

BRAC Policy Discussion on Nutrition Political Commitment Needed to Eradicate Malnutrition

Special Correspondent
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Political commitment is essential to eradicate malnutrition. The situation will improve if the Prime Minister or the President take the lead of the national nutrition programme. If needed, a separate ministry can be formed to change the malnutrition situation of Bangladesh.

National and international experts expressed these opinions in a policy discussion on "Scaling Up Nutrition; An Urgent Call for Commitment and Multi-Sectoral Action" held at BRAC Centre yesterday. BRAC organized this roundtable in the lead-up to the Nutrition Conference in New York at the end of this month.

Professor Tahmid Ahmed, director of the Centre for Nutrition and Food Security of ICDDR, said in his keynote address that Bolivia, Peru, Thailand and Brazil have seen great progress in eliminating malnutrition because the Prime Minister or the President of these countries took the lead of national nutrition services. He said: "600,000 children of Bangladesh suffer from severe acute malnutrition, 41 percent of children are stunted." He added: "Even with an increase in GDP and per capita income, the nutrition situation in this country will not improve on its own."

The policy discussion was joined by representatives from UNDP, UNICEF, USAID, World Health Organization, DFID, AusAID, World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations, World Food Programme, and many other representatives from different ministries of the Government of Bangladesh, as well as journalists.

Several speakers in the discussion pointed out that in some regards, the nutrition condition of Bangladesh is worse than in some African countries. The National Nutrition Programme is not working well in Bangladesh despite the government's claim to carry out this programme with the support from several ministries and organizations. In this regard, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, founder and chairperson of BRAC, said: "The position of Bangladeshi women is worse than the position of women in some African countries. In Bangladesh, the rate of infectious diseases like diarrhea among young children is much higher than in any African country. Awareness of maternal and child care practices is very poor among the mothers of this country. In addition, awareness of nutrition is also very poor." He added: "A Nutrition Ministry should be formed for this country. If a

separate ministry is created then the population will become more aware and the country will go farther to end malnutrition.”

During the meeting, several speakers pointed out that the role of the mass media is very important to create awareness of nutrition and to get politicians involved. “Prothom Alo always gives high importance to news on nutrition,” said Matiur Rahman, Editor of Prothom Alo. He asked media outlets to cooperate with nutrition experts and others to cover more reports and data on nutrition.

At the event, it was said that the “Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN)” movement is playing a vital role to eliminate malnutrition worldwide. This is a global initiative initiated by Ban Ki Moon. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Sir Fazle Hasan Abed are members of the SUN movement. Many guest participants expressed regret that SUN has not yet been officially launched in the country.

“Many of us consider nutrition activities to be complimentary tasks rather than the main task. Nutrition has not been considered as one of the priorities for this country’s development. There is confusion amongst politicians, including the prime minister, whether nutrition should be on the agenda of their election manifesto or part of the plan for the country’s development. The country will move forward in improving nutrition if politicians can overcome this uncertainty.” said S. K. Roy, a nutrition scientist.

Kawsar Afsana, the Director of the BRAC Health, Nutrition and Population programme opened the event with a speech.