

- Poverty has declined substantially in Bangladesh, but nutrition improvements have not kept pace
- For better results, nutrition needs to be mainstreamed into all relevant sectors
- Multisectoral coordination should be enhanced by building on the existing institutional setting

Strengthening the impact of poverty reduction on nutrition

Declining poverty rates in Bangladesh have been accompanied by a significant increase in people's purchasing power, improving their access to basic foods. However, contrary to the long-term trend, recent drops in income poverty have not resulted in equally strong progress in nutritional outcomes. To maximise the impact of poverty reduction on nutrition, interventions need to be targeted and integrated across all relevant sectors, including agriculture, health and education. Strengthening the institutional setup for multisectoral coordination will be key.

Better access to food

Along with economic growth, Bangladesh's commitment to social protection and safety net programmes has led to a sustained decline in poverty. Fewer people are poor and the average poor person is better off today than in the past. The share of households that do not spend enough to meet their basic needs almost halved over the past twenty years, from 56.9 percent in 1989 to 31.5 percent in 2010. Improvements are even more pronounced when applying a lower expenditure threshold. Since 2005 alone, nine million people have been lifted out of extreme poverty. These developments put the poverty target of MDG1 within reach by 2015.

The decline in poverty has been accompanied by an overall improvement of people's purchasing power, which strengthened their ability to access basic foods, especially of the poor. In 2011, average agricultural wages could buy 7.4 kilogrammes of rice, compared to just 4.6 kilogrammes in 2008. This increase of more than 60 percent is particularly noteworthy considering that the country's main staple even cost more at the end of this period.

Year	Poverty	Stunting	Underweight
2000	48.9 %	50.8 %	42.3 %
2010 *	31.5 %	41.0 %	36.0 %
Change/Year	- 4.30 %	- 1.86 %	- 1.36 %

Table 1: Nutrition improvements not keeping pace with poverty reduction
* Refers to 2011 for stunting and underweight.
Source: BBS, NIPORT, WB.

Nutrition outcomes lagging behind

In spite of these developments, recent improvements in reducing malnutrition have been relatively less pronounced. While poverty declined strongly over the past ten years, the fall in the prevalence of chronically malnourished (stunted) and underweight children has been markedly slower (see Table 1).

Higher incomes alone thus do not seem to be sufficient to promote appropriate nutritional behaviour. Indeed, many children in wealthy households also display a poor nutritional status, with about one in four attaining a height (stunting) or weight (underweight) that is significantly below the norm.

In a longer-term perspective, however, linkages between poverty reduction and nutrition improvements become more pronounced. Considering developments over the past twenty years, Bangladesh's progress in reducing malnutrition is remarkable, and almost in line with successes in poverty reduction (Figure 1, next page). While malnutrition remains a severe concern in the country, the drop in the prevalence of stunting and underweight is substantial, from above 60 percent in 1990 to around 40 percent in 2010.

Is the relationship between poverty reduction and nutrition simply blurred by a time lag? To some extent

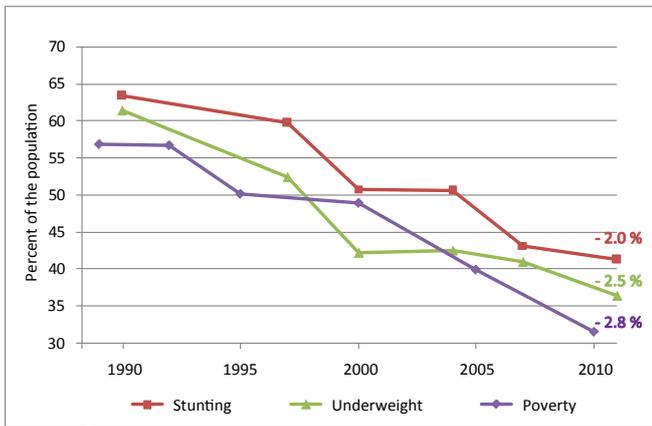


Figure 1: Long-term trends in poverty reduction and nutritional outcomes
 Note: Poverty is measured using the Cost of Basic Needs method. Value for 1989 is estimated assuming it changed proportionally to poverty measured using the Direct Calorie Intake method.
 Source: BBS, NIPORT, WB.

this may be true as higher incomes first need to trickle down into nutrition gains. Especially the prevalence of chronic malnutrition will only disappear when nutrition improves over an extended period of time. To prevent stunting, for example, the first 1000 days of a child are crucial; a period that already starts during a woman's pregnancy. However, the time component explains only part of Bangladesh's success story. More importantly, targeted policies and programmes have helped to ensure that higher incomes translate into better outcomes.

Integrating interventions across relevant sectors

Experiences throughout the world demonstrate that nutritional successes are stronger when poverty reduction is coupled with nutrition-specific interventions. This is particularly true for the fight against child malnutrition. Improving maternal knowledge, for example on appropriate feeding and care practices, and facilitating the transfer of this knowledge into practical solutions are of primary importance, while community-centred approaches can help increase nutrition awareness and behaviour change across all income groups.

A greater focus on integrated solutions is needed to maximise and accelerate the impact of poverty reduction on nutrition. Linkages are particularly vital with agriculture, health and education sectors. Nutrition interventions will be more effective if they are adapted to the realities of rural populations, such as promoting the cultivation of fruits, vegetables,

poultry and fish to reduce micronutrient deficiencies through homestead gardening. Similarly, cash and food transfer schemes, such as school-milk programmes, can contribute to more diversified diets by giving beneficiaries greater access to a broader range of food groups. Finally, health and hygiene interventions such as immunisation campaigns, as well as the upgrading of water and sanitation facilities can be important catalysts to boost the nutritional status of people.

Multi-sectoral collaboration is key

The National Food Policy and the Country Investment Plan provide a comprehensive framework to improve food security and nutrition in Bangladesh. While the Government has started mainstreaming nutrition into relevant sectors, the formulation and implementation of interventions, the mobilisation of resources, and the collaboration of all stakeholders need to be further improved.

Filling resource gaps identified in the Monitoring Report of the Country Investment Plan is an essential part in this process, as is the further alignment of priorities of the Government and Development Partners. At the same time, it is important to avoid the proliferation and fragmentation of coordination mechanisms between the different sectors. Instead, existing bodies should be strengthened and consolidated to improve effectiveness. Against this background, the Food Planning and Monitoring Committee should be enlarged to also include representatives of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, and other ministries relevant to food and nutrition security, food safety and quality. This would further strengthen the existing coordination mechanisms and reinforce the comprehensiveness of Bangladesh's efforts towards food and nutrition security ●

- Key sources: ● FPMU. National Food Policy Plan of Action and Country Investment Plan Monitoring Report 2012, Ministry of Food ● Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Household Income and Expenditure Survey, various issues ● National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT). Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey, various issues ● World Bank (WB). World Development Indicators.