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Bangladesh: identifying opportunities to improve assistance addressing risk and vulnerability in Cox's Bazar

OVERVIEW OF STUDY

An ECHO-funded technical assistance facility, managed by the World Food Programme (WFP), aimed to explore how social protection systems can be strengthened in fragile and forced displacement contexts, with a view to contributing to the global learning agenda on when and how these can be used to address humanitarian needs in a more cost-effective, efficient and predictable way.

Short-term technical assistance was provided to improve programme design or implementation in nine countries facing protracted crises¹. Each assignment tackled a priority theme identified collectively by humanitarian and development partners, complementing and catalysing efforts by national governments and their partners to enhance the well-being of chronically poor or vulnerable populations, those affected by crises, those living in conflict situations and/or refugees. The assignments focused on linkages between humanitarian

action and social protection: this included the identification of good practices and recommendations for improved institutional coordination, knowledge transfer, and delivery systems such as information systems or payment mechanisms. Projects were designed and managed in-country by a partnership of WFP, FAO, ECHO, UNICEF, DFID and World Bank representatives, in consultation with the government and other agencies according to the country context. One partner served as the lead in each country.

This briefing note summarises the technical assistance in Bangladesh. Here we mapped the landscape of safety net programmes for the Bangladeshi population in Cox's Bazar, identifying the extent of linkages between humanitarian action and the national social protection system, good practices for addressing vulnerabilities stemming from natural hazards, the refugee influx and idiosyncratic risks, gaps and bottlenecks. We identified opportunities for the government and UN agencies to collaborate

¹ The nine countries are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Somalia and Uganda.



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and deliver assistance more efficiently and effectively, including knowledge transfer between actors/schemes, consolidating programmes, adapting or scaling up existing programmes during crises, strengthening systems, and improving coordination.

COUNTRY CONTEXT

Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters. This combined with high poverty rates threatens livelihoods and drives inter-generational poverty and malnourishment. The importance of social protection in enabling the poor and vulnerable to better manage risks is well understood and the government is strongly committed. A portfolio of safety net programmes have contributed to poverty reduction efforts², however significant overlaps, gaps in coverage and constraints to scalability currently limit the system's ability to foster resilience to shocks³. The government's National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) guides reforms supported by a range of development partners. This includes strengthening delivery systems, improving targeting, and rationalising existing schemes, moving towards a 'life cycle approach'⁴ to effectively tackle risks. An action plan has been developed to address covariate shocks.

Cox's Bazar district has some of the highest rates of poverty and malnutrition in Bangladesh. The population is vulnerable to recurrent weather-related shocks. The social protection system doesn't effectively address the risks that households face, creating humanitarian needs met through parallel (governmental or international) channels. Since 2017 this district also hosts thousands of Rohingya refugees displaced from Myanmar⁵, straining host communities. Government safety nets are established in the district and aid agencies are also providing assistance to citizens in the affected areas. There is interest to understand how the social protection system could better meet needs of citizens and how humanitarian actions can better link with and complement this system.

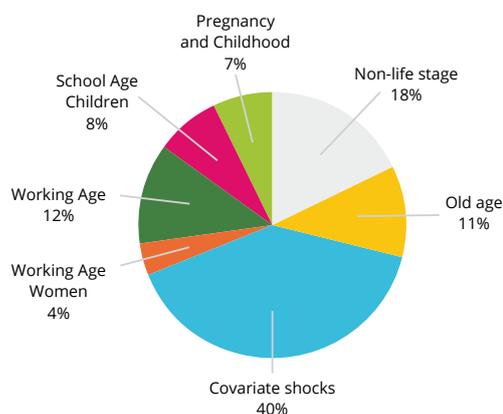
RESEARCH METHOD

This assignment, led by WFP and FAO, complements the abovementioned efforts of the government and development partners to reform and strengthen social protection. It is aligned with the NSSS. A draft concept note and ToR developed by WFP were shared, and endorsed by partners in country. The multi-agency approach helped bring together organisations experienced in different aspects of social protection, from development and humanitarian spheres, to define common objectives. The Ministry of Finance's Economic Relations Division was consulted in its role as inter-ministerial coordinator.

A desk review (comprising national policies and strategies, social protection and humanitarian programme documents, evaluations and assessments) was complemented by consultations with relevant representatives of aid agencies and government in headquarters, Dhaka and Cox's Bazar⁶. Data was used to map and compare social protection and humanitarian programme features (selection criteria, type and value of transfer, frequency of payment, size, budget) and to analyse the opportunities and constraints for strengthening collective efforts to address needs of vulnerable populations. Developing this shared understanding of issues and actions can allow mobilisation towards a common goal in future.

FINDINGS

Social protection spending classified by life-cycle stage



There are a range of opportunities to support the national social protection system to address risks of vulnerable citizens in Cox's Bazar. Encouragingly, some have already

- 2 Poverty incidence fell from 48.9 percent in 2000 to 40 percent in 2005, 31.5 percent in 2010 and 24.3 percent in 2016.
- 3 For example there are 145 nationally-funded programmes (reducing to 136 under NSSS) implemented by 23 ministries/departments and no information sharing mechanism. Programmes have low coverage and are badly targeted.
- 4 The life cycle approach promotes specific programmes to address risks that individuals face at different stages of the life cycle, ranging from free primary health care for infants to skills training for adolescents to unemployment benefits for working age adults to an old age pension for the elderly.
- 5 As of Dec 2017, more than 830,000 people were estimated to have crossed into Bangladesh.
- 6 In Dhaka this included UN resident coordinator; representatives of UNDP, UNICEF, WFP, FAO, World Bank, DFID, ECHO, EUD and the GoB's Cabinet Division. In Cox's Bazar it included representatives from aid agencies (Inter Sector Coordination Group, WFP, IOM, UNHCR, the Energy and Environment Technical Working Group and ACAPS) and GoB (Cabinet Division, Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW), Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (MoHFW), Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR), Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC), Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO), and the UP Chair of Sabrang Union.

been pursued by the GoB. Constraining factors are also identified which must be addressed if effective linkages are to be made.

Systemic data issues impede provision of an effective response and the design of a social protection approach:

There is a chronic lack of data to inform programming in several critical areas. While aid agencies perceive the refugee influx impacts negatively on host communities, there is little data available on the vulnerability of local populations pre- or post-crisis to substantiate this⁷. Agencies are not sharing programme data with government or coordination bodies. Information on government programmes is not structured systematically, with little evidence available to judge or compare programme performance. This limits analysis of who is most affected by the crisis, which programmes are effectively meeting needs or can be scaled up, and opportunities for consolidating assistance from humanitarian actors or ‘piggybacking’ on the social protection delivery system.

Implementing reforms planned under the NSSS is necessary to build a social protection system for addressing covariate shocks:

While there is progress towards some reforms at central level, little has changed in provision locally. System integration towards a lifecycle approach hasn’t happened and programmes continue to follow separate implementation. Targeting is not based on objective, life-stage criteria and is reliant on inconsistent application at the discretion of local ‘elites’. Priority is still given to programmes designed to address temporary food insecurity, rather than those investing in longer term resilience. Coverage of the poor remains low and transfer values are low in comparison to needs. Most programmes are not covered by the digital payment service reforms, and the MIS for managing data on and between programmes is not operational. Only a marginal reduction in the number of programmes means continued overlap of schemes. These issues mean schemes are not effectively addressing the risks poor and vulnerable households face in Cox’s Bazar. Realising the planned reforms will increase capacity of households to cope with disasters while strengthening system capacity to expand social protection in emergencies.

The socio-political environment in Bangladesh offers entry points for aid agencies to influence the changes needed:

The mode of governance in a country affects how policies are made and opportunities for non-state actors to influence reforms. The socio-political environment in Bangladesh and administrative changes taking place are providing opportunities for aid agencies to collaborate with government in defining, designing and implementing

social protection policy goals. Analysis suggests that the greatest opportunities for aid agencies to influence social protection policy from the perspective of bridging humanitarian action will be as a ‘knowledge broker’, using results of research and data from programmes to highlight problems and new solutions, and as technical partner, supporting implementation of agreed policy reforms.

It is feasible to adapt government programmes to respond to shocks, subject to further research: The government already responded to the impact of refugee displacement on host communities by increasing the budgets of social transfer programmes in affected Upazila⁸ and expanding assistance to new caseloads⁹. This demonstrates potential for institutionalising ‘shock responsive social protection’ in Cox’s Bazar and wider Bangladesh to address covariate risks. Further adaptations to the social protection system (such as vertical expansion of government schemes, or piggy-backing on aspects of the delivery system) will surely also be possible.

There are some issues. Firstly, data on vulnerability and scheme performance is needed to make any firm decisions on appropriate policy options. Secondly, expansion of government schemes is not informed by evidence of specific needs, while the total number of transfers in affected Upazila far exceeds the number of extreme poor. There are likely to be issues in the targeting approach that require further examination. Thirdly, scaling up programmes in disasters may risk overburdening local actors such as Union Parishads, undermining social protection performance. Subject to government buy in, aid agencies can support development of effective shock-responsive systems ex-ante, aligned to the NSSS, through research, technical assistance and capacity building.

Strategic and operational coordination between actors is needed to further this agenda: Aid agencies are directly providing transfers to citizens in affected Upazila, conceived and implemented in siloes. Agencies do not coordinate and assistance isn’t informed by joint needs analysis or any overall strategic approach. There is inadequate collaboration with local government officials (e.g. UNOs¹⁰). Provision of humanitarian transfers is not informed by national policy or by agencies’ own social protection and development experts. Coordination between local and national teams and between humanitarian actors and government is needed at central and local levels.

7 UNDP, UN Habitat and UNOPS have commissioned a series of five sector studies to fill this gap, to be published in 2019.

8 Including VGD; Old Age Allowance; Disability; Gratuitous Relief and Test Relief.

9 In Ukhiya it is estimated that there was a 14% increase in the number of households supported between 2017 and 2018, and an 32.6% increase in Teknaf.

10 Despite having responsibility for oversight and coordination of donor-funded assistance at Upazila level, UNOs had not been consulted on priority needs and had no information on aid agency distributions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the following, to link humanitarian action and social protection:

- Undertake analysis of vulnerabilities and of programme impacts in Ukhiya and Teknaf upazilas in Cox's Bazar, to provide data informing design of targeted transfers for addressing risks and shocks, including consolidating existing programmes and 'shock responsive social protection'.
- Modify approaches of aid agencies to contribute to achieving the priority social protection reforms identified under the NSSS, such as improving programme operations, piloting innovations and highlighting best practices which can be evaluated by government.
- Build coordination between aid agencies and government officials, to enable joint activities and build technical capacities within government in areas such as needs assessments, defining targeting, beneficiary registration, reporting and monitoring.
- Improve integration of the development and humanitarian divisions of aid agencies so that staff supporting the NSSS reform can advise on the design and implementation of transfer projects implemented in Cox's Bazar.
- Appoint an Upazila Development Coordination Officer funded by aid agencies. Responsibilities will include collecting and sharing information on aid programmes as well any support required by government officials; ensuring alignment of aid programmes with the NSSS; and sharing evidence of best practices from these programmes with officials.

NEXT STEPS

The technical assistance crystallises the vision for bridging humanitarian action and social protection in Bangladesh and roles for the government and its partners. While focusing on risks facing host communities in Cox's Bazar, actions can also improve effectiveness of social protection to address vulnerabilities nationwide.

Once data gaps are filled and the road map validated and endorsed in country, actors can be assigned leads, actions integrated into strategic plans of UN agencies (including existing partners and others such as UNDP), and resources mobilised. Establishing technical coordination between the social protection and humanitarian departments of aid agencies will be necessary.

LESSONS LEARNED

Experiences generated valuable lessons for other actors seeking linkages between social protection and humanitarian action in similar contexts:

- One barrier is the continued siloing of emergency and development programming within UN country operations. Success in this space demands meaningful collaboration between disciplines.
- In countries with existing national social protection systems, actions of aid agencies should be guided from the outset by principles of national ownership and capacity building. While there are operational roles for UN agencies, agencies should prioritise supporting the government to develop nationally-owned solutions.
- Actors should be well informed by the socio-political context, which will determine what changes are feasible and opportunities for agencies to influence these.
- A short term 'case-study' approach such as this is useful for scoping and determining entry points for collaborative action. Success depends on allocating sufficient time and resources to fulfil necessary consultations, including validation between all relevant stakeholders.

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