

ROUNDTABLE

Biofortified crops: Connecting value chain actors and policymakers in Bangladesh



HarvestPlus - Bangladesh Initiative to Enhance Nutrition Security and Governance (BleNGS) Project organized a roundtable titled “Biofortified crops: Connecting value chain actors and policymakers in Bangladesh” on November 13, 2022. HarvestPlus is part of the CGIAR and is based at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), a CGIAR research center. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.

Md Khairul Bashar, PhD, Country Manager, HarvestPlus Bangladesh

Bangladesh have self-sufficiency in food security, but nutrition deficiency is still high. About 28 per cent of children aged under 5 in the country do not get enough zinc in their diets. The farm families cannot afford nutritionally diverse diets and not easily reached by food fortification or supplementation initiatives. Biofortification has been proven to be a strong alternative in the combat of hidden hunger all over the world. Biofortification is the process of increasing the density of micronutrients in staple crops through conventional breeding techniques, agronomic practices, or genetic modification.

HarvestPlus-Bangladesh strategized its delivery from crop development to popularizing among farm community and scaling up production and commercialization including policy advocacy and communication. Up to 2021, through support from HarvestPlus program, ten zinc rice, one wheat and three pulse varieties were released by BRRI, BSMRAU, BINA, BWMRI and BARI subsequently in Bangladesh. About 3.1 million HH reached directly with biofortified crops’ seed and 18,000 MT zinc rice aggregated & milled for the consumers.

To boost and root biofortified crop mainstreaming of biofortification is needed in crop development, seed multiplication and extension through public and private sectors. Inclusion of biofortified rice in social safety net programs will also create another market for this specialized crop.

MA Saleque, PhD, Deputy Country Manager, HarvestPlus Bangladesh

The 54-month long BleNGS Project co-funded by the European Union started on September 1, 2018 in three upazilas of each Jamalpur and Sherpur districts in partnership with World

Vision Bangladesh, Unnayan Sangha and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). Around 6,240 demonstration plots of biofortified crops were established with other awareness raising events by the project. Focusing of nutrition governance all departments are aware now about biofortified zinc rice in the region. The local Government and private sector have taken up it for commercialization. Project’s Local advocacy meetings recommendations are required more investment in the extension, start up support in new areas and availability of seed in local markets.

Md Harun or Rashid, a consumer in Islampur Upazila of Jamalpur

HarvestPlus has helped me by giving seeds of zinc rice varieties like BRRI dhan72, Bangabandhu dhan100, and BRRI dhan62. I started with BRRI dhan72 the crops are yielded better than previous crops. Our children not getting sick and have healthy mental & physical growth owing to zinc rice.

Md Kadem Ali, a farmer in Jamalpur Sadar Upazila

Last year, HarvestPlus gave us seeds of BRRI dhan74 to grow crops. We got good yield. We also kept the seeds of BRRI dhan74 and distributed in our areas.

Mostafa Faruque Al Banna, Associate Research Director- FPMU (Food Planning and Monitoring Unit), Ministry of Food

If we want to ensure nutrition sensitive social

protection, then the inclusion of biofortified zinc rice in social safety net programs is very important. It is important to identify such pocket areas where zinc deficiency is high to include biofortified zinc rice of those areas’ social safety net programs.

Dr Mary Rashid, Team Leader, BleNGS project, World Vision

We need to design a comprehensive initiative that includes nutrition specific components to bring better nutrition outcomes. It requires organizational design and appropriate capacity building of all entities. We are working with the government and relevant departments so that our learnings can be mainstreamed through the core national programs.

Dr Rudaba Khondker, Country Director, The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN)

Govt has enacted a number of good policies. Now those policies need to be implemented by the Govt Institute/ Departments for mainstreaming. The leadership should come from the government so that we can track the progress of the biofortification initiatives properly. Currently, we are working with HarvestPlus on the commercialization of biofortified rice and we need to work more closely in future.

Saika Siraj, Country Director, Nutrition International (NI)

Biofortification is already in the national policies and international commitment of Bangladesh.

As the food price is high and there is an overall crisis in the global economy, the dependency on rice in Bangladesh will increase in the next two years. Therefore, this is high time we took coordinated actions and reached the most vulnerable population with biofortified rice.

Md Shahjahan Kabir, PhD, Director General, Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI)

BRRI developed biofortified zinc rice varieties are cultivating in favorable work environment. BRRI currently working to developed stress tolerant biofortified rice variety and also have plan to mainstream the biofortification in the future breeding program.

Md Benojir Alam, Director General, Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE)

Biofortified zinc rice is vital for us as our people do not get a sufficient amount of nutritious food. Biofortified zinc rice is now being cultivated in both the Aman and Boro season. So, we need to increase the demonstration of zinc biofortified rice for people who are suffering from a lack of nutritious foods.

Margherita Capalbi, Programme Manager, Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition, Delegation of the European Union in Bangladesh

According to National Nutrition Service findings, micro-nutritional deficiency is prevalent among children under five and women. The European Union (EU) is committed to support Bangladesh in achieving SDG 2 (zero

hunger). The EU is supporting the country with the food and nutrition program to promote nutrition and reduce all forms of malnutrition with special attention to adolescent girls, children and women.

Md Sayedul Islam, Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture

We have to ensure food security as well as nutrition security in our country. We are almost sufficient in food and rice, but hidden hunger prevails. We are concerned about the poorest section of the country who are suffering from micro-nutritional deficiency and their staple food is rice. So, biofortification is an excellent idea to minimize the problem. Our ministry and research organizations are closely working on it. We have high yielding rice varieties for Boro season but now we need to focus on the Aman and Aus seasons. Zinc biofortified rice varieties have to be high yielding, otherwise farmers would not be interested in cultivating them. The food ministry can play a very important role in procuring biofortified rice varieties.

Shaikh Mohammad Bokhtiar, PhD, Executive Chairman, Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC)

Dr Howarth Bouis, who discovered the idea of biofortification, highlighted three Ds (discovery, development, and dissemination) to make the biofortification initiative successful. Although rice is the country’s staple food, we need to think about the biofortification of some other staple crops.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- More investment for research, extension, and seed production of biofortified crops.
- Inclusion of biofortified zinc rice in social safety net programs to ensure nutrition-sensitive social protection.
- The production and marketing channels need to be strengthened so that biofortified rice can reach to everyone.
- The seeds of biofortified zinc varieties must be high yielding and profitable for farmers.
- Biofortification of non-rice staple crops should be taken in the research agenda.

NEWS

South Koreans

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But to end confusion, the country’s parliament has decreed that from June 2023 all official documents must use the standard “international age.”

That move, which follows a long-running debate over the issue, will bring the country into line with most of the rest of the world and cut down on legal discrepancies that arise from the use of three different systems.

In South Korea, a person’s “international age” refers to the number of years since they were born, and starts at zero – the same system used in most other countries.

But when asked their age in informal settings, most South Koreans will answer with their “Korean age,” which could be one or even two years older than their “international age.”

Under this system, babies are considered a year old on the day they’re born, with a year added every January 1.

US honours

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against corruption in their respective countries. They have given leadership, shown courage and influenced in disclosing information about corruption and preventing corruption, the US state department has said.

Rozina Islam told the function that the US state department office has acknowledged the role of journalism in preventing corruption and in bringing transparency in Bangladesh.

She said the award was for those journalists who are vocal and struggling amid harsh laws, fears, arrests, cases and harassment for protecting the freedom of expression at home and abroad.

Rozina, who has been working at the Prothom Alo for more than 10 years, was harassed, humiliated and was sued when she attempted to disclose the irregularities in the health sector during the pandemic.

She was given the “Most Resilient Journalist” award by the Free Press Unlimited, an Amsterdam-based agency, last year, according to a Prothom Alo report.

China firm seeks

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Both parties will jointly establish BHSR to implement the project and then the joint venture company will sign a franchise agreement with the Bangladesh government.

According to the proposal, Chinese employees will manage the operations of the project for the first five years. The ratio of Chinese and Bangladeshi employees will be 50:50 in the next five years, and the ratio will change to 10:90 in the next five. Bangladeshi employees will be solely responsible for the operation management after that.

Earlier in April this year, Li Jiming, the Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh, wrote to the Railways

First look at yourselves

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He made the remarks at the first preparatory meeting of the AL’s 22nd national council at the party president’s Dhanmondi office.

At another event, Abdur Razzak, agriculture minister and AL presidium member, asked the diplomats to refrain from taking sides.

He was addressing a rally organised by Dhaka city (south) AL at Mohanagar Natyamancha.

At the same rally, Quader said, “Delegations of different countries are in Bangladesh. Those who are from friendly nations, [we urge that you] do not take sides. Do not intervene in our internal affairs. We know how to protect our democracy.”

Razzak said, “The Canadian court said the BNP is a terrorist group, they can’t give shelter to any member of the party in Canada. Meanwhile, an ambassador made a statement about those terrorists yesterday. I am asking the ambassador – under which diplomatic norms did you make the statement on the internal affairs of a country? You cannot do it and should not in future.”

Earlier on Wednesday, US Ambassador to Bangladesh Peter Haas expressed concerns over reports of intimidation and political violence in the capital and urged the

minister, for carrying out the project under the government-to-government Public Private Partnership (PPP) framework and requested the minister for signing a memorandum of understanding between CREC and BR “as soon as possible”.

Last year, two other Chinese companies – China Railway Construction Corporation and China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation – expressed interest in forming a joint venture to construct, operate and manage funds for the high-speed rail project under a PPP model.

There is no visible progress over the proposals so far.

government to respect the rule of law.

Responding to the US envoy’s statement, Quader, also the road, transport and bridges, minister, at the council preparatory meeting, said, “The term ‘election fraud’ is used not only in Bangladesh, it is now being used in America as well. Five people died there. Congress was under attack. We saw how Nancy Pelosi [speaker of the House of Representatives] was hiding.

“At least two mass shootings are taking place every week. Nineteen children were killed in a mass shooting [recently]. You talk about human rights ... Police officers [in your country] were held for not providing security at the right time. You are commenting on our court. What about what happens in your country?”

He added, “There has been a conspiracy to stage a coup in Germany ... The UK prime minister has been changed. We are in a better situation than that. No one needs to interfere. So many things are happening in your countries, we did not interfere there. Two MPs were shot dead in Britain. Look at yourselves before you look at others.”

He said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will not listen to anyone’s request. “She is not afraid of anyone but God.”

We have to build Bangladesh

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Rahima Khatun of Faridpur won the award for her contribution to women’s education, Prof Kamrun Nahar Begum of Chattogram for rights, Farida Yasmin of Satkhira for socio-economic development, Afroza Parveen of Narail for literature and Nasima Begum of Jhenaidah for rural development.

Each of the recipients received a gold medal, a certificate, and a cheque for Tk 4 lakh.

The event was chaired by State Minister for Women and Children Affairs Fazilatun Nessa Indira.

US slaps sanctions on Chinese officials over Tibet rights

AFP, Washington

The United States yesterday imposed sanctions on two senior Chinese officials over “serious human rights abuse” in Tibet, including alleged torture and killings of prisoners and forced sterilization.

The United States blocked any US assets and criminalized transactions with Wu Yingjie, who was China’s boss in Tibet from 2016 to 2021, and Zhang Hongbo, China’s police chief in the Himalayan region since 2018 who is believed still to be in charge.

The sanctions announcement comes despite a relative easing of tensions between the United States and China since Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping met last month in Bali and agreed to step up dialogue.

Wu directed a policy of “stability” in Tibet that included “serious human rights abuse, including extrajudicial killings, physical abuse, arbitrary arrests and mass detentions,” the Treasury Department said in a statement.

“Additional abuses during Wu’s tenure include forced sterilization, coerced abortion, restrictions on religious and political freedoms and the torture of prisoners.”

Back in with abusers

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report, there are only 13 long-term government shelters for women and girls in Bangladesh, including seven Safe Custody Homes run by the social welfare ministry (two of which are in Dhaka division), and six shelters run by the women and children’s affairs ministry, where victims of violence and destitute women can stay for six months with up to two children aged under 12.

“In addition, eight Victim Support Centres [VSCs], which technically offer short-term shelter for up to five days, are run in coordination between Bangladesh police and NGOs. But services there are inconsistent and unreliable, and activists say that in reality they often don’t allow stays beyond one night in case of emergencies,” the report stated.

It added, “Finally, there are an estimated 15 additional NGO-run shelters. In total, therefore, there are only around 36 shelters in a country with over 80 million women and over 64 million children.”

Sifat-E-Noor Khanam, lawyer of Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), said, “We need many more shelters for female victims of violence, especially domestic violence, because, currently, they have nowhere to go.

“Even though it is said that there are 13 shelters run by the women and children’s affairs ministry and the Department of Social Services, we never get access to those [for the victims we represent] and the environment is not supportive.

“Besides, most of these shelters are located in the metropolitan areas, which is difficult for women from the grassroots to access.”

She added, “The victims need police referrals or court orders to get access to VSCs or One-stop Crisis Centres [OCCs]. However, most victims of domestic violence are unable to immediately file cases with police or go to courts.

“They also require urgent psycho-social counselling to do so.”

In fact, going to police stations sometimes creates further challenges for ordinary women, who are not always welcome to file a complaint, Sifat said.

Moreover, after staying at the OCC or VSC for up to five days, the victims are mostly sent to shelters run by non-government organisations or to their relatives’ homes.

“Since most of the NGOs are currently facing a funding crisis, they too can’t provide proper rehabilitation to these victims ... The state must take responsibility for this.”

One such shelter named Rokeya Sadan is being run by Bangladesh Mahila Parishad since 1985, with a capacity to provide accommodation to 20 victims at a time.

Fauzia Moslem, president of BMP, believes that the aim of a shelter for victims of violence must be rehabilitating and mainstreaming them.

“From our experience, we have seen that when we arrange facilities for sewing, boutique, art and music, formal and non-formal education, it helps them grow.

“However, when we have to stop such facilities due to funding crisis, the victims’ behavioural patterns change ... We are supposed to keep them for three to six months, but they have been here for over 15 years because we have nowhere to send them to.”

“It has become urgent for the government to look into this and create enough safe spaces for victims of violence while maintaining their privacy, safety and ensuring their rehabilitation.”

Sheepa Hafiza, eminent gender expert, echoed the same.

“In the existing shelters, the scope of proper rehabilitation is quite low ... Besides, there are so many rules and regulations one has to follow to get access to those places. That needs to be simplified, or victims will stop seeking access when it is necessary for them”