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# ASSESSING INDICATORS FOR SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS FOR THE VULNERABLE GROUP DEVELOPMENT (VGD) PROGRAM IN BANGLADESH

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We gratefully acknowledge the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for funding this study through the Policy Research and Strategy Support Program (PRSSP) in Bangladesh under USAID Grant Number EEM-G-00-04-00013-00. We also acknowledge the support of the CGIAR Research Program on Policies, Institutions, and Markets (PIM) led by IFPRI.

Data for this report came from IFPRI’s 2015 Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS), which was approved by the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh and funded by USAID.

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## 1. Introduction

Bangladesh has a wealth of institutional diversity and experience with targeted social safety net programs. Most of these programs are widely credited with providing the poor access to food and improving their livelihoods. However, the need for assistance is overwhelming. According to the latest poverty estimates, 24.3 percent of the country's 163 million people were poor in 2016.<sup>1</sup> Improving program targeting to reach the poorest of the poor effectively is needed to address the wide gap between the resources available for safety net 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 food intervention improves the real income and food security of the neediest without providing those benefits to members of the society who do not need them. Targeting of benefits to those most in need is an obvious way of reducing the costs of a program.

Upon request of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA) and the World Food Programme (WFP) in Bangladesh, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has undertaken this study to assess the suitability of indicators used for targeting the poor through the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) program in Bangladesh.

The VGD program is the largest social safety net program in Bangladesh that exclusively targets women. About 750,000 ultra-poor rural women and their 3.75 million family members receive a monthly ration of 30 kg of rice for 24 months. This support period is referred to as the "VGD cycle." The program began in 1975 as a relief program for families affected by natural calamities. The current VGD program seeks to integrate food security and nutrition with development and income generation. The program is implemented by the MOWCA with support from the WFP.

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<sup>1</sup> Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. 2018. *Report of the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2016*. Statistics and Informatics Division, Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

## **2. Data and Method of Analysis**

### ***2.1 Data***

IFPRI researchers designed the Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS)—the most comprehensive, nationally representative rural household panel survey to date in the country. The household survey questionnaires collected information on a wide variety of topics, such as household composition, occupation, education, dwelling characteristics, assets, food and non-food consumption expenditures, dietary intake of all household members, plot-level agricultural production and practices, height and weight of all household members, women's empowerment, and participation in safety net programs.

Two panel survey rounds of the BIHS have been conducted—the baseline in 2012 and midline in 2015—which tracks the same set of rural households over time. Results in this study draw upon data from the BIHS. The BIHS is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

### ***2.2 Method of Analysis***

This study uses consumption expenditures as an indicator of household welfare, and uses per capita expenditure as a proxy for income for two reasons. First, expenditures are likely to reflect permanent income and, hence, are a better indicator of consumption behavior. Second, data on expenditures are generally more reliable and stable than income data. Since expenditures are intended to serve as a proxy for income, the terms "expenditure" and "income" are used interchangeably.

The measure of total consumption expenditure is quite extensive and draws upon responses to several sections of the household survey. In brief, consumption is measured as the sum of total food consumption and total nonfood (nondurable and durable) expenses. Expenditures on individual consumption items were aggregated to construct total expenditures. Quantities of goods produced by the household for home consumption were valued at the average unit market prices of commodities.

The analysis disaggregates the sample households into per capita expenditure quintiles. Quintiles are based on household quintiles ranked by total per capita expenditures. Households

in the first quintile represent the poorest 20 percent of all households in the income distribution, while those in the fifth quintile represent the richest 20 percent of all households.

### **3. Methods of Targeting Used by the VGD Program**

VGD follows a two-step targeting mechanism. First, although the VGD program operates nation-wide, it concentrates more resources in food-insecure areas of the country through a geographic targeting mechanism. The Government of Bangladesh and WFP have devised a resource allocation map for safety net programs where each upazila of the country has been categorized by its relative poverty level. Based on this map, VGD food resources are allocated on a geographical targeting of upazilas in proportion to their poverty levels.

Second, within each upazila, the VGD program beneficiaries are selected by administrative review, using upazila-level committees made up of government officials, elected representatives of local government (i.e., union council chair and members), a school teacher, a freedom fighter, a respectable man and a respectable woman in the community, family planning worker, and partner NGO representatives. The VGD selection committee selects the beneficiaries according to a set of officially prescribed targeting criteria.

### **4. Targeting Effectiveness of Major Safety Net Programs**

BIHS collected information on social safety net participation and benefits received by participating households. Based on the survey data, Figure 1 shows the pattern of distribution of total safety net participants of major programs by income groups in rural Bangladesh in 2012. The Employment Generation Program for the Poorest (EGPP) targets the poorest most effectively, followed by the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) Program and the VGD program. The work requirement of the EGPP makes the program strongly self-targeted. Both male and female beneficiaries do physical work in the program that mainly involves earth moving. About half (49 percent) of the total EGPP participants belong to the poorest 20 percent of the households. However, around 29 percent of the EGPP participants were in the top three income quintiles in 2012, suggesting that there is still room for improvement in targeting

performance of the program. The patterns show that the VGD program is fairly well targeted to the poor.

## **5. Recent Performance of VGD Targeting**

Using data from the BIHS, Figure 2 compares the targeting effectiveness of the VGD program in 2012 (2011-2012 cycle) with 2015 (2015-2016 cycle). The results of our analysis reveal that VGD's targeting performance improved substantially: in 2012, of all VGD participant households, 36.5 percent belonged to the first quintile group comprising of the poorest 20 percent of households in Bangladesh. By contrast, in 2015, 43.4 percent of total VGD participants were among the poorest 20 percent of all households in Bangladesh. These findings demonstrate that targeting of the VGD program has become more pro-poor in recent years. However, the findings also indicate that there is ample scope to further improve the targeting performance. If the program was perfectly targeted to the poorest, then all the VGD participants would have belonged to the poorest 20 percent of the households in the income distribution (i.e., the first quintile).

## **6. Selection Criteria**

The VGD selection guidelines of the MOWCA for the January 2017 to December 2018 cycle stipulates that preference will be given to women whose households fulfill at least four selection criteria listed below. A mandatory criterion for VGD selection is that households must have at least one woman aged 20–50 years, who is designated as the card holder. Preference will be given to landless female-headed households with no source of income, and households with pregnant women or with children less than 24 months old. Specific criteria are:

1. Functionally landless households with no owned land or with owned land less than 0.15 acres. Landless households will get priority.
2. Household [head] working as day laborer earning a very small income or households with no fixed source of income.
3. Households with pregnant women or with children less than 24 months old (number of children not to exceed 2) will be prioritized for inclusion. There will be a quota of 10 percent for such households in each union.

4. Household head is female with no earning adult male member or with no other source of income.
5. Mothers with adolescent daughter, who is currently attending school, will be prioritized conditional on remaining in school, not marrying before legal age and not to be involved in any risky activities.
6. Households with members who are disable/autistic will be prioritized for inclusion.

#### **Exclusion criteria**

1. If the woman in the household is below 20 or above 50 years of age.
2. If the woman is a beneficiary of any other food or cash transfer program.
3. If the woman was a VGD cardholder in an earlier cycle (2013-14 and 2015-16).

#### **Other conditions**

1. Holding only one card in the household.
2. Selected woman will be entitled to receive free VGD card without any conditionality.
3. Monetary or any other benefits must not be solicited in exchange of providing VGD membership.

## **7. Assessment of Targeting Indicators**

### ***7.1 Efficacy of the Current Selection Criteria***

A program's effectiveness in reaching the poorest depends largely on the appropriateness of indicators used for beneficiary selection. Good indicators are those that are highly correlated with poverty, yet are easy to observe, record, and verify. How effective are the current VGD selection criteria in identifying the poorest?

The first selection criterion is, "Functionally landless households with no owned land or with owned land less than 0.15 acres. Landless households will get priority." This criterion, however, does not specify if landless would include homestead land. Therefore, we have analyzed 6 different variants of this indicator shown in Figures 3 to 8 using data from 2015 BIHS. For example, Figure 3 shows distribution of households in the most stringent indicator—that is, absolutely landless households who do not own any land whatsoever, not even homestead land. Only 8.5 percent of all rural households in Bangladesh belong to this category, and 35.1 percent of these households are among the poorest 20 percent of all households in the income distribution. Although the use of this indicator could target the poor well, 24.1 percent of

households in this category belong to the richer 40 percent of all households, who probably rent housing for living, and are likely to be engaged in non-agricultural activities generating relatively decent incomes. Another example is households who own only homestead land and no other land (Figure 4). About 39 percent of rural households belong to this category, where 28 percent of them are among the poorest 20 percent in the income distribution. Other land-related indicators are self-explanatory.

The second selection criterion is, “Household [head] working as day laborer earning a very small income or households with no fixed source of income.” Since there are two broad types of day laborers in rural areas—agricultural and non-agricultural day laborers, we have analyzed the targeting efficacy of both types using BIHS data. Household head working as an agricultural day laborer is highly correlated with poverty, and hence, is a very effective indicator to select very poor women belonging to these households. About 14 percent of all rural households fall under this category. Figure 9 shows that 46.4 percent of all households in this category belong to the poorest quintile, and three quarters of them are among the poorest 40 percent of all households.

The third selection criterion is, “Households with pregnant women or with children less than 24 months old (number of children not to exceed 2) will be prioritized for inclusion.” We have separately analyzed households with pregnant women (5 percent of all households), households with pregnant women aged 20 to 50 years (only 3.7 percent of all households), households with children less than 24 months (15.2 percent of all households), and households with children less than 24 months but only 2 children (9.8 percent of all households). Of these four indicators, the most pro-poor indicator is households with children less than 24 months, as 32.6 percent of these households belong to the first quintile group (Figure 13). The two indicators representing households with pregnant women do not show any noticeable association with income; therefore, these are not effective for targeting the poor (Figures 11 and 12).

The fourth selection criterion is, “Household head is female with no earning adult male member or with no other source of income.” We have analyzed the first part of this criterion. There is no female household without any source of income in our nationally representative

rural survey sample, which makes sense because no households can survive without any income. Interestingly, the results presented in Figure 15 show a positive relationship between income and female-headed households with no earning male member—18.3 percent of these households belong to the poorest quintile, whereas 29.7 percent of them are among the richest 20 percent of all households in rural Bangladesh. Similar pattern exists for all female-headed households in rural areas (Figure 16). These results indicate that female heads of households (18.6 percent of all rural households) receive income from household members such as a husband, son, or daughter who migrated either to cities in Bangladesh or to foreign countries. Therefore, these findings indicate that more often than not, targeting female household heads usually does not benefit the neediest.

The fifth selection criterion is, “Mothers with adolescent daughter, who is currently attending school.” Figure 17 shows that households with at least one adolescent girl aged 12 to 18 years who is enrolled in school (21.7 percent of all rural households) are distributed almost equally across the 5 income groups. For effective pro-poor targeting, a better indicator is households with an adolescent girl who is not enrolled in school (6.6 percent of all rural households), as shown in Figure 19.

The sixth selection criterion is, “Households with members who are disabled/autistic.” Figure 20 shows the distribution of households where the household head or the main income earner is disabled. Only 1.6 percent of all rural households fall under this category. The pattern suggests that the distribution is progressive (negatively associated with income) until the third quintile, then it becomes slightly regressive (positively related to income). The regressive pattern might be indicating that some households with disabled head/main income earners probably get financial assistance from private sources.

## ***7.2 Examples of Promising Indicators for Improved Targeting***

Using the 2015 BIHS data, we have identified several indicators that are highly correlated with poverty and are observable and verifiable; therefore, could be effective in selecting the poorest for the VGD program. Among the set of indicators we have analyzed, the following are most promising:

1. *Households without any private latrine* (only 3.3 percent of all rural households). Among these households, 43 percent belong to the poorest quintile and 65 percent are among the poorest 40 percent of rural households (Figure 21).
2. *Household head or the main income earner is a rickshaw or tricycle van puller* (4.2 percent of all rural households). Among these households, 40 percent belong to the poorest quintile and 68 percent are among the poorest 40 percent of rural households (Figure 22).
3. *Households without electricity connection, but the village has electricity grid* (31.6 percent of all rural households). Among these households, 32 percent belong to the poorest quintile and 58 percent are among the poorest 40 percent of rural households (Figure 23).
4. *Households without any private tube-well* (40.4 percent of all rural households). Among these households, 26 percent belong to the poorest quintile and 50 percent are among the poorest 40 percent of rural households (Figure 24).
5. *Households with walls made of jute sticks, bamboo, etc. (not brick or tin)* (27.8 percent of all rural households). Among these households, 28 percent belong to the poorest quintile and 50 percent are among the poorest 40 percent of rural households (Figure 25).

## **8. Conclusions**

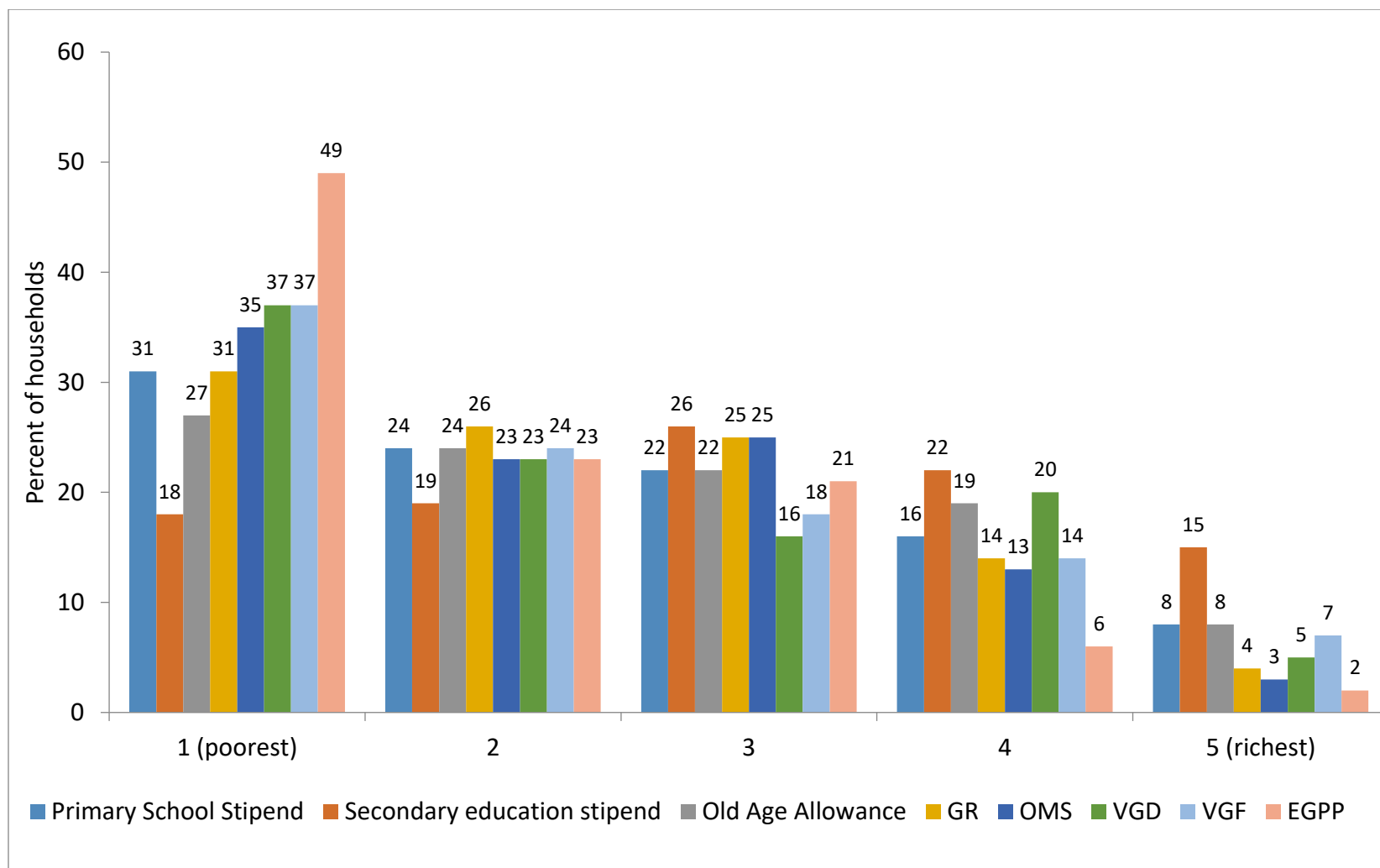
In this study, we have assessed the targeting effectiveness of the indicators used for selecting VGD program participants in Bangladesh. The purpose of the assessment is to strengthen the empirical basis upon which policymakers can make informed policy choices to refine the targeting mechanism of the VGD program so that the program can effectively serve the neediest families.

By choosing better indicators of household welfare and using them as selection criteria, it is possible to greatly improve the targeting effectiveness of the VGD program. Some of the current selection criteria used for selecting VGD beneficiaries are quite ambiguous. These

criteria, therefore, provide scope for exercising broad discretionary powers in the VGD beneficiary selection process.

We have identified a number of indicators that hold considerable promise to improve the targeting performance of the VGD program. Adoption of some or all of these indicators will increase the cost-effectiveness of the program, and help the VGD program achieve its policy objective of uplifting the poorest.

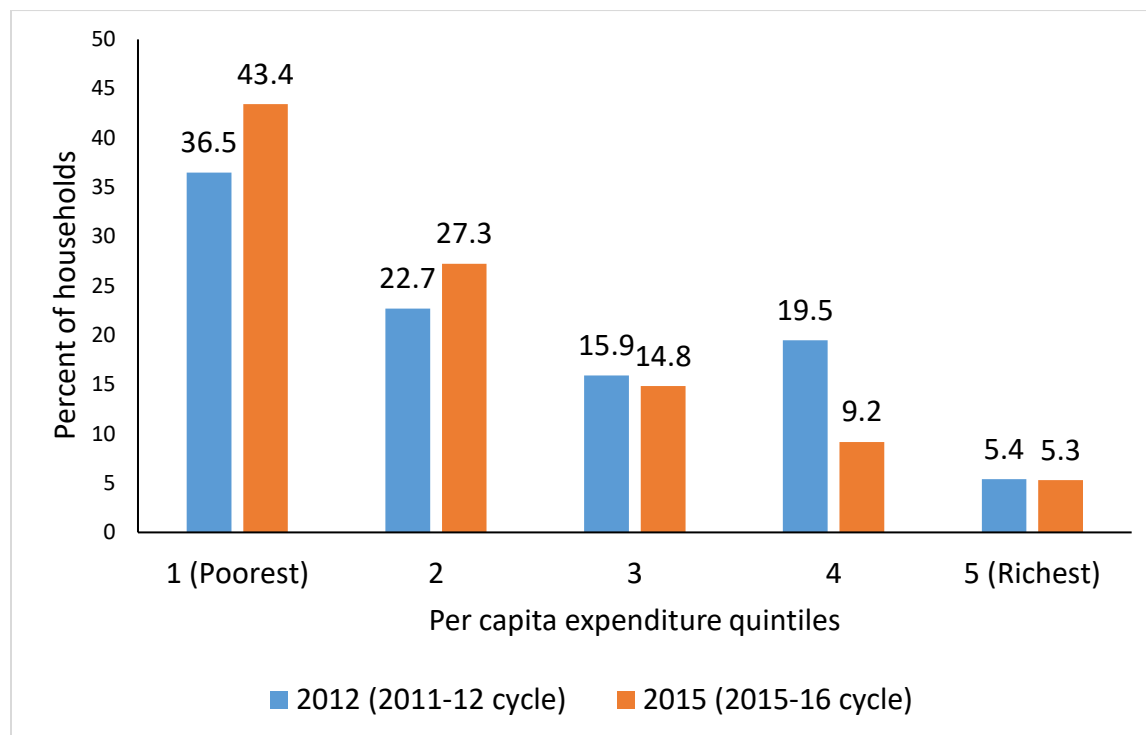
**Figure 1: Targeting effectiveness of major safety net programs in Bangladesh, 2012**



Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2012.

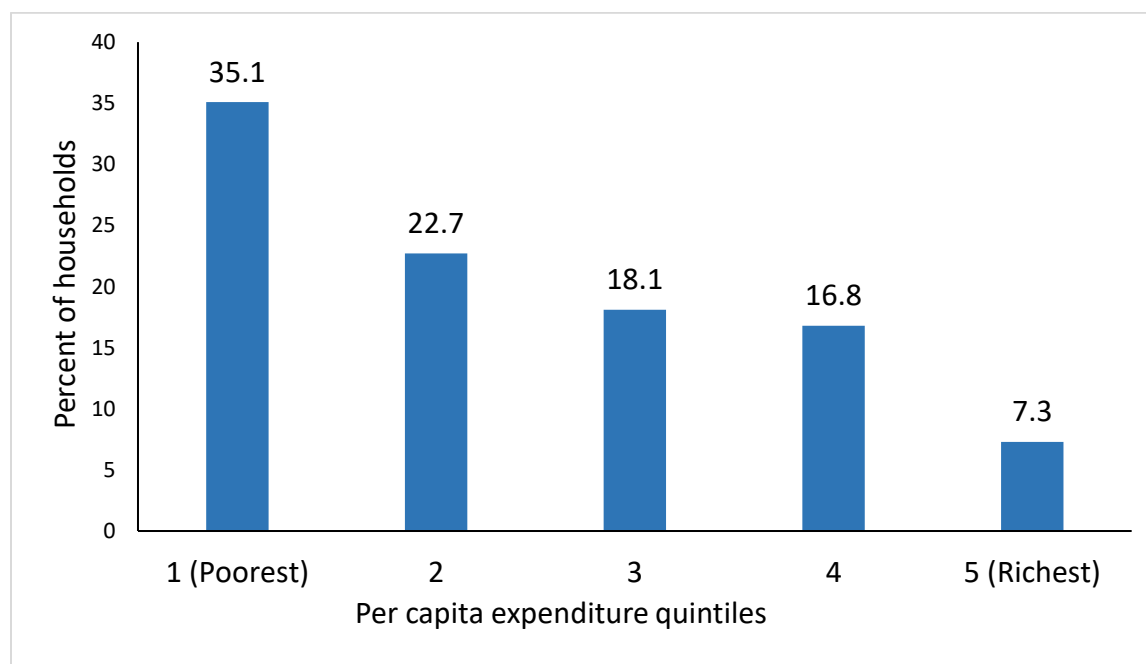
Note: EGPP=Employment Generation Program for the Poorest. GR=Gratuitous Relief. OMS=Open Market Sales. VGD=Vulnerable Group Development. VGF=Vulnerable Group Feeding.

**Figure 2: Comparison of distribution of VGD participants by income groups: 2012 and 2015**



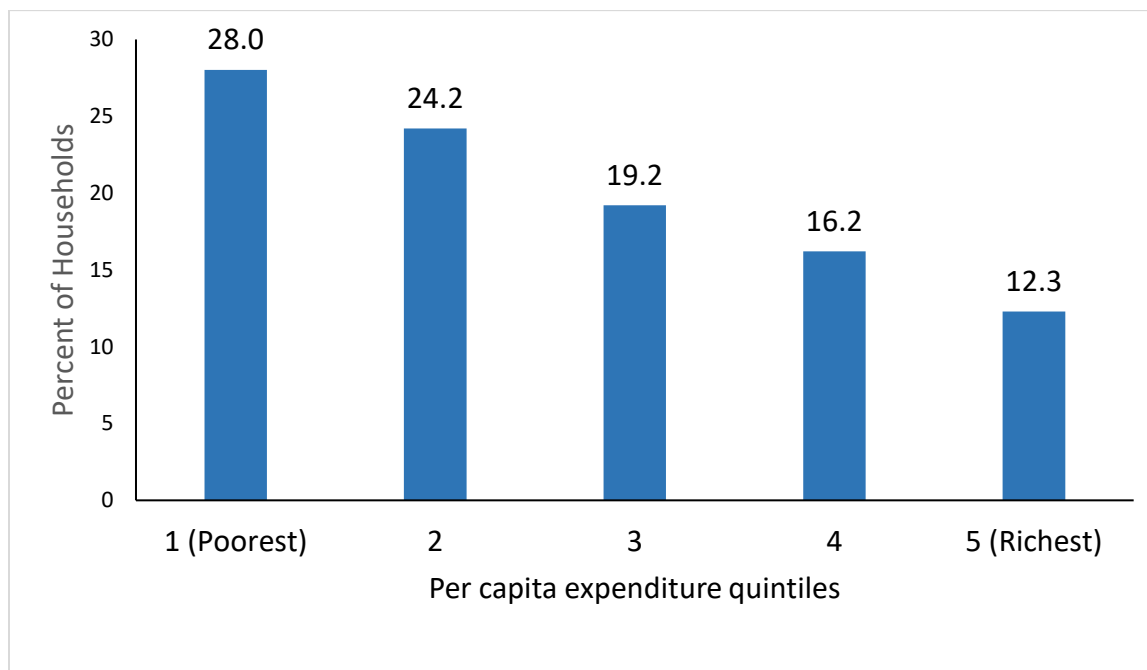
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2012 and 2015.

**Figure 3: Percentage of landless households who do not own any land, no homestead and no cultivable land (8.5 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



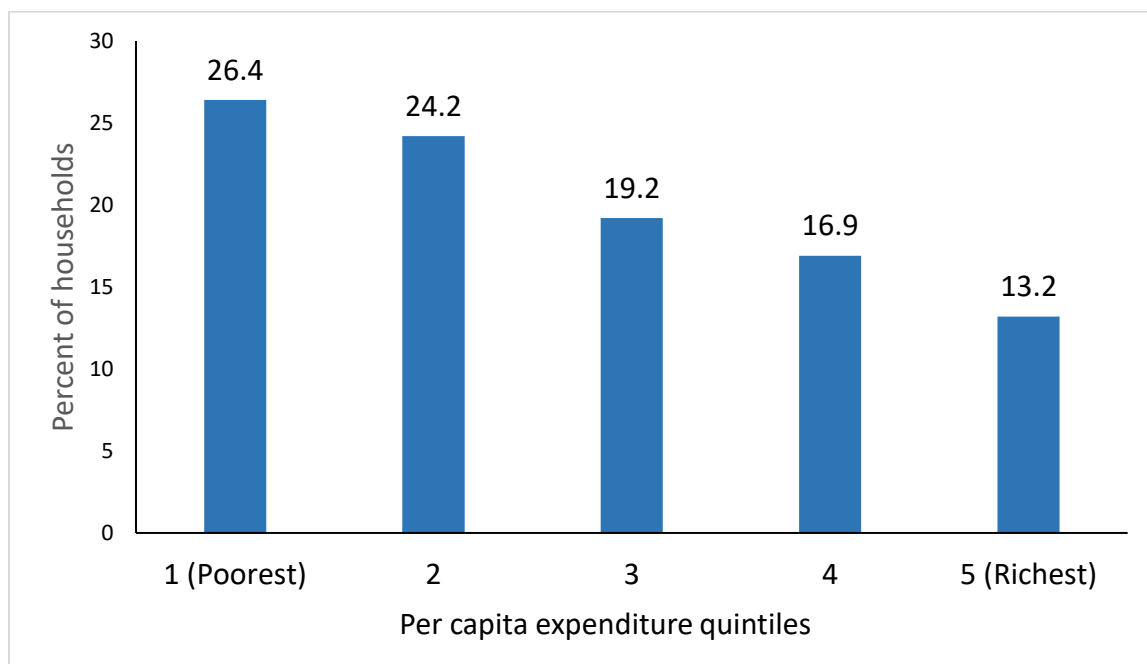
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 4: Percentage of landless households who do not own any land, but owns homestead land (38.7 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



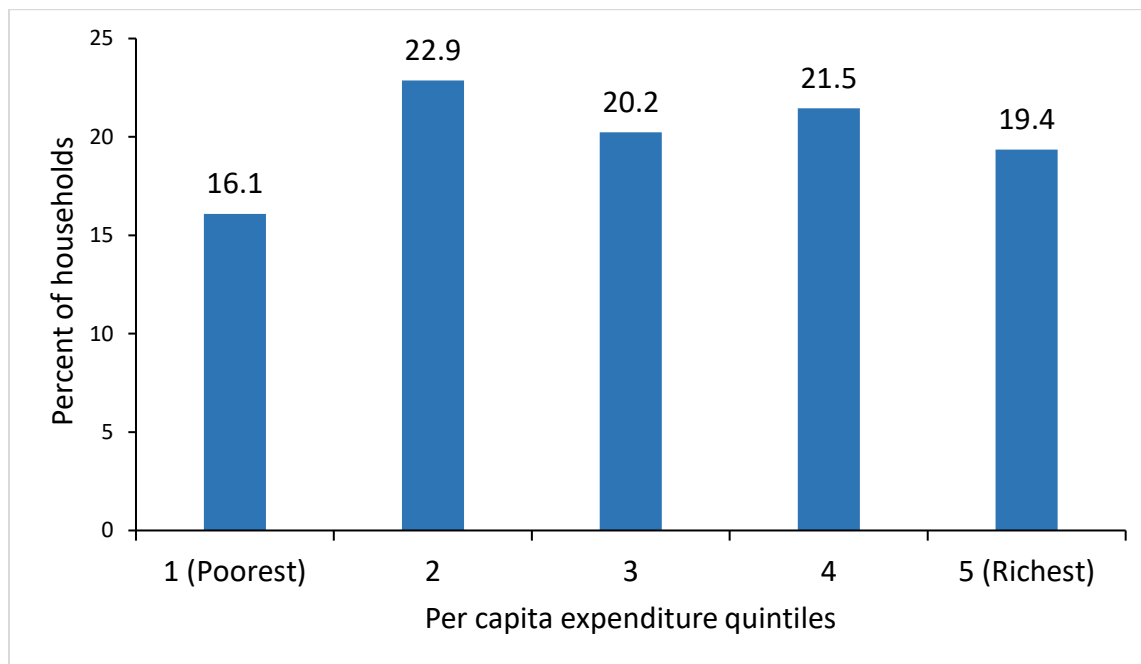
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 5: Percentage of households who own less than 0.15-acre land including homestead and some cultivable land (42.2 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



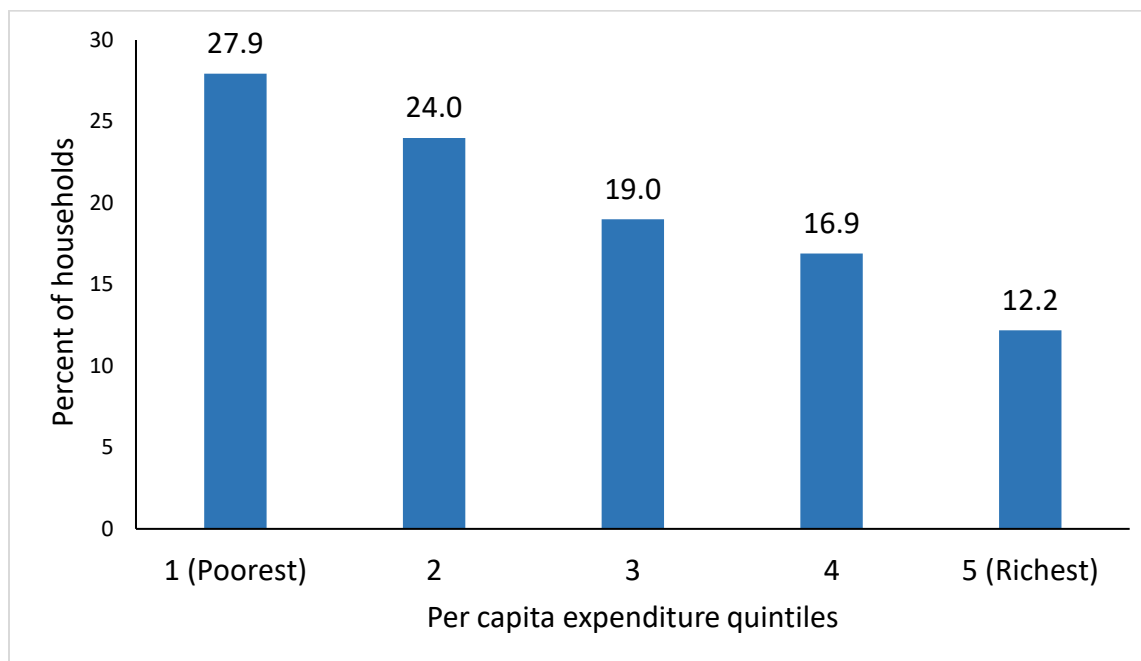
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 6: Percentage of households who own less than 0.15-acre cultivable land but some land, excluding homestead land (8.7 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



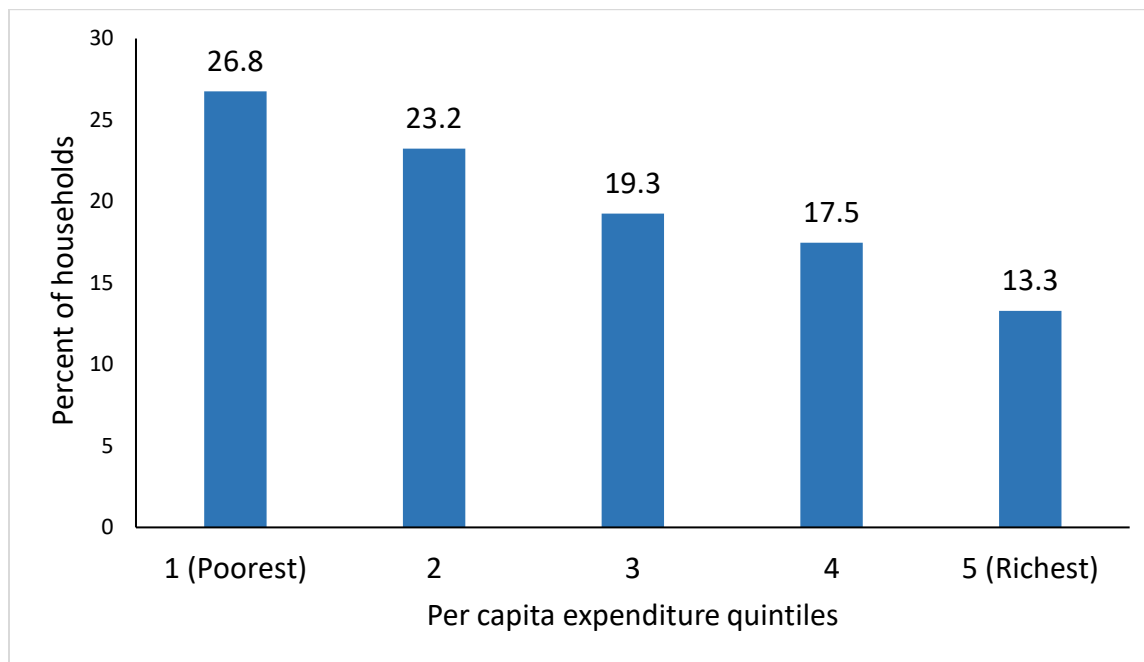
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 7: Percentage of households who own less than 0.15-acre land or no land but including homestead land (50.9 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



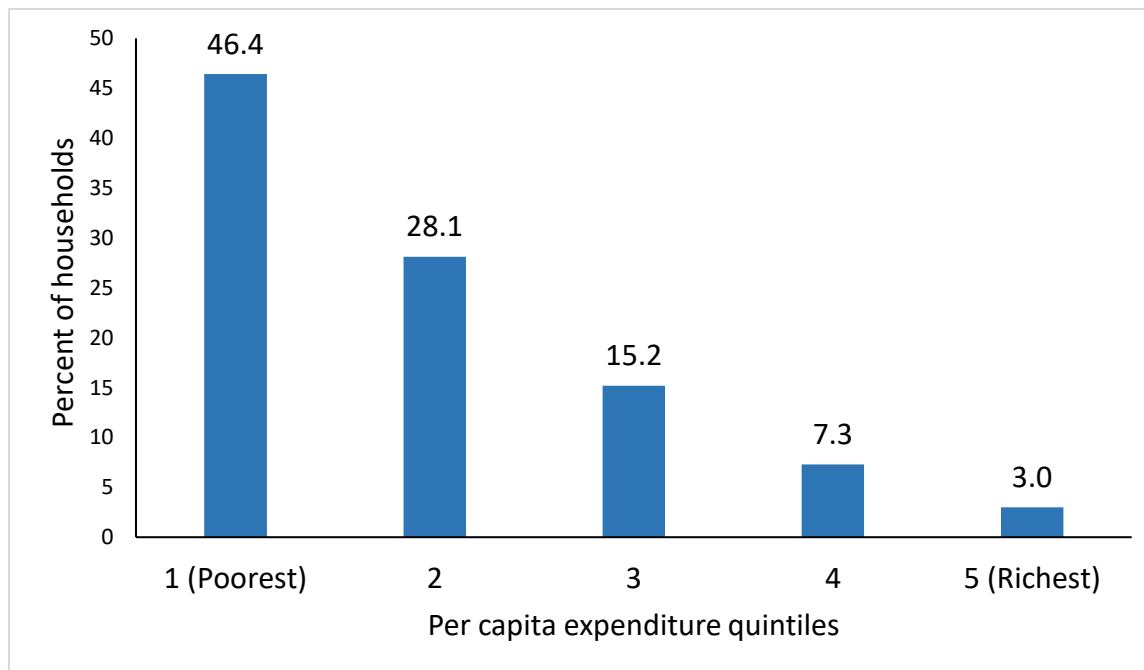
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 8: Percentage of households who own less than 0.15-acre cultivable land or no land, excluding homestead land (50.9 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



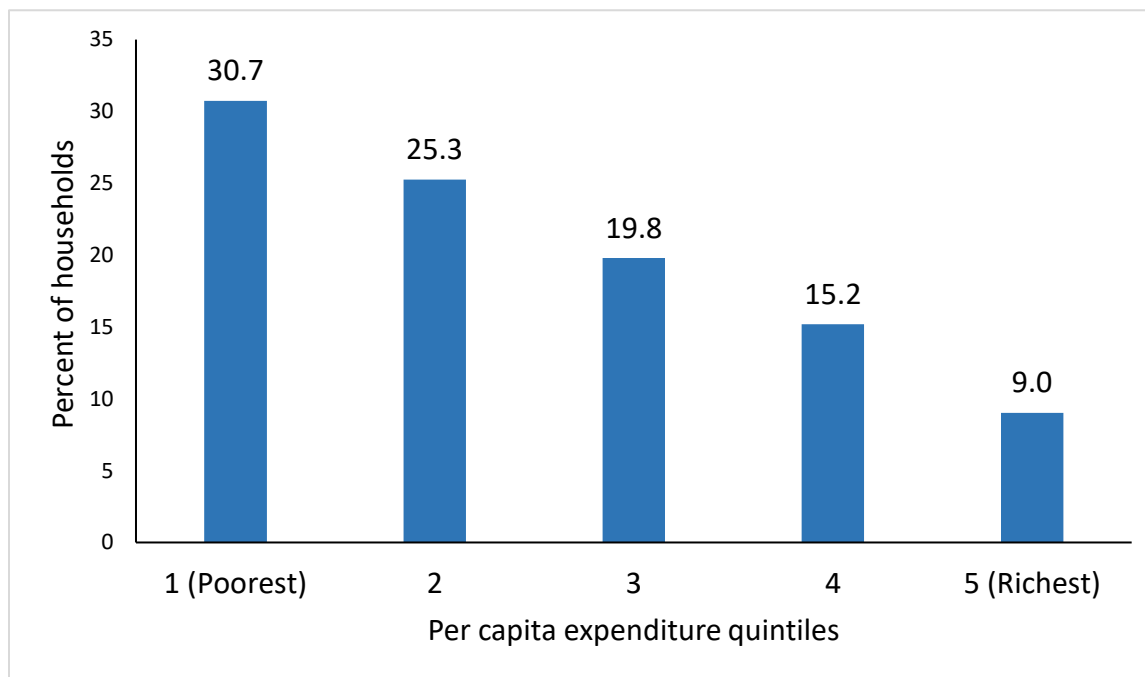
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 9: Percentage of household head/ main income earner is an agricultural day labor (14.1 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



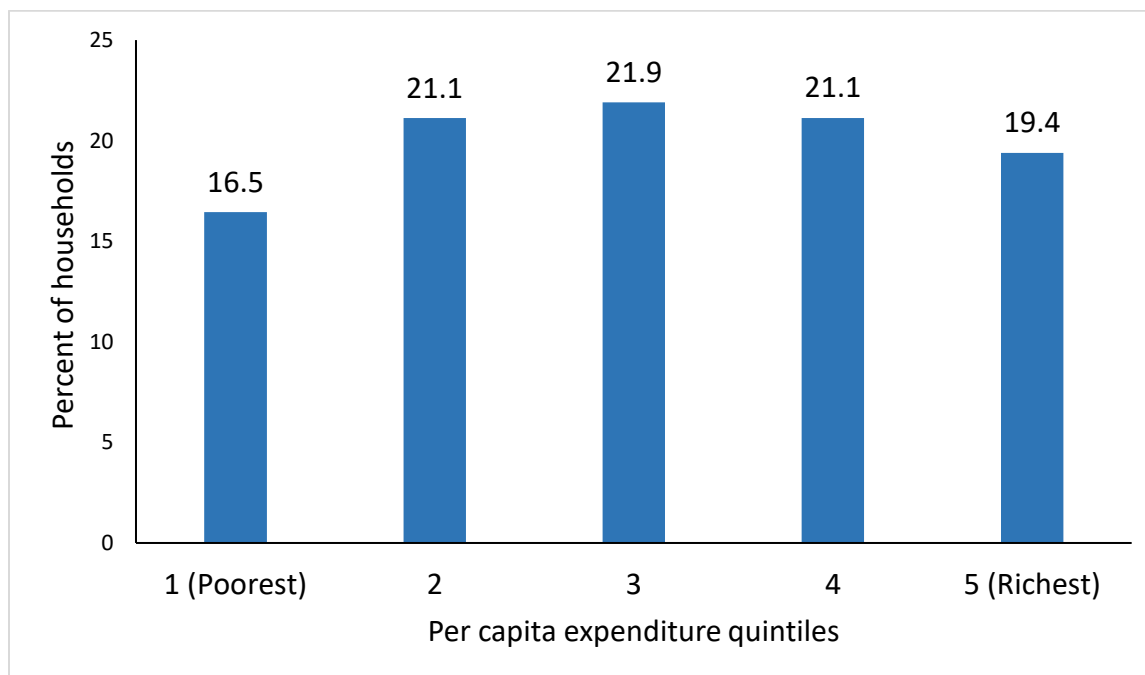
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 10: Percentage of household head/ main income earner is a non-agricultural day labor (10.4 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



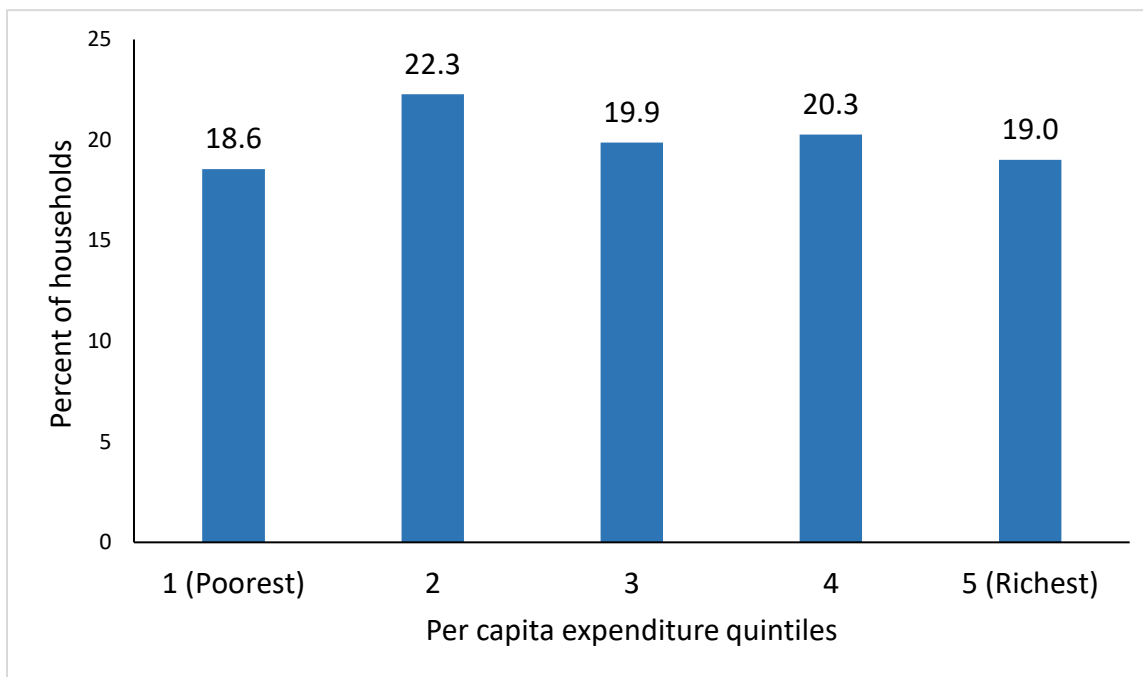
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 11: Percentage of households with pregnant women (5 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



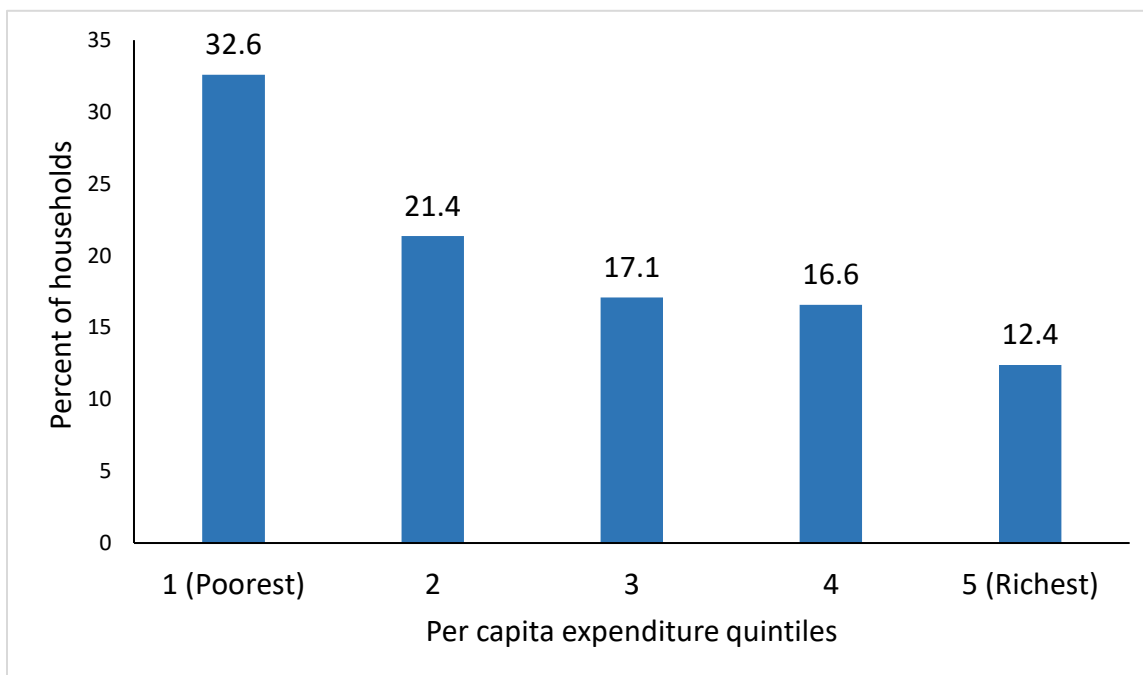
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 12: Percentage of households with pregnant women aged 20 to 50 (3.7 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



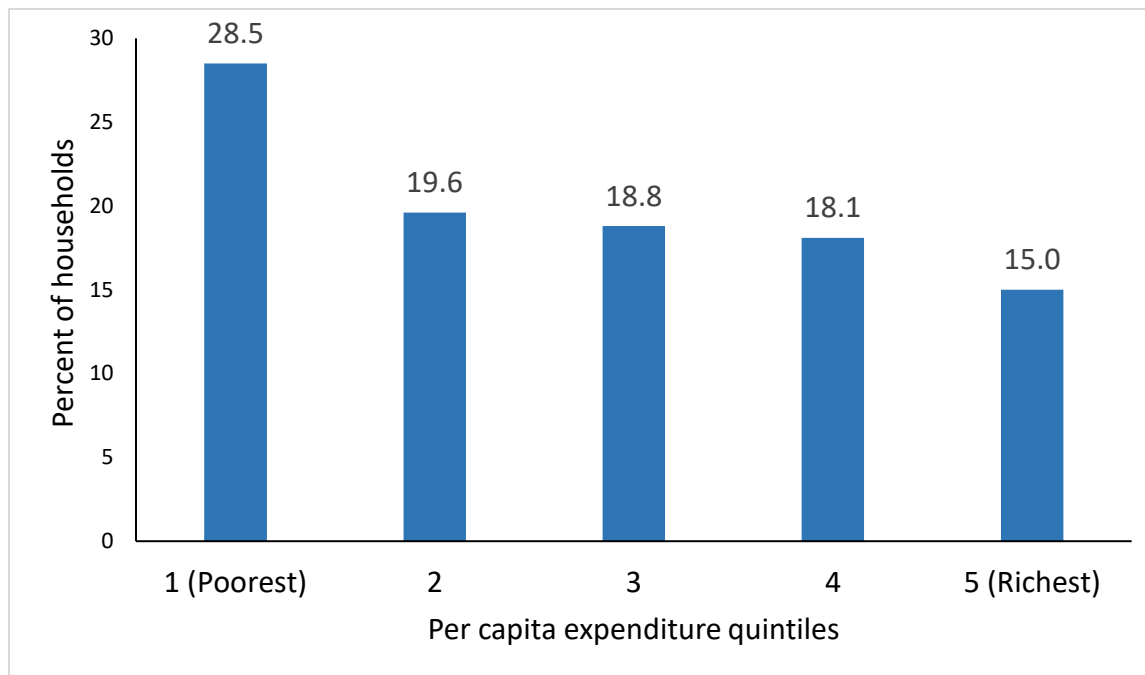
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 13: Percentage of households that have children less than 24 months old (15.2 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



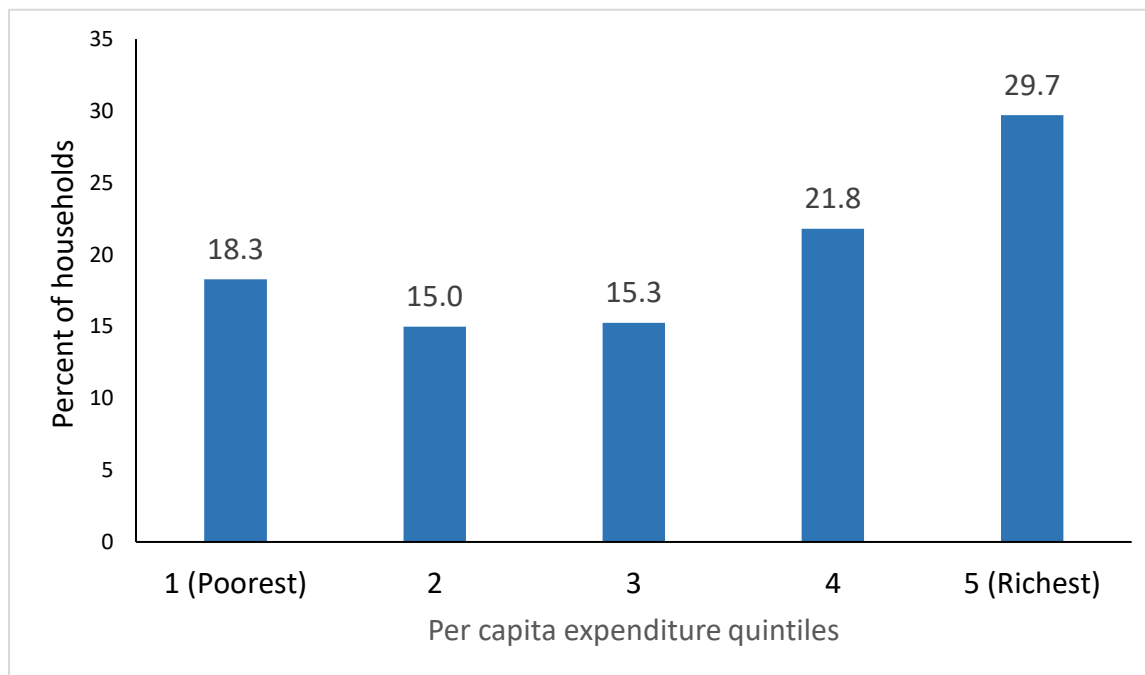
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 14: Percentage of households that have children less than 24 months old (but only two children) (9.8 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



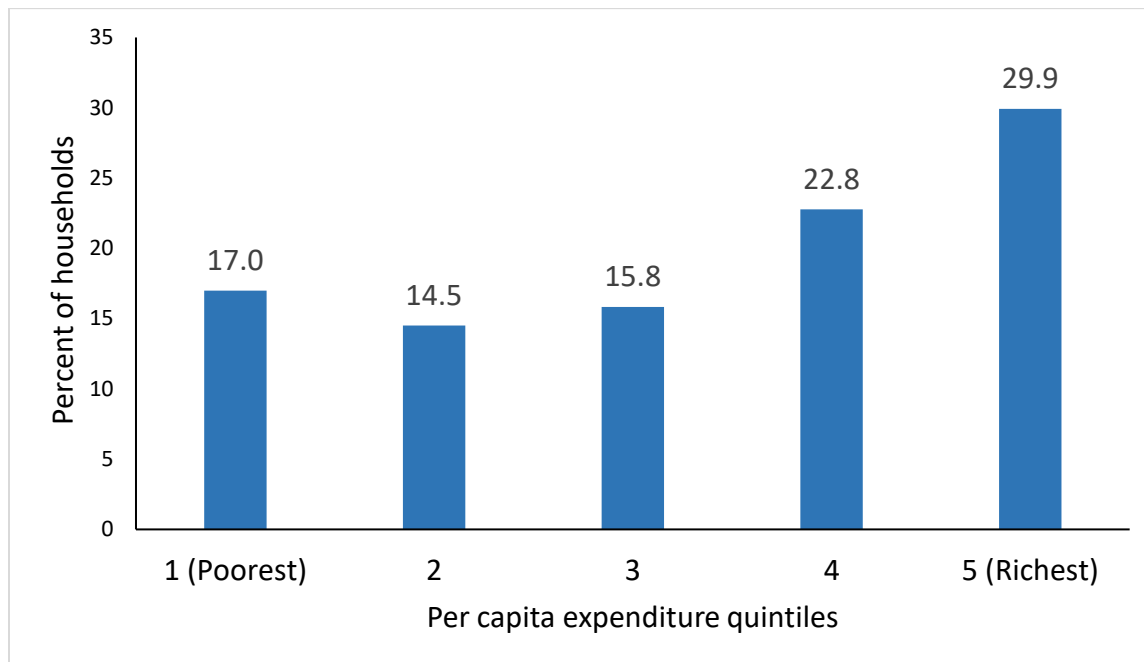
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 15: Percentage of female headed households with non-earning adult male (15.2 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



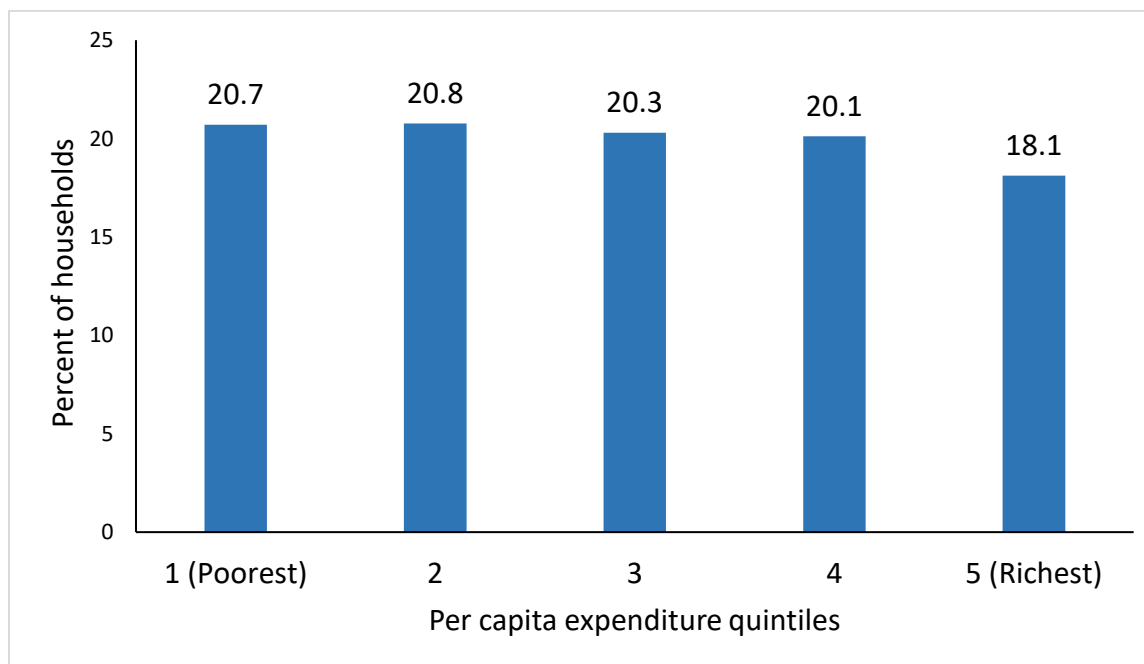
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 16: Percentage of female-headed households (18.6 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



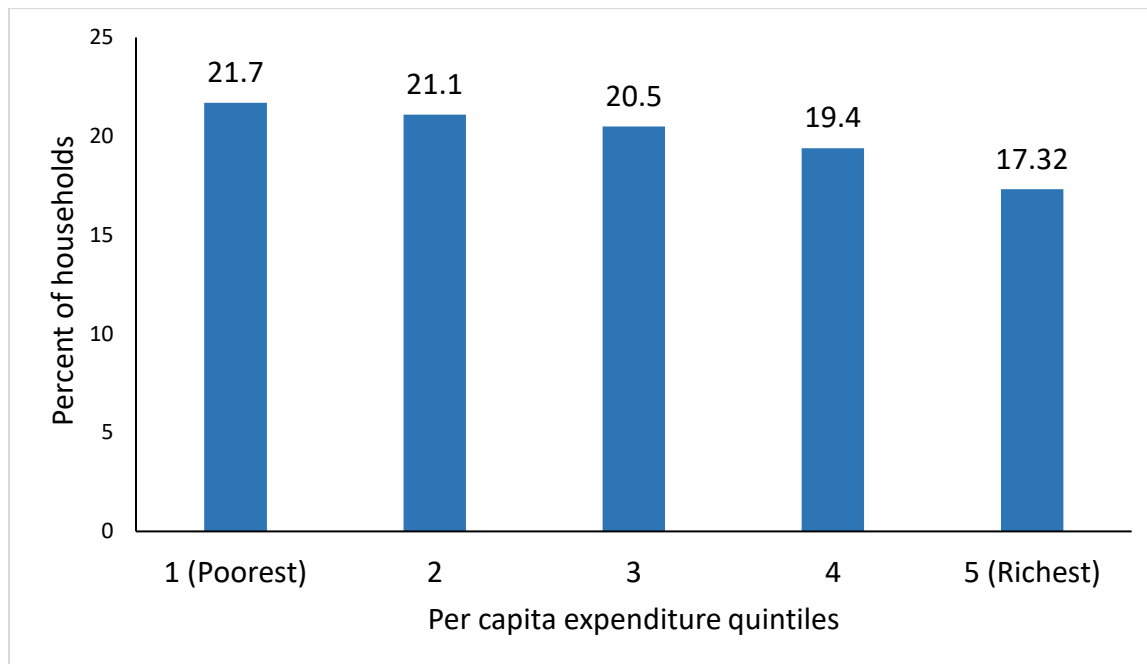
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 17: Percentage of households with at least one adolescent girl aged 12 to 18 years who is enrolled in school (21.7 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



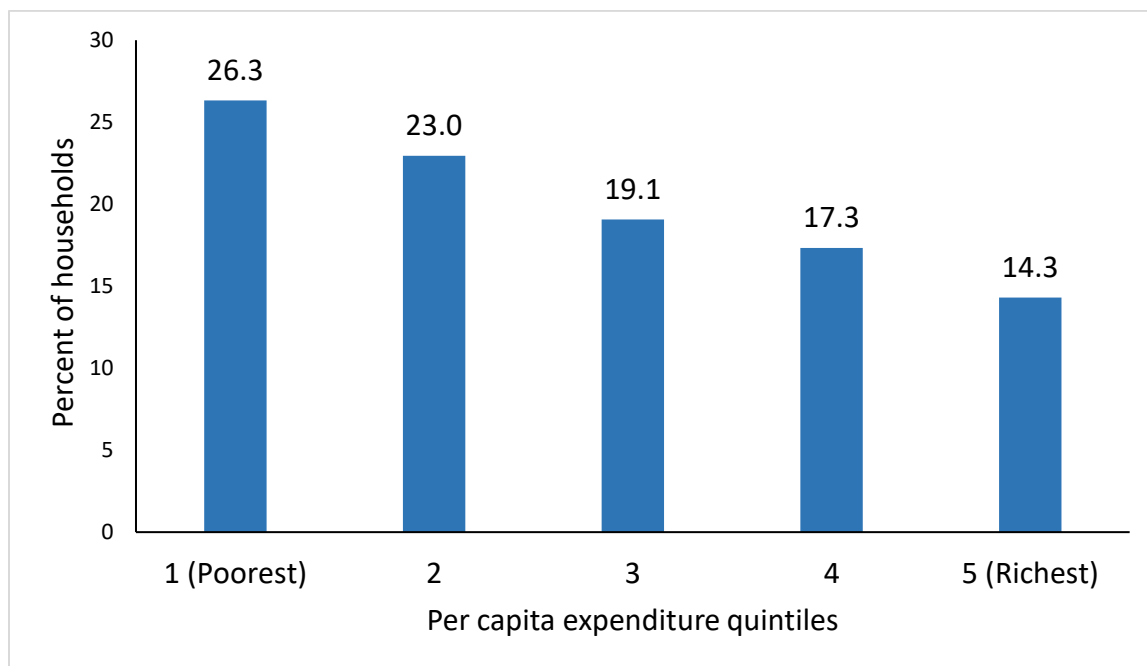
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 18: Percentage of households with at least one adolescent girl aged 12 to 18 years (27.5 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



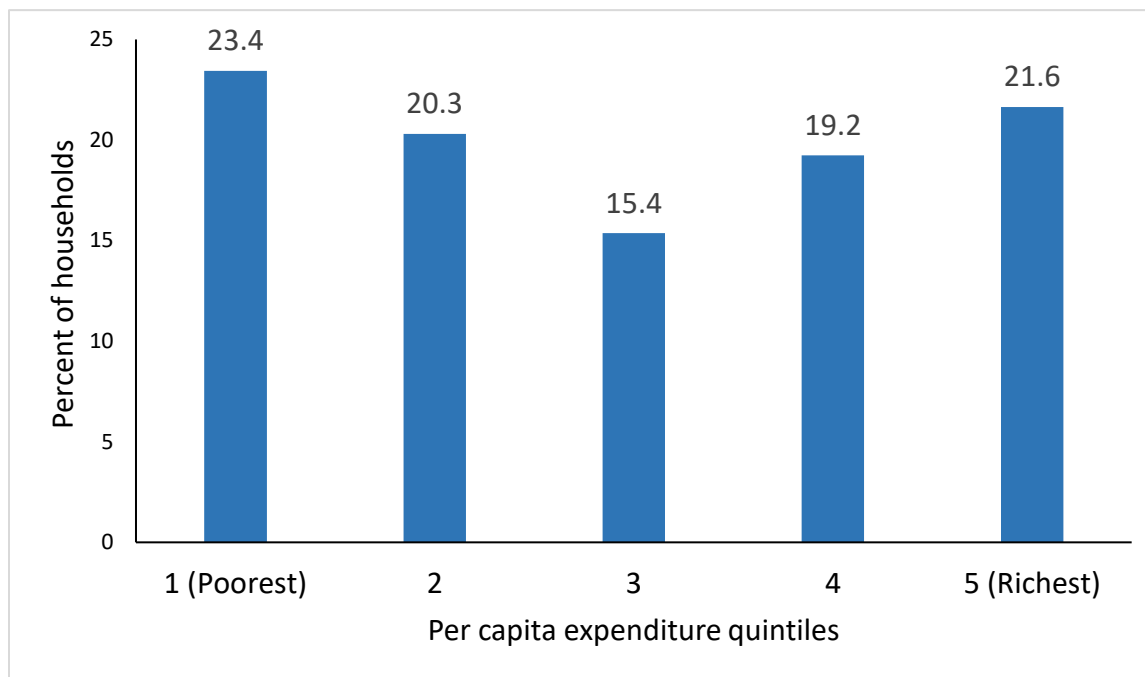
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 19: Percentage of households with at least one adolescent girl aged 12 to 18 years who is not enrolled in school (6.6 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



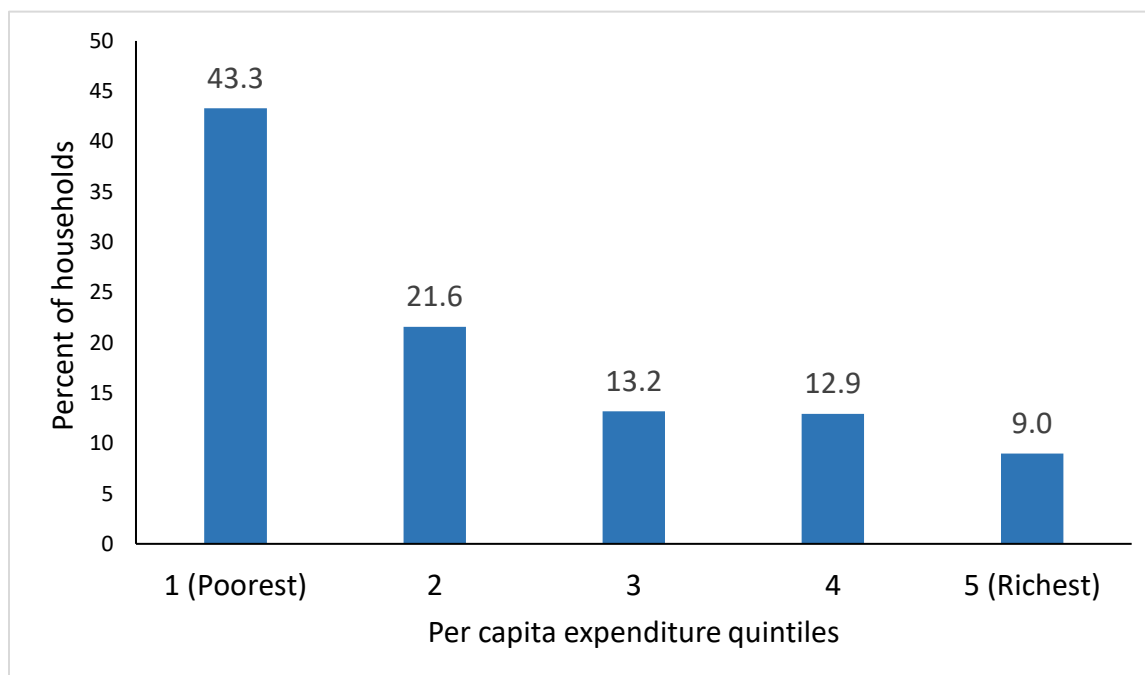
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 20: Percentage of household head/ main income earner is disabled (1.6 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



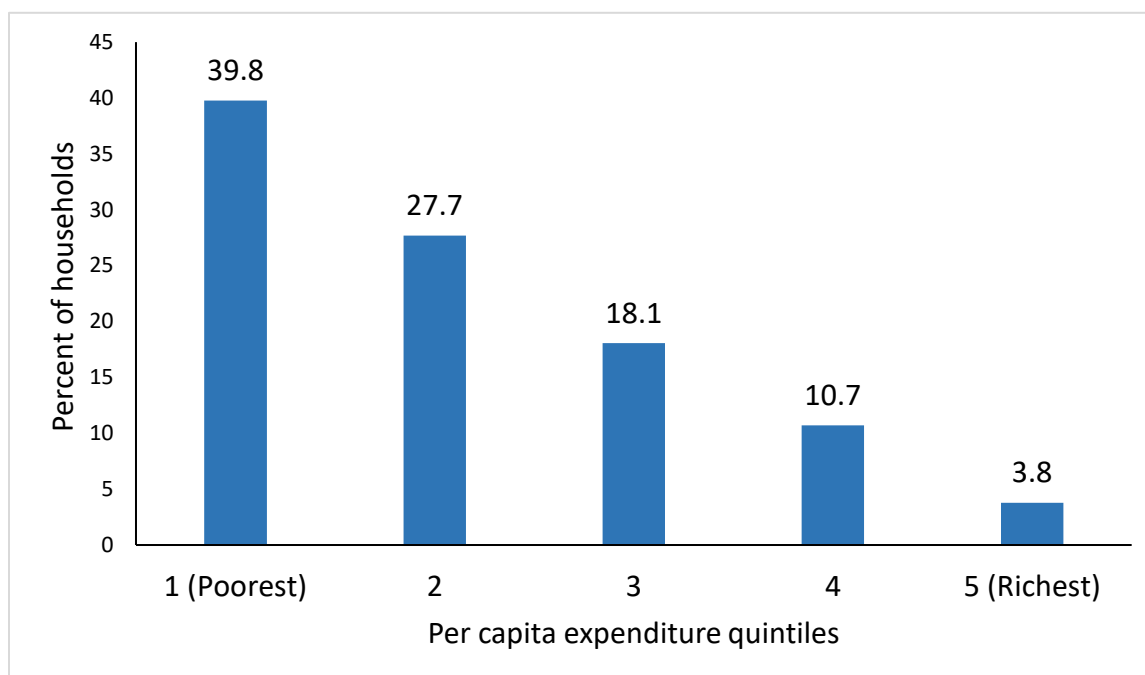
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 21: Percentage of households without any private latrine (3.3 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



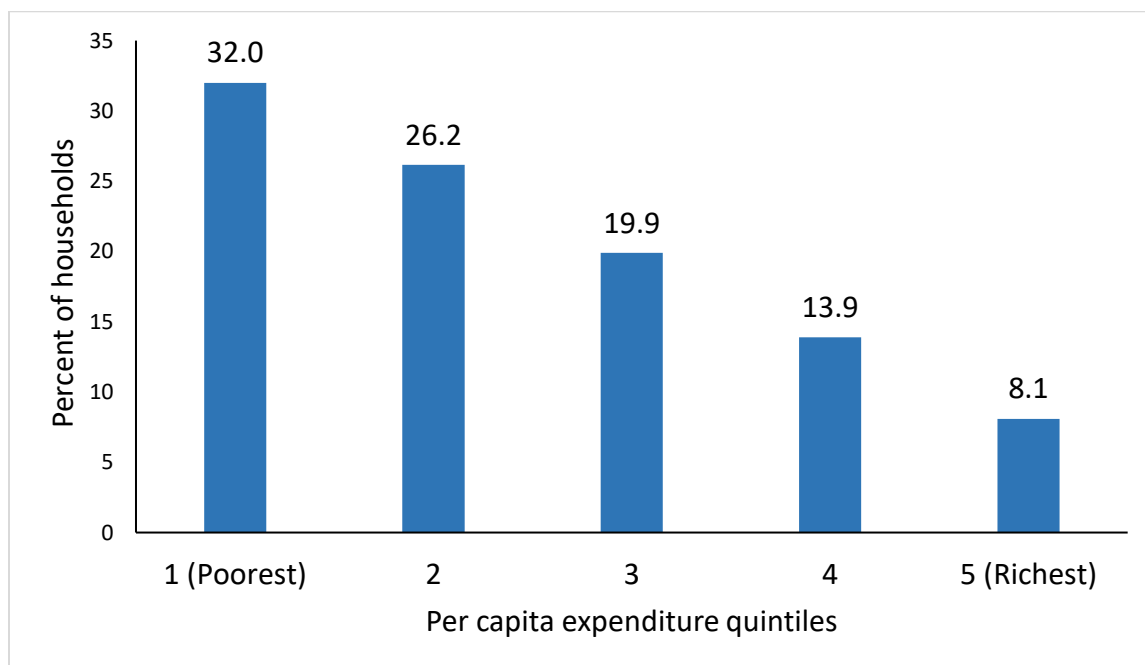
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 22: Percentage of household head/ main income earner is rickshaw and van puller (4.2 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



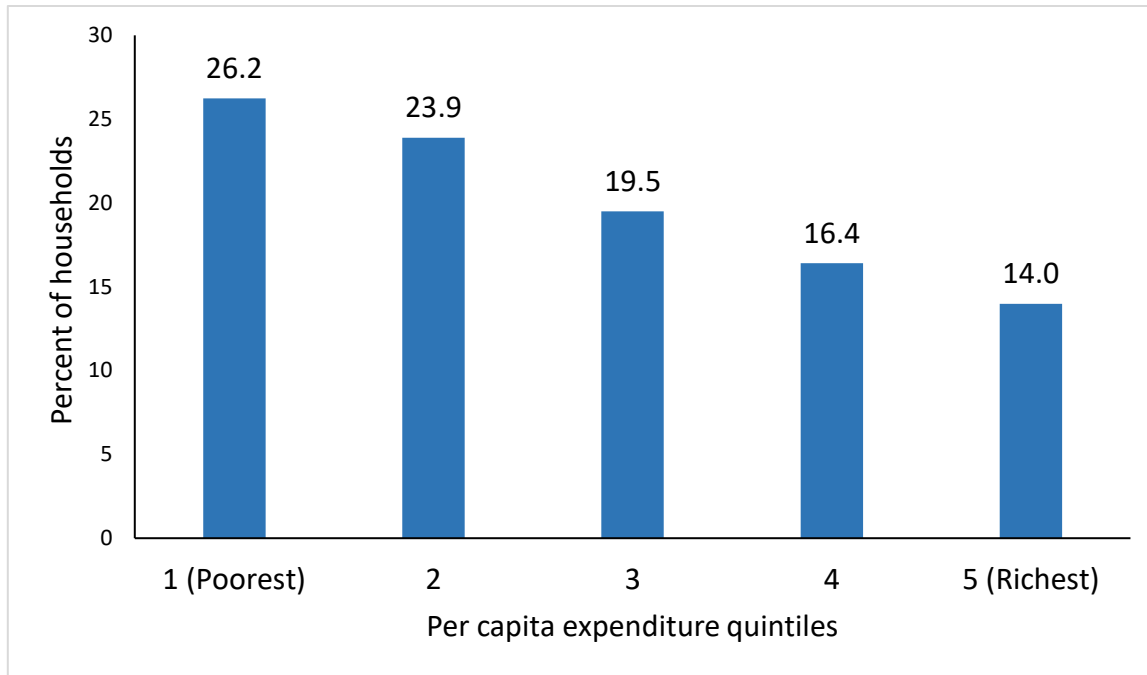
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 23: Percentage of households without electricity connection, but the village has electricity (31.6 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



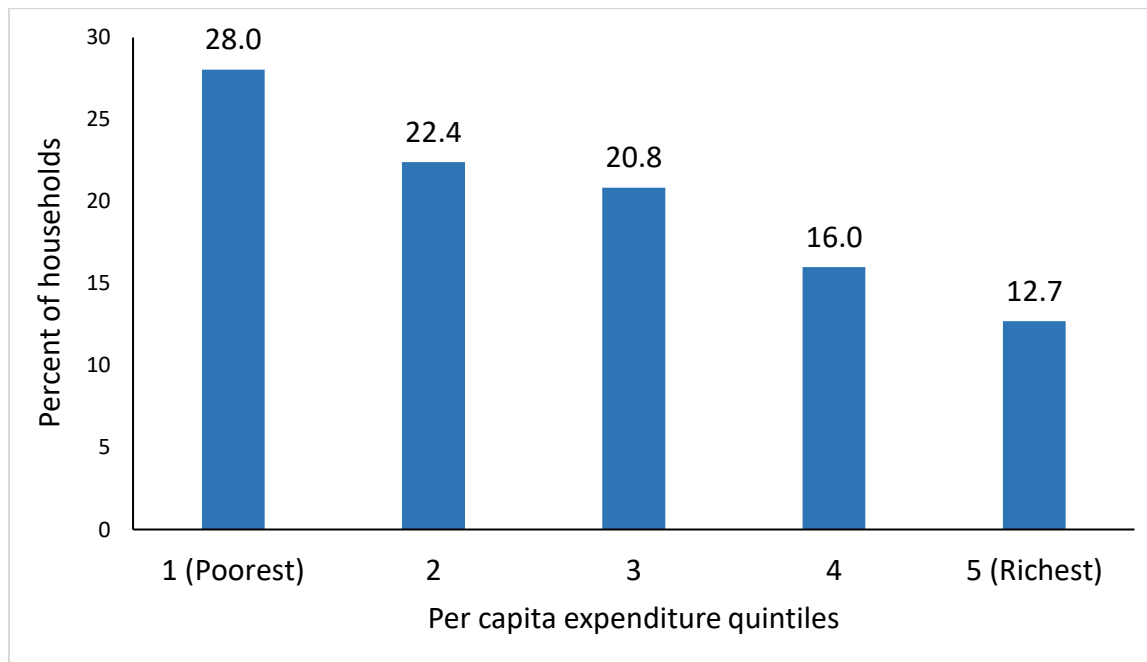
Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 24: Percentage of households without any private tube-well (40.4 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

**Figure 25: Percentage of households with house walls made of jute sticks/bamboo, etc. (not brick or tin) (27.8 percent of all rural households) by income groups, 2015**



Source: IFPRI Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, 2015.

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