



# The Financial Express

## Policy instruments for food sector

Abdul Bayes | Saturday, 29 February 2020

Among the things the nation can proudly celebrate in Mujib Borsho is, one is the achievements in the food sector. It is mainly because. Over the past three decades or so, Bangladesh has achieved enviable progress in improving food security and nutritional status of its population. This is no less an achievement given the statistics that if the whole world population were put in the USA, its density per square kilometre would not be as high as it is in Bangladesh. Leaving the gloomy side behind, food production has outpaced population growth, denying Malthusian doomsday.

Bangladesh has broadly achieved self-sufficiency in food. Interestingly, consumption of rice at household level has declined while consumption of other food increased. As per some available information, real wage rates of agricultural labour have almost doubled during the period 2000-2015. By and large, Bangladesh can boast an accelerated economic growth that has enabled her to reach the lower middle-income country status in 2015 running on a track for graduation from the UN's Least Developed Countries (LDC) list in 2024.

Substantial progress has also been made in improving the nutritional outcomes and the evidences are as follows. Available reports show that indicators of malnutrition such as the rates of stunting and wasting among children under five-years of age have declined over time although stagnated in recent years. "For example, the prevalence of undernourishment has declined from 35 per cent in 1990-2002 to 14.7 per cent in 2016-18 (FAO 2019). Similarly, the incidence of stunting among children under five years of age decreased from 51 per cent in 2004 to 31 per cent in 2017-18 (BDHS 2019). These indicate a commendable progress in achieving food and nutrition security in the past.

Despite these impressive achievements of the past, however, available evidences and reports, (paraphrased at times in this write-up), show that "Bangladesh still faces daunting challenges for ensuring food and nutrition security of its current population of around 160 million which is projected to reach over 186 million by 2030. There are several emerging trends that are likely to further increase the challenges for overcoming food and nutrition insecurity in the future". These include, inter alia, continuing population growth, increasing income inequality, deceleration in agricultural productivity growth, increasing scarcity of agricultural labour resulting from internal and international migration and mechanisation, likely adverse impact of climate change on food productivity, increasing pace of urbanisation that will result in urban population becoming more reliant on the smooth functioning of the market chain to access food, and rising concerns about food safety.

"Food safety is becoming an important issue due to increasing geographic separation of consumption and production centers as a result of urbanization. Growth of the middle- and upper-income classes that increasingly rely on purchased food that may go through some degree of processing also makes food safety an important consideration. Increasing incomes and urbanization have led to some dietary diversification but the rate has been slow, with cereals still accounting for 65-70% of the dietary energy intake. Diets have remained largely unbalanced with diets of more than 50% the population being deficient in Vitamin A, calcium, zinc and iron."



Experts are of the view that there is also the need to avoid the "multiple burden of malnutrition" that can result in high incidences of obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCD). Perhaps needless to mention that these are important factors, and if not addressed properly, can even threaten the progress made so far.

In line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, the government has committed to reducing poverty and improving nutritional status by 2030. In addition, as drawn from various research documents, "the Government of Bangladesh has subscribed to the objectives of Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) Framework for Action, Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement and the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition. Several initiatives are already underway with the Second Country Investment Plan for Nutrition-Sensitive Food Systems (2016-20) providing a framework for resource mobilisation, prioritisation and integration of multisectoral actions. Given the commitment made by the honourable prime minister to ensure "food security for all", and various trends that are likely to threaten food and nutrition security in the future, "there is clearly a need to redesign, revise and update the existing policies into a new food and nutrition policy for guiding investments and other interventions aimed at achieving food and nutrition security for all".

Food policies in the past used to give prominence to rice and, ipso facto, achievement of self-sufficiency in rice was the perennial objective. It is good news that with the achievement of self-

sufficiency, the role of rice, although still very important, is changing and it is now time to develop policies and policy instruments that promote production diversification to supply a range of food products, and promote the consumption of healthy, nutritious, diverse, safe and balanced diets. Improvements in water, sanitation and health are also needed to ensure proper utilisation of the nutrients consumed. Past food and nutrition policies did not adequately emphasise the potential synergy that can be realised through a proper integration of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive approaches for generating the desired nutritional outcomes rapidly and effectively. "A new policy that is holistic and promotes the use of a "nutrition lens" to assess and prioritise various options will help design multi-sectoral inter-linked interventions that are centred around improving the nutritional outcomes. In addition, a new policy that cuts across the mandate of over a dozen ministries can provide an institutional platform under one umbrella for facilitating coordination (part of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16), partnership and policy coherence (Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17) for effective implementation".

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