

PERFORMANCE OF VULNERABLE GROUP DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS FOOD SECURITY

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Abstract

Bangladesh has a wide range of social safety net programs. Despite that, there are several concerns on the delivery of the various social safety net programs with respect to their predesigned goal and objectives, especially in enhancing food security. Therefore, the need to establish research based facts on their performance towards food security. The present study focused on determining the performance of Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) program towards food security in Rangpur district, Rangpur division. Descriptive research design was adopted in the study. The 50 respondents were selected using disproportionate random sampling technique. Interview schedule and focus group discussions were conducted on the selected beneficiaries of VGD program to generate the required data. Descriptive statistics in the form of frequency and percent were used in the data analysis and presentation. Results revealed that majority of the respondents fall within 31-50 years, illiterate (85.0%), have small land holdings (≤ 15 decimal), medium family size (3-5 members) and face absolute poverty. The performance of VGD towards food security was mostly reported satisfactory in terms of food availability, access and stability, but poor in terms of utilization. The major problems faced in VGD program include inadequate provision and untimely distribution of food. Hence, strengthening of administrative structures, proper monitoring and evaluation, and improving the quality of provisions of the VGD program would go a long way in ensuring food security through the program.

Keywords: Holdings, VGD, performance, women and social safety net.

Introduction

Globally, developing nations are faced with bedeviling problems especially on poverty, hunger, malnutrition and security challenges. The challenges of food security take the lion share, and if addressed all other issues would follow suit. In line with this, a growing number of developing countries are investing in social safety net programs to improve the lives and livelihoods of billions of poor and vulnerable people, yet around 55 percent of the world's poor or 773 million people with acute needs

still lack safety net coverage especially in lower income countries (World Bank, 2015).

In Bangladesh there are a wide spectrum of social safety net programs. Specifically, there are 30 designed social safety net programs directly operated by the government of Bangladesh. Among these, there are 8 unconditional programs of which four are food transfers and four are cash transfers. There are also 10 conditional programs, comprising of seven cash transfers and three food transfers (Ahmed, 2007). Nevertheless,

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several programs have been discontinued over time or replaced by newer programs, e.g. the Women Support Center or the Rural Maintenance Program.

However, the present study focuses on Vulnerable Group Development (VGD). The VGD emerged in more or less its present form—a food aid supported development programme targeted at very poor women—in the mid-1980s. VGD originated from the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) after the famine of 1974. The VGD is jointly financed by the Bangladesh Government, the European Commission (EC), the World Food Program (WFP), and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). It is implemented under the Department of Women Affairs (DWA) of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. The targeted beneficiaries comprises of 255,000 vulnerable women. The beneficiaries were drawn from among the women who satisfied one or more of the criteria according to IMED (2011): i) Women heading a family (either widowed, abandoned, divorced, separated or with disabled husbands); ii) Functionally landless (own less than 0.5 acres of land); iii) Households with extremely low cash income (less than 300 BDT/month) or family income was low and irregular; iv) Family without any income; v) Family without necessary productive assets; women who were daily or casual laborers; vi) Women at child-bearing age but not members of any NGO providing comprehensive development services; and vii) Women who could receive training and utilize training for self-wellbeing.

The long term objective of the project was to improve the quality of life and enhance the

productive employment opportunities and strengthening the institutional capability of the Department of Women Affairs. Whereas in the short term, the objectives included improvement of food security of vulnerable women and their dependents through food support and training on food and nutrition, skill development for income generation and micro enterprise operation, strengthening the institutional capacity of the Department of Women Affairs and NGOs engaged in supporting the vulnerable groups for sustainable life improvement and income generating activities (IMED, 2011).

On the other hand, food security is said to be a flexible concept as reflected in the many attempts at definition in research and policy usage, and the expansion of the scope with advancement in knowledge. Even a decade ago, there were about 200 definitions in published writings (Maxwell and Smith, 1992). Therefore, the present study views food security as defined during World Food Summit in 1996 which was later refined as “A situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2002). The definition points to the four dimensions of food security: availability, access, utilization and stability.

Despite this social safety machineries on ground, HKI and JPGSPH (2014) reported that although Bangladesh has seen real wage growth in the past five years, food price spikes (have placed) balanced diets beyond the reach of many, particularly the urban poor and rural landless. The Household

Food Security and Nutrition Assessment also reported that one-quarter of households nationally were food insecure (WFP, 2015). In fact, there are several revelations; both local and International concerning the delivery of the predesigned purpose of the various social safety net programs in Bangladesh, especially in enhancing food security. With respect to VGD, a recent study by Building Resources Across Rural Communities (BRAC) reported that the beneficiaries of VGD and other safety net programs have found the fortified rice acceptable to them; as such, it has great potential for delivering to the women and their families a range of micronutrients that are severely lacking in the diets of the very poor (Chakraborty and Akter, 2014). According to Pradhan and Sulaiman (2014) VGD program helped decrease food deficit and increase food diversity among the beneficiary households. Ferdous (2012) in his study reported that due to the involvement of the beneficiaries in VGD program, food availability was enhanced, so also the number of meal/day increased. Even so, aside these studies and other general investigations that looked at a number of social safety nets in Bangladesh, a very few information are available that studied how VGD performed towards food security, covering the four dimensions of the food security. Thus, the present study was carried out in Rangpur district to provide an evidence to researchers and policy makers especially from the food shortage prone study areas of Bangladesh, through answering the following research questions: i) What are the socioeconomic characteristics of the beneficiaries of VGD program? ii) What is the performance of VGD program towards food

security? and iii) What are the problems faced by the beneficiaries of VGD program?

To answer the preceding research questions the following objectives were put forward to: i) describe selected socioeconomic characteristics of the beneficiaries of VGD program; ii) determine the performance of VGD program towards food security; and iii) identify the problems faced by the beneficiaries of VGD program.

Materials and Methods

The present research was conducted in Rangpur district under Rangpur division following descriptive research design. In order to select the respondents, list of the beneficiaries of VGD program was obtained from the responsible authority (Upazila Female Affairs Officer) to serve as the sample frame for the five randomly selected upazilas under the Rangpur district. From each upazila ten respondents were selected following disproportionate random sampling technique. The disproportionate random sampling technique was adopted due to unequal number of beneficiaries across the upazilas in the district. On the other hand, the few number of selected respondents was to increase breadth rather than depth so as to have representation from varying socioeconomic situations in the upazilas and enable generalization. Thus, the sample size for the study comprised of fifty (50) respondents. Interview schedule and FGD checklist were employed to collect data required for the study. The quantitative data were processed and analyzed using SPSS computer program, while the qualitative data were analyzed by collecting themes in accordance with the objectives of the study and describing them in view of that.

The focus variable of the study which is performance of the VGD program towards food security was measured based on the four dimensions of food security; viz. availability, access, utilisation and stability of food. The focus variable was measured covering the four dimensions of food security in line with the argument of Wineman (2014) that food security eludes precise measurement, and the conclusion of Leroy *et al.* (2015) after a critical review of food security measurement across the globe. The review revealed that no single indicator can or should be used to capture the complex reality of food security, and that a suite of indicators might be useful for the purpose of food security measurement. In the same vein, Pérez-Escamilla (2008) reported that the choice of method for assessing food security depends on the question that needs to be answered, as well as the budget available to conduct the assessment. Hence, ideally, food security assessments should be based on the application of several of these methods. That way, different dimensions from the food insecurity problem can be addressed in the same survey or study. So, under each of the dimensions, 13 constructs were developed which were measured on 5-point Likert-type scale. The use of 5-point Likert-type scale was to give clarity of the responses. For each of the statement score of '5', '4', '3', '2', and '1' were assigned against very high, high, moderate, low and very low, respectively. The response scores of the dimensions were computed into highly satisfactory, satisfactory and not satisfactory.

Other variables such as age was measured in terms actual years of the respondent, literacy level was measured based on ability to read and write or otherwise, family size

was measured based on the total number of members of a respondent's family who jointly live and eat together, farm size was measured in decimal based on farmland area owned by a respondent, and annual income was measured based on the total earning of a respondent from agricultural and non-agricultural sources.

Results and Discussion

In accordance with the objectives of the study, this section is presented as follows:

Socioeconomic characteristics

The observed age of the respondents ranged from 20 to 50 as well. Based on their age, the respondents were classified into three categories, viz. young, middle and old. Majority of the respondents (40.0%) were old age, while young were 24.0 percent. Findings in Table 1 reflect that the middle and old age were the major beneficiaries of VGD program compared to young age. This might be a function of reduced ability and the necessity to cater for basic needs and/or lack of pillar in the family.

Literacy could empower an individual to think critically and make positive judgement. Results in Table 1 disclose that most of the respondents (74.0%) were illiterate. But, a few (2.06%) could sign only. The findings indicated that in the study area, the literacy rate seems to be much lower than the national average of 72.8 percent (Wikipedia, 2018).

Farm size of the respondents ranged from 0.0 to 15.0 decimal. Based on the farm size, respondents were classified into 2 categories. Table 1 reveals that, 72.0 percent of the respondents had 15.0 decimal or less, while

Table 1. Distribution of the respondents according to their selected socioeconomic characteristics

Variables	Categories	No.	%
Age	Young (20-30 years)	12	24.0
	Middle (31-40 years)	18	36.0
	Old (41-50 years)	20	40.0
Literacy level	Illiterate	37	74.0
	Could sign only	13	26.0
Family size	Small (up to 3 members)	7	14.0
	Medium (3-5 members)	33	66.0
	Large (above 5 members)	10	20.0
Farm size	Landless	14	28.0
	Up to 15 decimal	36	72.0
Annual income	Low income (Below 40,000)	48	96.0
	Medium income (40,000 – 50,000)	2	4.0
	High income (Above 50,000)	0	0.0
Total		50	100.0

28.0 percent were landless. Having most of the respondents with less than 15 decimal might be a function of the criteria set for selection of the VGD beneficiaries. That is, beneficiaries must not possess a farm size of more than 0.5 acre (50.0 decimal).

The number of family members of the respondents ranged from 1 to above 5. Results show that majority of the respondents (66.0%) belonged to medium size family of 3-5 members. The majority therefore have a family size around the national average of 4.4 (BBS, 2011). However, around one-third (34.0%) of the respondents were small and large family sizes. This indicates that the family planning campaign of the government was adopted in the study area as it was envisioned.

Annual income helps an individual lead a quality life. Annual income of the respondents ranged from BDT below 40,000 – Above

50,000. Majority of the respondents (96%) earned \leq BDT 40,000. Nevertheless, 4 percent earned an annual income of BDT 40,000 – 50,000. But, nobody had an annual income above BDT 50,000. That displays poor economic status of the respondents.

Performance of VGD towards food security

Performance is the accomplishment of a given task measured against preset known standards of accuracy, completeness, cost, and speed. It could also be the fulfillment of an obligation, in a manner that relieves an individual or a people from responsibilities initially agreed upon. Results shown in Table 2 indicate that the performance of VGD program as measured on sixteen constructed statements covering various dimensions (availability, access, utilisation and stability) of food security.

Table 2. Performance of VGD program towards food security

Sl#	Problems	Extent of performance	
		Number	Percent
Food Availability			
1.	Not satisfactory (up to 20)	19	38.0
2.	Satisfactory (21-40)	24	48.0
3.	Highly satisfactory (above 40)	7	14.0
Food Access			
1.	Not satisfactory (up to 20)	11	22.0
2.	Satisfactory (21-40)	25	50.0
3.	Highly satisfactory (above 40)	14	28.0
Food Utilisation			
1.	Not satisfactory (up to 20)	22	44.0
2.	Satisfactory (21-40)	19	38.0
3.	Highly satisfactory (above 40)	9	18.0
Food Stability			
1.	Not satisfactory (up to 20)	10	20.0
2.	Satisfactory (21-40)	33	66.0
3.	Highly satisfactory (above 40)	7	14.0

It is discernible from Table 2 that increase in food access, availability and stability were reported by the beneficiaries to be predominantly satisfactory with regards to the VGD program. On the other hand, food utilization was obtained to be mostly between not satisfactory and satisfactory. In essence, the result implies that the performance of VGD in terms of food security is not up to the mark. In similar studies, Del Ninno and Dorosh (2001) and Matin and Hulme (2003) reported that most of the beneficiaries of social safety net programs in Bangladesh including VGD have experienced increased household income. They concluded that households that have benefited from these programs have improved their income levels and the quality and quantity of their food-intake.

Problems Faced by the Beneficiaries of VGD

Results displayed in Table 3 indicate that the major problem confronted by the respondents was untimely distribution. That suggests unavailability of the VGD provisions at the appropriate/needed time. Similarly, inadequate provision of food, which means the provision was not enough to meet the requirement. Other problems of significance expressed by the respondents include political biasness and stringent regulations. Perhaps, there was an influence of difference in political inclinations.

However, the degree of extent of these problems buttress the presence of important challenges needed to be addressed. Ahmed *et*

Table 3. Distribution of the respondents according to the problems faced

Sl#	Problems	Extent of the problem (%)		
		Low	Medium	High
1.	Low quality of food	24	66	10
2.	Political biasness	19	56	25
3.	Stringent regulations	46	34	20
4.	Inadequate provision	9	26	65
5.	Distribution from longer distance	77	13	10
6.	Limited information	86	12	2
7.	Untimely distribution of food	13	20	67

al. (2010) reported similar problems in their study.

Results of Qualitative Investigation

To obtain the qualitative information, three different focus group discussions were conducted with the beneficiaries. The focus group discussions involved 5 beneficiaries in each session for 60 minutes. Results obtained from focus group discussions are presented below:

Information obtained from the discussions revealed that food access was highly satisfactory, food availability and stability were satisfactory, while food utilisation was not satisfactory. However, nutrition, quality and quantity of intake of food were reported poorly by the beneficiaries during the focus group discussions. But, on a positive note the beneficiaries voiced some level of appreciation in terms of ease of getting food and its intake.

With respect to the problems faced by the beneficiaries in VGD program, inadequate provision and untimely distribution of food materials were highly admitted. Low quality of food, stringent regulations and distribution from longer distance were moderately attested

to. Conversely with the quantitative findings, political biasness and limited information flow were reported low.

Conclusion

The VGD is a long standing specialised social safety net program in Bangladesh that targets ultra-poor women in the way of food aid and a meagre income. The findings of the present study infers that the beneficiaries of VGD program were predominantly vulnerable with very low socioeconomic profile, therefore, require government's considerable effort to improve their socioeconomic status especially the educational level. The overall performance of VGD program towards food security was not very satisfactory, although there was an increase with regards to food access, availability and stability. Also, the beneficiaries were confronted by a variety of problems among which untimely distribution, inadequate provision, low quality of food and political biasness are the key. As a result, strengthening of administrative structures, proper monitoring and evaluation, and improving the quality of deliverables of the program would go a long way in ensuring better performance of the VGD.

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