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WFP's support to strengthening the national social protection system in Bangladesh

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Acronyms

CO	Country office
CSP	Country strategic plan
G2P	Government to person
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
KII	Key informant interview
MIS	Management Information System
NSSS	National Social Security Strategy
VGD	Vulnerable Group Development
VGf	Vulnerable Group Feeding
VWB	Vulnerable Women Benefit
WFP	World Food Programme



1. Introduction

This case study reviews the World Food Programme's (WFP) support to social protection in Bangladesh over the last decade. It assesses how WFP has supported the building blocks of Bangladesh's social protection system and delineates lessons learned, particularly in the context of the Vulnerable Women Benefit (VWB) programme and the national School Feeding programme. This is a light-touch exercise, undertaken through a rapid literature review and interviews with WFP staff and government officials.

2. Context

Country Context

Since gaining independence in 1971, Bangladesh has transformed from one of the poorest nations in the world to a lower middle-income country by 2015. It is now on track to exit the UN's 'Least Developed Countries (LDC)' list by 2026. The country has made remarkable progress in reducing poverty, with the national poverty rate dropping from 48.9 percent in 2000 to 18.7 percent by 2022 (Schutter 2023: 2).

One of the most densely populated countries, Bangladesh has a population of 165 million people (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2023). The literacy rate stands at 74.6 percent, with 76.56 percent of males and 72.82 percent of females being literate (ibid). Classified as a 'lower middle income' country, Bangladesh ranked 129th out of 190 countries on the Human Development Index in 2021-2022 (WFP 2023a). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was one of the world's fastest-growing economies, with an average GDP growth rate of 8.2 percent. However, this growth dropped to 6 percent in the 2023-2024 fiscal year (World Bank 2023). The country's labour force in 2023 comprised 73.21 million people, with 48.19 million men and 25.02 million women (Labour Force Survey, 2023).

Despite these positive trends, inequality is still a challenge. The Gini coefficient indicates that

income inequality increased from 0.45 in 2010 to 0.49 in 2022 while consumption inequality increased 0.32 to 0.33 in the same timeframe (Schutter 2023). Furthermore, a study from 2020 found that the economic shock of Covid-19 led to an estimated 22.8 percent of the country's population becoming 'new poor' in April 2020, i.e., people whose incomes fell into poverty for the first time due to an event (PPRC-BIGD 2020). Further studies on the 'new poor' found that these households were less able to find alternative livelihoods and access social protection and therefore were less likely to escape poverty (Raihan et al. 2021).

Bangladesh is recognized to have improved nutrition in a very sustained manner. For example, childhood stunting among children under 5 decreased from 60 percent in 1997 to 24 percent in 2022 (BDHS 2022). However, 51 million people, which is nearly 33 percent of the country's population, are food insecure. Of these, 11 million face acute hunger, positioning Bangladesh at the 81st rank out of 121 countries on the Global Hunger Index (WFP 2023a).

Bangladesh is at high risk of natural hazards due to climate change. It ranks 9th out of 193 in the World Risk Index which ranks countries based on risk of disasters (Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft and IFHV 2023). The index accounts for

exposure, vulnerability, and susceptibility to risk, as well as lack of coping capacities and lack of adaptive capacities. Bangladesh scores highly on all these parameters, reflecting its heightened vulnerability to climate-related hazards. Between 1980 and 2019, Bangladesh faced 252 weather and climate related disasters which resulted in 163,738 deaths and affected 60 million people (Hebbar and Shebab, 2020). Of these 252 disasters, storms and floods were the most common. These shocks have significant impacts on poverty and increase the vulnerabilities of the population. Evidence from previously undertaken research has found that households are unable to absorb the shocks from these disasters in the short-term leading to loss of assets, lower income particularly in agriculture, and reduction in household expenditure on education. Social protection systems in Bangladesh are linked to disaster management since some of the earliest work on social protection was relief work on disasters and rehabilitation (ibid).

Social protection context

Social protection¹ is embedded in the country's National Constitution (1972) Part II Article 15 (d) which states that citizens have *'the right to social security, that is to say, to public assistance in cases of undeserved want arising from unemployment, illness or disablement, or suffered by widows or orphans or in old age, or in other such cases'* (GoPRB 1972: 6). The Constitution also states that improving the nutritional status and public health are "among its primary duties" (ibid). Several policy documents have highlighted the government's commitment to reducing poverty and promoting inclusive growth. This includes the Perspective Plan of Bangladesh (2010–2021), the Sixth Five-Year Plan (2011–2015), the Seventh Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) and the Eighth Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) (Planning

Commission 2011, 2012, 2015b, 2015a). The 2015 National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) was also a step in the direction of building a welfare state. While the NSSS explicitly articulates the government's commitment to reducing poverty and inequality in the country, the new long-term planning document called Vision 2041 aims to end poverty (Bangladesh Planning Commission 2020). It expressed the shift to a lifecycle approach towards social protection which is widely accepted. This approach acknowledges that social protection should cover both risks and vulnerabilities across one's lifecycle from childbirth to old age (Bangladesh Planning Commission 2020; Planning Commission 2015). The NSSS has led to the formation of five thematic clusters to cover existing social protection programmes which include social allowance, food security and disaster assistance, social insurance, labour and livelihood intervention, and human development and social empowerment (Phelps and Taylor: 22). Each of these clusters is led by a ministry which is responsible for coordination. The clusters also have a Central Monitoring Committee under the Cabinet Division for coordination between the ministries (ibid). The Cabinet Division is the executive branch of the Prime Minister's Office which coordinates all the ministries. A new iteration of NSSS is scheduled to be released in 2026: it is expected to improve the interoperability of Information Management Systems, develop a single registry, strengthen the government-to-person (G2P) payment system, improve the selection of programme participants, increase and improve grievance and complaints mechanisms as well as strengthen the result-based monitoring and evaluation system (Phelps and Taylor 2023: 5).

Most social protection programmes focus on food distribution and cash transfers, accounting to close to 2.5 percent of the national GDP (Bangladesh Planning Commission 2023). One of the challenges in delivering social protection is the

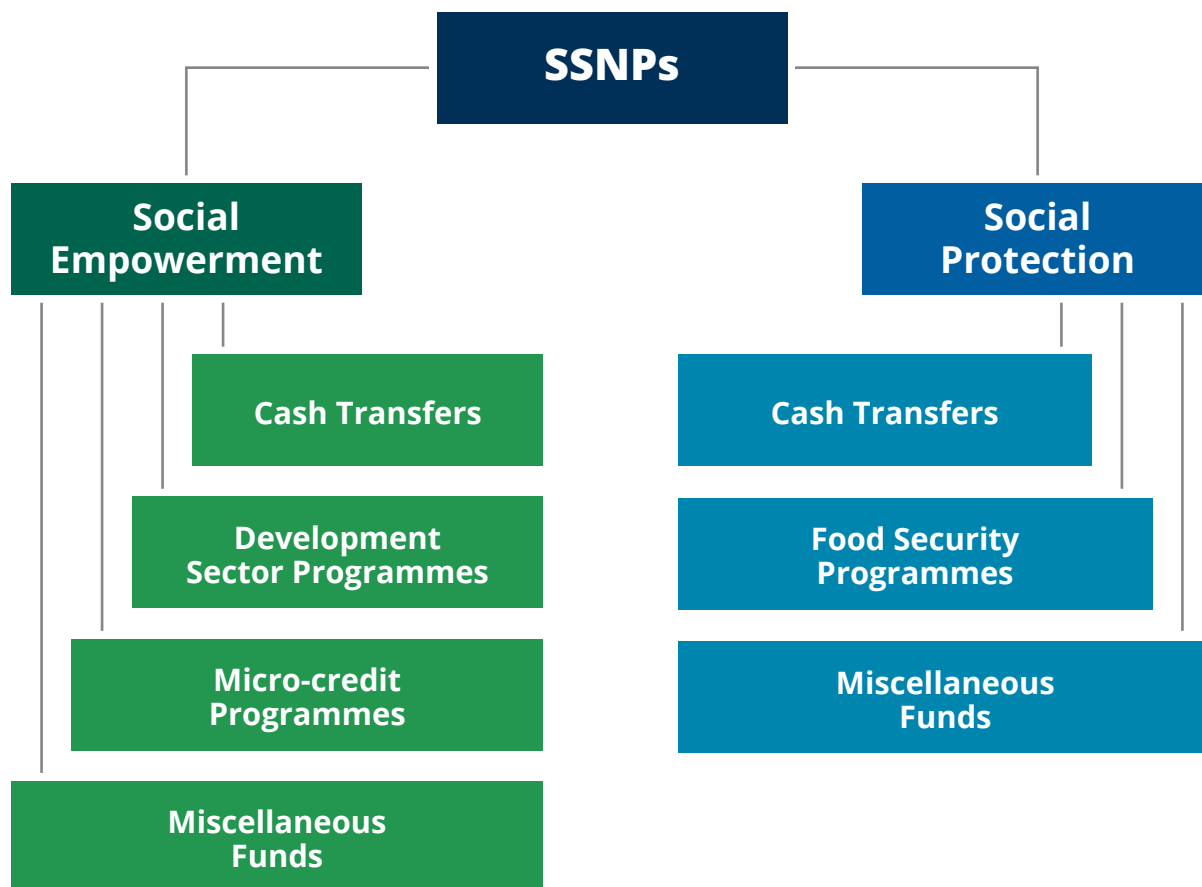
¹ A common interagency definition describes social protection as the "policies and programmes aimed at preventing and protecting people against poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout their life [...] with a particular emphasis on vulnerable groups (ISPA, 2016; SPIAC-B, 2019). Social protection strategies include: social assistance (non-contributory support to vulnerable individuals), social insurance (contributory protection against social and economic risks), and labour market policies (support for employment and worker protection).

coordination between the programmes (Planning Commission 2015). To resolve this, international agencies and Development Partners (DPs) are working with the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) to develop a unified social protection system. The government stated that there is a strong political commitment to develop Bangladesh into a welfare state (ibid: ii). While social protection programmes are recognized to have helped reduce poverty, a large section of people in situations of poverty and vulnerability do not have access to these programmes, which is recognized by the government. Other concerns regarding the state of social protection programmes include the relatively limited adequacy of benefits, leakage of funds, and the repeated access to support by non-poor (ineligible) households, also known as inclusion errors. These issues undermine the overall effectiveness of the social protection

system (Planning Commission 2015). This is further substantiated by survey data from 2016 which had revealed both exclusion and inclusion errors as key challenges (HIES 2016 in Razzaque and Rahman 2019).

The NSSS has medium-term goals of shifting from a “discretionary approach to a targeted universal approach” to avoid leakages and poor coverage, improve Management Information Systems (MIS), expand the coverage of core schemes for the extreme poor and most vulnerable populations while targeting different populations by age, disabilities, gender, geographic location, among others (Planning Commission 2015: xxi). Improving income security for poor women, eliminating extreme poverty to the extent possible and scale up ‘graduation’ programmes are some of the crucial goals of NSSS.

Figure 1: Typology of Social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) in Bangladesh



Source: Phelps and Taylor (2023)

Since the early 2000s, Bangladesh has moved away from focusing on food provision to a more comprehensive approach that includes addressing nutritional needs and promoting overall health and well-being. For example, the National Food Policy (2006) had three main objectives which include 1) an adequate and safe supply of stable and nutritious food, 2) increased purchasing power, and 3) access to food, and adequate nutrition for all (MFDM 2008). The strategy also highlighted the importance of increasing purchasing power for overall health and well-being. The National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (2020) draws attention to food and nutrition security as key policy areas as well. This was the first policy in Bangladesh which integrated food and nutrition security (Ministry of Food 2021).

Bangladesh's social protection system faces multiple challenges. The disparate nature of the social security system with over one hundred programmes makes coordination between

the multiple line ministries taxing. Broader challenges include but are not limited to ensuring accurate targeting, reducing leakages, and boosting funding for the programmes among others (Planning Commission 2015). The NSSS recognizes that despite poverty reduction measures, a significant section of the population is vulnerable to falling back into poverty and that social protection programmes are aimed at supporting this group in absorbing shocks and avoid such setbacks. One analysis of Bangladesh's social protection system in 2020 found that of the existing 125 programmes that year², 10 programmes accounted for 59 percent of the total budget allocated to social protection (Hebbar and Shebab 2020). The remaining programmes were smaller, not considered scalable and had overlapping targets (ibid). Better programme integration was part of the mandate of the NSSS . Additionally, the social protection system focuses largely on rural areas and is not robust in the urban areas (Planning Commission 2015).



² The number of social protection programmes have reduced from 125 to 114 between 2019 and 2023.

3. WFP's objectives and role

WFP has been active in Bangladesh since 1974, initially operating as a welfare relief organization focused on centre-based feeding programs, and supported approximately 155 million people through its various programmes (WFP, 2023a). However, as Bangladesh's economy gradually progressed, the nature of WFP's assistance evolved. By the late 2000s, WFP Bangladesh transitioned into an enabling organization, focusing on providing technical assistance to the government rather than just direct implementation. This shift allowed WFP to adopt a more strategic approach to resource utilization, emphasizing support for the government's efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero Hunger. But despite this shift, WFP has continued to play a direct role in implementing programs that address food security, nutrition, livelihoods,

and humanitarian assistance, particularly in response to emergencies.³

WFP Bangladesh has established itself as a trusted partner of the government, offering policy, strategic, and technical assistance while building capacity to strengthen the national social protection system. Its efforts have focused on enhancing and scaling up the Mother and Child Benefit Programme (MCBP) nationwide, as well as improving the design of the Vulnerable Women Benefit (VWB) programme to advance women's financial inclusion and economic empowerment. In collaboration with the government, WFP has worked to integrate nutrition and shock-responsive elements into these programs, aiming to address malnutrition and mitigate the impacts of large-scale shocks and stressors.



3 Key Informant Interview (KII) 1, WFP Bangladesh Senior Staff, December 2023

Additionally, WFP plays a key role in implementing digital innovations, improving social protection information systems, facilitating G2P payments, and promoting financial inclusion.

WFP Bangladesh’s Country Strategic Plan (CSP) for 2022–2026 aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for Bangladesh, the eighth Five-Year Plan (2020–2025), and WFP’s Strategy for Support to Social Protection. This alignment reflects WFP’s corporate vision and commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2 on Zero Hunger and SDG 17 on Partnerships by 2030. WFP’s global social protection strategy has two overarching priorities: first, supporting social protection systems that enable people to meet their food security, nutrition, and associated essential needs; and second, helping people manage risks and shocks. To achieve these goals,

WFP focuses on strengthening national systems and programs while aligning its own initiatives with the broader national social protection framework. Consistent with the strategy, the CSP emphasizes contributing to SDGs 2 and 17 through collaborative, system-strengthening efforts designed to enhance resilience and sustainability.

The strategic outcomes of WFP Bangladesh’s CSP center on improving food security and nutrition, with a particular focus on women, children, and vulnerable groups. They also emphasize social protection that is both nutrition-sensitive and shock-responsive, alongside robust emergency preparedness and response. These outcomes are underpinned by four cross-cutting themes: strengthening national capacities, enhancing food systems, advancing nutrition outcomes, and fostering data innovation.

Table 1: WFP Bangladesh 2022-2026 CSP’s Strategic Outcomes.

Serial No	Strategic Outcome
1	Populations affected by crisis in Bangladesh are able to meet basic food, nutrition and other essential needs during and after crises.
2	By 2026, the nutrition needs of women, children and vulnerable groups in Bangladesh are met through national institutions that have enhanced capacities to design and implement gender- and nutrition-sensitive social safety net programmes.
3	By 2026, vulnerable communities in Bangladesh are more resilient to shocks and natural disasters owing to enhanced national disaster management capacity and flexible nutrition- and gender-sensitive social safety net programmes.
4	Vulnerable crisis-affected populations in Bangladesh benefit from enhanced coordination and improved common services during and after crises.

Aligned with the Country Strategic Plan (CSP) and other key strategies, WFP has played a pivotal role in providing technical assistance to the design and implementation of Bangladesh’s social protection and food security policies, supporting the government in achieving its objectives. Notable contributions include WFP’s involvement

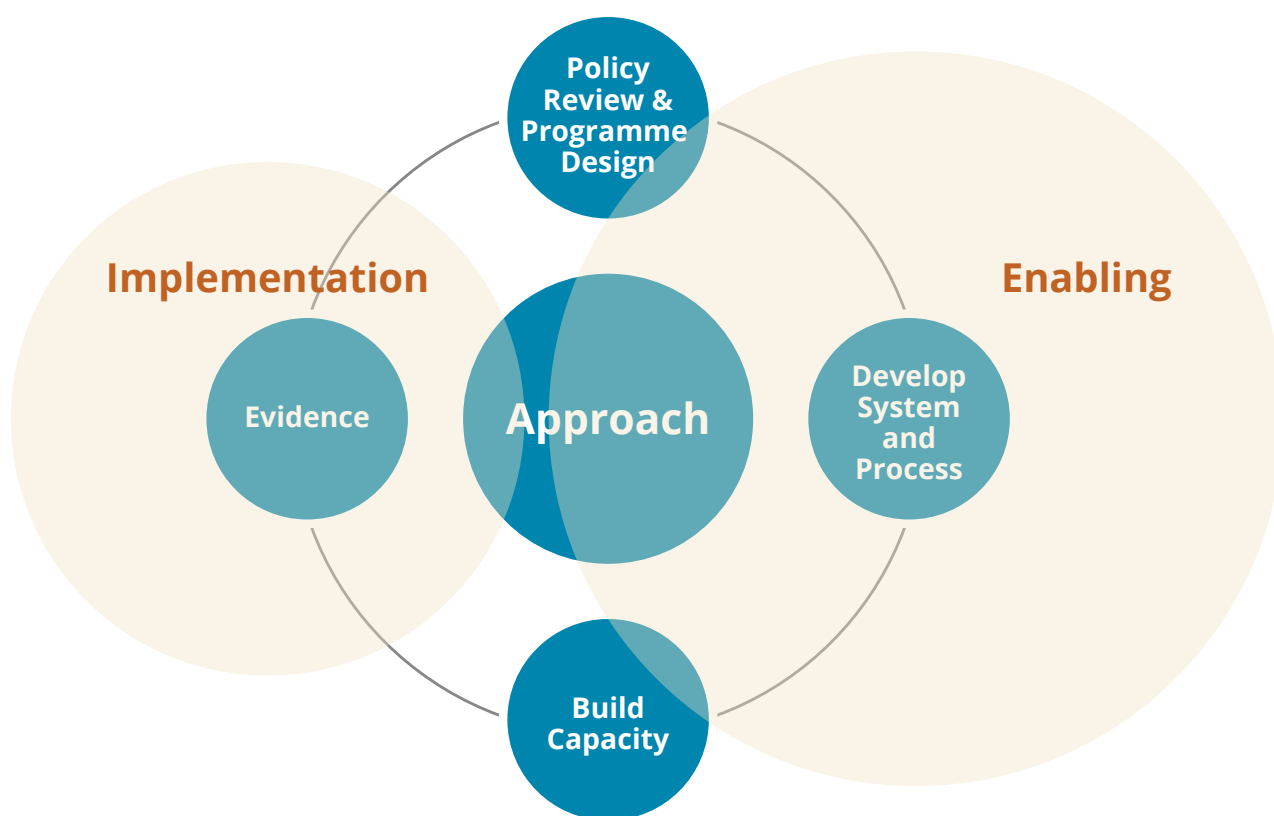
in the development of the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) in 2015 and its significant role in designing the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programme, particularly the Investment Component of the VGD (ICVGD). WFP has also pioneered initiatives that have been handed over to the government, such as the previously WFP-

managed School Feeding programme. Additionally, WFP has supported the government in enhancing programme targeting, improving the Government-to-Person (G2P) system⁴ and strengthening the social protection MIS.⁵ Furthermore, WFP provided technical assistance to introduce the Mother and Child Benefit Programme in 2019 and has been involved in enhancing both its design and implementation.

WFP has also adopted a capacity-strengthening approach which helped distinguish its activities and role between that of a direct implementer and an enabler in support of social protection, which are further explained in the figure below. Its role as an enabler has been clearly articulated through its partnerships and collaborations with the government, while it continues to implement independently, in part to generate evidence and proof of concept.

Two of the most significant contributions include WFP's work on the VWB and the School Feeding programmes. The following sections detail WFP's support to these two programmes, as well as the results and lessons learnt from this experience.

Figure 2: WFP Bangladesh's approach to capacity strengthening.



Source: Bangladesh Country Office WFP

⁴ The G2P system is a means of digitally transferring cash from the government to poor and vulnerable people and was used significantly during COVID-19 when physical access to public spaces was limited.
⁵ Key Informant Interviews (KII) 3 and 4, Senior Bureaucrats, December 2023

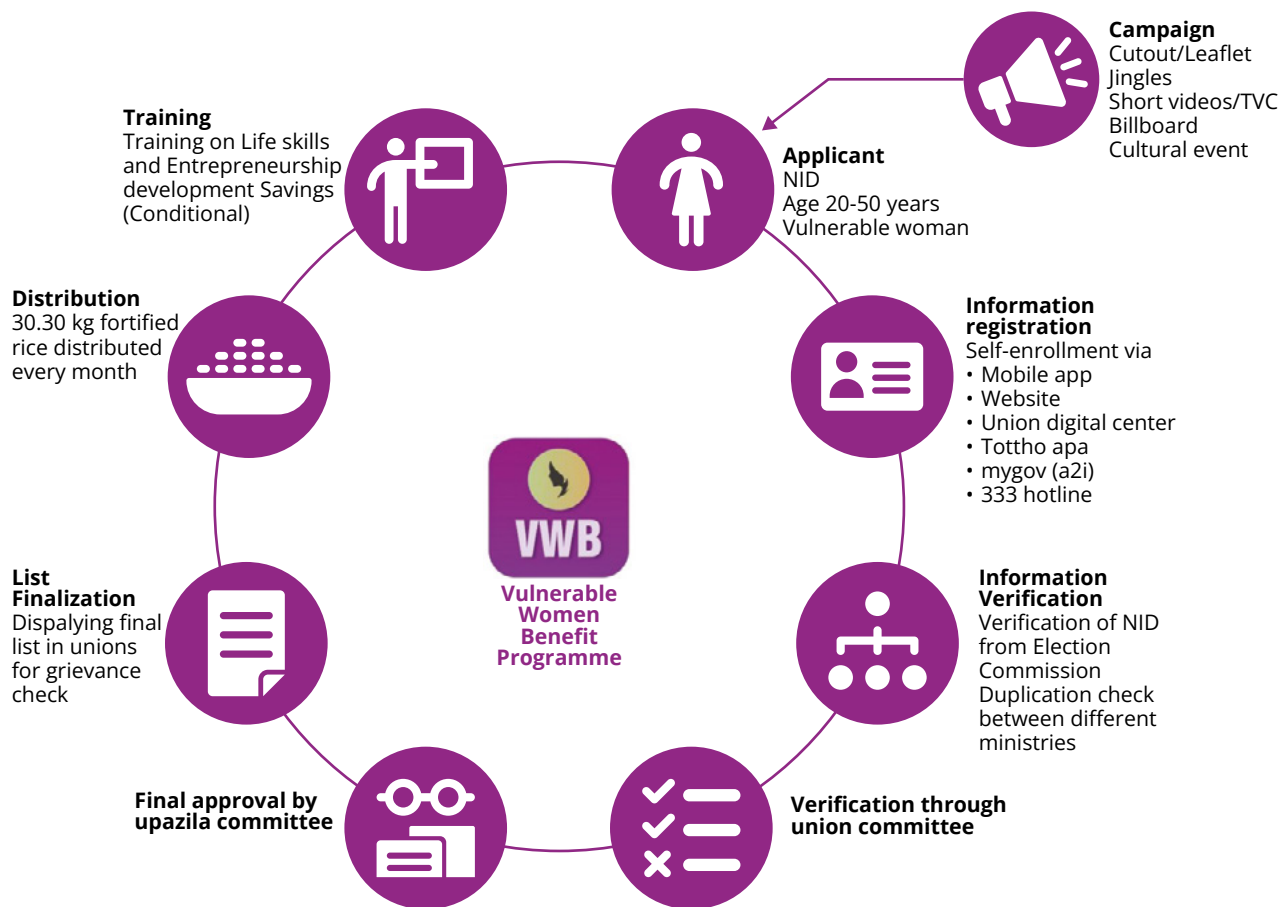
4. Activities and results

WFP’s work on Vulnerable Women Benefit and its Results

One of the most prominent schemes run by the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs (MoWCA) is the Vulnerable Women Benefit (VWB) programme. The VWB targets insolvent, widowed and/or divorced women aged 20–50 years who have no earning family members. Eligibility criteria include landless women or those who own less than 0.15 decimal of land. Under the VWB, women receive 30.3 kg of fortified rice along with

skills development training which is expected to help them graduate out of extreme poverty by 2030. The programme is predicted to support 3.2 million women in urban and rural areas to set up microenterprises. Every two years, the programme targets more than 1 million women. Women who have been a part of the programme and received benefits for two years cannot participate again until four years have passed (ibid.). The overall aim of the programme is to ensure that the nutritional needs of programme participants and their families are met, and to increase their labour-market participation to help guarantee a minimum income.

Figure 3: VWB programme features.



Source: VWB unit under the Department of Women Affairs (DWA)

The VWB programme has a long history in Bangladesh and has been renamed and reshaped over the decades to its current form (refer to Table 2). It has been modelled after one of the earliest WFP projects in Bangladesh, then called the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) programme (MoWCA 2020). The VGF was a food relief

programme that started in 1974 in response to a drought, gradually changing and gaining additional components over the years. The main programme participants were poor women and their households in rural areas who did not have any source of income (ibid).

Table 2: Evolution from VGF to VWB.

Year	Programme Name	Changes
1974	Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF)	Food-based relief programme.
1980s	Vulnerable Group Development (VGD)	Additional resilience angle with graduation goals and improved geographic targeting.
1990s-2000s		Added life skill training and training modules on disaster preparation and management.
2011		VGD becomes fully government owned and funded.
2016	Investment Component - Vulnerable Group Development	Added component called Investment Component VGD which included fortified rice and support with income-generation activities.
2024	Vulnerable Women Benefit (VWB)	Digital self-enrolment, meeting nutritional and income-generation needs.

In the 1980s, the VGF developed a resilience aspect and was renamed as Vulnerable Group Development (VGD). Expanding significantly, it went through further changes, for example, providing conditional transfers to women, rations, employment and skills training. WFP handed over the entire programme to the government to implement independently in 2011. Five years later, the Investment Component of VGD (ICVGD) was launched nationally by the government with additional support on income generation and fortified rice. In 2024, ICVGD and VGD were merged and renamed as the VWB programme, developing in line with the priorities laid out by the NSSS: supporting nutrition needs, income generation and focusing on the multiplier effects of such support.

WFP's policy inputs for development of VWB from ICVGD

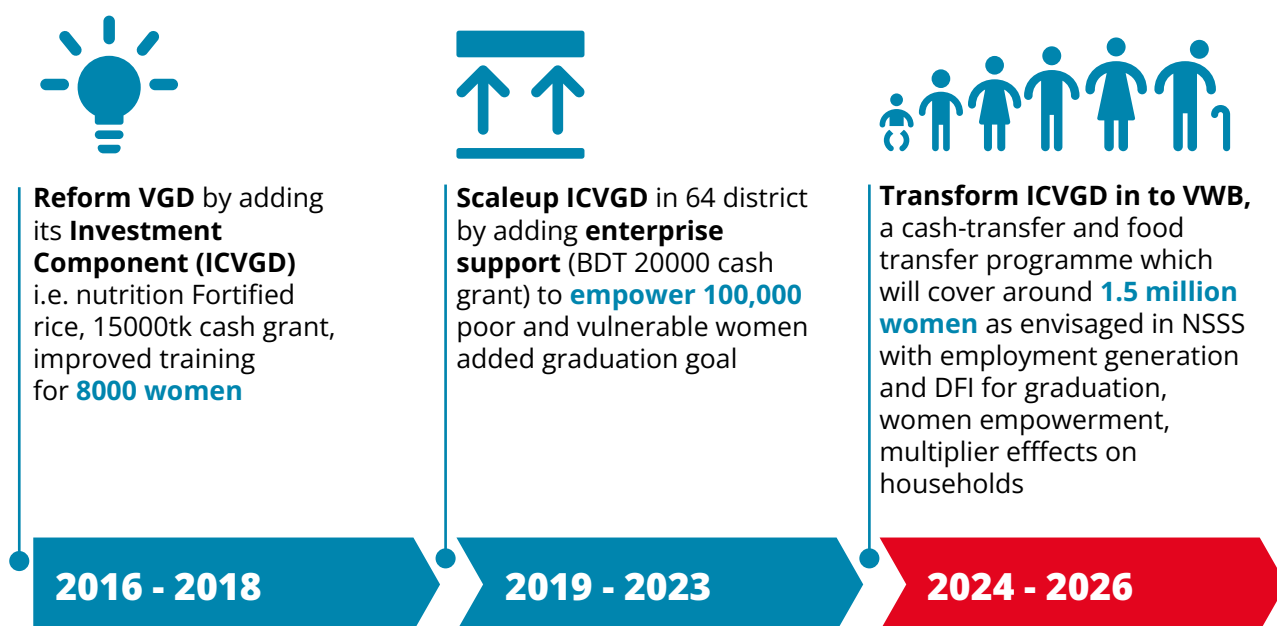
In 2013, two years after the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programme became fully government-owned, WFP collaborated with the Department of Women Affairs (DWA) and the MoWCA to conduct a capacity gap and needs assessment of the VGD programme. The assessment revealed two key findings: first, a persistent nutritional gap despite several years of programme implementation, and second, that many households reverted to their previous livelihoods after the programme ended, even after receiving support for income generation

and life skills training. The assessment highlighted the need for increased nutrition sensitivity in WFP's programmes and greater emphasis on income-generation support. It also recommended the inclusion of fortified rice and an investment component within the VGD programme to address these gaps. Fortified rice would help combat malnutrition, while the investment component would empower participants to engage in income-earning activities. These recommendations significantly influenced the development of the new phase of the VGD and the NSSS in 2015. Both these suggestions were later incorporated into VGD through a pilot programme called 'Investment Component Vulnerable Group Development' (ICVGD) which was implemented in eight upazilas (sub-districts) from 2015 to 2018.

The ICVGD programme encouraged participants to invest in income-generating activities using funds from a cash grant. In addition, the programme's training component was robust, covering a wider range of thematic areas and new income-generating activities. The capacity-building component of ICVGD focused on business management and life skills, offering a more sustainable approach to poverty alleviation compared to the original VGD model. Due to its initial success, the government expanded the ICVGD programme to 64 upazilas across 64 districts with technical support from WFP (MoWCA, 2020).



Figure 3: VWB programme vision (2016-2026)



Source: VWB unit under the Department of Women Affairs (DWA)








From 2023 onwards, the ICVGD was reshaped into the Vulnerable Women Benefit VWB programme, with WFP continuing to support the government in its design and implementation. One of WFP’s key contributions was establishing a Management Information System (MIS) unit at the Department of Women Affairs (DWA), enabling digital self-enrolment for the programme. Additionally, the VWB programme incorporated a nutrition-focused social behaviour change communication component. WFP also supported the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) in developing an online self-registration system for the VWB programme. This system helped reduce inclusion errors from 46% to 12%, resulting in an estimated saving of USD 106 million for the government (WFP, 2022). The establishment of the MIS system aligns with one of the proposals in Bangladesh’s Eighth Five-Year Plan (2020–2025), which aims to consolidate all registered programme participants across social protection schemes into a single database. As one senior MoWCA official remarked in a Key

Informant Interview (KII), **“All beneficiary data is in an online system thanks to WFP.”**⁶ The ICVGD action plan highlights WFP as a critical partner responsible for all technical capacity-building support (MoWCA, 2020). WFP also played an instrumental role in assisting MoWCA to draft the second phase of the NSSS action plan in 2021, aligning the vision of the VWB with the CSP targets to ensure the programme is both shock-responsive and nutrition-sensitive. WFP’s role as a vital partner in advancing social protection in Bangladesh under the government’s leadership has been widely recognized, including through formal acknowledgment in the NSSS and other policy documents (MoWCA, 2020).

Overall, WFP’s work on VGD, ICVGD and VWB has been significant, the latter two programmes coming into existence with significant support from WFP on design and implementation. Additionally, its support in improving MIS and G2P is expected to reduce leakages and its support with social behaviour change communication is expected to improve usage of benefits.

6 Ibid.

Table 3: WFP Bangladesh’s contributions to social protection building blocks, with a focus on the VWB (2013–2023).

Building blocks of Bangladesh’s social protection system		WFP Bangladesh’s Contribution
SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE	 Policy and Legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shaping the National Social Security Strategy. • Drafting the second phase action plan.
	 Platforms and infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and develop MIS. • Introducing online self-enrolment platforms. • Initiating the G2P system for the VWB programme participants.
	 Governance, capacity and coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training government officials and building their capacity for the utilization of digital platforms for VWB.
KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING	 Assessments and analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2013: Capacity gap assessment. • 2014–2016: Effectiveness of Micronutrient-Fortified Rice on Anaemia and Empowerment of Women under the VGD. • 2016–2018: ICVGD formative evaluation, baseline and endline study. • 2021–2022: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Joint learning assessment on online self-registration. - Regional livelihood mapping. • 2022: Situation analysis on digital financial inclusion and women’s economic empowerment.
	 Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successfully advocating to adopt ICVGD as part of the design improvement of the VWB. • Developing a policy brief on digital financial inclusion for vulnerable women which was approved by MoWCA and endorsed by central bank.
	 Monitoring, evaluation and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical support to set up the monitoring framework for the VWB.
PROGRAMME FEATURES	 Design of programme parameters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICVGD and VWB programme design and alignment with national policies and strategies.

Source: KIIs, the WFP Strategy for Support to Social Protection

School feeding

The School Feeding programme highlights WFP's pivotal role in strengthening social protection in Bangladesh through a combination of pilot initiatives, technical support, and research. Launched in 2001, WFP assisted the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and the Department of Primary Education in establishing a School Feeding programme that initially distributed fortified biscuits (WFP, 2023b). This initiative was introduced in response to a flash flood in the southwestern region and the rising school dropout rates. After more than a decade of WFP's involvement, the government, recognizing the programme's benefits and lessons, launched the School Feeding Programme in Poverty-Prone Areas in 2011, covering approximately 3 million children from 104 upazilas by 2022. WFP managed the implementation in ten upazilas, while the Ministry covered the remaining upazilas with technical assistance from WFP. Since 2023, WFP has continued to implement the school feeding programme in just three sub-districts of Cox's Bazar. WFP's support to the government has been comprehensive, including the selection of NGOs to implement activities, policy formulation, project design, programme implementation and scale-up, establishment of minimum standards for biscuit factory selection, monitoring and evaluation, identification of alternative school feeding modalities, and coordination with other agencies (WFP, 2022).

Furthermore, in 2013 WFP piloted the Cooked Meal programme in Bamna upazila in the southern region and Islampur upazila in the northern region. The programme was expanded to Lama upazila in 2018. The pilot demonstrated that both the fortified biscuits and cooked meals had a positive impact on education outcomes. School enrolment increased by 4.2%, and dropout rates were reduced by 7.5%. Additionally, schools participating in the programme saw a lower prevalence of anaemia among students.

Following sustained support and advocacy from WFP, the government approved the National School Meal Policy in 2019. The policy had two primary objectives: first, to contribute to the education, nutrition, health, and social security of all pre-primary and primary school-age children by gradually including them in the programme; and second, to improve the quality of school education and reduce inequality (Chowdhury, 2022). In the same year, the government launched the cooked meals modality in 16 sub-districts (out of 94), providing cooked meals and fortified biscuits on alternate school days each week to 400,000 schoolchildren. The programme continued until March 2020.⁷ During the pilot phase, cooked meals and homemade dishes were distributed in these 16 sub-districts, with local women compensated for their work in meal preparation and cooking expenses. In the remaining 78 upazilas, fortified biscuits continued to be distributed. The programme generated significant enthusiasm among politicians, who expressed strong interest in expanding it nationwide.⁸

In 2021, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education submitted a proposal for the School Feeding project to the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) for approval. However, ECNEC declined the proposal, expressing concerns about the sustainability of a government-led rollout of the programme, and advising the Ministry to develop a more realistic and feasible plan for government implementation targeting primary schoolchildren. Some of the programme deliverables included developing operational guidelines and standard operating procedures for food safety and quality of the new weekly combined food basket, establishing a monitoring and evaluation framework, and providing training for key officials and personnel at all levels. In addition, the government conducted a feasibility study to identify an appropriate food basket and operational arrangements to inform the design of a national School Feeding programme. Based on the recommendations of the feasibility study, the







⁷ Before closure of schools for the COVID-19 pandemic

⁸ Key Informant Interview (KII) 1, WFP Bangladesh Senior Staff, December 2023

Government School Feeding Programme (Phase 1) proposal was developed. The proposal aims to provide a weekly combined food basket (including fortified biscuits, buns, eggs, seasonal local fruits, and UHT milk) to 3.46 million schoolchildren in 150 sub-districts, covering all 180 school days per year. The proposal is currently (at the time of writing this case study) awaiting approval from the Planning Commission. Once the national School Feeding project is approved, WFP will continue to provide technical and capacity-strengthening support to the government.

Overall, WFP’s experience with school feeding has played a key role in strengthening Bangladesh’s social protection system. Through successful advocacy for innovative policies and programmes, consistent support to the government throughout the process and implementation, and capacity-building for government counterparts, WFP has made significant contributions. In particular, WFP has strengthened various building blocks of the social protection system through its work on the School Feeding programme, as detailed below.

Table 4: WFP Bangladesh’s contributions to the building blocks within the School Feeding programme

Building blocks of Bangladesh’s social protection system		WFP Bangladesh’s Contribution
SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE	 Policy and Legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shaping National School Meal Policy 2019 by giving technical advice.
	 Governance, capacity and coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing technical assistance to government in implementation of the School Feeding Programme in Poverty-Prone Areas’ programme.
KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING	 Assessments and analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Feeding Outcome Survey 2010 • Impact Study of the School Feeding programme 2018 • Capacity gap assessment through the System Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) in 2016 and 2019.
	 Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successfully advocating for the approval of National School Meal Policy 2019 which was later approved.
	 Monitoring, evaluation and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting pilots of hot meals from 2013 to 2019, regular evaluations of the School Feeding programme and assessing the impact of different modalities.
PROGRAMME FEATURES	 Design of programme parameters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing technical and financial support to Government in conducting a feasibility study to inform an appropriate food basket for the National School Feeding programme. • Providing technical support to the Government in preparation of the development project proposal (DPP) for the National School Feeding programme (Phase 1) which is scheduled to be approved and start in 2024.

Source: KIIs, the WFP Strategy for Support to Social Protection

5. Lessons Learned

Some of the key lessons learned from WFP's work over the last 12 years include the following:

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE IS SUSTAINABLE, INCREASES OWNERSHIP, AND IS COST-EFFECTIVE

Over the past 14 years, WFP staff have learned that shifting from direct implementation to providing technical assistance can be a highly strategic and cost-effective approach for driving considerable progress and development. Through programme pilots that demonstrate their added value and viability, WFP has supported the government in making key design changes. Furthermore, WFP's work in digitizing social protection, including enabling self-enrolment, improving management information systems (MIS), and utilizing digital cash transfers, has significantly reduced inclusion errors and saved the government an estimated USD 106 million (WFP, 2022). These processes are now owned by the government, with WFP continuing to partner with them to support these developments.

WORKING WITH THE GOVERNMENT REQUIRES MULTIPLE STRATEGIES

Through decades of engagement with the government, WFP has learned that a singular approach to collaboration is insufficient. Instead, a multifaceted strategy is crucial. By engaging in research, piloting, monitoring, advocacy, technical assistance, and funding, WFP has positioned itself as a valuable and adaptable partner for the government. This approach requires WFP to be resourceful, innovative, visible, and solution-oriented, ensuring it can effectively support the government in addressing key challenge.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS AND ACROSS CIVIL SOCIETY IS CRITICAL

While it is essential to understand and align with the government's needs, WFP recognizes the importance of fostering partnerships with other stakeholders, including civil society organizations. WFP has built strong relationships with organizations such as IFPRI, GAIN, the World Bank, and other UN bodies, all of which share common goals of improving welfare and reducing inequality and poverty. These networks and alliances play a vital role in supporting each other's efforts. Much of the progress made in social protection, food security, and nutrition in Bangladesh can be attributed to the collaborative work between WFP and these organizations, which have provided critical support to the government in various complementary ways.

EVIDENCE IS ESSENTIAL TO DRIVE CHANGE

WFP has spent years improving social protection in Bangladesh and successfully advocating for national policies and legislation. Drawing from its experience with school feeding, WFP began its involvement in such programmes in 2001. When the government took over responsibility for school feeding in 2021 and sought to scale the programme nationwide, it quickly became clear that the expansion would render significantly increased costs. This experience taught WFP the importance of generating robust evidence, not only to highlight the benefits of school feeding but also to demonstrate a sustainable and feasible operational strategy. By providing clear evidence of the programme's effectiveness and an implementable plan, WFP has helped ensure the government can expand the programme nationwide with limited risk and based on need.

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Annex: Key Informant Interviews

Key Informant Interview (KII) 1, WFP Bangladesh Senior Staff (2023). Interview by Niranjana Nampoothiri conducted on 14 December 2023 and written comments. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Bangladesh.

Key Informant Interview (KII) 2, WFP Bangladesh Retired Senior Staff (2023). Interview by Niranjana Nampoothiri conducted on 14 December 2023 and written comments. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Bangladesh.

Key Informant Interview (KII) 3, Senior Bureaucrat (2023). Interview by Niranjana Nampoothiri conducted on 14 December 2023 and written comments. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Bangladesh.

Key Informant Interview (KII) 4, Senior Education Bureaucrat (2023). Interview by Niranjana Nampoothiri conducted on 18 December 2023 and written comments. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Bangladesh.



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Photo pages 8, 10: WFP/Sayed Asif Mahmud

Photo page 14: WFP/Mumit M

Photo page 23: WFP/Saikat Mojumder