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Measuring the value of using social protection for emergency response:

Case study of floods in Bangladesh

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Acknowledgments

The global research project on 'Measuring the value of using social protection for emergency response' is led by Clare O'Brien (Senior Adviser, Social Protection Unit, World Food Programme) and Aphitchaya Nguanbanchong (Programme Policy Officer, WFP Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific).

For the Bangladesh case study we have been joined by Mohammad Mamunur Rashid (Programme Policy Officer, WFP Bangladesh) and Nalifa Mehelin (Knowledge Management Consultant, Social Protection Unit, WFP headquarters) as the lead national researchers. Riccardo Suppo (Head of Programme, WFP Bangladesh), Masing Newar (Senior Programme Policy Officer, WFP Bangladesh) and Siddiquil-Islam Khan (Resilience Innovation Programme, WFP Bangladesh) have been instrumental in providing senior management support both to initiate the study and throughout its implementation.

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PART A STUDY OVERVIEW



1. Objectives of the global research

What value do governments derive from their investments in making a social protection system or programmes a viable vehicle for national disaster response, in the event of large-scale shocks such as climate hazards?

To what extent can we trace quantitatively and qualitatively the investments made, and the benefits and challenges arising, for governments themselves and for people in need? This global research project aims to explore this question with the intent of both generating empirical evidence from three case studies, and consolidating a methodological approach that can be applied to other contexts.

Despite growing enthusiasm for using social protection in emergency response, there is limited evidence of the cost-efficiency, cost-effectiveness or other return on investment from doing so.

A modest body of work in global literature analyses the cost-efficiency of social protection programmes or humanitarian programmes in various contexts, and a growing body of work models the costs, benefits and estimated return on investment of anticipatory actions ahead of shocks. Relatively few analyses have sought to determine the potential gains in terms of quality of service delivery from delivering humanitarian aid (government- or internationally led) through social protection systems¹. There is limited understanding of the investments required in the enabling environment to best achieve the potential gains.

This research initiative intends to begin to fill the gap.

Three light-touch case studies explore current or recent response to shocks in Asia and Africa, each covering a different type of shock, and a different form of usage of the social protection system as part of the emergency response. The present report on Bangladesh is the first case study.

¹ For an exception, see e.g. time saved through using social protection for disaster response (Barca and Beazley, 2019).

2. Conceptual approach

2.1 Research questions

Each case study examines one or more emergency intervention(s) delivered by a national or local government, that leverages part of a social protection system or programme. It therefore shines a spotlight principally on national investments and responses, but takes into account international humanitarian support where relevant. The intervention may have taken place only once, in relation to a particular disaster, or may be an established mode of support used repeatedly. By ‘leveraging’ social protection we mean either that entities responsible for disaster risk management (DRM) integrate parts of the national social protection system into their response—such as using its workforce, coordination mechanisms, databases, payment platforms or monitoring systems—or that entities responsible for social protection contribute to disaster response through their own programmes, e.g. by temporarily expanding coverage.

To fully understand the value of social protection in emergency response we explore six key questions (Table 1). Together these enable us to elicit four types of information: normative (‘What should happen?’), diagnostic (‘What is happening?’), explanatory (‘Why is this happening?’) and forward-looking (‘What should we do next?’). These help us identify how investments are used and the benefits, challenges and efficiencies for system-strengthening.

While the research comprises several case studies we do not generate a simplistic ranking of countries or interventions of their return on investment: the scale and context is generally too divergent to offer a plausible comparison, and the results are enriched by qualitative assessments that do not lend themselves to numerical ranking. Rather, the emphasis is on the factors that drive costs and outcomes for an intervention in a given context.

Table 1. Key research questions

Type of information	Research questions	
Normative	RQ1	What is the intent behind using social protection for emergency response: what change do implementers seek to achieve?
Diagnostic	RQ2	How has the response worked in practice?
	RQ3	What have been the results of the response?
	RQ4	How much has the response cost?
Explanatory	RQ5	What are the drivers of the costs and processes used?
Forward-looking	RQ6	What practical strategies can be identified for enhancing the value of using social protection for emergency response?

Source: Authors.

2.2 Measuring value in terms of inputs, activities and outputs

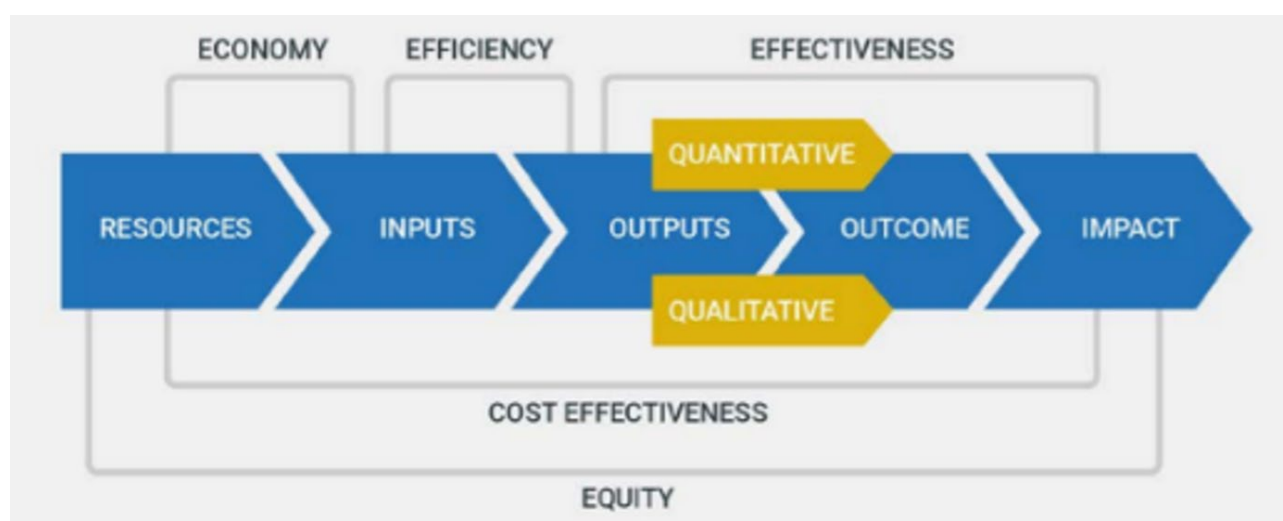
The performance of any intervention can be analysed across a series of stages (Figure 1). From an assessment of the budget ('resources'), and the human resources and material inputs obtained ('inputs'), one can explore how the inputs are used for activities that generate outputs; and from there assess the emerging short-, medium- and long-term outcomes, up to the overall impact (DFID, 2011; Pidd, 2012; King and OPM, 2018). The information at each stage serves different purposes in terms of accountability, ability to influence ongoing programmes etc.

To understand how investments result in policy outcomes, we need to pay close attention to resources, inputs and outputs, together with the activities that convert one to the other. These will guide us to the answers sought here, as to what investments have been made, how they have been used in

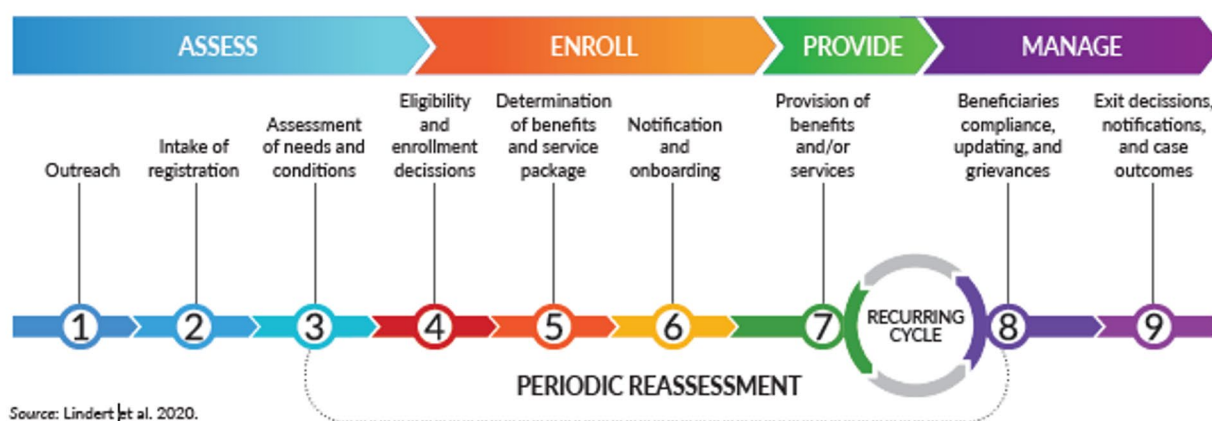
emergency response, and their results. We can also use this framing to identify the explanatory factors that drive the costs and results, and to consider the forward-looking question of how these can be further improved. Together these give us a 'return on investment' story. The later stages of assessing outcomes and impact, for programmes that deliver transfers, could add to that story and could be assessed by means of post-distribution monitoring and/or impact evaluations of recipients' experience; but these tend to be influenced by a wider range of factors including some that are outside the control of the implementing entity, and are beyond the scope of this study (see section 4 below).

Assessing the 'return on investment' is close to, but not the same as, assessing 'value for money'. The latter not only looks at how well resources are used but also requires judgments

Figure 1. How resources deliver value: the 'return on investment' story



Source: King and OPM (2018), derived from DFID (2011). Note: In some variants of the diagram, 'resources' and 'inputs' are combined, referring to both financial and non-financial resources together. In others, 'processes' or 'activities' are presented as a separate step that turns inputs into outputs.

Figure 2. A 'delivery chain' for cash transfer programmes

about whether the resource use is justified, ideally when compared with possible alternatives; these value judgments are necessarily subjective and dependent on context (King et al., 2023). We have aimed to take these broader considerations into account where feasible in the light of data obtained, and trying to draw on the criteria that the government itself uses, if identifiable, to judge what is good value for money. Their preferred measures of economy, efficiency or effectiveness might include e.g. increased coverage, reduced exclusion of certain target groups, more timely distribution of transfers, more sustainable funding, greater accountability etc².

In the social protection sector, investments can be made at a systemwide level or within particular programmes. Staff may be hired to manage multiple programmes, or just one; databases may be created for use by many programmes or be programme-specific. Moreover, the social protection system may itself draw on systems that cover multiple sectors, such as government-to-person (G2P) payment platforms or civil registration databases. We aim to consider these broader investments where possible, noting qualitatively the contribution of the investment if it is not realistic to apportion a share of the resource to the emergency response. We analyse the overall system architecture using the building blocks of a social protection system as outlined

in WFP's social protection strategy, namely policies and legislation; governance, capacity and coordination; platforms and infrastructure; and planning and financing (WFP, 2021a).

At the programme level, the delivery chain for cash transfer programmes articulated by the World Bank offers a neat summary of the activities that convert programme inputs (staff, vehicles, databases etc.) into outputs (households enrolled, recipients paid etc.) (Figure 2). The 'delivery chain' represents a more granular breakdown of the four 'Programme' building blocks of the WFP framework. We apply this to analyse the use of the investments.

Where data on costs are available, we aim to classify and analyse them using an established method for calculating the cost-efficiency of emergency cash transfer programmes (O'Brien, 2014). In the case of the Bangladesh case study, costing data are not available owing to the very integrated nature of disaster response with social protection, and because there was no flooding emergency during the research period, as is discussed in subsequent sections. The present study therefore concentrates on the description of actual and possible investments, with reference to detailed costs where known.

² See e.g. King (2023) or O'Brien et al. (2018) for other examples of types of return.

3. Bangladesh: using social protection to respond to floods

Our research in Bangladesh focuses on social protection as a response to riverine floods.

The country is at very high risk of a range of natural hazards, including riverine floods, flash floods, riverbank erosion, landslides, cyclones and earthquakes, and to a lesser extent drought³. River flooding is of exceptionally high concern: Bangladesh is assessed to have the world's highest exposure, with a score of 9.9 out of 10 on the INFORM Risk Index⁴.

River flooding directly impacts the incomes, assets and livelihoods of tens of millions of people. On the one hand, the Bangladesh delta is highly fertile, the flood plains lend themselves well to food production, and fisheries are of economic importance and becoming increasingly so. On the other, flooding can cause catastrophic disruption to those economic activities, as well as to other income sources, infrastructure and homes; it poses a risk to life and results in displacement of the population (General Economics Division, 2018; MOEFCC, 2022).

Climate change is expected to worsen these negative impacts. The average annual loss of gross domestic product (GDP) owing to climate-related disasters is currently 1.3%, and foreseen to reach 2% by 2050.

The National Adaptation Plan of Bangladesh 2023-2050, which guides medium- to long-term adaptation to climate change, demarcates the country into 11 'climate stress areas' according to multi-hazard risks; of these, four are considered to be at risk of high negative impacts of river flooding, mostly in the north and west around the Padma and Jamuna river basins (the lower parts of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers respectively). Together the population vulnerable to climate stresses in those areas is estimated at over 22 million.

The expansion of social protection is recognised nationally as an important area of action for disaster management in this context. It also falls under one of eight key sectors for addressing climate change (MOEFCC, 2022). The challenge is to maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of this contribution. The overarching question to which the study seeks an answer, by means of the key research questions listed in Table 1 above, is therefore:

What are the implications (both positive and negative) of using government social protection systems and programmes as a vehicle for responding to river flooding in Bangladesh, in terms of contributing to a cost-efficient, high quality response?

³ Riverine flooding arises from accumulated rainfall, causing a gradual rise in river levels that spills onto the adjacent land. Flash floods are sudden torrents of water from excessive rainfall which may occur even in usually dry channels.

⁴ INFORM 2024 Risk Index. The index scores countries from 0-10 for each hazard type, on the basis of exposure to the hazard; it also assesses the extent to which the population is exposed, their vulnerability and coping capacity.

4. Methodology

4.1 No river flooding emergency during the research period

The locations under review experience large floods once every several years. There was no assumption that a flood would occur in the summer monsoon season (June to September) in 2023. Two research scenarios were prepared, one if river flooding were to trigger an emergency response in the Padma or Jamuna basins—in which case the team would accompany the response in real time, capturing the costs and experiences of implementation by the government and of a ‘shock-responsive social protection pilot’ planned by WFP—and an alternative in the absence of floods.

Fortunately, that area did not experience flooding during the monsoon rains in 2023.

For this reason, the study has focused not on a specific incident, but rather on assessing the investments and actions to strengthen systems for shock-response, and determining expectations in terms of anticipated benefits and challenges for addressing river floods. We explore implications for both national and subnational authorities and their partners.

4.2 Scope of the research

As per the approach in section 2, we focus on the value of social protection in flood response in terms of inputs, administrative processes and outputs. It is, of course, also vital to know its impact on reducing people’s vulnerability and mitigating the adverse effects of shocks on households. However, a separate impact evaluation is planned by WFP Bangladesh the next time a flood response is triggered, so is not covered by this study.

The team considered analysing social protection when leveraged with an ‘anticipatory action’ approach, triggered upon the warning of an imminent flood, compared with a regular response after a flood has hit. It would have only been feasible if a response had been triggered in 2023, as the systems have been designed but not yet piloted. Since an

anticipatory action response did not take place, this, too, is not examined here.

Our initial intention was to prioritise understanding of the value of two social protection schemes: the Mother and Child Benefit Programme of the Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs (MOWCA), and the Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest (EGPP) by the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MODMR). WFP provides technical support to both. It rapidly became clear that so many other programmes are already used in emergency response that such a narrow focus would give only a very partial picture. We have reviewed a range of programmes, and, indeed, this breadth drives to a great extent the findings.

4.3 Fieldwork and analysis

The research entailed primary quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis in Bangladesh, and a literature review.

In an inception mission in June 2023 the team defined the study parameters, consulting with government counterparts. A stakeholder analysis was conducted to identify systematically the agencies and individuals implicated; from this a list of interviewees was drawn up. The main research took place over two weeks in October 2023.

The thorough review of documentation and data has included (see Annex A):

- Government policies, strategies, protocols, programme documents and budgets for social protection and DRM
- Strategies, studies and reports by international and national agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), consultancy firms and academic institutions, especially those published in the last five years on shock-responsive or adaptive social protection, and diagnostic assessments of approaches to addressing floods and other climate hazards
- WFP products, including studies of the landscape for social protection and disaster risk financing; standard operating procedures, and protocols and plans for anticipatory action through social protection to respond to riverine floods.

Primary research took place in Dhaka and in two districts.

In Dhaka the research comprised interviews in Bangla or English with some 21 key informants, from ministries and their departments; United Nations entities; NGOs; and consultancy firms (see Annex C). At subnational level the team visited Kurigram

and Gaibandha, two districts in the north of the country in the Jamuna river basin. These were selected as they are prone to river flooding and have received substantial technical support to help mitigate its impacts. Within each district two upazilas, or sub-districts, were selected for closer engagement. The team conducted a further 15 interviews with key informants from local authorities and district, upazila and union Disaster Management Committees, and held four focus group discussions with communities. Further quantitative data were obtained from respondents where possible on budgets, expenditure and programme responses.

Political, research and data factors have presented both opportunities and constraints.

Politically, many government bodies welcomed the research as it coincides with the intent of government policy; but constraints on movement in the run-up to national elections meant that a small number of interviews were not able to be conducted. In terms of research, we found considerable international interest and several recent studies on the topic; we made sure to review and build on, rather than to duplicate, those reports, and interviewed several of their authors to ensure complementarity in this study. As for data, it has proven very difficult to quantify investments and results owing to the very nature of the social protection system in Bangladesh, which is already highly integrated into the DRM system—making it relatively meaningless to distinguish a ‘social protection’ response from a ‘regular’ emergency response—and which allows a great deal of discretion and flexibility at local level, such that investments and expenditure are not tracked or aggregated in very granular detail.

This report consolidates the findings.

PART B ANALYSIS



5. Strong national commitment to using social protection to address emergencies

5.1 Social protection and DRM: 50 years of shared history

Social protection programmes have been an inextricable part of Bangladesh’s disaster management system in the entire half-century of its history since independence in 1971. A Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation was one of the first ministries to be created, in 1972, the government being mindful of the devastating consequences of the cyclone of 1970 that killed several hundred thousand people. Famine arising from severe flooding in 1974 prompted the ministry to establish a major social assistance programme, Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), in partnership with WFP; flooding in the 1980s led directly to the set-up of public works programmes; and further flooding in the 1990s brought the revival of the VGF programme as a disaster response mechanism, since the original initiative had in the meantime evolved into a more development-oriented intervention to address chronic poverty (General Economics Division, 2015; World Bank, 2019). Tackling the country’s vulnerability to natural hazards is a cornerstone of government policy-making, such that disasters no longer result in the same level of casualties as in previous decades. And as the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) notes, ‘an extensive system of safety net programmes has virtually eliminated post-disaster secondary cycles of death and hunger’ (2015, p.27).

This means that ‘shock-responsiveness’ was already a core feature of the national social protection system decades before the term was invented. While many social protection programmes are not used for emergency response, and conversely many aspects of DRM are not related to social protection, there is considerable convergence.

The question of how much the use of social protection adds to the cost-efficiency and quality of flood response (implicitly compared with a ‘traditional’ emergency response) is therefore moot, as social protection programmes are part of the traditional emergency response. We can nonetheless analyse the policies and institutional arrangements in this space (sections 5.2-5.4) to start to understand their value. We begin by reviewing in this section the normative question of what the government intends should happen according to its laws, regulations and policies. Sections 6 and 7 then look at how they have worked in practice.

5.2 DRM as a core objective of social protection policy

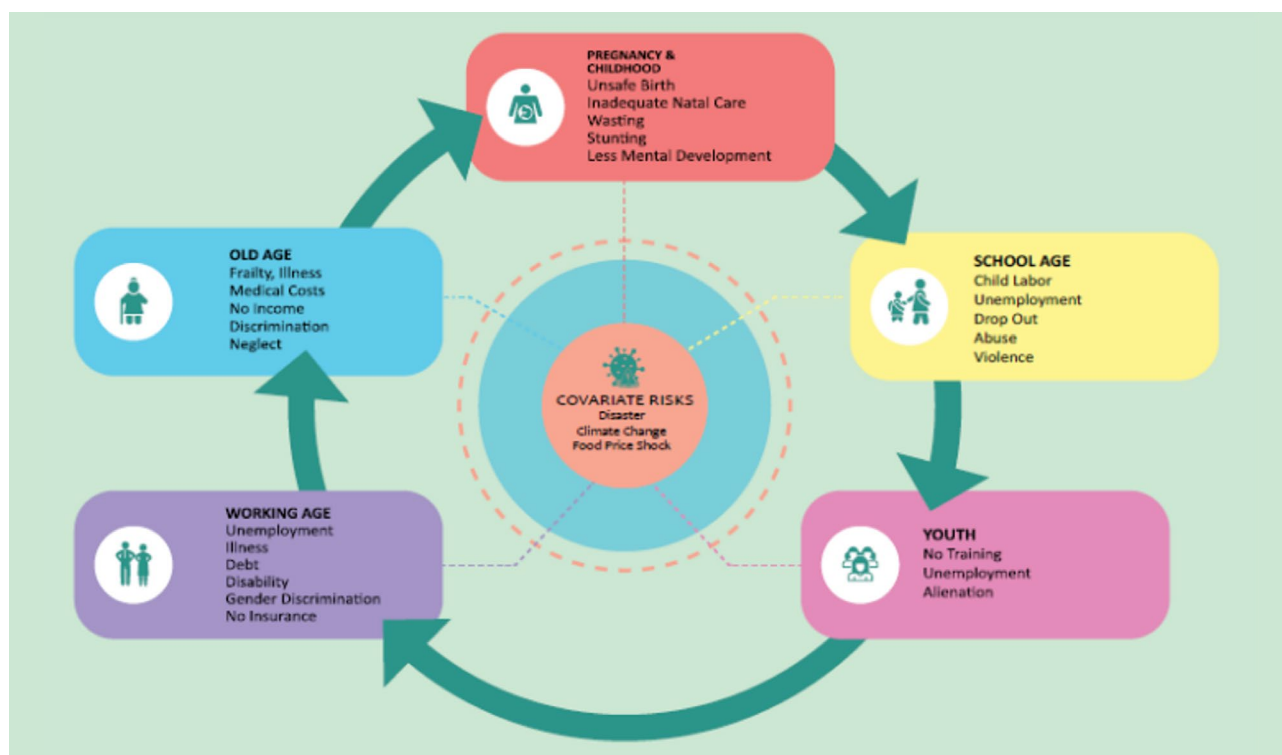
The NSSS, approved in 2015, is in Phase 2 of implementation with an Action Plan covering 2021-26 (General Economics Division, 2015; Cabinet Division, 2022). It is endorsed by, and embedded in, the main national planning document, the Eighth Five-Year Plan 2020–25 (General Economics Division, 2020a). The strategy sets out a clear policy framework and agenda for reform, characterised by:

- **an aim to consolidate the 145 programmes existing when the strategy was launched,** into a streamlined set underpinned by common systems and driven by the rollout of e-governance across government. By 2020 the number of programmes had reduced to 114, of which 20 accounted for the bulk of the budget (78%) (General Economics Division, 2020b)
- **an emphasis on system-strengthening as a foundation for efficient social protection, using digital solutions where appropriate.** Half a dozen systems have

been identified as being required for effective programme delivery. Of those, the programme management information systems (MISs) and the G2P payment platform are more firmly established. The single registry is being started. A common grievance redress system and a results-based monitoring and evaluation (M&E) platform are not yet underway.

A life-cycle approach has been proposed for programmes that address individual risks and vulnerabilities, but the strategy recognises that covariate risks can occur at any age. So, some programmes are classified under one of five life stages—pregnancy and early childhood, school-age children, youth, working age and old age—while others are classified as addressing covariate risks such as economic, climatic and health shocks, and food insecurity (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The government’s life-cycle framework for social protection



Source: Cabinet Division (2022).

The strategy also establishes five ‘thematic clusters’ that cut across the life stages, to promote inter-ministerial coordination⁵. The covariate risk-related programmes mostly fall under a ‘Food security and disaster assistance’ cluster, which is led by the Ministry of Food, though the MODMR manages the greatest share of programmes in the cluster (10 out of 28)⁶. Supporting households to address disaster risk is therefore at the core of social protection policy, both as a distinct component of the life-cycle framework and as a thematic cluster.

Programmes that address covariate risks, and that may be relevant for flood-affected populations, variously provide food, cash or in-kind goods such as corrugated iron sheets or blankets, or else subsidise the cost

of essential foods to offset price spikes that can occur during flooding (Table 2). Other programmes in the social security budget address flood risk at the community level rather than among households, such as for the construction of flood shelters. Relevant programmes in other clusters include several in the ‘Labour and livelihood’ cluster such as the EGPP, Cash for Work and Food for Money programmes. These are classified as being for the ‘Working age’ group and are aimed at people experiencing chronic, seasonal or cyclical food insecurity, a situation that may be exacerbated by a natural hazard:

Seasonal hunger arising from agricultural seasonality is often intensified by crop failure, poor harvest, and extreme weather conditions. (General Economics Division, 2015, p.26).



5 The five clusters are: (1) Social allowances (2) Food security and disaster assistance (3) Social insurance (4) Labour and livelihoods (5) Human development and social empowerment.

6 The exceptions are a handful of programmes of the Ministry of Social Welfare which are grouped as ‘Covariate risks’ but which might better be described as non-age-specific, such as the programmes supporting people with disabilities or non-communicable diseases, or widows. They fit in the ‘Social allowance’ cluster (Cabinet Division, 2022).

Table 2. Key social protection programmes addressing covariate risks

Programme	Ministry	Recipients (millions), revised 2022/23 budget ¹⁰
Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) ¹	MODMR	25.7
Relief Goods ²	MODMR	8.3
Gratuitous Relief ³	MODMR	3.3
Test Relief Cash ⁴	MODMR	0.4
House Grant ⁵	MODMR	0.2
Food Friendly Program ⁶	Ministry of Food	6.3
Open Market Sales ⁷	Ministry of Food	4.6
Food subsidy ⁸	Ministry of Food	-
Fund to deal with economic and natural shocks ⁹	Finance Division, Ministry of Finance	2.2

Source: Cabinet Division, 2022; Ministry of Finance, 2023. Notes: (1) Distributes rice to poor households in disasters and festivals (2) Blankets, clothing, corrugated iron, dry food etc. for vulnerable and disaster-affected people (3) Food or cash for vulnerable groups (4) Public works scheme providing food or cash to address vulnerability and poverty (5) Cash and/or corrugated iron for individuals or institutions meeting various criteria including having a house destroyed by a disaster (6) Entitlement for ultra-poor households to

buy subsidised rice (7) Subsidised essential food, released to stabilise prices when they rise abnormally. (8) General food subsidy programme (9) Funds, not part of a named programme, created for, 'day-laborers, farmers, laborers, domestic workers and victims affected by natural calamities such as floods, untimely floods, storms, hailstorms, cyclones etc.' (Ministry of Finance, 2023, p.4). (10) Figures are from the Finance Division's revised budget allocation, and may not represent precise numbers actually in receipt of assistance.

The NSSS framework provides a strong theoretical foundation for the effective use of social protection for managing disaster risk in at least three ways. First, it emphasises that a primary goal of social security is to, 'build resilience of the families of Bangladesh': improving the coverage and adequacy of regular programmes all year round is itself an approach for better shock-responsiveness, enabling poor and vulnerable households to, 'be in a significantly stronger position, with an important buffer against shocks' (General Economics Division, 2015, p.60). Second, it notes the importance of dedicated programmes such as Gratuitous Relief, ready to be activated when necessary: it recognises that even if programmes do flex or expand at the time of an emergency, this does not have to entail the temporary

scale-up of schemes that have other primary objectives. Nonetheless, third, it does allow in principle for the possibility of the temporary scale-up of programmes other than those in the 'covariate risk' life stage or the disaster assistance cluster, to deliver emergency payments in the event of a crisis.

The government is continuing to advance its thinking in this area, and recently issued guidelines on 'adaptive social protection' which cover the interface between social protection, DRM and climate change adaptation (Cabinet Division, 2024). These highlight principles including intersectoral coordination, risk-informed planning, flexible funding and programming, and resilience-building activities as some of the hallmarks of

a social protection system that can withstand immediate crises, adapt to future challenges, and enable people to do the same. The guidelines consider this approach to be a 'paradigm shift in understanding and addressing vulnerabilities', entailing a move towards increasingly proactive

rather than reactive measures, whereby social protection systems, 'are designed not only to address the existing vulnerabilities but also to anticipate, prepare for, and adapt to future risks and uncertainties' (Cabinet Division, 2024, p.10).

5.3 Social protection is recognised in DRM policy

Social protection considerations are evident in DRM policy documents. The Disaster Management Act 2012 gives a legal basis for the government to deliver assistance to people affected by disasters (Government of Bangladesh, 2012). It is operationalised through five-year National Plans for Disaster Management (NPDMs); and through the Standing Orders on Disaster, updated in 2019, which detail the standard operating procedures, roles and responsibilities for disaster response (MODMR 2017, 2019, 2020). The policies are designed to be coherent with regional and global commitments and frameworks on disaster risk.

The NPDM 2021–25, largely unchanged from that for 2016–20, lists social protection as one of eight strategic directions for achieving resilience to disasters. It perceives the role of social protection as being not just to scale up at the time of a disaster, but to build resilience simply by having solid programmes in place:

The safety net and social protection programme provides an excellent opportunity to strengthen risk management and risk reduction in Upazilas and Unions and enhance resilience of the poor and vulnerable to shocks and stresses. (MODMR, 2020, p.5)

Aligning its priorities with the global Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, it aims to increase the contribution of social protection to disaster risk reduction and governance through strengthening the financial capacity of social protection institutions and linking with livelihoods

and skills development. The plan takes a multi-hazard approach, as per the Sendai Framework, so applies implicitly to floods even where not specified.

Other policies such as the National Adaptation Plan 2023-50 and Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 take a similar perspective on the role of social protection. The National Adaptation Plan has an activity on 'Disaster, social safety and security', noting that,

Disaster management focuses on creating an enabling environment and strengthening disaster preparedness and infrastructure [...A]reas of emphasis include [...] expanding social safety nets and security. (MOEFCC, 2022, p.12)

The Bangladesh Delta Plan, which covers water resource management in the context of natural hazards, cites 'Social safety net and enhancement of rapid response recovery packages' as a strategy for safeguarding livelihoods of vulnerable communities in the light of floods (General Economics Division, 2018).

However, challenges are noted with implementing the policies. Constraints identified by one source are the capacity of MODMR to coordinate the activities of other ministries, and the difficulty of financial resource mobilisation to deliver the ambitious goals (Ahmed, 2019). There are also variations in application of the policies according to local context, including in relation to the selection of beneficiaries. Experiences of implementation are discussed more in section 6 below.

5.4 Governance and coordination mechanisms

DRM policies view disaster management as a government-wide task while reaffirming the central role of the MODMR and subnational structures⁷. The MODMR and its implementing agency, the Department of Disaster Management (DDM), are mandated to identify populations exposed to disaster risk and support risk reduction, recovery and rehabilitation through social safety nets (MODMR, 2019). They also coordinate DRM activities across government and with NGOs and other aid organisations, and issue instructions to local administrations. Many other ministries also have roles⁸. For instance, the Ministry of Social Welfare, MOWCA and their implementing agencies are required to coordinate with others on DRM; ensure that the protection of women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities is integrated into, and budgeted in, disaster response plans; and incorporate disaster risk reduction measures in social safety net programmes (MODMR, 2019).

Many coordination platforms exist for DRM; the Ministry of Social Welfare and MOWCA participate in some but not all. Platforms may be either political or technical in nature. Some are scheduled to meet regularly, e.g. the National Disaster Management Council and Inter-Ministerial Disaster Management Coordination Committee, while others convene in the event of a disaster, such as the National Disaster Response Coordination Group (MODMR, 2019).

Disaster Management Committees exist in every district, upazila and union. They must implement the orders and programmes of the DDM in relation to, 'disaster preparedness, risk reduction, emergency response, humanitarian assistance, rehabilitation, reconstruction, recovery and social safety nets' (MODMR, 2019,

p.151). They are chaired and/or coordinated at district level by the Deputy Commissioner and District Relief and Rehabilitation Officer; at upazila level by the Upazila Parishad chairperson, Upazila Nirbahi Officer and Upazila Project Implementation Officer; and at union level by the Union Parishad chairperson / member of the Reserved Women Seat and the Union Parishad secretary.

Social protection initiatives are deeply embedded into the structure and actions of these committees. The Standing Orders on Disaster set out a role for the committees and officers in ensuring the delivery of assistance for risk reduction, resilience-building and disaster response. This includes mapping areas exposed to risk and developing lists of vulnerable households; awareness-raising for disaster preparedness and response; and planning and implementing Gratuitous Relief, Test Relief, food for work, cash for work, VGF and other safety nets, employment generation programmes and the distribution of other humanitarian assistance. Social protection professionals, including Social Welfare Officers and Women's Affairs Officers, participate in many district and upazila committees. At union level, meanwhile, the Disaster Management Committee consists largely of respected community volunteers including teachers, businesses, livelihood groups such as farmers and fishers, and NGOs.

Among international actors, the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework provides one coordination mechanism. One of its priority outcomes is to improve access to shock-responsive social protection and social services (United Nations, 2022).

⁷ See also section 7.2 below.

⁸ For example, the National Adaptation Plan designates the MODMR, the Ministry of Social Welfare and MOWCA as lead agencies with the remit for 'Disaster, social safety and security', with about 15 others as supporting agencies.



5.5 Implications of the normative framework

What are the implications of this policy framework for appraising the value of social protection for flood response? Three observations are apparent:

- First, we have seen that the government has valued social protection as a part of emergency response for decades, and the social protection system (especially non-contributory social assistance) emerged from the need to support people exposed to, or suffering from, natural hazards, especially floods and cyclones. The policy environment is therefore favourable, so one might expect to find investments that result in both better resilience to floods, and a better response for affected populations.
- Second, the success of social protection in flood response now depends on implementation of the policies, since the policy debate itself is fairly well settled. Outcomes are determined by the resources invested and their use, as Figure 1 illustrated. There can be

a big gap between intent and practice. The National Adaptation Plan for climate change, for example, sets a price-tag for delivery of the plan up to 2050, but notes that the cost (including interventions relating to social protection) far exceeds currently available funding:

The Government now spends approximately \$1.2 billion per year for climate adaptation. Successful implementation of the NAP will require seven times more or \$8.5 billion per year. (MOEFCC, 2022, pp.92–93)

- Third, the intertwining of social protection and emergency response, and the multi-hazard approach to DRM, mean it is virtually impossible to meaningfully identify or ‘tag’ investments in either the social protection budget or the DRM budget as being devoted to social protection for flood response. This is not necessarily a bad thing: rather it shows the level of integration of social protection as an instrument for addressing disaster risk.

5.6 Pathway to date of discussions on options for policy reform

The NSSS life-cycle framework (Figure 3 on p.9) offers a neat way to probe where social protection investments in flood response are, or might be, made. We can break down the diagram into four areas. Table 3 summarises the implications of investing in each. All four approaches are either being implemented by the government or advocated for by its partners.

1. **Of the four approaches, core DRM programmes remain the primary means of support when floods occur.** The MODMR is clearly regarded as having the lead mandate, and the Standing Orders on Disaster are widely recognised as the guiding document governing responsibilities for addressing floods and other disasters. Efforts have been underway for many years to strengthen the

MODMR's social assistance programmes, including through a World Bank-funded project, Safety Net Systems for the Poorest, which has run continuously since 2013 with the main objective of supporting the MODMR in this regard.

2. **For investments in life-cycle programmes, two different perspectives emerge:**

- Ministries and policy documents emphasise the importance of these programmes continuing their regular functions of addressing vulnerability by extending their routine coverage and comprehensiveness. The National Adaptation Plan for climate change, for example, cites as a key action, 'Increase the coverage of social security/ social safety net programmes for building

Table 3. Actions to invest in social protection for better flood response

Action	Area of NSSS framework ¹	Description
1. Invest in the core DRM programmes	The 'Covariate risks' circle	Improve flood-related outcomes through programmes whose main purpose is for use in disasters, including floods
2. Invest in the life-cycle programmes	The five life stages in the outer ring	Improve flood-related outcomes through programmes whose main purpose relates to something other than covariate shocks. The rationale might be, for example, to leverage additional funding, workforce or materials to fill gaps and/or to complement the core DRM programmes. It would be important to be sure that such activities do not duplicate or further fragment the core disaster response
3. Invest in the links between programmes	The dotted lines	Investing in coordination between programmes that address covariate risk (the inner circle) and life-cycle schemes (the outer ring) can help reduce gaps and improve efficiency
4. Invest in the systems that underpin the entire sector	The green background	Systems for e.g. G2P payments, MISs and the single registry, M&E and grievance redress can improve the sector as a whole. Programmes that provide assistance in the event of floods could benefit as much as any other, especially if systems are designed with the specific context of flooding in mind

Source: Authors. Note: (1) See Figure 3. p.14.

community-based resilience and adaptive capacity', including through the regular provision of income security for the elderly, widows and persons with disabilities; it also advocates for the introduction of risk transfer and insurance mechanisms for farmers (MOEFCC, 2022, p.74).

- Many international agencies are increasingly interested in advocating for the use of the life-cycle programmes to distribute transfers to flood-affected populations, either immediately after flooding or a few days ahead, using anticipatory action approaches. Discussions on anticipatory action linked to social assistance have been ongoing since about 2015, including through two 'national dialogues'. Several pilot projects are being undertaken and a working group / task force on forecast-based financing and anticipatory action has been established. The model of using life-cycle programmes for disaster response, through temporary expansions or adjustments to the design, is allowed in principle by the NSSS. While some government respondents indicated that they would not expect emergency scale-up to be a major feature of these programmes given that many social assistance schemes dedicated to disaster response already exist and are budgeted, the new guidelines on adaptive social protection speak strongly in favour of flexible programming and indicate that this is likely to be an increasing emphasis of the national approach.

3. **Investing in links between programmes is discussed to some extent and does not entail major resource inputs.** Examples might include, for example, sharing beneficiary lists from a life-cycle programme with the implementers of an MODMR programme to ensure inclusion of vulnerable households in flood response. Ministry respondents confirmed that while there is generally an effort to avoid duplication of assistance to

households, this should not apply to disaster response because vulnerable households receiving social assistance might also be affected by floods and need further temporary support. As programmes already share many common platforms and coordination mechanisms, though, there are relatively few resources other than beneficiary lists that are exclusive to a programme that could be linked. The emerging focus on adaptive social protection, on the other hand, may give rise to other opportunities for linkages, not just among social protection programmes but between social protection and climate change interventions.

4. **Investments in the systems that underpin the whole social protection sector are a major focus of current policy reform efforts, and are explicitly intended to facilitate disaster response.** The mid-term review of the NSSS, for example, observed that,

An expansion in coverage and value of transfers of priority schemes to put the poor and vulnerable population in a resilient position may provide an important safeguard against such covariate shocks. However, programmatic reforms of social security alone will be far from being adequate in dealing with such shocks. It is also essential to strengthen the institutional as well as administrative capacities for that matter. (General Economics Division, 2020b, p.82)

It noted the importance of, 'establishing a strong management information system (MIS) along with a functional electronic cash delivery channel so that immediate risk mitigation strategy can be adopted in the face or aftermath of a crisis'. This view is shared by the government's international partners, many of which (such as WFP) are supporting investments in system-strengthening for regular social protection programmes while recognising that this has an added value when disasters occur.

6. Social protection for flood response: actions, investments and intentions

We now look at how flood response through social protection works in practice, using the four routes just outlined, and attempting also to identify quantitatively and/or qualitatively the investments that have been, or could be, made in each, where known. The analysis focuses on the last three financial years, from July 2020 to June 2023, where information is available.

The major flood during this period was from July to October 2020, when prolonged flooding affected over 5 million people in the north, centre and northeast, concurrent with the COVID-19 emergency. Some flooding also struck one of the interviewed upazilas in Kurigram district in 2023, resulting in the distribution of assistance to affected populations.

6.1 Current use of social protection for flood response: primarily Gratuitous Relief and VGF

There is no fixed list yet among ministries of programmes that count as tackling ‘Covariate risks’, at the heart of the categorisation set out in the NSSS. Finance Division budget documents use a different categorisation. A World Bank public expenditure review of social protection in 2021 devises eight groups, of which one is for, ‘Households in situation of transient poverty as a result of shock’; but that includes only a few of the programmes which the government itself considers to be for addressing risks, being those that distribute ad-hoc assistance at times of shock, and not those that build resilience for people vulnerable to shocks. Many others (including the VGF) are listed separately as programmes for, ‘Households who are in situation of chronic poverty’.

We can be reasonably confident that the MODMR’s Gratuitous Relief and VGF programmes are considered by the government to be among the main instruments for disaster relief, along with assistance for housing repair, as these are cited as such in the Humanitarian Assistance

Programme Implementation guidelines (MODMR, 2013). The government considers that Gratuitous Relief and Test Relief are ‘more appropriate and effective’ than others in the aftermath of natural hazards such as floods and cyclones (General Economics Division, 2020b). In the 2020 floods, a review of the response in the first six weeks noted the use of Gratuitous Relief (cash and rice), the housing grant, as well as the distribution of dry food, baby food, animal fodder and corrugated iron sheets (Sadique and Kamruzzaman, 2021). More generally, analysts note that the VGF tends to be used later for post-disaster recovery, while the Gratuitous Relief is used for the immediate emergency (Hebbar et al., 2021). VGF is also used to distribute assistance to poor households during festivals, which means that it is difficult to identify how much is being spent on disaster relief.

The Finance Division has some additional budget lines of its own for disaster response, including for flooding if needed (see Table 2 above). These complement the MODMR’s programmes. It was not apparent that they have

set criteria for eligibility or value. They were used particularly during COVID-19 to provide additional support to households in need.

Besides these, many programmes that are valuable for supporting households affected by natural hazards rightly have wider goals and eligibility criteria that include other types of covariate risk, particularly economic adversity. For instance, if a household is made destitute in a disaster, it may be eligible for poverty-targeted programmes. Similarly, the Open Market Sales programme releases food onto markets to stabilise prices; this might be scaled up if prices increase during flooding, even though the programme is not exclusively for flood response.

When the scale of a disaster exceeds the government's capacity to respond, the national response is complemented by international humanitarian assistance funded and/or implemented by several dozen agencies and NGOs. In the case of the 2020 floods, by May 2021 the international response amounted to \$25 million, channelled to some 50 international, national and local organisations (LTWG, 2021).

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF GRATUITOUS RELIEF AND VGF FOR FLOOD RESPONSE

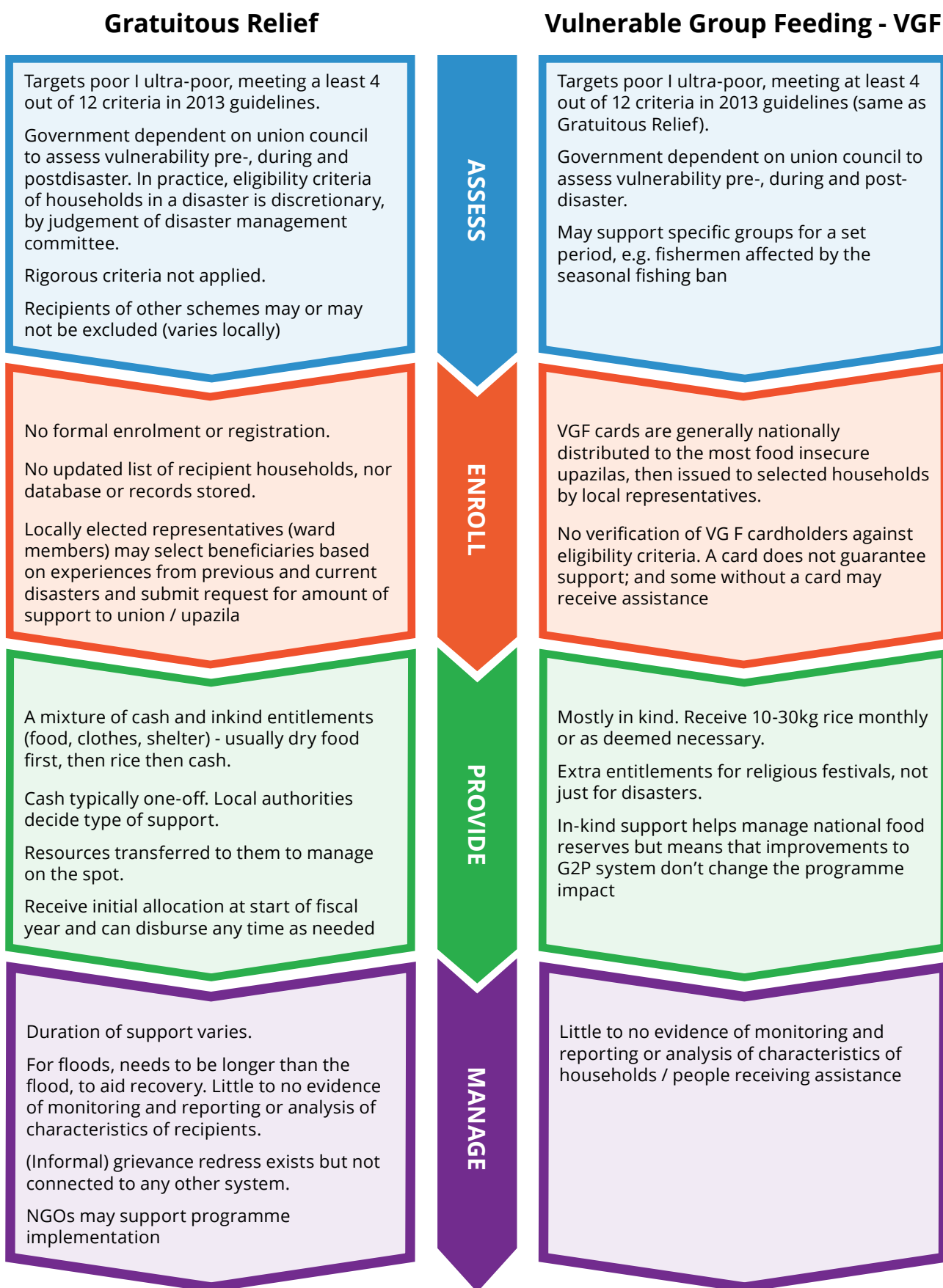
The Gratuitous Relief and VGF programmes are reported by some respondents to have several advantages in flood response. Figure 4 summarises how the two programmes work. They are long-running schemes, well embedded in policy and widely accepted by implementers. With respect to Gratuitous Relief, several respondents valued the flexibility of a programme that is not confined to a set transfer modality, value, duration or list of beneficiaries: this gives the adaptability that other countries are increasingly seeking to introduce in their national systems where such schemes are

absent. Policymakers appreciate that the option to distribute in-kind food offers an outlet for managing grain reserves and supports the livelihoods of growers. The programme manages to draw to some extent on vulnerability data: in the 2020 flood response, affected districts with higher poverty rates tended also to have a higher percentage of households receiving Gratuitous Relief cash (Sadique and Kamruzzaman, 2021).

At the same time, respondents identified gaps and opportunities for adjustment along the delivery chain which might serve as an entry point when considering how other parts of the social protection system might effectively complement them:

- **Assessment:** Vulnerability maps exist but are not updated regularly, and it can be difficult to obtain real-time updates of households' situations during a disaster.
- **Eligibility: inclusion and exclusion.** The responsiveness and flexibility of Gratuitous Relief and VGF inevitably have a trade-off in terms of oversight and transparency. Eligibility criteria are broad, but without guidelines for prioritisation. Currently, 9.9 million people are VGF card holders, but the process of distribution of cards is not reported to be systematic, while being in possession of a card does not guarantee receipt of assistance. The Gratuitous Relief programme has no card system. And while there are no rules to prevent recipients of other social protection programmes receiving support in the event of a flood or other emergency, since the disaster may bring about additional needs on top of those for which they are receiving assistance, nonetheless in practice recipients of other benefits such as the MCBP sometimes find themselves excluded from support on the grounds that they are already receiving state support.
- **Transfer: cash vs. in-kind assistance.** While some recipients are satisfied with the in-kind

Figure 4 How Gratuitous Relief and VGF are used during emergencies



Source: Authors.

entitlement, others expressed disappointment with both its quality and quantity, especially where food is distributed from grain reserves reaching the end of their shelf life. There is known to be resale of unwanted rice. From an administrative point of view, the local representatives expressed concern due to the lack of adequate storage facilities. Some respondents indicated that, if markets are functional during a disaster, they would prefer cash as it gives them greater choice and autonomy in determining their needs—and, even better, any kind of work where they could

earn money. Limited use of cash also means that investments in improving the G2P system will have less effect on programme efficiency.

- **Management: monitoring and accountability.** Even without a pre-set beneficiary list it could be feasible to record recipients of Gratuitous Relief at the time of distribution, for enhanced accountability. This facility is not yet available, which makes it difficult to detect or address errors of inclusion and exclusion, or understand how resources are being spent.

6.2 Investments in core DRM programmes

Funds are allocated to disaster response programmes as part of the regular budgeting process, then adjusted as needed. We summarise recent budget allocations for many of them in Table 4. For the last two years the annual budget for Gratuitous Relief has been in the region of Tk 6 billion, or approximately \$55 million. Many other programmes that have a bearing on disaster response, though also a much wider remit as discussed, have much larger

budgets. The proportion of the budget allocation or expenditure devoted to flood response in each of these programmes is not recorded. Part of the national allocation is distributed to districts, and from there onwards to upazilas, unions and to disaster-affected households.

The Finance Division also keeps some contingency funding in reserve, not only for social assistance but also for other disaster

Table 4. Budget allocations for selected social protection programmes addressing covariate risk, by financial year (Tk billion)

	2020/21		2021/22		2022/23	
	Budget	Revised	Budget	Revised	Budget	Revised
VGF	9.40	9.41	14.56	9.62	9.91	15.42
Relief Goods	2.05	1.85	1.85	1.85	1.90	1.90
Gratuitous Relief	30.63	2.43	5.91	5.73	5.90	6.22
Test Relief Cash	15.30	23.25	14.50	14.50	14.50	14.50
Open Market Sales	9.73	9.49	10.20	19.44	17.20	23.38
Food subsidy	13.59	13.89	14.61	15.85	17.00	18.39
Funds to deal with economic and natural shocks	-	0.25	50.00	49.00	50.00	20.00

Source: Finance Division.

response actions such as moving people to shelters. If the scale of the disaster exceeds available resources in a locality, authorities may request additional assistance. Support to flood-affected households may vary in duration depending on the intensity of the flood: it may be needed for several months if flooding persists, while at other times it may be shorter. In the case of the international response to the 2020 floods, three-quarters of the \$50 million received was devoted to food security and nutrition, cash and materials; the remainder was allocated to shelter and to protection-related interventions. Implementation costs amounted to 84% of the total funding, with 12% on operational expenditure and the remaining 4% on overheads.

Many DRM programmes experience big fluctuations in budget allocation between initial and revised budgets within one financial year, and also substantial adjustments from one financial year to the next. Revisions may be upwards or downwards. While expenditure of allocated budgets was not reported by respondents to be problematic, other analyses have indicated that execution of the government budget as a whole is lower than expected; a recent public expenditure review noted that in the social protection sector, budget execution is less than 80% of the revised budget, and within that, the budget utilisation for disaster-related programmes is particularly variable (World Bank, 2021; Nasrin, 2023):

Varying intensities of disasters mean that programs such as GR [Gratuitous Relief] or VGF, have hard-to-predict budget utilization. Similarly, the scale of food-based programs like OMS [Open Market Sales], FFP [Food Friendly Programme] or FFW [Food For Work] can depend on food stock availability and

need for market stabilization which varies year to year. (World Bank, 2021, p.90)

In short, the financial inputs into disaster response in Bangladesh are highly variable, as concerns the amount invested—in the original allocation, the revised budget, and actual expenditure—as well as the channel (the programme). As a result, the outputs also vary, in terms of the nature of the transfer—be it cash, food, other in-kind support or a subsidy—along with its value and duration, and the number of people they reach. Coverage can be a challenge: one estimate of the government’s response to the 2020 floods estimated that, in the first six weeks, the scale of assistance was enough to reach about 54% of flood-affected populations with rice, only 2% with cash, and about 12% with dried food (Sadique and Kamruzzaman, 2021).

One area of notable underinvestment highlighted by respondents is the shortage of budget allocations for the administration of the programme at subnational level: funding is mainly for the transfer itself, not for the material inputs such as transport, communications materials etc. This results in a limited ability for the workforce to deliver related essential activities and outputs, starting from lack of updated hazard and/or disaster maps in the pre-disaster phase, to awareness-raising and communication in the pre- and post-disaster period⁹. An interagency project, ‘Scaling up Flood Forecast-based Action and Learning in Bangladesh’ (SUFAL II), provided resources for early warning messaging and communication in selected locations, which made a big difference to awareness of imminent flooding and preparedness; people residing in locations without these investments took no early action at all when a flood was imminent,

⁹ The same limitation has been identified by other studies in relation to other social assistance programmes. For example, an analysis of the Maternity Allowance and Lactating Mother Allowance, the predecessors of the MCBP, also showed that the effective delivery of the programme was constrained by the absence of a budget for transport or for administrative personnel, which might otherwise have enabled programme monitoring (Maxwell Stamp, 2017). In the case of those programmes, 95% of the budget was devoted to the transfer itself; the study’s authors recommended an expansion of administrative expenditure so that the transfer share was proportionally reduced to 85%, which could greatly strengthen oversight and targeting, and encourage the participation of high quality NGOs in implementation.

while 33% of those in areas supported by the project took early action, most of whom felt it had reduced their post-flood recovery costs, by an average of Tk 3,500 (Oxford Policy Management, 2023). Embedding these investments in a national programme could potentially quantifiably improve outcomes.

Some changes to Gratuitous Relief and the VGF are planned or underway; these investments can be expected to generate a return, though the research team was not able to obtain data on their costs or the results to date.

Many of these reforms have been planned under the World Bank-funded Safety Net Systems for the Poorest project, including the drafting of programme manuals, improved pro-poor targeting (though recognising that Gratuitous Relief is guided by emergencies rather than just poverty levels), awareness-raising of eligibility and entitlements, and the creation of programme-level MISs (World Bank, 2013, 2023). Some investments, such as the creation of a grievance redress mechanism and improvements to monitoring, are intended to cover multiple MODMR programmes.

6.3 Investments in the life-cycle programmes

With so many established social assistance programmes dedicated to disaster response, what might be the value of a flood-response component in life-cycle programmes? As mentioned, there is no agreement as yet as to whether they should be used in this way: stakeholders are still gathering evidence. Investments since mid-2020 in programme-specific actions (as opposed to broader system-strengthening, which is covered in section 6.4 below) have been concentrated on advocacy, diagnostic studies and pilots.

Life-cycle programmes assessed by international actors for possible top-up assistance or temporary expansion if floods occur include the MODMR's EGPP and Test Relief, MOWCA's Mother and Child Benefit Programme (MCBP), and two programmes of the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Old Age Allowance and the Allowance for Widows, Deserted and Destitute Women (Widow's Allowance)¹⁰.

- The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) launched a partnership with ECHO in 2022 to pilot anticipatory action approaches

for flood response, including through social protection, but did not pre-determine which programme it would be applied to.

- Scale-up of the MCBP and EGPP is being explored by WFP in partnership with MOWCA and the MODMR respectively, given the agency's existing relationship with those ministries. A pilot is foreseen to channel international humanitarian assistance, with a view to appraising whether such an action might be relevant as part of a future government-funded response. The pilot, if floods occur during the project period, is expected to provide top-up assistance to 4,500 MCBP and 4,500 EGPP beneficiaries in four districts in the northwest.
- Scale-up of the Old Age Allowance and Widows' Allowance was assessed by the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society as a potential route for channelling its own assistance, rather than as a mechanism for adoption by the government (Sengupta and Sivanu, 2022).

Proponents of the use of life-cycle programmes in flood response perceive that

¹⁰ The EGPP provides up to 80 days of seasonal employment annually, from March to May and from October to December, for ultra-poor households during the lean season. The MCBP, Old Age Allowance and Widow's Allowance are cash transfer programmes; while they are each categorically targeted, they are not yet able to reach all people that meet the eligibility criteria but are being expanded gradually as budget allows.

they could add value in each element of the delivery chain, with the potential to generate improvements in economy, efficiency and/or effectiveness (Table 5). For international actors the particular appeal is that many of these programmes are cash-based and have recently developed digital platforms for enrolment and payment: they offer a quick way to send support to households who are known to have vulnerabilities which might be compounded by a shock, and who might risk being omitted from Gratuitous Relief support. The availability of a database of recipients offers greater transparency for monitoring of programme

effectiveness than under Gratuitous Relief, where recipients are not recorded. In addition, where top-ups are concerned, there is a perspective that providing extra assistance to programme beneficiaries can help to protect the hard-won gains already made under the programme, such that investments already made in improving household well-being are not undone as soon as there is a disaster¹¹.

Government respondents and policy documents tend to emphasise the view that the best contribution of life-cycle programmes to managing disaster risk is to continue to

Table 5. Perceived value of using life-cycle programmes for flood response

Programme	Assess	Enrol	Provide	Manage
MCBP	Ensure inclusion of women assessed as having existing vulnerabilities (if aid goes to current recipients)	Recipients already enrolled, so easy access to 1.25 million households	Benefits would be cash-wbased Can take advantage of the G2P system, with fast disbursement Assistance could help to protect the development gains made so far	Systematic monitoring and reporting using the programme MIS
EGPP	Ensure inclusion of economically vulnerable households (the seasonally unemployed)	Recipients will already be registered, even if not currently receiving assistance (EGPP unlikely to operate during the flooding)		
Old Age / Widows' Allowance	Ensure inclusion of older people	Recipients already enrolled, so easy access to 5.7 million (Old Age) and 2.5 million (Widows) recipients	Benefits would be cash-based Can take advantage of the G2P system, with fast disbursement	

Source: Authors, based on the perspectives of key informants, project proposals and reports.

¹¹ Gains could also be protected if beneficiaries of life-cycle programmes were enrolled onto regular disaster response programmes; however, the risk that such individuals may be intentionally excluded rather than included into the programmes leads some agencies to prefer the top-up as a more secure means of reaching those populations.

improve their regular functioning all year round, helping to build people’s resilience.

This could be done by, for example, extending coverage of regular programmes in flood-prone areas, or using the EGPP to build flood defences (General Economics Division, 2020b; MODMR, 2021). The MODMR does not currently favour using the EGPP database to select households for flood assistance as it could set a precedent for beneficiaries of a public works programme to receive assistance without the work requirement, given that the timing of floods is not likely to coincide with the usual seasonal timing of the EGPP. The Finance Division has no objection to life-cycle programmes using a portion of their resources for disaster response, if they wish, but does not expect to direct any of its own resources through those channels for that purpose given that several dedicated programmes exist; this would imply that the policy option may best suit international agencies wishing to disburse their own resources via the national system, even if not subsequently adopted by the government. The approval of the 2024 guidelines for adaptive social protection may shift the balance more

towards inclusion of risk-informed components in these life-cycle programmes.

International agencies such as WFP also recognise the value of life-cycle programmes for routinely building resilience to shocks.

Reforms to expand coverage and improve the effectiveness of the core programmes can be expected to be beneficial in the event of floods. For example, the MCBP is undergoing continual and rapid evolution. A streamlined series of steps is being institutionalised, starting with awareness campaigns, followed by on-demand registration by pregnant women or mothers, speedy verification and approval of eligible applications and prompt payment of transfers. Questions regarding major investments such as the size and skillset of the workforce at local level are being worked out: these could have an impact on the availability of resources during a disaster. Many improvements to delivery systems are being developed via the MCBP and other programmes with the intention of them becoming available sectorwide. These are discussed next.

6.4 Investments in linkages between programmes

The third route to improving social protection for flood response—investing in the linkages *between* programmes—requires time and coordination, but not necessarily much additional expenditure other than the investments in system-strengthening already discussed, such as ensuring interoperability of MISs.

For example, records from the beneficiary list of the MCBP could be shared with implementers of Gratuitous Relief in a flood-affected area to ensure that current beneficiaries were included for additional support, even if the MCBP itself were not the channel for the extra funding.

6.5 Investments in system-strengthening

Very substantial investments have been made in recent years to strengthen the delivery systems used across multiple social protection programmes. Results are starting to be seen, including in relation to the efficiency and effectiveness of flood response.

SYSTEMS TO 'ASSESS'

1. **Risk assessment / hazard mapping.** The DDM has developed tools to assess hazard risks in urban and rural areas, and coordinates with national and international NGOs to apply them. CARE is supporting the government to invest in community risk assessments and risk reduction plans.
2. **Systems for forecasting, early warning and community-level actions.** These are being developed by SUFAL II, funded by ECHO and implemented by CARE, Concern Worldwide and Islamic Relief. In Gaibandha district, for example, a well structured early warning system meant that the district, upazilas, unions and communities received warning of a flood simultaneously from the MODMR, the Flood Forecasting Warning Centre and the Indian embassy. The return has been greater awareness of approaching floods and consequent early action in SUFAL II-supported areas compared with control areas, as noted above. Officials began to act on the basis of their roles in the Standing Orders on Disaster, such as by activating the union and ward-level disaster management committees, while some community members took actions such as preserving dry food and cooking fuel, saving livestock or building barriers around their crops. However, no financial resources are currently available for early warning within national social assistance programmes as local authorities cannot incur expenditure before the disaster. Union parishad members

reported funding any such activities, if undertaken at all, at their personal expense.

3. **Triggers for funding.** Investments have been made in a trigger system for forecast-based financing, developed under the Forecast-Based Financing / Anticipatory Action task force in 2019. The trigger was activated in the floods in July 2020. Its efficiency has been measured in terms of timeliness: international funds were released by the UN Central Emergency Response Fund within four hours of the thresholds being met, an achievement that is claimed as the, 'fastest disbursement of such funds in UN history' (FAO, 2023, p.5).

SYSTEMS TO 'ENROL'

Digital platforms for enrolment. Each social assistance programme is developing its own MIS, with work ongoing to make them interoperable via a 'single registry', so ministries can maintain their own databases while being able to cross-reference them. The single registry itself is a low-cost investment being developed in-house by the Finance Division with the support of one consultant. Although these platforms have not yet been drawn on for flood response, the intended return on investment with respect to efficient and effective enrolment is twofold:

- **Timeliness:** the intention is for self-registration, whereby people apply to programmes in their own time at a local Union Digital Centre¹². In a disaster this could reduce the burden of rapid registration at the moment of the flood (such as through georeferencing data that identifies whether the household is in a flood-affected ward).
- **Coverage:** the number of people who apply for a life-cycle programme, and whose details may be made available, far exceeds the

¹² Union Digital Centres are one-stop outlet for online and digital public services of all sorts including e.g. birth and death registration, passport applications, bill payments etc. See e.g. A2I, 2022. Using this system for disaster response would therefore be building on integrated systems that go beyond even social protection.

number of actual recipients. For example, some 23 million people applied to the Vulnerable Women's Benefit, though only 1 million are enrolled. The larger dataset could enable greater inclusion in other schemes.

The advantages of digital enrolment would not need to be confined to life-cycle programmes if the MODMR's covariate risk programmes were also to adopt it, although some respondents were hesitant about relying solely on an electronic database for enrolment information if connectivity were disrupted in the disaster.

SYSTEMS TO 'PROVIDE'

G2P. The G2P system is a major contribution to the efficiency of cash-based interventions. Launched in 2021 and now reaching 31 million recipients of cash transfers across 26 programmes, it has been hailed by the government as a 'miraculous solution' to the distribution of benefits, demonstrating its worth for 'quick and easily monitorable' disbursements during the COVID lockdown (Hasan, 2022, p.11; Finance Division, 2023). It has numerous efficiency gains for both the government and recipients:

- Previously, government funds would be released from the exchequer to banks to await disbursement sometimes several months in advance. Costs are directly saved through the reduction in administrative costs of passing the funds from the centre to commercial banks. More than that, there is a far bigger implicit saving because, with G2P, money leaves the government's bank account only at the moment it is paid to the beneficiary, so it can accrue interest for longer. Savings from direct and implicit bank charges alone are estimated at Tk 5.4 billion in the first year of operation in seven main programmes (WFP, 2021b)¹³.
- The system not only delivers the cash but keeps records, with automatic error checks. This helps eliminate data entry errors that

might occur with an Excel-based system.

- The G2P system requires verification of identities and bank accounts. This has eliminated several million 'ghost' beneficiaries and duplicate records. It also means that the recipients are known, which could facilitate analysis of targeting accuracy and the identification of inclusion or exclusion errors.
- Recipients can now generally obtain their support without leaving their village, such as through a mobile money provider; and the cash-out charge is capped at 0.7% of the transfer value (as the government subsidises the commercial rate). Previously, and especially where people had to travel to collect physical cash, it could cost several hundred taka to access a benefit; the journey might have entailed going to the upazila or district, perhaps even accompanied by another person or having to stay overnight.

Despite the system's numerous advantages, its value can, of course, only be realised for programmes that pay cash. In-kind assistance will continue to play an important role in flood relief and also merits investment. Moreover, the research team did not manage to identify where and how the efficiency savings made from these reforms are being re-invested, i.e. whether they are retained within the respective programmes (such as to extend coverage) or used for further system development.

SYSTEMS TO 'MANAGE'

Grievance redress and M&E. Integrated systems for day-to-day programme management are planned but not yet functioning. Some grievance redress systems exist for certain programmes, but there is little awareness of their availability. The intention in establishing a stronger system is to improve outputs and outcomes, including by flagging inclusion and exclusion errors.

¹³ The transfers themselves were estimated to amount to Tk 100 billion during 2020–21. Administrative costs of disbursement are estimated at Tk 6 billion under the previous payment system, and Tk 0.7 billion under G2P—reducing administrative costs by a factor of 10. This assumes that money is withdrawn from the Treasury and was sitting in a commercial bank account for an average of 4–6 months before the G2P system was introduced; deprived of these funds, the government is assumed to have had to borrow from the Treasury which imposed a further cost.

7. Funding and workforce: the inputs that drive results

7.1 Financial resources and funding mechanisms

In any policy area, efficiency and effectiveness are influenced not just by the level of funding but by its allocation and budget execution.

Planning for responses to disasters such as floods presents greater challenges than in many other areas of public policy, given the inherent uncertainty as to how much assistance will be needed, if at all, and in what locations. For this reason, and with the frequency and intensity of shocks being on the rise, there is increasing attention globally on improving disaster risk financing mechanisms. The Government of Bangladesh is tackling these challenges in a number of ways.

EXPERIENCES WITH THE BUDGET PROCESS FOR CORE DRM PROGRAMMES

As noted in section 6.2, subnational authorities are allocated a budget via the MODMR at the start of the financial year, with the option to submit requests for additional ad-hoc support to the Finance Division if demand outstrips the available budget. The annual budget cycle includes consultations between line ministries, the Planning Commission and the Finance Division, with a committee meeting in April to finalise the budget. Budgets for disaster response are allocated to districts using a formula that to some extent takes into account the vulnerability of the population and its exposure to hazards.

A National Disaster Emergency Fund was set up in 2021 to provide a facility for securing funds for disaster response, in addition to those in the regular budget. Governed by

the Disaster Management (Fund Management) Rules 2021, it is a special account that exists at national level and also in each of the 64 districts. International and national NGOs and agencies, private entities and others are entitled to put money into the fund, with the district Deputy Commissioner overseeing disbursement, using committees to determine how to distribute the funds among locations. The research team was not able to ascertain the extent to which these funds are yet active or resourced: and, anecdotally, some hesitation was expressed as to whether contributors might expect some kind of reciprocity.

The timely release of budget allocations from national to subnational level is, of course, crucial for emergency preparedness and for facilitating prompt action. With respect to flooding a smooth process is particularly important, because the financial year begins in July, just when the risk of monsoon floods is very high. Previously the government experienced challenges with the release of funds at the start of the year, but respondents indicated that this process had improved over the last few years, such that officials can start incurring expenditure within days of the beginning of the financial year.

A second issue about timeliness concerns the onward disbursement of the funds to populations in need. Here there is a constraint, as there is currently no mechanism to allow assistance to be distributed in advance of a shock, even if the flood or other adverse weather event is foreseen a few days in advance. The task force on forecast-based financing and anticipatory action is continuing to work on this aspect.

The forthcoming adaptive social protection guidelines recognise that retaining flexibility in funding is paramount, in terms of both budget size and its allocation. To achieve this they note that it may be valuable to diversify funding sources, enhance the use of contingency funds, and create a regulatory framework that permits rapid reallocation of resources in response to changing circumstances.

LIMITED OPPORTUNITY AS YET FOR LEVERAGING LIFE-CYCLE PROGRAMME BUDGETS

While other line ministries are allocated budgets for their regular social assistance

7.2 Workforce

We have seen that the workforce for managing disaster response, including the delivery of assistance, is drawn from several functions¹⁴. The DDM's workforce at local level—the District Relief and Rehabilitation Officers and Upazila Project Implementation Officers—work alongside local government officials (the deputy commissioner at district level, and the Upazila Nirbahi Officer) as well as counterparts from many other ministries and departments, ranging from agriculture and livestock to engineering and energy, to education, health and social services. They come together in the disaster management committees which are one of a number of sectoral standing committees that support delivery of public services throughout the country. At union level, where not all ministries have staff, many of the committee members are respected members of the local community, acting in voluntary capacity.

The cross-functional composition of the committees is intentional. The approach aims to strengthen local governance by promoting accountability and encouraging participation from community members in the management

schemes, they do not automatically receive additional support for scale-up during a shock. The Finance Division considers that the extra demand is catered for by the provision of the disaster response programmes. However, line ministries can choose to allocate their own budgets as they see fit: there is no official exclusion of the concept that a life-cycle programme such as the MCBP could provide extra assistance in a flood if it chose to. Meanwhile, as recognised by many national policies, it remains important for the life-cycle programmes to continue to expand coverage for routine social protection, as an efficient way to build resilience to future shocks.

of local services, capitalizing on their different experiences.

The trade-off is that committee members mostly work voluntarily, and not all are active. All efforts are greatly appreciated, and respondents indicated that sometimes committee members take actions at their own expense, such as to raise awareness of imminent shocks, or to help people and livestock reach places of safety. Moreover, when a disaster happens, actions are not confined to people with a position on a committee: there is a collective effort to respond, with many people contributing simply in their capacity as members of the community. However, in a voluntary system it becomes difficult to obligate participants to make the system more efficient or comprehensive, or to undertake tasks that are currently done less often. The time taken to implement all aspects of a programme, such as targeting, monitoring and addressing grievances, is not estimated or budgeted for, and there is not a dedicated workforce to carry out these activities fully. This reduces programme costs, but potentially at the expense of enhanced efficiency or effectiveness.

¹⁴ See section 5.4 above.

Among the options for investing in social protection for better flood response, would any bring additional manpower?

It is not clear that they would yet. The representatives of MOWCA and the Ministry of Social Welfare at district and upazila level already serve on the disaster management committees, and the ministries and departments have roles identified in the Standing Orders on Disaster. So, bringing in a greater role for life-cycle programmes, and the different ministries that run them, would not necessarily increase the workforce available for flood response. However, two options might add value

1. Reforms being explored for the improvement of the regular social protection programmes might present an opportunity. In particular, MOWCA currently has no staff below the upazila level, but a union-level additional workforce is being considered. If approved and implemented, this strengthening of the regular social protection system could be beneficial in the event of a shock, bringing additional professional staff into a response.
2. Where the workforce of other ministries engage with people at community level in the course of implementing other social protection programmes, they might have the possibility to raise awareness of disaster response schemes, or refer applicants to the right channels for support.



8. Conclusions

In response to the overall research question, *‘What are the implications (both positive and negative) of using government social protection systems and programmes as a vehicle for responding to river flooding in Bangladesh, in terms of contributing to a cost-efficient, high quality response?’*, this research has found the following:

1. **The normative context is quite favourable.**
 - **DRM has long been a part of social protection.** Programmes to respond to disasters, including floods, are considered part of the social protection system, so the use of social protection does not represent a departure from standard practice. Within the national system there are numerous ways of making use of social protection in emergencies, and there are still options for improving cost-efficiency and quality of the response.
 - **The policy environment is favourable, while rightly emphasising that a main role of social protection in disasters is to build resilience and address chronic vulnerability.** The strategic direction of the NSSS and its action plans, the Standing Orders on Disaster and the guidelines on adaptive social protection, provide a basis in principle for promoting the use of social protection systems and programmes post-disaster, and is favourable towards system improvements including the greater use of digital approaches for registration and payment, and the flexible scale-up of life-cycle programmes if relevant. At the same time, many policy documents recognise the importance of expanding the coverage of regular social protection programmes to help reduce people’s vulnerability for the long term.
- **Reform of core DRM programmes is not a focus among policy implementers or international partners.** The main disaster response programmes, especially Gratuitous Relief, have been touched to some extent by broader projects of reform and technical support to the MODMR, but are not a focus of policy attention. Since COVID-19 the government has moving towards delivering additional post-disaster assistance through new routes, including by programmes led by the Finance Division; international actors are focusing more on applying disaster-related scale-ups to life-cycle programmes and improving the systems that serve the whole social protection sector.
2. **While neither the inputs devoted to responding to floods through social protection, nor the results, can be quantified owing to programme design, many of the broader investments in social protection have the prospect for adding value to the cost-efficiency and quality of future responses.**
 - **Disaster response programmes do not track recipients or results.** The Gratuitous Relief programme, and some others for disaster response within the social protection budget, are entitled to be used for many different purposes including to distribute food to households during festivals as well as for response to flooding, cyclones or other hazards. The households or individuals who receive assistance are not recorded.
 - **The latest reforms to social protection delivery systems may support improved cost-efficiency and programme in future, though the DRM programmes are not strongly connected to them; life-cycle programmes have stronger**

links. Investments in MISs have benefited many social protection programmes. If the Gratuitous Relief programme were to begin to maintain records as to which households have received assistance and for what disaster, it could certainly take advantage, not only in terms of the prior investments in hardware and software but also by drawing on data from other programmes to identify gaps in assistance and reduce duplication. Other recent efficiency gains in the national social protection system relate to cash-based programmes, such as the huge increase in G2P payments that go directly from the central government to beneficiary accounts. Gratuitous Relief predominantly offers food and other in-kind assistance and so is not yet linked to these reforms. However, if (typically cash-based) life-cycle programmes begin to be increasingly used for flexible scale-up in disasters, the investments made in the overall system may deliver benefits for post-disaster response as well.

- **Adjustments to the categorisation of social protection programmes could enhance the identification of financial resources devoted to flood response and other shocks.** To more clearly identify the resources invested in DRM in general within the social protection budget, it would be valuable to reach agreement as to which programmes fall under the category of responding to covariate risks, in whole or in part. Understanding budget allocations and expenditure for flood response, in particular, would entail more detailed reporting from the union level upwards about the objectives for which the Gratuitous Relief and other funds have been spent, since the budget for disaster relief activities cannot be allocated to specific types of shock in advance; and most programmes that support people affected by disasters also serve many other purposes.

3. Costs are not driven by whether or not

flood response is counted as being part of the social protection sector; but in general, the resources invested in administration of the programmes is reported to be low.

- **Disaster response programmes are funded partly by dedicated budget lines, and partly through requests for additional support during the year.**
 - **A strengthened role for social protection would probably not entail any change in the human resources available to deliver assistance.** The workforce for supporting flood response at local level is drawn from numerous functions thanks to the approach of convening committees. Social protection and DRM actors are already included in these committees, and no change is expected to the social protection workforce in the near future. Much of the system relies on the contribution of local volunteers.
 - **Improvements to the quality of the response might require an increase in resources to support programme administration locally.** Investments could enable updates to hazard mapping, increased travel for raising awareness of imminent shocks and of the programme, as well as enhanced monitoring and reporting.
4. **Four options have been identified for improving the quality of disaster response through social protection, including for floods: investing in core DRM programmes, investing in life-cycle programmes, investing in links between programmes and investing in the systems that support the sector overall.** Actions in these respective areas can include increasing the administrative resources for Gratuitous Relief; ensuring that recipients of life-cycle programmes are not excluded from disaster response; and connecting disaster response programmes with the MISs and other ongoing reforms of the sector as a whole.

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Annex B: Acronyms

DDM	Department of Disaster Management	M&E	monitoring and evaluation
DRM	disaster risk management	MIS	management information system
DWA	Department of Women's Affairs	MODMR	Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief
ECHO	European Commission Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations department	MOEFCC	Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change
EGPP	Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest	MOWCA	Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation	NGO	non-governmental organisation
G2P	government-to-person	NSSS	National Social Security Strategy
GDP	gross domestic product	UN	United Nations
MCBP	Mother and Child Benefit Programme	VGF	Vulnerable Group Feeding
		WFP	World Food Programme

Annex C: List of interviewees

Name	Agency	Position
Mohamad Khaled Hasan	Cabinet Division	Joint Secretary
Md. Tarikul Islam Khan Budget Management Unit	Finance Division	Joint Secretary (Budget 3), Social Protection
Md. Touheedul Islam Budget Management Unit	Finance Division	Deputy Secretary (Budget 3), Social Protection
Md. Rajibul Ahsan	Finance Division	Deputy Secretary
Netai Chandra Dey Sarkar	MODMR (DDM)	Joint Secretary
Md. Moniruzzaman	MODMR (DDM)	Project director (Additional secretary), Safety Net Systems for the Poorest—Strengthening of the MODMR Program Administration Project
Sufia Nazim	MOWCA	Joint Secretary
Farida Yesmin	MOWCA	Deputy Secretary
Rubina Ghani	MOWCA (DWA)	Asst Programme Director, MCBP
Reba Amin	MOWCA (DWA)	Programme Officer, MCBP
Nasima Begum	MOWCA (DWA)	Programme Officer, MCBP
Naznin Sultana	MOWCA (DWA)	Programme Officer, MCBP
Md. Saidul Arif	Kurigram	Deputy Commissioner and District Magistrate
Md. Abdul Hai Sarkar	Kurigram	District Relief and Rehabilitation Officer
Rasedul Hasan	Kurigram Sadar, Kurigram	Upazila Nirbahi Officer
Md. Rafiul Alam	Chilmari, Kurigram	Upazila Nirbahi Officer
Md. Mosharrof Hossain	Chilmari, Kurigram	Project Implementation Officer (PIO)
Sokhina Khatun	Chilmari, Kurigram	Upazila Women's Affairs Officer
Md. Dewan Moudud	Gaibandha	ADC General
Md. Ishaq Ali	Saghata, Gaibandha	Upazila Nirbahi Officer
Mr. Mithun Kundu	Saghata, Gaibandha	Project Implementation Officer (PIO)
Md. Mosharraf Hossain	Saghata, Gaibandha	Chairman
Md. Shahriar Rahman	Fulchari, Gaibandha	Upazila Nirbahi Officer
Md. Shahid Uz zaman	Fulchari, Gaibandha	Project Implementation Officer (PIO)
Mst. Papia Sultana	Fulchari, Gaibandha	Upazila Women's Affairs Officer
Md. Golam Mostofa Kamal Pasha	Fulchari, Gaibandha	Chairman
Nargis Jahan	Gaibandha	Deputy Director, DWA
Md. Mohsin	WFP	Senior Partnerships Advisor
Mazharul Aziz	FAO	National Programme Specialist
Kazi Rabeya Ame	CARE Bangladesh	Senior Consortium Coordinator- SUFAL
Kaiser Rejve	CARE Bangladesh	Director, Humanitarian and Resilience
Faiem Ahmed	German Red Cross	Senior officer
Tahera Akter	German Red Cross	Knowledge management, Anticipatory Action
Sayanti Sangupta	Red Cross Climate Centre	Consultant
Kavim Bhatnagar	Ecorys	Senior Consultant PFM and Social Protection
Aminul Mohaimen	Ecorys	Senior MIS Expert in PFM and Social Security

World Food Programme

Via Cesare Giulio Viola 68/70,
00148 Rome, Italy - T +39 06 65131

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