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SAVING
LIVES
CHANGING
LIVES

Social protection

A safety net that leaves no one behind

Why social protection matters

Imagine being a mother trapped in a cycle of poverty – skipping meals so her children can eat, taking whatever daily work she can find, and living in fear of the next disaster. Or a young farmer, who loses everything to a sudden flood, with no safety net to fall back on. Now imagine that, instead, you received just enough support – a small monthly allowance, a regular bag of fortified rice, or a grant to start a small business – to shift that reality. This is the power of social protection – a quiet, yet transformative force that restores dignity, builds resilience, and opens doors to opportunity.

In Bangladesh – where climate shocks, rising costs, and deep-rooted inequality collide – investing in strong, inclusive social protection systems is more than good policy. It's a promise to protect progress, reduce suffering, and ensure no one is left behind.

From food aid to lifelong opportunity

The World Food Programme (WFP) has stood alongside Bangladesh for over five decades. WFP's work in

Bangladesh began in 1974, in the wake of independence and famine, with emergency relief focused on female-headed households who were among the most vulnerable in a nation struggling to recover. By 1975, the **Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) programme** was delivering rice to poor women, offering critical food support during a time of deep need.

Yet, food alone was not enough. In the early 1980s, the VGF programme evolved into the **Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programme** - an innovative approach that combined food assistance with life skills, entrepreneurship training, and savings support. Led by the Ministry of Relief (now the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief) in partnership with BRAC, VGD sought not only to feed women, but to empower them to break the cycle of poverty. Through the 1990s and 2000s, WFP helped scale this model and integrate food assistance into broader social protection systems.

Programmes like food-for-work provided immediate relief from hunger while creating long-term assets, such

as roads, embankments, and community infrastructure, which strengthened resilience and supported development. In 2013, a joint capacity and needs assessment of the VGD programme was conducted by WFP and the Department of Women Affairs. To address gaps identified, an enhanced model called the **Investment Component for VGD (ICVGD)** project was developed. Under this model, participating women received fortified rice to improve nutrition, intensive life skills and entrepreneurship training, and a one-time cash grant of BDT 15,000 (USD 180) delivered through secure digital payments and can be used to invest in small businesses and build resilient livelihoods.

From support to systems

WFP's technical support consists of policy reform; programme and system reform, institutional accountability; strategic planning and financing; and partnership for sustainability.

The launch of the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) in 2015 marked a bold move toward a unified, inclusive, and lifecycle-based safety net to protect citizens from poverty, shocks, and exclusion.

With technical support from WFP, the Government rolled out ICVGD Phase II in 2019, reaching 100,000 women – a milestone in building digital, efficient, and empowering social protection systems. That same year, the Government committed BDT 7 billion (approximately USD 68.4 million) to scale the programme nationwide. Building on lessons from ICVGD, the VGD programme was rebranded in 2022 as the **Vulnerable Women Benefit Programme (VWBP)**, in line with NSSS directives.

Another targeted initiative, the **Mother and Child Benefit Programme (MCBP)**, was launched in 2019 by the Department of Women Affairs under the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA), with WFP's technical support. It aims to improve maternal and child health and nutrition through monthly cash transfers to low-income mothers, complemented by behaviour change communication (BCC) sessions in community courtyards that promote essential health services and better nutrition.

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Smarter safety nets for a resilient tomorrow

In 2018, WFP began piloting forecast-based targeting and early warning triggers in national programmes such as the **Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest (EGPP)** and **MCBP**, both of which were adapted to deliver anticipatory assistance ahead of climate shocks. Building on the success of these pilots, by 2023, shock-responsive elements were integrated into core national schemes – the Old Age Allowance and VWBP, in four flood-prone districts. Within a year, the SRSP approach expanded to 15 districts and three additional safety nets.

Behind the scenes, the introduction of digital cash transfers, real-time Management Information Systems (MIS), online self-registration, and a database of over 2 million beneficiaries - with MIS interoperability with the National ID and single registry - has enhanced programme effectiveness, transparency, efficiency, and accountability. The inclusion of Social Behaviour Change (SBC) further strengthens impact.



With WFP's technical support, these programmes now reach over 12 million people.

Some 2.7 million women receive fully digital cash transfers through Government-to-Person (G2P) payments under MCBP and VWBP, marking a major step forward in financial inclusion. In 2024, the ICVGD project delivered a one-time digital cash transfer to 100,000 beneficiaries, showcasing continued progress toward digitized, efficient, and inclusive social protection.

The road ahead

Bangladesh's social safety net system is one of the most extensive in the region, with over 100 schemes implemented across multiple ministries. While this demonstrates a strong national commitment to social protection, opportunities remain to further streamline and harmonize efforts. Progress under the NSSS is ongoing, with continued work needed to improve coordination and integration, particularly to ensure coverage reaches those in remote or climate-vulnerable areas.

The momentum is clear. The foundations have been laid. With sustained investment and stronger coordination, Bangladesh can lead in building inclusive, climate-smart safety nets – and WFP stands ready to support that journey every step of the way.