

Improving household diets and family income through the NICE project in Bangladesh - Luna Akhter's and Omar Faruk's journeys

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In Rangpur city, Bangladesh, the Nutrition in City Ecosystems (NICE) project is working to transform urban food systems by strengthening governance local structures, increasing the production of nutrition-sensitive value chains, and facilitating the involvement of women and youth as entrepreneurs along the supply chain.

In Rangpur, 30% of women were found to rely on only poorly diverse diets (consumption of less than 5 from 10 food groups in the last 24 hours - MDD-W) in the NICE baseline. There was also a lack of supply of nutritious foods to the local city markets, and very low knowledge levels on the importance of diverse diet, or the concept of agroecological production. Moreover, men were the main, sole decision takers regarding food production (71.4%) and food processing (62.1%) though to a lesser extent for food purchase (19.2%).

Luna Akhter

Luna Akhter used to be a housewife, responsible for a family of nine, and was struggling to find employment after her Master's degree at Carmichael College, Rangpur. However, she could not secure herself a job. Balancing the parallel challenges of studies, job-seeking, family responsibilities and her first pregnancy in 2017, Luna was determined to ensure a decent household income. However, the COVID-19 pandemic made life very difficult; her husband lost his job in Dhaka and moved back to the family village in Rangpur. Deeply concerned about their future, Luna took matters into her own hands.

In May 2022, Luna's brother told her about the NICE project and Farmers' Hubs (FHs). Eager to explore the opportunity, she attended a roadshow and was selected as a candidate Agri-Entrepreneur. Training followed, for example on the importance of healthy diets and nutrition as well as some key principles of developing a business. In August 2022, Luna started her FH on about 0.03 hectare. She set it up in the Pargacha area of Rangpur. She and her husband called the business Luna Farmers' Hub. To get going, they invested 150,000 taka (BDT), currently about \$1400. Two-thirds came as an interest-free loan from their relatives, to be repaid gradually as the business flourished.

Luna started by producing seedlings in 500 trays, each with 104 holes. Responding to increasing demand, she bought 500 more, but those were still not enough. Within three months, Luna added another 400 trays. The first 500 contained cauliflower and cabbage seedlings. Luna sold all 52,000 seedlings for BDT 93,600 (approx. \$860). This great

start enabled her to begin repaying the loan. She soon started producing seedlings of tomato, chilli, papaya, bitter gourd, snake gourd, ash gourd and *brinjal* (aubergine/eggplant). To ensure good demand, Luna concentrates on whichever vegetables are in season. She also takes care that her own family eats well, and talks to her friends and neighbours about the importance of a diverse diet for better health.



Luna Akhter with chilli seedlings tray in her hub at Pirgacha Rangpur, during high demand of chilli and she was happy to sell a big batch of chilli seedlings.

Omar Faruk

Omar Faruk is a young, hard-working vegetable seller in the Bangladesh city of Dinajpur. Until recently, Omar found it hard to earn enough money. This was also because he was determined to keep vegetables affordable for his community. With typical dedication, Omar persevered even when his sales cart broke down.

In March 2023, through involvement with youth activities in the NICE project, Omar was able to access a replacement sales cart through the NICE project. The cart is extremely durable, having a good aeration system with no clogging. The vegetables are arranged on crates, so they can be easily watered, keeping them fresher for longer and reducing wastage. It also has an automated weighing scale for proper measurement of the vegetables for city buyers. The cart carries a slogan: “From Farm to Families – Safe Vegetable Cart”.

Omar can now sell his beans, potatoes, bitter gourd, tomatoes, and other produce more efficiently and over a wider area. Monthly sales have increased from 10-12,000 taka to 20,000 (about \$180). The extra income benefits all five members of his family.

Omar not only sources his vegetables from the city’s vegetable warehouse Bahadur Bazar but also directly from NICE nutrition Farmers’ Hubs. He collects seasonal vegetables like brinjal, and tomatoes, and is glad to know they have been produced safely. Omar says, “I try to handpick all the vegetables for my customers. Moreover, I received a training to learn more about nutrition value of the food so I can also talk to my customers in an informed way.” As well as being good for his customers, Omar’s commitment to safe and healthy food also ensures their trust and loyalty. And as the cart has a microphone and loudspeaker, clients always know when the friendly cyclist is on his way!



Omar Faruk with his vegetable van selling nutritious, quality produce at his city market

Video link:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1FbwZzB9sujhVrJzdZxidIFS3nzvfO11A/view?usp=drive_link