

COMMENTARY ON COVID-19 AND THE FOOD SYSTEM

**COVID-19 and food security in Bangladesh:
A chance to look back at what is done and
what can be done****JAFSCD
Responds to
the COVID-19
Pandemic**Debashish Sarker Dev^{a b *}

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The COVID-19 pandemic has created a global health crisis, and the long-term impact of the pandemic is predicted to reach far beyond today. In a lower-middle-income country with upward economic growth, such as Bangladesh, it is essential first to understand the present situation in order to create a proper recovery plan. Bangladesh has made significant progress in poverty reduction over the last two decades. Its poverty rate dropped to 23.2% in 2016 from 48.9% in 2000 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2018), which has also helped improve the country's food security status. Bangladesh has made remarkable progress over the last few years (Roy, Dev, & Sheheli, 2019) in most of the four dimensions of food security: food availability, food access, food utilization, and food stability.

However, travel restrictions, local lockdowns, and social distancing measures being in place for a prolonged period will set back the country's progress towards achieving food security. One of the concerning issues is that while people consider achieving food security to be a critical challenge, they hardly consider pandemic issues to be a big challenge. Our past experience with epidemics and

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pandemics does not seem to have done enough to make us seriously consider pandemic issues in our preparedness plans (Anwar, Nasrullah, & Hosen, 2020). Although the government always states that it is well prepared for any crisis, the current COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh has presented mixed results in terms of food security (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.).

What Steps Are Being Taken to Ensure Food Security?

Food security is very much dependent on supplies from the agricultural sector, as this ensures food availability. The government's attempt to subsidize farm machinery to help farmers harvest agricultural produce in a timely manner was useful. With proper attempts made by the ministry of agriculture and the field-level agriculture extension workers, farmers were close to success in harvesting and marketing enough rice and other agricultural products. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, there are sufficient cereals and other food products stored in the country, which is a good sign for food security.

If we reflect on the access dimension of food security, the government took some commendable steps to solve the problem temporarily. Although the planning was done before the pandemic hit Bangladesh, the steps were improvised during the COVID-19 crisis. Through its local administration, the government provided food and assistance to poor people. It is estimated that more than 5 million ultra-poor people got support from this initiative. The government requested that the rich people in society help the needy people, and a lot of rich people responded to this urge and helped needy people by providing food and essentials. Further, the government has taken a hardline stance to control prices in the food market so that people can buy necessary foods for a fair price. The government also launched a web portal, named Food for Nation,¹ which was created solely to deal with food supply and customer access. The website is the first of its kind in Bangladesh, creating an open, web-based agricultural marketplace and making a direct connection between producer and customer. Besides this, another web portal, named Corona Info,² also provides services related to food relief. The government listed all of the contact numbers for online food delivery services and essential food suppliers in this web portal so that people can easily access them. Another admirable attempt at increasing food security, through Corona Info, was opening a simple online application system for food relief where poor people, or their neighbors on their behalf, can request emergency food supplies. However, it is unclear whether online platforms are helping the food security cause in Bangladesh, as most of the needy and food-insecure people are not able to connect with such platforms.

Nonetheless, these attempts are praiseworthy for increasing people's food access. The government is trying, furthermore, to influence people to consume diversified foods, such as milk, eggs, rice, oil, and meat, as these products are in surplus production inside the country. The government likewise tried to include these products in its food relief program, which is an indication that it is attempting to promote proper food utilization and nutrition. However, it is clear from reports that not everyone, and particularly not poor people, are guaranteed to get food. When there is no surety of food, which is especially the case during the pandemic, it is expected that many people will not have proper food utilization nor nutrition.


Moreover, Bangladesh has experienced some hiccups in efforts at food stability. At the very beginning of the lockdowns, we observed an upsurge in the purchase of essential goods, and food products were the main target for people. Before announcing the lockdown, the government failed to plan how people would lead their lives under these new guidelines, and this is reflected in the price hikes and the frequency that essential food products were out of stock at the beginning of the pandemic. After the

¹ <https://foodformation.gov.bd/>

² <https://corona.gov.bd/>

lockdown was put in place, the poor bore the brunt of the hardship; daily wage laborers, in particular, suffered, given that their income source was gone. These people are always at risk for food insecurity, and the pandemic further exacerbates their situation. This exemplifies that the government's system to maintain food stability is flawed.

What Should We Look Forward To?

If we look closely, all of these efforts, at their core, are attempts to increase the survival of poor people. However, food security is not the only factor in their survival. The COVID-19 pandemic gives us an uncertain future, but also provides limitless opportunities to start over in building a sustainable food system. The pandemic exposed the flawed system of government and society, which initially forgot to recognize the influence of pandemics on food security. It also showed that the government's efforts were not enough to ensure the basic need of food for the people of Bangladesh. COVID-19 changed the context of our economic attention. It gives us a chance to restructure our efforts to make a food-secure society. The post-coronavirus rebuilding program must listen first to the lived experience of affected people. The government needs to unfold the potential of learning from people's social, cultural, and economic practices while dealing with the prolonged crisis. Food is the first basic need of human beings, and food should be at the center of any recovery or social safety plan. Relatedly, agriculture should be given the foremost priority for rebuilding packages. The government should encourage farmers, prioritize agricultural marketing, and create spaces for farmers to share their views. They should also prepare to build a farmer-consumer oriented producing-processing-marketing-selling system to lead a comprehensive recovery and increase preparedness for dealing with food insecurity. 

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