

BANGLADESH

IMPROVEMENTS IN THE LIVES OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN: PROJECTS FROM THE FIELD



Suchana: Ending the cycle of undernutrition in Bangladesh

Malnutrition in Bangladesh

While Bangladesh could potentially still meet the global target for 2025 (25%) and child stunting has fallen by 12 percentage points between 2007 and 2017-18, child stunting remains highly prevalent (31%)¹. One in 12 children under the age of five also suffer from wasting – associated with weakened immunity and increased risk of death. At the same time, and with 40% of adult women anaemic, overweight and obesity continue to rise at national level. Undernutrition comes with high social and economic costs, which disproportionately affect the poorest households. Globally, nutrition-related factors are estimated to contribute to about 45% of deaths in children under-5 years of age². Undernutrition has lifelong consequences: by undermining a child's physical and cognitive development, it can lead to long-term reduction in productivity and a greater risk of chronic diseases later in life. The economic cost of undernutrition is estimated to exceed USD 1 billion per year in Bangladesh³.

Suchana (2016-2022)

Suchana is a EUR 53.8 million programme jointly supported by the EU and the UK Foreign, Development and Commonwealth Office (FCDO). It aims to significantly reduce the incidence of stunting in children under two in two districts of Sylhet Division (which has the highest stunting and wasting prevalence, as well as the worst levels of gender inequality in Bangladesh). The programme's multi-sectoral approach focuses on tackling undernutrition within the critical 1 000 days from conception until children reach their second birthday. This involves working closely with key ministries representing multiple sectors to strengthen delivery systems and improve people's access to key nutrition-related services as well as directly empowering women and men through support to income-generating activities, homestead gardening and awareness about health and nutrition. At the same time, *Suchana* is harnessing evidence of progress to catalyse support from government

and other stakeholders to scale up a multi-sectoral approach and improve nutrition governance across the country. Core programme targets include:

- Livelihood diversification and increased income for 1.3 million people;
- Empowering 68 000 adolescent girls from poor households to extend school attendance and prevent child marriage;
- Delivering improved nutrition services through the local health system to a quarter of a million poor households.

To ensure that nutritionally vulnerable households and individuals are better able to absorb climatic, health and economic shocks, a key component of the programme focuses on increasing access to government social protection schemes, including maternity allowance⁴. *Suchana* is implemented by a consortium of national and international NGOs led by Save the Children.

Tangible results in the lives of women and children

Suchana has been designed to boost knowledge and evidence and so promote commitment and momentum for change. Following the collection of baseline data in 2016, the results of the impact assessment (2019-2020) confirm significant improvement, even when compared to the control group. Driven by the boost to household income and savings, severe household food insecurity has more than halved, while women's dietary diversity has almost doubled. The rate of exclusive breastfeeding has increased by more than 20% and the number of children aged 6-23 months getting a minimally acceptable diet has more than tripled.



Outcomes ⁵	2017	2018	2019
Median income per year (Tk)	80 000	86 000	96 000
Households with any savings	34.5%	34.3%	56%
Severe food insecurity	29%	19%	13%
Women's diet	27%	34%	53%
Children's diet	10%	15%	35%
Exclusive breastfeeding	62%	73%	85%
Women's empowerment	27%	45%	56%

Realising human potential

Access to adequate nutritious food is a fundamental human right and provides the foundation for healthy individuals and societies. *Suchana* reinforces Bangladesh's national plan of action for nutrition by demonstrating that efforts to improve the nutrition of women and children should be understood as an investment in realising human potential, rather than a cost. Using a rights-based and gender-transformative strategy, *Suchana* positions women's political, social and economic empowerment centre-stage: for example, by supporting women to establish village savings and loan groups to strengthen their decision-making in the household, while at the same time ensuring men's participation in education and counselling sessions on maternal and child nutrition.

Tackling climate and environmental challenges

Bangladesh is uniquely vulnerable to climate change, with two-thirds of the country less than five metres above sea level. In 2017, severe flooding was experienced across the intervention area. *Suchana* has taken concrete steps to support beneficiaries to adopt climate-resilient livelihoods and disaster preparedness practices to increase resilience to shocks and stresses. Interventions include production diversification, eco-friendly cropping patterns and climate-smart cultivation techniques. Early warning systems have been introduced to help beneficiaries to get information and knowledge on short-term/rapid climatic hazards (such as cyclones, floods and storms), as well as long-term/slow hazards (such as drought and long-term climate change).

- 1 Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey (2018).
- 2 WHO (2019); <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/children-reducing-mortality>
- 3 Howlader, S.R. et al. 2012. Investing in Nutrition Now: A Smart Start for Our Children, Our Future.
- 4 The EU also supports the Government of Bangladesh (via budget support) to scale up national coverage of maternity allowance and child benefit. A programme reorientation is enabling the provision of income support to garment workers who have lost their livelihoods as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak in the country.
- 5 Results from *Suchana* Impact Assessment undertaken by icddr.org. Baseline data collected in 2016. Endline data in 2019. Internationally recognised indicators used: for severe food insecurity, household level; for women's diet, minimum dietary diversity for women; for children's diet, the minimum acceptable diet; for women's empowerment, decision

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Photo: Women coming back from the field, Dhaka Hills, Sreemongal, Bangladesh. © EU

