



## Speaker Summary Note

**Session:** South Asia

**Speaker:** A.M.M. Shawkat Ali  
Former Secretary of Agriculture, Bangladesh

**Title:** Leveraging Agriculture Better for Improved Nutrition and Health in South Asia

### 1. Introduction

In achieving the above objective, the priority actions for the key players like policy makers, farmers, private sector, civil society, academia and media may differ across the South Asian region. However, there is a commonality that arises from the overriding need to address the issues like food security, nutrition and health poverty through appropriate linkages to agriculture. This is because food, nutrition and health insecurity persist in varying degree in the countries of the region. The comments reflect Bangladesh situation.

### 2. Priorities for action by policy makers

Till date, agricultural policy makers emphasized more on higher productivity of staples food like rice and wheat and less on crop diversification and access of the poor to a more diversified food items. Much less attention is also paid to marketing of produce across different parts and assuring a reasonable price for consumers as well as producers.

For a country like Bangladesh to arrest shrinking lands for agriculture, can the agricultural land loss be regulated? If so by what means? As regards technology, more attention needs to be paid to affordable use especially in low and medium growth areas. The other areas include:

- Removing institutional barriers common in public delivery system involving such areas as improved coordination, effective and result oriented monitoring and taking timely and corrective actions;
- Educating farmers on the use of new technologies to achieve economy and efficiency in fertilizer and water;
- Attention to removing the gap in policy formulation and farmers' field experience;
- Use of improved information technology for dissemination of extension and market prices;
- Updating and disseminating soil health related messages; and
- More attention by policy makers to institutional strengthening of public food distribution system which is pro-poor and free from malpractices.
- Forging effective partnership with private sector.
- Public awareness campaign on diversified dietary intake, in particular, emphasizing sources of cheaper agricultural produce as a source of health nutrition security.

### **3. Priority actions for farmers**

Effective farmers' organization is virtually nonexistent. Consequently, they have poor bargaining capacity being forced to sell produce immediately before or after harvest when there are falling prices. This calls for proactive support to farmers in building up farmer-led marketing as well as storage and preservation facilities. In this, the state has a responsibility. Farmers also need to have a farmer-led extension system which is inclusive. The existing system is top down and public delivery system is divided across different entities.

### **4. Priority actions for private sector**

In stabilizing agricultural input and output prices, the private millers and traders need to develop strategies to provide reasonable incentive to farmers. The elements of the strategy include:

- Timely procurement and supply;
- Farmers confidence-building measures by developing a mechanism of contract growing method;
- Grading and packaging of produce;
- Play a pro-active role in assuring sale of safe food items, and
- Implement corporate social responsibility for farmers' welfare.

### **5. Priority actions by civil society**

The prioritized areas for actions are listed below:

- Organizing information dissemination seminars/workshops for all the key actor involved in building up sustainable linkages of agriculture to nutrition and health;
- Closely monitor the situation to provide necessary feed back to policy makers, farmers, private sector, academia and media; and
- Assist the policymakers and implementing agencies in sustained actions to achieve the objective.

### **6. Priority actions for academia**

- Take actions as appropriate to strengthen field research programme rather than pure academic research;
- Timely updating of research data; and
- Avoid repetitive research;

### **7. Priority actions for media**

- Providing adequate space and time on agricultural production, sale price, availability and safety of products drawing on field data including international market situation;
- Assure reliability of the data used, the quality of analysis, conclusions drawn and remedial measures;
- Play a more proactive role enabling policy makers to make informed policy decision; and
- Act as an alternate monitoring outlet.

### **8. Actions not mentioned elsewhere**

The mechanism of regional food security to be instrumented through SAARC Food Bank needs to be functionally effective. The options for international reserve of foodgrains may also be explored.