

Enhancing multi-sectoral and multi-level governance and policy impact on food systems in Bangladesh

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The global food system is currently inadequate in providing and distributing nutritious diets to meet the dietary needs of more than 8 billion people worldwide. About a third of the world's population suffers from some form of malnutrition, with many countries grappling with a 'triple burden' of malnutrition: the coexistence of overnutrition, undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies. Rural-Urban migration exacerbates the issue, as city-dwellers often encounter poor diets due to a complex interplay of factors. These include shifts in the food environment, such as increased access to highly processed foods and changing perspectives and behaviours toward convenience foods. Moreover, degradation of natural resources and pollution typically go along with rapid and unplanned urbanization.

Food and cities have had a symbiotic relationship for centuries. Food strongly determined where cities developed, impacting their design, economic situation and even political structures. Furthermore, food united and strengthened community bonds and helped to maintain a common identity among citizens. However, in recent times, this relationship between food and cities has become increasingly opaque, with growing distances between cities and food production (Haysom 2015).

In Bangladesh, urban poverty is often ignored and poverty seen as a rural phenomenon only. While social safety nets such as the food-friendly program (FFP), a food security measure, are well established in the rural hinterlands, similar measures are missing in urban centers. However, as 52% of the population of Rangpur City Corporation living in 152 slums are categorized as poor by the local government, the local government operates an Open Market Sale (OMS), a subsidized sale of food products (with prices still approximately three times costlier than in the government-led food-friendly program).

Building awareness of a food systems approach

Despite major developments spearheaded by visionary local leaders and communities, many local governments still continue to face major challenges to integrate food security, nutrition and sustainable food systems into their agendas (Haysom 2015). Food systems and nutrition are multi-sectoral by nature. Silos and entrenched ways of working do not fully grasp the holistic impact of food. In Bangladesh, the second National Plan of Action for Nutrition 2016-2025 (NPAN-2) pushes multisectoral collaboration. Under the mandate of the Bangladesh National Nutrition Council (BNNC), District and Upazila¹ Nutrition Coordination Committees (DNCCs / UNCCs) are thus coordinating the implementation of NPAN-2 among different stakeholders and sectors. The NICE project works closely with BNNC and is further strengthening this collaboration not only to devolve efforts, activities and responsibility to district and upazila level, but also to give cities a stronger voice and clear responsibility in the future NPAN-3.

To underscore the critical need for embedding nutrition and food system governance within city-level institutions and to maintain the priority of nutrition and food systems within the agendas of city corporations and municipalities, NICE has been a proactive champion for the creation of **Standing Committees on City Nutrition and Food System** in the local governments. Rangpur City Corporation and Dinajpur Municipality, the two NICE cities in Bangladesh, have acted on this impulse and instituted official Standing Committees on City Nutrition and Food System, aligning with the legal framework set out in section 50(2) of the Local Government (City Corporation) Act 2009. The committees were established in August 2003 and October 2023, respectively. The primary role of the Standing Committees on City Nutrition and Food System is to strengthen the city food system on behalf of the city administration and facilitate cross-sectoral collaboration among diverse nutrition and food system stakeholders. Their responsibilities include:

- Supervising and ensuring regular meetings of multisectoral, multi-stakeholder food system platforms for urban food system transformation.
- Advocacy and promotion of food security programs for the urban poor and vulnerable communities in the city.
- Multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder collaboration to facilitate safe and nutritious food products to the city through short and traceable value chains
- Sensitization and awareness-raising on nutrition, food safety and healthy, balanced diets
- Food systems monitoring for evidence generation
- Women and youth empowerment in the food system
- Transformation of Rangpur / Dinajpur into model nutrition vital cities with a food system charter summarizing each food system stakeholder's commitment

Advocacy efforts are on-going by NICE in collaboration with Rangpur city corporation and Dinajpur municipality to ensure compulsory establishment of Standing Committees on City Nutrition and Food Systems within the Local Government (City Corporation) Act 2009 for all of Bangladesh. This initiative is currently under consultation with the national parliamentary standing committee on local government.



Discussion on food systems questions around World Food Day

¹ An upazila is an administrative division in Bangladesh, functioning as a sub-unit of a district; All photos are from NICE/SFSA.

Strengthening multi-level collaboration

In a similar vein, Rangpur City Corporation and Dinajpur Municipality are actively working to establish a City Food Desk in their respective city administrations. These desks are intended to streamline communication and collaborative problem-solving on issues such as nutrition and food security, food safety, value chains etc. between city authorities and the Local Government Division at the Bangladeshi Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives. The FAO's Dhaka Food Systems Project has been instrumental to originally set-up and support a Food Desk at the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives and piloting respective counterparts in the 4 city corporations that make up Dhaka.

Enhancing capacity across stakeholders

Besides its advocacy efforts for improved food systems governance and communications pathways through strong steering from standing committees and city food desks, NICE also promotes healthy diets and improved nutrition more generally. This is achieved through advocacy at both city and national levels. Key meetings have been convened to raise awareness about the importance of healthy food procurement in alignment with the WHO action framework for developing and implementing public food procurement and service policies for a healthy diet (see <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240018341>). These efforts are primarily directed towards integrating these standards into Bangladesh's national public procurement system, engaging with the new Bangladesh Public Procurement Authority (BPPA) under the Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) of the Ministry of Planning as well as Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA) at the Ministry of Food.

Furthermore, Rangpur City Corporation is intensifying its push for a food friendly program and has submitted requests to the Local Government Division at the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives together with the Ministry of Food, while NICE continues its advocacy efforts respectively sensitisation of the Ministry of Food, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Planning as all, policy decision, budgetary allocation and cabinet level political decision chaired by the Minister of Food are finally required for a successful piloting of food friendly programs in city corporations and municipalities.



Sale of safe and nutritious foods in an urban market; school children take part in a social and behaviour change communication campaign for healthy diets