

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Report of the Task Force on "Comprehensive Food Security Policy for Bangladesh"

July, 2000

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Background of the Task Force for Comprehensive Food Security Policy.....	1
I. Introduction.....	2
i) The evolution of food policy in Bangladesh.....	3
ii) Increased market orientation of food policy.....	4
iii) Targeting of food distribution.....	4
iv) Outline of the report.....	5
II. Food availability.....	6
i) Availability: the current status.....	6
ii) Policies to increase food availability.....	9
a) Distribution from public stock.....	9
b) Incentive for private sector trade.....	10
c) Price incentives for domestic production.....	11
d) Increase other measure to domestic production.....	12
e) Promotion of non-foodgrain crops.....	12
f) Promotion of non-foodcrop products.....	12
g) Increasing agriculture productivity in rain-fed farming.....	14
h) Provision of agricultural credit.....	15
i) Post-disaster rehabilitation programs.....	15
j) Reduction of post-harvest losses.....	16
iii) The National Agricultural Policy.....	16
III. Access to food.....	18
i) Access to food in Bangladesh: the current situation.....	18
ii) Policies to promote access to food by all households.....	21
a) Direct transfer to target groups.....	22
b) Employment generating income growth.....	23
c) Credit programs.....	24
d) Programs for ultra-poor households.....	24
iii) Policy and program implications.....	25
IV. Food utilization and nutrition.....	27
i) Food utilization and nutrition in Bangladesh: the current situation.....	27
ii) Policies to promote food utilization and nutrition.....	29
a) Ensuring sufficient micro-nutrients.....	29
b) Ensuring safe drinking water and improved sanitation.....	30
c) Promotion of a balanced diet.....	30
d) Ensuring safe, high-quality food.....	31
e) Promoting adequate health status.....	31
iii) Programs for enhancing nutrition and utilization.....	32
V. Recommendation and conclusions.....	35
Tables and Figures.....	41-60

**Background of the Joint Task Force report on
“Comprehensive Food Security Policy for Bangladesh”**

The Development Forum meeting held on 19-20th April 1999 suggested the Government of Bangladesh to develop a Comprehensive Food Security Policy. In the light of the suggestion of Development Partners, the World Food Programme (WFP) has further requested the Government of Bangladesh form a Joint Task Force to develop a Comprehensive Food Security Policy. Accordingly, upon consultation with all related ministries, the Economic Relations Division of Ministry of Finance initiated a summary for the Honourable Prime Minister with the proposal for formation of a 14 member Joint Task Force with the Secretary, Ministry of Food as the Chairman and the Director General of the Food Planning and Monitoring Unit (FPMU) as the member-secretary. The Honourable Prime Minister has approved the summary in mid-August, 1999. The notification with Terms of Reference (TOR) of the Joint Task Force is attached (Annexure-A).

The first meeting of the Joint Task Force held on September 9, 1999 decided to co-opt additional member-representatives from Ministry of LGRD and Cooperatives, Ministry of Fish and Livestock, Ministry of Water Resources, Director General of Food, European Union and ADAB. A seven-member Core Group also formed with Director General of FPMU as Chairman to make a report on the scope, goal and strategies of the Comprehensive Food Security Policy and submit a proposal for formation of Working Sub-Committees.

Three inter-ministerial subcommittees were formed to report on three major subject areas of food security namely (i) Sub-Committee on Availability of Food led by Ministry of Agriculture (ii) Sub-Committee on Access to Food led by Food and Fertilizer Monitoring Wing of Planning Commission and (iii) Sub-Committee on Utilization of Food led by Health and Population Wing of Planning Commission. All the sub-committees worked for about three months to prepare their reports on respective areas. After analysing the discussions and recommendations of three sub-committee reports, the Core Group finalised their draft report and placed the draft for approval of the Joint Task Force meeting held on March 13, 2000. The Joint Task Force considered the draft report and after detailed discussion approved the draft report with some suggestion for changes in the final draft to be available for discussion in the mid-April meeting of the Development Forum. The following report was finalised by the Joint Task Force meeting held on July 27, 2000.

Report of the Task Force on “Comprehensive Food Security Policy for Bangladesh”

I. Introduction

Ensuring food security is one of the major challenges that Bangladesh faces today. Despite

significant achievements in foodgrain production, (foodgrain production has more than doubled since Independence in 1971), food insecurity both at national and household level remains a matter of major concern for the Government. Currently, about half of the population lives below the "food-based" poverty line (consuming less than 2,122 kcal/capita/per day) and one quarter of them subsist in extreme poverty (less than 1,800 kcal/capita/per day). Apart from the prevailing deficit in total calorie intake, the normal diet of Bangladeshi people is seriously imbalanced, with inadequate shares of fat, oil and protein and with more than 80 percent of the calories coming from cereals. Women and children are especially vulnerable due to their greater nutritional requirements. Moreover, large segments of the population periodically undergo the distress of transitory food insecurity caused by drought, floods, cyclones and other natural disasters. Thus, food insecurity and malnutrition are fundamental characteristics of the lives of the poor in Bangladesh.

In this context of chronic poverty and a hazardous natural environment, **the Government of Bangladesh is firmly committed to achieving food security for all**, defined at the 1996 World Food Summit as: **access by all people at all times to the food need for an active and healthy life.**

Food security has three components:

- 1) **Availability** of food through domestic food production, commercial imports, food aid and security stocks;
- 2) **Access** to food, the ability to produce or purchase food at the household level, as determined by a household's income, other resources, government transfer programs and market prices;
- 3) **Utilization** of food by individuals and **Nutrition**, which are determined by actual food intake (the adequacy of their diets), health and caring practices.

At the 1996 World Food Summit, the Government of Bangladesh set as its goal to reduce the number of undernourished people to half by the year 2015. Achieving this goal will require attention to all three aspects of food security in a co-ordinated effort involving several ministries, the private sector, NGO, and other concerned agencies. This report on a National Comprehensive Food Security Policy is intended to provide a framework for this much-needed and important effort.

The Evolution of Food Policy in Bangladesh

Food policy in Bangladesh has undergone major changes over the last decade, moving from a system involving large-scale government interventions in rice and wheat markets to a more market-oriented policy, with foodgrain distribution increasingly targeted to those households most in need. Moreover, as foodgrain production has increased and foodgrain availability has been successfully maintained, the focus of government policy has gradually expanded to include major efforts at nutrition

education and targeted nutritional interventions for women, infants and children.

Increased Market Orientation of Food Policy

As physical infrastructure (roads, telecommunications, electricity) has improved, private foodgrain markets have expanded and become more integrated, making it feasible for the government to place greater reliance on the private sector for food distribution and marketing. The government's share in total rice purchases and sales has dropped dramatically over time, as rice production and private sector marketing have increased. Moreover, the liberalization of private sector imports of rice and wheat in the early 1990s has reduced government needs for commercial rice and wheat imports. Over time, the share of private sector foodgrain imports in total commercial imports has increased, from an average of only 56 percent from 1994/95 to 1995/96, to an average of 77 percent in 1997/98 and 1998/99. These private sector imports were particularly significant following the floods of 1998 when from November 1998 to April 1999) over 1.7 million MTs of rice and 0.4 million MTs of wheat helped offset a 2.1 million MT rice production shortfall, stabilizing market supplies and prices.

Targeting of Food Distribution

Since the early 1990s when major rationing channels (Statutory Rationing in urban areas and Palli Rationing in rural areas were abolished), the share of public distribution targeted to poor households and those in need of short-term relief has risen sharply. In the early 1990s, only about 40 percent of foodgrain was targeted to the poor and for relief operations. In recent years, this has risen to over 80 percent as the Food-For-Education, Food-For-Work, Vulnerable Group Development and Vulnerable Group Feeding have expanded.

Thus, in accordance with the recommendations of the Strengthening of Institutions for Food Assisted Development (SIFAD) Task Force report, Bangladesh has restructured its use of food aid resources towards development activities. VGD is now a food for training program. The nature of Food-For-Work has changed from simple earthen infrastructure to compact earthen road or black-topped feeder roads, with adequate environment and fish passage friendly structures contributing to developed marketing of input and output of the rural sector and generating transport sector employment. Likewise, Food-For-Education contributes to long-term development through school attendance and ultimately the literacy rate for the rural poor. Nonetheless, there is further scope of improving the development focus of these programs.

Outline of the Report

In the three sections that follow, this report covers the three major components of food security: food availability, access to food and utilization/nutrition. These three sections of the report are based largely on the reports of sub-committees mandated to cover these topics. Though the importance of rice in the Bangladesh diet is undeniable, the focus of the reports of the sub-committees and the

comprehensive food policy described here is on more than just rice (or foodgrains). Rather, this report attempts to address all aspects of food security, extending the discussion to other food items, and covering short- as well as long-term aspects of food security at the national, household and individual level. Following the chapters on availability, access and utilization/nutrition, major policy and operational recommendations are presented.

It should also be noted that the topics mentioned above are not covered fully in this report: food security is too complex subject for one single report to achieve comprehensiveness in that sense. However, this report does attempt to present a framework that at least highlights all the major aspects of food security, and it is in this sense that this report presents a comprehensive food security policy.

II. Food Availability

Food availability, the first component of food security, is often thought of in terms of foodgrain availability. Since about 80 percent of calories in the Bangladesh diet come from rice and wheat, this view is understandable. However, availability of other types of food are also important, particularly if Bangladesh households are to diversify their diets and consume adequate amounts of protein, fats and oils, and micro-nutrients. Thus, while this chapter devotes major attention to foodgrain production, imports and stocks, it includes other food items, as well.

II. A. Availability: The Current Status

Out of the four components of availability (national food production, commercial imports, food aid and government security stocks), national food production is the major source of supply at both market and household levels. The majority of the rural population is directly involved in food production, and shortage of land is the major constraint on agricultural production. Bangladesh has only 0.07 hectares of agricultural land per capita, a figure that is declining with population growth and increased used of land for non-agricultural purposes.^[1] This continued expansion of the population base tends to lessen the food security of marginal farmers and leads to increased numbers of landless households.

In spite of severe land constraints, however, Bangladesh has made considerable progress in foodgrain production, making it virtually self-sufficient in rice under normal climatic conditions. Rice plays the dominant role in Bangladesh agriculture, occupying around 75 percent of the cultivable land. Increasing both production and productivity of rice is thus a high priority. Bangladesh has more than doubled its foodgrain production since independence, and total rice and wheat production reached 21.8 million MTs in 1998/99. The target food grain production for 2002 is 25 million metric tons. However, the production of other main food items such as vegetables, pulses, oil-seeds, fruits, meat, milk and eggs is insufficient, both in terms of local demand and nutritional requirements.

As shown in Table 2.1 and Figure 2.1, the foodgrain gap, defined as the difference between net production (production less 10 percent for seed, feed and wastage) and the foodgrain consumption requirement (defined as 454 grams or 16 ounces per person per day) has narrowed in recent years and is projected to be only 1.11 million MTs in 1999/2000. Thus, foodgrain production has more than kept pace with population growth, in large measure due to increased production of boro rice and wheat.

Production and intakes of several other crops are far below nutritional targets, however (Table 2.2). Pulses accounted for only 39 calories per person per day (1.9 percent of total calories) on average in 1997, less than one fifth of the target of 231 calories per person per day. Intake of fish and meat were about two-thirds of the target levels, and intake of vegetable oil and fruits were approximately one third and one fourth of requirements. Vegetable consumption was less than one-seventh the target level.

Domestic production accounts for nearly all the consumption of pulses, fish, most meat, eggs, milk and most vegetables. In the absence of substantial imports, increases in consumption will thus require corresponding increases in domestic production. As shown in Figure 2.2, real rice prices (i.e. rice prices adjusted for non-food price inflation), have fallen significantly over the last fifteen years, from Taka 16 to 18 per kilogram in the mid-1980s, to Taka 12 to 13 per kilogram in most recent years.

This decline in real prices was made possible by the increases in rice production described above, along with perhaps some decline in per capita demand for rice. In contrast, real prices of *masur* and *khesari* (two major pulses) have not declined, and real prices of *masur* have generally been higher in the last five years than they were in the first five years of the 1990s, indicating that domestic production has not grown faster than demand. Increases in availability of these non-foodgrains would lead to lower real prices and higher domestic consumption per capita.

Fortunately, the vast agricultural potential of Bangladesh is still to a large extent yet to be realized, as evidenced by the large difference between potential and existing productivity in crop and non-crop agriculture. Programs and specific policies for increasing domestic production are discussed in the last section of this chapter.

The three other major components of availability in Bangladesh, commercial imports, food aid, and disbursement from government security stocks, are particularly relevant for foodgrains. Private commercial imports of foodgrain were restricted until July 1992, but since then have added to domestic supplies and helped stabilize prices following major domestic production shortfalls, such as those in 1994-1995 and in 1998-1999. Food aid (almost exclusively wheat) has averaged about 6 lakh MTs per year in recent non-flood years, equal to about 3 percent of total annual foodgrain production. In addition, commercial imports of high-gluten wheat for baking have added several lakh MTs per year. Releases of foodgrain from government stocks, (which originate from domestic procurement, public commercial imports and food aid), also add to domestic supply, (though domestic procurement temporarily withdraws foodgrain from domestic markets).

II. B. Policies to Increase Food Availability

To help ensure adequate foodgrain availability, i.e. sufficient supplies of food at affordable prices, the Government of Bangladesh is involved in all aspects of availability. The Ministry of Agriculture and other ministries focus on production policies and investments that influence medium and long-run availability. The Ministry of Food aims to ensure availability, especially in the short-run, through various market interventions. Distribution of foodgrains from public stock is designed to have an **immediate impact** on availability of foodgrains among households in a given region.

Encouragement of private sector trade in both the domestic and foreign markets likewise increases availability of foodgrains, though often with a **lag of one week to several months**. Providing adequate price incentives to domestic production in the current cropping season through procurement of foodgrains affects availability with a lag of **several months**. Agricultural research and extension, investments in irrigation, roads and other rural infrastructure, and provision of agricultural credit are all designed to affect production in the **current season** as well as in **future years**, (Table 2.3).

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Distribution from Public Stock

The people of Bangladesh, particularly the low-income groups, face acute nutritional stress because of weather-induced variability in production including natural disasters such as drought and floods and consequent shortage in market supply and upward pressure in prices.^[2] Public foodgrain stocks enable the Government of Bangladesh to respond quickly to emergency food situations. This distribution, undertaken with the Ministry of Relief and Disaster Management, augments foodgrain availability in the targeted areas and helps to stabilize market prices.

To provide for the emergency food needs of households the Ministry of Food:

- Co-ordinates with the Ministry of Relief and Disaster Management to ensure quick disbursement of foodgrain to affected households in times of disaster.
- Holds enough foodgrain stocks to cover at least three months of emergency distribution in addition to its normal working stock needs. (A stock of this magnitude is needed since two to three months is generally required to procure large quantities of foodgrain, even in emergencies.)
- Diversifies sources of government commercial rice. In this way, the Ministry of Food aims to avoid the risk of foodgrain shortage in the event of disruptions in supplies from any single exporting country.

Incentives for Private Sector Trade

The private sector foodgrain trade involves tens of thousands of millers, wholesalers, and small traders who buy, store, transport and sell foodgrain throughout the country. Over the last two decades, this private foodgrain market has grown phenomenally along with the expansion in domestic rice and wheat production. Government market interventions are designed to enhance the stability of the market, encourage competition and promote food security without damaging private market incentives for trade and storage. Since the liberalization of private sector international trade in foodgrains in the early 1990s, the Government of Bangladesh has also encouraged private sector imports in times of large production shortfall to offset the decline in domestic supply.

To enhance national food security through the participation of private sector trade, the Government of Bangladesh:

- Maintains incentives for private foodgrain storage and marketing
- Allows free flow of foodgrain within the country
- Permits private stockholding of foodgrains
- Encourages private sector imports through low import tariffs on imported foodgrain

Price Incentives for Domestic Production

Adequate production incentives, whereby procurement prices are set at levels greater than the average costs of production, are an important aspect of Government of Bangladesh efforts to increase domestic production and boost farmer incomes. The Ministry of Food's procurement of foodgrain from farmers, millers and traders is designed to support producer prices, as well as to build up stocks.

Procurement prices and quantities are, however, limited by fiscal constraints, since to the extent that procurement prices are set above the government's sales price plus the costs of storage, transport and distribution, a government subsidy is required.

In order to encourage domestic foodgrain production, the Government of Bangladesh

- In years of normal or bumper harvests, purchases foodgrain for its distribution programs in the domestic foodgrain market through internal procurement at a price high enough to cover average domestic costs of production
- Ensures adequate, balanced and timely supplies of fertilizer and other inputs so as to avoid input shortages and extreme input price increases

- Conduct research and extension on improved rice and wheat varieties

Increase Other Measure to Domestic Production

In order to increase domestic production, the primary component of availability, the Ministry of Agriculture and other ministries are also involved in promoting production of non-foodgrain crops and non-crop food products, increasing productivity of rain-fed farming, providing agricultural credit, strengthening post-disaster rehabilitation programs, and reducing post-harvest losses.

Promotion of Non-Foodgrain Crops (Vegetables, Oilseeds, Pulses and Fruits)

Although Bangladesh has made considerable progress towards increasing food grain (rice and wheat) production since independence, the production of non-cereal crops mainly pulses, oil-seeds, fruits and vegetables, still remain far below satisfactory level. The slow progress of growth in the production of non-foodgrain crops are mainly due to competing demands for land, low level of technological base and almost no support from research and extension.

For rapid expansion of both productivity and production growth, the Government of Bangladesh will pursue the following initiatives:

- Rapid introduction of modern varieties along with a package of appropriate management practices, supported by strong extension and input services.
- Development of organized marketing facilities, processing, preservation techniques, storage etc. to boost the production of non-foodgrain crops;

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Promotion of Non-Crop Food Products (Milk, Meat, Fish and Eggs)

Increasing production in the livestock and fisheries sub-sectors can be considered as one of the important frontiers towards augmenting total food production in the country. Livestock are a source of milk, meat and eggs, and provide most of the draught power and organic manure in agricultural production.

Fish provide for about 60 percent of animal protein and nearly 1.2 million people are directly employed by this sub-sector of agriculture. In spite of having vast water resources and steady increases in fish production, per capita fish availability is on the decline as fish production has not been able to keep pace with the increasing population and fishing pressure. Besides, the sector is under increasing

stress because of overfishing, decreasing natural fish stock, environmental and habitat degradation, and uncoordinated, multiple ownership and use of water bodies.

Considering the importance of these two sectors in the country's food security and foreign exchange earnings, the Government will pursue increasing their production through following activities:

- Improvement of the quality and productivity of animals and poultry by strengthening research and extension programs
- Promotion of veterinary health care services particularly for the control of infectious diseases and parasitic infections associated with wider coverage of vaccination
- Expansion of the rural livestock marketing network, timely input supply, sufficient credit facilities particularly for resource-poor farmers, and greater involvement of NGOs;
- Development of location-specific, participatory fisheries technologies associated with various supports services including credit, marketing, processing and post-harvest handling;
- Promotion of irrigated rice-fish culture in the rice fields and promotion of shrimp culture with improved quality and quantity both at production and processing levels.

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Increasing Agricultural Productivity in Rain-fed Farming

Bangladesh has made considerable progress in increasing the acreage of irrigated areas. However, the share of rain-fed farming in terms of coverage, is still large, constituting nearly 60 percent of the arable land. Moreover, because not all the arable land in Bangladesh is suitable for irrigation, a sizeable area will still remain under rain-fed agriculture.

Rain-fed farming is characterized by frequent crop failures, low input use and low crop productivity. Although crop production in these areas is largely dependent on rainfall and on the inundation from the Ganges river and its tributaries, and the majority of the areas are drought prone, still non-irrigated areas have a big potential for increased agricultural productivity and production. Increasing productivity of rain-fed farming systems is a high priority for enhancing the food security for the population living in these areas.

To achieve this the following strategies should be undertaken, on a priority basis:

- Identification, development and promotion of drought tolerant crop varieties with associated production practices, and drought and salinity mitigating technologies for different rain-fed farming systems
- Encouragement of large-scale adoption and application of water harvesting technologies.

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Provision of Agricultural Credit

Credit is considered as a fundamental tool for increasing agricultural productivity and production, since the majority of the farming households are resource-poor, with very little capacity to invest in their agriculture without external support. In recent years, support to agricultural farmers through formal credit has been streamlined both in terms of its management and targeting. The current government policy of intensification and diversification for enhancing agricultural productivity by adopting resource intensive modern technologies calls for further strengthening of the agricultural credit program.

In view of this, the Government:

- * Provides credit to agricultural farmers (landless, marginal and small) in order to increase productivity of their farming systems and to enhance household food security.

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Post-Disaster Rehabilitation Programs

Because natural calamities such as floods, droughts and cyclones frequently threaten Bangladesh agricultural production, property and even lives, disaster preparedness and post-disaster rehabilitation are important components of food security. The following measures may be taken:

- Supplemental irrigation during drought to avoid widespread crop failures or seriously reduced yields
- Homestead gardening, including fruits, vegetables, livestock and poultry, in the homestead areas that are typically from flooding during normal flood years.

- Development of more location- specific flood and drought tolerant varieties and associated production technologies for major crops through the National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS).

Reduction of Post Harvest Losses

Post harvest loss in agricultural production is substantial. Depending on the season, crop, and level of technological practices adopted for post- harvest handling, losses can reach as high as 30 percent. Highly seasonal production of fruits, vegetables and spices causes gluts, leading to tremendous amount of crop losses and wastage. Besides direct production loss, due to the vagaries of nature, crop losses can be caused by poor knowledge on post-harvest technology for storage, preservation, processing and handling. Reducing the post harvest loss as much as possible, is an issue of vital concern in achieving food security in the country.

To minimize post harvest loss, the following steps are recommended:

- Promotion of viable marketing systems to move the produce rapidly from producers to consumers.
- Promotion of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and Integrated Crop Management Program (ICM) to increase crop production and as well as to minimize post-harvest losses.
- Support for investment and training of farmers in improved post-harvest technology (threshing, storing, transporting etc.), especially for seasonal fruits, with a priority given to women's groups.
- Technical and financial support to the construction and improvement of commercial and farm level grain storage facilities.

II. C. The National Agriculture Policy

The National Agriculture Policy of 1999 and several other policies to increase availability of food are already in place. The National Agriculture Policy calls for a rapid expansion of agricultural production base which include pulses, oil-seeds, vegetables, fruits, meat, milk, eggs, etc. in addition to food grain production in order to ensure both food and nutrition security of the people. A wide range of strategies to promote crop diversification and intensification of agriculture are to be implemented, including:

1. Increasing the efficiency of input supply systems for seed, fertilizers and minor irrigation;

2. Strengthening research and extension systems;
3. Promoting Integrated Pest Management (IPM);
4. Encouraging agricultural mechanization;
5. Developing the agricultural marketing network;
6. Optimizing land use;
7. Expanding agricultural education and training
8. Streamlining and increasing agricultural credit facilities;
9. Following a food based nutrition approach;
10. Protecting the environment;
11. Ensuring increased participation of women;
12. Improving the coordination among the Government, NGOs and private sector;
13. Building up a reliable database.

In addition to the National Agriculture Policy, the Bangladesh government has also formulated a Seed Policy, New Agricultural Extension Policy, Livestock Policy, Fisheries Policy, National Water Policy, Environment and Forestry Policy, a Pesticide Act, and credit policies to define the overall agricultural sector policy framework of the Government.

III. Access to Food

This chapter focuses on the second component of food security: **access to food**, which is closely related to the household's purchasing power. Own-production of food and cash income from wage employment or profits from own-enterprises are the major sources of purchasing power. But, household access can also be enhanced by government and NGO programs that supplement cash or food resources, as well as through private gifts and borrowing.

Food security, and in particular, access, have both short-run and long-run dimensions. Emergency relief often is required to cope with acute short-run food shortages caused by natural disasters such as floods and cyclones. Even when there is no natural disaster, however, millions of poor households lack adequate resources to acquire enough food to meet their minimum food requirements, especially during seasons of slack labor demand and high food prices.

This chapter examines the access problem in Bangladesh and reviews some of the existing programs and policies designed to address it. Section A discusses the concept of access and presents data on the current situation in Bangladesh. Section B describes policies designed to promote access to food by all households. Policy implications are given in section C.

III.A. Access to Food in Bangladesh: The Current Situation

The key issue regarding access to food is purchasing power of households, including food available through government programs. In Amartya Sen's terminology, this ability to acquire food through the household's own production, income, participation in government and NGO programs, gifts and borrowing is called "food entitlements". The price of food is one determinant of access since it affects the quantity of food a household can purchase with its income.

About half of the population does not consume minimum caloric requirements, mainly because of insufficient incomes to meet their needs for food, clothing, shelter and other necessities. Food and other material goods are not the sole determinants of comfortable, happy lives. Nonetheless, poverty causes severe hardships, limits the options and often shortens the lives of millions of people in Bangladesh.

As shown in Table 3.1 and Figure 3.1, the poverty gap (the total amount of cash transfer that would be required to raise the household incomes of all poor households above the poverty line) is very large. Using national household survey data from the 1995/96 Household Expenditure Survey (the most recent year available), a rural poverty line of Taka 513 per person per month and an urban poverty line of Taka 946 per person per month, shows that about 48.5 million people in rural areas and 9.6 million people in urban areas are poor (Table

3.1 and Figure 3.1). Raising each of these individuals' income to the poverty line would require a total of Taka 11,300 crore (2.7 billion US dollars), Taka 7,700 crore (1.8 billion US dollars) to lift the rural poor out of poverty and an additional Taka 3,600 crore (0.9 billion US dollars) to lift the urban poor out of poverty. These figures are in addition to actual food distribution and development spending in that year, when total foreign aid was 1443 million U.S. dollars (6060 crore Taka) and food aid of 737 thousand MTs of wheat was valued at 138 million U.S. dollars (570 crore Taka). Such large transfers are of course neither feasible, nor sustainable. The point is simply that no plausible increase in food aid will in itself fill the poverty gap.

A number of factors contribute to this widespread lack of access to food in Bangladesh. Insufficient government and private resources for investment in physical infrastructure (roads, bridges) contribute to slow overall economic growth. Shortage of human capital as reflected by a high level of illiteracy and general lack of education prevents individuals from reaching their potential. Unequal land distribution results in a large number of farmers with insufficient land to grow enough food for their families or earn sufficient incomes. Inadequate market infrastructure increases market margins between producers and consumer, ultimately lowering the prices producers receive for their products. Recurring natural disasters destroy the physical infrastructure, necessitating frequent rebuilding efforts.

Because of the shortage of capital and land relative to the abundant unskilled labor in Bangladesh, wages in Bangladesh are low. The average agricultural daily wage in 1998/99 was only 59 Taka/day (BBS data). Average construction wages were only slightly higher, 77 Taka/day. Using an exchange rate of 49 Tk/dollar, these wage rates are only about \$1.20 and \$1.60 per day, respectively, somewhat higher than the one dollar per day norm used in international poverty comparisons. But these wage rates are not large enough to keep a family out of poverty if they represent a major share of total household income. Moreover, as shown in Table 3.2 and Figure 3.2, real wages in Bangladesh agriculture show a slightly declining trend over the past twenty years. Apart from four years in the mid-1980s, (1984/85 to 1987/88), when real agricultural wages averaged 65 Taka/day (1999 prices), real wages have been below 60 Taka/day (1999 prices) every year for two decades. Real wages in the construction sector have risen by 22 percent since 1993/94, but are still 9 percent below their peak of 84 Taka/day (1999 prices), and the long-term trend is flat.

Not only is the average level of income low, but variability of incomes results in transitory food insecurity for many households. Households may be able to afford sufficient food in normal times, but lack this capability in times of natural disasters or other emergencies. Therefore, special attention needs to be given to disaster prevention and the food security of households affected by natural disasters.

In addition, some pockets of Bangladesh such as Rangpur, Jamalpur and Kurigram are particularly food

insecure. Major reasons for this include river erosion in these areas, little non-farm employment and unequal land distribution. Monitoring of these areas is particularly important in times of droughts, floods or economic recessions.

Numerous programs are in place to address the access problems through increasing employment and rural incomes, including food for work and cash for work programs such as those operated by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives, and others. Among the largest food-transfer programs is the World Food Program's Vulnerable Group Development, operating since 1988. This program is aimed at increasing sustainable access to food through long-term training. The VGD program includes short-term transfers along with training so that participants can eventually escape poverty and achieve food security. About five lakh women are participating in the current 1.5 year cycle.

III.B. Policies to Promote Access to Food by all Households

The Government of Bangladesh uses two broad approaches to increase access to food for all households, particularly for the poor (Table 3). First, a number of programs use direct transfers of food or the cash proceeds from food aid monetization to increase **short-run access** to food and thus help meet their immediate food security needs. Second, in order to increase the poor's **long-run access** to food, the Government of Bangladesh designs policies, implements programs, and invests in development projects designed to raise incomes of the poor and their capacity to acquire food through employment - generating economic growth.

Direct Transfers to Targeted Groups

In the absence of direct transfers of food or cash with which to purchase food, private foodgrain markets fail to provide food for the impoverished, especially the hardcore poor who are exposed to severe nutritional risk throughout the year. Moreover, in a country where about half of the people live below the poverty line, there are many households who face seasonal food insecurity, i.e. face hunger and deprivation during the lean season. The Government of Bangladesh, therefore, targets the population groups, disaster-prone areas and seasons where nutritional stress is most acute through income transfers, targeted food distribution and public works programs.

In order to increase access to food by poor households in Bangladesh, the Ministry of Food provides foodgrains for distribution or sale through various programs operated by the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, cooperatives and NGO's:

- Direct distribution to households for **emergency relief** by the Ministry of Relief and Disaster

Management

- Distribution of foodgrains as **wages in Food-For-Work** programs (managed by the Local Government Engineering Department, the Ministry Disaster Management and Relief, the Bangladesh Water Development Board, and others)
- Direct distribution to poor households participating in **training and development activities** (as in the Vulnerable Group Development) (managed by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs)
- Distribution of foodgrains to **poor school-aged children** in the Food-For- Education program (managed by the Primary and Mass Education Division)
- Sales of foodgrain at **subsidized prices to poor consumers** in both urban and rural markets through Open Market Sales (OMS) and other sales channels (managed by the Ministry of Food).

The above programs are designed, not only to alleviate short-term food insecurity, but also to increase the skills of the poor and to build infrastructure in order to enable sustained income growth. In addition to these programs, the Ministry of Food also sells foodgrains at subsidized prices for special priority groups through Essential Priorities, Other Priorities, Large Employment Industries and Flour Mills (Table 3.4).

Cash payments instead of direct food distribution are an alternative method for increasing access to food by poor households. Small amounts of cash are at times given along with food in relief efforts and Cash-For-Work has replaced some Food-For-Work activities. However, food transfers have been shown to lead to greater consumption of foodgrain (in particular, wheat) than do cash transfers, particularly when these transfers are small relative to total household foodgrain consumption and when they are targeted to women and poor households. Arguably, in-kind transfers may also result in smaller leakages than cash transfers. On the other hand, cash transfers may conserve transport costs and thus lower the cost of delivery per Taka received by program participants.

Employment-generating income growth

Though government and NGO programs that provide additional food or income to households contribute to food security in the short-run, the best way to ensure sufficient food entitlements for all households in the long run is through broad-based, labor-intensive economic growth in the country. The focus on increasing employment is especially important since for most of the poor, their access to land and to capital is limited, notwithstanding micro-credit programs. Because most of the poor reside in rural areas, rapid growth of the rural economy is a pre-requisite for sustainable household food security in Bangladesh. Foodgrain distributed through the PFDS for Food for Work, Food for Education and other programs assists in developing the physical and

human capital needed for increasing the incomes and food security of the poor in Bangladesh.

To promote income growth of the poor, the Government of Bangladesh undertakes numerous development policies and projects involving:

- Public investment in transport and communication
- Public education and skill development programs
- Growth-promoting macro-policy

Credit Programs

Credit programs targeted to poor households are another important mechanism for increasing long-term access to food by the poor. Government programs, such as Rural Development and the Cooperative Division's Credit Programs (particularly through BRDB), and non-government credit programs, such as the Grameen Bank and BRAC, provide needed capital, and in some cases, training, to poor households, particularly women. In spite of the success of these programs at the micro-level, however, the poverty rate in rural Bangladesh remains at about 50 percent.

Programs for the Ultra-Poor

Even with the achievement of sustainable increases in income of most of the poor, there will likely remain a segment of the population who are destitute, sick, old and infirm -- people are not capable of participating in income earning opportunities. The breaking-up of joint families, the weakening of traditional community-based social security, and the increasing progression towards individualistic values have further compounded the problem. There is a need for putting in place social security cover for this segment of the population to increase their economic and food security. A recently introduced pension scheme for the distressed, aged persons and widows is one mechanism to assist these people. Other programs may be needed, as well.

III.C. Policy and Program Implications

Numerous policies and programs are currently in place to address the problem of access to food. Even greater effort and resources are needed, given the magnitude of food insecurity in Bangladesh.

Increased coordination across programs may be useful at both the national and local levels to ensure maximum efficiency and coverage. A first step, here, would be to compile a complete account of

government and major NGO programs in place to increase access by households.

Unfortunately, funding for many access programs (including Vulnerable Group Development and various food for work and cash for work programs) depends on the level of food aid, which fluctuates according to projections of the food gap. The food gap calculation, however, is essentially a measure of availability of foodgrain relative to a standard target (454 grams/person/day).

Millions of poor households lack adequate purchasing power to consume sufficient food even when the food gap is relatively small. These poor households need additional entitlements (income-earning opportunities or transfers of food or of cash) to augment their capacity to acquire food. But lower levels of food aid are likely to result in less total resources for poverty alleviation. Numerous programs exist to increase access to food in the short- and long-term that do not depend on food aid or food transfers. The Government of Bangladesh and the development partners should therefore make a long-term commitment to food security and not link resources for these programs to the size of the national food gap.

More effort should also be given to finding program options that involve various combinations of food, food plus cash, and cash transfers. If only food is used for these programs, the total size of the program will be constrained by the level of food aid and GOB foodgrain procurement (both international and domestic). The problem of inadequate access to food is too big to be addressed by food transfers alone, however.

Finally, in the short-run, food access can be enhanced by targeted programs. The long-term solution remains sustainable increased incomes for the poor through technological innovation in agriculture, employment, training and investment.

IV. Food Utilization and Nutrition

This chapter discusses food utilization and nutrition issues in Bangladesh and reviews some of the existing programs and policies designed to improve nutrition, particularly at the household and individual level. The first section discusses the current situation in Bangladesh. Section two describes policies designed to improve food utilization and nutrition of all people in Bangladesh, particularly poor women and young children who are especially vulnerable. Programs for enhancing nutrition and utilization are reviewed in section three.

IV.A. Food Utilization and Nutrition in Bangladesh: The Current Situation

Malnutrition is endemic in Bangladesh and the level of malnutrition is one of the highest in the world. Nutrition is a critical factor in any individual's growth and capacity to function in the society. Moreover, adequate levels of food intake, nutrition and health are needed for an economically productive and socially active nation.

As indicated in Table 4.1 and Figures 4.1(a and b), about half of the urban population (i.e. about 9 million people in 1995/96) and about half of the rural population (about 45 million people) lived in households where the mean per capita calorie consumption per day was 2100 or less. Thus, for these households, utilization of food (in terms of calories) was on average not sufficient for the household members.

Besides, chronic dietary deficiencies, non-food factors such as personal and environmental hygiene, sanitation, water quality all contributes to the present state of malnutrition. The lack of adequate health and safety measures causes a greater extent of intestinal infectious diseases. In general, females are less educated and they have little control over the decisions affecting their lives and their access to employment is limited. Unequal treatment against women starts at birth and girls are taught to be self-sacrificing. The poor maternal nutritional status throughout their life cycle is indicated by low body mass index, low weight gain during pregnancy and low birth weight rate. Thus the malnutrition is passed from one generation to the next. The effects of extreme poverty fall most severely on women and children. Unlike other aspects, focus is on individuals, particularly the vulnerable, environment, caring practices of infants, disease etc. all influence nutrition outcomes.

Poor nutrition takes a devastating toll in children and women - through hunger, sickness and loss

of life, for instance, the under-five mortality rate is 102 and the maternal mortality rate is 4.3 per 1000 live-births (Table 4.2). Low birth-weight incidence is estimated at 30 - 50 % and micro-nutrient deficiencies are rampant (over 70% of pregnant women are anemic). About 75% of the child's life spent in illness due to infections. Low birth weight and poorly nourished children have reduced resistance to common infections. They find it difficult to recover from even common illness because of deficient immunity system. Roughly two-third of deaths amongst under-five children are attributed to malnutrition. About one-fourth of maternal deaths are associated with anemia and hemorrhage. In addition to loss of lives, there is a heavy loss in work output associated with malnutrition. The economic consequences of Bangladesh's malnutrition problem are profound, resulting in loss of productivity, and reduced intellectual and learning capacity. These losses are difficult to quantify though the most visible cost is in the drain on health services budget.

IV.B. Policies to Promote Food Utilization and Nutrition

Because of the diverse factors affecting food utilization and nutrition, a variety of mechanisms and approaches are needed, including some not directly involving food (Table 4.3). Ensuring consumption of sufficient macro-nutrients (calories, protein, fats and oils), particularly for vulnerable individuals (i.e. poor women and children), is the most obvious aspect of food utilization. Safe drinking water and improved sanitation are also important to enable absorption of the nutrients individuals consume. A third major mechanism is promotion of a balanced diet that contains sufficient micro-nutrients that are lacking in most Bangladesh diets. Fourth, ensuring safe and high-quality food can result in greater nutrition content of food as well as reduce the risk of disease or illness. Finally, promotion of an adequate health status through food supplementation, education and disease control, includes broader health measures than just those related to water and sanitation.

Ensuring Sufficient Macro-Nutrients

Ensuring sufficient consumption of macro-nutrients (calories, protein, and fats and oils) is at the heart of food security policy. Efforts at increasing foodgrain production, availability and access have aimed largely at ultimately increasing foodgrain calories consumed. But protein, fats and oils are also necessary for adequate nutrition.

Even when sufficient macro-nutrients are available and households have sufficient resources for access, poor women and children often remain vulnerable, and suffer very high health and developmental costs because of inadequate consumption of macro-nutrients. Where availability and household access are limited, women and children often are especially adversely affected. At the community level, further identification of vulnerable groups and individuals is needed to target development and nutrition programs and to design appropriate strategies.

Increasing empowerment of these vulnerable groups and individuals is also needed so that resources available to the household or community are accessible for these individuals, as well. Primary education for girls, micro-credit, and development projects involving training of vulnerable individuals can all help to empower women and thus positively influence their consumption of sufficient macro-

nutrients.

Ensuring Safe Drinking Water and Improved Sanitation

Safe drinking water and improved sanitation can potentially have a major impact on nutritional outcomes in Bangladesh, because of the current high prevalence of diarrheal and other water-borne diseases. Health education, including proper care practices for children, and the importance of boiling water and sanitary practices for preventing disease, is one important mechanism.

Infrastructure development is also needed, including public investments in water supply (e.g. community tube wells) and sanitation. Maintenance of existing public facilities is also important. Checks for water quality of existing and planned facilities, in particular, arsenic levels in drinking water, are a high priority.

Promotion of a Balanced Diet

As shown above, the average diet in Bangladesh does not contain sufficient protein, fats and oils, or micro-nutrients to promote good health. This dietary imbalance is particularly serious for young children and adolescent girls, who need these nutrients for growth, and for pregnant and lactating women.

Nutrition education is one major instrument for promoting a balanced diet. Dietary guidelines should be communicated through the mass media (which may be especially effective in reaching the non-poor) and through community-based Behavioral Change Communications (BCC) programs, particularly in rural areas. It may be useful to develop a uniform nutrition education module that could be incorporated into various programs.

Food fortification and food supplementation are other instruments. Examples are the planned fortification of *ata* (whole-wheat flour) distributed through Food For Education, and supplementary feeding through the Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project (BINP) and the National Nutrition Program (NNP). Home gardening can also encourage vegetable consumption, both for the growers and for those who benefit from increased availability of vegetables in the market.

Ensuring Safe, High-Quality Food

Food safety is an important concern, since existing standards in Bangladesh are not generally enforced. Investments in safe storage facilities (mainly by the private sector), development and enforcement of grades and standards for food quality, and improved packaging (again mainly by the private sector), are the major instruments for improving the safety and quality of food.

Promoting Adequate Health Status

Food utilization and health status are closely linked. Food utilization and nutrition are among the many factors influence health status, and health status influences an individual's biochemical absorption of food nutrients. Food supplementation can improve the health of malnourished individuals, particularly women and children. Health education, including proper caring practices for children, can help prevent disease and speed recovery. Finally, disease control, a major part of public health policy, benefits not only nutrition, but for general health outcomes.

IV.C. Programs for Enhancing Nutrition and Utilization

Until recently, nutrition and utilization of food have received less attention in the national development process. The actions taken by the Government in recent time, among others include the approval of the National Food and Nutrition Policy (1997), the approval of the national Plan of Action on Nutrition (1997), reactivation of Bangladesh National Nutrition Council. The Government has also planned the Bangladesh National Nutrition Project to cover broader aspect of nutrition and utilization problems. The Government has taken the nutrition considerations as one of the topmost priorities for the development of human resources. The Government's vision is to effectively and firmly integrate nutrition and related programs into the country's overall development process. Nutrition has also been elevated as one of the major issues for GOB's developmental policy dialogue with the development partners.

Several programs have been carried out by the Government of Bangladesh in cooperation and co-ordination with the development partners and NGOs in the field of nutrition and utilization of food. Some of these are:

- Health and Population Service Package (HPSP) of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
- Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project (BINP) of the Ministry of Health
- Control of Iodine Deficiency Disorders (CIDD) Project of Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries

Corporation (BSCIC) of the Ministry of Industries

- Expanded Program for Immunization (EPI) of Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
- Health Education Program; implemented by Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
- Nutrition Surveillance Project (NSP) coordinated by Helen Keller International (HKI) and other NGOs
- Community Nutrition Program of Ministry of Health and Ministry of LGRD
- Support for Bangladesh Institute of Research and Training on Applied Nutrition

Some other large programs are also in place aiming to ensure household food security directly by providing foodgrain to vulnerable population groups or indirectly through enhancing food production or income transfer, carried out under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Food, Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives. A number of Non-Government Organizations (NGO) have also been active in the field of nutrition and utilization of food, most as part of their child care, health care, women's empowerment and health care activities.

Health and Population Services Package (HPSP)

Reducing the rate of population growth can help ensure that food availability, employment opportunities, and public infrastructure for health education are adequate for the people of Bangladesh, in the medium-term. The Health and Population Services Package of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has implemented various public health interventions related to nutrition, (i) Expanded Program for Immunization; (ii) Control of Acute Respiratory Infections; (iii) Control of Diarrheal Diseases; (iv) Reproductive Health; and others. The Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project (BINP) is also under HPSP.

Bangladesh National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN)

The Bangladesh National Plan of Action for Nutrition, 1997 provides a description of existing nutrition situation, defines the policy goals, objectives and targets, outlines the strategies for implementation and provides the institutional framework for translating these plans into action. The goal of the NPAN is to improve the nutritional status of the people of Bangladesh to the extent that malnutrition would no longer be a public health problem by the year 2010. The objectives and targets of NPAN may be seen in annexure-1.

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Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project (BINP)

The success of the Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project (BINP) has demonstrated that community mobilization and community-based nutrition services delivered by NGOs can bring rapid, sustainable reductions in severe malnutrition among children and deliver targeted food and micro-nutrient supplements to reproductive-age women suffering chronic energy and micro-nutrient deficiency.

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National Nutrition Program (NNP)

The first phase of NNP is designed to operationalize key components of correspond the GOB's National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN). This would be achieved by reducing severe and moderate malnutrition among young children, breaking the cycle of malnutrition through reduction in the incidence of low birth weight, and reducing anemia and other micro-nutrient deficiency among pregnant women and adolescent girls.

V. Recommendations and Conclusions

Food security has several components and numerous dimensions. In order to address these complex and inter-related issues, a comprehensive food security policy for Bangladesh, including availability, access and utilization aspects is needed.

Food security discussions and planning unfortunately have often had a much narrower focus, over-emphasizing the estimated “food gap”, the difference between a target level of availability and domestic production. The food gap, however, measures only availability of foodgrains, thus neglecting availability of other foods. Moreover, focus on the food gap has often diverted attention from the other major aspects of food security: access and utilization.

Yet, availability of foodgrains is not always the constraint on food security in Bangladesh. Rather, because of the widespread poverty, access to adequate diets (i.e. households’ insufficient capability to acquire food) and utilization of food (influenced by poor health and other factors) are generally the major constraints on food security.

Policy Recommendations

This report has identified a number of key areas for increasing food security in Bangladesh including:

1. **Incentives for sustained growth in domestic food production**, which are important not only for adequate availability, but increasing rural incomes and access to food as well. Agricultural research and dissemination (for both foodgrains and other food products), investments in irrigation and marketing infrastructure, and appropriate domestic foodgrain procurement and price stabilization policies are needed, ensuring profitability of efficient domestic production. Macro-economic policy is important here as well, since appreciation of the real exchange rate (an increase in the real value of the Taka relative to other currencies) could make domestic food production less competitive with imported food.
2. Further development of **private markets** to facilitate efficient distribution and storage of food within the country, timely food imports following domestic production shortfalls, and exports of agricultural and small-scale industrial products to increase incomes of the poor.
3. **Emergency preparedness** to alleviate the transitory food insecurity caused by floods, cyclones and

other natural disasters that often occur in Bangladesh. **Public foodgrain stocks** equal to three to four months of emergency distribution requirements and a relief system to distribute food, clean water, medicine and other needs should be maintained. This required level of minimum public foodgrain stocks should be reviewed annually to take into account changing conditions in domestic and international markets.

4. Promoting **income growth of the poor** through a labor intensive development strategy coupled with skills enhancement and increased access to capital (through micro-credit programs) for poor households. This income growth is a necessary condition for sustainable access to food by poor households.
5. **Targeted food and non-food interventions** to food insecure people, particularly poor women and children, and destitute, old and infirmed individuals. Targeting is important, here, because of the need to conserve scarce resources and in order to limit potential adverse impacts of foodgrain distribution on producer prices.
6. Strengthening **nutrition education**, particularly for poor, food insecure households, so that household resources are efficiently used for nutrition and health of vulnerable individuals, particularly women and children. Promotion of **diversity in diets** through increased availability of non-foodgrains and nutrition education in order to increase consumption of protein, fats and oils, vegetables and micro-nutrients. Given the weak link between incomes and consumption of micro-nutrients, increases in household incomes without nutrition education are unlikely to result in a major improvement in nutrition.
7. Increased **investments in rural infrastructure and social services**, especially **clean water, sanitation** and **medical services**, to promote public health, a key component in favorable nutritional outcomes.
8. Further **evaluation of current policies and programs** is needed, along with in-depth analysis to understand the inter-relationships between availability (especially domestic food production), access (sustainable increases in rural incomes), and nutrition.

Operational Recommendations

9. **Re-focus the debate** on food security so that aid and investment for food security does not fluctuate according to the size of the harvests in Bangladesh or the level of stocks in food aid donor countries.

Instead of concentrating on food aid levels and food gaps, more attention should be given to alleviating food insecurity of the poor by increasing access to food by the poor through food- and cash-financed programs of skills-enhancement, nutrition interventions, etc. One possibility is that the GOB and development partners could **commit a combination of cash and food to programs targeted to food insecure households** in Bangladesh. The goal of these efforts would be to achieve a measurable improvement in nutritional and health outcomes (reductions in infant mortality, stunting and wasting, micro-nutrient deficiencies) in a specified period of time. A useful step in changing the focus of food security policy would be to construct **food security resource budgets**, (involving an inventory of current and recent projects and programs involved in the various aspects of food security), that would be monitored and updated regularly.

10. Improve **coordination across GOB and development partners' projects** and programs so as to assist the Government of Bangladesh in integrating major elements of its food security programs that are separated by Ministerial and development partner boundaries. Among the major programs are the programs in the Rural Development Strategy funded by the World Bank; the food aid programs funded by USAID, WFP and others; and the National Nutrition Project, also funded by the World Bank. Since these are large, multi-year programs, there are likely to be large benefits from co-ordinating their activities. There is also a need for co-ordination with GOB development efforts financed by its own funds or those of development partners. This co-ordination need not be done exclusively (or even mainly) at the national level. Instead, local governments (at the district or thana level) might be best-placed to decide how to best integrate these activities operationally, given an overall national food security framework. Participation of NGO's and civil society, at both the national and the local level, might also increase the effectiveness of these efforts.
11. The GOB should consider **expanding the mandate of the existing Food Planning and Monitoring Committee** to monitor and plan overall food security efforts, including utilization and nutrition issues, such as the availability and prices of non-foodgrain commodities, the number and the income levels of poor households, the food consumption gap for calories and other nutrients, and the nutritional status of children. Representatives of related Ministries might be included so that progress on all aspects of food security, in addition to availability and prices, could be discussed on at least a quarterly basis.
12. Finally, **specific targets** need to be set, programs and projects designed, resources committed and

institutions mobilized and strengthened to **operationalize** the general policy framework outlined above.

Conclusions

Since Independence, Bangladesh has made substantial progress in increasing domestic production of foodgrains, thus to a large extent overcoming the constraint of insufficient foodgrain (and calorie) **availability**. There is no room for complacency, however. Continued efforts are required to maintain these hard-won gains in availability in the face of continued population growth.

Adequate availability, though, is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for food security. Significant improvements in household food security in Bangladesh can be achieved without major increases in **per capita** foodgrain production or food aid, but such improvements do require a major effort at increasing access to food and utilization of food by poor households. Thus, all aspects of food security must be addressed: greater efficiency of domestic agriculture (and enhanced availability of food, including non- foodgrains); sustained increases in the incomes of the poor (their access to food) and improved food utilization by under-nourished individuals (through education and health care). In this way, it is hoped that all people in Bangladesh will enjoy the food security that they truly deserve.

^[1] There is some scope, however, to expand cultivation on the relatively small amounts of currently fallow land.

^[2] Other factors, including unequal access to resources and markets, seasonal fluctuations and regional variations of employment opportunities, compound the nutritional stress.