

IUBAT CPR Monograph
on
Benchmarking the Nutritional Status of Women in the Tongi-Ashulia Road Slums

NEWS RELEASE

Poor nutrition and use of harmful substances threatens public health

Dhaka August 29, 2010

On the occasion of the publication of its 7th research monograph, the Center for Policy Research (CPR) of International University of Business Agriculture and Technology (IUBAT) organized a Launching Ceremony at the VIP Lounge of the National Press Club on August 29th. The presentation was led by monograph authors Prof Dr John Richards, Member of the IUBAT Advisory Council from Simon Fraser University and Prof Dr Karen Lund, Chair, IUBAT College of Nursing; visiting professors to IUBAT from Vancouver, Canada. It was moderated by the university Vice-Chancellor Prof Dr M Alimullah Miyan and Dr ASA Masud was the designated commentator. The ceremony was attended by senior academicians, journalists, nutrition and health experts.

The monograph “Benchmarking the Nutritional Status of Women in the Tongi-Ashulia Road Slums” involved a detailed survey, conducted by the IUBAT College of Nursing students, of nutrition conditions and purchasing choices among women in shanty communities of Uttara over the past two years. Speakers stated that poor nutrition due to unbalanced diet accompanied by frequent use of harmful substances by the impoverished community in slum areas is a growing threat to public health in the country.

The study marks the beginning of a long-term research project on nutritional issues by this non-government university. IUBAT has published 6 earlier monographs on different aspects of the socio-economic situation in Bangladesh.

Part of the survey used a World Health Organisation (WHO) instrument for assessing diet quality. Dr Richards observed that over 6 % of diets were “risky”; a large majority of 89 % were “fair”; 5 % were “good” and none were rated “excellent”. Most women consumed adequate calories, mostly from rice. Most also consumed adequate sources of protein, from meat or pulses. However, diets were seriously lacking in fruit/vegetables and dairy products.

- Only 12 % were consuming sufficient quantities of dairy products. Milk is one of the main sources of calcium; crucial for bone maintenance in older women and bone formation in children.
- Only 32 % consumed sufficient fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables supply a wide variety of necessary micronutrients. Without these micronutrients people experience many health problems including weakened ability to fight disease.

- Surprisingly 38 % consumed excessive servings of foods high in fat and sugar content. Excessive consumption of fats and sugars is associated with a high incidence of heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

Over the last five years, there has been a great deal of inflation and volatility of food prices. The most notable problem was the spike in world cereal prices in 2008. Between 2005 and 2009, the prices in Dhaka of the following increased by over 100 percent: potato, lentil, powdered milk, and beef. Over these years, most other basic food prices increased by more than the rate of inflation in Bangladesh.

Food price inflation and volatility has probably had a negative impact on quality of nutrition among the families of these women. People may have abandoned certain foods whose prices have risen dramatically but, lacking basic information about nutrition, may not have chosen suitable substitutes. Faced with high prices of rice, a staple food, families may have reduced purchases of fruits and vegetables.

The survey assessed other aspects of nutrition, including quality of water used for drinking and consumption of tobacco and betel nut.

Untreated tap water creates potential risks of intestinal diseases. Pipes are often broken or tampered with, allowing entry of contaminants to the water supply. Two thirds of those sampled used untreated tap water. Only one third protected their families by using either boiled tap water or deep tube well water for drinking purposes.

Prolonged regular use of tobacco and betel nut is associated with a variety of cancers. Tobacco is the most important cause of mouth, throat and lung cancers. Among countries of South Asia, the World Health Organisation has estimated mortality rates for cancer to be highest in Bangladesh, closely followed by Nepal and Myanmar. The rates in the other South Asian countries were substantially lower. Among the women surveyed, over half chewed paan regularly; two thirds of their husbands smoked.

The prices of tobacco and paan in Bangladesh are very low relative to other countries. This fact contributes to the very high rates, by international standards, of use of these products.

The survey tried to assess whether public programs were effective in improving nutrition among these families.

- Literacy seems to have a large effect on whether women choose to chew paan. Only one third of the women said they could read and write. Paan use among this group was less than half that among women who could not read.
- Women who reported receiving personal health advice from a traveling health worker were more likely to use safe drinking water and had somewhat higher quality average diets.
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Poor nutrition and use of harmful substances such as tobacco and betel nut is responsible for up to one third of disease worldwide. In conclusion, Dr's Richards and Lund stated

that the report supports the idea that well designed public health programs and continuing focus on government initiatives to achieve universal primary education are improving nutrition and overall health among low-income groups.

Dr ASA Masud commented extensively on the monograph and congratulated the authors, the College of Nursing and the IUBAT CPR for making an important contribution to our understanding of nutritional health in Bangladesh. The audience participated in a lively discussion following the presentation and comments. In his Presidential speech Prof Dr Miyan spoke about the responsibility of universities to involve themselves in critical issues of their local communities. He emphasized the importance of good nutrition to health and its direct connection to economic prosperity and appreciated the substantive research work being carried out by the College of Nursing. (The monograph can be downloaded from www.iubat.edu/cpr)