

Towards Food and Nutrition Security in Bangladesh: Policy and investment frameworks for coordinating and monitoring actions



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Introduction

Bangladesh has provided a positive example of how a country can construct a framework for developing inclusive policies on food and nutrition security, generating investment to support those policies, and implementing capable monitoring. The framework was designed to produce policies that are comprehensive, pro-poor and gender sensitive. The framework also elevated the ability of stakeholders to formulate effective and equitable policies, and resulted in scaling up financing for agriculture, food security and nutrition.

Bangladesh National Food Policy, its Plan of Action and the Country Investment Plan for agriculture, food security and nutrition are an exemplary case of a long-term effort to put in place a comprehensive result-based framework for enhancing food and nutrition security policies and investments.

In 2006, Bangladesh adopted a pro-poor and gender sensitive National Food Policy (NFP). This policy guides Bangladesh's efforts towards achieving the Millennium Development Goal One (MDG1) of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, and the World Food Summit target of providing food security for all, defined as access

by all people at all times to the food needed for an active and healthy life. Previously, Bangladesh dealt with hunger by focusing on food production and public distribution of cereals. The NFP broadens national priorities and takes a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach that encompasses availability, access and utilization of food.

Two national plans have helped distil the policy into deeds. A Plan of Action (PoA) developed in 2008 details areas of intervention, actions, targets, responsible actors and indicators of progress to realize the objectives of the NFP. A Country Investment Plan (CIP) for agriculture, food security and nutrition¹ articulates priorities and marshals

resources. The CIP is a five-year (FY 2010-2015) country-led planning, funding and alignment tool that includes 12 priority programs and is fully embedded in the country's Sixth Five Year Plan. Both the PoA and CIP are time-bound to 2015. Overall, the NFP, PoA and CIP provides the policy and investment framework to guide and coordinate national efforts toward the achievement of MDG1.

Bangladesh illustrates how a knowledge-based and inclusive approach can create a shared vision of food and nutrition security that results in national policies, and how that shared vision succeeded in fostering investments to support those policies. An inclusive approach created momentum for coordinated actions across government, civil society, private sector and the international development community.

This brief also aims to identify factors that contributed to the success of the National Food Policy Capacity Strengthening Programme (NFPCSP), which is jointly implemented by the Ministry of Food and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The programme has supported Bangladesh in its efforts to define a comprehensive food security policy and investment framework that allowed the aligning of interventions by development

partners with national priorities. The NFPCSP has been receiving financial support from the European Union (EU) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The adoption of a nationally owned vision for comprehensive food and nutrition security policy and investments proved effecting in mobilizing high-level commitment and multi-stakeholder collaboration facilitating the mobilization of US\$2.2 billion for the acceleration of progress toward the MDG1 hunger target.

Country context: trends and issues

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with approximately 150 million people living on limited land, and is highly vulnerable to natural disasters such as floods, cyclones and droughts. The frequency and severity of these disasters are increasing because of climate change. Bangladesh is experiencing higher rainfall, greater climatic variability, rising sea levels, and water and soil salinity. Practically all cultivable land is in use, and population pressure has reduced the average farm holding from 1.7 hectares in 1960 to 0.6 hectares in 2008².

Despite these challenges, economic growth accelerated and gross domestic product (GDP) growth is now consistently above 5 percent per year. Progress towards achieving MDG1 has been encouraging with poverty declining from 57 percent in the early 1990s to less than 32 percent in 2010³. Bangladesh has already achieved the MDG target for reducing undernourishment by half: the proportion of its population consuming less than the minimum level of dietary energy declined from 34.6 percent in 1990-1992 to 16.8 percent in 2010-2012⁴. Under nutrition has also been significantly reduced: the prevalence of underweight children under five years of age was estimated at 36 percent in 2011 compared to almost 62 percent in 1990⁵. These results can be attributed to a relatively equitable distribution of land, declining population growth, a high and increasing inflow of remittances from migrants, the emergence of an export-oriented industrial sector, a dynamic civil society and a pro-poor and pro-rural orientation of development policies, including a wide set of food- and cash-based safety nets.

Overall, the country has advanced from being labelled a development "basket case" to a "surprisingly good" example of promoting pro-poor development, with most development indicators improving faster than neighbouring countries that have higher per capita income and faster economic growth⁶.

Against a backdrop of overall economic and social development, a significant shift occurred in the discourse on food security and nutrition, as reflected in the policy and investment framework and related governance system. As in many other countries, in Bangladesh the food security discourse focused largely on ensuring the availability of main food staples at affordable prices. Accordingly, food security was seen primarily as a responsibility of the agricultural sector in terms of production, and of the Public Food Distribution System for delivering grains at subsidized prices for poverty alleviation, price stabilization, and relief in the aftermath of natural calamities.

Key milestones on the road toward policy coherence on food and nutrition security

Following the World Food Summit of 1996 and the formulation of the MDGs, Bangladesh initiated a participa-

tory process of rethinking its approach to food security. In 2000, a task force established to develop a new food policy proposed the adoption of a comprehensive approach to food security. This approach included food availability, economic, social and physical access to food, food utilization and other nutritional issues, such as water and sanitation. All were seen as essential elements for attaining food security. The broad-based and multi-sectoral consultative process conducted in the following years covered cross-cutting issues, such as gender and the needs of disadvantaged groups. The process forged a wide consensus on the new approach and strengthened the commitment of key government and non-government actors.

FAO's technical assistance through the NFPCSP played a catalytic role in finalizing the NFP, and in developing the PoA adopted by the Government of Bangladesh. The PoA articulates the NFP objectives in 26 strategic areas of intervention and actions to be undertaken during 2008-2015. It identifies responsibilities of government and non-government actors. It provides a set of targets and indicators and defines an inter-ministerial coordination system to monitor progress that was implemented with the support of the NFPCSP. The first monitoring report was published in December 2009⁷. The CIP, conceived as the investment arm of the NFP and its PoA, was presented in 2010. It was subsequently reviewed and prioritized in 2011⁸ through a national consultative process including civil society and the development community. It is a five-year (FY 2010-2015) country-led planning, fund mobilization and alignment tool that includes 12 priority programmes and is fully embedded in the Sixth Five Year Plan. Nutrition is one of the three key programmatic areas of the CIP, but is also mainstreamed across all other areas in agriculture and access. The nutrition-specific programmes are aligned with the health-based nutrition actions of the National Nutrition Services under the Health Nutrition Population Sector Development Programme. Moreover, nutrition sensitive interventions, including food-based interventions that promote dietary diversity and the consumption of nutrient rich foods, are mainstreamed within agriculture and social protection programmes.

In addition to stimulating increased investments, the process of developing, implementing and monitoring a comprehensive inter-ministerial policy framework on food security has contributed to a better identification of priorities and increased knowledge and technical capacities in investment planning and monitoring.

An inclusive institutional set up ensures the coordination of interventions and monitoring (Figure 1). This includes a Cabinet-level Food Planning and Monitoring Committee (FPMC), chaired by the Food Minister and with various ministers and secretaries as members. This Committee provides strategic orientation on food security issues and establishes a high-level commitment to inter-sectoral collaboration. The National Committee, also

chaired by the Food Minister, is composed of the secretaries of the various concerned divisions, heads of universities/research institutions, development partners, the private sector and NGOs. Among other things, it oversees CIP implementation and monitoring processes. The Food Policy Working Group is the mechanism for coordinating collaboration at the technical and operational level through the four Thematic Teams that carry out monitoring of the PoA and the CIP.

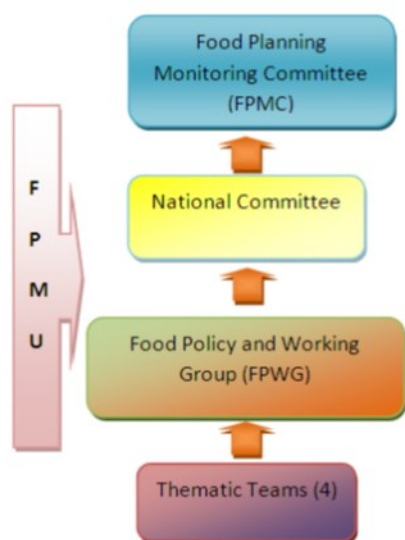


Figure 1. Inter-ministerial coordination system for food security

This institutional setting oversees a results-oriented monitoring process that is consistent with national planning processes and harmonized with the MDG1, the Sixth Five Year Plan Results Framework and the results specified in the NFP PoA and CIP.

Positive results

The first joint Monitoring Report of the PoA and CIP completed in 2012 shows that while Bangladesh is becoming a more food secure, better-nourished and healthier country, progress remains uneven. Encouraging results were observed for numbers of children under-5 who are underweight (36 percent) and children under-5 suffering from stunting (41 percent), which have declined steadily since 2004. If the current pace of decline is sustained, the MDG target to reduce the percentage of underweight children under 5 years of age to 33 percent, as well as the national target to reduce stunting to 38 percent by 2015 can be achieved⁹. Other indicators for poverty and food security show that the rate of growth of agricultural GDP in the previous two years has been above both the 2011 and 2015 targets. Government spending on social protection has been steadily rising, and since 2005 poverty has declined by 21.3 percent. This data indicates that poor people have become less poor and that extreme urban poverty has sharply dropped. Overall, the target of halving the incidence of poverty by 2015 appears achievable.

With significant progress in increasing agricultural productivity and output, food – particularly rice – is more readily available, but many people still do not have access to it in adequate quantity, quality and diversity. Efforts are required to diversify, intensify, and to enhance the sustainability and resilience of food production. This calls for increased investments in research, extension

infrastructure, and policies able to promote the participation of small holders in the markets, including a rethinking of the allocation of public support to agriculture.

In the area of economic and social access, acceleration of income growth and poverty reduction is required, particularly in rural areas, focusing on accelerating the growth of agricultural-based value chains. The reorientation and rationalization of the social safety net system towards a more comprehensive social-protection approach that has been recently undertaken needs to consider explicitly the integration of social protection with agricultural and nutrition interventions. With regard to the area of food utilization and nutrition, it is crucial to leverage fully the role of agriculture for nutrition, with a focus on mothers and children and prioritization of nutrition improvement in the first 1,000 days of life. Furthermore, it is essential to ensure full complementarity and synergies between food-based and health and sanitation-focused nutrition interventions.

The report also updated the CIP budget and monitored financial commitments, proving that the CIP has been a powerful tool for fund mobilization. The nationally owned strategy allowed Bangladesh to take advantage of the opportunities generated by the renewed global attention to food security and nutrition that stemmed from the G8 Summit in L'Aquila¹⁰ and the Rome Summit on Food Security in 2009, following the international food price crisis. Bangladesh formulated the CIP in according to the principles adopted in Rome, and thereby became the first Asian country to receive funding under the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program.

The CIP has led to substantial up-scaling of investments to accelerate progress towards the MDGs on reducing hunger and under-nutrition¹¹, with funding increased by US\$ 2.2 billion¹² in the fiscal year 2010-2011.

The success of the NFPCSP has two key factors. Firstly, with its team of national and international experts that work side-by-side with government staff, the NFPCSP has helped strengthen human and institutional capacities; enhanced access to information on food security and nutrition for policymaking; and promoted broad-based coordination and collaboration for policy monitoring. Through continuous on-the-job training and mentoring, the NFPCSP has supported the Food Planning and Monitoring Unit in its role of secretariat to the various high level committees, providing technical and operational support to the Food Policy Working Group and Thematic Teams and in leading extensive consultations among stakeholders. Secondly, by financing and supporting a large research grant scheme, it has engaged in a process of knowledge generation and dialogue among stakeholders in support of a more inclusive, knowledge-based policy process. By supporting the formulation of interventions and acting as a facilitator of dialogue between donors, government and other key stakeholders, the NFPCSP has contributed to coordination, alignment and

enhanced aid effectiveness.

The experience of the NFPCSP shows that supporting governments in developing consistent policy, investment and associated institutional frameworks can (i) enhance results orientation, consistency and effectiveness of the interventions for food security and good nutrition; (ii) facilitate resource mobilization for combating hunger and poverty; (iii) and promote institutional strengthening for food security governance, enhanced coordination and improved working modalities.

Lessons learned: Key factors for replication in other countries

The Bangladesh experience shows that policy process, within a multi-stakeholder environment, can benefit from a strong link to participatory knowledge generation through partnerships and dialogue in information dissemination and consensus building. Moreover, it shows that better policy and investment frameworks are necessary for more effective policymaking. In and of themselves, however, they are not sufficient. Formulation of policy frameworks needs to proceed jointly with the development of institutional, technical and managerial capacities to devise, implement and monitor interventions, while specific efforts are needed to enhance coordination within and among government agencies, development partners and civil society.

Enhancing policy making through institutional development requires time, resources and political commitment. Government ownership, leadership and commitment to a long-term undertaking is indispensable as well as the determination of development partners to provide not only funds and technical assistance, but to also actively engage in the processes of policy and institutional development. A government decision to move towards a comprehensive approach to food security initiated the NFPCSP, which has counted on the continued commitment of FAO, EU and USAID for almost 10 years.

Another key requirement is the identification of a technical institution of the Government that is at the core of the national policy processes, and that can act as a champion for the capacity development process. In Bangladesh, the Food Planning and Monitoring Unit is both the main beneficiary and the implementing partner. Equally important is the establishment of strong partnerships with key stakeholders in the donor community and civil society based on a demonstrated capacity to respond promptly to emerging needs for technical assistance. The NFPCSP has established its network of partnerships and its credibility by providing sound technical responses on emerging issues and collaborating with key stakeholders.

For such an undertaking, a critical mass and sound mix of highly qualified resident expertise is required. The NFPCSP has 10 resident international and national professionals, mostly at PhD level, covering availability, ac-

cess, nutrition, management and communication. They are supported by strong linkages with in-country, regional and global sources of expertise such as those provided by national experts and FAO.

Conclusions

Bangladesh is an exemplary case of a long-term effort to put in place a comprehensive framework for food and nutrition security policies and investments consistent with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, L'Aquila Initiative on Food Security and the Rome Principles for Sustainable Global Food Security.

The process that led to the establishment of this framework has been complex, especially because of the multi-sectoral approach that involved multiple government and non-government actors. It required an articulated institutional framework and wide consultations to define inclusive solutions that involve development partners, the private sector and civil society.

Effective policymaking demands technical and institutional capacity strengthening, generation of information and knowledge, and dialogue and partnerships. Located within a key government agency, NFPCSP has extended support to multiple government and non-government agencies, promoted the sustained commitment of several stakeholders to various stages of the policy process, and favoured the alignment of actions and resource mobilization to the country's evolving priorities, policies and institutional setting.

The Bangladesh experience with the CIP shows a possible third way between project-based and budgetary support in promoting aid effectiveness and mobilization of international assistance and domestic resources for food and nutrition security.

Endnotes

- 1 Government of Bangladesh (2011).
- 2 Hossain (2012).
- 3 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2010).
- 4 FAO (2012).
- 5 Stunting is estimated at 41 percent as of 2011, compared to over 63 percent in 1990 (FAO 2012).
- 6 *The Economist*, 3 November 2012.
- 7 Food Planning and Monitoring Unit, Ministry of Food and Disaster Management (2010).
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 National Institute of Population Research and Training, Mitra and Associates, and MEASURE DHS ICF International (2012).
- 10 The L'Aquila Food Security Initiative.
- 11 Food Planning and Monitoring Unit, Ministry of Food and Disaster Management (2012).
- 12 Of which US\$ 1,713 million is from the Government of Bangladesh (109 percent increase) and US\$ 457 million from development partners (31 percent increase), bringing the share of the budget already financed to over 57 percent, despite the budget increased in the same period by US\$ 947 million (11.6 percent increase) to a total of over US\$ 9.1 billion.

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Disclaimer

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