

## Preventing ill-health through balanced meals

The Washington-based Worldwatch Institute, in one of its monographs on the 'global epidemic of malnutrition' about a decade ago, noted that Bangladesh was one of the very few countries in the world where children have been getting shorter than their parents. It blamed the grain-focussed agriculture of the 'Green Revolution' initiated in the 1960s, which encouraged farmers to go for as many as three rice crops a year and forget about growing lentils or pulses. So, while people at large became very rice-secure, availability of lentils, known as poor man's protein, dwindled. This, according to the researchers, impacted on the growth of children -- the overwhelming numbers in the poor bracket -- whose access to high quality proteins like fish and meat, eggs and milk, became all the more precarious. Today, although awareness about balanced meals has been growing, there is still a palpable crisis in human health due to poor nutrition in Bangladesh. A 2008 UNICEF report reveals that in Bangladesh about 46 per cent of babies under five were shorter than they should be for their age, 15 per cent were too thin and 40 per cent were underweight. Other reputed organisations also support the fact that widespread malnourishment in Bangladesh is undeniable and it begins in the womb, with underfed mothers giving birth to underweight, weak, babies struggling to survive. The potential of the human resource is thus nipped in the bud. Nothing less than a national movement is required, to educate the poor and rich alike about what constitutes a balanced diet, as well as demand that enough of these essential foods are accessible and affordable for all.

Health directorate officials last year said that the government was planning to appoint nutritionists in public hospitals. It may have some merit, but the fact is, the state of the entire nation's diet is quite deplorable and has to be addressed in a sustained manner by the country's nutritional policy makers. Bangladesh's solely grain-based, food-for-education and work, may be a step in the right direction, but it does need to be enhanced with enough of the other essentials that have to go into a balanced diet, a pre-requisite for building a robust human resource. If policy makers recognise the links between diet and disease they can approach the issue of food security with reasonable care and intelligence to ensure that the quality of the human resource improves in the near future.

Over 80 per cent of the disease burden in poor countries like Bangladesh is said to be due to malnourishment and poor hygiene. To address this intricately interlinked problem, nothing less than a multi-pronged approach would do. Coordinated and complementary efforts by all -- government, non-government and other stakeholders in the health and education sectors -- are called for. If the thousands of non-government organisations (NGOs) operating in Bangladesh were mobilised to disseminate the correct information on diet-based primary health care for all -- mothers, babies, and other members of the family -- half the battle would be won as the nation would begin to become healthier and more productive.

Some NGOs have already been encouraging their target groups to raise poultry and grow vegetables. Such activities have helped many overcome night blindness, a Vitamin A-deficiency disease which is still quite common among Bangladesh's poor. All dedicated development activists have consistently been stressing the importance of a people's diet in both overcoming and preventing the 'impoverishment of the human material'. If the decision-makers applied their minds to this grave truth with enough seriousness, healthier and more productive generations would not be far behind.