

**IFPRI Podcast Series**  
**Episode 2: Scaling Up Nutrition for the Poor in Bangladesh**

**Sivan:** Hi and welcome to *Research Talks*, a podcast series that explores how research is making an impact on people and policies (with a focus on the 'how'), brought to you by IFPRI. I am your host, Sivan Yosef, and today we're going to explore how for the first time ever, research findings got translated into an actual national program in Bangladesh. Let's hear a preview from Akhter Ahmed, a senior research fellow and Bangladesh country representative with IFPRI.

**Akhter:** I've worked at IFPRI for, this is my 29th year, and I've worked in about 12 countries. Government implementing this agriculture, nutrition and gender research is quite unprecedented, but having them agree to scale up too... that is at another level. So, this I have not seen in my life at IFPRI.

**Sivan:** When most of us think about good nutrition, we imagine small day-to-day things we can do. Maybe buying more fruits and vegetables or cooking at home. So these things are important for sure, but what happens when we want to improve the nutrition of not just one person, but a whole city, or even or a whole country?

It turns out that to create that kind of massive change, you might have to go way back before the food is sold in a supermarket, before it's transported on a truck, before it's processed. You might have to go all the way back to the beginning, at the farm.

This is exactly what IFPRI researchers working in Bangladesh figured out in 2011. Here is Akhter Ahmed again, describing this huge survey they ran.

**Akhter:** We spoke with the United States Agency for International Development, who is funding our project in Bangladesh about conducting a new national rural household survey called the Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey or BIHS. It became the most comprehensive survey to date in Bangladesh.

**Sivan:** The survey told Akhter's team something they already knew: that most Bangladeshi farmers grow only one crop: rice. Bangladeshis eat a lot of rice, so farmers just follow the demand.

**Akhter:** We learned from the survey that families, when they grow other crops besides rice, the families tend to eat a wider variety of foods. They have greater dietary diversity. It might sound obvious, but we see in other countries that this link is not always there because households may prefer to sell what they grow instead of eating it.

**Sivan:** They also figured out something else that's pretty interesting.

**Akhter:** The survey was also the first to collect women's empowerment data nationally. We found that women's empowerment improves both agricultural diversity and the diets of mothers, children and families. It is not exactly clear why, but we think this is because women typically cook for their families, so when they are able to make decisions with their husbands on what crops to produce, how much, what inputs to use and so on, they help to make decisions with an eye on nutrition.

**Sivan:** So what were the next steps? What did you do?

**Akhter:** We were enthusiastic about the results and thought to ourselves, why not use these results to design an actual program? So, in April 2014, at the meeting at the USAID mission in Bangladesh, I approached Mark Tegenfeldt, who was our program officer at that time and explained the survey results and shared our idea about an experiment that could tell us how to best improve agriculture, nutrition and gender.

**Sivan:** USAID was excited about the idea and asked the team to write up a concept note. They got to work and proposed an intervention called ANGeL (Agriculture, Nutrition, and Gender Linkages) that would test 5 different scenarios to see which could impact people's nutrition in the biggest, most positive way.

The scenarios combined different types of trainings. The first two scenarios focused on nutrition training, which is also called behavior change communication. You basically invite people to talk about ways to improve certain behaviors, like breastfeeding for longer or eating healthier.

The third scenario focused just on agricultural production training.

**Akhter:** Farmers were trained on how to produce high value, and high nutritive value crops

**Sivan:** Like fruits and vegetables

**Akhter:** And not only crops, but also livestock and fisheries

**Sivan:** And the last type of training focused on gender, in partnership with Helen Keller International. So the last two scenarios were combination packages. Scenario #4 combined the nutrition and agriculture trainings. And Scenario #5 combined everything together: nutrition, agriculture and gender trainings.

Got it? Good, back to Akhter!

**Akhter:** We presented this concept note to Mark. He was in deep, deep thought about how there could be some problem for training delivery by male extension workers.

**Sivan:** In Bangladesh, more than 90% of extension workers are male.

**Akhter:** You know, we thought about when they deliver nutrition messages, such as breastfeeding and things like that, they might not be too comfortable both the trainer and the trainees. So, Mark thought that, why not we also train some local women on these nutrition-behavior change communication? So, we can then compare whether the delivery of nutrition messages makes a difference by the gender of the person who is delivering the messages.

**Sivan:** USAID was on board with the plan. So was Helen Keller International.

**Sivan (in conversation with Akhter):** So who was left?

**Akhter:** The Government of Bangladesh. We know that in a country of over 160 million people to really make a difference, we had to work with the government. So, I personally contacted the Honorable Minister of Agriculture, Matia Chowdhury, about the concept note and she agreed and called a meeting. I went to the secretariat. I was quite nervous about presenting in front of the honorable minister. She is known to be tough and rigid. And the room was full; it's a capacity of 100 people and some people were actually standing also. I started presenting this concept note to the minister and everybody in the room. So after the presentation, everyone looked to the minister to see her reaction.

She announced, "We will implement this with our agriculture extension network. We will cover the cost." Once we had the Minister of Agriculture's backing, we were ready to continue the hard work.

**Sivan:** The Ministry officially launched ANGeL in October of 2015. Minister Chowdhury reviewed the planning documents herself.

**Sivan (in conversation with Akhter):** Are ministers usually involved to that detail in a project?

**Akhter:** I think this is quite unique in this case. She was quite enthusiastic about this project. She probably saw that what this study could do-- how it could impact the people in the country to improve their nutrition status, and to also increase agricultural income and gender relationships.

**Sivan:** Helen Keller International and IFPRI began preparing for the trainings. They had to create 3 training manuals, these pretty practical documents training people on how to give seminars on nutrition, agriculture, and gender. These types of classes are called training of the trainers, because the trainers, would eventually go out to the community and educate their neighbors on what they had learned. In the case of ANGeL, the trainers included 100 government agriculture extension officials and 25 local community women.

**Sivan (in conversation with Akhter):** Did these community women have any experience in delivering trainings like that?

**Akhter:** Not really. We announced in the villages that we are going to recruit some women who should have passed at least higher secondary education schooling. So, several women applied, and then we interviewed them

**Sivan:** With the agriculture extension officials and local women on board, the training of the trainers began.

**Akhter:** They came to Dhaka and the Ministry of Agriculture said that we could use one of their agriculture ministry premises, which is called Mushroom Development Center. So, there is a conference room in the center, and we started conducting the training of 100 agriculture extension officials in that room, but the room had only fans, no air conditioning. So, imagine that you are in a training in Bangladesh in April and May when the temperature can get as high as 90 degrees Fahrenheit and the room has no air conditioning. The heat was really affecting everyone's focus and concentration. So we went ahead and purchased six air conditioning units and installed them in a day in the conference room, and then everybody was happy. This is a cool idea, literally [Laughing], so I think that worked very well.

**Sivan:** IFPRI researchers did a baseline survey to figure out what people's nutrition and welfare were like before they received the ANGeL intervention. Then they rolled out the trainings. 4,000 different households, made up of married couples who had small children, received different trainings together in their communities. The design of the whole thing was a randomized controlled trial, which is basically the gold standard in research. Then after about a year and a half, IFPRI evaluated everything.

**Akhter:** We analyzed the data, and we found that agricultural production knowledge and practices both improved, nutrition knowledge and practices also improved and both men and women were empowered. And women in particular benefited from agriculture and nutrition trainings, not only did they learn more but they applied what they learned more than their husbands. So, this is also something not very clear why that happened, but that happened. I think women were probably more attentive in the training sessions and they did not miss any training sessions.

**Sivan:** In other words, the gold package—the combined training of agriculture, nutrition, and gender improved crop diversity on the farm; it improved farmers' incomes; it improved nutrition knowledge, and it also empowered women. Both men and women's attitudes on gender improved too. Everyone was amazed. But that's not the end of the story. There's actually one more big finale.

**Akhter:** So, we had the proof of concept. So, why not implement this as a national program? So we had a number of meetings with the Minister of Agriculture officials, and in December 2018, the Secretary of Agriculture, Mr. Nasiruzzaman, he announced that ANGeL will be scaled up as a national program. That was really a very big day for us, that the government has decided to implement a research-based program nationwide. This did not happen before.

**Sivan (in conversation with Akhter):** So listening to you, the most amazing thing about this story to me is that ANGeL is actually, it's not an IFPRI project, right? It's a project by the Bangladesh government that was implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture, and it even had to get approved by a bunch of different ministries, right?

**Akhter:** Yes, yes. There was an inter-ministerial committee, they approved both the research design and now the Ministry of Agriculture has approved the scaling up. Now it will go to the Ministry of Planning for the final design for implementing the program. And the government has decided to spend about \$92 million for this first stage of implementation.

**Sivan:** A big thanks to Akhter Ahmed for sharing the amazing story of ANGeL, and to Julie Ghostlaw for facilitating the interview. If you'd like to learn more about ANGeL, you can google IFPRI and ANGeL and it will be in the top results. And don't forget to subscribe to our podcasts so you don't miss a single episode from IFPRI. Til Next Time!