

# Food Security for the Extreme Poor in Bangladesh

**Introduction and Context:** The Article 25 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 declared right to a standard living with adequate food for everyone including other basic rights (Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948). In the Constitution of Bangladesh, food along with clothe, shelter, education and treatment have been declared as ‘**basic needs**’ but, not as ‘**right**’ (RtF Charter 2015). Government is positive towards right to food act and has recently formulated Food Safety Act 2013. The current Policy Brief is prepared based on experiences of partner organisations in the northern and southern regions of Bangladesh and the food security framework i.e. food accessibility, availability, utilisation and sustainability, which are mostly included in the 7th Five Year Plan 2016-2020, where collaborative efforts of different partners have been emphasized.

**Argument:** Despite of significant poverty reduction and economic growth, extreme poverty still remains as a major challenge in Bangladesh. These people are highly vulnerable to different disaster and deprived of social and economic rights. Of the 7-10 million poor vulnerable char people, a significant number live in the north-western parts. Plain land Adivasi (about 1.7-2.0 million<sup>1</sup>) and Dalit (un-touchable) population (about 5 million<sup>2</sup>) are the mostly poor and extreme poor living in some parts of Bangladesh, who need special attention to ensure their food security. The current policy brief focuses on those extreme poor and vulnerable communities.

**Factors of Extreme Poverty:** Multiple complex factors contribute to the poverty and food insecurity for the extreme poor, such as, lack of access to land,

natural calamities, employment and income opportunities, price hike, income inequality, market volatility, food distribution and supply gap and inadequate social safety nets programme, etc. (BBS 2014, Practical Action 2014 and 7<sup>th</sup> FYP 2016-20). Income inequality in five South Asian nations widened over the last three decades 1980-2010 (MHHDC 2015) despite of economic growth of 5.9 percent/year and distribution of wealth remained uneven, due to weak public institutions and could only gain 1.5% growth in social development. In Bangladesh, rice inflation increased the number of poor people by 12.1 million-January 2005- March 2008 (MHHDC 2015).

**Strategies and Actions:** To address the complexity of the extreme poor of different social categories, creation of jobs with decent environment; positive initiatives for women's empowerment; special interventions targeting the extreme poor like CLP, REOPA, SHOUHARDO, BRAC, EEP Shiree (7th FYP). Skills on different trades for the extreme poor can largely create employment. Accelerating the growth in the production of non-rice food, such as pulses, oils, fish and animal products have fast growing demand with economic prosperity for the extreme poor (Hossain 2015)<sup>3</sup>. Providing access to land, wetlands (have vast potentials) and other productive resources are essential for diversification of economic opportunities for enhancing production and growth. In Bangladesh, each year the country is losing 1% of cultivable land. Innovation of technology for natural resources use can meet the increased food security. Sandbar cropping technology innovated by Practical Action, under its EEP Shiree project is such an encouraging example (Case 1).

<sup>1</sup>Mr. Robin Soren, Chairman of National Adivasi Council, Bangladesh

<sup>2</sup>HEKS/EPER (2015)

<sup>3</sup><http://archive.thedailystar.net/beta2/news/achievement-and-challenges/>; Accessed on December 26, 2015

**Case 1** *Practical Action has demonstrated its 'sandbar technology' since 2005 in the transitional land (raised seasonally for six months on the river beds) for producing pumpkin with the flood and river eroded displaced people living on isolated chars and embankments in the north-western Bangladesh. It has been proved successful in producing pumpkin along with some other short duration cash crops like squash. Since 2005, Practical Action has worked for 16,000 households with technical and financial supports. Of those, 80% have been graduated out of their extreme poverty situation (CMS 2015) in two consecutive years and substituted to production of the lost land to some extent. There remains huge un-used sandbar each year with high potential.*

Women, engaged traditionally in agricultural activities that have large potential, but not trapped yet. An example of HEKS/EPER is shared (Case 2). Easy access to knowledge, quality seeds, technologies, financial services with easy terms, gender focused ICT based extension services are essential to enable them, where Krishi Call Centre can significantly contribute.

**Case 2** *HEKS/EPER's bull fattening activity with technical support of Practical Action, for 2800 Dalit and Adivasi people of the North West Bangladesh contributed to increase their annual income by 21% (BDT 15,049) against their base annual income of BDT 71820 after 1.5 years of initiation in 2013. Each household fattened one bull in a 4 months' cycle that generated extra employment and contributed to such increase of annual income beyond their daily labouring.*

Anemia status among the poorest women and children is high. The undernourishment in Bangladesh is still 16% (GNR 2015). Inadequate food intake and chronic malnutrition amongst the poor is yet prevalent, which reveals specific actions through concerted effort. Inefficient food delivery system affects food supply, decrease availability, price hike, market volatility and accessibility (Alauddin, S M and Islam, Faruk UI, 2014). Regional cooperation (like SAARC Food Bank, though not functional) can contribute in crisis moment (RtF 2015). Targeted income transfer, credit programme and insurance mechanisms may generate high payoffs

in reducing poverty and improving food security (Hossain 2015). There is evidence of cattle insurance with positive results (Case 3).

**Case 3** *Oxfam GB's recently, piloted index based insurance product/tool developed based on measurement of water level proved successful in reducing risks or loss of man-days of day laborers caused by flood as an institutional measure of solution. The water level crossed the index level in 2014 and thus, Oxfam provided premium to over 700 households of four villages under Sirajganj district. However, Oxfam feels further need of research before going to its wider replication.*

**Conclusion and Policy Recommendations:** Based on the discussions and realities, the current Policy Brief has made following recommendations to enhance food security for the extreme poor-

- revitalizing the existing Social Safety Net Programme (SSNPs) under broader social protection policy and strategy,
- enhancing efficient public food distribution system to significantly contribute to the food security of the vulnerable households those lack means to access food,
- accelerating growth in the production of fast growing non-rice food items by providing access to land, optimum use of potential of wetlands for fish production and other productive resources for diversification of options for enhancing production and economic growth for food security with nutritional consideration of the extreme poor,
- providing technical, financial and input services in easy term to the women engaged in homestead vegetation, fruit production and livestock farming,
- introduction of insurance programme (crop, cattle, etc.) to reduce loss and damages of crops, cattle and wages of the poor and small holders,
- enact Food Security Act as one of the basic human rights,
- strengthen Regional and International collaboration and cooperation in ensuring food security like establishing SAARC Food bank.

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