

Suborno Nagorik Foundation: A beacon of hope

PRIYAM PAUL

"Although people with disabilities are the largest minority group in the world in terms of numbers, I didn't even think about them before I experienced that massive accident," said Asif Iqbal Chowdhury while sharing the story of how he founded Suborno Nagorik Foundation.

Considering the larger number of people with disabilities in Bangladesh, he found that the country has very few facilities for them. So, he established the foundation to address the gap and as such, it is currently working for the rehabilitation and social welfare of people with disabilities.

UNPREDICTABLE LIFE EVENT

Asif was born in Rangpur and graduated from Madras University before going on to work at many world-renowned companies like Toyota-Navana for years.



hospitals in Bangkok and Kerala, but no significant improvements were seen.

But under the close supervision of Valerie Ann Taylor at the Centre for Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed (CRP) at Savar, Dhaka, he finally got a stable mind and body.

Here, he came to realise the difficulties of being a person living with disability in our society and began to think about working for them. Before that, it had been a challenge for Asif to keep active and remain mentally stable in his now wheelchair-ridden life.

A NEW BEGINNING



ATM Tahmiduzzaman, Deputy Managing Director of UCBL

Asif found that people in general can hardly understand the problems and difficulties faced by a person with disabilities, where minimum basic human requirements are barely fulfilled. So, he began sharing his

experience in a bid to sensitise people about these issues.

In 2018, Asif started Suborno Nagorik Foundation in his home district of Rangpur and eventually got government registration in 2020.

To ensure the needs of people with disabilities are met, the foundation is working in areas such as accessibility, rehabilitation, health, education, livelihood improvement, training, awareness, peer counselling, women empowerment, legal and human rights, sports and more.

Suborno Nagorik Foundation has gradually expanded its working area to five districts in the country, namely Dhaka, Gazipur, Rangpur, Nilphamari and Kurigram.

During the pandemic, it distributed sports and health equipment, wheelchairs, artificial legs, and others equipment free of cost among people with disabilities.

Currently, the foundation depends on Asif's personal funding and assistance from his friends. However, the endeavour requires more regular funding to run smoothly. Moreover, Asif believes strategic planning and funds would make it more institutional.

In 2022, Suborno Nagorik Foundation in association with United Commercial Bank, Daffodil International University and The Daily Star took an initiative to honour

inspirational people with disabilities at a national level.

It awarded people and organisations associated with persons with disabilities in four categories: special needs childrens' parents, successful persons with disabilities, organisations that employ people with disabilities and sports organisations where persons with disabilities are included.

Mostafa Azad Chowdhury Babu, FBCCI senior vice president, was present in this ceremony. In addition, Syed Ashfaqul Haque, executive editor, The Daily Star; Dr Md Sabur Khan, founder and Chairman Board of Trustees, Daffodil International University; ATM Tahmiduzzaman, deputy managing director, UCBL; Abul Kalam Azad, EVP and head of Brand Marketing and Corporate Affairs, UCBL; and others spoke at the event to appreciate such an initiative.

The foundation plans to expand its territory and continue arranging this award ceremony each year with more components to inspire and reward people for their efforts in this regard.

Asif was greatly inspired by Indian paralympian Deepa Malik and Pakistani activist Muniba Mazari, who also are also persons with disabilities.

He believes sports are important for people with disabilities because it provides not only amusement, but also showcases their potential to others.

"Even though our Prime Minister said her government would allot a place for the rehabilitation centre, that commitment saw no progress due to a lack of funding, complex bureaucratic procedure, and other factors," Asif said.

"However, I have high hopes regarding our desired centre for these specialised people. More of these centres should be built in different areas to make the service available for all," he added.

Asif won a national award in 2019 under the Person with Disability category. He is also an executive committee member of the Bangladesh Paralympic Committee and a consultant of Proyash, a special school run by the Bangladesh Army and other organisations that work with people with disabilities.

He is also vocal about the problems of people with disabilities. Asif



Asif Iqbal Chowdhury, Founder of Suborno Nagorik Foundation

regularly appears on BTV, The Daily Star and other livestream programmes to motivate and guide persons with disabilities to be active and explore their potential.

Disability is a state of being that anyone can come across at any moment of life. Moreover, the number of people born with disabilities is huge. So, the government should consider implementing appropriate action plans and allocate funds for them. Furthermore, affluent sections of our society and corporate bodies must come forward to support initiatives like the Suborno Nagorik Foundation.

Intake of biofortified zinc rice for health, growth, and development



A.K.M. NURUL AFSAR

Micronutrients are required for our body in minimal amounts but play a major role for human health, growth, and development. They also keep our body active and functional. All vitamins and minerals are known as micronutrients and, they are available in our food items.

Micronutrient deficiencies affect over two billion people worldwide and are especially prevalent in developing countries. Such deficiencies increase morbidity and mortality rate across the lifespan and can impair physical growth and cognitive development. Every year, Bangladesh loses over \$700 million in GDP to mineral and vitamin deficiencies (Bangladesh: Nutrition at a Glance, World Bank).

In Bangladesh, micronutrient deficiencies are endemic and affect all age groups, and multiple deficiencies are common especially among the children and women. They are suffering from the highest rates of micronutrient deficiencies, particularly from vitamin A, iron, iodine, and zinc.

Micronutrient malnutrition has long ranging effects on health, learning ability and productivity, which in turn have high social and public cost. For example, zinc deficiency increases the risk of

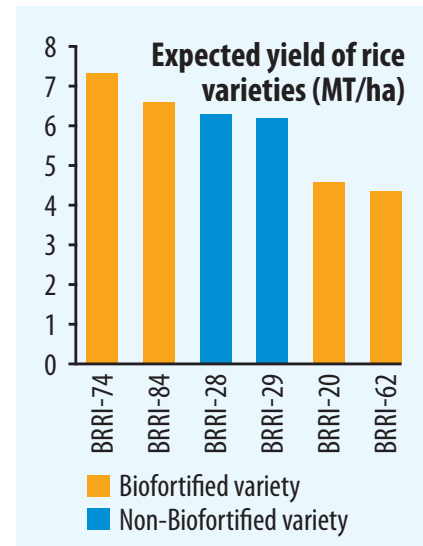
- Diarrhea in young children by 33%,
- Pneumonia by 69%, and
- Malaria by 56% percent (Caufield et al. Zinc deficiency. Comparative Quantity of Health Risks. WHO 2004, 256-279.)

The National Micronutrients Status Survey (NMSS) 2011-2012, for the first time in Bangladesh, provided nationally representative data on zinc status in selected populations. The national prevalence of zinc deficiency was 44.6% in preschool children (Pre-SAC) and 57.3% in non-pregnant and non-lactating (NPNL) women. The prevalence rate of zinc deficiency in slums was 66.4%. However, the preliminary report of NMSS 2019-20 in Bangladesh

reveals that zinc deficiencies among Pre-SAC and NPNL women are 32.5% and 45.5%, respectively.

Zinc deficiency is a public concern. Time has come to focus on zinc as an essential and important micronutrient. Zinc is essential for:

- ▶ Strong and robust immune system
- ▶ Optimal blood sugar balance
- ▶ Healthy metabolism
- ▶ Protein synthesis
- ▶ Growth and development
- ▶ Wound healing
- ▶ Hormone health
- ▶ Better sleep
- ▶ Improving mood
- ▶ Antioxidant



Zinc is not stored in the body. So, it is important to regularly consume food that is rich in zinc. Rice, being the staple food, is the principal source of protein and minerals in the diet of Bangladeshi people. The people of Bangladesh consume almost 70% of their diet as rice. With the development of technology and considering the preference of the consumers, rice is being processed in the rice mills using modern technology and making rice highly glazed by removing the outer

layer i.e., bran, even some portion of endosperm i.e., starch. As a result, highly polished rice varieties lose almost all nutritional values such as vitamins and minerals. On the other hand, poor people cannot afford to buy fish, meat, milk, fruits and vegetable which are the other major sources of micronutrients. Hence, they suffer from micronutrient deficiencies. Improving nutrition status can have a significant impact on survival as well as physical and cognitive growth and productivity. Good nutrition, comprising adequate quality and quantity of food intake and reduction of illness, is also a basic human right and an essential input for economic development.

To address the micronutrient deficiencies of the people, the GoB has developed different policies and strategies for the inclusion of food fortification including biofortification. The relevant policies and strategy documents are:

- ▶ National Strategy on Prevention and Control of Micronutrient Deficiencies, Bangladesh 2015-2024.
- ▶ Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition 2016-2025.
- ▶ Bangladesh Second Country Investment Plan 2016-2020.
- ▶ National Food and Nutrition Security Policy of Bangladesh 2020.
- ▶ 8th Five Year Plan 2020-2025.
- ▶ The above-mentioned policies and strategies suggest the following three options:

1. Ensure balance and nutritious diet through crop diversification which involves huge cost.

2. Food fortification with synthetic vitamins and minerals which also increases cost.

3. Biofortification is the appropriate option for the poor people of the country to tackle zinc deficiencies without added cost.

Biofortified Zinc paddy is successfully made following field trial and lessons learned with active support from HarvestPlus. HarvestPlus joined hands with Global Alliance for Improved



Nutrition (GAIN) and others to promote cultivation and consumption of biofortified zinc rice through commercialization of biofortified crops (CBC) project. Till now, as many as 11 varieties of BZR have been developed by BRR1, BINA and BSMRAU.

Zinc content in the rice and yield for BRR1 dhan74, BRR1 dhan84 and Bangabandhu dhan100 are 24.2 mg per kg, 7.1 MT/ha; 27.6 mg per kg, 6.5 MT/ha; and 25.7 mg per kg, 7.7 MT/ha respectively. Yield of biofortified zinc rice and some of the common varieties shown above in bar diagram.

BRR1 dhan74 is a coarse variety and price wise it matches with the government declared procurement price. Ministry of Food has already included, from the current Boro procurement season 2021-2022, procurement of biofortified zinc paddy (BRR1 dhan74) and its rice through internal procurement policy from five districts, and these are: i) Bhola, ii) Barisal, iii) Thakurgaon, iv) Gaibandha,

and v) Rangpur where concentration of production of BRR1 dhan74 is accessible.

Challenges:

- ▶ Due to lack of awareness among farmers, consumers and value chain actors BRR1 dhan74 is often mixed up with other coarse varieties of paddy during marketing.
- ▶ Currently, no segregated supply chain exists to support processing and distribution of BRR1 dhan74.
- ▶ Adequate amount of biofortified paddy is not available in the market.

Way forward:

- ▶ Farmers should be encouraged to cultivate biofortified BRR1 dhan74 extensively so that the government can buy zinc biofortified rice through the internal procurement system and can maintain it separately for distribution among the targeted groups.
- ▶ Demand should be created through organising awareness programmes so that consumers become aware of the benefits of zinc rice and millers adopt a segregated supply chain for biofortified zinc paddy/rice.
- ▶ The line ministries should create demand for biofortified rice in the safety net programmes such as school feeding programme, VGD, etc.
- ▶ DAE should identify two/three varieties of biofortified zinc rice taking into consideration the agronomic competitiveness so that farmers are benefitted as well as the micronutrient need of the poor people, those who cannot afford to consume costly food that are rich in zinc micronutrient, is fulfilled.

Conclusion:

Zinc is one of the few micronutrients that are present in all our body tissues. It is crucial to ensure that we get zinc in our diet, and biofortified zinc rice is the appropriate option without any added costs in that regard.

A.K.M. Nurul Afsar is former Director General of Food & Advisor, CBC project GAIN/GORAI

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