



## ADDRESSING MALNUTRITION IN BANGLADESH

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-  **PROJECT** Bangladesh Initiative to Enhance Nutrition Security and Governance project (BlENGs)
-  **TIMEFRAME** 4.5 years (2018 to 2023)
-  **PROJECT PARTICIPANTS** Pregnant and breastfeeding women, children under five, adolescent girls, people with disabilities, extreme poor and poor households and smallholder farmers.
-  **REACH** 1.7million nutritionally vulnerable people overall
-  **LOCATION** Bangladesh, Jamalpur and Sherpur Districts
-  **DONOR** European Union
-  **GOAL** Improve maternal and child nutrition in six sub-districts in rural and nutritionally vulnerable areas of Jamalpur and Sherpur

## How do poverty and malnutrition relate?

This case study begins by explaining how malnutrition and poverty interact. It then demonstrates the ways in which programming, such as BleNGS, can be designed and implemented to address the inequalities of malnutrition related to poverty, gender and social barriers. Malnutrition and poverty reinforce each other as a vicious cycle. Poverty is a driver of malnutrition as it limits people's food security, access to health services and nutritious food. Malnutrition impairs cognitive development, reduces learning potential and leads to

reduced productivity and earning potential in adults. Yet investing in nutrition has great economic returns, with reductions in stunting projected to increase gross domestic product by 4–11% across African and Asian regions. When the project started in 2018 the least wealthy 20% had stunting of 40% while the wealthiest 20% had stunting of only 17%. It was therefore vital to use a strategy with this as its starting point.

## Targeting people most affected

Project locations were six sub-districts in the Jamalpur and Sherpur districts, selected due to a high stunting rate of 42-46%, above the national average of 41%. 49% of households were below the poverty line. In addition some of the interventions were only available to the poorest households- those who bear the greatest burden of malnutrition. These 20,000 poor and extreme poor households (including 2,080 children under five years) received small livestock (goats), fruit and vegetable seedlings for home gardening, and dedicated community nutrition promoter home visits to provide education and monitor progress.

## Focus on women

Nutrition and gender are strongly interconnected, with malnutrition disproportionately affecting women and girls. In Bangladesh, like in other contexts, social norms limit women's access and control over resources, including access to food. For example, women tend to eat last and less. Households with pregnant and breastfeeding women were primary target in BleNGS and several components of the programme focused on empowering women and improving gender relations at household and community level.

Through the MenCare approach, 6,445 couples attended 13 sessions over six months. They learnt about equality and non-violent family relationships, fatherhood, and caregiving practice. On completing the sessions, couples became change-maker families in their community sharing their learning with others and influencing wider community changes. In addition to MenCare, pregnant and breastfeeding women received support from community nutrition promoters through home visits, cooking demonstrations, kitchen gardening, and micronutrient supplements.

## Tajmahal learns the meaning of nutrition

Tajmahal, 42, (opposite) is widow, and mother of two. living with her son and daughter. Her husband was the breadwinner and after his death Tajmahal struggled to raise her two children. She took on work cleaning houses for her neighbours but the income was not enough to feed her children, let alone ensure their proper nutrition.

Her family was classified among the poorest. She received two goats, different types of nutritious vegetable seeds and fruit saplings and training on goat rearing and homestead vegetable cultivation. Tajmahal has worked hard and grown her income and food sources. She then began rearing poultry and bought two cows with the savings. She is growing her small livestock business, her family get milk and vegetables from her ventures and she sells excess produce in the local market for income.

**"I never thought about food in terms of nutrition. Food was always just food if it filled our bellies. But now I think about the right food for my children and also advocate for good nutrition in my community," says Tajmahal. "My dream is to build my own goat farm in the future. I believe I can provide very well for my children and myself now."**

**OPPOSITE:** Tajmahal with her goats. ©2023 World Vision



Over 18,000 women participated in agriculture producer groups and received training on climate-smart techniques, producing diverse crops of vegetables and fruits. The results show a real change in female empowerment; women's involvement in high value crop farming went up four fold (from 6% to 25%), decision making in household agricultural activities increased from 47% to 68%, their control over income from 47% to 60%, and knowing that their inputs in health and nutrition matters.

## Learning from project participants

The project was also pro-poor in the sense of learning from the least wealthy through the Positive Deviance Hearth (PD Hearth) inquiry approach. This investigated community assets, resources, services and wisdom that are important to keep children healthy. World Vision and community volunteers conducted home visits to poor households who have healthy children to identify how they overcame barriers to keep their children healthy. This uncovered local solutions which, combined with other information, resulted in developing low cost menus from locally available nutrient-high foods, to rehabilitate malnourished children. The menus were then shared in in group sessions for 4,800 malnourished children and their parents. PD Hearth in BleNGS was a demonstration of local solutions to address malnutrition using the community's own resources and knowledge to bring about change.

## Inclusion in governance

What is governance and why is it important? Governance is the process of making and enforcing decisions of (in this case) local, district and national governing bodies. Pro-poor governance involves looking not just at how those decisions affect the poor but having poor households taking an active role. Evidence underscores that good governance plays a fundamental role in nutrition.

BleNGS strengthened Community Clinic capacity to deliver nutrition services, by training health workers on delivering nutrition services, data management and reporting, as well as seconding community nutrition promoters for additional support. It also facilitated community participation in governance through the World Vision Citizen Voice and Action (CVA) model. BleNGS implemented CVA in 46 Community Clinics. A total 31,245<sup>1</sup> community members participated in community meetings, which raised awareness of rights, assessed gaps in service provision and informed the community of progress in improving services. There were more improvements in these clinics, for example availability of drinking water, handwashing, and flushing toilets, compared to those where CVA was not implemented. Community Clinics reported good stocking

management, a general improvement in equipment stocks and a post Covid recovery in stocking of medicines.

CVA also improved women and girls' representation in the clinics' management structures, as demonstrated by the story of Mafuza. 141 more women and girls became part of the community clinics governance groups, which increased female representation from 30 to 36%.

## Mafuza

Mafuza became part of a CVA group with BleNGS. She says, "After the CVA formation, we received training for two days on how to run the CVA process. Awareness of community clinic services was very limited in my community so I held regular monthly meetings to raise awareness among my community people." Mafuza's advocacy through the CVA group led to the development organisation BRAC donating a chair and table at her local clinic. The local government office installed a water well.

Due to Mafuza's CVA group efforts, Shahida Begum, a pregnant mother, said, "I come to this clinic every month for my regular check-ups. Their service is very satisfactory. I also bring my daughter here for any emergency primary health care service. It saves us money as it is close to our home, and we also get treatment and medicine free of cost. My child and I both are healthy now. I am really happy to have the community clinic's services."

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**Mafuza adds, "When people see me now, I can see the respect in their eyes. Through my work with the CVA, I have built a good network with the local government and NGO authorities. I also contribute equally to decisions that benefit my family now."**

**OPPOSITE (TOP):** Mafuza a CVA group member, BleNGS project in Bangladesh. ©2023 World Vision

**OPPOSITE (BOTTOM):** Mafuza on the right with fellow CVA group member Abdul, in discussion with a government health worker. ©2023 World Vision

<sup>1</sup> Participants were: Men - 3,681, Women -12,207, Boys -58 and Girls -15,299





## Leave no one behind

By the end of the BleNGS project, key outcomes for children's health, including stunting, minimum acceptable diet and exclusive breastfeeding improved more markedly among the poorest than the rest of the population. Stunting saw a striking decrease (this is a positive result) of 5% amongst the poorest 40% of households. Likewise, the number of children with a minimum acceptable diet in the poorest groups increased by about 60%. This illustrates the importance of the leave no one behind Sustainable Development Goals<sup>2</sup> principle, to focus on the most vulnerable.

<sup>2</sup> [The Sustainable Development Agenda - United Nations Sustainable Development](#)

## Conclusion

The approach in the BleNGS project was intentional at design, implementation and evaluation, with a purpose to achieve inclusion. By shifting perceptions and taking an equity lens, the poorest are meaningfully included and participate in project activities to the greatest extent. It has been shown that this approach has also been successful in meeting the aims of the project, to improve the nutrition of women and children comprehensively, by tackling the root causes of malnutrition.

**ABOVE:** As part of her nutrition education, Lipi, (centre, wearing green) the PD Hearth facilitator, is showing community mothers how to prepare balanced food. She's showing how to make a simple three-step dish so that the mothers may try it at home. ©2023 World Vision

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**COVER PHOTO:** Ibrahim, pictured with this father. When he was 14 months old, he was severely malnourished and referred to hospital by the community nutrition promoter working with the project. After treatment, Ibrahim is now a healthy and energetic little boy. ©2023 World Vision

