



WHAT'S ON YOUR PLATE?

Empowering Bangladeshi Researchers through Innovative Methods

Twenty-seven master's students entered the conference room at Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) with anticipation. A few students knew what to expect, while the rest hoped their ability to learn quickly would help them thrive over the next few weeks. They were here in the department of agricultural economics and rural sociology to work with a team of researchers led by a University of Florida doctoral candidate, Kelly Davidson. During the research process, the students would learn novel methods in behavioral and experimental economics, increase their understanding of food-based nutrition, and gain valuable skills for future employment. Though only a few of these students (from two different universities in Bangladesh) had been hired as data collectors on previous INGENAES projects, all were eager to learn about data collection and gain field experience for the first time.

Seven days later, they each completed INGENAES's weeklong enumerator training and took on the professional role of data collector, or enumerator, on the INGENAES "food plate" research project. The study would measure the impact of two different nutrition interventions in Bangladesh by testing 1) the SHIKHA project food plate and 2) participatory training on nutrition

and the intra-household allocation of food. The SHIKHA food plate (designed by FHI360 with the support of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, BRAC, and the United States Agency for International Development) is a melamine plate printed with pictures of local food items and messages that encourage dietary diversity.



SHIKHA Food Plate with buffet items. ©INGENAES. Davidson 2016

To measure the impact of the plate and training interventions, 1,200 study participants were invited to dine at a lunch buffet on two occasions, where the students discreetly recorded their food choices. Some of the participants dined using a regular plate, while others served themselves on the SHIKHA food plate.



Enumerators attend training on the SHIKHA Food Plate's nutrition breakdown. ©INGENAES. Davidson 2016

The nature of the research required students to work as data recorders while acting as event coordinators and catering staff as they observed study participants' food choices during the two lunch buffets. At each meal, six students managed the set-up and implementation of the buffet and meal observation. Many of the study participants had never been to a buffet, so in addition to recording food choices, the enumerators were tasked with explaining the process, engaging with the participants to make them feel comfortable, and encouraging them to eat as much as they would like. Because this was a randomized controlled trial experiment, the students learned the importance of standardized research processes and project management.

The weeklong training had prepared the enumerators by engaging them in role-play activities to understand behavior, discussions about nutrients and food group classification, and agricultural production. The students offered critical feedback about key crops produced in the

regions of interest, local food items commonly consumed, and cultural sensitivities for approaching households to collect survey data throughout the process. In this way, the training process was as much a capacity building opportunity as it was an exchange of collaborative ideas to improve the research, with researchers learning from the students and vice versa. After completing training, students collected survey data at the buffet and in the field using electronic tablets – a first experience for all. Shaon, a master's student at BAU who took part in the pilot design, training, and data collection, said, “I felt empowered as an enumerator.... I can employ this experience in my own research.”

While the students arguably experienced the most capacity building, INGENAES also engaged with faculty and staff from the universities, BAU Extension Center, Suhsilan, and the Bangladesh Institute for ICT Development to strengthen connections across the institutions and develop their skills in project management, research design, and coordination. Being involved in the project on the organizational and implementation side meant professional development in the truest sense as they engaged with community members, strengthened their project management skills, managed budgets, and perfected their training techniques.

The research would not have been possible without the support of all of these individuals. By bringing together this multidisciplinary, multi-agency team, this project developed the capacity of current and future researchers while directly engaging with and strengthening institutions in Bangladesh. At the same time, INGENAES supported and facilitated evidence-based research investigating the effectiveness of nutrition-sensitive approaches and tools for engaging men and women. The project served as a unique platform to build capacity and bring together a number of institutions working for a common cause.

Note: The research will be published in early 2018 as a peer-reviewed journal article. Contact Dr. Davidson at kelly.davidson@ufl.edu for further information.

Cover photo: Researchers ready to observe meal choices at the buffet. © INGENAES. Davidson 2016

This publication was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development, USAID. The contents are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States government.



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