



BANGLADESH INITIATIVE TO ENHANCE NUTRITION SECURITY AND GOVERNANCE (BIENG)



SECTOR

Nutrition



TIMEFRAME

4.5 years (1 September 2021 to 31 August 2022)



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

Context and objective

Nutrition was a key challenge in the communities of Jamalpur and Sherpur. Limited resources meant families were unable to produce a variety of foods needed for a balanced diet, compounded by not being fully part of the health system. This meant inadequate services and support for families, who then lacked opportunities to learn positive diet and care approaches for young children.

BleNGS is a combination of nutrition, agricultural and health interventions, women's empowerment and local community participation in nutrition governance. The project supports the health system through health worker training and community nutrition promoters, to enable effective delivery of quality nutrition services. Community social behaviour change activities are in place to support communities to adopt and maintain positive nutrition practices and behaviours.

To increase food security and diversify diets of the poor and ultra-poor households, farmers are organised into Produce Groups where together they learn agricultural practices which can be used in their individual farms. To increase consumption of nutritious staples, farmers are trained and supplied with rice and lentils, which are bio fortified with zinc.

The project has worked closely with local government to establish and /or re-establish nutrition coordination committees at district and divisional levels. These committees are involved in planning nutrition policy implementation and service delivery. They provide technical and management support to Community Clinics, which BleNGS partners with at a community level.

Project approach

This case study focuses on three interrelated community approaches aimed at improving the nutrition of women, girls and children.

Community Nutrition Promoters (CNP) are community volunteers who visit mothers and families at home to provide key messages and support during pregnancy. They promote breastfeeding, hold cooking demonstrations and facilitate community nutrition education sessions.

Producer Groups are made up of about 25 smallholder farmers - men and women - who are trained, using a demonstration plot, on good farming and climate smart techniques to increase food production. They grow a variety of food to feed their families and sell surplus in local markets. Women in particular have been supported and engaged to take part.

MenCare mobilises families to transform perceptions around gender roles. The aim is to increase women's participation in income generation activities, local development initiatives and the decision-making process - at household and community level.

This case study demonstrates the role communities have played in improving nutrition practices and behaviour through peer-to-peer support and create long term social change through transforming gender norms.

BELOW: Monika Khatun, a producer group member, (front right) sharing her learnings and giving suggestions to other female farmers of her community. ©2022 World Vision



Activities

Carers of children under five are an important focus for BleNGS and 224 Nutrition Promoters are at the core of this work, supporting families and connecting community activities. They visit families with children under two-years-old, to provide messages on breastfeeding and nutritious diet for children, women and girls. Their family visits are designed not only to meet with mothers but also others who are part of the families' support system. Fathers and men are included through MenCare.

To break the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition, adolescent girls are leading the change, Nutrition Promoters and teachers facilitate awareness and peer-to-peer sessions on healthy lifestyles, nutrition, and life skills.

960 Producer Groups have been mobilised, producing nutritious crops, fruits and vegetables for families and for sale in local markets. The groups receive agriculture support, such as climate resilient seeds. Through action learning centres they gain skills, including growing vegetables on raised beds to prevent crop loss due to flooding, and reintroduction of 'neglected' nutritious crops like sweet potato. In addition to learning farming techniques, the groups receive training on child feeding and cooking demonstrations from nutrition promoters.

Malnutrition remains highest among the poorest households and distributing seeds or small livestock is a meaningful way of helping establish a sustainable livelihood and source of food. The poorest families have received sweet potato vines to increase their access to nutritious food sources. Sweet potato was once a common breakfast or snack but it started to lose popularity despite being nutritious.

"Sweet potato cultivation is very easy, the production cost is low but the yield is high. If there is no rice at home we boil and eat sweet potatoes. Besides keeping us full for a long time, sweet potatoes provide adequate nutrition and an opportunity to make some money by selling the surplus."

- Mst Morium, a BleNGS participant.

ABOVE RIGHT: A facilitator in the BleNGS project shares life skills with an Adolescent Girls Club to increase their awareness and knowledge. ©2021 Himalay Joseph Mree/World Vision



Results

- The proportion of women achieving a Minimum Diet Diversity (MDD) has increased by 12 percentage points, from 46% to 53%.
- Child feeding and caring practices have improved. The proportion of young children achieving a minimum acceptable diet was poor at the start of BleNGS. There was a 5 percentage point increase at project midline, from 12% to 19% in line with the target set by the project.
- Close to 70,000 pregnant and breast-feeding women receive regular and timely home visits by nutrition promoters. During the first 1,000 days, a mother receives 12 support home visits from a CNP. There has been a remarkable increase in knowledge and practice on appropriate pregnancy and post-natal care. Pregnant women are taking iron-folate tablets, attending the antenatal check-ups, taking recommended rest and eating nutritious food.
- 62,000 farmers have been mobilised, trained and produce bio fortified rice which is enriched with zinc, an important nutrient. 5,000 of them are also growing zinc rich lentils. These crops help the family's nutrition while surplus brings in extra income. Over 44,000 adolescent girls are actively participating in peer-to-peer clubs and awareness sessions.
- Thanks to MenCare, women's decision-making has improved. The proportion of women participating in decision-making on nutrition for their families has increased remarkably, from 23% to over 60%. And decision-making on use of family income increased from 47% to 57%.
- Six nutrition coordination committees are fully functioning and meet regularly at regional levels.



Conclusion

Communities and families have been positively impacted by the work BleNGS has done with them, which effectively integrated multiple sectors - health, agriculture, livelihood support and local governance. The aim of improving nutrition in women, girls and children has been achieved, along with improving overall household food security.

Using a mix of direct nutrition services and community actions to influence social norms, and enabling access to nutritious food through Producer Groups and bio-fortified crops, has had a big impact on nutrition outcomes. MenCare too has been transformative: real changes have taken place as more women take part in income generation activities, local development initiatives and decision-making at household and community level. Government-led nutrition coordination committees, which have been supported by BleNGS, are now critical post-project mechanisms.

Challenges and solutions

Activities are implemented through group approaches. These were impacted by Covid lockdowns, as communities could not meet in groups for a while during the third year of the project. The fourth year was 'catch up' and now all targets are back on track. Interaction with communities suffered during lockdown - except for home visits by nutrition promoters, who were able to continue. Smaller groups of farmers were later able to meet safely until more community interaction was appropriate. While project activities and targets are on track, the intensity of follow up, mentoring and support was derailed and that is a key focus of the project in its current final year.

Next Steps

BleNGS is in its final year, which is mostly consolidating all the achievements of the last four years for sustainability. Mentoring community groups and follow up by coordinating committees are now the main focus.

Project partners, led by the Institute for Development Studies, are planning the final evaluation. They will look at understanding how different approaches, including nutrition promoters, Producer Groups and MenCare, work, as well as producing a qualitative assessment of Community Clinics to explore the impact of BleNGS support.

OPPOSITE: Fulesa (with daughter Tabassum and husband Afzal) was married at 15 and took on a traditional household role. Afzal was impacted by the MenCare sessions on family-dream visioning, work distribution, and joint decision-making in the BleNGS project, Bangladesh, and has helped Fulesa to achieve her dream of studying for a degree, and is progressing towards his own career. ©2022 World Vision



Kohinoor's Full story

While her responsibilities have not changed, Kohinoor Begum, 29, is now a lot more confident about managing any challenge that comes her way. With a husband reluctant to run the family of six, Kohinoor and her mother-in-law took on all the responsibilities of the household management.

Kohinoor raised chickens and ducks at home and worked as a day labourer in other people's farms to support her family. But her earnings were never enough. Kohinoor has a hearing and speech impairment which made her situation even worse.

In 2021, she received various seeds, including radish, carrots, spinach, long beans, sweet pumpkins, red amaranth, as well as training in modern vegetable cultivation from the project. Kohinoor made BDT 2,750 from selling the first produce from her garden. The family now also has a constant supply of vegetables to meet their nutritional needs. In 2022, two goats joined her livestock. She also received them from BleNGS project.

With a commitment to serve the most vulnerable groups, the BleNGS project enrolled Kohinoor, a resident of Jamalpur's Naya Charpara village, as a participant. Considering her needs, the project customised the training sessions and included her mother-in-law Jorina Begum to support her.

ABOVE: Kohinoor Begum, pictured above and on the cover, working in her vegetable garden. Kohinoor has received livelihood support from the BleNGS project - see above for her full story. ©2021 World Vision

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"BleNGS is the first project that has provided such support to Kohinoor," said Jorina. "Kohinoor has three children, aged between 13 and two years. During her first two pregnancies, Kohinoor and her babies were very weak. But because of the support we have received, she and her baby were much healthier during her third pregnancy," said Jorina, adding, "The project also linked us with the community clinic so Kohinoor received regular checkups as well as iron and folic acid supplements easily."

The project has supported many families like Kohinoor's to get disability cards known as the "Golden Citizen Card", as well as connected them with government's safety net programmes.

Kohinoor is much happy now. She loves her two goats so much and one of them is pregnant now, said the mother-in-law, interpreting Kohinoor's gestures.

To date a total of 1,283 people with disabilities have received similar support under the project.

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