



IFPRI AND BANGLADESH

A Strong Partnership for
Food Security and Nutrition



IFPRI's wide range of partnerships in Bangladesh have influenced the design and operation of large-scale national programs and 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.

IFPRI's decades of research in Bangladesh are 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 2.2 million metric tons of food grains annually, equivalent to 14 percent of total national consumption. IFPRI's research on the system in the late 1980s 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.

Pro-Poor Food Security Initiatives

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 were formerly identified to benefit 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. This was the first time that conditionalities coupled 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.

Addressing Crises and Building Resilience

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 government. They also monitored rice markets and trade in the aftermath of the flood 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 rice imports, preventing a price spike and a significant drop in food availability.

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 could be more effective. 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.

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, where 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 is now a strategic, rather than administrative, unit within the government that uses data analysis to develop smart coping mechanisms and policies.

Current IFPRI research is focusing on different types of crises. Climate change, for example, poses critical challenges for farmers in Bangladesh. IFPRI researchers are creating investment strategies and action plans for Bangladesh to reduce climate risk in its agri-food system, mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, and work toward sustainable intensification of agriculture. Another prominent crisis is that of the Rohingya refugees, a minority ethnic group that holds no citizenship rights in Myanmar, making them the largest "stateless" group in the world. IFPRI researchers have found that the Rohingya residing in refugee camps in Bangladesh have secured employment opportunities in the retail, trade, and services sectors but are still systematically paid less than their Bangladeshi counterparts. The

research has also uncovered a high level of economic interaction and trust between the Rohingya and local Bangladeshis, signaling potential for long-term sustainability and peace.

Long-Term Policy Support

The success of the IFPRI partnership with the Government of Bangladesh and other national stakeholders led to 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 various ministries, the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), the Economic Research Group, and BRAC—to evaluate and deliver options and evidence on agriculture, food security, and nutrition to decisionmakers and stakeholders. One of the program's first achievements was to support the government's development of the Country Investment Plan for agriculture, food security, and nutrition by providing policy analysis.

IFPRI-PRSSP researchers also designed and conducted the Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS), the most comprehensive, nationally representative rural household survey conducted to date in the country, in 2012. This survey provided critical baseline data for USAID's Feed the Future program, and a follow-up panel survey round in 2015 showed a 16 percent reduction in poverty in the Feed the Future zone. The evidence demonstrated that better targeting can improve on-the-ground programming. BIHS data prompted the World Bank to offer the government a US\$500 million loan to improve its safety net system. Using BIHS data, IFPRI researchers also assessed the targeting performance and recommended improved beneficiary selection criteria for the largest safety net for poor rural women, the Vulnerable Group Development program, which the government accepted for implementation for 2018/19. The World Bank also used IFPRI's analysis to develop targeting criteria for a US\$304 million social protection program, the Income Support Program for the Poorest, targeting poor pregnant and young mothers.

IFPRI is conducting the third survey round in 2019, which serves as the endline for USAID's Feed the Future program and the baseline for the five-year US Global Food Security Strategy. The survey data is a global public good, used by numerous researchers around the world.

Bangladesh was one of three countries to pilot the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)—the first comprehensive and standardized tool to directly measure women's empowerment and inclusion in the agricultural sector, and their control over critical parts of their lives. It was also the first country to implement the index in a nationally representative survey, the BIHS. Findings showed that improving women's community leadership and control of assets were promising policy interventions, and

that increases in women's empowerment are positively associated with agricultural diversity, calorie availability, and dietary diversity, and help households move out of poverty. This type of research makes the case that women are central to improving food and nutrition security and livelihoods.

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 informed the government's decision to renew the program for an additional term. Under the PRSSP, IFPRI and the Ministry of Agriculture, with support from USAID, launched the Agricultural Policy Support Unit (APSU) in 2012, which delivers real-time information to policymakers on such topics as food prices or production levels. In 2015, IFPRI worked with APSU to select and prioritize the Ministry of Agriculture's development program priorities for the next five years. The final list of projects, which was monitored by the APSU, consisted of 147 projects with a total budget of US\$2.04 billion for five years.

The recently launched Integrated Food Policy Research Program, a joint venture with the Ministry of Food, BIDS, and the University of Illinois, is providing research-based policy recommendations on all aspects of the food system. The research program is designed to work closely with the Ministry of Food to: 1) enhance food policy research capacity and 2) undertake analytical work on emerging food policy issues, and 3) conduct collaborative research.

Linking Nutrition to Agriculture and Social Protection

IFPRI's work with Bangladesh has expanded in recent years to include a focus on nutrition—through direct nutrition interventions and indirect interventions that link with such complementary sectors as agriculture. In 2014, HarvestPlus released the first zinc-biofortified rice variety to Bangladeshi farmers to address micronutrient malnutrition, in collaboration with the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute, International Rice Research Institute, and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Agricultural University. To date, HarvestPlus has reached 1.4 million households in Bangladesh with zinc-biofortified rice, which provides up to 60 percent of daily zinc needs and benefits farmers because it matures earlier, is high-yielding, and is disease- and pest-resistant.

To provide evidence for the national social protection strategy, IFPRI partnered with the UN World Food Programme to conduct the Transfer Modality Research Initiative (TMRI), a two-year pilot study to determine which form of safety net transfer—cash or food—works best for the ultra poor in rural Bangladesh and whether impacts of these transfers change

when linked to nutrition behavior change communication (BCC). TMRI had remarkable impacts. While all transfer modality combinations caused significant improvements in food security and nutrition in participating households, the greatest impacts came from transfers when they were combined with nutrition BCC. Cash transfers combined with nutrition BCC in the north decreased child stunting by 7.3 percentage points over the two-year project period—almost three times the national average decline. Motivated by TMRI results, the country's 7th Five Year Plan (2016–2020) now supports the integration of nutrition education into social safety net programs. A study found that women receiving transfers with BCC experienced 26 percent less intimate partner violence 6 to 10 months post project.

Investments in young child nutrition include IFPRI's evaluation of the Alive & Thrive program, an initiative to raise rates of breastfeeding and improve young children's meals. IFPRI's findings that the program doubled both the rates of exclusive breastfeeding and the proportion of children achieving minimum dietary diversity contributed to the model's adoption by multiple donors. The Transform Nutrition program, which focuses on improving child nutrition in the critical first 1,000 days, evaluated the effectiveness of the government's National Nutrition Services Program delivery, resulting in several changes to reduce bottlenecks and improve the program.

In 2015, the Agriculture, Nutrition, and Gender Linkages (ANGeL) project, a partnership between IFPRI and the Ministry of Agriculture, was launched to identify actions

and investments in agriculture to promote agricultural diversity, increase farm household income, improve nutrition, and empower women. ANGeL tested the impacts of different combinations of trainings for men and women in farm households in 16 districts across rural Bangladesh. Agricultural production trainings were implemented by government agriculture extension agents, nutrition trainings were provided either by agriculture extension agents or female community nutrition workers, and gender sensitization trainings were facilitated by Helen Keller International (HKI).

IFPRI's impact evaluation found that training farm households—husbands and wives, together—on agriculture, nutrition, and gender improved agricultural diversity, farmers' incomes, nutrition knowledge and practices, and dietary diversity and empowered women. Integrated agriculture, nutrition, and gender trainings had the greatest benefits: women were empowered in asset ownership and income decisions, while men became more empowered in production and income decisions. Both men and women's attitudes on gender improved.

The ANGeL project has had an unprecedented policy impact, representing the first ministry-led initiative to use evidence from rigorous research to design a national program aimed at strengthening the agriculture-nutrition-gender nexus in Bangladesh. The Ministry of Agriculture is now using ANGeL's research-based evidence to design, implement, and scale up the most effective interventions nationally to improve agricultural productivity, nutrition, and women's empowerment.

Looking Forward

Over the decades, Bangladesh has made impressive strides toward food security and poverty reduction goals. In doing so, the Government of Bangladesh and national partners have engaged with IFPRI in a full range of research themes, from social protection and natural disasters to trade and nutrition. 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. For example, Bangladesh is a priority country under IFPRI's Compact2025 initiative, which brings stakeholders together to set priorities, innovate, and synthesize lessons to accelerate progress in ending hunger and undernutrition by 2025. 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.

»» For more on IFPRI in Bangladesh, see bangladesh.ifpri.info.

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