

HAFL Master's Thesis Abstract

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Title: **Advancing Sustainable Healthy Diets in Bangladesh: Expert Interviews on Challenges, Opportunities, and the Way Forward**

Summary:

Background and aim: Since the 1970s, nutrition science has been expanding its scope to include various aspects of the food system and sustainability. This expansion has led to the consideration of sustainable food systems, which ideally produce sustainable healthy diets. Sustainable healthy diets are defined by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations and the World Health Organization as "*dietary patterns that promote all dimensions of individuals' health and wellbeing; have low environmental pressure and impact; are accessible, affordable, safe and equitable; and are culturally acceptable*". Bangladesh has made significant progress in improving the nutrition status of its population in the last 30 years. Yet it is undergoing a nutrition transition due to demographic and economic shifts in which undernutrition exists alongside rising obesity rates and micronutrient deficiencies. Approaching nutrition from the perspective of sustainable healthy diets is necessary to consider all the interrelated food systems components. This study aims to gather knowledge on the interpretation of sustainable healthy diets by experts working in the food system in Bangladesh, as well as discover the challenges, opportunities, perceived priority areas and strategies for advancing sustainable healthy diets in Bangladesh.

Methods: First, a narrative literature review on the features of sustainable healthy diets and the state of nutrition in Bangladesh was performed. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were then conducted with experts working in the food system in Bangladesh. A total of ten interviews were conducted, transcribed and analyzed qualitatively with a mixed deductive/inductive theme analysis.

Results: Sustainable healthy diets were interpreted as an emerging and important area by the participants. The concept was interpreted to include nutritional, environmental, social factors, as in the literature, and participants particularly focused on the dimensions of food security. However, knowledge and political factors were considered as well, which is a relevant finding of this study. Priority areas were perceived in many areas of the food system with associated challenges and opportunities perceived in food production, government and institutions, and the socio-cultural landscape. The environment (threat of natural disasters in particular) and the current market system were seen as challenge areas, with no opportunities identified. The rise of the IT sector was seen as an opportunity with no challenges mentioned. Food safety, stabilizing market



prices, increasing demand for local, nutritious foods, defining a 'new normal' within the COVID-19 crisis, and setting up a multi-stakeholder data system were other priority areas. Four strategies emerged from participants' responses: collaborating and engaging in systems level work with all levels of the food supply chain, simplifying and segmenting nutrition actions, adopting a learning and capacity-building culture, and creating massive awareness of harmonized nutrition messages.

Conclusions: This study contributes to the sustainable healthy diet discourse in the context of nutrition in Bangladesh. It provides an exploratory investigation into the experiences of challenges and opportunities and viewpoint of experts working in the Bangladesh food system on how to advance sustainable healthy diets. Further research should focus on the perspectives of supply chain actors such as food producers, consumers, and the private sector, and evidence should be created regarding the strategies surfaced in this study.

Keywords: Food Systems, Nutrition, South Asia, Qualitative Analysis, Food Security

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