

Building a South Asian Coalition for Improved Nutrition (SACIN) through Fiscal and Trade Policies

Bangladesh Chapter

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Prepared by
ARK Foundation
Dhaka, Bangladesh
<https://arkfoundationbd.org/>

Project Background

In August 2024, a consortium was established among four partner organizations from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka with the objective of generating evidence on how fiscal and trade measures can be leveraged to address the triple burden of malnutrition. The consortium also aims to build a platform for national and regional partnerships to advocate for policies that promote good nutrition and healthy diets.

ARK Foundation, as a prominent health research organization in Bangladesh and a member of the consortium, has identified and addressed gaps and limitations in the country's food and nutrition policy. It has also focused on advancing healthy diets and reducing all forms of nutrition-related burdens, in line with both national priorities and global goals. In this study, aligned with the consortium's objectives, the report focused on fiscal and trade measures to address the challenges within the country's food and nutrition ecosystem.

Abbreviation

ACF	Action Against Hunger
AIT	Advance Income Tax
AT	Advance Tax
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
CD	Customs Duty
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GAP	Good Agricultural Practices
GAVI	Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization
GAIN	Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition
GO	Government Organization
HIES	Household Income and Expenditure Survey
icddr	International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
INGOs	International NGOs
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
NFP	National Food Policy
NFNP	National Food and Nutrition Policy
NMS	National Micronutrient Survey
NNP	National Nutrition Policy
NNS	National Nutrition Services
NPAN	National Plan of Action for Nutrition
NPAN2	Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition
NPNL	Non-pregnant, Non-lactating
PoA	Plan of Action
RD	Regulatory Duty
SACIN	South Asian Coalition for Improved Nutrition
SD	Supplementary Duty
SSB	Sugar Sweetened Beverages
TTI	Total Tax Incidence
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VAT	Value Added Tax
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

Glossary

Food Security	Refers to consistent access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets individuals' dietary needs for an active and healthy life.
Nutrition Security	A state which ensures that not only food is available, but that it has adequate nutritional quality and supported by a stable environment and health services.
Triple burden of malnutrition	Coexistence of undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and overnutrition within the same population
Food System	Encompasses all actors and processes involved in food production, distribution, consumption, and waste management, and plays a central role in determining dietary outcomes.
Stakeholder Engagement	Refers to the active and meaningful participation of diverse actors—including government bodies, researchers, civil society, and private sector representatives—in shaping and implementing food and nutrition policies.

Executive Summary

Bangladesh faces a complex triple burden of malnutrition which is characterized by the coexistence of undernutrition, persistent micronutrient deficiencies and the rising prevalence of overweight and obesity. Despite commendable progress in national food security, the government is intensifying its focus on achieving "Nutrition Security" for its entire population. This challenge is underscored by mixed outcomes in national health indicators. While deficiencies in Vitamin A, Vitamin D, and Zinc among children have declined, iron deficiency has increased affecting 15.1% children in 2019–20. Additionally, deficiencies in Folate and Iron have worsened among non-pregnant, non-lactating women with the prevalence of anemia reaching 28.9%.

Bangladesh's food and nutrition ecosystem faces intersecting structural challenges that impede progress. With a rapidly growing population standing at 165.16 million and high population density (1,119 persons per km²) put pressure on the existing resources. The situation is further exacerbated by the steady, ongoing decline of agricultural land. By threatening the domestic food production, the agricultural lands are widely used now to non-agricultural uses at an estimated 2,500–3,000 hectares annually. Though Bangladesh is experiencing steady economic growth, the trend of rising inequality and poverty can affect 28% of the population by 2025. With severe inflation, affordability can be further declined. The food price index was nearly doubled between fiscal years 2019–20 and 2023–24 and the purchasing power of vulnerable households have further diminished.

According to national data, rural diets remain heavily reliant on carbohydrates (349.1g rice/day), while urban diets show higher consumption of meat (50.2g/day) and processed foods. This data showcased the rural-urban divide in the consumption pattern in the country. Also, access to dietary diversity is further restricted by fiscal policy, such as high import tariffs on healthy fruits. The Total Tax Incidence (TTI) on healthy fruits sometimes can reach as high as 118% and can cause major accessibility barrier. Households, who are already struggling to meet their basic demand, now experiencing limited access to healthy and fresh fruits.

Over decades, Bangladesh's policy framework has evolved from ensuring post-independence food availability to achieving rice self-sufficiency by 2000. Recently, the country has also developed multisectoral strategies such as the National Nutrition Policy (2015) and the Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN2, 2016–2025). However, the progress has often been halted due to lack of coordination, inadequate budgets and political commitment. Agricultural (GAP 2020), food safety (Act 2013) and nutritional (NPAN2) policies heavily focus on undernutrition and contaminants and overlook the rising prevalence of obesity, non-communicable diseases, ultra-processed food consumption and the modern urban dietary risks.

Addressing this multifaceted challenge requires coordinated action across a complex stakeholder environment. This includes lead government ministries (Health, Agriculture, Food, Finance), specialized agencies such as the National Nutrition Services (NNS) and Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA), technical and financial support from international partners and UN agencies (WHO, FAO, WFP) and field-level implementation by domestic NGOs and civil society networks.

Fiscal policy interventions should include a rebalancing of high import tariffs (51%–118% TTI) on healthy fruits to improve affordability, while simultaneously imposing higher taxes on processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) to discourage consumption. To combat micronutrient deficiencies, private sector incentives, such as Tax/VAT exemptions are recommended to expand mandatory food fortification to staples like rice and wheat.

From supply side, interventions designed around increased public investment in diversified, nutrition-sensitive agriculture, supported by mechanisms like Special Economic Zones and subsidized access to technology is required. This should be secured through the establishment of long-term bilateral trade agreements between Bangladesh and other partner countries to ensure a stable supply of essential foods. Social safety nets must be strengthened through evidence-based targeting towards vulnerable women and children and through the direct distribution of fortified staples to low-income households. All these efforts should be complemented by increased investment in public awareness campaigns on healthy diets.

The nutritional challenges that Bangladesh now faces are complex and inter-generational can threaten the development of human capital and long-term economic productivity. Advocating for necessary policy changes to address the rising burden of NCDs is required. The government policies must transit beyond a singular focus on food availability to address the modern drivers of malnutrition and obesity, including affordability, dietary quality.

Outline

Abbreviation	3
Glossary	4
Executive Summary	5
1. Introduction	8
2. Methodology	9
3. Country Profile: Food and Nutrition	10
Rising population	10
Declining agricultural land	10
Economic growth and inequality	11
Rising inflation	12
Urban-rural divide	12
Excessive fruit import tax	13
4. Stakeholder Mapping	13
5. Bangladesh Food and Nutrition Policy Overview	18
An Overview of Country's Food & Nutrition Policy	18
Early Years (1971-1980)	18
Shift towards Self-Sufficiency (1980-2000)	18
Modern Policies (2000-Present)	18
Policy Criticism: How policy reformed overtime and identifying gaps	19
6. Policy Recommendations	25

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is encountering a complex nutrition crisis which is shaped by a combination of undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and the rising prevalence of overweight and obesity—a situation these days often labeled as the “*triple burden of malnutrition*” (1). While there have been significant improvements in agricultural production, food availability, and economic growth, notable disparities still remain in ensuring nutrition security for all, especially among children, women, and marginalized communities. Bangladesh government, after achieving “*Food Security*” and understanding the importance of healthy, nutritious and balanced diet, is focusing on “*Nutrition Security*”.

According to the National Micronutrient Survey (NMS) 2019–20, approximately 50% (43.7% mild and 7.2% moderate) of children in Bangladesh suffer from Vitamin A deficiency. In comparison, the NMS 2011–12 reported a much higher prevalence of Vitamin A deficiency at around 77% (mild 56.3%, moderate 20.0%, and severe 0.5%). This indicates significant progress over the past decade; however, a substantial proportion of children still remain affected. A similar improvement is observed in Vitamin D (declined from 39.6% to 21.9%) and Zinc deficiencies (declined from 44.6% to 31.0%) over the same period. Surprisingly, Iron deficiency showed an upward trend, increasing from 10.7% (NMS 2011–12) to 15.1% (NMS 2019–20).

A comparison between NMS 2011–12 and NMS 2019–20 represents that the non-pregnant, non-lactating (NPNL) women in Bangladesh showed notable improvements in several micronutrient components. Deficiencies that decreased include Vitamin A (from 39.7% to 7.5%), Vitamin D (from 71.5% to 69.9%), Vitamin B12 (declined by 1.8% and reached to 20.20%), Zinc (from 57.3% to 43.4%), and Iodine (from 42.1% to 29.6%). However, Folate (from 9.1% to 29.0%), Iron (up by ~7% and reached to 14.1%), and Anemia (up by 2.9% and reached to 28.9%) have shown a different trend.

Apart from children and NPNL women, other groups such as school-going children, pregnant mothers, adolescents (particularly females), and the elderly often fail to receive adequate nutrition. This concern has been highlighted in various studies and investigations. However, the lack of nationwide or representative surveys limits a comprehensive understanding of the actual situation.

Historically, Bangladesh’s diet has been predominantly centered on rice as the principal staple food, complemented by pulses, potatoes, fish, meat, vegetables, and leafy greens. The country is endowed with a wide range of seasonal fruits, as well as certain fruits that remain available across all seasons. Additionally, consistent livestock production has supported a steady supply of milk and eggs, which serve as key sources of animal protein in the national diet. However, due to purchasing power and socio-economic inequality, diet patterns differ across populations. Majority of the population cannot afford nutritious food items like fish, meat, fruits, milk on regular basis which leads them to consume an unbalanced diet (2).

Alongside cultural practices, food production patterns, and socio-economic disparities, several other factors influence the consumption of nutritious diets such as increasing food demand from a growing population, declining agricultural land, rising food and non-food inflation, shifting dietary preferences among urban residents, and high import taxes. These factors not only affect national food and nutrition security indicators but also exacerbate the vulnerabilities of the populations who are living in the critical zone.

This report, based on the current state of the food and nutrition ecosystem and the challenges faced by various stakeholders, provides evidence-based recommendations to strengthen national policies and ensure sustainable “*Nutrition Security*” for all citizens.

2. Methodology

The SACIN consortium adopted a multi-step, evidence-based, and data-driven approach to reviewing national policies, identifying gaps, and proposing innovative, actionable solutions through fiscal and trade policies for one of the most malnourished regions in the world. The initiative aimed to create a network of organizations, policymakers, and practitioners who would work towards improving the nutrition status of the respective countries and initiate dialogue among them to develop and promote effective policies. It also seeks to support the adoption of healthy diet agendas in the respective countries and expand collaboration opportunities among the participating countries at both regional and global levels.

To achieve this target, the ARK team conducted a comprehensive desk review supported by secondary data analysis to gain a thorough understanding of Bangladesh's current food and nutrition ecosystem. This review identified existing and potential gaps, risks, and challenges, which were documented as evidence. A key component of the desk analysis was an extensive review of national policies, which highlighted underlying gaps and challenges within the country's policy frameworks. The policy analysis included all policies and plans of action associated to food and nutrition since the formation of Bangladesh and categorized them into different phases. The policy analysis focused on how each policy addresses nutrition, the limitations or shortcomings within these policies, and the role of additional measures such as the Good Agricultural Practices Policy (2020), Edible Oil Fortification Act (2013), Salt Iodization Act (2021), National Agriculture Policy (2018), and the Food Safety Act (2013) in addressing nutritional objectives.

The secondary data analysis includes a review of published national and international statistics and surveys to examine patterns of food consumption and dietary habits, sources and gaps in nutrition, factors influencing food and nutrient intake, as well as national agricultural production and associated factors. This analysis was further supported by macroeconomic indicators, including cumulative production and consumptions, inflation rates, price index, and national trade data. National surveys such as the Household Income and Expenditure Survey, Demographic and Health Survey, National Micronutrient Survey, Sample Vital Statistics, Agricultural Statistics or Yearbook and other data published by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) were considered. Additionally, data published by international agencies such as the World Bank, World Trade Organization, and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) were incorporated to provide a comprehensive perspective.

The ARK team also conducted a stakeholder mapping to identify key actors and influential stakeholders capable of shaping policies and practices in Bangladesh. These actors include government and semi-government organizations involved in policymaking, government-owned administrative and monitoring agencies, national and international think tanks, I/NGOs, alliances, and other institutions working in the food and nutrition sector. Subsequently, a series of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Stakeholder Consultation Workshops were organized with government officials, policymakers, civil society members, researchers, and sectoral representatives. These interviews and consultations served to validate findings, generate practical insights, and build consensus around policy recommendations.

All evidence, insights, and discussions were consolidated and synthesized to inform strategic policy actions, facilitate policy dialogue and support effective policy formulation.

3. Country Profile: Food and Nutrition

Food security has long remained one of the most pressing challenges for Bangladesh. The country faces mounting pressure from a rapidly growing population that requires adequate and nutritious food alongside other basic necessities. On the other hand, it struggles with land scarcity, limited natural resources, inadequate technical capacity and knowledge, lack of modern equipment and technology, insufficient research capacity, and reliance on traditional farming practices. Emerging threats such as climate change, global price volatility, international trade tensions, and shifting diplomatic relations with neighboring countries have further intensified the complexity of ensuring food and nutrition security. In this chapter, we will discuss about the current status of nation's food and nutrition ecosystem along with the challenges it is facing.

Rising population

As of 2024, around 173.6 million people reside in Bangladesh (3) making it the 8th most populous country in the world (4). Between 2011 and 2022, Bangladesh's population density grew from 976 to 1,119 persons per square kilometer (5). Notably, among these population, ~10% belongs to under 5 children, 19.11% are youths, 50.5% are female, 1% belongs to ethnic population, 68.49% belongs to rural area, 18.7% people live below national poverty line (6) (7)

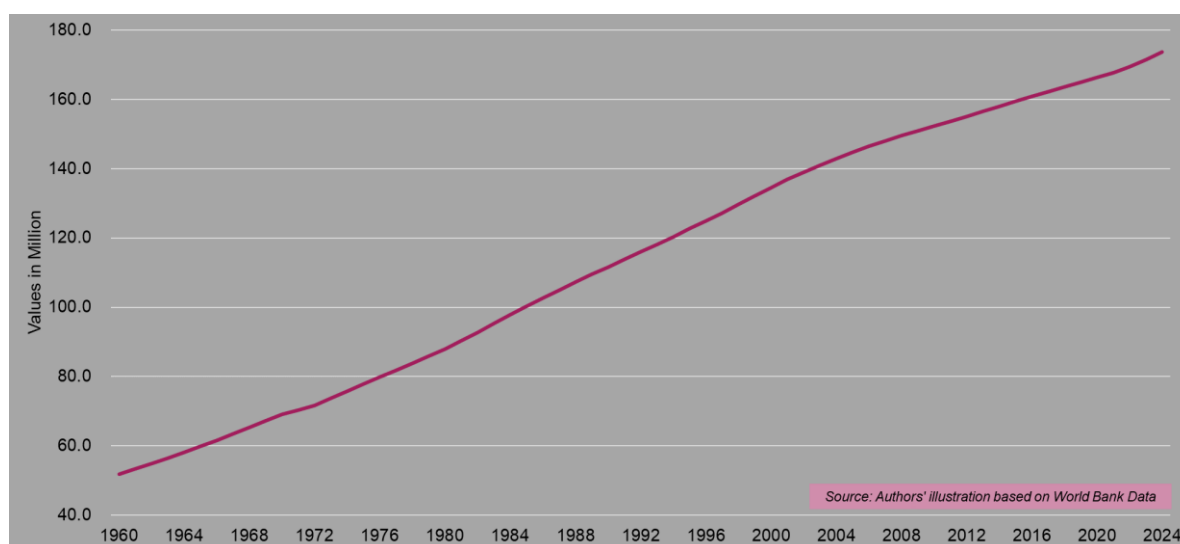


Figure 1: Increase of total population in Bangladesh from year 1960 to 2024.

Declining agricultural land

Land has been considered as the first factor of production for food and agriculture. In Bangladesh, as the population continues to grow, the area of cultivable land is steadily decreasing. In recent years, the country has been losing approximately 2,500 to 3,000 hectares of agricultural land annually to non-agricultural uses such as housing, infrastructure development, industrialization, urbanization and other causes (8). However, the nation does not have any reservation or protection or land utilization law to secure agricultural lands. Experts have identified this continued loss of agricultural land as a serious threat to the nation's future food security, which may lead to severe challenges in sustaining agricultural productivity and meeting the growing food demand.

Definition of Agricultural Lands by FAO: Refers to the portion of total land area used for farming activities, including arable land (land used for temporary crops), land under permanent crops (land cultivated with long-term crops), and permanent pastures (land used for five or more years to grow natural or cultivated forage).

The illustration below shows the steady decline of Bangladesh’s agricultural land since the 1990s. At present, the country has approximately 94 thousand square kilometers of land for agricultural usages.

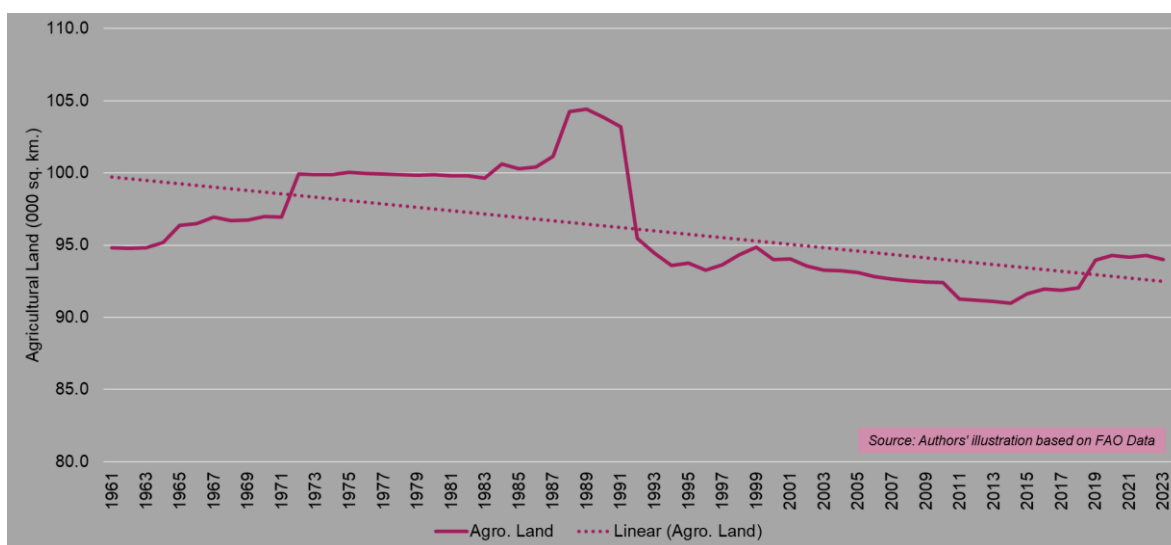


Figure 2: Declining agricultural land in Bangladesh from 1961 to 2023.

Economic growth and inequality

Bangladesh has witnessed a steady economic growth in the last two decades and has been considered as a role model of development in many aspects. However, at the same time, the rising economic inequality has also raised concern. Households with economic disadvantages often lack the financial capacity to afford the minimum cost of a nutritious diet. This leads to an excessive reliance on carbohydrate-rich foods (mostly rice, potato and pulse) and consumption of essential energy, protein, and fats remain inadequate (9). Such pattern indicates that the affordability of healthy diet is closely linked with consumption patterns.

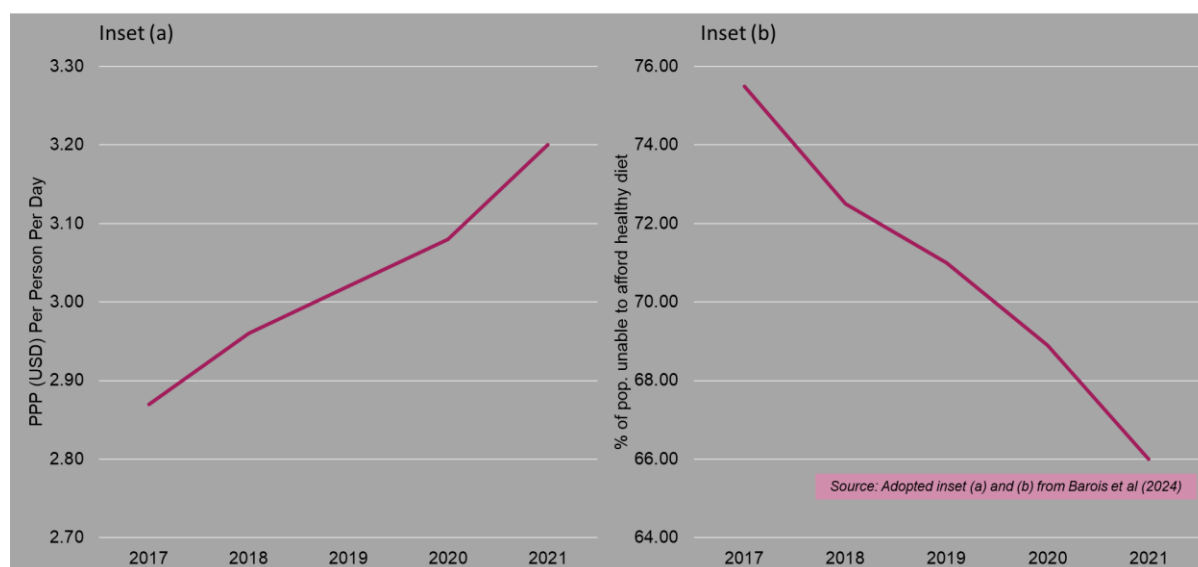


Figure 3: (a) Cost of healthy diet and (b) percentage of population unable to afford a healthy diet.

The above illustration presents (inset a) the daily per capita cost of a healthy diet and (inset b) the proportion of the population unable to afford it. Although Bangladesh is projected to experience steady economic growth in the coming years, poverty rates have simultaneously increased, indicating a widening inequality gap. National poverty has increased from

approximately 19% in 2022 to around 28% in 2025 (10), suggesting that a growing share of households will face heightened vulnerability and reduced access to nutritious diets.

Rising inflation

Another key factor influencing food affordability is inflation. The rise in inflation is creating a dual-dilemma in Bangladesh. The steady rise in both food and non-food inflation is affecting consumers' purchasing power. Simultaneously, the increase in the agricultural wage index is driving up cost of cultivation, further contributing to higher food prices. The general price index increased to 9.73% in FY 2023–24, up from 5.56% in FY 2019–20. During the same period, the food price index nearly doubled, increasing from 5.56% to 10.65%. Similarly, the non-food price index increased from 5.85% to 8.86%, while the agricultural wage index increased from 6.48% to 8.17%.



Figure 4: Inflation in Bangladesh from 2019 to 2024.

Urban-rural divide

In Bangladesh, urban and rural population is showing a different trend in consumptions. While, urban population is preferring convenience over nutrition and consuming more processed foods, rural residuals are preferring cheaper carbohydrates. Findings from the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2022 and 2010 reveal that urban households consistently consume less rice and potatoes than their rural counterparts. In contrast, urban consumers show higher consumption of meat, egg and fruits while they are more inclined to consume “food outside the home”.

Table 1: Per Capita Daily Intake (Gram) of Major Food Items by Locality from HIES 2010 and HIES 2022. (Source: BBS, 2022)

Food Item	HIES 2022			HIES 2010		
	National	Rural	Urban	National	Rural	Urban
Rice	328.9	349.1	284.7	416	441.6	344.2
Wheat	22.9	18.3	33	26	23.3	33.6
Potato	69.7	71.9	65	70.3	71.5	67.7
Pulses	17.1	15.9	19.9	14.3	13.2	17.2
Vegetables	201.9	202.2	201.3	166.1	170	155
Edible Oil	30.8	30	32.6	20.5	18.3	26.6
Onion	30.2	29.1	32.5	22	20.2	27.8
Meats	40.1	35.3	50.2	18.6	14.2	30.8
Eggs	12.7	10.7	17.2	7.2	5.8	10.9

Food Item	HIES 2022			HIES 2010		
	National	Rural	Urban	National	Rural	Urban
Fish	67.8	67.7	68.2	49.5	45.8	59.9
Milk & Milk Products	34.1	32.1	38.5	33.7	31.8	39.2
Fruits	95.4	90.9	105.3	44.7	42.6	50.4
Sugar/Gur & Sweets	16.4	16.7	15.6	8.4	7.4	11.3
Food Taken Outside	63.6	57.8	76.1	29.8	28	35
Miscellaneous Foods	98.2	97.7	99.3	72.8	71.4	77
Total	1129.8	1125.4	1139.4	1000	1005.2	985.5

Excessive fruit import tax

GoB imposes varying taxes and VAT on imported fruits. An analysis of the National Customs Tariff (FY 2024–2025) indicates that the Total Tax Incidence (TTI) ranges from approximately 55% to 118%, depending on the product category. The government periodically adjusts these rates in response to market conditions (11). However, to enhance affordability, particularly for the border population group, a more balanced and appropriate tax structure should be considered.

Table 2: Imposed Tax and VAT on different fruit products.

Product Group	Values in Percentage						
	CD	SD	VAT	AIT	RD	AT	TTI
Fresh Premium Fruits (Apples, Oranges, Mangoes, Apricots, etc.)	25	20	15	10	20	5	118
Tropical/Frozen/Dried Fruits (Bananas, Figs, Pineapples, Avocados, Frozen fruits, etc.)	25	0	15	10	20	5	84
Dates (Fresh or Dried)	25	0	15	10	3	5	63
Plums and Sloes (All Forms)	25	0	15	10	5	5	66
Dried Fruits and Nuts (NES Forms, Excl. Wrapped/Canned)	25	0	0	10	20	0	55

4. Stakeholder Mapping

Collaboration across sectors is essential for effective nutrition policy. In this section, we have compiled key stakeholders in Bangladesh—government bodies, development partners, civil society, NGOs, and INGOs—who influence food and nutrition outcomes. The table below highlights their roles in shaping, implementing, and supporting multisectoral nutrition strategies.

Type	Name	Works on
GO-Lead Ministries	Ministry of Health and Family Welfare	This ministry primarily focuses on health, nutrition, and population, playing a pivotal role in formulating and implementing related policies. It also coordinates with local and international agencies working in the areas of food and nutrition.

	Ministry of Agriculture	This ministry primarily works with agricultural production, crop diversification, production of safe and nutritious crops and ensure public food and nutrition safety.
	Ministry of Finance	This ministry influences fiscal policy which may affect nation's food and nutrition ecosystem. This ministry allocates budget for food-related programs, subsidies for agriculture, and funding for nutrition and food safety initiatives operated by different government organizations.
	Ministry of Food	This ministry envisions ensuring adequate, safe, and nutritious food for all citizens. It works to achieve national food security through an integrated food management system. Its key objectives include strengthening food security, providing assistance to vulnerable populations, ensuring the availability of safe and nutritious food, and enhancing people's purchasing power to improve food access. Additionally, the ministry regulates food imports and exports, maintains national reserves of rice, potatoes, and wheat, and oversees market price stabilization of essential food commodities.
	Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock	This ministry is responsible for fisheries and livestock development, including disease control, research, introduction of new breeds, farmer training, equipment distribution, and other activities related to fisheries and livestock production.
GO-Support Ministries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Women and Children Affairs • Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives • Ministry of Primary and Mass Education • Ministry of Social Welfare Ministry of Disaster Management & Relief 	The Government of Bangladesh views the National Nutrition Policy as a multi-sectoral initiative. In recent policies and action plans, several ministries have been identified as partner ministries for its implementation. Based

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Education • Ministry of Environment and Forest • Ministry of Finance • Ministry of Industries • Ministry of Information • Ministry of Planning • Ministry of Commerce • Ministry of Religious Affairs 	on their roles, these ministries are categorized as “support” or secondary ministries; however, they may also play significant roles in policy reform and implementation.
GO-Support Department or Organizations	National Nutrition Services (Operates under MOHFW)	National Nutritional Service (NNS) is a department which works under Ministry of Health. This department is committed to reducing the rate of malnutrition and improving the nutritional status of the people, especially children, adolescents, pregnant and lactating, the elderly, the poor, and other disadvantaged populations in both urban and rural areas of Bangladesh.
GO-Support Department or Organizations	Bangladesh National Nutrition Council (Operates under MOHFW)	An advisory body under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare which is responsible for guiding national nutrition strategies and policy coordination. The Council plays an important role in shaping multisectoral approaches to improve nutrition outcomes across Bangladesh.
GO-Support Department or Organizations	Bangladesh Food Safety Authority	The Authority provides scientific and technical support to the government on food and nutrition security. Its key functions usually encompass advising on policy formulation and updates, assessing and managing food safety risks, coordinating with national and international bodies
GO-Support Department or Organizations	National Consumer Rights Protection Directorate	The directorate protects consumers from unsafe or mislabeled food products by collecting food sample, testing, and raising public awareness activities through meetings and workshops. It handles complaints as well and enforces penalties for violations .
GO-Support Department or Organizations	Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution	The institution sets and enforces national standards, certifies products, tests and

Organizations		calibrates goods, regulates measurements, monitors imports, protects consumers, raises awareness, and represents Bangladesh in international standardization bodies.
UN and other aid agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) • World Bank • United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) • Food And Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) • International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) • World Food Programme (WFP) • World Health Organization (WHO) 	International aid agencies usually play a crucial role in supporting Bangladesh's efforts to improve nutrition and food safety. In addition to direct donations, their contributions also include technical assistance and policy guidance. Thus, in order to achieve nutrition security across diverse communities in Bangladesh, these organizations contribute to both immediate relief and long-term progress.
INGOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World Vision International • Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) • Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) • Plan International • Action Against Hunger (ACF) • Save the Children • CARE International • SNV Netherlands Development Organisation • Helen Keller International • Concern Worldwide • Oxfam International • Abt Associates Inc 	There has been a revolutionary change in International NGOs (INGOs) approach in addressing nutrition challenges. While their initial focus was on direct interventions such as food aid and supplementation programs, they have been gradually shifting toward policy advocacy to create more sustainable and systemic change. INGOs now provide aid in tackling the root causes of malnutrition by promoting climate-resilient agriculture, supporting nutrition-sensitive farming practices, and facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogues.
NGOs	BRAC	In Bangladesh, non-governmental organizations

	<p>iccdrb (International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh)</p> <p>Uttaran</p> <p>Proshika</p> <p>Mastul Foundation</p> <p>Nutrition For Change</p> <p>SAWAB Foundation</p> <p>ARK Foundation</p>	<p>(NGOs) play a major role in advancing nutrition and food security. For example- some of their work includes implementing climate-smart agricultural practices, distributing quality seeds, and improving food access in vulnerable regions. These NGOs collectively contribute to building resilient communities and promoting equitable access to nutritious food across Bangladesh.</p>
Civil Society Network	<p>Right to Food Bangladesh</p> <p>Bangladesh Health Watch</p>	<p>It is a civil society network that advocates for a Right to Food Act, it also engages in policy dialogue, youth mobilization, and national campaigns for food and nutritional security.</p>

5. Bangladesh Food and Nutrition Policy Overview

Bangladesh's food policy has evolved significantly with a focus on increasing agricultural production and ensuring food security for all. During post-independence time, food aids, international relief packages and commercial imports (by government) played a crucial role in preventing famine. Over time, the government implemented various strategies to boost food production which includes subsidized inputs, increased investment in agriculture, privatizations and expansion of extension services. A key turning point was achieving self-sufficiency in food production in 2000. Currently, the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy aims to further strengthen food and nutrition security, aligning with national and international commitments, according to the Ministry of Food. An overview of nation's policy transitions has outlined below:

An Overview of Country's Food & Nutrition Policy

Early Years (1971-1980)

Immediately after independence, Bangladesh faced severe food shortages and relied heavily on food aid from other countries, especially in the immediate aftermath of the 1974 famine. The government implemented measures such as rationing and price controls to ensure food availability and affordability, particularly in urban areas. Efforts were made to increase rice production through improved irrigation, fertilizer use, and the introduction of high-yielding varieties.

Shift towards Self-Sufficiency (1980-2000)

The introduction of high-yielding varieties of rice, particularly the IR8 variety, considerably increased rice production. Improvements in irrigation infrastructure, such as deep tube wells and shallow tube wells, played a crucial role in increasing agricultural productivity. Government subsidies on fertilizers and pesticides helped farmers increase their yields. By the early 2000s, Bangladesh had achieved self-sufficiency in rice production, significantly reducing reliance on food aid. 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, limiting their effectiveness.

Modern Policies (2000-Present)

After 2000, Bangladesh has adopted a number of strategic policies to guide its approach to food and nutrition. One of the earliest comprehensive efforts was the National Food Policy (2006), which emphasized availability, access, and utilization of food, and 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 largely focused on food availability rather than nutrition outcomes. The National Nutrition Policy (2015) marked a pivotal shift in acknowledging the multi-dimensional nature of nutrition, focusing on both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions. It recognized the roles of agriculture, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene), education, and gender equity. However, the policy lacked specific operational frameworks for collaboration between sectors, particularly agriculture and health. Furthermore, its alignment with local government structures was weak, hampering the decentralization of nutrition programming. Following this, the Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN2, 2016–2025) 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, implementation has been limited by inconsistent political commitment, lack of dedicated budgets, and gaps in technical capacity across line ministries. Later other policies, plans and acts were introduced; however, many remains aspirational which lacked detailed implementation roadmaps, poor or no indication for tracking progress, or mechanisms for holding institutions accountable.

Policy Criticism: How policy reformed overtime and identifying gaps

Policy	How Policy Addressed Nutrition	Policy Criticism
National Food Policy 1988	It does not specifically address nutrition.	The NFP 1988 focuses primarily on the availability and distribution of cereals to ensure national self-sufficiency and prevent hunger but it does not specifically address nutrition. It is identified as a major/key limitation as it does not deal with food items like fish, meat, vegetables, pulses, oil etc.
New Agricultural Extension Policy (NAEP) 1996	This policy New Agricultural Extension Policy (NAEP) does not cover nutrition. It emphasizes on agricultural production and inter-department collaborations which can promote agro-production.	NAEP 1996 was one of the first initiatives which strengthen inter-department collaboration. This policy created a layout of collaboration for upcoming policies and plan associated to nutrition.
National Food and Nutrition Policy (NFNP) 1997	The NFNP 1997 recognized nutrition as a human right and emphasized a multisectoral approach, prioritizing vulnerable groups and addressing micronutrient deficiencies and non-food factors like sanitation and health education.	The NFNP 1997 was visionary in its framing of nutrition as a national priority, but it was more aspirational than actionable. It laid the groundwork for future policies, but its lack of specificity and institutional support limited its effectiveness.
National Plan of Action for Nutrition 1997	The National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN) of 1997 was a comprehensive strategy in Bangladesh to combat malnutrition by 2010. It focused on key areas like ensuring food security, addressing micronutrient deficiencies, and promoting breastfeeding, all while empowering communities and protecting vulnerable populations.	The plan commendably framed nutrition as a human right and addressed key issues like micronutrient deficiencies, vulnerable groups, and non-food determinants through a multisectoral lens. However, it lacked actionable strategies, measurable targets, and failed to address urban nutrition, overnutrition, and the role of civil society and private sector, limiting its practical impact.
National Food Policy 2006	The National Food Policy 2006 emphasizes improving nutrition through diversified diets, micronutrient supplementation, and targeted support for vulnerable groups like women and children. It also promotes nutrition education, school feeding programs, and cross-sectoral coordination to ensure a holistic approach to food security.	The National Food Policy 2006 acknowledges nutrition as vital to food security and proposes broad strategies like diet diversification and supplementation. However, it lacks clear implementation plans, measurable targets, and fails to address cultural, gender, and local barriers to effective nutrition outcomes.

Policy	How Policy Addressed Nutrition	Policy Criticism
National Food Policy Plan of Action (PoA) 2008-2015	The National Food Policy Plan of Action (2008–2015) outlines eight key strategies to improve nutrition, including balanced diet planning, food supplementation, nutrition education, and support for maternal and child health. It also emphasizes safe water and sanitation, food safety, and breastfeeding promotion to ensure comprehensive nutritional outcomes across all population groups.	The National Food Policy Plan of Action (2008–2015) outlines comprehensive strategies to improve nutrition, including diet diversification, supplementation, education, and maternal-child health initiatives. However, it faces criticism for unrealistic targets, weak accountability, and limited attention to cultural and gender barriers, with fragmented coordination across implementing agencies.
National Nutrition Services (NNS) Operational Plan 2011-2016	The National Nutrition Services (NNS) Operational Plan 2011–2016 outlines integrated nutrition interventions such as micronutrient supplementation, growth monitoring, breastfeeding support, and behavior change communication through the health system. It also emphasizes food fortification, school-based nutrition education, and multi-sectoral coordination to improve nutrition outcomes, especially for women and children.	The NNS Operational Plan 2011–2016 effectively outlines key nutrition interventions like micronutrient supplementation, breastfeeding support, and behavior change communication. However, it overlooks adolescent nutrition, non-communicable diseases, urban dietary challenges, and lacks strategies to address cultural barriers and ensure robust monitoring.
The Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN2) 2016-2025	The Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN2) 2016–2025 outlines Bangladesh’s strategy to improve nutrition as a key to national development. It targets all age groups, focusing on vulnerable populations like children, adolescent girls, and pregnant women. The plan combines direct nutrition interventions such as breastfeeding and micronutrient support with broader efforts in agriculture, education, and sanitation. It addresses both undernutrition and rising obesity, promotes dietary diversity, and sets measurable goals to reduce stunting, anemia, and low birth weight. Through multi-sectoral coordination and strong monitoring, NPAN2 aims to build a healthier, more resilient population by 2025.	The NPAN2 offers a strong framework for tackling malnutrition through targeted interventions and cross-sector collaboration, but its approach to nutrition remains narrow. It overlooks critical issues like ultra-processed food consumption, chronic diseases, urban dietary challenges, and the cultural dimensions of eating, limiting its effectiveness in addressing Bangladesh’s evolving nutritional landscape.

Policy	How Policy Addressed Nutrition	Policy Criticism
National Nutrition Policy (NNP) 2015	NNP 2015 treats nutrition as a national priority, focusing on all age groups with special attention to vulnerable populations. It combines direct interventions like breastfeeding and micronutrient support with broader strategies in agriculture, education, and sanitation, aiming to reduce malnutrition and promote dietary diversity through measurable goals and coordinated action.	The NNP 2015 lays a strong foundation for tackling malnutrition through measurable targets and multi-sectoral strategies, focusing on vulnerable groups and direct interventions like breastfeeding and micronutrient support. However, it overlooks rising issues like ultra-processed food consumption, chronic diseases, urban dietary shifts, and cultural food practices, limiting its ability to address Bangladesh's evolving nutrition challenges holistically.
National Food and Nutrition Security Policy Plan of Action (2021–2030)	The National Food and Nutrition Security Policy Plan of Action (2021–2030) positions nutrition as a cornerstone of Bangladesh's development, linking it to health, education, and economic growth. It adopts a life-cycle approach, targeting all age groups with a mix of nutrition-specific interventions such as breastfeeding support and micronutrient supplementation and nutrition-sensitive strategies across agriculture, education, water, sanitation, and social protection. The policy emphasizes improving food systems, ensuring dietary diversity and food safety, and prioritizing vulnerable populations including women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. It also includes a detailed framework for monitoring progress through clearly defined objectives, responsible actors, and indicators.	The National Food and Nutrition Security Policy Plan of Action (2021–2030) effectively prioritizes nutrition through multi-sectoral strategies and clear targets, focusing on undernutrition and vulnerable groups. However, it underplays rising issues like obesity, ultra-processed foods, urban dietary risks, and cultural food practices, limiting its ability to address Bangladesh's evolving nutrition landscape comprehensively.
Plan of Action (PoA) for 2021-2030	The Plan of Action (2021–2030) under Bangladesh's National Food and Nutrition Security Policy outlines a comprehensive framework to achieve food and nutrition security through five strategic objectives. It promotes sustainable food production, strengthens value chains and food safety, addresses nutrition gaps via improved health and sanitation services, enhances access and resilience through public support systems, and	The Plan of Action (2021–2030) under Bangladesh's National Food and Nutrition Security Policy makes a strong commitment to improving nutrition through coordinated, multi-sectoral strategies. It emphasizes reducing undernutrition, enhancing food safety, and supporting vulnerable groups with clear targets and institutional accountability. However, its approach to nutrition remains narrowly focused on traditional concerns like stunting and micronutrient deficiencies, while underplaying emerging

Policy	How Policy Addressed Nutrition	Policy Criticism
	<p>improves governance and accountability. Each objective is supported by specific areas of intervention and a detailed matrix linking actions to responsible institutions and measurable indicators, ensuring coordinated implementation and progress tracking across sectors.</p>	<p>challenges such as obesity, non-communicable diseases, and the growing consumption of ultra-processed foods. The plan also lacks attention to urban food environments, food marketing, and the behavioral and cultural aspects of eating, which are increasingly relevant in a rapidly changing society. Without addressing these broader dimensions, the policy risks falling short of delivering truly comprehensive nutrition security for all Bangladeshis.</p>
<p>Bangladesh Advocacy Plan for Nutrition 2019-2025</p>	<p>The Advocacy Plan for Nutrition (2019–2025) by Bangladesh’s Ministry of Health and Family Welfare promotes nutrition as a key driver of development, aiming to raise awareness among policymakers and mobilize resources for effective implementation of NPAN2. It focuses on strategic communication and multi-sectoral collaboration to influence policy and public attitudes, though it gives limited attention to grassroots advocacy, digital outreach, and impact monitoring.</p>	<p>The Advocacy Plan for Nutrition (2019–2025) rightly promotes nutrition as a development priority, but it overlooks key challenges like obesity, ultra-processed foods, and urban dietary risks. It focuses on high-level policy engagement while neglecting grassroots mobilization, digital outreach, and impact monitoring limiting its ability to address Bangladesh’s evolving nutrition landscape comprehensively.</p>
<p>National Food Safety (Contaminants, Toxins and Harmful Residues) Regulation 2017</p>	<p>The National Food Safety (Contaminants, Toxins, and Harmful Residues) Regulation, 2017 does not directly address nutrition in terms of dietary quality, nutrient intake, or public health nutrition strategies. Its primary focus is on chemical safety, setting legal limits for contaminants like pesticide residues, toxins, and harmful substances in food to protect consumers from acute and long-term health risks. While this contributes indirectly to safer food and public health, the regulation does not discuss nutritional adequacy, dietary diversity, or nutrition-related diseases such as undernutrition or obesity. In short, it’s a food safety regulation with a chemical lens, not a nutrition policy.</p>	<p>The National Food Safety (Contaminants, Toxins, and Harmful Residues) Regulation, 2017 does not address several key aspects of nutrition. It omits any discussion of dietary quality, nutrient adequacy, or balanced eating patterns, focusing solely on chemical safety rather than overall nutritional well-being. There is no mention of nutrition-related health outcomes such as undernutrition, obesity, or non-communicable diseases. The regulation also excludes guidance on food labeling, consumer education, and promotion of healthy diets, which are essential for informed choices and public health. In short, while it safeguards against chemical hazards, it does not engage with the broader dimensions of nutrition.</p>

Policy	How Policy Addressed Nutrition	Policy Criticism
Bangladesh Good Agricultural Practices Policy 2020	The Bangladesh Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) Policy 2020 focuses primarily on food safety, environmental sustainability, and responsible farming, but it does not directly address nutrition in terms of dietary diversity, nutrient content, or public health outcomes. Its emphasis is on reducing chemical contamination, improving input use, and ensuring safe food production for both domestic consumption and export markets.	While the policy contributes indirectly to nutrition by promoting safer and cleaner agricultural practices, it does not include provisions for enhancing the nutritional value of crops, promoting nutrient-rich farming systems, or linking agriculture with nutrition-sensitive goals.
Edible Oil Fortification Act 2013	The policy promotes safe food production, aiming to reduce chemical contamination and microbial risks, which indirectly supports better nutritional outcomes. It encourages clean and responsible farming practices, which can contribute to healthier food systems.	The Bangladesh GAP Policy 2020 rightly focuses on safe and sustainable farming, but it overlooks key nutrition concerns. It fails to promote nutrient-rich crops, dietary diversity, or align agriculture with public health goals. The lack of consumer awareness, food fortification, and integration with national nutrition strategies limits its impact on nutrition outcomes.
Salt Iodization Act 2021	The National Plan of Action on Nutrition (NPAN2) 2016–2025 takes a life-cycle approach, delivering nutrition interventions from pregnancy to old age. It uses a multi-sectoral strategy linking health, agriculture, education, social protection, and WASH to address malnutrition's root causes. The plan combines nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive actions like breastfeeding support, micronutrient programs, and school feeding. With a strong equity focus, it prioritizes vulnerable groups and includes clear indicators and institutional roles for monitoring progress.	While the National Plan of Action on Nutrition (NPAN2) 2016–2025 offers a broad framework for tackling malnutrition, it falls short in several critical areas. It underrepresents urban nutrition challenges, such as rising obesity and increased consumption of processed foods. The plan also overlooks behavioral and cultural factors that shape dietary habits, limiting its effectiveness in promoting sustainable nutrition. Additionally, it lacks a clear strategy for engaging the private sector in fostering healthier food environments and does not leverage digital platforms for nutrition education or service delivery, missing key opportunities to expand its reach and impact.
National Agriculture Policy 2018	The National Agriculture Policy 2018 emphasizes the production and marketing of safe and nutritious food as a key objective. It promotes crop diversification by encouraging the cultivation of high-value, nutrient-rich crops such as oilseeds, fruits,	Although the National Agriculture Policy 2018 acknowledges nutrition, it lacks a clear strategy for integrating agriculture with public health nutrition. It does not address consumer behavior, dietary diversity, or cultural food practices that influence nutritional outcomes. The policy shows weak

Policy	How Policy Addressed Nutrition	Policy Criticism
	<p>vegetables, and non-traditional items like barley and jam potato. The policy also supports nutrition-focused research, including post-harvest technologies and food-based applied nutrition, and links agricultural productivity with broader national goals for food and nutrition security.</p>	<p>coordination with national nutrition frameworks like NPAN2 or the National Nutrition Policy, limiting its alignment with broader goals. Additionally, it overlooks urban food systems and emerging issues such as obesity and processed food consumption, missing critical opportunities to respond to Bangladesh's shifting nutrition challenges.</p>
<p>The Food Safety Act 2013</p>	<p>The Food Safety Act, 2013 of Bangladesh focuses on regulating the production, processing, import, and distribution of food to ensure public access to safe food. While it links food safety to human health, it does not directly address nutrition in terms of dietary quality, nutrient content, or broader public health nutrition strategies. Its contribution to nutrition is indirect, emphasizing safe food as a right and regulating contaminants like pesticide residues and additives that can affect nutritional safety.</p>	<p>The Food Safety Act, 2013 of Bangladesh focuses on regulating food production, processing, import, and distribution to ensure access to safe food, linking food safety to human health. However, it falls short in addressing core nutrition concerns. The Act makes no mention of nutrient-rich foods, dietary diversity, or nutrition-sensitive agriculture, and lacks integration with national nutrition frameworks like NPAN2 or the National Nutrition Policy. It also overlooks consumer nutrition awareness, food fortification, and behavioral change strategies. By treating nutrition as peripheral rather than central to food policy, the Act misses a vital opportunity to align food safety with broader public health and nutrition goals.</p>

6. Policy Recommendations

- **More targeted approach on women and children**

GoB has undertaken various initiatives to support vulnerable women and children and to promote healthy diets among them. However, several studies have revealed that cash incentive programs are often misused or poorly targeted. It is therefore recommended that a more “targeted and evidence-based approach” be adopted to ensure that assistance effectively reaches the intended beneficiaries.

- **Balancing import tax on healthy fruits**

Fruits are an essential component of a balanced and healthy diet. In Bangladesh, people consume both traditional and imported fruits. Among the imported fruits, apples, oranges, and grapefruits are popular. However, high import taxes have made many of these fruits less affordable for consumers. The Total Tax Incidence (TTI) currently ranges from approximately 51% to 118%. It is therefore recommended that a more suitable and equitable tax structure should be considered to ensure better affordability and access for all segments of the population.

- **Increase investment on public awareness**

One of the core challenges is the lack of public awareness regarding healthy eating practices. Many people remain unaware of how to maintain a balanced diet using traditional foods and locally available ingredients — for instance, the concept of a “colorful plate” or “eating rainbow”. Promoting the consumption of local fruits and traditional dietary diversity is essential. It is therefore recommended to increase investments in public awareness campaigns and integrate nutrition education into both general and specialized education programs, including adult education program.

- **Incentives for private sector to promote food fortification**

To address micronutrient deficiencies, food fortification has emerged as an effective and widely adopted strategy. The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has introduced both mandatory and voluntary fortification approaches. Currently, the fortification of salt and edible oil is mandatory. However, these efforts alone are insufficient to effectively combat widespread micronutrient deficiencies. Staple foods such as rice and wheat should also be brought under fortification initiatives. To encourage broader participation, the government may consider providing incentives to the private sector (e.g., Tax/VAT exemptions).

- **Distributing fortified rice/wheat through government social safety net programs**

GoB distributes rice and wheat through various social safety net programs, primarily targeting low-income households. Since these staples are widely consumed by poorer communities, integrating fortified rice and wheat into such programs could significantly enhance their nutritional intake. This approach would serve as an effective means to improve the nutritional status of vulnerable and marginalized populations.

- **Increased investment in nutrition-sensitive and diversified agriculture industry**

GoB should expand its investments in nutrition-sensitive and diversified agricultural sectors to enhance the production of healthy and nutritious foods. To foster the growth of such industries, the establishment of Special Economic Zones, provision of subsidized utilities (e.g., electricity and gas), government-backed low-interest loans, and comprehensive technical, infrastructural, and administrative support will be essential. Furthermore, the government should formulate long-term investment policies to ensure the efficient mobilization of capital and create an enabling environment that attracts private sector participation.

- **Ensuring open access for equipment and technology**

As a technologically backward country, Bangladesh remains heavily dependent on international markets for acquiring equipment and technology. Similarly, machinery and technologies essential for producing, processing and testing healthy and nutritious foods are also import dependent. To facilitate this process, tax exemptions and administrative support are necessary.

In addition, establishing bilateral agreements with developed countries for technology transfer would be crucial to enhance local capacity and promote sustainable growth in the nutrition-focused food sector.

- **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 stable supply chain and ensure price stability.

- **Imposing excessing tax on Processed Foods and Sugar Sweetened Beverages (SSB)**

The rising consumption of processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) poses significant health risks, particularly among urban populations who rely more heavily on ready-made and restaurant foods. The increasing intake of these products by children and young people is especially concerning. To address this issue, the GoB should consider imposing higher taxes on processed foods and SSBs to create a price barrier and discourage excessive consumption.

- **Prioritizing National Investment for Special Economic Zones for Agricultural Sector**

As part of Bangladesh's ongoing economic growth initiatives, the government has established Special Economic Zones (SEZs) across the country. To further strengthen the agricultural economy, it is proposed that dedicated SEZs be developed for the agricultural sector. Strategic public investment in these zones will help attract international investors, enhance agricultural productivity, and boost national production capacity.

Conclusion

Since independence, Bangladesh faced a formidable challenge in ensuring food security for its large population, as the nation was heavily dependent on traditional agricultural practices and not able to adopt modern technologies and methods required for agricultural production. Through strong policy measures and sustained government efforts, supported by national and international collaborations, the country successfully stabilized food production and made remarkable progress toward achieving food security.

Over time, the national agenda has evolved from securing adequate food supply to ensuring nutrition security for all citizens. However, despite these advancements, the nutrition ecosystem remains fragile, and multiple challenges persist. To overcome these barriers and build a resilient, nutrition-secure nation, strategic trade and fiscal initiatives must be prioritized. These measures can enhance agricultural productivity, strengthen market systems, and create an enabling environment for sustainable nutrition advancement in Bangladesh.

National policy should focus on enhancing public awareness and adopting a more targeted and evidence-based approach for vulnerable groups, particularly women and children. Fiscal measures can be utilized to strengthen nutrition education programs, promote behavior change communication, and ensure that social protection and cash incentive schemes effectively reach their intended beneficiaries. Introducing locally produced healthy and nutritious foods to mass population can bring balance in national consumption.

Policy reforms should also aim to encourage private sector engagement in nutrition advancement. This includes providing fiscal incentives for food fortification, especially for staple foods like rice and wheat. Parallel investment in nutrition-sensitive and diversified agriculture, supported through the establishment of SEZs for the agricultural sector, will be vital to enhance productivity, attract investment, and promote innovation in food and nutrition eco-system.

Trade and taxation policies must be realigned to support nutrition goals. This includes rationalizing import taxes on healthy fruits to improve affordability, imposing higher taxes on processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) to discourage unhealthy consumption, and forging long-term bilateral trade agreements to ensure a stable supply of nutritious foods.

In summary, Bangladesh's journey toward nutrition security requires a coherent policy direction that strategically combines awareness, targeted fiscal measures, private sector participation, and balanced trade policies. Through such integrated policy actions, the country can build a resilient and inclusive nutrition ecosystem that secures the health and well-being of all citizens.

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