

The hard truths about Bangladesh's food security

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Bangladesh is considered self-sufficient in food, yet market prices fluctuate with import disruptions and rising global costs. How can food security be ensured?

There are two key issues. First, politicians often present misleading data. While the government claims self-sufficiency, salt is the only item we do not import. We do not import vegetables, but that does not mean we have enough. The WHO recommends 250 grams of vegetables per adult daily, yet we produce 30 percent less than required.

Last fiscal year, Bangladesh did not import rice—an exception in the past decade. However, this year, we need to import 2 million tonnes by May, with 500,000-600,000 tonnes already brought in. We require 8-8.5 million tonnes of maize but produce only 4-4.5 million. For wheat, we need 9 million tonnes but grow just 400,000-500,000. Maize is vital for poultry and egg production, and this year, even potatoes are being imported.

Achieving full self-sufficiency is impossible—we import 90 percent of edible oil and 80-90 percent of sugar. The key is managing the supply chain effectively. Importing at the right time and from the right sources can stabilise markets. For example, importing onions in peak season hurts farmers. A coordinated approach is needed to balance fair prices for farmers and stable supply for consumers. The real challenge lies in improving marketing systems and organising supply chains.

How do you view the government's claim that an unseen syndicate is responsible for rising staple food prices?

The term 'syndicate' has become an overused and misleading buzzword in Bangladesh. Government officials use it to divert public attention from real issues.



goods reducing market rates. Even in sectors like petroleum and gas, where the government plays a direct role, prices continue to rise.

Bangladesh's agricultural universities are making significant progress, but how effectively are their advancements benefiting farmers on the ground?

There is no direct relationship. I do not wish to undermine the contributions of agricultural universities. They offer agricultural degrees, and many graduates are engaged in meaningful work. These universities also conduct research, alongside institutions such as BARI and BINA.

However, a major issue is that researchers and those involved in marketing agricultural products operate in isolation. In countries like the United States, 80 percent of seed companies obtain their products from universities. In many countries, new crop varieties undergo quality assessment and are sold to the highest bidder, but Bangladesh lacks such a system.

I once approached BARI, requesting exclusive access to a specific variety, assuring them that we would handle production and sales. They responded that the law only permits them to supply BADC. However, once research is transferred to BADC, progress stagnates.

A strong link between agricultural researchers and commercial enterprises is essential; without it, research will not effectively benefit farmers.

What is the current status of seed availability in Bangladesh?

Bangladesh needs around 4,000 tonnes of certain vegetable seeds, but only 1,000 tonnes are imported. Many crop seeds, such as cauliflower, cabbage, coriander, and carrots, cannot be produced locally due to climatic limitations, as they originate from colder regions.

Until recently, no entity in Bangladesh—whether BARI, BINA, or any university—had successfully developed a small cucumber variety. Our company,

Today, only 45 percent of the population depends on agriculture, and its GDP contribution has fallen to around 13-14 percent.

PHOTO:
MOSTAFA SHABUJ



Farmers busy with Boro rice cultivation in the Haor areas of Sylhet.

PHOTO:
SHEIKH NASIR



A farmer cultivating rice using a rice transplanter machine in the Tollabaria field of Mohammadpur Upazila, Magura.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Take sugar, wheat, or edible oil—only a few importers dominate these markets because large-scale imports require significant investment. For instance, importing wheat from Ukraine typically involves shipments of at least 10,000 tonnes. Smaller shipments of 3,000 tonnes would still cost around \$10 million or thousands of crores in taka, making it unfeasible for ordinary traders.

As a result, high-level syndicates do exist in essential commodity imports. The government has the capacity to import these products, yet its involvement has never led to lower prices. Bangladesh has no precedent for government-imported

Lal Teer, spent 14 years developing one. We have now entered the seed production phase, and this variety is being cultivated widely.

At Lal Teer, we develop seed varieties in accordance with international quality standards. Our seeds are also exported—last year alone, Lal Teer exported seeds worth \$2 million, including tomatoes, green chillies, and various other crops, to 11 countries. If our seeds were not of high quality, international buyers would not accept them.

I estimate that if Lal Teer sells seeds worth Tk 100 crore, at least Tk 10 crore worth of seeds are unofficially smuggled into India. Due to Indian regulations, we cannot export them legally. We have already raised this issue with the Foreign Ministry. While Indian seeds enter our market freely, we cannot export ours to India.

Given Bangladesh's vulnerability to climate change and frequent natural disasters, what measures should be taken to enhance the resilience and sustainability of the agricultural sector?

The main challenges for agriculture in Bangladesh are as follows: Limited arable land. A lack of seed varieties that meet consumers' taste and aroma preferences. The growing impact of climate change.

To address these issues, we are establishing a new R&D station in Rampal, in the south of the country, where temperatures are higher. We are studying the effects of heat on crop production. Additionally, we are conducting trials on salt-resistant crop varieties, as salt intrusion is increasingly threatening agriculture.

Technological solutions can also play a role. If we can properly adopt and utilise biotechnology, it could help mitigate climate change effects. However, our progress in this area remains slow, and significant advancements will take time.

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