

22. A major food transfer program in Bangladesh fell short during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Public food transfer programs serve as an important safety net for those facing hunger and food insecurity in both low- and high-income countries around the world. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these programs have become even more crucial, as food insecurity and poverty rates have soared. But lockdowns and other public health restrictions can also disrupt food distribution operations and thus limit their effectiveness.

Along with a broad set of social protection schemes, Bangladesh has in place several overlapping food transfer programs. The largest of these, the Food Friendly Program (FFP), provides 30 kg of rice per month per eligible family in the lean season months of March–April and September–November, reaching roughly 27.5 million people annually. Eligible households are those that are poor, functionally landless, and where the household head works as a day-laborer; special consideration is given to households with additional vulnerabilities, such as elderly, disabled, or female-headed households. FFP recipients, therefore, are among the most vulnerable sections of the population. In response to COVID-19, the government of Bangladesh expanded the FFP, making available an additional month of transfers to existing beneficiaries in May 2020. However, [our research](#) shows that the program did not deliver the full allotments of rice to recipients, complicating efforts to alleviate severe economic impacts.

In 2018, IFPRI [conducted a study](#) to evaluate the performance of the FFP and found the program to be functioning well. The 2018 study was based on a nationally representative sample of 4,526 FFP recipient households, along with other actors – dealers, *upazila* (sub-district-level) food controllers, and local administrators such as union chairmen – involved in the program. As concerns began growing about the impact of the pandemic and the countrywide lockdown imposed from March 26–May 31, 2020 (referred to as a “general holiday”), we decided to conduct phone interviews of the same households from the 2018 study to better understand how the program fared in addressing the pandemic-induced challenges of food insecurities, job losses, and reduced incomes. This follow-up survey was completed in August 2020 and surveyors were able to interview 2,800 out of the original sample of 4,526 households. Our analysis shows that key household- and *upazila*-level characteristics are similar for both survey rounds, indicating the two samples are comparable. Characteristics are also broadly similar between those that remained in the sample and those that dropped out between rounds.

The 2020 survey results highlight the particularly severe impacts of the pandemic on the poor, with more than half the respondents reporting that the primary income-earning member of their household had lost their job, and 90 percent reporting that their July 2020 income was less than their pre-pandemic income. Food insecurity, measured using FAO's [Global Food Insecurity Experience](#)

[Scale](#), was very high. More than 80 percent of the sample reported being worried about not having enough food to eat, being unable to eat healthy and nutritious food, eating only a few kinds of food, and eating less than they should. Close to two-thirds said their household had run out of food at some point since the imposition of the “general holiday.” Food insecurity was markedly higher among those households that experienced job losses.

Faced with rising food insecurity, households were forced to resort to a variety of coping strategies to meet basic needs, including reducing expenditures on health (62 percent) and nonfood items like clothes and education (90 percent), and spending from their savings (76 percent). Fewer than 5 percent of respondents were able to access credit from formal institutions, and most relied on borrowing from within their informal networks of friends and family.

As COVID-19 exacerbated existing food insecurity and poverty, food transfer programs became more important than ever as a means to meet basic food needs. But our survey results show the FFP program fell short. Just 64 percent of respondents reported receiving their full entitlement of 60 kg of rice in March–April, and 58 percent reported receiving less than 10 kg of the promised 30 kg in May. This substantial shortfall highlights the failure of the FFP to function effectively while facing a crisis such as a pandemic. In addition, while the average per kilogram price of the rice remained roughly the same, the proportion of households who reported having to pay bribes to receive their entitlement rose from 4 percent in 2018 to 10 percent in 2020.

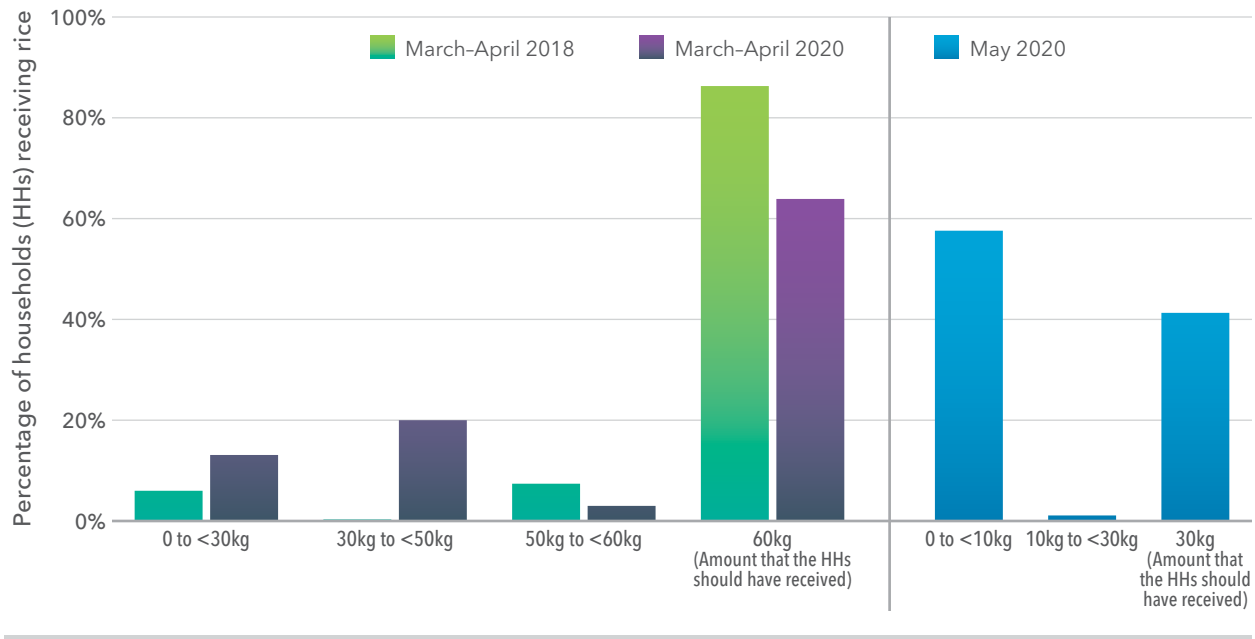
Several factors could have caused the FFP to falter, including supply disruptions and restrictions on movement, as well as lack of proper information about household eligibility conditions. For example, of the households who had been removed from the program in 2020, 36.7 percent did not know the reason why, 23 percent thought they had been removed without valid justification, and about 13 percent thought they were excluded because of disagreements with local officials.

The partial failure of well-established safety net programs such as the FFP to adequately adapt to unanticipated shocks like COVID-19 has real financial and human costs. While other modalities of social protection, such as cash transfers, are employed globally, food transfer programs remain the preferred modality in Bangladesh, making them an essential tool for mitigating the impact of major shocks. The importance of the FFP as an existing safety net is highlighted by our finding that other newly (and relatively hurriedly) introduced cash and in-kind transfer schemes reached less than a quarter of the households in our sample.

Thus, there is a need to regularly assess the costs of these programs, evaluate their effectiveness, and devise strategies to both broaden and deepen their reach. Our primary policy recommendation going forward is to set up routine monitoring mechanisms for FFP and similar safety net programs using digitally enabled small-sample phone surveys. That would allow the government to identify and address distribution challenges quickly, helping to avert spikes in food insecurity and hunger.

In addition to increasing research and monitoring, there is a need for more dynamic targeting to identify those pushed into poverty because of economic shocks and ensure that they are also covered by social safety nets. Bangladesh did not broaden the FFP to include additional beneficiaries during the pandemic, meaning that people who did not qualify for this public food transfer program pre-pandemic were not eligible for any support.

FIGURE 1 Food Friendly Program: Monthly receipt of rice, 2018 and 2020



The need for dynamic and frequent data collection is underscored by [recent research](#) that demonstrates how food insecurity patterns can change over time. Using multiple rounds of nationally representative panel data post-COVID, the authors show that after an initial spike, moderate and severe food insecurity prevalence had returned to pre-pandemic levels by January 2021. However, mild food insecurity prevalence rose and remained elevated at almost 20 percentage points above pre-COVID levels. Eighteen months after the pandemic, a distressing 68 percent of rural households reported some form of food insecurity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted both the vulnerabilities of our economic systems and the potential of technology-based solutions such as phone surveys to overcome some of the logistical challenges that unanticipated shocks can present to effectively implementing, monitoring, and evaluating safety-net programs. Harnessing such technology and applying dynamic targeting criteria can help safety net programs adapt to sudden shocks and further enhance their impact on hunger, poverty, and the overall economy.

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