

Food security in crisis period: challenges for a hunger free Bangladesh

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The article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has affirmed everyone's right of standard living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. Even though humanity has reached the Moon crossing the planetary boundary, however everyone's equal access to the food is still not achieved. Billion hungry faces remind our failure to achieve 'food for all' everyday. Some unprecedented or some induced events are aggravating the situation to a more complex form, where the word 'right to food' or 'food for all' sounds rhetoric.

"Right to food" is a constitutional right according to National Constitution in Bangladesh. The article 15 (a) of the Constitution states that: "It shall be a fundamental responsibility of the State to attain, [...] a steady improvement in the material and cultural standard of living of the people, with a view to securing to its citizens [...] the provision of the basic necessities of life, including food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care". However, like many other developing countries of the world, Bangladesh yet to fulfill the basic rights of the citizen, particularly attaining food security still remain a high issue in seminar, symposium rather achievement in real terms.

Agreeing with the reality, this year World Food Day's theme has been set as '*Achieving food security in times of crises*', to draw the attention of the international community towards the sufferings of the 70 percent of world population residing in the rural areas, particularly in the developing countries in times of crisis. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations, food security is a situation in which all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

Food insecurity, to whatever extent, is prevailing in the country, mostly affects the segment of population who are mostly dependent on the agricultural for their livelihood. Hunger and malnutrition are the products of food insecurity as outcome of several factors. Price hike of essentials, seasonal food insecurity, increasing price of agricultural inputs, climate related factors led to the food insecurity to a large part of population in Bangladesh who are mainly the rural poor farmers.

Different governments at many crisis periods have been faced with the challenges to ensure food security for the poor people of the country. Diverse inefficiencies within the systems have led to the failure of the range of measures that have been adopted at various times for creating defense for the people against the crisis.

Food crisis and price escalation hits the poor and the vulnerable the hardest, as a large percentage of their income, in fact, is spent on food. Bangladesh has been experiencing rising trend of inflation since early 2007, particularly in case of food grain. Even though the recent price hike is some how affect of global economic recession and consequently price spiraling of the principle food grain, however most often local market does not adjust price with international price decrease. Such less committed profit based market mechanisms increase the sufferings of the poor. Consequently, the poor become deprive from their right of access to food. Indeed, poor governance and some corrupted government officials aggravate the situation. Millions go to sleep hungry due to some people's illegal benefit.

The increase in the price level of the essentials has led to the erosion of real income of people from all segments of the society. Due to the price hike, four million people have been pushed below the poverty line, according to the World Bank Statistics. They further show that the gross income of the poor decreased by 36.7 percent between January 2007 and March 2008.

Farmers in the remote rural areas are the most vulnerable to the price hike as they are deprived from fair price for their products due to various inefficiencies prevailing in the agricultural product market. Several times government has tried to adopt some measures to ensure fair price to the farmers including procurement of food grain from farmers at a price which would provide them a certain level of profit over the production cost. But, the procurement drives has sometimes criticized for inconsistencies and political biasness. In many cases the real farmers did not get the real price and are being forced to sell their production to the middlemen, eventually the middlemen got the advantage of government's procurement action.

Food price monitoring is another safeguard measure of the government against food prices. Along with the government some private institutions are involved in monitoring the food prices in the city markets. Nevertheless, the mechanism in some cases does not produce effective result due to irregularity.

Food grain price has shocked the world to a new level of awareness. And every country individually or regionally has been developing its own safety net to face the looming crisis. In the circumstances, Bangladesh should be prepared to fight the crisis on its own, while at the same time being a food importing country increase its bargaining capacity with the rich and food surplus countries.

Another crisis that hit rural Bangladesh every year is seasonal food insecurity. In the northern part of Bangladesh, a severe food crisis occurs every year which is known as Monga. During the pre-harvest period this periodic food shortage occurs, which is related to land tenure arrangements, the traditional system of subsistence agriculture and the exploitative loan system of the agricultural credit market. In the lean period (Bengali month Kartik) northern districts of Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari, Rangpur, Gaibandha, Bogra and Sirajganj experience widespread unemployment in the agricultural fields.

As there is widespread unemployment during this lean period and due to the unavailability of alternative income opportunities, the people's purchasing capacity decrease to a critical level. In addition, inadequate supply of food grain in the market

and bare food stock in the households forced them to stay hungry. Many people eat poisonous and debris food and suffers from illness. Some innocent deaths due to hunger taunt our so called modern civilization where 'food for all' remain as political agenda rather basic right. Accordingly, government take some initiatives such as introducing food for work in the munga areas, however this is proved not enough to improve the overall scenario.

Along with above mentioned human induced crisis many unprecedented natural events in the form of cyclones, flood, and drought are likely to occur and worsen the situation of food insecurity in a more convoluted form as a result of climate change. The impacts of climate change on agriculture food production are global concerns and for that matter Bangladesh, where lives and livelihoods depend mainly on agriculture, are exposed to a greater danger as the country is one as the top most vulnerable countries due to climate change.

In Bangladesh, the overall impact of climate change on agriculture production will be negative. Impacts of climate change such as temperature extremes, drought, changing rainfall pattern, cyclone, flood and salinity intrusion are declining crop yields every year and the arable land has already decreased to many fold since independent which, mostly threatening the food security.

Moreover, variability in climatic factors is contributing to increase pests, insects and microorganisms in agriculture, resulting huge reduction in crop production. The impact of these changes on the live of the people, economy, infrastructure, agriculture and food security are beginning to unfold as evidenced by cyclone Sidr and Aila.

In response to the flood, cyclone and other climatic hazards governments take post-hazards initiatives in the form of relief, cloth distribution, seed distribution, fertilizer and other agriculture raw materials distribution. These are essential, but nit enough for long term food security. Moreover, corruption and irregularities in the relief distribution make affected people's life more problematic.

The government here should act as a pioneer for taking necessary actions along with Non Government Organizations (NGOs) to face the challenges of food security. The agriculture department must be given top priority to develop climate resistant crop verities and technology for flood affected, munga and costal area. Therefore, agriculture research should be geared up especially plant and animal breeding research.

Moreover, Government and NGOs should promote practices to increase homestead food production for char land dwellers, homestead vegetable production in drought-prone areas. In face of climate change community based adaptation programmes should be prioritized both in policy and practice. The weather forecasting early warning system should be developed to an international standard so that people can be informed about the upcoming disaster whether flood or cyclone and the farmers can take immediate actions to save their crop and properties from the climatic hazards. Thus, loss from climatic hazards can be kept to a minimum level. Both the print and electronic media can play a significant role in spreading the programs to grass-root level.

For saving the greater segment of the population from the various natural and induced crisis, it is required to build strengthen the agriculture sector as majority of population are dependent on agriculture directly for their livelihood. Development of the agricultural sector is vital for developing the rural economy and attaining food security for the rural poor. Hence, increasing investment in agriculture is of utmost importance to enhance the livelihoods and food security in the rural poor communities. According to FAO estimate, developing countries need US\$ 30 to be invested in agriculture in every year to reduce the number of hungry people by half by 2015.

Despite some repulsive news, it is fascinating that Bangladesh has made significant progress in achieving food security as its hunger scenario has improved since 1990 (The Daily Star, 15th October, 2009). According to the Global Hunger Index (GHI) released by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the country's GHI score dropped from 35.9 in 1990 to 24.7 this year. In spite of such improvement in overall hunger scenario, Bangladesh still holds slot in GHI at a level that IFPRI termed 'alarming'. Though the production of cereals has increased significantly since 1996 but access to food still remains a key problem. Keeping people's right to food in central, it will be required for the government to adopt policies to improve food availability by targeting self-sufficiency in food grain and increasing and diversifying domestic production. At the same time ensuring easy access to inputs and fair price of products to the small and marginal farmers is necessary. Affective utilization of the funds that the country receives from the donors should be ensured for adopting the mitigation strategies for climate change. The loopholes prevailing within the market mechanisms should be removed to enhance food accessibility and ensure nutritious food for the increasing population.

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