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## **Food Security in People's Republic of Bangladesh**

"Food security is given the topmost priority in Bangladesh. Side by side with domestic food production, greater importance is given to ensure access to adequate and safe food by all people at all times for maintaining an active and healthy life" (GoB). Food security in our world today is uncertain for too many countries. It is not only a matter of improving technology, but also of working together as a global community.

Bangladesh is the eighth most populated country in the world, with the United States being fourth and Brazil being sixth (CIA). However, "as much as 50% of the population lives in disaster prone areas" (USAID). With about 360 miles of coastline, Bangladesh is subject to frequent flooding, along with natural disasters like the cyclone that hit in May, 2009. The climate varies between wet and dry, and the temperature ranges from 60-100 degrees Fahrenheit.

Along with the unpredictable physical environment, Bangladesh has one of the highest population densities in the world, second only to traditionally urban areas such as Singapore. Also, "almost all available land is already under cultivation, and urban land encroachment and degradation are serious problems in some places" (Runge et al 46). Over the years, land allocated for protein crops has been reduced to make way for the "rapid expansion in the production of cereals" (Hossain).

Approximately 200 definitions and 450 indicators of food security exist, but one of the commonly accepted definitions of food security is,

when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. (FAO)

For many subsistence farmers in Bangladesh, food security is not an academic pursuit but a day-by-day struggle to survive, and "it is at the local and, most especially, the household and individual levels where the notion of food security is best operationalized" (Sage 141).

Through World Vision, I sponsor a Bangladeshi child in the Barua family; a boy named Imon. The sponsorship helps to provide him and his community with health care, improved hygiene, yearly checkups, school fees, and roads and bridges. Imon is in first grade, and he loves playing soccer. His favorite subject is Bengali, and one of his chores is carrying wood. Imon lives with his father, who is a fish seller, his mother, who takes care of the household, and his two brothers. He lives in a rural farming community where the typical house is made of bamboo walls, a metal roof, and a dirt floor. The community survives on rice, fish, and vegetables if they can afford them. Potatoes, chilies, legumes, and oil seeds also supplement the staple diet (Shrestha 214). "The diet of Bangladeshi people is seriously imbalanced, with inadequate consumption of fat, oil and protein, and with more than 80 percent of calories derived from cereals" (Hossain). Even with donations from World Vision, Imon's family struggles to make ends meet.

This paper will focus on addressing problems created by globalization and trade policies for subsistence family farmers. However, Bangladesh's food security problems fall under multiple categories which must also be addressed, including poverty, chronic hunger, natural disasters, food distribution, and land tenure.

## **Natural Disasters**

One of these obvious problems comes from the environment in the form of natural disasters. Crops are too often destroyed by flooding or drought. When these factors can't be predicted or prepared for, farming families risk losing everything, especially since most farmers are subsistence farmers, growing only enough to barely feed their families each year. According to Hossain,

Domestic food grain production remains susceptible to floods and droughts thereby perpetuating the threat of major production shortfalls, inadequate food availability, and vulnerability from fluctuation in prices.

On top of this, as soon as a natural disaster occurs, national funds that traditionally go to help the poor are diverted to disaster relief. Even if a farming family isn't directly affected by a natural disaster, the country as a whole shifts its focus to helping disaster victims, leaving other farmers to fend for themselves. With climate change being a popular discussion topic today, rising sea levels are often discussed. According to the World Bank, a one meter rise in sea level would cover half of Bangladesh's rice land. It would also displace about 40 million Bangladeshis (Brown 125).

Along with unpredictable natural occurrences, Bangladesh's rivers lead to frequent land erosion every year, "causing thousands to lose their land" (Hossain). Farmers are forced to worry about the possibility of their land, which usually isn't enough to even support the family, disappearing entirely to torrential rivers multiple times a year. Water is their only hope of survival, yet it is also the greatest danger.

## **Chronic Hunger and Poverty**

Another basic issue involving food insecurity in Bangladesh is chronic hunger. Nearly 40% of Bangladeshis live below the food consumption-based poverty line (Houssain), and 22% of people in Bangladesh receive less than the minimum number of calories for a person participating in light activity. Few of Bangladesh's poor actually receive the number of calories expected for the amount of work they complete in a day. This affects everything they do. It is well known that "people cannot be chronically malnourished and reasonable productive at the same time" (Runge et al 113). For Imon's family, this would mean that his father would not be able to work as long, or he wouldn't be as productive. His mother would be sick more often, and Imon and his brothers would have a difficult time concentrating on even the most basic schoolwork.

According to Hossain, "acute and chronic malnourishment is unusually high in Bangladesh with about 20 percent of both boys and girls severely stunted and about 12 to 14 percent boys and girls severely underweight." If chronic hunger limits the amount of work and learning Imon would be able to handle, it would also keep him locked into poverty, doling out the same fate to Imon's future family. "To be deprived of food is a denial of a fundamental right to a full and active life" (Runge et al 113). Hunger creates a vicious cycle of need in Bangladesh's poor, and "poverty is the major factor effecting food security in Bangladesh" (USAID). According to Runge, hunger and poverty are directly linked, so poverty must be eliminated first (13). Because "poverty in Bangladesh is mostly a rural phenomenon" (Anriquez et al 87), the focus of food security must be on the rural sectors.

However, in Bangladesh's famine of 1974, where 100,000 lives were lost due to floods, "at no point was Bangladesh short of food...The rich farmers were hoarding rice and not letting any of the poor peasants see it" (Lappé et al 16). Lappé goes on to claim that,

famines have occurred not because of a shortage of food but because people's claim to food is disrupted. When people are denied the resources to grow or retain enough of their own harvests to meet family needs, and when only buying power-money-gives people claim to additional food, many will go hungry and even starve if their income falls or food prices dramatically rise. (17)

When resources are scarce and unstable, Bangladeshis have issues gaining access to important necessities, even if there is still a surplus in the area. "The lesson is that increased food production and low food prices are not sufficient to end hunger. Hunger today is less a problem of general food availability than of access" (Runge et al 15).

## **Land Tenure**

One factor that also affects poverty is land tenure. Bangladesh employs the sharecropping system in many areas, and "landlords often prefer to evict tenants regularly because they fear that long-term tenants might someday assert legal rights to the land" (Lappé et al 87). According to Lappé, this explains "why resources are so underdeveloped-- it reflects [peasants'] economic sense." Tenant farmers will not build up the soil or invest in long term improvements if they are regularly evicted from the land. They will only contribute the bare minimum that is required to plant and harvest the crop.

Most farmers in Bangladesh are small landholders, "owning less than 1.5 acres of land...farms of this size are usually unable to produce enough to feed the family for a year", even with most farmers producing double or triple crops (Shrestha 213, 215). Based on these farm sizes, almost half of Bangladesh's rural households are functionally landless (Anriquez et al). For these families, access to food depends heavily on the wage rate and food prices in the market (Hossain). In Bangladesh, only eight percent of rural households own over two hectares of land, which is "just enough to produce food needed by a six-member family and stocks of a few months' requirements to tide over temporary crisis" (Hossain). Because of this shortage of land and the unpredictability of farming, "poverty is more frequent among farm households, especially small farms" (Anriquez et al 87). This can be broken down farther based on the size of land owned by each family.

Households with less than 1/2 an acre of land have a poverty rate of 57%, households that own between 1/2 an acre and 1.5 acre have a poverty ratio of 46%; and poverty reduces to 31% for households that own between 1.5 and 5 acres. (Anriquez et al 86)

Without steady incomes or enough land, Bangladeshi families like Imon's have no chance of ever rising above the poverty line. Their land keeps them from raising enough food, their hunger keeps them from being productive enough to earn an outside income, and their lack of money keeps them from improving their land or buying more. The circle is inescapable without outside help.

## **Global Community**

All of these factors have a huge impact on Bangladesh's food security, but the main issue at the moment involves the global community as well.

Nations, acting individually, are unlikely to provide their people with the requisite tools to end hunger and protect the environment. Food security will require an additional level of effort and organization at an international level. Global changes have outpaced national institutions because many of the most pressing issues are transnational. (Runge et al 37)

Bangladesh relies heavily on outside help, whether in the form of imports or nonprofit organizations. Bangladesh has consistently imported around .5 million tons of rice per year, leaving them far from self sufficiency (Hossain). "Developing countries will frequently be unable to meet cereal demands from their own production, increasing their reliance on international trade" (Runge et al 49). However, in this time of global recession, many countries are no longer able to provide this support. For example, "India, the neighbor on three sides, formally banned export of food grains to Bangladesh on the legitimate grounds that India itself was likely to experience food shortages...food from India [generally] has a cushioning effect on food scarcity in Bangladesh" (Hulme).

Even in the United States, as stock prices and house values fall and American workers are laid off, less attention is given to other countries in need. The average American family is less likely to donate money to organizations helping Bangladesh when they're barely able to pay their own bills. Though the recession is not directly related to Bangladesh, they feel the bite of it more than most wealthy countries ever will. With this factor affecting food security,

The World Food Summit goal of reducing the number of food-insecure persons by half by 2015 will not be achieved, even by 2025, based on current estimates of economic and population growth...the world's poor must share broadly in the gains from sustained, environmentally compatible, global growth. (Runge et al 36)

## Conclusions

"Public investment in agricultural research in Bangladesh has remained low" compared to other East Asian countries (Hossain). Unless Bangladesh can come together and develop a way to grow crops sustainably, the country will have issues eliminating food insecurity. Farmers and policy makers alike must have a better understanding of "poverty dynamics and linkages between adverse shocks (such as floods and droughts), rural income, credit markets, and nutrition" (Hossain). As stated in the beginning of this paper, change must start with the individual households that define the rural poor. The government and non-profit organizations can only do so much if they forget about this essential group. In the past, food security successes have

resulted from massive public and private investments that allowed successful interactions between farmers, input suppliers, and a publicly supported research and extension system...If hunger among the world's poorest families is to be reduced and ultimately ended, the future contributions of scientific research to agriculture will be critical. (Runge et al. 70)

Imon and I don't have very much in common. I was born in Iowa, which is about the same size as Bangladesh, and we both like cats. That is where our similarities end. I cannot imagine living in the unpredictability that he faces every day, and he would be shocked by the amount of food my family wastes every year. Our countries are very separated, on multiple levels. Imon Barua is in first grade, and he is far away from global politics and decisions. However, the global community holds his future in their hands. He is one of the lucky ones whose village has outside help, but they are still below the poverty line, dealing with food insecurity every day.

Bangladesh has always had to deal with most of the issues discussed here, from land availability to natural disasters to hunger. However, the turning factor is global contribution. If outside help for Bangladesh is lessened in light of the current global hardships, what little food security the country has will be lost. As responsible international citizens, we must continue to watch out for countries like Bangladesh where food insecurity is still very prevalent. Runge writes, "food security cannot be

accomplished by nations operating in isolation" (114). Though the global markets are currently unsteady, they are Bangladesh's best hope for survival. Until the global recession passes, Bangladesh has to worry about remaining stagnant or possibly declining in the sense of moving towards food security. Food secure nations must take a more active role in helping countries like Bangladesh provide for the world's hungry.

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