

Food security for all

Intimate partner violence is high in Bangladesh with nearly three-fourths of married women having experienced violence at the hands of their husband, with about a half having experienced physical violence by husband in a year, writes Abdul Bayes

Securing Food for All in Bangladesh is a compilation of articles, by foreign and Bangladeshi experts, spanning 15 chapters addressing four broad issues — (a) agricultural technology adoption; (b) input use and agricultural productivity; (c) food security and output market; and (d) poverty, food security, and women's empowerment. It is, in a nutshell, an account of the changing agriculture and food security in Bangladesh backed by rigorous research. Pitted against historical perspective, at times, future policy prescriptions are drawn from the findings of the research. The book is edited by Akhter U Ahmed, Nurul Islam and Mustafa K Mujeri and is published by the University Press Limited.

To begin with, an introduction by the editors poses progress in food security improvement over time arguing that despite declining arable land, Bangladesh has performed well in feeding a large population with domestic production ('Green Revolution'). In fish production, call it a 'silver revolution', the country has recently ranked top; no less exhilarating is, perhaps, the growth of the livestock sector.

Food availability has increased and so has food access adduced to real wage acceleration, rise in per capita income, poverty reduction, social safety nets etc. Improvement in food use is reflected by a steep reduction in under five deaths, a fall in stunting rate and, more importantly, chronic undernutrition and undernutrition among women of reproductive age witnessed a sharp wane over the past decades.

But chiming challenges remain the authors' acumen — a third of the cultivators are 'pure tenants' where incentives can hardly reach, marginal and small farms starve of working capital and necessary extension services, imperfect dairy market has allowed milk importers to transfer the costs to consumers without transferring benefits, the shortage of feed and fodder, inadequate supply of veterinary services, quality control etc loom large on the horizon.

By and large, poor nutrition in Bangladesh is rooted in poverty, food insecurity, gender inequality and lack of access to basic health, education and water, sanitation and hygiene services.

A few words on the future trajectory of food security improvement also come from the introductory chapter where the editors emphasise increasing income of small commercial farmers, increasing investments in agricultural research and extension services, creating non-farm employment opportunities, increasing production of high-value crops, revamping social safety nets to reach the most vulnerable, ensuring nutrition during pregnancy, reaching adolescent girls with health, nutrition, and empowerment interventions.

'Food security in Bangladesh has been greatly enhanced over the past two decades by policies that have allowed a major public food grain distribution to co-exist with private sector trade. Increasing the efficiency of the public distribution system while maintaining incentives for private sector trade can help ensure that food security continues to improve in the coming decades as well.'

The existing characteristics of the rice value chain in Bangladesh indicate that the chains are neither competitive nor equitably distributed — the millers, wholesalers and large buyers in the downstream making the most margin and farmers in the upstream deprived most.

Improving the rice value chain bring significant advantages to the participants, especially the small rice farmers, through enhanced competitiveness and more equitable value addition across the entire chain. A reliance on the market alone is unlikely to ensure; the government should ensure fair price to growers through procurement and other means and support farmers through creating storage facilities eg co-operative, private-public partnership and encouraging farmers to enter into more vertical and horizontal partnership to enhance capability and bargaining power.

Contrary to common perceptions and previous studies, real wages in rural areas have escalated in recent years, coupled with comparative advantage in readymade garments and other factors that led to an increase in labour demand and calls for a reorientation in agricultural policies with due attention to raising overall productivity.



Securing Food for All in Bangladesh
ed Akhter U Ahmed, Nurul Islam & Mustafa K Mujeri
The University Press Limited, Dhaka

In delving deep into the sudden price spurt on the domestic market of onions in early July 2013, the authors attributed the rise partly to a decline in onion production in India 'although onion imports in Bangladesh increased

substantially from April to July 2013.' The irony was that onion price still rose sharply during this period as 'Bangladeshi traders anticipated a significant (weather-induced) decline in imports of onion from India. Ipso fac-

to, they began speculative stockpiling of the product in order to make extra profits'. So the market supply declined not only because of reduced imports from India but also because of a curb on the release of stocks. Some short, medium and long-term measures are recommended to avert future crisis in onion market.

The fish value chain is growing and transforming very rapidly in all segments. The 'quiet revolution' in the fish value chain is a domestic market revolution — first, tripling of volumes and actors in all segments of the value chain over the past decade; rapid capital deepening in the form of investments by hundreds and thousands of actors in the fish value chain apparent in a great jump in feed use, equipment and pond construction, and investments in mills, hatcheries and vehicles. Second, diversification and specialisation beyond carps to commercial tilapia and catfish have raised yield. A reduction in the prices of farmed fish over time added to food security. 'However, the direct influence of government and NGOs in causing this quiet revolution has been relatively minor in comparison with investments of millions of farm households and medium enterprises.'

The celebrating news that headcount poverty dwindled over the decades seems to conceal more than it reveals — there has been substantial mobility into and out of poverty using panel data from the Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey 2011–2012 and 2015, results of descriptive analysis suggest that a substantial share of rural population — say, nearly a fifth — are trapped in persistent poverty and the average consumption over time is below the poverty line over the two rounds of the survey; about 16 per cent of the population moving out of poverty and 9 per cent falling into poverty. The role of social norms and values is important in poverty alleviation; women's empowerment and less violence increase probability of upward mobility. Access to education and electricity, share of non-farm income, size of social safety net transfers matter for an upward mobility.

Intimate partner violence is high in Bangladesh with nearly three-fourths of currently married women having

experienced violence at the hands of their husband; about 50 per cent having experienced physical violence by current husband and one-fifths having been inflicted in the past 12 months. Transfer programmes, like widely used cash transfer (or even microcredit), are assumed to reduce violence by increasing income to the household. But it could be observed that only so long the programme persists, the trick works.

However, if backed by behavioural change communication, transfers tend to significantly trim violence, even 6–10 months after a transfer programme ends. 'We present suggestive evidence that the post-program effect of transfers linked to BCC may have occurred through sustained increases in women's threat points, greater social costs to men of inflicting violence, or long-term improvements in household well-being — even focused on children, nutrition rather than women.'

But comforts arising out of past performance is outpaced by emerging concerns: 'Future agricultural growth and food and nutrition security are threatened by population growth, worsening soil fertility, diminishing access to land and other scarce natural resources, increasing vulnerability of crop varieties to pests and diseases, and persistent poverty leading to poor access to food. In addition, the impacts of climate change — an increase in the incidence of natural disasters, sea intrusion, and soil salinity — will exacerbate food and nutrition insecurity in the coming decades if corrective measures are not taken....'

Securing Food for all in Bangladesh is a book of immense importance, especially to those interested in the transformation of agriculture and food security in Bangladesh. It has embodied theories, empirics, practice and suggestions that would help policy formulations. But on a few fronts, things have radically changed in pre- and amidst-pandemic periods which, we hope, the book would address in its revised editions.

Abdul Bayes, a former professor of economics and vice-chancellor, Jahangirnagar University, is now an adjunct faculty at East west University.