

- A balanced diet is essential to lead an active and healthy life
- Food consumption in Bangladesh is gradually becoming more diversified
- Promoting non-rice food production can provide additional momentum

Strengthen diversification to further improve food and nutrition security

Households in Bangladesh are slowly changing their diets. They consume a broader range of foods, with a larger share of calories coming from vegetables, fruits and animal-products. These are promising developments to strengthen people's food and nutrition security. However, food consumption remains heavily centred on cereals, with rice alone providing almost two thirds of energy intake. Diversifying domestic food production could further improve the situation.

Encouraging trends

Rice is the national staple in Bangladesh. It is part of almost every meal in the country and generally constitutes the main source of energy in people's diets. This is particularly true for households in rural areas, where average daily rice consumption currently amounts to 442 grams. Such a diet is unbalanced and does not provide the basis for an active and healthy life.

Considering that eating habits are part of a country's cultural identity and as such have evolved over centuries, it is encouraging to see that food consumption is diversifying in Bangladesh. While cereals constituted more than 80 percent of people's daily calorie intake twenty years ago, this share has gradually fallen to below 70 percent. The current level is still a long way from the desirable maximum of 60 percent, but such a goal now seems within reach, especially for urban populations (Figure 1).

With rice consumption decreasing, other food groups are gradually gaining importance. Between 2000 and 2010, average per capita consumption of essentially every food group except cereals grew. Developments have been particularly promising as regards the

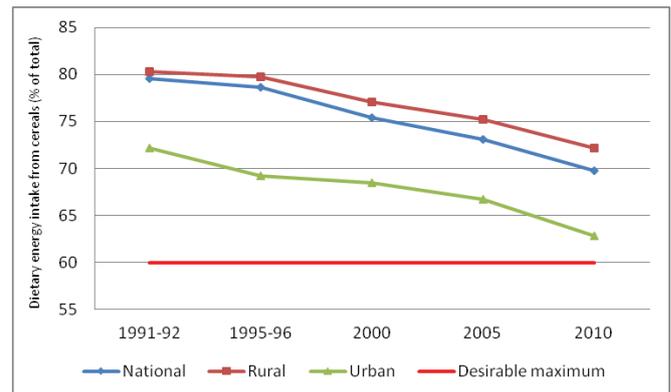


Figure 1: Cereals becoming less dominant in Bangladeshi diets.

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics

consumption of fruits and vegetables and animal foods, which are rich in protein and micronutrients. For other foods, the change in dietary preferences must be seen with some reservation. Increased intake of sugar and edible oils, for example, is still below the desired level but might turn into a health concern if recent trends continue. In addition, the consumption of spices already lies significantly above the desirable level for a balanced diet (see Table 1 on reverse side).

Several factors have contributed to this development, including increased incomes, changing lifestyles, greater consumer awareness, and improved availability of different foods. The decline in poverty rates has arguably been the most powerful driver as it allows more people to afford better diets. Similarly, international migrants sending money home and adopting new eating habits of their respective host countries have profoundly influenced the consumption patterns of family members who stayed in Bangladesh.

| Food group | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 | Desirable |
|---|------|------|------|-----------|
| Cereals | 487 | 469 | 464 | 375 |
| of which rice | 459 | 440 | 416 | 350 |
| Fruits and vegetables | 169 | 190 | 211 | 400* |
| Potatoes | 55 | 63 | 70 | 60 |
| Legumes | 16 | 14 | 14 | 60 |
| All animal foods (including milk & eggs) | 87 | 95 | 109 | 180 |
| Edible oils | 13 | 17 | 21 | 40 |
| Sugar | 7 | 8 | 8 | 18 |
| Spices | 50 | 53 | 66 | 20 |

Table 1: Trends in food intake (grams/capita/day)

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Desirable level derived from BAN-HRDB. * Value recommended by WHO/FAO (2003).

In addition, targeted interventions such as integrated homestead farming, social protection schemes and nutrition education programmes have facilitated or directly promoted access to a larger variety of foods, and strengthened awareness of the importance of dietary diversity. Finally, a broader set of food items is available on local markets, also as a result of increased imports. As a matter of fact, while diets are gradually becoming more diverse, domestic food production has not adjusted at the same speed and remains dominated by rice.

Production diversification needed

Food supply has been steadily expanding, with current growth rates of agricultural GDP exceeding the Government's target of 4.4%. Despite this development, agricultural production is not becoming more diversified. Indeed, the share of rice in total food value-added remained stable during the past decade, and even increased in the recent past. The lack of diversification is also illustrated in the share of cropped area used for rice production, which has stayed around 75-80 percent over the past thirty years.

As Bangladesh approaches self-sufficiency in rice, the country will face a trade-off between generating an increasing exportable surplus of rice and a higher degree of self-reliance for other foods. While Bangladesh should sustain the growth of rice production in line with the needs of a growing population, it is time to scale up investments towards more diversified, higher value-added agricultural production so as to improve the country's food and nutrition security from two sides: enhance domestic availability of a larger variety of foods and increase farmers' incomes.

A more diversified production system will also have positive macroeconomic impacts, and could reverse a potentially challenging trend. With demand for non-rice foods increasing faster than domestic supply, the country's agricultural trade balance has deteriorated fourfold in the past decade, to a deficit of more than USD 5 billion. Scaling up production of fruits and vegetables (trade deficit of USD 870 million), legumes (-USD 379 million), as well as dairy products and eggs (-USD 236 million) would significantly improve this situation.

What can be done?

Over the past ten years, rice production in Bangladesh increased by 38%, to almost 34 million tonnes in 2011/12. In view of this remarkable progress in satisfying people's basic food needs, the focus now should shift towards ensuring an adequate degree of diversification. Investments in fisheries, livestock, horticulture, and other non-rice crops need to be scaled up in order to raise productivity and encourage farmers to diversify their production.

As outlined in the Country Investment Plan for agriculture, food security and nutrition, support is particularly needed to promote research and extension in non-rice crops; improve the management of natural resources for fisheries; advance animal health and husbandry for increased livestock production; and invest in processing and marketing capacities. These investments should be complemented with interventions that facilitate the engagement of small farmers in more productive activities, such as promoting access to diversified and high-quality inputs, credit, insurance, predictable social safety nets, as well as improved market information and marketing structures ●

Key sources: ● Bangladesh Applied Nutrition and Human Resource Development Board (BAN-HRDB). 2007. National Food Basket of Bangladesh for 2007-2012 to Ensure Balanced Nutrition. ● Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Report of the Household & Expenditure Survey 2005 and 2010. ● Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. 2011. Bangladesh Country Investment Plan. A road map toward investments in agriculture, food security and nutrition. ● FPMU. National Food Policy and Country Investment Plan Monitoring Report 2012. ● WHO/FAO. 2003. Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases. Report of a joint WHO/FAO Expert Consultation.