

Poverty Alleviation Programmes in Bangladesh and their
impact on nutritional status of the vulnerable groups

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Country paper - Bangladesh
by

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Introduction

The national poet of Bangladesh Kazi Nazrul Islam said "Poverty thou art the giver of greatness". It might be true in the spiritual sense, but in our practical life poverty causes malnutrition, unhygienic conditions, and disease.

Ensuring physical well-being of an individual is perhaps the first step towards achieving overall well-being of a population. An individual can think of satisfying other material needs only after his or her basic physiological need is satisfied. Hence, it may be argued that in the hierarchy of needs for human resource development, nutrition probably should occupy the first place.

Poverty leads to hunger and malnutrition. The nutritional well-being of a population is a reflection of the performance of social and economic sectors in national development. Poverty, in fact, is a multifaceted and a dynamic concept. It has, among others, social, economic, political and demographic dimensions. But, poverty shows its ugliest face in terms of hunger and malnourishment.

Worldwide, more than 1.3 billion people live on the income equivalent of less than one dollar per day. The majority of them (700 million) are desperately poor and chronically hungry. No place in the globe is immune to poverty. With few exceptions, the incidence of poverty is higher in rural than urban areas. Women and girls suffer from poverty more than men and boys. Infants, young children, and elderly people are particularly vulnerable to poverty and malnutrition.

Protein-energy malnutrition is defined as a structural problem embedded in poverty and under-development¹. Under-nutrition has been identified as one of the most severe public health problems in many developing countries like Bangladesh. It has been estimated that, nearly 800 million people remain hungry² worldwide, and every year, millions of children die due to under-nutrition³.

In Bangladesh, about 72% of children aged six years and below are under-weight and 50% are stunted⁴. Mothers are also the worst victims of malnutrition. About 30-40% of the newborns are below the normal weight (less than 2.5 kg) and 70% of mothers and children suffer from anaemia due to iron-deficiency⁵. The prevalence of nightblindness due to vitamin A deficiency is 1.7%, and iodine deficiency disorders affect 47.1% of the total population⁶.

Poverty alleviation programmes in Bangladesh

Government strategy

The government programmes and strategies in poverty alleviation and creation of employment opportunities are laid down in the country's Five Year Plans (FYPs). The First FYP (1973-78) gave special emphasis on poverty alleviation, whereas the Second (1980-85) and the Third (1985-90) FYPs aimed at employment creation. Subsequently, the government intends to give more emphasis on poverty alleviation in the Fourth FYP (1991-95). The poverty alleviation programmes (PAPs) have received about 17% of the total allocations in the fourth plan, 13% in the third plan, and 14.3% in the second plan⁷.

As poverty is the most pressing problem in the rural areas of Bangladesh, a rural development plan must address the problems of poverty. The Fourth Five Year Plan envisages to pursue an employment oriented growth policy.

The focus of this policy is to promote greater opportunities for the rural poor for productive employment in both farm and non-farm sectors of the economy. The poverty eradication and employment orientation of the FFYP gives special focus on rural development and rural institution with the following strategies:

1. reduce rural poverty by increasing gainful employment and income opportunities on a sustained basis through expansion of the productive sectors;
2. develop rural infrastructure;
3. improve technology and skills for productive activities and ensure better access for the rural poor to the means of production;
4. facilitate agricultural development through institutional support and expansion of irrigation;
5. improve basic physical infrastructure in the rural areas; and
6. promote participation of women in rural development.

The rural poor who need to be concerned by the programmes belongs to three socio-economic groups: (a) landless agricultural labourers, (b) small farmers, and (c) rural informal sector (e.g., poor households engaged in non-agricultural sector).

Poverty alleviation: role of the government

Since independence in 1971, many development programmes with specific aim to alleviate poverty have been implemented in Bangladesh by both the government and NGOs⁸. Such programmes and their objectives are summarized below.

Ministry of Agriculture:

The Ministry of Agriculture, through its different agencies, has been implementing development projects in Bangladesh.

Agricultural extension, research, and support services are the major intervening areas through which farmers have access to new technology, demonstration, training facilities, inputs, land and water resources, development of farm and non-farm activities, etc. To accelerate production and increase income as well as employment of the farmers, there were 40 investment projects in the Annual Development Plan (ADP) for 1991-92. A summarized list of the projects is given below:

1. CIDA funded crop diversification programmes;
2. Comprehensive crop rehabilitation programme in the southern districts;
3. Horticulture research and development;
4. Crop storage cum-credit project with SIDA assistance;
5. Marginal and small farmer's systems crop intensification project with IFAD funding;
6. Agriculture support services project with IDA assistance;
7. Minor irrigation development projects;
8. Poverty alleviation through integrated area development programme;
9. Strengthening to national vegetable seed production; etc.

The common objective of different projects implemented by the Ministry of agriculture is to alleviate poverty through ensuring appropriate technology package (low cost technology, high productivity technology), improved advisory/extension services, increased access to water resources, skill development, formal/informal credit, market, etc.

Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development
Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB)

BRDB has gained experience in managing poverty alleviation programmes. It has been implementing a number of projects in different regions of the country. The poverty alleviation projects implemented by BRDB are:

1. Productive Employment Program (RD-5) in Faridpur, Madaripur, and Kurigram districts;
2. Production and Employment Projects (RD-9) in greater Rangpur district except Kurigram;
3. Production and ^{Employment} Program (RD-12) in greater Dinazpur, Bogra, Khulna, Barisal, Jamalpur, and Mymensingh districts;
4. The Women's Program in 100 ⁽¹⁰⁾ tannas in all the greater districts.

The major common objectives of the poverty alleviation projects of BRDB are to:

- a. increase production in agriculture and non-agriculture activities;
- b. generation of self-employment opportunities;
- c. increase income through production, business enterprises and employment;
- d. human development through welfare services.

Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD)

BARD, an autonomous institution under the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development, and Co-operatives, was established in 1959 for strengthening country's capacity to alleviate poverty through training, action research, and programme implementation. Small Farmers and Landless Development Programme (SFDP) and Comprehensive Village Development Programme (CVDP) are the two major experiments of BARD towards poverty alleviation. Common objective of all the development initiatives of BARD is to alleviate poverty through organizing rural poor, supplying agricultural inputs, providing credit, and through technology transfer. Evaluation of BARD projects show that the projects had positive impact on income, consumption of nutrient-rich food, knowledge on nutrition, anthropometric status of the target population, etc.

Ministry of Women's Affairs

Keeping the alleviation of poverty in view and in accordance with the national plan, the Ministry of Women's Affairs has been implementing the following projects:

1. Community-based NGO services for poor women and children;
2. Agro-based rural development programme for women;
3. Self-reliance programme for rural women;
4. Women's vocational training for population activities;
5. Day care services for the children of working women;
6. Technologies for rural employment with special reference to women;
7. Rural women's employment creation project;
8. Integrated programme for women's participation in income generation activities, and to give legal assistance

The major common objective of the poverty alleviation projects of the Ministry of Women's Affairs is to integrate women in the development process through socio-economic activities as such to increase productivity and raise their living standards.

Ministry of Youth and Sports

Youth is an overwhelming segment of population, within the age group of 15-30 years, constitutes about one third of total population in Bangladesh.

Major programmes of the ministry towards alleviating poverty are:

1. Project on skill development training, motivation, and support for self-employment activities for the un-employed youths;
2. Thana resource development and employment project. The project aims at testing an institutional framework for promoting economically and financially viable non-farm employment for the rural poor.

Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief

Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programme has been implemented by the ministry in collaboration with World Food Programme (WFP) and the local union parishads. Its clients are the so-called vulnerable women who get identified by the local union parishads for entitlement to VGD resources (31.25 kg wheat per person per month for a period of two years).

Ministry of Industries

A number of programmes are being implemented by Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) under the Ministry of Industries with aims of reducing poverty in Bangladesh. The main poverty alleviation programmes of BSCIC are summarized below:

1. Women entrepreneurship development programme. The programme is now being implemented in 24 thanas;
2. Development of rural industries;
3. Development of cottage and rural industries project in Chittagong Hill Tracts;
4. Bee-keeping and honey processing;

5. Self-employment for rural destitute women in Bangladesh through cottage industries;
6. Small industries development programme.

The prime objectives of the projects implemented by BSCIC are:

- a. creation of employment;
- b. utilization of local resources;
- c. use of easy and labour intensive technologies;
- d. income generation and distribution;
- e. poverty reduction, and gradual alleviation of poverty.

Ministry of Finance

The priority given to poverty alleviation in the government's action plan need strong follow-up support from relevant service delivery organizations. Banking sector, particularly rural banking institutions, can play an important role in this regard. Institutional credit is a strong instrument to improve the conditions of the rural poor.

Agrani Bank, Bangladesh Krishi Bank (BKB), Janata Bank, Rupali Bank, Rajshahi Krishi Unnayan Bank, and Sonali Bank in the public sector have been implementing 32 programmes for poverty alleviation all over the country since 1979. Among the banks, BKB's contribution is the maximum which accounts for roughly 56% of the total financial assistance provided to the target groups. BKB's position is followed by Grameen Bank which account for about 38% of the total financial assistance. While in terms of financial outlay BKB's position is predominant, the number of beneficiaries is greater than that of the Grameen Bank operations.

Poverty alleviation: role of NGOs

Apart from the government agencies, a large number of non-government and voluntary organizations are also engaged in activities for the socio-economic up-lift of rural poor. The number of non-government organizations (NGOs) have raised significantly over the years. Recently, NGOs have expanded their activities over large areas and in different fields.

Among the major NGOs in Bangladesh, BRAC, Swanirvar Bangladesh, and Proshika are the largest ones in terms of number of staff, programme coverage, and their credit programmes. Helen Keller International (HKI), an international NGO, is also involved in implementing home gardening project along with other agencies in Bangladesh. Major poverty alleviation programmes of NGOs and their objectives are summarized below.

BRAC

BRAC, since its inception in 1972, is involved in implementing multi-dimensional development programmes. Rural Development Programme (RDP) is the core of all development activities of BRAC. BRAC believes that the landless rural poor are capable of bringing changes in their lives, meeting their needs, and improving their socio-economic conditions if they are organized and are given development inputs.

BRAC introduced the RDP in 1986 to assist the landless rural poor to organize themselves into village organizations (VO) for their socio-economic upliftment.

Major components of the programme are:

1. Savings and credit
2. Employment and income generation
Sericulture, social forestry, poultry, livestock, fisherie. vegetable cultivation, irrigation, income generation for the vulnerable group development , and rural enterprise Project.
4. Social Development
Non-formal Primary Education, health and population programme (HPP), paralegal programme, essential health care, training, and management development programme.

More than 80% of the participants of BRAC's programme are women. Major objectives of BRAC's development programmes are empowering the rural poor and alleviating poverty. As of January 1995, a total of 35,894 villages in 50 districts are covered by BRAC's rural development, non-formal primary education and health programmes. Research report suggests that, after a few years of programme implementation, the Rural Development Programme (RDP) of BRAC could improve assets and income status and could also reduce the seasonal vulnerability of the target population in terms of income, expenditure on food, and rice consumption⁹. A study done on the income generation for the vulnerable group development programme (IGVGDP) reveals that the programme could reduce the prevalence of mild and moderate malnutrition (wt-for-age) among the children aged 0-96 months at the end of two years of the programme implementation¹⁰. Other studies suggest that the use of tubewell water and slab latrines was increased and the child mortality was decreased due to BRAC's health and non-health interventions.

Swanirvar Bangladesh

For achieving self reliance in economic and social life, Swanirvar Bangladesh movement was initiated in 1975. At the beginning, emphasis was given to mobilize the support of political leaders, bureaucrats, local leaders and the target groups for strengthening the movement. A training programme was introduced to conscientise the small farmers, landless women and social workers of the local area.

Voluntary mass participation schemes, family planning programmes, literacy programmes, etc. were undertaken towards that objectives. The organization has gained its strength in reaching the rural poor mainly through its credit programme. There are separate groups for men and women and each group consists of five members. The project has covered 138 thanas in 40 districts.

Proshika Manobik Unnayan Kendra

Established in 1976, Proshika assists the rural poor in forming groups and developing regular savings. They also provide them with education, training, credit, and various support services. Proshika's development strategies are directed towards the following socio-economic categories of people: (a) the landless labourers; (b) the farmers who own small land or the tenant farmers who work in rented land for cultivation, and (c) the occupational working people such as fisherman, weavers, rikshaw-pullers, etc. At present, Proshika works in 3176 villages in 22 districts.

Helen Keller International (HKI)

Helen Keller International in Bangladesh is currently operating a project entitled NGO Gardening and Nutrition Education Surveillance Project (NGNESP). The NGNESP is based on two activities: a home gardening pilot project designed to test the impact of home gardening strategies on vitamin A status, general nutritional status, income levels and consumption levels of poor

rural households; and a USAID financed social marketing project with messages and media strategies developed on the basis of qualitative research. A total 13 NGOs are currently implementing the NGNESP project in 90 thanas around the country. HKI provides extensive training, social marketing, coordination of inputs, technical supervision and monitoring. Evaluation studies done on the NGNESP project reveal that the project could increase calorie intake of the target households by about 15%. There was also a substantial decline in severe malnutrition and the prevalence of nightblindness among the children of the target households¹¹.

Indicators of assessing poverty

Food and nutrition approach

The Institute of Nutrition and Food Science (INFS) attempted to measure the poverty situation in Bangladesh through (i) changes in per capita intake of food over a period of time, (ii) estimation of nutritional status of a population with energy intake below some norms called requirements¹². At the recommended required point a line is drawn and the proportion of population below this line is termed as poor.

Changes in per capita consumption of calorie and protein

The changes in per capita food consumption during the period covered by three national nutrition surveys (over 20 years) are shown in Tables 1.

INFS calculated energy requirement for all age and sex on the basis of FAO/WHO suggested methodology to 2273 kcal per person per day¹³. Table 1 shows the per capita calorie intake in 1981-82 in rural Bangladesh falls short of the required level. The gap between the requirement and the actual intake has also widened over time. According to 1991-92 BBS survey, per capita calorie and protein intake in the rural Bangladesh was higher compared to all three surveys done by the INFS.

This could be because of the differences in methodology which was used to carry-out the surveys by the INFS and BBS.

Table 1. Per capita nutrient intake in rural Bangladesh

Nutrients	Requirement (as per WHO/FAO)	INFS survey			BBS survey
		1962-64	1975-76	1981-82	1991-92
Calorie (Kcal)	2,273	2,301	2,094	1,943	2,266
Protein (g)	45.3	57.9	58.5	48.4	63

Income approach

According to this approach the poverty line is determined on the basis of the level of income necessary to satisfy the minimum need of life. The cost of the minimum diet corresponding to the prescribed required minimum calorie is estimated. Then the cost of other non-food items are added. The aggregate thus obtained stands for the income requirement at the poverty line.

Magnitude of poverty

Levels of poverty in rural areas was higher in 1973-74 compared to that in urban areas according to all the studies reported in table 2. It continuously increased in the rural areas until 1981-82 when it peaked at around 80% compared to 65% in 1973-74, according Osmani & Rahman (1986). It then fell dramatically to around 50% in 1983-84 and further to 47% by 1985-86. Similarly the level of poverty in the urban areas also fell from around 50% in 1981-82 to around 40% by 1983-84 and 44% by 1988-89.

Estimates based on HES (Household Income and Expenditure Survey) data show that the head count ratio of poverty declined from 71% in 1973-74 to 44% in 1988-89¹⁴. There was fluctuation in the incidence of poverty around the horizontal trend line. The poverty situation seemed to have deteriorated till 1976-77 when it reached its peak at about 80%. There has been a gradual improvement over the situation in the early 1980s and the magnitude of poverty came down to around 41% in 1985-86. Since the situation deteriorated again and the proportion of rural population living in absolute poverty increased to 44% in 1988-89¹⁵. The sharp increase in the incidence of poverty in the 1970s can be explained by the war of liberation, severe droughts and floods in the early 1970s and disinvestment in assets by the low income group after the famine in 1974. However, a rapid improvement in poverty situation in the 1980s is difficult to explain.

Table 3 shows the prevalence of marginal (poverty line 1) and hard core poverty (poverty line 2) in urban and rural areas of Bangladesh from 1973-74 to 1991-92. Per capita calorie intake was taken as the basis to establish poverty lines.

Table 2. Percentage of population below poverty line in Bangladesh

Year	Rural						Urban					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
1973/74	55.9	47.7	65.27	55.7	84.0	82.9	37.8	32.3	62.0	-	76.0	81.4
1976/77	68.2	62.3	-	61.1	-	-	40.3	37.4	-	-	-	-
1977/78	-	-	-	67.9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1978/79	68.7	-	-	-	-	73.8	4.8	-	-	-	-	-
1981/82	-	-	79.12	-	-	57.0	-	-	50.66	-	-	66.0
1983/84	-	-	49.81	-	-	51.0	-	-	39.52	-	-	66.0
1985/86	-	-	47.08	-	-	48.0	-	-	29.11	-	-	56.0
1988/89	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	44.0

Note: 1, Muqtada (1986), 2. Islam and Khan (1986), 3. Osmani and Rahman (1986), 4. Rahman and Haque (1988), 5. Alamgir (1978), 6. BBS (1991).

Source: Chowdhury and Shahabuddin (1992) and BBS (1991)

Table 3. Proportion of population below recommended calorie intake and "hard core" poverty line by residence

Year	Poverty line I		Poverty line II	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
1973-74	81.4	82.9	28.6	44.3
1981-82	66.0	73.8	30.7	52.2
1983-84	66.0	57.0	35.0	38.0
1985-86	56.0	51.0	19.0	22.0
1988-89	47.6	48.0	26.4	28.6
1991-92	46.7	47.8	24.6	27.6

Source: BBS Statistical Year Book.

Problems and issues related to nutritional improvement

Most of the poverty alleviation programmes in Bangladesh primarily aim to increase income of the participating households through providing credit, skill development training on income generation, and through creating both on-farm and off-farm employment opportunities. Several problems stand on the way of the success of poverty alleviation programmes in improving nutritional status particularly of the vulnerable groups. Some important issues need to be given due emphasis for achieving the objectives of poverty alleviation and nutritional improvement. Some of the important constraints are briefly discussed below:

1. Targeting the programme participants: Most of the poverty alleviation programmes in Bangladesh do not consider nutritional status indicators to select target households. Only economic indicators such as income, land ownership, assets holding, etc. are given priority to define the target programme participants.
2. Reaching the malnourished: An uphill and elusive task is to reach the population who are chronically poor and malnourished. Poverty alleviation programmes in Bangladesh could effectively reach the poor, but, perhaps, not the poorest of the poor in a community. Studies suggest that majority of the malnourished individuals belong to the households who are chronically poor and deficient in major nutrients. Severe economic vulnerability and food insecurity prevent the malnourished households from involving in medium and long term development programmes. There immediate target is to collect minimum required amount of food for survival. In many instances, it is difficult to include the poorest of the poor in the growth oriented traditional poverty alleviation programmes.

3. Scaling-up vs. quality of programmes: In Bangladesh many poverty alleviation programmes are aimed at increasing the area coverage through intensive credit disbursement to the target households. Programme managers at different levels give more emphasis on the amount of loan disbursed as one of the most important and sensitive indicators to measure programme's success. It results in compromising the quality of delivery of other developmental inputs of the programme such as creating awareness, facilitation of extension, and motivational activities.
4. Inadequate nutritional awareness of programme managers: Most of the poverty alleviation programmes in Bangladesh lack skilled manpower adequately trained in nutrition and related issues. This results in inadequate commitment and efficiency in programme planning and implementation to maximize nutritional benefits of the growth oriented poverty alleviation programmes.
5. Inadequate commitment and knowledge on nutrition of the government officials, local leaders, and grassroots level programme implementors.
6. Inadequacy of nutritional objectives: Nutritional status is one of the measures of human well-being. In general, majority of the development programmes in Bangladesh do not have any prior direction on how the programmes would affect nutrition of the target population. Programme objective in terms of improvement of nutritional status of the target population is not well defined and even ignored in many development programmes.

7. Invisibility of nutritional improvement: Nutritional benefits are intangible and often very hard to quantify its improvements using the traditional tools to measure nutritional changes.
8. Difficulty of using nutritional indicators to monitor and evaluate the poverty alleviation programmes.
9. Sustainability of the poverty alleviation programme: This has been an important issue to alleviate poverty and maximizing its impact on nutrition of the target population. Experiences suggest that many poverty alleviation programmes could not sustain after withdrawal of financial supports. Therefore, suitable strategies have to be find out to sustain the programmes in the communities.

Conclusion

The government of Bangladesh, through the Fourth Five Year Plan, has shown strong commitment towards alleviating poverty and improving quality of life of the poor. The government and NGOs have been implementing a large number of poverty alleviation programmes with the emphasis to increase income of the target population without due consideration of the nutritional improvement of the vulnerable groups such as women and children. Therefore, integration of proper nutritional components has become an essential task to transfer the benefits of the poverty alleviation programmes into improved nutrition.

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