



## Policy Options to Integrate Nutrition-Sensitive Approaches into the Social Protection System in Bangladesh

### Social Protection System in Bangladesh

The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) increased its social protection programmes (SPP)<sup>1</sup> budget from 1.3 percent of GDP in FY1998 to 2.4 percent of GDP in FY2018<sup>2</sup>, supporting over a hundred SPP's, according to the Ministry of Finance. This investment in social protection has halved the proportion of the population below the national poverty line from 49 percent in 2000 to 24 percent in 2016 (BBS, 2017), combined with sustained economic growth.

In 2015, the GoB adopted the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS), which incorporates a life-cycle approach to reform the social protection system. This aims to address several issues in the current system, such as inclusion and exclusion errors, due to weak targeting and monitoring; monetary transfer amounts that are too small for meaningful impacts; coordination problems between implementing ministries/ agencies; low coverage; and low levels of funding for early childhood, the elderly and persons with disabilities.

In addition, the social protection system is facing newer challenges, such as the aging population, weakening of traditional care practices within families, migration and urbanization. There is a strong need for a social protection system that can build resilience, respond quickly to crises, and provide sustainable, long-term solutions for recovery.

As part of NSSS reforms, the 23 ministries/ agencies that are implementing SPP's have been grouped into five thematic clusters, each with a lead coordinating ministry<sup>3</sup>, to improve cooperation and coordination. This should result in fewer programmes and larger transfer amounts to recipients, whilst keeping the total SPP budget unchanged.

The national identity system is being used to establish a national single registry of potential beneficiaries, in order to improve targeting. Enhanced management information systems for each programme will improve monitoring and control. An electronic Government to Person (G2P) payment system will reduce transaction costs and ensure transfers are on-time for beneficiaries.

### Nutrition-Sensitive Social Protection (NSSP)

Social protection is a key strategy to tackle malnutrition, as poverty is a root cause of food insecurity and malnutrition (FAO, 2015). In Bangladesh, while child stunting prevalence has halved since the mid-1990s to the present time, around a third of young children are still affected (BDHS, 2017-2018) – a level that is among the highest in the world. In urban areas, 26 percent of children under five are moderately and severely stunted, and the prevalence in slums is almost twice that in non-slum areas (UNICEF, 2016).



Studies in Bangladesh and other countries have found that cash transfers (both conditional and unconditional) reduce poverty and food insecurity. However, there was no consistent evidence that the provision of “only cash” improved child nutrition. This implies that increasing the transfer amount alone would not reduce the level of malnutrition, and that other complementary actions are required along with the cash transfers.

Nutrition-specific interventions directly address the immediate causes of malnutrition, such as through dietary supplementation and feeding practices. Nutrition-sensitive interventions address the more underlying causes of malnutrition through broader interventions, such as social protection. Nutrition-sensitive interventions therefore are necessary complements to nutrition-specific interventions in order to make lasting gains.

The following approaches can help make social protection more nutrition-sensitive:

- Target nutritionally vulnerable people, with special emphasis on women in reproductive age, children during the first 1,000 days of life and adolescent girls;
- Integrate nutrition education and promotion into social protection programmes;
- Incorporate nutrition objectives and indicators; and
- Strengthen the linkages to basic services such as education, health and WASH services.

In Bangladesh, the importance of nutrition-sensitive approaches is explicitly mentioned in the Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition 2016-2025, and the Second Country Investment Plan on Nutrition-Sensitive Food Systems 2016-2020.

## Policy Options to Integrate Nutrition-Sensitive Approaches into the Social Protection System

Integrating nutrition-sensitive approaches into multi-sectoral interventions could further accelerate the improvement of nutrition for all. An analysis of SPPs showed that only seven government-led SPPs<sup>4</sup> have notable nutrition-sensitive approaches that specifically target pregnant and lactating mothers, children for the first 1,000 days, combine nutrition education and promotion with cash transfers, and link with health services to improve children's nutrition and development, and this represented roughly 2.6 percent of the total SPP budget of FY2017 and 0.9 percent of the coverage.

Research by IFPRI and WFP (2016) showed that high quality and intensive behavioral change communication (BCC) is required along with an increased transfer amount of 1,500BDT per month<sup>5</sup>, in order to have impacts on child nutritional status. Regular and reliable cash transfers that allow people to buy nutritious, healthier food and increasing their caloric intake for ending hunger. Similar approaches could be integrated into SPPs that potentially impact other nutritionally vulnerable populations, like the Child Benefit Scheme<sup>6</sup> and the Old Age Allowance, as well as those targeting the urban poor.

Some 16 SPPs programmes focus on disaster relief and climate resilience (15.4 percent of the total SPP budget of FY2017), but they have little linkage to nutrition-sensitive approaches. There is a need for standardized criteria for targeting and prioritizing the first 1,000 days of life, while developing the database for potential beneficiaries. Appropriate nutrition messages should be disseminated along with emergency assistance to inform people about correct food choices and improved diets even in emergencies. There needs to be stronger links between social protection, humanitarian activities and longer-term approaches to livelihoods, resilience, food security and nutrition.

SPPs can help the poor to increase their access to basic services (e.g. through fee waivers for key services, school stipends, covering transportation costs, etc.). However, if the availability of services or the quality of services is deficient, then SPPs will not contribute as much as they could to human development. Increased public financing and attention to ensure the universal availability of good-quality, basic services need to go side-by-side with the reform of SPPs. Services such as health, sanitation, and child care, that have direct impacts over nutritional outcomes, need to be integral to social protection. Services need to be improved with reference to access, outreach and coverage to enhance development and nutrition outcomes.

## End Notes:

- 1 The term SPP refers to the GoB's Social Safety Net Programmes, which consist of programmes for Social Protection and for Social Empowerment.
- 2 Excluding pension and Freedom Fighter's honorarium, the social protection budget was 1.3% of GDP in FY2018.
- 3 The five clusters are: 1. Social Allowance (with Ministry of Social Welfare as lead), 2. Food Security and Disaster Assistance (with Ministry of Food as lead), 3. Social Insurance (with Ministry of Finance as lead), 4. Labor and Livelihood Investment (with Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief as lead), and 5. Human Development and Social Empowerment (with Ministry of Primary and Mass Education as lead).
- 4 The seven SPPs are: 1. Maternity Allowance Programme for the Poor; 2. Allowances for Urban Low Income Lactating Mothers; 3. Investment Component of Vulnerable Group Development; 4. School Feeding Programme; 5. Income Support Programme for the Poorest; 6. Support to Urban Health and Nutrition; and 7. Increase Productivity and Opportunity for Employment for Women.
- 5 This amount is equivalent to 25% of the average monthly household consumption expenditures of poor households in rural Bangladesh, which was tested in the IFPRI-WFP Transfer Modality Research Initiative and resulted in a reduction of stunting by 7.3 percentage points over two years.
- 6 The Child Benefit Scheme (CBS) targets 7.5 million children aged 0-4 years, and is planned to start in 2019.

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