than 800,000 tonnes of agricultural seeds. However, it is apparent that by keeping stocks of such items, we will be able to fulfill the availability criteria. We need to create storage per 1000 population. If correct laws are in place alongside the availability factor, then nutrition demands of Bangladesh may be satisfied. However, hurdles exist in the distribution area.

The government of Bangladesh currently provides incentives for various industries around the country. My suggestion is to help those who are really in need, especially who fall under the poverty line. If anyone rises above the poverty line, they should be excluded. A digital list, inclusive of details for people living under the poverty line is required in Bangladesh. In addition, cash subsidies can also be a solution as long as beneficiaries spend them responsibly. I would also recommend establishing a separate entity solely for women and children. A properly nourished mother will not only be economically empowered but more often than not, the outcome will be a healthy child. Thus, cash subsidies could be given only to women. A compulsory school-feeding programme can also be of great help to our country because 33 percent of children in Bangladesh are malnourished.

Bangladesh's rice production is reaching a saturation point, and an increase in production levels can only be achieved by producing rice on lands/fields reserved for other purposes. Besides, one of the benefits of a higher production of maize and wheat is that it helps in feeding livestock, which helps in meeting the demand for more nutrition. We need to emphasise on the production of other beneficial crops as well.

Rich people are being given ownership of parts of rivers in Bangladesh. This interferes with the rights of villagers who fall victim to malnutrition.

MA Mannan, MP, State Minister, Ministry of Finance and Planning

We want to do well for the country and we have no limitations on the level of development we want for Bangladesh. The Awami League means well and wants to work for the people but cannot always fulfill its duties due to various limitations. Those who are a part of the right to food movement should know that they are respected and more work will be done by them and the government in the nutrition sector.

There are multiple sources of nutrition. People can choose nutritious food items according to their tastes. The main aim should be to provide minimum levels of nutritious food items.

We are proud of our social safety net programmes. I firmly believe that improvements have been made in rural areas and I myself am witness to this. Beneficiaries in such regions are much more aware of their rights, rations and the regulations. There are areas which are considered "out of reach" as of now, but respective administrations are well aware of those localities.

Currently, we are operating school-feeding programmes in 22 upazilas under which we provide high-nutrition biscuits to school students. In fact, our Prime Minister wants this programme to be in place in all schools around Bangladesh. I believe that if we come to power in the next election, we will be able to do that.

There are areas we need to work on, especially in rural regions. An aspect I want to highlight is safe water. If we channel our investments towards it, the returns will be very high. Corruption in the Jharaj system is another concern; issues include fake identities and procedural mismanagement. The government is looking into these issues seriously.