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Modernizing Bangladesh's Social Protection System

Priorities for More Effective and Inclusive Social Protection

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Abstract

Bangladesh has made considerable progress in reducing poverty, with social protection programs playing an important role in protecting poor and vulnerable households from economic shocks and promoting human development. Despite these achievements, the system faces persistent challenges, including fragmented programs, weak coordination, targeting errors, and inefficient allocation of public resources. A substantial share of social protection spending is directed toward programs that do not primarily benefit the poor, while many vulnerable households remain inadequately covered. Addressing these shortcomings has become increasingly important as Bangladesh confronts rising food prices, slower economic growth, and climate-related risks.

This policy note presents a roadmap for building a more efficient, equitable, and adaptive social protection system. It recommends scaling up successful programs while phasing out inefficient ones. By improving targeting and reducing benefit leakage, social protection coverage for poor households can be significantly expanded even within the current budget.

The proposed reforms would streamline program delivery, expand support for poor and vulnerable households, strengthen the country's capacity to respond to economic and climate shocks, and improve the effectiveness of public spending. Together, these measures would create a more effective, transparent, and adaptive social protection system that promotes inclusive growth, reduces poverty, and strengthens Bangladesh's resilience to future challenges.

Introduction

Bangladesh's Social Protection Journey

Bangladesh has extensive experience supporting the poor through various social safety nets and protection programs. Since the 1970s, the country's social protection efforts have developed through continuous innovation and experimentation. The safety net system has evolved from being relief oriented to incorporating various components of long-term development objectives.

In Bangladesh, social protection or safety net initiatives are referred to as social security programs encompassing social insurance, labor market interventions, and assistance programs to reduce poverty and vulnerability. The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS), adopted by the government in 2015, guides the country's social protection initiative. The NSSS emphasizes a lifecycle risk approach, digital government-to-person (G2P) delivery systems, inflation-adjusted benefits, and robust monitoring and evaluation. In line with the NSSS, the government has streamlined its social protection system by reducing the number of programs and consolidating various fragmented programs (Ministry of Finance 2026).

Recent Reform: The Family Card Program

As a social security reform initiative, the government launched the Family Card Program in March 2026 on a pilot basis. The program has the potential to become the country's most significant social protection reform since the introduction of the NSSS. During the pilot phase, approximately 67,000 households were enrolled. As Bangladesh's largest social protection initiative, the program provides an unconditional monthly cash transfer of 2,500 Bangladeshi Taka (about US$20.50) to marginalized rural and urban households through G2P digital payment channels. The cash transfer is paid to the adult female head of each beneficiary household to strengthen women's financial inclusion and decision-making. Beneficiaries are identified using Proxy Means Test (PMT) scores to target poor and vulnerable households. The program is implemented by the Ministry of Social Welfare (IWMI 2026; Ministry of Finance 2026).

Trends in Public Spending on Social Protection

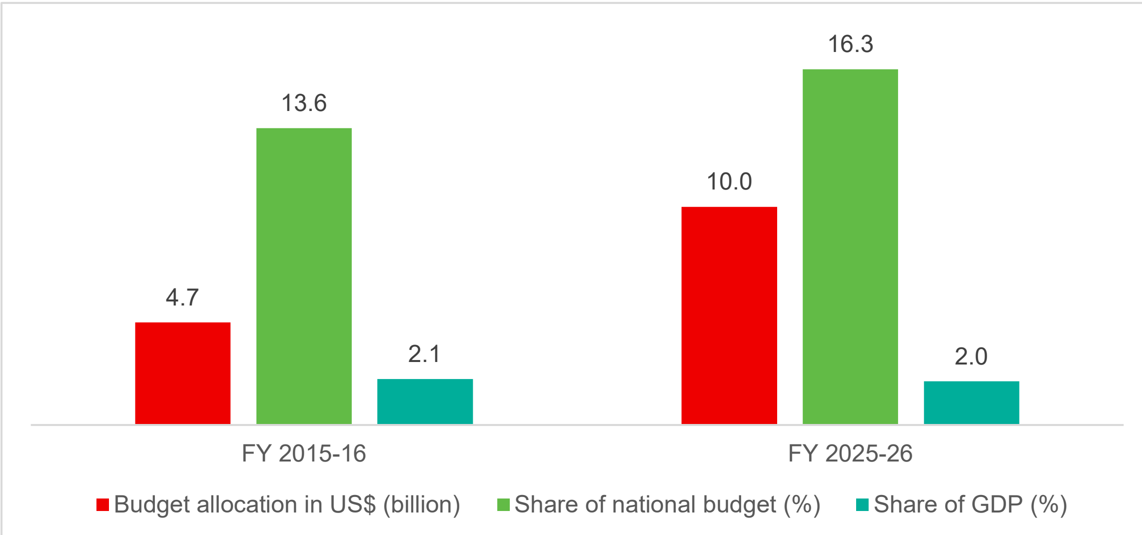
The government allocates a significant portion of its budget to social security programs. Figure 1 shows social security program (SSP) budget allocations in US$ and as shares of national budget and gross domestic product (GDP) in fiscal year (FY) 2015-16 and FY 2025-26. In FY 2015-16, the government spent 35,975 crore[1] Taka[2] (US$4.7 billion) on social security, which constituted about 13.6 percent of the national budget and 2.1 percent of the country's GDP. By FY 2025-26, the allocation had surged to 120,596 crore Taka (US$10.0 billion), representing 16.3 percent of the national budget and 2.0 percent of GDP (Ministry of Finance 2026).[3]

[1] 1 crore = 10 million.

[2] Taka (Tk) is the currency of Bangladesh. The average official exchange rate was Tk 76.54 per US$1.00 in FY2015-16 and Tk 120.60 per US$1.00 in FY2025-26.

[3] The FY2025-26 allocation represents the revised budget. The Bangladesh Social Security Budget for FY2026–27 proposes a record Tk 144,338 crore (Tk 1.44 trillion), a 20 percent increase from FY2025-26. Source: Ministry of Finance. 2026. *Social Security Budget Report FY 2026-27*. Ministry of Finance, Finance Division, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, June 11, 2026.

Figure 1: SSP budget allocations in US$ and as shares of budget and GDP in FY 2015-16 and FY 2025-26



Source: Social Security Budget Report FY 2026-27, Finance Division, Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh.

Key Challenges Facing Bangladesh's Social Protection System

Bangladesh's social security system has played an important role in helping vulnerable households smooth consumption, stabilize incomes, and cope with economic shocks. Despite these achievements, the system faces several structural weaknesses that limit its effectiveness, efficiency, and overall impact.

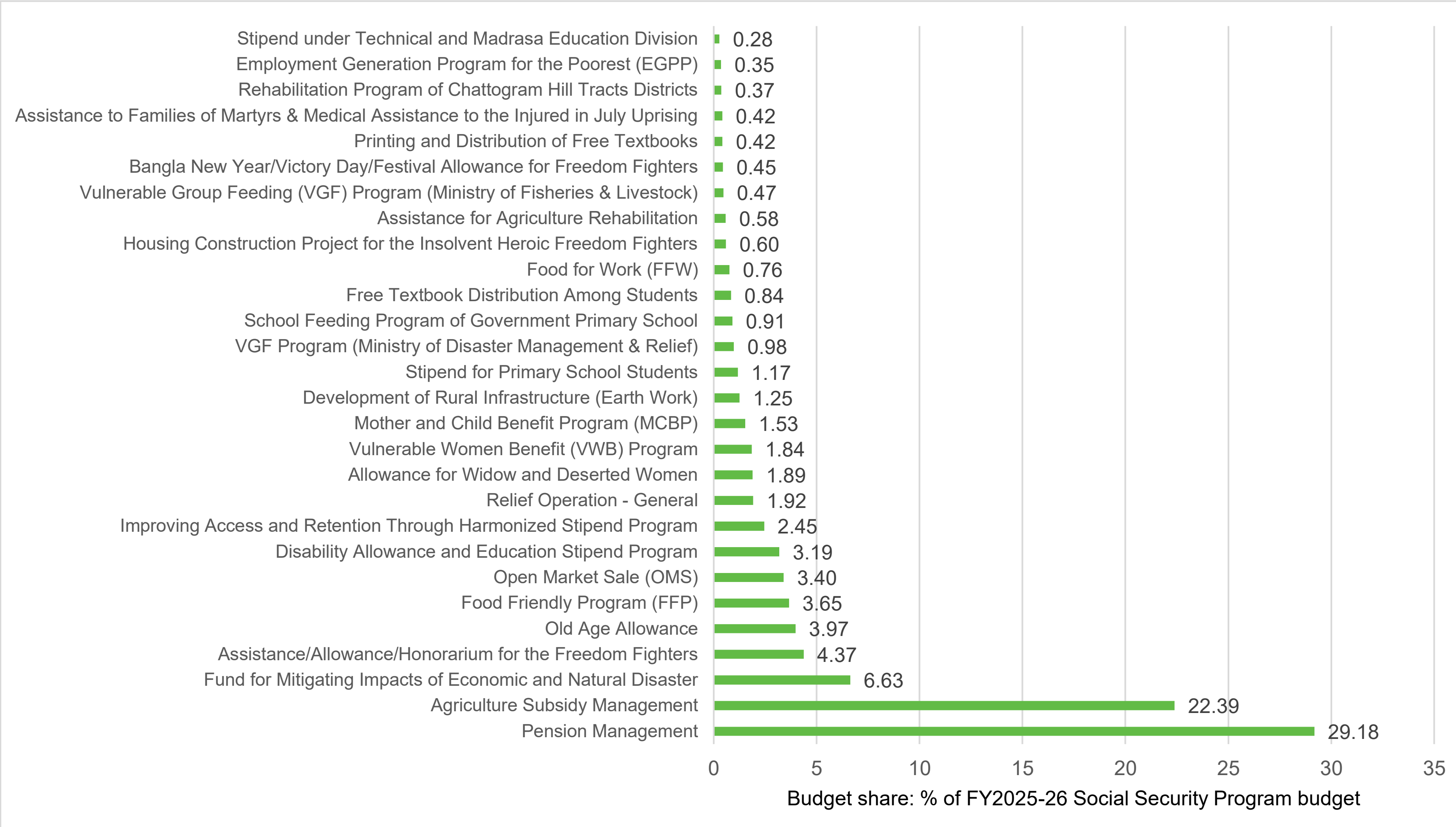
Misallocation of Public Resources

A major concern is the composition of public spending. Over the past decade, a substantial share of the social security budget has been allocated to pensions for government employees and their families, although most beneficiaries are not among the country's poorest or most vulnerable. In addition, expenditures on agricultural subsidies and certain infrastructure projects are classified as social protection despite not serving its core objectives. Including these unrelated expenditures inflates the reported size of the social protection budget and presents a misleading picture of the government's investment in protecting poor and vulnerable populations.

Fragmentation of Programs

The system is also highly fragmented. In FY 2025–26, Bangladesh operated 90 social security programs across 25 ministries, resulting in duplication, weak coordination, and administrative inefficiencies. Figure 2 illustrates the social security budget shares for 28 major programs (out of 90), which accounted for about 96 percent of the total budget in FY 2025-26. The distribution of resources remains heavily skewed. The pension program for government employees alone absorbed 29 percent of the total budget. The five largest programs together accounted for about 67 percent of all spending but served only 5.5 percent of total beneficiaries. As a result, the remaining programs are forced to operate with limited resources, providing inadequate benefits

Figure 2: Budget shares of major social security programs in FY2025-26



Source: Authors' estimates using data from Social Security Budget Report FY 2026-27, Finance Division, Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh.

Note: The Vulnerable Group Development (VGD program has been renamed as 'Vulnerable Women Benefit' (VWB) program by the government.

and reaching only a fraction of those in need. This fragmented allocation of resources undermines both program effectiveness and equity.

Inadequate Benefit Levels

Benefit inadequacy is a major challenge. In an effort to expand coverage, many programs have kept benefit levels extremely low. For most poor and extremely poor households, transfers represent only 1 to 3 percent of total household income—far too little to meaningfully improve welfare, build resilience, or help households escape poverty (World Bank 2021). Expanding coverage without ensuring adequate benefit levels has reduced the transformative potential of social protection.

Weak Targeting and Coverage

Finally, weaknesses in beneficiary targeting continue to undermine program performance. Significant inclusion and exclusion errors persist across most social protection programs, leaving many eligible households without support while allowing many non-poor households to receive benefits (Coudouel, Sabbih, and Ahmed 2021). The Social Security Budget Report FY 2026–27 acknowledges that these targeting errors remain high in major programs (Ministry of Finance 2026). Improving the accuracy of beneficiary identification is therefore essential to enhance both the equity and efficiency of public spending.

Together, these challenges—misallocation of resources, fragmentation, inadequate benefit levels, and weak targeting—reduce the poverty-reducing impact of Bangladesh's social security system. Addressing these structural weaknesses is critical to building a more efficient, equitable, and responsive social protection system capable of meeting the country's evolving development needs.

Strengthening Targeting for Better Outcomes

To enhance the effectiveness of the social protection system in uplifting the poor, there is a pressing need to improve targeting, increase benefit amounts, expanding urban coverage, and scale up successful programs while phasing out inefficient ones. By improving targeting and reducing benefit leakage, social protection coverage for poor households can be expanded even within the current budget.

Why Better Targeting Matters

According to the latest poverty estimates, 18.7 percent of the country’s population (31 million people) were poor in 2022 (BBS 2023). Improving program targeting to reach the poorest of the poor effectively is needed to address the wide gap between the resources available for social protection programs and those in need of support.

Targeting effectiveness indicates the extent to which program benefits are received by the neediest versus the less needy or non-needy population. A well-targeted intervention improves the livelihoods of the neediest without providing those benefits to members of society who are better off. As such, targeting benefits to those most in need is an obvious way of reducing the costs of a program.

Targeting Approaches

Social protection programs generally use two broad targeting approaches: (1) self-targeting (indirect targeting) and (2) administrative targeting (direct targeting).

Self-targeting occurs when program benefits are available to all, but the program is specially designed so that mainly the poor choose to participate. This approach reduces administrative costs, does not require income verification, and is often more politically acceptable because participation is based on individual choice rather than government selection.

Administrative targeting complements self-targeting by identifying eligible poor and vulnerable households through defined eligibility criteria. Its main challenge is developing an accurate and cost-effective system to distinguish those in need from those who are not. Inevitably, some poor households are wrongly excluded (exclusion errors) while some nonpoor households are wrongly included (inclusion errors). Reducing one type of error generally increases the other, requiring a careful balance between coverage and targeting accuracy (Grosh 1994).

Evidence from Bangladesh

We assessed targeting performance using data from IFPRI's Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS). Figure 3 shows the pattern of distribution of total safety net participants of major programs by income groups in 2019.

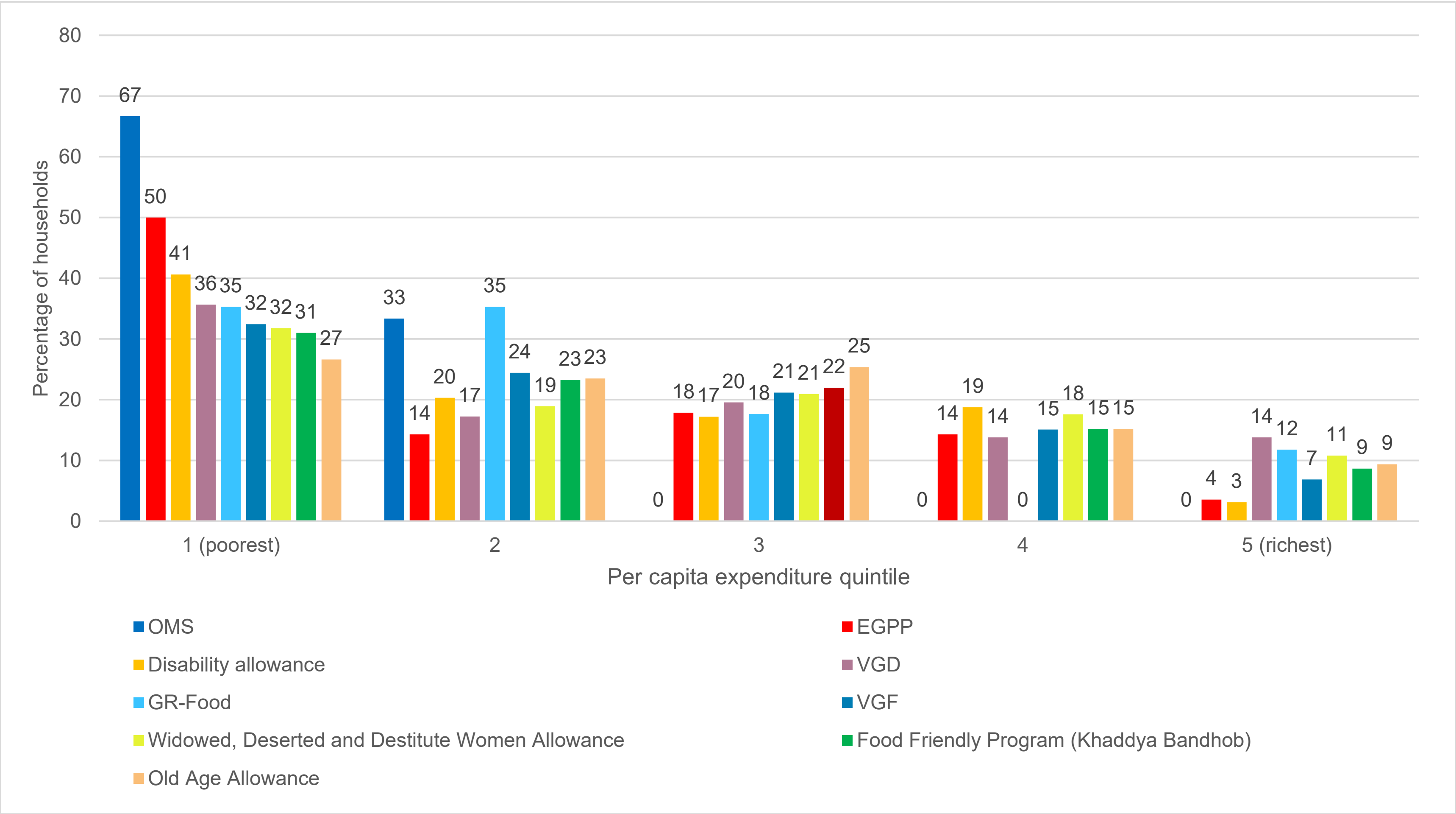
The Open Market Sales (OMS) and Employment Generation Program for the Poorest (EGPP) targets the poorest most effectively, followed by Allowances for the Widowed, Deserted and Destitute Women program (AWDDW) and the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) program.

The OMS program features a self-targeting component. Although it is technically open to all, participation is much higher among the poor compared to the non-poor. Beneficiaries seeking subsidized food often endure long waits in queues for the OMS truck. However, the associated stigmatization can be significant.

EGPP involves physical labor, primarily earth-moving tasks, performed by both male and female beneficiaries. The heavy physical work requirement of the EGPP at a low daily wage makes the program strongly self-targeted. However, a major limitation of workfare programs is that the demographically vulnerable — including children, the elderly, and those who are disabled or chronically ill — are often not able to perform the intense physical labor involved in cash- or food-based public works programs.

The AWDDW and the VGD programs targeted the poor fairly well. The AWDDW is an unconditional cash transfer program to improve the livelihoods of socially disadvantaged poor women who are widow or deserted by husband. The VGD program has a two-year cycle, and each beneficiary woman is entitled to receive 30 kg of rice per month.

Figure 3: Targeting effectiveness of major safety net programs in Bangladesh, 2019



Source: Authors' estimates using data from IFPRI's Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS), 2018/2019.

Note: EGPP=Employment Generation Program for the Poorest. GR-Food=Gratuitous Relief (Food). OMS=Open Market Sales. VGD=Vulnerable Group Development. VGF=Vulnerable Group Feeding.

Improving Beneficiary Identification

The Social Security Budget report FY 2026-27 states, “The government has introduced a Proxy Means Test (PMT)-based poverty assessment under the Family Card Pilot Programme to establish a more transparent, objective and data-driven targeting framework.” (Ministry of Finance 2026).

Proxy means testing is used in many developing countries to identify the poor for targeted social safety net programs. PMT uses multivariate regression to predict income or consumption expenditure that correlate certain proxies, such as assets and household characteristics. Points are assigned to selected indicators, and eligibility for program benefits can be determined based on a total score, as a proxy for household income. The weights of the indicators are given by the values of the coefficients of the selected explanatory variables. At IFPRI, we designed PMT for targeting the food subsidy program in Egypt (Ahmed and Bouis 2002).

Limitations of Proxy Means Testing

Prediction by any model, however, is never exact; therefore, errors are expected. Indeed, results from a growing number of countries around the world show that exclusion errors generated by proxy means tests are very high (World Bank 2011; AusAID 2011; Kidd, Gelders, and Bailey-Athias 2017).

Several reasons explain inaccuracies in the PMT targeting. Underlying them is that regressions rarely explain more than half of the variation in consumption expenditure between households (Coady, Grosh, and Hoddinott 2004).

A Hybrid Targeting Approach

In Bangladesh, recognizing the limitations of relying solely on PMT for targeting, the government directs that PMT scoring be recalibrated on current Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) data and a hybrid framework combining community validation (Ministry of Finance 2026).

Evidence-Based Categorical Targeting

As an alternative to proxy means testing (PMT), we propose adopting an evidence-based categorical targeting approach that directs social protection benefits based on characteristics—such as age, gender, disability, and other easily observable and verifiable indicators—that are strongly associated with poverty.

The 2026 social security budget report includes maximum income thresholds as eligibility criteria for programs such as the Old Age Allowance and the Allowance for Widowed and Deserted Women. In practice, however, income is difficult to verify because of limited tax records, multiple and fluctuating income sources, and unreliable self-reported earnings. As a result, income-based targeting is often inaccurate.

At the request of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) and the World Food Programme (WFP), IFPRI developed evidence-based targeting criteria for the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) program and the Improved Maternity and Lactating Mother Allowance (IMLMA), now the Mother and Child Benefit (MCB) program. Using data from the Bangladesh

Integrated Household Survey (BIHS), representative of rural Bangladesh, IFPRI identified simple, verifiable indicators that would substantially improve targeting accuracy. MoWCA subsequently adopted these criteria for both programs (Ahmed 2018a, 2018b).

MoWCA and WFP further requested IFPRI to develop indicators for targeting the urban poor through the Vulnerable Women's Benefit (VWB) program. IFPRI developed a set of targeting indicators using the urban sample of the 2016 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES). Seven indicators were identified across four categories: occupation (household head is a rickshaw/tricycle van puller or a non-agricultural day laborer, households with a member who is a maid servant), assets (households with no electric fan or television), dwelling characteristics (households with walls made of hemp/hay/bamboo, etc.), and location (households living in slums or other low-income areas). Households meeting at least two of the seven criteria would qualify for the program. An ex-ante evaluation showed that these indicators correctly identified 85 percent of poor urban households, with only 15 percent of the poor incorrectly excluded (Ahmed and Bakhtiar 2022).

Improving Transparency and Accountability

Local selection practices and political influence often result in substantial inclusion and exclusion errors in Bangladesh's social protection programs. Reducing favoritism and rent seeking requires transparent and standardized beneficiary selection procedures.

Program eligibility criteria should be widely publicized at the community level, and a robust grievance redress mechanism should allow households that believe they were wrongly excluded to appeal their eligibility. These measures would improve transparency, accountability, and the fairness of beneficiary selection while minimizing the exclusion of deserving households.

Reform Priorities for a More Effective Social Protection System

Scale Up High-Performing Programs

A comprehensive review of social safety net evaluations in Bangladesh has helped us identify the most effective programs.

We have identified five social protection programs for expansion based on their strong targeting performance and potential welfare impacts:

1. Vulnerable Group Development (VGD)
2. Mother and Child Benefit Program (MCBP)
3. Old Age Allowance
4. Allowances for the Financially Insolvent Disabled
5. Allowances for Widowed, Deserted, and Destitute Women

VGD participants receive 30 kg of rice per month for a period of 24 months. The nominal value of food-based programs adjusts with changes in food prices, ensuring that beneficiaries receive appropriate support despite price fluctuations. However, for cash transfers, inflation erodes the real value of benefits. Therefore, it is critical to adjust cash transfer amounts every 3 to 4 years to account for inflation.

Increase Benefit Amounts and Expand Coverage

To strengthen the key programs for scaling up, we propose the following:

1. Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) program:

   - Incorporate high-quality, intensive nutrition behavior change communication (BCC) training for women in each two-year program cycle: This addition would make VGD a nutrition-sensitive social protection program.

2. Cash-based programs (Mother and Child Benefit Program; Old Age Allowance; Allowances for Financially Insolvent Disabled; Allowances for Widows, Deserted and Destitute Women):

   - Expand program coverage: Increase program coverage in both rural and urban areas to reach a larger proportion of vulnerable households.
   - Increase benefit amounts: Substantially increase the benefit amounts to ensure that participants experience meaningful improvements in their livelihoods.
   - Implement the government-to-person (G2P) payment scheme: Streamline and expedite the disbursement of cash benefits to program participants through the G2P payment system.

In the food-based VGD program, the current value of the monthly transfer of 30 kg of coarse rice is approximately Tk 1,800. However, the cash transfer amounts for the other programs—MCBP (Tk 850 per month), Old Age Allowance (Tk 700 per month), Allowances for the Financially Insolvent Disabled (Tk 850 per month), and Allowances for Widowed, Deserted, and Destitute Women (Tk 700 per month)—are relatively low. To ensure a meaningful impact on welfare, we recommend a substantial increase in these cash transfers.

Expand Urban Social Protection

Design of social protection programs for urban areas must account for key differences from rural contexts. Urban women, unlike rural women, are more involved in diverse economic activities. The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) and the 8th Five-Year Plan highlight the inadequate coverage of social security programs for urban poor, despite significant migration from rural areas. In 2010, 30.1 percent of rural households benefited from social safety net programs, compared to just 9.4 percent of urban households (GED 2015). The NSSS advocates for expanding urban social safety net programs to provide equitable support, especially for vulnerable women.

Expand the Open Market Sales (OMS) Program

- Scale up the distribution of essential foods such as rice, wheat flour, and cooking oil at subsidized prices to help stabilize market prices, especially during seasonal price hikes in March-April and September-October. Prioritize distribution of essential foods in low-income urban areas by trucks to effectively reach the poorest. OMS is a self-targeted program because long waits make it unattractive to the non-poor.

Introduce Urban Public Works

- Launch an urban clean-up initiative that engages both men and women, providing income opportunities for participants while enhancing city cleanliness. This would be a self-targeted program. Better-off people would not take part in cleaning roads and public spaces, so it would naturally reach the poor.

Promote Sustainable Graduation from Poverty

While transfer payments provide short-term relief for the poor, evidence is mixed on whether they lead to sustainable income growth for the ultra-poor. Many social safety net programs offer temporary poverty alleviation. To achieve lasting improvements in food security and livelihoods, providing meaningful transfer sizes and bundling the transfers with other components that promote sustained income generation (such as training or access to financial services) appear promising. Research, such as studies on BRAC's Targeted Ultra Poor (TUP) program, demonstrate that asset transfers bundled with training and other support can lead to sustained improvements (Ahmed et al. 2009). Multisectoral social safety net programs are costlier than traditional safety nets, requiring careful balancing between program coverage and sustainability, but their longer-term benefits may enhance their cost-effectiveness. Given their positive outcomes, scaling up these programs with contextually appropriate designs is recommended in economically lagging and disaster-prone areas.

There is increasing interest in assessing the long-term impact of social protection programs on poverty reduction, particularly after transfers conclude. IFPRI developed the Transfer Modality Research Initiative (TMRI), a two-year cluster randomized controlled trial (RCT) designed to assess the most effective form of safety net transfers—cash or food—for ultra-poor women in rural Bangladesh. The study also explored whether combining these transfers with nutrition behavior change communication (BCC) would enhance their impact (Ahmed et al. 2024, Ahmed et al. 2025b).

IFPRI re-surveyed TMRI households in 2018, four years after the intervention ended. The results demonstrate that combining either cash or food transfers with nutrition BCC led to a sustainable reduction in poverty (Ahmed et al. 2025a).

Strengthen Health Protection for the Poor

Social health insurance program: Rural households in Bangladesh are highly vulnerable to shocks such as natural disasters, economic downturns, and agricultural losses, which severely disrupt livelihoods and lead to food insecurity and financial instability. Health-related expenses are a major contributor to these shocks. Data from IFPRI's 2019 Bangladesh Integrated Survey (BIHS) show that 22 percent of rural households reported health expenditures as their most significant negative income shock, with no households having health insurance. Health-related shocks often drive nonpoor households into poverty and worsen the condition of already poor households (Quisumbing 2011). Given the catastrophic impact of healthcare costs, a well-designed health insurance program for *both* rural and urban poor is essential and should be piloted and evaluated for effectiveness.

Health vouchers: Health insurance systems are complex and time-consuming to establish, requiring strong administration, regulatory frameworks, and funding for sustainable coverage. Health vouchers, by contrast, provide a simpler solution with direct, targeted access to services, needing minimal infrastructure and adaptable to specific needs—ideal for linking social transfers to health services in resource-limited settings. In Bangladesh, programs like the Maternal Health Voucher Scheme have been introduced on a limited scale, showing improved maternal and child health outcomes and increased health service utilization among participating women (Sultana et al. 2023; Das and Nag 2018; Nandi et al. 2022). Further research on the supply and demand of health voucher programs can maximize their impact on service uptake and health outcomes and can benefit rural and urban poor.

Policy Recommendations

Priority 1. Improve Targeting

- Adopt a hybrid targeting system that combines proxy means testing (PMT), categorical targeting, and community validation.
- Reduce inclusion and exclusion errors.
- Strengthen grievance redress mechanisms.

Priority 2. Increase Benefit Amounts

- Raise benefit levels.
- Index cash transfers to inflation.

Priority 3. Consolidate Fragmented Programs

- Merge overlapping programs.
- Reduce administrative duplication.

Priority 4. Expand Urban Social Protection

- Scale up the Open Market Sales (OMS) program.
- Introduce labor-intensive urban public works programs.
- Expand the Family Card Program to urban areas.

Priority 5. Invest in Graduation-Oriented Programs

- Integrate cash transfers with:
    - Nutrition services
    - Skills development
    - Financial inclusion
    - Livelihood support

Priority 6. Strengthen Health Protection for the Poor

- Introduce:
    - A social health insurance program
    - Health voucher programs

Priority 7. Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation

- Improve monitoring systems to track program performance.
- Conduct regular impact evaluations to inform policy and program improvements.

Conclusion

Bangladesh has built one of South Asia's largest social protection systems, but greater spending alone will not deliver stronger outcomes. Improving the quality of spending through better targeting, adequate benefits, and program consolidation is now the central reform challenge.

The Family Card Program provides a timely opportunity to modernize Bangladesh's social protection architecture. If combined with improved beneficiary identification, digital delivery, and stronger accountability, it can become the cornerstone of a more integrated and responsive national social protection system.

Future reforms should move beyond short-term income support toward promoting resilience, human capital development, and sustainable graduation from poverty through integrated social protection interventions.

By aligning public resources more closely with the needs of poor and vulnerable households, Bangladesh can build a more efficient, equitable, and shock-responsive social protection system that supports inclusive growth and advances the country's aspiration to achieve upper-middle-income status.

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