



COMPACT  
2025



# BANGLADESH

**ENDING HUNGER & UNDERNUTRITION**  
CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

MAY 2016

SYNOPSIS OF ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

## Synopsis of Compact2025 Roundtable Discussion in Bangladesh

Compact2025, launched in November 2015, is a bold new initiative for ending hunger and undernutrition by 2025. It brings stakeholders together to set priorities, innovate and learn, fine-tune actions, build on successes, and synthesize sharable lessons in order to accelerate progress.

Compact2025 and partners organized a roundtable discussion in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on May 5, 2016 to set the critical groundwork for assessing how to end hunger and undernutrition in Bangladesh by 2025. The roundtable identified key knowledge, policy, and implementation gaps as well as opportunities, potential synergies and priority areas for action. This synopsis summarizes the discussions, recommendations, and next steps.

### Bangladesh's food security and nutrition situation

While hunger and undernutrition are still serious problems in Bangladesh, the country has made strong progress to reduce both. Underlying these gains have been advances in poverty reduction and consistent economic growth, as well as improvements in other important areas like parental education, health, sanitation.

The country has made great strides in reducing hunger. From 1990/92 to 2014/16, prevalence of undernourishment fell by half, from 32.8 percent to 16.4 percent—a sign of strong, yet incomplete progress. Child undernutrition, manifested in stunting or low height for age, is still high. The proportion of children under 5 years of age affected by stunting in Bangladesh dropped from 48 to 36 percent between 2005 and 2014. Prevalence of child stunting varies by demographics: In 2015, it was more prevalent in rural areas (37 percent) than urban areas (31 percent), and among the poorest quintile (49 percent) compared to the wealthiest quintile (19 percent).

Undernutrition results in severe human and economic costs: It costs Bangladesh more than US \$1 billion annually due to lost productivity, and even more in health care costs. In order for Bangladesh to meet its goals and end hunger and undernutrition by 2025, progress must be significantly accelerated.

### Roundtable discussions

Over 100 stakeholders from a range of sectors participated in the roundtable discussion. IFPRI director general Shenggen Fan opened the meeting and outlined some of the key issues, and IFPRI Representative in Bangladesh, Akhter Ahmed, presented Bangladesh's current food security and nutrition situation and recent trends. These presentations set the stage for a series of panel and roundtable discussions.

Participants discussed questions of (1) which new or different policies/programs are needed to accelerate progress; (2) what data, information, and knowledge gaps must be filled; (3) what innovative approaches can be used to break down silos; and (4) what roles should different stakeholders play. They discussed these questions in two sessions, first on agriculture, nutrition, and gender, and then on social protection and nutrition. A third discussion took place around how to better coordinate policies and programs across sectors and stakeholders, and how to use innovative approaches to enhance synergies. A final panel on accelerating process included reflections from Akhter Ahmed.

### Five major recommendations

Recommendations resulting from the Bangladesh roundtable discussion to address challenges, fill gaps, and exploit opportunities to accelerate progress, include:

1. **Make strategies, policies, and programs more nutrition-driven**

Strategies, policies and programs across sectors should be more nutrition-driven, and food security and nutrition should be placed in a broader policy context. For example, instead of directing agricultural strategies toward self-sufficiency goals, the focus should be on food security and nutrition outcomes. Agricultural investments are still

targeted toward conventional staple crops. While this was appropriate in the past, increased investments in more nutritious foods are needed today. Through policy changes, incentives should be improved for farmers to increase productivity and agricultural production diversity. Nutrition-driven agricultural interventions such as biofortification should be scaled up.

Social protection policies and programs should also become more nutrition-driven: For example, programs can focus on delivering more nutritious foods, and policies can target nutrition as a measurable outcome. Further, social protection should integrate interventions that boost agricultural productivity—drawing from Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Programme, for example—and amplify impacts on nutritional outcomes using BCC. Other sectoral programs such as school feeding programs can also become more nutrition-driven by delivering more high-nutrient foods, thereby contributing to health and nutrition outcomes while creating more demand for such foods.

## 2. Empower women, smallholders, and consumers

Women empowerment is a key pathway to improving nutrition, and more must be done to address social constraints that trap girls and women in cycles of hunger, undernutrition, and disempowerment. The case of Syllhet, where the lack of women empowerment appears to explain the high rates of child stunting, reinforces the need to empower women and girls. Interventions should target girls and adolescents with a focus on improving their nutrition, access to health services, and educational status. School feeding programs should extend to secondary schools to encourage families to keep adolescent girls (and boys) in school. Doing so can help delay early marriage while continuing education, as well as provide nutritious foods. Social change should be promoted to address child and adolescent marriage and its underlying causes (e.g. the dowry system). Gender-friendly work climates should also be promoted, and women should be further integrated into the labor market.

Small farmers must be supported through better land tenure systems that allow for ownership and leasing of land. Consumers should be made aware of the importance of nutrition, gender equality, and water, sanitation, and hygiene. Furthermore, food safety should be improved with support for smallholders to upgrade and comply with quality standards, and education for consumers in food preparation.

## 3. Fine-tune, consolidate, and operationalize policies

There are many promising strategies, policies, and plans in Bangladesh that can help to accelerate progress. The new National Social Security Strategy, Food and Nutrition Security Policy, and Country Investment Plan have been drafted and approved. However, these plans must be operationalized with fast and effective implementation, guided by action plans. These action plans should integrate better use of technology to improve service and information delivery while reducing leakage.

Further, many policies should be fine-tuned or consolidated. Subsidies on water, land, energy, and fertilizers that support the production of conventional staple crops should be re-directed toward more nutritious crops. Policies should be better targeted by focusing on areas and groups suffering most severely from hunger and undernutrition. For example, there is a need for policies that target vulnerable people living in urban areas. Additionally, good existing policies should be consolidated: There is a plethora of safety net programs in Bangladesh, but just 10 of them account for more than 90 percent of total expenditures, thus spreading resources too thin for the remaining programs.

## 4. Improve coordination and engage with non-traditional partners

No one sector or organization in Bangladesh can end hunger and undernutrition alone: Coordination is key to complement each other’s efforts while avoiding duplication. The Country Investment Plan, a rallying point for active participation from multiple stakeholders, is a good start. However, even more coordination is needed. The Local Consultative Groups (LCGs) facilitate coordination between development partners and government, but

convening of the LCGs for agricultural and rural development are becoming less frequent. The LCG meetings should be revived and frequency of meetings should be increased.

Further, more engagement is needed with non-traditional partners. The private sector has a key role to play in advancing food security and nutrition, and there is need to improve the enabling environment for private enterprises to thrive. For example, inclusive food value chains should be developed with improved rural-urban market linkages. Agricultural mechanization should be further expanded. Farmer associations should also be strengthened.

## 5. Fill data and knowledge gaps

There are several data gaps that must be filled in order to generate evidence to inform strategies, policies, and programs. While, for example, some sex-disaggregated data is available in Bangladesh through IFPRI's nationally representative surveys, even more is needed, as is more data on dietary diversity. The institutional capacity of the national statistical system, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) of the Ministry of Planning, needs to be strengthened to collect the needed data at regular frequencies and publish the data in a timely manner. Further, a better understanding of where undernutrition exists—for example, in certain regions or in urban slums—as well as more data on its underlying determinants can indicate the nature and severity of undernutrition in different contexts.

More research is needed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of policies and programs. For example, while research shows that combining cash transfers with behavior change communication (BCC) interventions can have big impacts, the program is very expensive. More work is needed on how to improve such programs' cost-efficiency while retaining their benefits. Further, more research is needed to understand and overcome the social and political barriers to accelerated progress. For example, greater transparency and understanding of the political economy landscape in the country can help improve accountability of elected officials for nutrition outcomes.

Filling data and knowledge gaps requires sustained investments in R&D and upgraded knowledge management and information-sharing systems. More investment is also needed to further develop rice varieties for sustainable intensification without high capital requirements. There is also a need for better systems to share data, knowledge, and lessons learned both among and between stakeholders and sectors. One example could be creating a database of research findings to inform policy formulation and programming. Monitoring and evaluation systems that have feedback mechanisms to inform programs at all levels should be improved.

## Next steps

There are many opportunities to fill gaps in research, policy, and implementation in order to accelerate progress. Responding to the needs identified at the roundtable discussion, Compact2025 aims to set up a Knowledge and Innovation Hub in Bangladesh, ideally within the Prime Minister's Office in partnership with relevant ministries and stakeholders. The hub will work to support country goals, processes, and programs with demand-driven research and innovation for the purpose of accelerating progress. It will help to collect data, strengthen capacities, and enhance tracking and monitoring systems. With a focus on South-South learning, the hub will synthesize lessons and compile, share, and communicate information and best practices within Bangladesh and beyond. It will also leverage existing networks, including the Regional Strategic Analysis and Knowledge Support System (ReSAKSS) in Asia. Outputs of the hub will include a freely accessible website, which will be set up so that it can be used by farmers and individuals in local communities through their mobile phones. A follow-up roundtable will be held in 2017 to reconvene stakeholders, evaluate progress, identify action gaps, and fine-tune next steps toward ending hunger and undernutrition by 2025 in Bangladesh.