

**DO SOCIAL SAFETY NET POLICIES REDUCE POVERTY IN BANGLADESH?
UNDERSTANDING PERCEPTION OF STATE PHILOSOPHY IN SWIMMING
ACROSS THE TIDE**

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ABSTRACT: *Bangladesh is a populated country and most of the people live below the poverty line. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1980s safety net programmes has been adopted to reduce poverty from Bangladesh. At present 30 social safety net programmes are now operation in Bangladesh. The objective of the study is to find challenges ahead to implement Social Safety Net (SSN) programmes that initiated to reduce poverty at rural areas specially. The article is based on content analysis method and secondary data has been used to conduct the study. The study found that there is various weakness in social safety net policies. There is lack of integration and coordination among different safety net programmes and providers. Political stability is one of the great obstacle to fulfill the ultimate goal of safety net programmes. The extent, nature and mechanism of safety net programs change with the change of government. Besides this, corruption, shortage of budget etc hinder the implementation of safety net programmes. However, high political commitment, increase allocation, better targeting beneficiary, involvement of NGOs, civil society, monitoring and overseeing, reduction of corruption should be ensured.*

KEYWORDS: Social Safety Net, Poverty, State Philosophy, Swimming Across the Tide, Poverty Politics Nexus

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has been struggling for a long time to reduce the incidence of poverty and to improve the living standards of its millions of impoverished citizens. In recent decades, she has made significant progress in reducing poverty. A credible record of sustained growth within a stable macroeconomic framework has been established. Significant improvements have been achieved in the areas of child and maternal mortality, life expectancy, net primary enrolment rate, women's economic participation, gender parity in primary and secondary education, etc. Rural infrastructural developments eroded much of the remoteness for the majority of villages. Healthy inflow of remittances, expansion in micro-credit operations, and remarkable success in RMG exports significantly contributed to achieve the above. Despite the progress, poverty rates remain still high in Bangladesh. There are pockets of extreme poverty with inequality as a rising concern. Also, imbalance in growth and poverty reductions at the regional level is highly visible with some parts of the country are seriously lagging behind. There is still a long way to go for gender parity and women developments (Raihan, 2011). Social protection programs are critical means through which the government of Bangladesh can address extreme poverty and vulnerability. A new analysis from the center on budget and policy priorities underscores that the poor are no longer the primary beneficiaries of the government safety net. The great recession and its lingering aftermath has damaged state budget to an extent unseen for decades, severely challenging states capacity to support critical social safety net programs.

The main of social safety net is to reduce poverty. Social safety net has protection and promotion effects and can play poverty reduction. The country has been trying to spread the benefit of this growth in various forms of which social safety net programs in the recent years principally assumed to reduce poverty. Safety net allows government to make choices that support efficiency and growth. This paper provides analysis of social safety net programs and the reason behind the poverty in spite of allocation of huge amount of money in budget.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a number of articles and theories that describe and analysis the political economy of budget. Budget plays the most vital role to attract the people in the regard of govt. success. There is a great influence of party philosophy in the budget as Jens Peter Siebel and Athanassios Pitsoulis told in their article "Four Budget Deficit Theories in One Model". A govt. can target voters in order to secure electoral victory, either in the next election or the election on after the next (Lockword 1996). Govt. collects revenue and spends it in the different welfare activities for the citizen. The success of a budget depends on the transparency and accountability of budget processing and implementing. An effective public expenditure system is a precondition for a successful budget (World Bank, 1998). A guide to Budget Work for NGOs (2001 International Budget Project) address civil society actors wishing to engage in applied budget work for the purpose of strengthening the social and poverty reduction content of budget and related policy frame work. The process of allocation of resources to different institution and purposes is essentially a political, rather than purely technocratic one. Any attempt to address content of budget allocation without looking at political process is therefore unlikely to be helpful. Cabinet, Ministry of Finance, spending department, State and Local Government, the legislature, the auditor are actors of national budget (Norton and Elson, 2002). Bangladesh Governments budget contain the strategies for mobilization, allocation and distribution of money by means of fiscal and monetary operation with due consideration of political economic, and bureaucratic decision making process (Kaushik and Ranjan Panda, 2011). The budget is divided into two sorts such as consolidated fund and public account of the republic and two parts: Revenue and development. Absence of competitive parliamentary debate on budget, dependency on foreign aid, deficits, corrupted administration, lack of resource mobilization etc. are the key reasons behind the failure of the budget to fulfill the public demand and to eradicate the major economic problem of the country such as poverty in spite of allotting a huge amount of money every year in the budget.

In political budget governments may use expensive economic policies prior to elections to influence voters and maximize change of re-election. (drazen,2011). This outcome is known as political economic cycle. In the developing countries less attention is given to examining the productiveness of various components of public spending. In addition, Bangladesh as many other developing countries has relatively weak institutions. As a result, there are relatively few constraints on government actions and accountability. In Bangladesh the business interests now overwhelm the politics of Bangladesh. The existing process of budget preparation in Bangladesh is not at all simplified, efficient, transparent let alone a vehicle for effective participation of the poor, vulnerable and voiceless who are not much organized (rahman,2002). The organized richer groups of the society with better access to political power and bureaucracy on the other hand can always lobby for promoting their own interests immediately before the finalization of the national budget while the poorer groups have virtually no control over the changes in macroeconomic policies envisaged in the budget.

Objectives of the Study

This paper aims to find challenges ahead to implement Social Safety Net (SSN) programmes that initiated to reduce poverty at rural areas specially. Following this objective, the study specifies few more purposes to analyze:

1. To scrutinize the performance of existing programmes taken under Social Safety Net (SSN) policy at Rural Bangladesh;
2. To make a static explanation regarding politics-poverty nexus in policy formulation and implementation phase of Bangladesh; and
3. To suggest future policy agenda to bring effective SSN programmes.

Background of the Study

With about 40 percent of its population living below the poverty line and an increasing number of population being added below the lower poverty line, Safety Net Programme in Bangladesh is more than a necessary element in fighting poverty (Iqbal, 2008). Bangladesh government with the commitment to alleviate poverty within the shortest possible time took the initiative of including the most vulnerable section and poor people under different Safety Net Programmes to reduce their sufferings. PRSP (Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper) documents identify social protection strategies as one of the pillars of Poverty reduction, which includes: (i) ensuring macroeconomic stability to ensure pro-poor growth; (ii) improving governance for sustaining growth and poverty reduction; (iii) investing in human development to enhance human capabilities; and (iv) implementing social protection programmes to reduce vulnerabilities and improve income-generating opportunities.

Since independence in 1971, when 70% of the population lived below the poverty line, the two major vehicles of Social Safety Nets were food rations and relief work following disasters and other calamities. With the passage of time, when notable progress towards reducing widespread poverty was made, the country had to find better means of targeting. Such realization led to the emergence of new and sophisticated programmes and abandonment of programmes like food rations (Morshed, 2009). To encounter new dimensions of vulnerabilities and to address newly affected people resulting from growing pace of globalization, different economic shocks and natural calamities, government is including diversified types of Safety Net Programmes. There are more than 30 Social Safety Net Programmes are now in operation in Bangladesh. As new programmes are added and old programmes dropped/suspended at regular intervals, so the exact number fluctuates. Almost all ministries or agencies are pursuing some work directly or indirectly which are contributing to poverty alleviation or adding to the wellbeing and empowerment of the poor. In Bangladesh, the allocation for Social Safety Net Programmes is gradually increasing over the years. Starting in 1975 it has been growing fast in Bangladesh (allocation, coverage etc). In 1996, Social Safety Net contributed 0.8 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP), 5.7 percent of the total public expenditure

(World Bank, 2008). With gradual expansion now in 2010-11, Social Safety Net is contributing 2.64 percent of total GDP. (Government of Bangladesh, Ministry of Social Welfare, 2012). With the intention and broader objective to provide social security to the marginalized section of people, government is gradually expanding the Social Safety Net programmes but to make the programme more effective needed assessment of these programmes yet to be done.

It has increasingly been realized that a proper assessment should be done; overall capacity needs to be further strengthened and made compatible with the growth pace. The effectiveness of a programme depends on how well the programme is being implemented and on the overall achievement of the declared objectives of the programme. The present study intends to find out challenges ahead to implement Social Safety Net (SSN) programmes that initiated to reduce poverty at rural areas specially.

METHODOLOGY

This is an applied research. The article is based on content analysis method and secondary data has been used to conduct the study. The information has been collected from several institution study reports, national and international research reports.

Introduction of the Concept of “Social Safety Net”

The concept of ‘social safety net’ came from the broader term ‘social protection’. In chronological order, safety net came first into the discourse during the 1980’s in response to the (presumably short-term) adverse effects of structural adjustment (Adato, Ahmed and Lund, 2004 cited in Zohir, S. et al., 2010). The concept was later popularized in East Asia during the financial crisis (Paitoonpong et al, 2008; cited in Zohir, S. et al., 2010). Safety net is a concept that is largely associated with the idea of a short-term buffer. Although the term ‘social safety net’ was adopted in the 1980s, programmes of similar nature (albeit not termed as such) have long been in practice. Some examples include rural works program, relief to areas adversely affected by natural calamity, etc. With globalization giving rise to sporadic bouts of crises worldwide, new experiences were acquired during the 1990’s, which subsequently led to the extension of the concept of short term safety net to longer term interventions, often coined as social protection. During that period of time the developing partners were also very much concern about these. They wanted to deal with matters related to public policy, which involved multidimensional interventions with increasing emphasis on human rights. Thus, pressure was often created on national governments to include pro-poor polices in their budget and public policy. There was clearly a shift in focus, or rather, widening of the focus – the importance of ‘safety nets’ during the 1980s giving way to ‘social protection’ during the 1990s. Social protection had long been considered an issue of domestic concern in developed countries, where institutional arrangements emerged in order to protect citizens against risk and provide assistance to the destitute (Norton et al, 2001; cited in Zohir, S. et al., 2010). In the context of the developing world, social protection is a new term that expands from the concept of short-term Safety Net Programmes, and emphasizes a longer-term development approach, which includes social assistance and insurance (Page et al,2005; cited in Zohir, S. et al., 2010).

Existing Programmes taken for Poverty Reduction

Programs	Coverage	Budget
Old Age Allowance	27.23	980.10
Allowance for the Widow, Deserted & Destitute Women	10.12	364.32
Allowance for the Financially Insolvent Disabled	3.15	132.13
Maternity Allowance Programs for the Poor Lactating Mothers	1.16	48.88
Honorarium for the Insolvent Freedom Fighters	2.00	360
Honorarium & Medical Allowance for Injured Freedom Fighters	0.08	75.64
Grant for Resident in Government Orphanages and Other Institutions	0.18	30.88
Capitation Grant for Orphan Student in Non-Govt. Orphanages	0.54	71.40
General Relief Activities	7.32	89.36
Block Allocation for Disaster Management		100
Non-Bengali Rehabilitation	1.21	19.80
Allowance for distressed Cultural personalities	0.01	2.50
Pension for Retired Govt. Employees & their families	4.81	6691.51
Ration for Shaeed Family and Injured Freedom Fighters	0.25	22.50

Social Empowerment

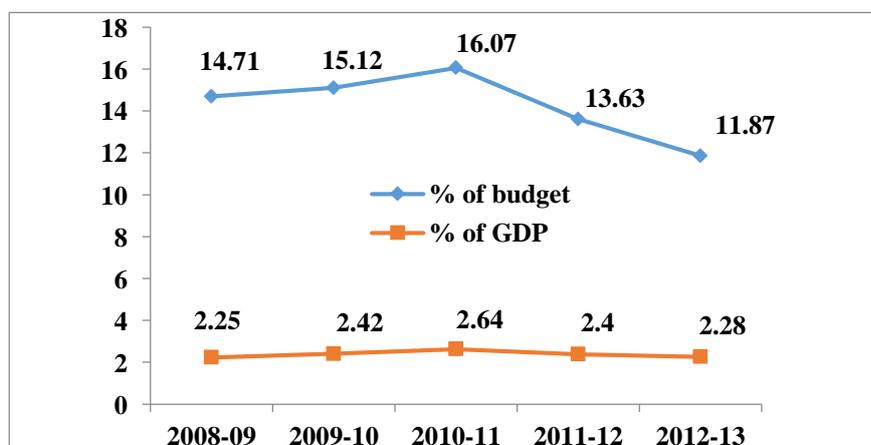
Programs	Coverage	Budget
Stipend for Disabled Students	0.29	9.70
Grants for the Schools for the Disabled	0.12	5.81
Housing Support	2.14	14.00
Agriculture Rehabilitation	29.82	62.15

Food security Programs: Social Protection

Programs	Coverage	Budget
Open Market Sales (OMS)	209.11	1565.00
Vulnerable Group Development (VGD)	91.33	851.06
Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF)	85	1326.91
Test Relief (TR)	39	1291.94
Gratuitous Relief (GR) Food	80	265.38
Food Assistance in CTG-Hill Tracts Area	7.14	240.81
Food for Work (FFW)	50	1456.98

Micro-Credit Programs: Social Empowerment

Programs	Coverage	Budget
Micro-Credit for Women Self-employment	0.09	1.00
Fund for Micro-Credit through PKSP	21.38	50.00
Social Development Function		298.50

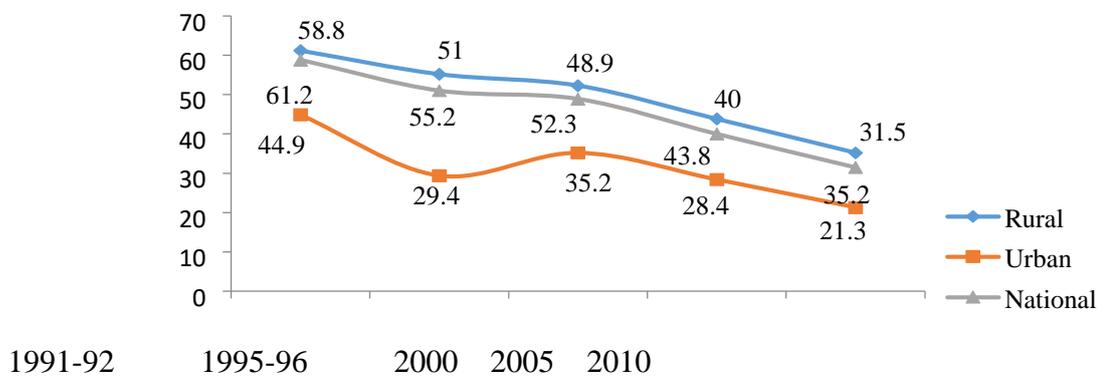
Figure 1: Allocation for SSNPs as % of total national budget and GDP

Source: Budget in Brief, Finance Division, Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh

Reduction in poverty in Bangladesh

There has been significant reduction in poverty since 1990 in Bangladesh. Figure shows that national headcount poverty declined from 58.8 percent in 1991-92 to 31.5 percent in 2010. Rural headcount poverty experienced a gradual decline over the same period and it declined from 61.2 percent in 1991-92 to 35.2 percent in 2010. Urban headcount poverty declined during 1991-92 and 1995-96 but encountered a rise during 1995-96 and 2000 and then declined afterwards. Overall, urban headcount poverty declined from 44.9 percent in 1991-92 to 21.3 percent in 2010.

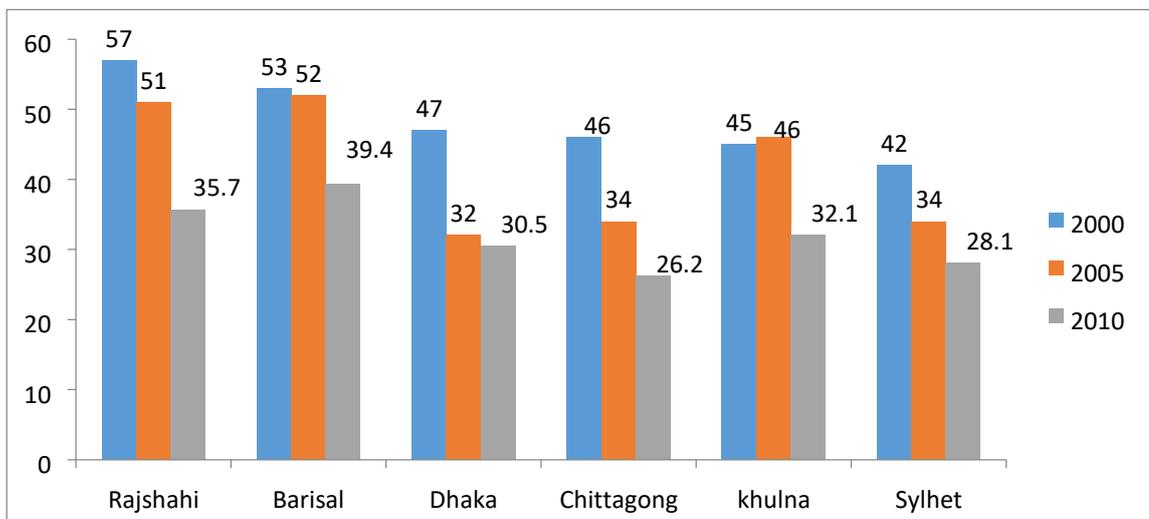
Figure 2: Headcount poverty trends in Bangladesh



Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Various HIES

Regional Distribution of Poverty

Figure 3: Headcount poverty trends for divisions



Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, HIES 2000, 2005 and 2010

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A Poverty-Politics Nexus of Bangladesh Economy

It appears that in Bangladesh, targeting criteria of the SSNPs is good at targeting the poorest. Also the SSNPs are perceived by the beneficiaries as helpful especially the poorest. However, there are a number of weaknesses in Bangladesh SSNPs: (PRSP, 2005; SFYP, 2011). There is no integrated national policy for social protection and safety net programs based on a comprehensive and updated risk and vulnerability mapping. Often, the extent, nature and mechanisms of many safety net programs change with a change of government. There is also lack of integration and coordination among various safety net programs and providers. A number of ministries are involved in implementing and monitoring safety net programs. Many are funded with donor money. Budgetary provisions are ad-hoc and given as block allocations. Though SSNPs have played a role in mitigating poverty, their coverage remains limited given the magnitude of extreme poverty that exists in the country. Furthermore, SNPs cover mainly the rural poor, whereas the nature of urban poverty is more severe than rural poverty in certain respects.

The nature of extreme poverty varies with variations in geography and agro-ecology. Separate safety net programs are needed to alleviate poverty arising from area specific problems like river erosion, salinity and arsenic pollution. Geographic targeting taking these characteristics into account is still lacking. A number of ministries and departments within them offer safety net programs as a matter of their core business. Nodal ministries are those of Women's and Children's Affairs and the Ministry of Social Welfare. The use of small infrastructure development programs such as road maintenance, to provide workfare programs also involves agencies whose core business is elsewhere, such as the Local Government Ministry and the Water Resources Ministry. The impact of natural disasters means that the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management becomes involved periodically, including through its own safety net programs, which are triggered by disaster. The Ministry also has an on-going involvement through its FFW program. There is little coordination across ministries and programs - many of the programs are fairly similar and targeted at similar beneficiaries, leading to overlaps and households gaining access to more than one program. For example, both the Ministry of Social Welfare and Ministry of Food and Disaster Management run public work programs but have little knowledge of each other's programs. 5.24 At a non-government level, there are some large significant players and hundreds of NGOs involved in the delivery of safety net services. NGOs are often the major providers of microfinance and also play a critical role in delivering particular safety net programs. The development and implementation of safety net policies now appears to proceed in coordination with these NGO. Most implementing ministries lack sufficient capacity to monitor programs, which leads to benefits being misallocated. Monitoring should be used to provide information to management. This allows progress with implementation to be assessed and for timely decisions to be made, ensuring progress against stated milestones. Monitoring also allows for the measurement of quality and effect of processes and procedures.

The importance that the government places on safety net programs does not always emphasize the crucial role of information. Collecting, analyzing and disseminating information on program impacts and effectiveness would allow the government to make more accurate decisions on whether to expand or contract a particular program. Evaluations, carried out at regular intervals, should determine whether the project objectives, expressed set in terms of expected outputs, are being or will be met and at some future point in time. Like many other

developed and developing countries in the world, in Bangladesh there are also lots of implementation problems. Many of the government policy decisions cannot reach the desired destination due to many factors as have been mentioned above. Many factors are responsible behind noncompliance of the policy decision taken from the government. As part of the broad factors, factors like patronage, corruption etc. contributing to a large extent to the deviation from what policy recommends in Bangladesh. These types of irregular activities are widely prevalent in Bangladesh, as Zafarullah and Siddiquee (2001) has argued that- “the public sector of Bangladesh became ineffective due to different forms of corrupt practices including misappropriation of funds, rent-seeking, bribery and deviation from the administrative ethics. “The prevalence of corrupt practice and its consequences are mentioned in the following articles also- “It is usually known that almost all kinds of corruption perpetuate in politics and administration in Bangladesh”. The most common form of corruption is pecuniary bribes (Taslim, 1994). Other forms of corruption are: abuse of authority, nepotism, favoritism, fraud, patronage, theft and deceit. In many cases forms of corruptions are intertwined with their consequences” (Khan, 1998). Some damaging consequences of corruption are taking place in Bangladesh context as the World Bank suggests:

“undermines public confidence in government; engenders wrong economic choices and constrains government’s ability to implement policies; makes the poor pay the price” (World Bank 1996a: 66).

In developing and least developed countries there are strong correlation between political connections and receiving the benefit of Social Safety Net (Caeyers and Dercon, 2008). As the statement suggests, in a third world country like Bangladesh where resources are insufficient, one of the important sources of patronage distribution is different government funded projects and programmes at the rural level. As part of the government programmes, the Social Safety Net Programmes are thought to be major vehicles of this patronage distribution. The politicians bearing powerful positions in government in majority cases might want to distribute patronage to their supporters and also to their relatives through these safety net programmes. For these patronage distributions the political leaders at the local level might rely on the implementing officials to serve their interest. In our country people representatives want to gain popularity and for this they get some program for the poor. But this does not help in the social protection of the poor. The safety net program taken by the government does not give life time support to the poor people. The people of our country elected their representatives to work for them. But when they came in power then think that the government, their party and the finance of the government are their own wealth and for that they work for their own interest. This mine concept hampered the success of the safety net programs.

Political party declared a detail election manifesto before election; they publish their manifesto as the only way of developing the country. After winning election they ignore the program and involve only in political activities. In some programs like kajer Binimoa khaddo (KABIKHA), test relief (TR) only party members are involved and the beneficiaries are those who directly involved in politics.

Various governments came on power in different times. Most of the government fails to ensure in all over country, as a result some region get more benefit than other region. This is identified as a major problem for implementation of safety net program. In the way of poverty alleviation ministers and local leader conflict is a common obstacle. During the last BNP government though ministers take many programs but these programs cannot implement as a result of conflict.

Government tries to take and implement many development programs, in the duration of five years it is very hard to make a program successful. After five years when government changes, new government implement new programs they cut off the old programs only for political ideology. It is a great obstacle to implement the social protection program. Government implemented programs named old age allowance and old age pension but local leaders make these programs as their own political program. Politicians give old age pension card those are in favor of them.

When ministries release fund from ministry, these fund go through a bureaucratic procedure. At the root level when this fund distributed, a great deal of amount has vanished as bureaucratic corruption. Corruption greatly hampered the poverty alleviation programs; from top to bottom political members are corrupted. Though many programs are taken by the government but these programs fails to meet success. In village level local government members carry poor mentality. They take percentage from all programs as their own property. They do not feel shy to side out the rice, biscuits, medicines and many others, which come as government relief.

The government tries to attract voters and provide facilities to the people (specially the elite class) who stand by them in time of crisis or need through operating program in the name of social safety net program. The authority is very successful to diagnosis the reasons of problem and taking development program as a remedy of the problem, but failing in implementing these program and sending benefits of these efforts door to door of the people and mistaking in identifying the people who are worthy of or need to receive such sorts of benefits leads the government in backward position from where government cannot bring ultimate remedy. The greed for state power compel government to politicize these development or social safety net program.

Proposed Recommendations

- Ensuring high political commitment of all political parties.
- Ensuring role of all concerned like mass people, government, civil society, development partners and NGOs etc.
- Better targeting of the beneficiary should be ensuring.
- Considering the real condition of area rather than dividing allocation in all areas.
- Increase allocation in employment generating activities.
- Reduce corruption.
- Minimizing the number and improving the accountability of intermediaries who are involved in administering safety net programmes.
- Establishing a standing arrangement for monitoring and overseeing the development and implementation of policies and programmes for safety net programmes.
- Coordinating the views and activities of the government and non-government Organizations in SSN areas.
- Introducing periodic evaluation of programmes to throw light on what is working and what is not.

- Allowing for reform and consolidation of programmes where needed.
- Introducing and strengthening community based program.
- Defining a structural way to implement the program.

CONCLUSION

In Bangladesh a significant percentage of the population live below poverty line. They are utterly vulnerable and need support of the government for their survival. For many poor people Social protection allowances are the only sources of their livelihood. However, from the findings of our study it appears that the expectations of many poor remain unfulfilled due to some irregularities found in the system sometimes caused by the implementing authorities. Therefore, the suggestions may be taken into consideration to remove the procedural irregularities in the system. This will help the government to achieve the target of the allowance programme and also support those vulnerable people of the country who live in abject poverty and endless misery.

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