

# Better together:

*collaborating to tackle malnutrition in Bangladesh*



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*To reduce micronutrient deficiencies and improve access to safe, affordable nutrition for all Bangladeshis, the country's Scaling Up Nutrition Business Network (SBN) has worked hard to leverage partnerships with key government stakeholders, and help them work towards meeting national nutrition priorities.*

Improving nutrition is critical in Bangladesh, where the [Global Nutrition Report](#) states that child stunting is 31% and anaemia in women is almost 40%. Since joining SBN in July 2019, the People's Republic of Bangladesh has been resolutely committed to working closely with the government to support small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in their efforts to tackle malnutrition. Making up almost 70% of all food-related businesses, SMEs form the backbone of the food supply system for the vast majority of Bangladeshis. "SBN strategically supports SMEs through its partnership with the government, to strengthen the capacity of SMEs and enable them to revamp their supply, distribution, and services of nutritious, safe and affordable food," explains SBN Bangladesh's Coordinator, Syed Muntasir Ridwan.

## Supporting small for a big impact

According to Syed, there is no common framework regarding public-private partnerships on nutrition, which has led to mutual mistrust and sensitivity. Although it has had to tread carefully and work to build trust among different stakeholders, SBN Bangladesh's priority has been to provide critical support for SMEs, and brokering strategic partnerships with government entities has been key to this effort. "Partnerships with government ministries and trade bodies can significantly influence and foster wider change through the whole value chain," Syed reveals. "The adoption of business-friendly policies enables SMEs to flourish and reach their full potential."

*"SBN Bangladesh aims to empower the private sector through leveraging multi-stakeholder support to transition towards a food system that leads to economic, health, and environmental sustainability."*

Syed Muntasir Ridwan,  
SBN Bangladesh Coordinator

One SBN activity has been the creation of an SME platform at the sub-national level, through a collaboration with the National Association of Small and Cottage Industries of Bangladesh (NASCI) and the Chamber of Commerce. As the apex trade body for SMEs, NASCI has the capacity to create sub-national committees, and has also contributed to the health and nutrition of Bangladeshis by building the capacity of its 3,000 members, and connecting them with local and national technical and financial service providers.

At the end of 2020, SBN Bangladesh and NASCI hosted five workshops, each with 23-30 SMEs and 20 stakeholders in attendance. The aim was to better understand how the SMEs were affected by COVID-19, their general challenges, and to demonstrate their options for growth and development. The workshops served to promote understanding of what additional support SMEs need to grow and move forward, and contribute towards improving access to affordable, safe, and nutritious food.

The entrepreneurs involved saw this as a unique opportunity for growth, to sustainably expand their market to benefit both their businesses and consumers by improving their products' nutritional value. The group of entrepreneurs





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most engaged with this effort were women, many of whom have ambitious plans for their enterprises and the impact they could have on nutrition within their communities. As such, the SME platform aims to have at least 50% women entrepreneurs as SBN members in the sub-national SBN committees. SBN Bangladesh is also working with NASCIB and its partners to develop a women-only community within their network to promote gender equality and address the specific challenges female entrepreneurs face, such as access to finance and safety concerns in transporting their products.

## Pushing hard for progress

Bangladesh's regulatory environment is relatively complicated, leading to high levels of non-compliance by SMEs. In addition, the regulatory bodies lack adequate technical and

human resources to monitor food safety across Bangladesh. To eliminate these barriers, SBN Bangladesh has been working with the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), and other key partners to provide capacity building for regulatory bodies, such as the Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA), and ensure that SMEs have access to simpler information and certification mechanisms.

SBN Bangladesh's collaboration with the Ministry of Industries, for example, has facilitated the connection of SBN members with relevant ministries and civil societies who are well-positioned to provide long-term support and technical assistance. For example, through their connection with other government agencies, such as the Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA) and the Bangladesh National

Nutrition Council (BNNC), the network can encourage policy-level advocacy and ensure easy access to any material produced. A cooperation agreement has been signed with BFSA which will endorse and validate a food safety curriculum developed by SBN Bangladesh, WFP, and GAIN, to aid individuals, businesses, and organisations in consuming and producing nutritious and safe food.

To increase the availability of local technical support for SMEs, SBN Bangladesh is also collaborating with research and academic institutions, including the Institute of Nutrition and Food Science (INFS) at Dhaka University, and Bangladesh Agriculture University's (BAU) Food Engineering Department. These collaborations are working to improve access to food safety and nutrition knowledge for SMEs. In addition, involving these organisations in project development helps build the capacity and skillset of the organisations themselves.

## Strategy for success

“SBN Bangladesh aims to empower the private sector through leveraging multi-stakeholder support to transition towards a food system that leads to economic, health, and environmental sustainability,” explains Syed, “and this has been one of our key strategies for success.” For example, Bangladesh has a very strong civil society movement, which SBN has been leveraging to raise awareness on nutrition with the business

community. SBN has also been working with its partners to integrate the role of the private sector in improving nutrition outcomes with a wide range of public organisations, including United Nations (UN) Nutrition, BNNC, research networks, academia, and development institutions. Moreover, SBN's Steering Committee in Bangladesh consists of 29 members, including representatives from key government, civil society, the UN, and private sector stakeholders, which has to align the interest of different cross-cutting groups across food systems. “Each partner has been involved in the development of the SBN Strategy, from the initial stages to its finalisation,” Syed adds. “SBN Bangladesh has also taken a systemic approach in linking the aspirations and interests of different partners with national nutritional priorities. It is vital that we tap into the strengths, incentives, and interests of each of our partners to help us to reach our strategic objectives.”

## Plans for expansion

Looking ahead, SBN Bangladesh is identifying areas where it can leverage its partnerships to widen its positive impact. For example, while the government already mandates the fortification of multiple food products, compliance requirements with regards to loose/unpackaged products are low due to the lack of accountability. SBN Bangladesh is therefore planning on enhancing the capacity of all NASCIB members involved in the wholesale sector, on fortification and food safety.



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