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The U.S. Government's Global Hunger & Food Security Initiative



CHANGE MAKERS IN BANGLADESH

Harnessing the Leadership, Creativity, and Passion of Young People

When Arzoo Ismail was asked to advise a new “Nutrition Club” at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) in Dhaka, she almost said no. “I hesitated a bit since I am not a nutritionist or food expert by profession. I do, however, have a passion for healthy eating and living and I try to live my life around such philosophies.”

Such is the mindset of many [Nutrition Club](#) members, most of them university and high school students who care deeply about the health and wellbeing of people in their community but have little formal training in nutrition. Through the clubs, student members are being trained and deployed as volunteer change agents that build nutrition awareness among schoolchildren, their parents, and peers through sharing their knowledge in urban and rural areas.

It is really exciting to know how I can be healthy and keep my community people healthier.”

- Mobarek Hossain, BAU Nutrition Club President

What started as a collaborative initiative between Bangladesh Institute of ICT in Development (BIID), and INGENAES in August 2016 with a handful of volunteers helping out at a nutrition expo (at the Institute of Nutrition and Food Science at Dhaka University) has blossomed into a very promising capacity development program for young development professionals. INGENAES and BIID wanted to establish these Nutrition Clubs to prepare youth to become the next agricultural development leaders. At the same time, the clubs would enable real health

improvements in urban and rural communities in Bangladesh; these communities continue to experience high levels of malnutrition, gender-biased norms that lead to unequal food distribution and consumption in the household – meaning more women and girls are undernourished – and food insecurity.

Many of the students involved in the clubs already recognize the critical situation that many in or around their communities are in regarding food insecurity and nutrition, so they want to help in some way. As the President of BAU’s club Mobarak Hossain shared, “I enjoy our teamwork and disseminating nutrition-based knowledge through our club. It is really exciting to know how I can be healthy and keep my community people healthier.”

The clubs provide space, guidance, and resources for these students to dialogue and learn more about nutrition issues while gaining and sharing knowledge to contribute to the main objectives of the Nutrition Clubs. The clubs aim to scale up standardized nutrition messages in a coordinated manner to the general people of Bangladesh and increase food security – for example, through promoting kitchen gardening. In urban areas specifically, the clubs aim to increase awareness on healthy eating and lifestyle and promote rooftop gardening as part of urban nutrition messaging. More broadly, they aim to eradicate undernutrition, discard gender-biased norms, and improve gender-equity in terms of food distribution and consumption at the household level.

The Nutrition Club model has gained momentum over the past two years especially after the successful Nutrition Olympiad hosted by BIID in 2017, which brought together eight Nutrition Clubs to engage with one another and compete in nutrition-themed learning events. That momentum has propelled BIID and university and high school collaborators to launch more and more clubs with over 2,000 volunteers in 17 clubs to date (March 2018).

If that doesn't speak clearly enough of the relevance and success of the initiative, its sustainability does. The clubs

have become so popular and valuable that students, school faculty and staff, and BIID staff have led and scaled up the initiative without INGENAES's financial support.

Shahid Akbar, CEO of BIID who conceived and then launched the initiative, explained, "I wish you could see the results of INGENAES through the Nutrition Club. Usually when any development project in Bangladesh is over, it is difficult to see any activities continues under that project, but for the Nutrition Club, INGENAES is over yet we are continuing and even scaling up."



BIID and the College of Home economics Nutrition Club organized a workshop on "Importance of Adolescent Nutrition" on 31st May, 31, 2018 in HEC Auditorium.

In fact, BIID has been integral in the success and growth of the clubs. BIID helps institutions establish the nutrition clubs through providing guidance, an action plan, and valuable training. Just as INGENAES originally helped strengthen BIID's institutional capacity in gender and nutrition integration in extension, BIID also provides

capacity building and leadership trainings for volunteers. These trainings prepare the institutions as a whole and the individuals doing the day-to-day planning and management of the nutrition clubs, teaching them to effectively manage their clubs, conduct community-based activities, and provide nutrition messages most relevant to the target

communities. Taking their support a step further, BIID encourages volunteerism and acts as a nutrition club partner at various events and programs by providing material needs like communication materials, T-shirts and food plates for the clubs. Overall, BIID helps the nutrition clubs through providing strategic as well as logistical support.

The thousands of members have truly taken ownership of the Nutrition Club mission; they have also unmistakably made the Nutrition Club work for their own capacity building goals and for the unique communities with which they engage. For example, many Nutrition Clubs have participated in training on basic nutrition knowledge, smart cooking and homestead gardening conducted by BIID or Helen Keller International, while others have taken that knowledge to the next step and established homestead or school gardens, like at the Imam Gazzali Girls School and College in Pabna and Bangladesh Railway Government School in Mymensingh.



Nutrition campaign “Wall Magazine” at BAU

[BAU Nutrition Club](#) has been an exceptional club model, winning the award for Best Nutrition Club at the 2018 Olympiad. To support the internal development of the club with a current member base of 200+ in a more structured manner, BAU Nutrition Club established their own secretariat within their university premises. The club has been persistent in terms of working towards building individual as well as collective capacities of the club members through promoting their skills and self-worth to grow a strong sense of responsibility towards their club and the community at large.

BAU Nutrition Club has initiated a variety of activities, including publishing the *Eat Well, Live Well* wall magazine, organizing essay contests, and implementing the concept of school gardening in a school-based Nutrition Club nearby. The underlying motto of this initiative was to connect the children of Railway Government High School with nature and help them learn more about the source of the food that they eat.

“The club certainly adds value to various stakeholders by sharing knowledge in effective ways. A valuable message can be lost if not communicated well. Hence, the seminars, workshops, campaigns, and other events we hold are designed to primarily raise awareness on healthy food habit and maintaining a healthy lifestyle in general. **We believe that if we are touching even one mind, we are nudging one family and the future of it with positive vibes.**”

- Arzoo Ismail, Nutrition Club Advisor

General Secretary of BAU Nutrition Club Ruhul Amin said, “I believe we could change the whole world if we change our ways of eating. As a part of that school gardening campaign, we inspired the children to go back home and educate their families about healthier food, their sources and how these sources could be accommodated within limited land resources. Some of the children actually took their lessons back to home and shared them with their family. We believe these small efforts prove highly effective to educate the community around.”

BAU Nutrition Club has time and again demonstrated their commitment towards bolstering nutrition awareness by reaching out to different audiences through club-wide campaigns.

“As a club, our main goal is to educate that part of the community who are yet to be educated about good nutrition and healthy lifestyle,” said Ruhul Amin, BAU Nutrition General Secretary.

These campaigns help unify members across institutions and contribute to their shared mission. A couple of campaigns organized by BAU were held right before the [2018 Nutrition Olympiad](#). The “Nutrition Drawing” campaign, held in three schools located in Dhaka, involved students aged 8-12 coming up with innovative painting conveying their understanding of good nutrition and healthy lifestyle.

The [#standagainstmalnutrition](#) photo contest campaign (below) involved Nutrition Club members coming up with innovative nutrition messages and convincing people from diverse walks of life to take a photo endorsing the message. The deep-rooted motive of this contest was to leave the beneficiaries with “food for thought” on good nutrition.

“Our experience with the community tells us that it has become a common practice to repeatedly educate that part of the community who are already aware of good and bad nutrition. But as a club, our main goal is to educate that part of the community who are yet to be educated about good nutrition and healthy lifestyle,” said Ruhul.



The #standagainstmalnutrition campaign organized by BAU Nutrition Club

Before that, the 2017 “Food Plate for All” campaign built nutrition awareness through promoting a standard food plate guide in urban and rural communities. The initiative disseminated nutrition messages and promoted standard diet behavior among the mass population. Through this campaign, food plates bundled with nutrition information were distributed to help people adopt healthy food habits. (A baseline survey of the users is currently being conducted which will be followed up with an end line survey. [The survey will be used to observe behavioral change and measure any diet improvements of users.](#) The

Nutrition Clubs are currently engaging their volunteers to carry out the campaign in their communities.)

As the student members gain greater knowledge, tools, and confidence in their own abilities, they are able to increase nutrition awareness in their communities. With guidance and support from the Nutrition Clubs, they are building the capacity of people to gain access to enough, quality food for every household member while making healthy, educated food choices that improve their nutrition and wellbeing in the long run.



One of the booths at the 2018 Olympiad

Indeed, students – the true drivers of change in their institutions and communities – are getting excited about nutrition. Students from the Department of Food and Nutrition, College of Home Economics (HEC) had already formed a nutrition club of their own before BIID extended their hands to foster cooperation. As a part of their nutrition club, they organize campaigns at HEC three times a year in which they provide customized nutrition tips to the participants based on height, weight, food habits, lifestyle, etc.

After the 2017 Nutrition Olympiad, the students decided to join hands with BIID to scale up their initiatives and take them to their local communities. Since then, the HEC Nutrition Club has been operating in full swing as an official part of the Nutrition Club network now fanning across Bangladesh. After bagging a couple of awards in the 2018 Nutrition Olympiad, HEC's club continues working on individual as well as the collective development of the 450+ club members.

Recently with guidance from BIID, HEC's club organized a workshop, "What's my Big Idea about Nutrition?" They sought to motivate the nutrition club members to set a vision for themselves towards ensuring a healthier community, and therefore grow a sense of ownership towards contributing to the "zero hunger" movement. The club now plans to shoulder the responsibility of a school-based nutrition club located in Joymantap in Singair Upazila where they will launch a series of workshops and activities directed towards changing the nutrition related behavior among adolescents in the community. HEC nutrition club

is just one example of the change that enthusiastic student all over the country are inspiring.

Eager to continue the momentum driving nutrition knowledge and change, a second Nutrition Olympiad was held in April 2018 to strengthen the Nutrition Club network and share knowledge and experiences across institutions. This time, 17 clubs participated with over 300 members taking part, preparing themselves to lead nutrition gains in agricultural development (left).

Shahin Afroz Bipasha, Olympiad participant and General Secretary of the Islamic University Nutrition Club reflected on the event, explaining, "My best experience after joining Nutrition Club Initiative has been attending the Nutrition Olympiad and anchoring the program....and acting in an awareness building presentation by our club. In the Olympiad I met many important people working in the nutrition sector too; altogether it was great!"

Emphasized by this year's motto, "Nutrition and Empowerment of Youth for a Healthy Nation", the Olympiad was an opportunity to realize several overarching goals. The platform served to: engage youth in the development and implementation of national policies and strategies related to improving nutrition in Bangladesh; foster the exchange of ideas and initiatives, and seek innovative solutions for the role of youth to improve nutrition in rural and urban areas (as well as learnings from other countries); build partnerships between youth and government, international and national organizations, academia and private sector actors for improved nutrition of children and youth; and strengthen the capacity of youth in nutrition leadership and skills and for deepening technical knowledge in food security and nutrition.



Shahid Akbar poses at a booth at the Olympiad



Food design competition entry at the 2018 Olympiad

The Olympiad included activities like skits, a food design competition (above), cooking competition, in addition to the stalls that individual clubs and organizations set up to demonstrate nutrition activities. Some 900 young

participants from the capital city Dhaka and other districts, government officials, representatives from international and national organizations, civil society, private sector, academia, and media participated. This Olympiad brought the voices of the youth to the national policy development process and implementation, serving as a space to foster direct dialogue between youth and the government, practitioners, academia, and the private sector.

By the end of 2018, the goal is to establish 2000 clubs in addition to the existing 17 clubs with partners, including BIID and the Ministry of Post, Telecom and ICT Division. To this end, three more clubs just formed: clubs at the Maple Leaf International School (March 23, 2018) and the Government College of Home Economics (April 2, 2018), as well as the Nutrition Awareness Club at Dhaka (March 30, 2018). The ICT Division has expressed interest in introducing eSolutions on nutrition through Nutrition Clubs at 1900 schools under Sk. Russel Digital lab of the ICT Division spread all over the country.

Moreover, the original Nutrition Club concept note and standard operating procedures were recently modified to facilitate self-organized groups to start clubs. This was after BIID identified that the major problem with school/college/university-based clubs was the institutional bureaucracy that often stagnated their formation and operations. Additionally, BIID modified the concept note to ensure inclusiveness of dropout students, underprivileged youths and disabled communities.

So what does the future look like as Nutrition Clubs gain more traction and students continue to gain enthusiasm and, in turn, initiative? As Arzoo explained, “Sharing knowledge is about creating more knowledge. In the future, we would like to see our club in international platforms sharing success stories of different communities the club engages with.”

Story by Katy Mosiman and Shahid Akbar.

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More info on Nutrition Clubs: <http://www.nutritionclub-bd.net/>

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