

Assessing the Food and Nutrition Policies to Overcome the Triple Burden of Malnutrition in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is facing a complex nutrition challenge driven by undernutrition, widespread micronutrient deficiencies, and increasing overweight and obesity simultaneously, a phenomenon widely recognised as the “triple burden of malnutrition” (1). As Bangladesh already achieved food security, the government is now prioritising improving national policies to ensure ‘Nutrition Security’ for all Bangladeshi citizens (2).

WHAT’S AT STAKE?

Even though Bangladesh achieved food security, it hasn’t fully translated into nutritional security (1). Nutrition security remains uneven, particularly for children, women, and marginalised groups (2). In this context, Bangladesh is navigating a triple burden of malnutrition, where undernutrition, persistent micronutrient deficiencies, and rising overweight all coexist (1). These nutrition challenges are driven by structural factors, including rapid population growth, shrinking agricultural land, rising inequality, food and non-food inflation that erode purchasing power, urban dietary shifts, and high import tariffs on nutritious foods. A pronounced rural–urban divide persists, with rural diets dominated by rice and urban diets increasingly characterised by meat and processed foods. At the same time, high import taxes further restrict access to healthy fruits. Although multisectoral strategies such as the National Nutrition Policy and NPAN2 are in place, progress remains slow due to weak coordination, limited financing, and inconsistent political commitment.

This brief presents a review of some of the key food and nutrition policies since independence and suggests future policy recommendations gleaned from the study to ensure ‘Nutrition Security’ for all Bangladeshi citizens, and may provide valuable lessons for other South-Asian countries.

RESEARCH APPROACH

- Used a multi-step approach to assess national food and nutrition policies in Bangladesh
- Reviewed food- and nutrition-related policies since 1971 to identify gaps and inconsistencies
- Conducted secondary analysis of national and international data on diets, nutrient gaps, agricultural production, and macroeconomic trends
- Mapped key stakeholders to inform strategic policy actions
- Developed actionable fiscal and trade policy recommendations to support effective policy dialogue

KEY FINDINGS

POST-INDEPENDENCE FOOD CRISIS AND EARLY AGRICULTURAL INTERVENTIONS (1971-1980)

Immediately after independence, there were food shortages in Bangladesh, and it relied heavily on food aid from other countries, especially in the wake of the 1974 famine (3). The government used rationing and price controls to provide access to food. Plans were made to improve irrigation, fertiliser use, and the development of high-yielding varieties of rice in an attempt to boost rice production.

SHIFT TOWARDS SELF-SUFFICIENCY (1980-2000)

The Bangladesh early policy landscape reflects a gradual shift from the food security perspective towards the wider perspective of nutrition. The National Food Policy 1988 focused almost entirely on cereal production and distribution. The Agricultural Extension Policy 1996 improved collaboration between

departments. On the other hand, the National Food and Nutrition Policy 1997 marked an important step as it conceptualised nutrition as a human right, while adopting the multisectoral approach. The National Plan of Action for Nutrition 1997 expanded this vision with a strategy targeting micronutrients, breastfeeding, and community engagement, yet lacked clear targets, an urban nutrition focus, and mechanisms for implementation.

Later due to the introduction of high-yielding varieties of rice, especially the IR8 variety, increased rice production. There have been improvements in irrigation infrastructure, such as deep tube wells and shallow tube wells. This also played a significant role in increasing agricultural productivity (4). Government subsidies on fertilisers and pesticides helped farmers a great deal in increasing their yields. By the early 2000s, Bangladesh had achieved self-sufficiency in rice production, reducing reliance on food aid (4). During this period, the government also introduced various policies and action plans to address the need for improved nutrition and balanced diets. However, most of these initiatives were fragmented, lacked actionable recommendations, and did not provide clear objectives, which in turn limited their effectiveness.

EVOLUTION OF NATIONAL FOOD AND NUTRITION POLICIES AND THE SHIFT TOWARD MULTISECTORAL APPROACHES (2000-PRESENT)

One of the earliest approaches towards a comprehensive policy was the National Food Policy of 2006. This focused on the availability, access, and utilisation of food. It was followed by the National Food Policy Plan of Action (2008–2015). This plan attempted multisectoral coordination by involving ministries of food, agriculture, health, education, and social welfare. However, it mostly focused on food availability rather than nutritional outcomes. The National Nutrition Policy (2015) brought about a major paradigm shift by focusing on both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions. It took into account the roles of agriculture, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene), education, and gender equity. However, this policy did not have any operational frameworks to facilitate multisectoral cooperation, especially in the agriculture and health sectors. Furthermore, its alignment with local government structures was weak, which hampered the decentralisation of nutrition programming. The outcome of this situation was the development of the Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN2, 2016–2025). The Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition laid out a multisectoral action plan across 17 ministries, covering areas such as food safety, dietary diversity, maternal and child nutrition, and capacity building. Despite its breadth, its efficiency in implementing these goals is hampered by inadequate political will and a lack of both budgets and capacity in line ministries. Later, other policies, plans and acts were introduced, but are mostly goal-oriented and lack operational frameworks or indicate little or no way of being held accountable in their implementation.

Overall, Bangladesh's nutrition policy framework has made significant progress in recognising nutrition as a human right and advancing multisectoral coordination. Journey toward nutrition security requires a comprehensive policy. Through such integrated policy actions, the country can build a resilient and inclusive nutritional ecosystem that secures the health and well-being of all citizens.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. More targeted approach to women and children

GoB has undertaken various initiatives to support vulnerable women and children and to promote healthy diets among them. However, social safety net programmes such as cash incentive

programmes are often misused or poorly targeted. Therefore, it is recommended that a more “targeted and evidence-based approach” be employed in delivering support to ensure that it reaches the target underserved group.

2. Balancing import tax on healthy fruits

In Bangladesh, people consume both local and imported fruits. High import taxes have made many fruits less accessible. It is, therefore, recommended that a better tax structure be taken into consideration for improved affordability and access for all segments of the population.

3. Increase investment in public awareness

Many citizens are not aware of how to ensure a balanced diet through locally grown fruits and foods, including, for example, “eating the rainbow” or having a “colourful plate.” It would be advisable to note that there should be an increase in funding levels directed towards public awareness initiatives, as well as nutritional education included within general or specialised educational courses, including adult education initiatives.

4. Incentives for the private sector to promote food fortification

The Government of Bangladesh GOB is implementing both mandatory and voluntary food fortification schemes to overcome the problem of micronutrients. Food sources such as rice and wheat must also be covered in food fortification activities. Incentives such as tax/VAT exemptions should be provided for the involvement of the private sector.

5. Distribution of fortified rice/wheat through government social protection programs

GoB provides rice and wheat to the low-income households through different social safety net programs, so inclusion of iron-fortified rice and iron-fortified wheat in these social safety programs would greatly benefit them regarding their nutritional intake.

6. More investment in nutrition-sensitive and diversified agriculture sectors

GoB needs to increase its investment levels in the nutritional-sensitive as well as diversified agricultural sectors, which would help increase the output of healthy food/nutritional food products. Additionally, the government needs to develop appropriate investment strategies that would result in efficient capital mobilisation and create an enabling environment that attracts private sector participation.

7. Facilitating open access to equipment and technology

The machinery and technologies required for the production, processing, and testing of healthy and nutritious foods are import-reliant. For such importation to be made easy, tax exemptions and administrative assistance are required. Furthermore, the establishment of bilateral arrangements with developed countries for the transfer of technology will be very important for the improvement of capacity and sustained growth for the nutrition-focused food industry.

8. Establishing long-term bilateral trade agreements

Bangladesh imports a wide range of fresh and processed foods each year to meet domestic demand. GoB should identify reliable sources of nutritious food and establish long-term bilateral trade agreements or supply contracts to ensure a consistent and sustainable supply for the local market. This will help maintain a proper supply chain and ensure price stability.

9. Levy an Excess Tax on Processed Foods and Sugar-Sweetened Drinks (SSB):

The increased demand for processed foods and sugar-sweetened drinks is a major health concern, especially for people living in urban areas who consume more processed and restaurant meals. To tackle the problem, the GoB may consider levying higher taxes on such foods to make them cost-prohibitive and discourage excessive consumption.

10. Prioritising National Investment for Special Economic Zones for the Agricultural Sector

As a measure of the continued economic development of Bangladesh, the government has established Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in the country. To support the development of the agricultural sector economy, there is a proposal to establish dedicated SEZs in the sector. Strategic public investment in the SEZs will help to attract foreign investors and increase production in the country.

References

1. Fill the Nutrient Gap [Internet]. WFP; 2019 Dec. Available from: https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000164599/download/?_ga=2.203981524.556280387.1768731864-483406992.1760925779
2. Bangladesh National Food and Nutrition Security Policy Plan of Action 2021-2030 [Internet]. Ministry of Food of Bangladesh; 2021 Sep [cited 2026 Jan 15]. Available from: [https://mofood.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/mofood.portal.gov.bd/page/1f722343_5fdb_494d_8b62_31fc14abc1da/nothi_81_2022_12_22_91671701102%20\(2\).pdf](https://mofood.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/mofood.portal.gov.bd/page/1f722343_5fdb_494d_8b62_31fc14abc1da/nothi_81_2022_12_22_91671701102%20(2).pdf)
3. Atwood DA, Jahangir ASM, Smith H, Kabir G. Food aid in Bangladesh: from relief to development. In: In Out of the shadow of famine: evolving food markets and food policy in Bangladesh [Internet]. International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) by Johns Hopkins University Press; 2000. p. 148–64. Available from: <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/155863>
4. Technical Proceedings of Bangladesh Integrated Food Policy Research Program launched [Internet]. [cited 2026 Jan 15]. Available from: <https://bangladesh.ifpri.info/files/2017/10/IFPRP-Launch-Proceedings.pdf>

This brief is informed by: Saify Md. B, Rahman F, Hasan A, An-noor N, Huque R. Understanding the Impacts of Fiscal and Trade Policies to Address the Triple Burden of Malnutrition in Bangladesh: A Policy Landscape Analysis. 2026

For more information contact Fahmidur Rahman at fahmidur.rahman.bd@gmail.com