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Searching for a food-system research

Abdul Bayes | Saturday, 19 October 2019

Last week, the news about consumption of eggs in Bangladesh stole the headlines of some newspapers. The good news is that, per capita consumption of this nutritious food in Bangladesh, now at 103 per year, meets the international mark of 104. Compared to this, just a decade earlier per capita consumption of eggs was a scanty 40 per year. The low consumption during that decade could mostly be attributed to low production and high prices. Over time, however, the production of eggs in the country went up almost three times, thanks to the rapid growth of poultry firms against some odds.

The famous Engel's Law states that as incomes rise, marginal propensity to consumption (additional spending out of additional income) of non-staple foods also rises. Bangladesh is believed to have entered into that phase as reflected by the increased demand for fruits, vegetables, meat, and milk via increased per capita income over time.

For a pretty long time, we have been bogged down with food availability only. We noticed how massive malnutrition could persist along with self-sufficiency in food grain production. It took us a long time to understand that, it is not intake of food per se but intake of a healthy diet - filled with micro and macro nutrients - that forms the foundation of human health and well-being. A deficiency in nutrients in diets tends to deter physical and cognitive development, thus, resulting in poor health and productivity. By and large, it is both quality as well as quantity of food that goes to grease human wheel through enhanced productivity. The importance of quality foods in addressing massive malnutrition in Bangladesh could not be stressed more.

The problem is the paucity of adequate and quality data on the trends and changing determinants of food consumption. Lacking is also an appropriate analysis on the drivers of food systems as a whole. Without accurate dataset complemented by rigorous analysis, evidence-based policy prescriptions for fighting malnutrition barely bears fruit. Over the last decades, a plethora of perennial research on agriculture could be in evidence but, for some reasons or others, a rigorous research on food systems with a holistic approach is mostly missing. However, the scant evidences on food consumption trends, based mostly on in-depth and case studies and data generated by Household Income and Expenditure Survey of (HIES), do shed some lights on both positive and negative outcomes of food intake in Bangladesh. Let us cite a few of them, drawing upon existing studies:

The overall calorie intake per capita/day is reported to have decreased from 2300 K.cal in 2010 to 2210 K.cal in 2016 owing mostly to a reduction in per capita rice consumption where rice was the dominant driver of energy. As opposed to this, the proportion of energy derived from income-elastic commodities like meat, fruits, vegetables and oil increased during the same period. The change could mostly be attributed to a rise in per capita income. Perhaps there is little doubt that the change in consumption pattern took place in the right direction.

But, allegedly, the dietary improvements have been more diverse among the well-off segments than the vulnerable population which failed to experience the same increase. In other words, disparity in dietary



diversity prevails. Similarly, perception-based household food insecurity is reported to have fallen from 70 per cent in 2011 to less than 30 per cent in 2014, but women's dietary diversity is said to have improved at snail's pace during the same period. Another research reveals that consumption of fish in the country rose by 30 per cent between 1990 and 2010, but intake of iron and calcium from fish did not concomitantly rise. This was possibly because of, as the researcher reckons, increased consumption of less micronutrient dense farmed fish and decreased consumption of more dense wild fish.

The above-mentioned research findings have ample merits and possibly could serve policy purposes too. But, food intake is only one element of the whole set of variables that keep a person healthy like access and availability of quality foods, even cooked foods. With rapid economic growth and per capita income that Bangladesh has been witnessing over the past decade, the food market has been assuming diverse dimensions that need immediate research attention.

Take the case of the expanding market for fast food. A research finding shows that over half of the private university graduates in Dhaka visits fast food shops at least once a week and 44 per cent goes regularly. Likewise, food taken outside has increased. Are the markets regulated or are the foods safe and secure in terms of healthier diets? Again, supermarkets entering the agricultural supply chain, growing urbanisation, globalisation, culture etc. are affecting consumer preference, dietary decisions,

food chain linkage etc. All of these issues are important determinants of nutrition and health. We also need to look closely at the food processing sector employing one-fifth of manufacturing employment and production. Again, knowledge in food transformation is a call of the time.

A ray of hope, however, is visible on the horizon regarding research on our food systems. In 2017, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) partnered with Wageningen University and Research of Netherlands on a five-year Food Systems for Healthier Diets Project to be undertaken in different countries including Bangladesh. As could be learnt, "The program focuses on food systems through the agri-food value chains impact pathway and the associated policy enabling required accelerating food system innovation, scaling, and anchoring". The ICDDR,B and IFPRI joined hands this year to strengthen food systems in Bangladesh under the umbrella called Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH).

It is expected that the research collaboration will come up with insights for policy makers to develop Bangladesh's food systems for healthier diets by digging into plough-plate chain and the associated sub-systems.

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