



Partnering for Food Security in Bangladesh

IFPRI's wide range of partnerships in Bangladesh have influenced the design and operations of large-scale national programs and also provided real-time policy analysis during times of crisis. The country's commitment to using research to guide policy decisions has helped to foster a culture of evaluation that can truly have an impact on hunger and malnutrition.

The story of IFPRI's decades of research in Bangladesh is set against the context of longstanding partnerships with the government and national research organizations. In the 1970s, these collaborations centered on analyzing Green Revolution policies such as fertilizer subsidies. A decade later, attention shifted to the high-stakes system of rationing. In the 1980s, the public food distribution system, one of the aims of which was to transfer food to the poor, was handling more than 2.5 million metric tons of food grains annually, equivalent to 14 percent of total national consumption. In 1989, IFPRI embarked on a number of studies to provide policy insights on the system to the Ministry of Food. IFPRI's research revealed that both rural and urban rationing channels were inefficient and ineffective with leakages, or diversion of food grains, from rural rationing as high as 70 percent. IFPRI researchers recommended eliminating the program and streamlining procurement of a smaller food security stock through open tenders. In 1992, the government of Bangladesh acted on these findings and abolished the system in rural areas, saving nearly US\$100 million annually.

An Alternative to Rationing

With rural rationing eliminated, the government now needed to redirect efforts into more effective, targeted social protection programs for the 6.1 million households that formerly benefited from rationing. IFPRI chaired a working group to review options and recommended the then globally unprecedented idea of food for education: poor households would receive food transfers on the condition that their children attended school. The idea represented the first time that conditionalities would be used to couple human development with food aid. After an initial pilot program and positive assessment by IFPRI in 1994, the government launched the program as its first major food initiative in the post-ration era. A follow-up IFPRI impact assessment showed that the program increased school participation by up to 30 percent and girls' earning potential by up to 35 percent. IFPRI's documentation of the program's effectiveness contributed to the design of the Global Food for Education program established by the US Department of Agriculture and the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

The success of the initiative cemented IFPRI's credibility as an independent research partner for the government and ushered in an era of evaluating all types of programs. Evaluations in 2000 and 2004, for example, found that school feeding raised school enrollment by 14 percent and children's energy intake by 11–19 percent; and that the country's cash-for-work, food-for-education, and wheat relief programs were most cost effective, while rural rationing had been least effective. In 2002, IFPRI researchers collaborated with seven government ministries, the World Food Programme, and other food aid donors to evaluate the performance of four large national safety net programs, recommending better enforcement of scheduled food aid arrivals and monitoring of transit losses and national food-stock levels. IFPRI's partners subsequently established an action plan to monitor the implementation of these recommendations, which saw a high degree of acceptance by the government.

Also in 2002, IFPRI researchers assessed the performance of two national conditional cash transfer programs, one of which was the Female Secondary School Assistance Project, aimed at boosting girls' still very low

school-enrollment rates. They recommended that the program target the poor directly, include boys as program beneficiaries, and increase transfer amounts to cover families' educational expenses and opportunity costs of sending children to school. In 2010, the government and the World Bank redesigned the program to incorporate these recommendations.

Real-Time Analysis in Times of Crisis

Bangladesh has long been beset by natural disasters but, in late 1998, an especially devastating flood led to a major shortfall in rice production and a potential food security crisis. Working closely with the Ministry of Food's Food Planning and Monitoring Unit (FPMU), IFPRI researchers produced a series of policy advisory memos in response to direct requests for critical analysis from the Bangladesh government on such topics as food aid requirements, rice production, food stocks, and procurement issues. In particular, the researchers monitored rice markets and trade in the aftermath of the flood, building on IFPRI colleagues' years of work on agricultural production and marketing in Bangladesh, and presented real-time evidence that private-sector rice imports were stabilizing rice supplies and domestic market prices. This evidence encouraged the government to maintain incentives for more than 2 million tons of private-sector rice imports, preventing a price spike and a significant drop in food availability in consumption.

IFPRI researchers also conducted research to evaluate household coping mechanisms and recovery rates in the face of natural disasters and to examine how food distribution programs can more effectively target food aid in the future. The study showed that poor people coped by taking out private loans and using governmental and nongovernmental food transfers. Private-sector imports of rice also boosted domestic food supplies, smoothing out price volatility and preventing more declines in households' purchasing power and calorie consumption (although the flood still had a serious long-term impact on the nutrition of preschool children).

The success of the Bangladesh government in responding to the 1998 flood rested on a foundation of policy changes

in the early 1990s and investments in analytical capacity. In the early 1990s, IFPRI's project with the Ministry of Food supported the development of a National Food Policy statement and legislation that legalized private sector imports of rice and wheat. This policy reform made the huge post-flood inflow of private-sector rice imports possible.

IFPRI also supported long-term capacity building to meet the government's need for timely, practical policy analysis. In 1992, the Institute had already set up an informal food situation room in its offices, which staff from the Ministry of Food's FPMU would visit to discuss the latest market data and analysis. These informal collaborations slowly built up interest in market analysis and from 1997 to 2001, IFPRI worked closely with FPMU staff to analyze data on domestic and international prices, food stocks, and trade and provided technical training in food policy analysis for government officials. FPMU has recently been elevated to become a strategic, rather than administrative, unit within the government that uses data analysis to develop smart coping mechanisms and policies.

Long-Term Policy Support

The success of these various initiatives culminated in the 2010 launch of the Bangladesh Policy Research and Strategy Support Program (PRSSP) for Food Security and Agricultural Development, IFPRI's biggest project ever in the country. The program provides policy and advisory services and collaborates with key national institutions—including the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, the Economic Research Group, and BRAC—to evaluate and deliver options and evidence on agriculture, food security, and nutrition to decision-makers and stakeholders. One of the program's first achievements was the completion of the Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, the most comprehensive, nationally representative household survey conducted to date in the country, between 2011 and 2012. A part of the survey has provided critical baseline data for USAID's Feed the Future program. The evidence demonstrated that better targeting can improve on-the-ground programming. It also prompted the World Bank to offer the government a US\$500 million loan to improve its safety net system.

In 2012, IFPRI researchers undertook a process evaluation of Bangladesh's largest safety net program, the Employment Generation Program for the Poorest, which offers people provisions for work during the two lean periods each year. The evaluation found the program to be successful in generating employment for 1.5 million people annually, particularly women, with low levels of misappropriation. These results influenced the government's decision to renew the program for an additional term.

Under the PRSSP, IFPRI and the Ministry of Agriculture launched the Agricultural Policy Support Unit in 2012, which delivers real-time information on such topics as food prices or production levels to policymakers.

Recent Strides in Linking Nutrition to Agriculture and Social Protection

IFPRI's newest work is focused on nutrition—through direct nutrition interventions and indirect interventions that link with such complementary sectors as agriculture. Most recently, in 2015, the Ministry of Agriculture has started implementing a pilot project designed by IFPRI researchers to identify actions and investments that can promote agricultural production diversity and dietary diversity for improved nutrition and make recommendations on how to invigorate pathways to women's empowerment. The government plans to use the research-based evidence created by the project to design a national program. This program will serve to scale up the most effective interventions for orienting agriculture toward improved nutrition and women's empowerment at the national level. In 2014, HarvestPlus released the first zinc-biofortified rice variety to Bangladeshi farmers, with the aim of releasing eight additional zinc rice and wheat varieties in the next few years.

To provide evidence for the national social protection strategy, IFPRI researchers designed a two-year experimental social protection program in 2012 implemented by the World Food Programme to determine which benefit type is most effective for improving the ultra-poor's welfare: cash, food, a combination of the two, or a cash/food/nutrition education option. They found that nutrition education is key in accruing

benefits from food and cash transfers: Bangladeshi households that participated in nutrition education sessions consumed more—and more diverse—foods than those who received only food, cash, or both, with some even showing a significant reduction of chronic child undernutrition or stunting.

Looking Forward

Over the decades, Bangladesh has made impressive strides in its food security and poverty-reduction goals. In doing so, it has engaged with IFPRI in a full range of research themes, from social protection and natural disasters to trade and nutrition, with innovations continuously emerging. IFPRI's latest work, for example, has yielded valuable insights on the role of gender. In 2011–2012, researchers used the Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey to collect data for the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index, which tracks women's decisionmaking power over agricultural production, productive assets, and the use of household income, among other domains. The results showed that improving women's community leadership and control of assets were promising policy interventions. Researchers also found that increases in women's empowerment are positively associated with calorie availability and dietary diversity at the household level. This type of research helps make the case that women are central to improving food and nutrition security.

Looking forward, the Institute will continue to strengthen its partnership with the Bangladesh government and local institutions, as they build long-term capacity in policy analysis and evidence-based research. The country, for example, is envisioning that the Agricultural Policy Support Unit will become a strategic arm that will engage

the national agricultural research system, universities, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector in conducting collaborative policy research. It is through these types of partnerships, which can effectively translate research into policy action, that Bangladesh will scale up its successes against hunger and malnutrition.

Resources

For IFPRI's research on Bangladesh, see <http://www.ifpri.org/country/bangladesh>.

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