

How do we ensure food security in post-pandemic Bangladesh?

MD JOYNAL ABDIN

BD ANGLADESH is a service sector led economy, where 52.8 percent of the GDP comes from the service sector, followed by 29.6 percent from industry and 12.6 percent from agriculture. Since independence, the contribution of agriculture to GDP has been decreasing with time. That does not mean that the volume of agriculture production or its significance is reducing, rather that the GDP of Bangladesh is increasing at a faster rate than the rate of growth of the agriculture sector. Currently, the Bangladesh agriculture sector is producing 38.7 million metric tonnes (MMT) of rice and 1.25 MMT of wheat against its annual demand of 32 MMT of rice and 5.5 MMT of wheat. While our rice production is enough to meet local demand, the additional demand for wheat is usually met through imports.

This year, Covid-19 has hit the economy hard. In the over two months of "general holiday" (lockdown), the poverty rate has increased, standing at 35 percent in June 2020, compared to 24.3 percent in 2016, according to the Centre for Policy Dialogue. In the households stricken by poverty during the pandemic, income earnings and savings have come to a standstill. According to a recent study, the Covid-19 pandemic has potentially reduced average monthly income of lower income groups from Tk 15,000 per month to Tk 3,700 per month.

A significant number of expatriate worker's families have also suffered huge losses in their fixed income from remittances in the last few months, since many expatriate workers are under lockdown in host countries and are not being able to earn, and many more have lost their jobs and have been forced to return home. As a result, the purchasing power of these families have been significantly reduced as well. Therefore, the question of food security in Bangladesh is not a matter of the available stock of food grains in the country, but rather about the ability of the masses to purchase food grains during and after the pandemic.

If the current countrywide floods are prolonged for much longer, they could turn out to be a major threat for the production of food grains in the upcoming agriculture season in Bangladesh. It will have an adverse impact on poultry, dairy, fisheries and livestock production as well. During the lockdown period, farmers had to sell eggs and milk at lower than their production costs in order to survive, but this made them lose their sustainability. Most of the vegetable supply chains were also significantly disrupted and are under extreme stress.

According to a recent study conducted by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN, farm gate prices in Bangladesh have dropped for eggs (-18 percent), broilers (-15 percent), day-old layer chicks (-75 percent) and day-old broiler chicks (-90 percent), with about 50 percent of eggs and 70 percent of broilers unsold at farms. Moreover, 40 to 50 percent of newly hatched day-old chicks were unsold and destroyed. About 50 percent of broiler farms are thought to be out of business already and are unlikely to risk starting a new crop. As a result, around 70,000 farmers will be affected. Layer farms will gradually shut down if low egg prices persist, and hatcheries and feed mills will face losses as well.

A survey by Khaddo Odhikar Bangladesh found that 87 percent of the poor (50 million) people of Bangladesh are already in a serious food crisis due to the coronavirus situation. Therefore, ensuring food security should be a priority for the government and relevant national and multilateral agencies, especially since overall market activity across the country has already been severely affected due to Covid-19 restrictions and current floods.

The government has already taken certain steps to deal with the challenges of agriculture production and food security in the coming days. The government stimulus package, which was announced at the start of the pandemic in Bangladesh, includes Tk 5,000 crore worth of soft loans with a six month grace period at four percent interest

(reduced from 10 percent) to different agricultural sectors, including seasonal flower and fruit, fisheries, poultry, dairy and livestock. However, this excludes the crops and grains sectors.

Other support from the government includes the waiving of advance taxes on feed for fisheries, livestock and poultry and the easing of Letter of Credit (LC) margins for essential commodities. Instructions have also been issued on prioritised customs

seeds, fertiliser, pesticide etc due to disrupted international trade, especially imports, and limited capacity of farmers to store harvested crops. We could also be potentially faced with factory or facility shutdowns, port restrictions and congestion, leading to the spoilage of perishables vegetables and fruits, and increasing food waste due to a lack of refrigerated storage. Finally, there could also be delays of retrieval in capital investment.

All of these adverse effects may result

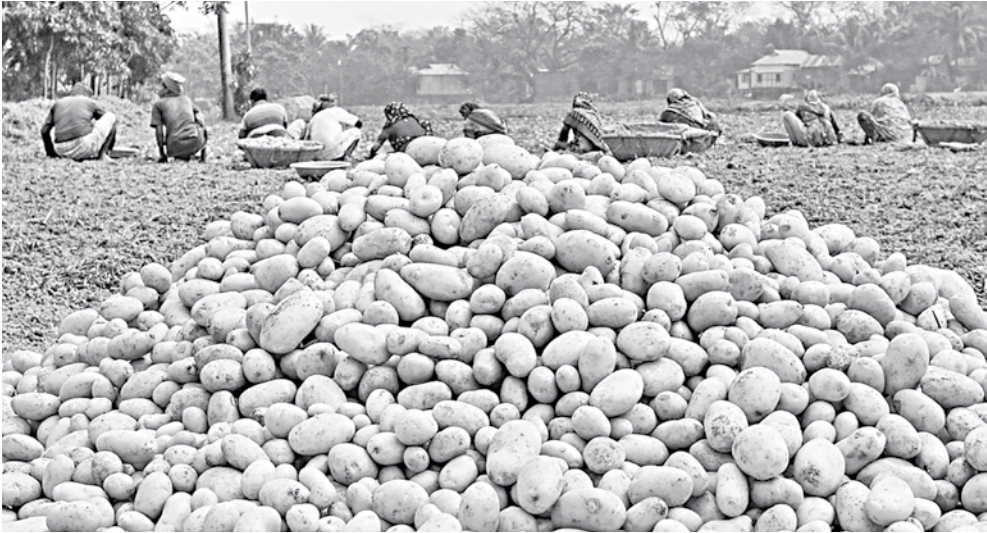
food shortages and price hikes by ensuring free trade and strengthening regional mechanisms for food security. It should be noted that the two to three million deaths in the Bengal famine of 1943 were due to food supply disruptions, not a lack of food availability, so it is crucial that the supply chains continue to function effectively.

Farmers and agricultural workers should also be included in the government's assistance packages and any social protection programmes that are addressing the crisis. The government's substantial agricultural stimulus package should start giving loans and grants on an urgent basis, and primary agriculture inputs like seed, fertilisers, pesticide etc should be made available at affordable costs.

In the long run, we should focus on accelerating the movement towards the mechanisation of agriculture, technology-based farming, value chain development and automation. During the pandemic and beyond, we should inspire direct marketing through online platforms to facilitate trading of produce, avoid food waste and mitigate loss of farmers' profits by reducing multiple layers of intermediaries. Cold chains should be established across districts as well to lengthen the shelf life of fresh vegetables, fruits and other produce. Additionally, the government should strengthen district-level food price volatility monitoring activities to control any unethical hikes of food prices.

It is heartening to see that the Bangladesh government has taken strong steps to protect the economy from the adverse effects of Covid-19, offering recovery packages worth more than a trillion Taka to different sectors. However, more attention is required for the agriculture sector in order to ensure food security for all in post-pandemic Bangladesh. Because of the prolonged floods on top of Covid-19, our farmers and low-income groups could become more susceptible to hunger in the near future.

MD JOYNAL ABDIN is Secretary at Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DDCI).



Food security is threatened not by availability, but by access to agricultural produce. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Sports and the struggle for identity

ARAFAT IBNUL BASHAR

DO you know that the Rohingyas have a football team of their own? Well, you can't be blamed for not knowing that, because they are not members of the FIFA or the Asian Football Confederation. Instead, they are members of the Confederation of Independent Football Associations (CONIFA). CONIFA is a football federation of teams hailing from *de facto* nations, regions, minority peoples and sports isolated territories, who are not affiliated with FIFA. Founded in 2013, they have organised three world cups till now, with the 2020 edition being cancelled due to the pandemic. The objective of CONIFA is to promote and celebrate people all over the world and their identities through football and cultural activities. The World Cups hosted by CONIFA are referred to as the "World Cup of the unrecognised" by the media.

Although getting membership in FIFA, the governing body of world football, is easier compared to that of the United Nations, as evident from the number of members, it is still not free from politics. According to Article 11 of FIFA Statutes, an association or an entity can be a member only if it possesses membership of a regional confederation or, in case it is not independent, the country upon which it is dependent authorises it. Getting authorisation from the occupying state is not realistic, while getting membership from regional confederations is not that simple. UEFA Statutes require recognition of majority members of the UN as an independent country in order to be a member, while CONMEBOL (the South American Football Confederation) Statutes confer membership to countries recognised by the international community as independent. The Statutes of CONCACAF (North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football) mentions taking into account the political, economic and social

structures of a territory in order to grant membership.

Similarly, the Olympic Charter, after amendment in 1996, requires recognition of the entity by the international community for participation in the Olympics. On the contrary, requirements for membership in CONIFA are very flexible, as membership could be granted to even entities who are linguistic minorities. The teams that are members of CONIFA represent territories or

entities that are linguistically, culturally or historically distinct from the sovereign state they are a part of. Previously, there have been similar initiatives, such as the VIVA World Cup, the UNPO Cup etc, but none of them have lasted.

In geopolitics, sporting events might not be a game changer, but it would be incorrect to underestimate its influence in the international community. Olympic Games or FIFA tournaments are enjoyed by billions of

fans around the world. Boycotting sporting events, exchanging players between countries or engaging in competitions have all been used as alternative ways to send political messages or rebuild diplomatic relationships between states. In fact, East Germany used participation and success in different sporting events to bolster their claims of statehood. In recent times, Kosovo has been trying to strengthen their claims of statehood through membership in sporting bodies.

The objective behind participation in the CONIFA tournaments by different entities vary, depending on their status. For territories like Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it is a platform to make a political statement. Not being able to engage in global sporting events due to their disputed status, they aspire to send a positive message to the world about themselves. On the other hand, participation of entities such as the Rohingya or Tibet can be considered more of a protest against the

states they are a part of, and they see these events as another frontier for their fight for self-determination. For entities like The United Koreans in Japan, Chagos Island and Padania, it is just a matter of celebrating their culture. Few teams like Monako, Kiribati and Tuvalu participate only because they lack the football infrastructure for a FIFA membership. Irrespective of the status, it is safe to assume that the common goal for all the members of CONIFA is to play the game of football, bearing their own identity.

A significant number of members of CONIFA are either entities struggling for their right to self-determination or are *de facto* nations trying to build legitimacy and gain attention from the international community. As Bengalis, the idea of utilising football with the aspiration of gaining independence is not alien to us. During our Liberation War, we had the Shadhin Bangla football team, which played across India in order to raise awareness and financial support for the war. Created by the Mujibnagar government, the team played 16 matches in total, raising INR five lakh, which was used to buy arms for the freedom fighters. The first match that the Shadhin Bangla team played against Nadia Ekadosh on July 24, 1971, was said to have garnered an audience of around 15,000 people. The Shadhin Bangla team stood as a symbol of protest against the discrimination of the West Pakistan regime—a symbol of an independent country in the world stage. Participating entities in CONIFA, to some extent, are trying to replicate that form of protest and yearning for freedom, using the platform to generate a sense of nationalism and unity.

But such initiatives are bound to get hostile receptions from the states in control of these disputed territories and entities. CONIFA's initiatives have been blamed for providing encouragement to separatist movements. Players of the Karpatalja team were disqualified from playing in Ukraine

for life by the authorities due to their participation in CONIFA. The Ukrainian Security Service even took steps to ban the players from entering the country, accusing them of "sporting separatism."

China pressured sponsors to withdraw due to CONIFA's decision to allow the Tibetan team to participate. Participation of the Tamil Eelam team was met with opposition from the Sri Lankan government, who stated that inclusion of the Tamil Eelam team will "promote and support divisive, separatist tendencies as well as violence in many countries."

Similarly, the Republic of Cyprus stated that CONIFA was legitimising the Turkish annexation of Northern Cyprus by allowing them to play. Besides, holding CONIFA tournaments in disputed territories has been subject of controversy. Georgia held that the CONIFA tournament in Abkhazia was illegal since under Georgian law, anyone entering Abkhazia through Russia would be entering Georgian territory illegally and that the body lacked Georgia's authorisation. Again, the Azerbaijani community of the Nagorno-Karabakh region opposed holding a CONIFA tournament in Nagorno-Karabakh, stating that such an event poses a threat to peace and stability in the region and stands in violation of international law.

Sports encompass a significant portion of human activity. Thus, participation in sporting events under the banner of one's own identity is a part of one's right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community. The right to take part in cultural life is inseparable from human rights and fundamental to human dignity. Teams in CONIFA might not achieve the heights reached by the Shadhin Bangla team, but they are nonetheless an embodiment of the spirit held by them.

ARAFAT IBNUL BASHAR is a student of LLM at the Department of Law, University of Chittagong.



The Rohingya football team. PHOTO: CONIFA

QUOTABLE
Quote

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR
(1929-1968)
American religious leader and civil-rights activist.

History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamour of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Jeweler's units

7 Sub spot

11 "Twelfth Night" heroine

12 Verve

13 Encourage to buy add-ons

14 Airport line

15 1814 treaty site

16 "— la vista!"

17 Put up

18 Start to melt

19 Spot

21 Rink makeup

22 Yeti's cousin

25 Watch attachment

26 Bear in the air

27 "The Joy Luck Club"

29 Church leader

33 Packed in boxes

34 Comfort food source

35 "Frozen" queen

36 Bottom-of-page line

37 Layer

38 Statue setting

39 Lip

40 Took in

DOWN

1 Discreet

2 Dominant

3 Out of bed

4 Gets satisfaction for

5 Pinball mistake

6 Mule of old song

7 Coffee bar order

8 Waistband material

9 Research assistant

10 Preposterous

16 George-town team

18 Reject with disdain

20 Team

22 Kenya neighbor

23 Deep ravines

24 Pudding choice

25 Sides

28 Eye drops

30 Leading

31 Irritate

32 Blundered

34 Portion out

36 Remote

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BEEBLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

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