

Four city working groups joining forces to improve food system in the Metropolitan Area

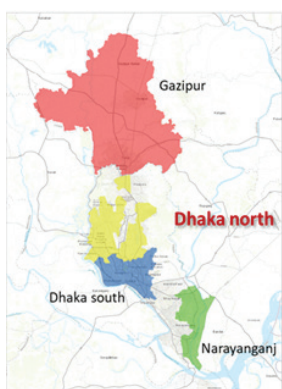
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রিপোর্টটির বাংলা এডিশনটি পড়তে এই লিঙ্কে ক্লিক করুনঃ <https://cutt.ly/mNqLZXH>
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This 17th special edition focuses on the Food System City Working Groups: multistakeholder platforms formed in each of the four City Corporations (Dhaka North, Dhaka South, Gazipur, and Narayanganj) of the Dhaka Metropolitan Area (DMA) aiming to contribute to improved city-level food system governance. This special edition draws on a case study describing experiences and insights from these City Working Groups (CWGs).

Fragmented action to address food and nutrition issues

Dhaka is one of the largest and fastest growing megacities in the world and experiences pressing issues around food safety, malnutrition among the urban poor, inadequate functioning of market systems, and food loss and waste. In the DMA, each of the four City Corporations (CCs) experiences similar challenges when it comes to food and nutrition.



However, the food system issues manifest in different ways because of differences in size of the cities, and different contexts such as available space or population characteristics and resources. Even so, these issues show how the current food system is failing the citizens of the DMA, some more than others, and emphasise the need to strengthen governance for food and nutrition security.

Coordinated action is needed to deal with the various food system issues in an integrated way, and ensure that actors and sectors needed to contribute to change are engaged. In short: there is a need for coordinated action from a systemic perspective. Multiple institutions around food and nutrition exist, but they often work in a fragmented way and there is no

policy or strategy at the city- or DMA-level to guide these efforts. This raises challenges on how to feed Dhaka's growing urban population in a healthy and sustainable way, and how food system governance can be strengthened.

To address the need to improve food system governance in the DMA, four Food System City Working Groups (CWGs) have been set-up in each CC with support of the DFS project. These CWGs are multistakeholder platforms that discuss and analyse food system challenges, identify and prioritise action points at city level and develop joint plans and policy recommendations. The CWGs are led and chaired by the CEO of each CC.

City Working Groups: the case study

The CWGs are set-up to contribute to food system governance in their respective cities and the DMA as a whole. Food system governance is about decision-making processes in the food system, how these decisions are made and by whom. In addition, it also links to how these decisions are followed up by institutions at different levels that are involved in or affected by these decisions, for example through policies and regulations. The CWGs are platforms that aim to support these decision-making processes. The CWG case study aimed to document how the CWGs contribute to food system governance, which resulted in the following key insights:

The Food System CWGs are multistakeholder platforms in four city corporations that aim to support decision-making and action to improve the food system in their cities.

Insight 1: CWGs can help to better understand and address complex challenges

The CWGs are meeting on a 6-8 week interval and bring together a wide group of actors within each city; city officials from various departments,

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representatives from ministries and government agencies, non-government organisations (NGOs), community representatives and many others. By having this diverse group of actors around the table, CWG members can exchange information and perspectives around specific food issues. This is a valuable characteristic of the CWGs because it helps members to discuss issues such as food safety, functioning of fresh markets, nutrition among the poor or food loss and waste from different viewpoints and better understand the underlying causes and consequences of these issues.

These exchanges help the CWGs to create a better overview of pressing issues, who is doing what and where gaps are. These discussions then help the members to come to agreement on what issues should be prioritised and who can take which role. This level of exchange and coordination on food and nutrition issues did not exist at the city level before and creates a unique opportunity for CWG members to better align their work and share their resources – knowledge, staff, tools, funds – to come to joint action.

Insight 2: CWGs can help break the walls between sectors and actors

Another unique characteristic of the CWGs is that they bring actors of different levels around the same table. This means that community representatives can speak directly to the city ward councillors, representatives of fresh markets or other key decision-makers who are occasionally invited, such as the mayor or other city officials. Apart from connecting actors across levels within the CWG, the CWGs also provide a means to reach out to other levels (e.g. national government) and scales (e.g. other CWGs). Members of the CWGs highly appreciate these opportunities to share their perspective on food and nutrition issues and feel the CWGs creates an important platform to raise a strong and unified voice on what is needed to address these issues.

In addition, this diversity of stakeholders around the table provides a unique opportunity for non-government CWG members to speak to departments from different ministries – that are also members - simultaneously. This is not only useful for getting a better understanding of critical issues, but also to make the need for intersectoral collaboration explicit and to coordinate such collaboration by clarifying roles and responsibilities. As such, the CWGs can help break the siloes between different sectors and align stakeholders around a common cause.

The CWGs facilitate dialogue between different organisations from local to national level. This helps to create overview and understanding of key issues, and come to agreement on priorities for action.

Insight 3: CWGs can increase adaptability to the unique context of the city

Each CWG is established at the city-level, meaning that each group is able to develop its own focus, priorities and actions. Narayanganj set up activities to monitor food safety at hotels and restaurants and grade them

based on safety situation. In Dhaka North, a first awareness raising mobile court focused on food safety and the first pilots on urban gardening were set-up. The set-up of this mobile court is unique in its kind because it focuses on raising awareness and informing vendors on food safety and hygiene practices rather than fining them for malpractices. In Dhaka South the focus was on training poultry vendors on fresh markets. In Gazipur, amongst others, street food vendors were trained to improve food safety and hygiene practices and there is a higher focus on urban gardening due to its connectivity to the suburban peripheries.

While ministerial and sectoral plans are usually developed at the national level, these CWGs bring the opportunity to take into account the specific needs of each city and which stakeholders are needed to address those needs. With that, cities are much more capable to respond to what is happening in their cities' food system and adapt accordingly. In addition, learnings from the CWGs are being collected along the way, for example by organising learning visits from one city to another. This allows the CWGs keep developing and improving as a governance platform.

Insight 4: CWGs can provide a platform where inclusive decision-making takes place

CWGs offer a space that welcomes all types of stakeholders, from different organisations, backgrounds and perspectives. While these stakeholders enrich the discussions by bringing their ideas to the table, they can also participate in decisions made. Examples are the selection and prioritization of key issues, or the provision of input in city food charters that outline the key challenges, focus areas and vision for each city. The CWGs therefore provide a platform that can help to amplify different voices that – outside the CWG – may not be that powerful on their own. The diversity of members in the CWG offer not only space for inclusive decision-making, but also contribute to the adaptive capacity of the group – two characteristic that go hand-in-hand. An important note is also that if the CWGs wish to provide this platform, it is key to remain reflective on which perspectives are not yet represented or which other stakeholders might be invited to the CWG.

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Insight 5: CWGs can potentially contribute to long-lasting impact in the food system

One of the key strengths of the CWGs is that they are fully dedicated towards the cities' food system and initiate targeted action to address the issues in it. As such, the CWGs form a vehicle to make prompt decisions, mobilise action, engage with (new) partners in those activities, and make the coalitions grow bigger and wider. At the same time, the CWGs also developed an ongoing dialogue and long-term vision for what the food system in their cities should look like, and what strategies are needed to get there, as also reflected in their City Food Charters. Over time, and through close collaboration with the CCs, the CWGs are increasingly showing their potential to offer a decision-support structure to the CCs

regarding food in their cities.

However, the challenge is to strike a balance between implementing activities in the field and strategizing to anchor the CWGs into the existing governance landscape for long-term impact as their continuity is at stake after the DFS project ends. The CWGs point out the importance of leadership by the CCs, but also the need to develop a strategic plan with a clear role and mandate for the CWG within existing governance structures at city and national level. But, if they manage to do so, the CWGs can form a hub where knowledge development, partnering and action for a safe and sustainable city food system can be fostered.



The CWGs form a vehicle for prompt decision-making and collaborative action.

City Coordinators play a vital role in the process

Each of the CWGs is convened and facilitated by a DFS project staff; a city coordinator. The role of the city coordinators has been crucial in bringing together stakeholders and setting up the CWGs. Tasks ranged from organising the practicalities and setting the agenda together with the CC to building relations with members to increase commitment and organise learning. One of the core capacities of these city coordinators is their previous experience in working with the government, their know-how of protocols and procedures, and how to engage key stakeholders in the learning journey of the CWGs. These city coordinators have been, and still are, key catalysts to spark and follow-up on action in each of their CWG.

Recommendations

The emerging insights provide a starting point for reflection within each of the CWGs. This can help them to identify their strengths and discuss what practices can strengthen their contribution to a safe and sustainable food system. In addition, other cities might take these insights as an inspiration to start CWGs in their own cities and join Dhaka's learning journey.

Based on the findings and reflections on those findings, a number of cross-cutting recommendations for future CWG development emerge:

To convene and engage:

✓ **Ensure for someone to take the lead**

The role of the DFS project in initiating and anchoring the CWGs has been vital. Having a leading party – this could be the city corporation, a development partner or another organisation – is necessary to flag the need to put food on the urban agenda and mobilise and engage key stakeholders.

✓ **Start where the energy is and what resonates to keep members engaged**

A common denominator in all CWGs is that they linked up to the existing priorities of the CCs and existing work by the CWG members. Rather than starting from scratch, the CWGs tried to bring together what was already done by their members and address issues that matter to them to create and maintain their engagement.

✓ **Embrace knowledgeable and experienced convenors as key catalysts to spark action**

Each of the city coordinators had professional experience in working with the government and development partners. This made them valuable facilitators of links within the CWGs as well as between the CWG and other institutions. For these convenors to take this role and grow in it, capacity building and ongoing reflection are key.

To consolidate and sustain:

✓ **Engage the government from the very start, it takes time**

Building a close relation with the local government was mentioned as key factor to increase legitimacy of the CWG. In addition, the presence of a focal person in the government who is approachable and has a direct link with decision-makers was considered essential to organise practicalities around the CWG meetings.

✓ **Build strong links between CWG, City and National level**

It is important for the CWG to become an embedded structure within the existing institutional landscape with a clear role and mandate, and strong links to the city government and national government.

✓ **Formalise and strategize for the long-term, alongside short-term action**

Whereas the development and implementation of activities can help to motivate and engage stakeholders, a longer-term strategy is needed to guide the group towards a bigger vision. In addition, a long-term strategy is key to buy time as a group to find and reinforce their role as governance platform and contribute to systemic impact.



Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

FAO Representation in Bangladesh

Road#18, House#74, Block J, Banani, Dhaka 1213, Bangladesh

Email: FAO-BD@fao.org

Twitter: www.twitter.com/FAOBangladesh

Facebook: www.facebook.com/FAOBangladesh

www.fao.org/bangladesh/en/