

# PROGRAM BRIEF<sup>1</sup>

## Vulnerable Group Feeding Bangladesh

In the wake of the famine in 1974, the Government of Bangladesh, in partnership with the World Food Programme (WFP), launched the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) Program. When introduced, VGF provided a monthly transfer of 31.25 kg of wheat per household per month for a period of two consecutive years. To date, VGF continues to be a humanitarian program that provides food transfers to the poor during disasters and major religious festivals.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> The Program Brief series discusses major safety net programs that the Government of Bangladesh implements. The series includes notes on the Old Age Allowance; Allowances for the Widow, Deserted and Destitute Women; and Allowances for the Financially Insolvent Disabled by the Ministry of Social Welfare; Employment Generation Program for the Poorest; Food for Work; Work for Money; Test Relief; and Vulnerable Group Feeding by the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief; and the Child Benefit Scheme. Many of these programs are supported by the World Bank.

## BACKGROUND

Since the 1970s, Bangladesh began a trail of experimentation and innovation through which safety net programs have evolved from short-term relief to a ladder to conditional transfers to employment generation and so on.<sup>ii</sup> The Liberation War in 1971 left many dead, raped, injured, homeless and highly vulnerable. Widowed and oppressed women were a particularly vulnerable group. The large disaster - a major monsoon flood - struck the war-torn country in 1974 and destroyed the majority of the annual rice crop. This exacerbated the trend of rising prices of rice, a staple food in Bangladesh.<sup>iii</sup> The segment of the population that relied on farming for livelihoods saw a steep decline in their purchasing power leading to the most intense famine the country has ever witnessed. The famine lasted from March to December 1974 but its aftermath of malnutrition and disease trailed well into the following year. That is when the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) was launched in partnership with WFP who helped identify the food insecure upazilas through a mapping exercise, and VGF cards were allocated to most food insecure upazilas. Eligible households then received wheat through representatives of the Local Government<sup>i</sup> and the program continued through annual allocations.

In 1984, once again, the country faced severe monsoon floods putting an extreme strain on food supplies. This also reduced employment of the rural landless by 25 million-person days. However, with lessons from 1974, the Government acted promptly and the food crisis did not escalate to famine.<sup>v</sup> There was growing realization that food support was not sufficient to bring people out of poverty; rather, a combination of support and capacity building for income generating activities would be important. This highlighted the need for partnering with Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). In 1985, as part of the Government's response to the food crisis, in partnership with BRAC, a part of VGF took a new form and became Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) which was an augmentation of the program from short term relief to a ladder approach—which includes microcredit and economic empowerment.

By 2000 several studies<sup>iii iv v</sup> had revealed that VGD was effective in enabling many women's transition from subsistence relief to mainstream income generating activities through micro-credit. One evaluation<sup>vi</sup> notes that VGF marked the beginning to this reorientation process through poverty targeted food support, which was a much-needed move-away from universalist ration

programs that used to favor the urban middle classes at the expense of the rural poor.

Following the devastating floods of 1998, once again, VGF in its original form was launched and since has become an integral part of the safety net portfolio of the country. Even though the Government has placed growing importance on converting food based-programs to cash transfers in recent years, VGF continues to transfer food, the amount of which was about 21 percent of the lower poverty line as of 2010.<sup>xi</sup>

At present, the Safety Net Systems for the Poorest (SNSP) Project, supported by the World Bank and implemented by the Department of Disaster Management (DDM) under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR), is extending support for improved administration of DDM's major safety net programs—which include humanitarian relief programs (Vulnerable Group Feeding [VGF], Gratuitous Relief [GR]) and public works programs (Employment Generation Program for the Poorest [EGPP], Food for Work [FFW]/Money for Work [MFW], Test Relief [TR]).

## KEY FEATURES OF VGF

VGF provides food transfers to poor households during religious festivals like Eid-ul-Fitre and Eid-ul-Azha. The program also provides food transfers to people affected by natural disasters and works in tandem or concurrently with Gratuitous Relief (GR). About half of VGF support is provided during festivals and the other half is used for disasters relief.

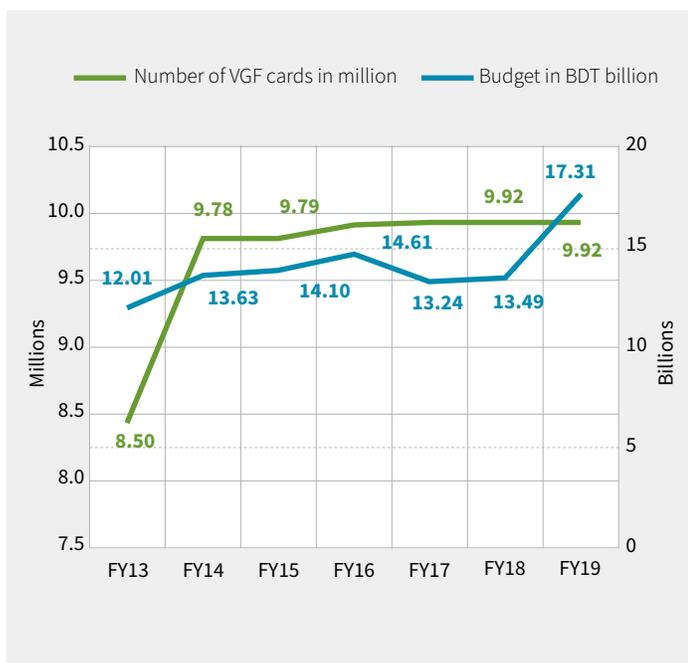
### VGF's main objectives include:

- Ensuring food security for poor and destitute people;
- Preventing diseases of disaster affected people and children;
- Ensuring stability of market price of basic food items;
- Providing food transfers to unemployed people during recession;
- Contributing to poverty reduction through temporary support to poor populations; and
- Supporting the socioeconomic development of the extreme poor.

Over the last five years, VGF budget and number of beneficiaries show an increasing trend (figure 1). As of FY19, the budget allocation represents 2.7 percent of the social protection budget and 0.07 percent of GDP. However, average benefit per card (beneficiary) per annum, has hovered in the range of BDT 1,330 (US\$ 16) and 1,470 (US\$ 17.7).

**Table 1: Key features of VGF**

Number of beneficiaries	9.9 million (approximate number of VGF cards)
Amount of food transfer	10-30kg of rice per month per household with different provisions for specific vulnerabilities.
Eligibility	Means tested
Agency	Department of Disaster Management, Ministry of Disaster Management & Relief



**Figure 1: Annual budget and number of beneficiaries of VGF**

Source: Budget, Finance Division, Ministry of Finance; Department of Disaster Management, Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief

## 1) Outreach

According to the implementation guidelines of VGF, DDM, in collaboration with the humanitarian Programme Implementation Committees (PIC) at the upazila, union and ward levels, is expected

to ensure mass communication regarding VGF’s objectives, eligibility criteria, entitlement and grievance process. The Project Implementation Officers (PIOs) and Disaster Risk Reduction Officers (DRROs) in charge of DDM’s program administration at the upazila and district levels respectively, are expected to devise mass communication plans on VGF at the ward level. This campaign is expected to be carried out subject to approval of the PIC. The range of communication options include announcement, meeting, workshop, street-theater, etc. The Upazila Executive Officer (UNO) will subsequently allocate the required funds to the PIC for the implementation of the communication plan. The PIC must ensure that at least 50 percent of the beneficiaries are aware of the objectives, eligibility criteria, entitlement and grievance process of VGF.

As found through spot checks and household surveys commissioned by DDM and World Bank respectively, most awareness is carried out in the forms of announcements and through words of mouth by Ward Members. Compared to other programs implemented by DDM, the level of awareness of beneficiaries about eligibility and entitlement under VGF is lower, about 60 percent, as reflected by SNSP Project’s monitoring surveys from FY16 to FY18.

**Table 2. Upazila poverty rates and VGF allocations**

Upazila Poverty Rates	Prescribed allocations for VGF
>=40%	45%
29%-39%	25%
19%-28%	20%
<=18%	10%

## 2) Targeting

### Geographic

Geographic targeting of VGF was closely correlated with divisional poverty levels between 2005 and 2010. With the aim of improving geographic targeting further, in 2013, the Government<sup>vii</sup> decided to use the Bangladesh Poverty Map of 2010 for allocations to VGF besides some other large safety net programs and worked out allocation formula using various factors.

Spot checks commissioned by DDM<sup>viii</sup> have revealed that over recent years, geographic allocations have been closely aligned to the prescribed formula with the highest allocations going to the poorest areas (table 2).

### Household

Selection of VGF beneficiaries uses a comprehensive set of twelve criteria out of which an applicant has to meet at least four to become eligible to be a beneficiary of the program. The twelve criteria are broadly grouped into the following in the program manual (table 3).

**Table 3.** VGF eligibility and entitlement

Eligibility	Entitlement
Poor and extreme poor who are unable to have two square meals a day	10-30kg per month per household
People affected by natural disasters and in extreme need of food and financial support	
People who are food insecure because of unemployment	
Those who need to refrain from working, for greater public interest (e.g. fishermen during the breeding season)	
Children who are malnourished	50g soya protein or 100g soya milk per student, per day or any other food item as determined by the Government

Pro-poor selection of beneficiaries has also performed well with 48 and 45 percent of VGF beneficiaries belonging to the bottom expenditure quintile in FY14 and FY16 respectively.<sup>ix</sup>

### Gender

VGF has placed great emphasis on prioritizing women. Over the years, research has suggested that due to poor access to resources, lesser education, inadequate marketable skills, gender roles imposed by social norms, and the disproportionate burdens of childbearing and household work, women are less able to insure themselves against life risks including shocks, diseases, climatic disasters etc.<sup>x</sup>

Recognizing the importance of focusing on women, the Government has been using gender quota of 70 percent in VGF, as stipulated in the program’s implementation guidelines. However, according to spot checks and household surveys commissioned by DDM and the World Bank respectively, gender targeting has not fared well in VGF, in recent years, as presented by figure 2.

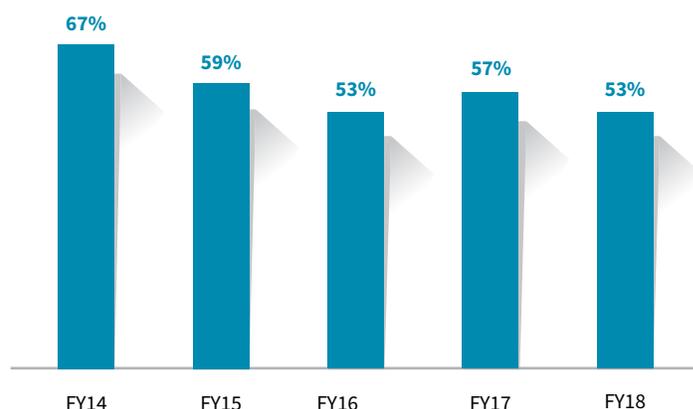
Evaluations, spot checks and some anecdotes suggest that there are multiple challenges in preferentially enlisting female beneficiaries. Some frequently raised issues are as follows:

- Carrying a load of 10kg rice is arduous; and therefore, even when a woman is enlisted, she has to bring an able bodied male member of the household to carry the rice. Instead, households and representatives of the Union Council find it convenient to enlist a man from the same household.
- Child bearing, malnutrition and poor access to health care take a toll on women’s health. Many become frail and susceptible to frequent illnesses that confine them within the homestead. Since the presence of the enlisted beneficiary is essential at the point of claiming the entitlement, the Union Parishad does not encourage enlistment of women who have a higher likelihood to be sick than men from the same households.
- Poor awareness about the gender quota of VGF and conservative social norms add to the reluctance of the Union Parishad and households to enlist women as beneficiaries.

Irrespective of the gender of the person enlisted, the entitlement is consumed by the entire household; therefore, one may assume that poor compliance to the gender quota may not affect the program’s impact. However, the insistence on requiring a male member to carry back the rice may obliquely exclude households that are headed by women or do not have any male member, and therefore are most in need of the benefit.

### 3) Food distribution

All public food distribution is carried out through the Public Food Distribution System (PFDS) which originated during the famine of 1943. The PFDS expanded rapidly following the Liberation War in 1971, and furthermore till the late 1980s, propelled by the



**Figure 2:** Proportion of women beneficiaries of VGF

Source: Department of Disaster Management, Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (PPRC spot checks, FY17, FY18); World Bank (household surveys and spot checks for SNSP, FY15, FY16 and FY17)

Government's coping strategy for large floods that continued to frequent the country.

The PFDS is administered by the Food Planning and Monitoring Unit (FPMU) of the Ministry of Food; and operates through monetized (when the food is sold, and the resulting cash is used for transfers) and non-monetized (when transfers are in the form of food) channels. Food transfer programs of the Government, including VGF, are in the non-monetized category.<sup>xi</sup>

For VGF, DDM makes annual allotment plans based on poverty rates and the incidence of natural disasters in the country. Based on these estimates, DDM issues Allotment Orders which translate into food grain delivery orders by Food Controllers of the Ministry of Food; and actual food deliveries are received by Union Chairmen from local food depots of the PFDS. The entire process following the allotment from DDM is overseen by District Commissioners and UNOs.<sup>xii</sup>

#### 4) Grievance

The implementation guidelines of VGF describe a detailed procedure for grievance filing and resolution. As per the guideline, the upazila is the first tier of grievance reporting and the UNO who is not involved in beneficiary selection or entitlement distribution, is the Grievance Redress Officer (GRO). Grievance can also be filed at the district office, DDM and MoDMR. Grievance boxes need to be placed at these offices and registers need to be maintained to record and track grievances which need to be resolved within fifteen days of being filed. The guidelines also mention that there should be a phone number for grievance reporting. At the same time, an Information System being developed by DDM for improved program administration also has a provision for grievance reporting and management. The guidelines also lay out a comprehensive process of appeal in case a grievance is not redressed within the stipulated time or the complainant wants to contest the outcome. The PIC is responsible for publishing grievances received monthly in the local newspaper.

Despite the detailed grievance mechanism stipulated in the guidelines, actual incidence of grievance filing and resolution is limited. Anecdotal information through field visits suggest that people in the lowest tiers of poverty tend to dread facing authorities. These people are also vulnerable to power relations in society and refrain from conflict, even when aggrieved, with influential people in fear of reprisal.

While grievance reporting is largely absent, beneficiary awareness is very low about who the designated GRO is. As of FY18, more than 70 percent VGF beneficiaries believed that the

Chairman of the Union Parishad is the GRO; while only a quarter of beneficiaries knew that the UNO is the GRO. The Chairman of the Union Parishad is closely involved in beneficiary selection and entitlement distribution and thus, it is likely that the local community is apprehensive about filing a complaint. At the same time, an anecdotal finding about common belief is that filing a complaint with the UNO would be overstepping the first tier of authority i.e. the Union Parishad and there may be negative consequences.

### PROGRAM ACHIEVEMENTS

An early evaluation<sup>xiii</sup> of VGF for its initial period found that the program had targeted well: 75 percent beneficiaries were from households dependent on proceeds of manual labor; 90 percent of the mothers were housewives and their families had no cultivable land; and almost all beneficiaries were illiterate. However, the evaluation also revealed that VGF had little impact on outputs that may have long-term consequences (such as nutrition): household intake of energy and protein was found to be poor despite the supplements provided by the program. The study recommended that more fundamental measures to improve the households' socio-economic wellbeing, including through income generating activities (IGA), were needed to create meaningful impact through VGF. This was later catered to through VGD.

Since 1998, VGF along with other humanitarian reliefs such as GR<sup>xiv</sup> has performed well to avoid major food crises during and following natural disasters. GR was provided to flood affected people during the devastating floods of 1998; VGF was provided after the flood receded.<sup>ii</sup> Similarly, during the sustained floods of 2017, while GR provided cash, shelter reconstruction support and some rice, VGF provided 30kg of rice to each affected household every month for about five months.<sup>xv</sup> Albeit the humanitarian programs' contribution to preventing major food crises following natural disasters, evaluations have suggested scope for reducing inclusion errors (e.g., inclusion of the non-poor or other ineligible households as beneficiaries) and also raising the low level of program benefits.<sup>ii</sup>

In recent years, the discontinuation of VGF was considered on the basis that there are similar other food distribution programs and the policy direction was shifting from food-based programs to cash transfers for safety nets. However, the floods of 2017 when VGF was a key instrument for the Government to reduce the risk of food shortage, highlighted the program's continued relevance once again.

## CHALLENGES

- **Poor Targeting:** VGF continues to be a program marked by challenges of targeting eligible beneficiaries. At the same time, the inherent design of the program that entails carrying back heavy loads of rice as entitlement, marginalizes women who are the preferred beneficiaries of the program.
- **Lack of efficient distribution:** Over the years, VGF has become a program that is expensive to administer and has significant scope for leakage. At the same time, it continues to be a relevant program especially in emergency response following natural disasters. A more efficient alternative is yet to be identified.

## WORLD BANK SUPPORT

The World Bank has been providing financial and technical support to the DDM of the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief from 2009 to present. Initially the design and implementation of the EGPP program was supported, and later, the program coverage was expanded to other safety net programs under DDM as part of the SNSP Project.

The SNSP Project aims to enhance efficiency and transparency of VGF and other major programs under DDM with modernization of systems and business processes.

<sup>1</sup> Hulme, David and Thankom, Arun, 2009, Microfinance, a reader

<sup>2</sup> National Social Security Strategy (NSSS), 2015

<sup>3</sup> Kagy, Gisella, 2012, Long Run Impacts of Famine Exposure: A Study of the 1974 – 1975 Bangladesh Famine, Preliminary Draft, University of Colorado

<sup>4</sup> Razzaque et al., 1990

<sup>5</sup> Clay, Edward, Food Policy, Volume 10, Issue 3, August 1985, The 1974 and 1984 floods in Bangladesh: From famine to food crisis management

<sup>6</sup> Social Safety Nets in Bangladesh – a PPRC-UNDP Research Initiative, Volume 1, Review of Issues and Analytical Inventory

<sup>7</sup> Safety Net Systems for the Poorest (SNSP) Project, implemented by the Department of Disaster Management, supported by World Bank

<sup>8</sup> Spot checks were undertaken by a third party thinktank, Power and Participation Research Center (PPRC), as part of SNSP Project implemented by DDM and supported by the World Bank.

<sup>9</sup> Household surveys undertaken by the World Bank as part of the SNSP Project

<sup>10</sup> United Nations, 2009 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development, Women's Control over Economic Resources and Access to Financial Resources, including Microfinance

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed, Akhter U; Rashid, Shahidur; Sharma, Manohar; and Zohir, Sajjad; 2004; Food Aid Distribution in Bangladesh: Leakage and Operational Performance

<sup>12</sup> Humanitarian Program Implementation Manual, 2016, DDM

<sup>13</sup> Faruque, A. J. M. O.; Abdullah, M.; Ahmed, M. K.; Ahmed, K.; Institute of Nutrition and Food Science, University of Dhaka, 1986, Studies on Vulnerable Group Feeding Programme: Dietary and socioeconomic studies

<sup>14</sup> GR is an emergency response program that provides mostly in-kind support and cash immediately following a disaster. While VGF operates on a regular annual basis, it complements GR in the medium term, following a major disaster.

<sup>15</sup> Department of Disaster Management, Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief



### For more information:

Project details:  
<https://bit.ly/2TOa2Vb>

Overview on Bangladesh's safety net program: World Bank. 2016. Bangladesh Social Protection and Labor Review: Towards Smart Social Protection and Jobs for the Poor. Bangladesh Development Series, no. 33; World Bank, Dhaka, Bangladesh. © World Bank.

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