Evidence-based e-government policies for advancing governmental service delivery and accountability in support of the Sustainable Development Goals

A joint project of
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), and
- Access to Information Programme, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh

Social Protection in Bangladesh
A Concept Note

Foreword

The project is a joint initiative of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) and the Access to Information Programme (a2i), Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh.1 The broader goal of the project is to identify how people, processes, tools, and techniques related to information communication technology (ICT) can support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by concerned ministries and agencies in Bangladesh. Social Protection, amongst others, has been identified as a priority area for Bangladesh. This concept note focuses on the following SDG target and indicator:

- SDG 1.3 Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.
- SDG 1.3.1 Proportion of population covered by social protection floors/systems, by sex, distinguishing children, unemployed persons, older persons, persons with disabilities, pregnant women, newborns, work-injury victims and the poor and the vulnerable.

Data for this concept note came from five sources: (a) desk research on open source materials such as published reports and SDG tracker data; (b) consultations with the Cabinet Division, the Lead Ministry for promoting social inclusion in Bangladesh; (c) SDG Action Plan of the Lead Ministry; (d) interactions with field level officials and social protection beneficiaries in Kishoreganj district2; and (e) focus group discussion with concerned officials conducted during the second national capacity development workshop held in Dhaka in June 2018.3

This concept note has six parts as stated below:

1. Background
2. Issues and Priorities
3. Measuring progress with available data

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1 For the UN system, the project code is DA 1617B-Bangladesh.
2 The field visit to Kishoreganj District of Bangladesh was conducted on 5-6 June 2018. During the field trip, the project team met concerned officials from the district, sub-district, and union council levels, and beneficiaries of social safety net allowances at the union council level.
3 The second national capacity development workshop on ‘Building Institutional Capacity for E-Government Data Analysis and Evidence-based Decision-Making to Support Sustainable Development Goals’ was jointly organized by UN DESA and a2i on 26-27 June 2018.
1. BACKGROUND

The theme of poverty eradication has emerged as a main overarching axle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, cutting across all 17 Goals and 169 Targets. Goal 1 states explicitly to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere”, while its inter-linkage and interdependence across 16 other Goals are also underscored.

Poverty is often associated with other conditions leading to discrimination such as being a disabled or older person, or living in remote and poor rural areas. Some factors such as barriers to accessing microcredit or employment can lead to vicious circles preventing people from escaping poverty. There is also an inter-generational reproduction of poverty. In addressing such disparities, one core principle emanating from the 2030 Agenda is to “Leave no one behind”. This principle is essential to guide government institutions in delivering on all their functions including social protection, along with the need for effectiveness, inclusiveness and accountability. Various barriers continue to hinder access to public services by the poorest and most vulnerable, including discrimination, financial costs, geographical location, environmental factors, language, cultural or institutional lack of access to digital technologies. Constraints and solutions vary greatly depending on the population groups concerned, be it children, youth, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons, migrants, slum dwellers and other people living in extreme poverty.

Ensuring that no one is left behind requires identifying each and every person in the country, a process that began in Bangladesh with the adoption of the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS). It also requires effective social protection policies. This includes efforts to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth; ensure full and productive employment and decent work for all. Having strong social safety nets for the poor and vulnerable, as highlighted in SDG 1.3.1 has been recognized as an effective driver of poverty eradication and in ensuring that no one is left behind.

Social protection policies aiming to promote social integration and tackle discrimination should be designed to achieve real change and specific outcomes, and monitored through a robust statistical system that can make disaggregated data available on various marginalised segments of society. Social protection policies may include measures such as transfers and benefits, in cash or in kind, designed to reduce poverty, provide income security and protect against a range of risks, vulnerabilities and lifecycle contingencies including unemployment, old age, childhood, maternity or sickness.

Bangladesh has made significant strides towards lowering poverty rates and bolstering social protection schemes. According to the World Bank, poverty in Bangladesh fell from 18.5% in 2010, to

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13.8% in 2016, with the 7th Five Year Plan (2016 – 2020) aiming to further reduce poverty rates to 8.9%. It is also likely that Bangladesh will leave the category of the “Least Developed Countries” by 2024, propelled by better social protection, health, education, lower vulnerability and an economic boom.\(^7\)

The development success of Bangladesh can be attributed to the integration of poverty reduction into its current national development priorities. Government spending on social protection programmes has increased from BDT 359.75 billion (FY2015-16) to BDT 542.06 billion (FY2017-18) and the share of social protection spending as the percentage of GDP increased from 2.09% to 2.44% during the same period.\(^8\) Nevertheless, while progress has been encouraging, problems of coverage, identification of vulnerable groups and implementation of social protection programmes remain. There is also insufficiencies. For example, there is currently no social insurance for unemployment or retirement.

\[2. \text{ ISSUES, PRIORITIES, AND CHALLENGES}\]

\[2.1 \text{ Current Issues}\]

The social protection system in Bangladesh is highly complex. According to the Ministry of Planning, as of 2015, there were 145 programmes under the social protection system financed through the budget. Previously, the programs were administered by as many as 23 line ministries and agencies, with no formal mechanism for sharing information between the relevant agencies.\(^9\) As such, because of the proliferation of programmes, the ‘budget for most programmes is small’ and the ‘average benefit per individual is low.’\(^10\) Appendix 1 provides a list of key social protection programmes, as listed in the open source literature. In 2016, the Government of Bangladesh established 5 Thematic Clusters of ministries/divisions that implements SPPs. These clusters are the platform to share and cooperate on their activities.

Another problem with the social protection system in Bangladesh is the degree of overlap between programmes which results in limited coverage of the vulnerable population. According to the Planning Commission, 65% of SPPs address life-cycle related risks. However, coverage of children aged 0-4 years is very small. Coverage of the disabled and elderly is also very small. Even though coverage for school-going children is the highest, the actual transfer amount is very low, rendering it of little assistance.\(^11\)

Another potential issue with the existing social protection eco-system is its continued relevance given the changing structure of Bangladesh economy. Currently, food transfer and rural employment programmes dominate social protection programmes. However, given the rapid progress that has been made in terms of eliminating hunger and reducing rural poverty, a reassessment of such schemes could be required.\(^12\)

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\(^6\) World bank Bangladesh continues to reduce poverty but at a slower pace


\(^12\) GED, *National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) of Bangladesh*. 
The current system has also raised questions due to the way SPPs are implemented and rolled out. Currently, most of the SPPs are allocated based on the recipient’s residential address, with most programmes are focused on the rural poor. However, given the declining rural economy and the influx of the rural population into urban areas, the way programmes are implemented need to be reviewed.13

### 2.2 Priorities

The Government of Bangladesh has identified several social protection priorities.

- National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) aims to consolidate all safety net programmes to support citizens who are most in need.
- The prioritized beneficiaries of the NSSS are women, children, the aged and disabled.
- Data collection and analysis are instrumental for the effective disbursement of resources. As such, as part of its anti-poverty strategy, the government is developing a National Household Database (NHD) under the Social Safety Net Systems (SSNS) to facilitate better targeting of poor and vulnerable households.14
- Microcredit and microfinance programme for social and self-women empowerment
- Another priority is to effectively capitalize ICT to help transform the rural economy (Digital Bangladesh Vision). This will help to reduce the transaction costs of trading with the urban economy. As Bangladesh is still a predominantly agriculture economy, ICT will help to bring rural farms closer to growth centres
- Local level implementation/ Role of local government (improving take-up rate or outreach)

### 2.3 Challenges

Several challenges may impede the efforts of Bangladesh to achieve its SDG Target 1.3.1. These are listed below:

- The success of Bangladesh’s poverty reduction strategy hinges on its ability to collect and track data related to the country’s poor. Currently, Bangladesh’s census collection techniques are still (manual) and rely heavily on door to door household surveys. On top of that census data are considered to be static data which run the risk of being outdated. In contrast, CRVS data can offer realtime, continuous, specific, and disaggregated information on poverty situation at the person level.
- The ability to successfully build its national statistics database will be a major challenge for Bangladesh
- Other negative externalities that affect Bangladesh’s potential to implement SDG 1.3.1 include frequent cyclones, droughts, and floods. Bangladesh is extremely vulnerable to natural disasters, which is one of the barriers to poverty eradication. Such external challenges will compound the efficacy of implementing and achieving SDG 1.3.1
- Maintaining GDP growth to support poverty reduction efforts is another major challenge to Bangladesh. This means financing gap can cause a potential problem.

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13 GED, National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) of Bangladesh.
14 Critics have doubt as to whether the NHD operates under the SSNS. They also view that the NHD itself is a static thing. It will produce outdated data. By the time the report of the NHD would be published, the actual economic condition of a particular household will be changed.
At the field level, the Office of the District Social Service (DSS) is responsible for the management of various social safety net allowance delivery system. During a field visit to Kishoreganj district, the project team found three challenges in the delivery of financial supports under the Bangladesh Government’s social safety net. These include: clientelism (government representatives’ selection of beneficiaries to create a patron-client relationship); local people’s hostility to DSS officials unwilling to approve of fake demands; and long wait times to process the delivery of social safety allowances.

3. MEASURING PROGRESS WITH AVAILABLE DATA

SDG Tracker shows yearly data for social protection data for the years 2005 – 2030. As figure 1 shows, the proportion of people under the social protection scheme in Bangladesh has more than doubled from 13 per cent in 2005 to 28.7 per cent in the base year 2016. The Government of Bangladesh has a target to increase this number to 40 per cent.

![Figure 1: Proportion of population covered by social protection floors/systems distinguishing children, unemployed persons, persons with disabilities, pregnant women, newborns, work injury victims and the poor and the vulnerable, 2005-2030](image)


*Note:* Disaggregated data is not available for various population groups.

The identification and classification of what constitutes vulnerable groups with respect to poverty is important and depends on country context. Here the CRVS system can support in producing NHD. In Bangladesh, poverty is defined using the Costs of the Basic Needs (CBN) method. With this benchmark, particular population groups in Bangladesh are especially vulnerable to poverty. They are:

- Households with young children;
- Rural young;
- Women (and widow);
- Disabled;
- Older persons;
- Indigenous people;
- Migrants and refugees;
- Unemployed;

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• Unskilled;
• Slum dwellers (like those in Dhaka).

### Table: Mapping Vulnerable Groups in Bangladesh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vulnerable Groups</th>
<th>Urban – Rural Distribution (%)</th>
<th>Gender Distribution (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Households with young children</td>
<td></td>
<td>N.A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Young</td>
<td>N.A</td>
<td>N.A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>7.27% (Rural)</td>
<td>6.04% (Urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older persons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnic minorities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Groups exposed to natural disasters</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), 2016*

### 4. LEAD AGENCIES AND ACTORS

The Cabinet Division is the lead and the General Economics Division of the Planning Commission is the co-lead for the SDG 1.3.1.

The line ministries and divisions responsible for implementing many social protection schemes are listed below:

• Financial Institutions Division, Ministry of Finance
• Finance Division, Ministry of Finance
• Information and Communication Technology Division
• Local Government Division
• Ministry of Agriculture
• Ministry of Cultural Affairs
• Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs
• Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief
• Ministry of Education (both Secondary and Higher Education Division and the Technical and Madrassa Education Division)
• Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment
• Ministry of Food;
• Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock
• Ministry of Housing and Public Works Ministry of Labour and Employment
• Ministry of Liberation War Affairs
• Ministry of Primary and Mass Education
• Ministry of Social Welfare
• Ministry of Women and Children Affairs
• Ministry of Youth and Sports
• Rural Development and Cooperatives Division
• Health Services Division
• Family Planning and Health Education Division
• Statistics and Informatics Division

5. DATA COLLECTOIN AND DATA GAPS

The following agencies/ministries are responsible for generating, providing and tracking data:

• The Statistics and Informatics Division (SID) at Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) is responsible for collecting most of the social protection data under the following surveys:
  o Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) Database
  o National Household Database (NHD)

• The Department of Social Services (DSS) \(^16\) under the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) is responsible for collecting data on disability services under the following survey:
  o Disability Information System

Data for SDG 1.3.1 is partially available. Disaggregated data are not currently available on SDG Tracker.

6. IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY: RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Concerned stakeholders consulted for this joint project recommend the following actions to implement the SDG 1.3.1:

I. **Identify data gaps**, especially those related to disaggregation by various population groups. Initiate necessary steps, in collaboration with BBS and DSS, to address the data gaps.

II. **Assist lead agency**—the Cabinet Division, and the co-lead—the GED—to **develop plans and strategies** for systematic collection, analysis, publication, and visualization of data related to SDG indicator 1.3.1.

III. **Conceptualize and implement one ICT-enabled application and service** to support the implementation of SDG 1.3.1. Although the Government of Bangladesh has tasked the SID at BBS to develop a single and integrated registry/national database for all the social protection schemes, the extent to which the database has progressed is not clear. The GoB may consider development of an ICT-enabled central Management Information System (MIS) for the delivery of social protection supports.\(^17\)

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\(^16\) It has also developed a database of all of its SPPs recently. This should be a great source of data feed in for the SDG tracker.

\(^17\) This recommendation came from a focus group discussion attended by senior officials from the Cabinet Division and the Department of Social Service and other concerned stakeholders who attended the second national capacity building workshop in June 2018. During the field visit to Kishoreganj district in June 2018, concerned stakeholders also recommended the introduction of an ICT-enabled system for the objective and unbiased selection of social safety allowance beneficiaries to avoid political clientelism, improved relations between DSS officials and local people, and faster delivery of financial allowances.
IV. **Promote Inter-Agency Collaboration** between the Cabinet Division, GED, and nearly two dozen line ministries having 145 social protection programmes. This can be done by developing an ICT-enabled Integrated Coordinated Mechanism for all the concerned ministries and agencies responsible for promoting social protection programs.

V. **Capacity Building** in terms of human resource development of the ministries/divisions engaged and involved in SPPs implementation and coordination.

**Appendix 1: Key Social Protection Programmes in Bangladesh**

Even though the Bangladesh Government has taken steps to introduce a more comprehensive and all-encompassing social protection system, impact from the current social protection programmes are low when compared to the level of government spending. According to the 2017 Voluntary National Review, government allocation for Bangladesh’s social safety net programmes more than doubled in the past decade, from 1.9% of GDP in FY 2009-2010, to 2.44% of GDP in FY 2017-2018. Nevertheless, HIES reports that only 27.80% of intended recipients in Bangladesh are covered by some form of social safety net programme.

Besides low coverage across the country, other problems associated with existing social safety net programmes include “uneven geographical coverage, with particularly low coverage in urban areas” and “transfer levels that are too low to impact poverty.”

The Government of Bangladesh has implemented a series of programmes and initiatives aimed at poverty reduction and reducing vulnerabilities in society. The social protection system in the country is mapped against the lifecycle of an individual. They include:

**National level coordination programmes**

**Annual Development Programme (ADP)**
The ADP is a list of projects in various sectors and annual allocations for them, out of a five-year plan period for implementation. The ADP is prepared on the basis of the year’s development budget that has been approved by Parliament. As such, the quantum allocated to the ADP fluctuates, depending on the size of the national budget in that year. The ADP is revised almost every year, due to the delay in disbursements of foreign aid. As a result, allocation for social protection spending may vary from the original budget to the revised budget.

**National Social Security Strategy (NSSS)**
This national programme was adopted by the Cabinet of Bangladesh in 2015 in a bid to streamline and strengthen existing social safety net programmes so as to achieve better value for money.

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Social protection programmes targeting specific vulnerable groups

Social Safety Net Programme (SSNP)
In 2015, the Government of Bangladesh implemented anti-poverty strategies through the expanded NSSS to address risk and vulnerability and help reduce poverty and inequality. Some aspects of the SSNP include:

- Cash Transfer (Allowances) Programmes & Other Activities (21 on-going programme)
- Food Security Programmes: Social Protection (11 on-going programs)
- Micro-Credit Programmes: Social Empowerment (3 on-going programs)
- Miscellaneous Funds: Social Empowerment (7 on-going programs)
- Miscellaneous Funds: Social Protection (11 on-going programs)
- Development Sector Programmes: Social Empowerment (77 on-going programs)

Strengthening Women’s Ability for Productive New Opportunities (SWAPNO)
SWAPNO is a joint project between the Local Government Division in Bangladesh, the UN SDG Fund and the ILO. It aims to provide women in poor and vulnerable households with 18 months employment so as to give them the opportunity to learn skills to gain employment and earn a living.

Women

- VGD for Ultra Poor Women
- Old Age Allowance programme
- Widows’ Allowance

Disabled

- Disability Allowance

Rural

- Rural Maintenance Programme

Disaster Management

- Employment Generation Programme
- Food for Work

Note on authors and correspondence: This concept note is the product of a team work carried out by Wai Min, Ramiz Uddin, ASM Ali Ashraf, Ronan Gomes, Tito Chakma, and Sadia Afroose Shampa. Han Ling and Wai Min produced the first draft with substantial inputs from ASM Ali Ashraf and Tito Chakma. The authors acknowledge inputs from the Technical and Madrassah Education Division at the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh for sharing useful insights. Inquiries regarding the content of this concept note can be directed to: kwok@un.org, ramizuddin@a2i.pmo.gov.bd, aliashraf79@gmail.com.