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House 40/C, Road 11 (new)
Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1209
Bangladesh
Telephone: (+88 02) 55001185,
55001989, 18156979
Fax: (+88 02) 55001181
E-mail: info@cpd.org.bd

Social Safety Net Budget of Bangladesh *Catching Some, Missing Many*

Fahmida Khatun, Syed Yusuf Saadat, Zazeeba Waziha Saleh, and
Faiza Tanaz Ahsan

Key Findings

1. In the proposed budget for FY2025, the social safety net budget allocation, excluding pension, national savings certificate interest, and agricultural subsidy, stood at 9 per cent of the budget and 1.32 per cent of the GDP.
2. Pensions for government officials, interest on national savings certificates, and agricultural subsidies account for 46 per cent of the total budget allocation for social protection in FY2025.
3. Apart from pensions for retired government officials, interest payments on national saving certificates and agricultural subsidies, the allocation for all other programmes decreased by 12 per cent in the budget for FY2025

Key Recommendations

1. Given the high prices of essential food items, it is imperative to avoid reducing budget allocations for core social safety net programmes (SSNPs), as this would adversely impact the poor.
2. Pensions for retired government employees, savings certificate interest assistance, and agricultural subsidies should be decoupled from the SSNP budget to ensure more targeted and effective resource allocation in favour of the poor.
3. Redundant programmes should be consolidated to avoid duplication of programmes with overlapping targets, guaranteeing more effective utilisation of resources.

1. Introduction

Social protection is expected to play a crucial role in development planning when aiming to promote inclusive growth in an economy with a significant number of people living in poverty, a large proportion of vulnerable individuals, and a high rate of informal employment. However, an analysis of the country's current state of Social Safety Net Programmes (SSNPs) reveals that there is still no comprehensive and organised approach to social security. Besides, a large number of informal sector workers remain outside social protection. Bringing them under such programmes is administratively challenging and may result in dualism within the social protection programme. Therefore, there is a need for a universal social security system.

The International Labour Organization's (ILO) Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) (ILO, 2012) asserts that social protection is a human right. It mentions that social protection is a necessity for development, a tool for reducing social exclusion, an investment in workers' empowerment, and a mechanism that is conducive towards gradual formalisation of employment (ILO, 2012). The Recommendation calls upon countries to establish and maintain social protection floors and progressively transition to higher levels of social security. In this regard, the ILO recommends that countries abide by 18 broad principles, which include, inter alia, universality, entitlement, adequacy, non-discrimination, transparency and tripartite participation (ILO, 2012). Based on their national circumstances, countries are urged to guarantee income security and essential healthcare throughout the life cycle so everyone can live a dignified life, free from hardship. For this purpose, the ILO recommends that countries diversify their sources of finance to fund social protection floors. It also suggests countries take steps towards reducing fraud and tax evasion, which tend to misappropriate valuable resources that may be otherwise utilised efficiently to provide social protection benefits. The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has provided social protection to the poor through several SSNPs. However, these programmes fall short of the country's social protection requirements due to resource constraints. The government formulated the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) in 2015 to build social safety measures for all deserving citizens, particularly the poor and vulnerable, to make the country free from hunger and poverty (General Economics Division, 2015). This policy brief highlights and evaluates the anticipated distribution of

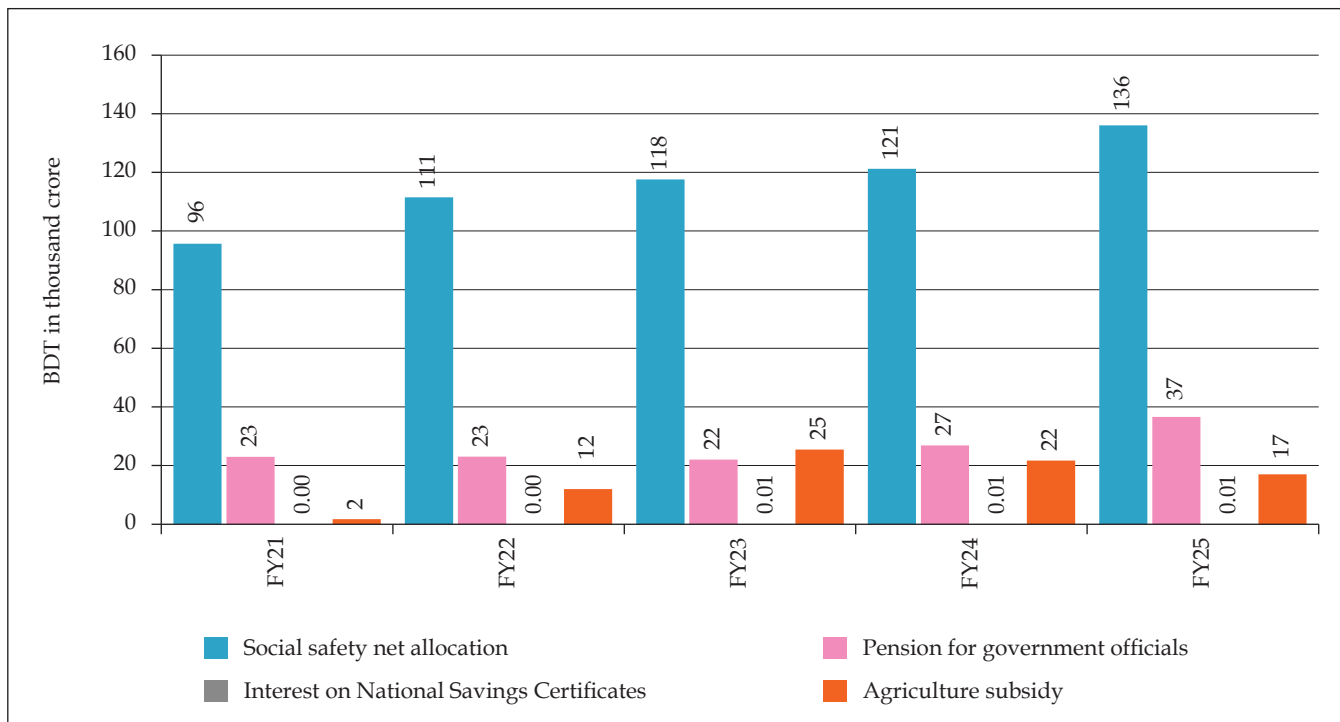
funds for social safety net initiatives in Fiscal Year (FY) 2025, including the status, successes, obstacles, and other issues.

2. Budget Allocation for SSNPs

Bangladesh's social safety net budget has traditionally been artificially inflated by including the pensions of government officials within its scope. While providing pensions to government officials who have dedicated their lives to the service of the nation and the people is of paramount importance, all retired government officials cannot be considered vulnerable. Therefore, the budget allocation for pensions for retired government officials must be decoupled from the social safety net budget allocation. In recent years, the social safety net budget has been artificially inflated even further by including the interest payments of national savings certificates and agricultural subsidies within the social safety net budget allocation. National savings certificates, a financial instrument offered by the government, can be purchased by everyone, even by private corporations. Therefore, all those receiving interest payments on national savings certificates cannot be considered vulnerable. Similarly, the benefits of agricultural subsidies are enjoyed by all farmers – those who are small, poor, and landless, as well as those who are big, rich, and powerful. Therefore, agricultural subsidies are not intended exclusively for the vulnerable. Hence, Bangladesh's social safety net budget allocation appears larger than it actually is. As of FY2025, three of Bangladesh's largest SSNPs – pensions for retired government officials, interest payments on national savings certificates, and agricultural subsidies – had no relevance to the poor or vulnerable.

Figure 1 shows the breakdown of Bangladesh's social protection budget allocations over five years, from the Revised Budget for the Fiscal Year (RBFY) 2021 to the Budget for the Fiscal Year (BFY) 2025. Budgetary resources for SSNPs steadily increased, rising from BDT 95,683 crore in RBFY2021 to BDT 136,026 crore in BFY2025 (MOF, 2024a). The allocation for government officials' pensions also increased from BDT 22,010 crore in RBFY2021 to BDT 36,580 crore in BFY2025 (MOF, 2024a). It is important to note that the rate of increase in pension allocation for retired government officials has always been higher than the rate of increase in the total social safety net budget allocation. For instance, in the proposed budget for FY2025, the proposed allocation for the total social safety net budget represents a 12 per cent increase compared to RBFY2024, whereas the proposed allocation for pensions for retired government officials represents a 36 per cent increase compared to

Figure 1: Social Safety Net Allocation, Pension for Government Officials, Interest on National Savings Certificates, Agricultural Subsidy (in thousand crore BDT)



Source: Authors' illustration based on data from the Ministry of Finance (MOF, 2024a).

RBFY2024. The allocation for agricultural subsidies has increased by 10 times over the past five years, from BDT 1,700 crore in RBFY2021 to BDT 17,000 crore in BFY2025 (MOF, 2024a).

2.1 Utilisation of SSNPs

It is important to note that while the Ministry of Finance (MoF) publishes the budget allocation and revised budget allocation for SSNPs, the actual expenditure on SSNPs is never published. Various studies have highlighted many problems with Bangladesh's social safety net schemes. Some of the most prevalent issues are inadequate funding, poor targeting, wasted resources, poor communication between organisations responsible for implementation, excessive overhead, and the complete lack of an assessment framework to measure results (Rahman, et.al., 2011) (Khatun, et.al., 2012). Addressing inclusion and exclusion errors, fraud, and corruption in social assistance systems in Bangladesh is challenging due to the lack of comprehensive information and insufficient competence within government ministries to conduct internal audits that may uncover the underlying causes of irregularities in these programmes. Research has shown that the highest

likelihood of errors, fraud, and corruption arises when choosing recipients (van Stolck & Tesliuc, 2010). In Bangladesh, there is a widespread understanding that beneficiary selection for social security programmes is often flawed. Due to insufficient monitoring and assessment, these irregularities continue without being reduced or stopped. The fact that the actual expenditure on SSNPs in Bangladesh is not publicly disclosed makes it challenging to ascertain how much money is being spent, how many people are being benefitted, and whether there are any anomalies in the expenditure.

2.2 Actual Allocation for the Poor in SSNPs

Over the years, the inclusion of pensions for retired government officials, interest payments on national savings certificates, and agricultural subsidies within the social safety net budget have reduced the allocation for programmes meant for the poor and vulnerable. Figure 2 shows that pensions for retired government officials increased from 22 per cent of the total safety net budget in RBFY2024 to 27 per cent of the total safety net budget in BFY2025 (MOF, 2024a). On the other hand, apart from pensions for retired government officials, interest payments

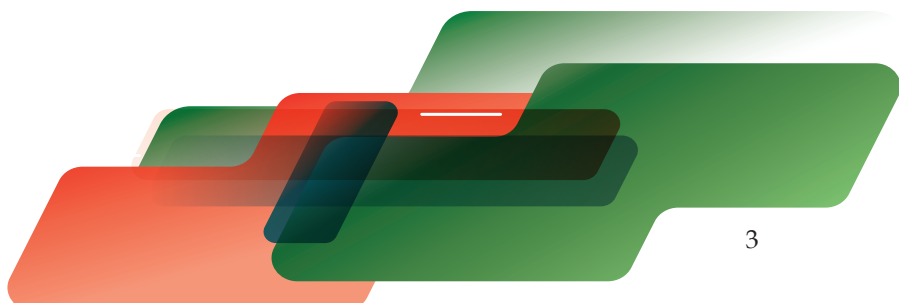
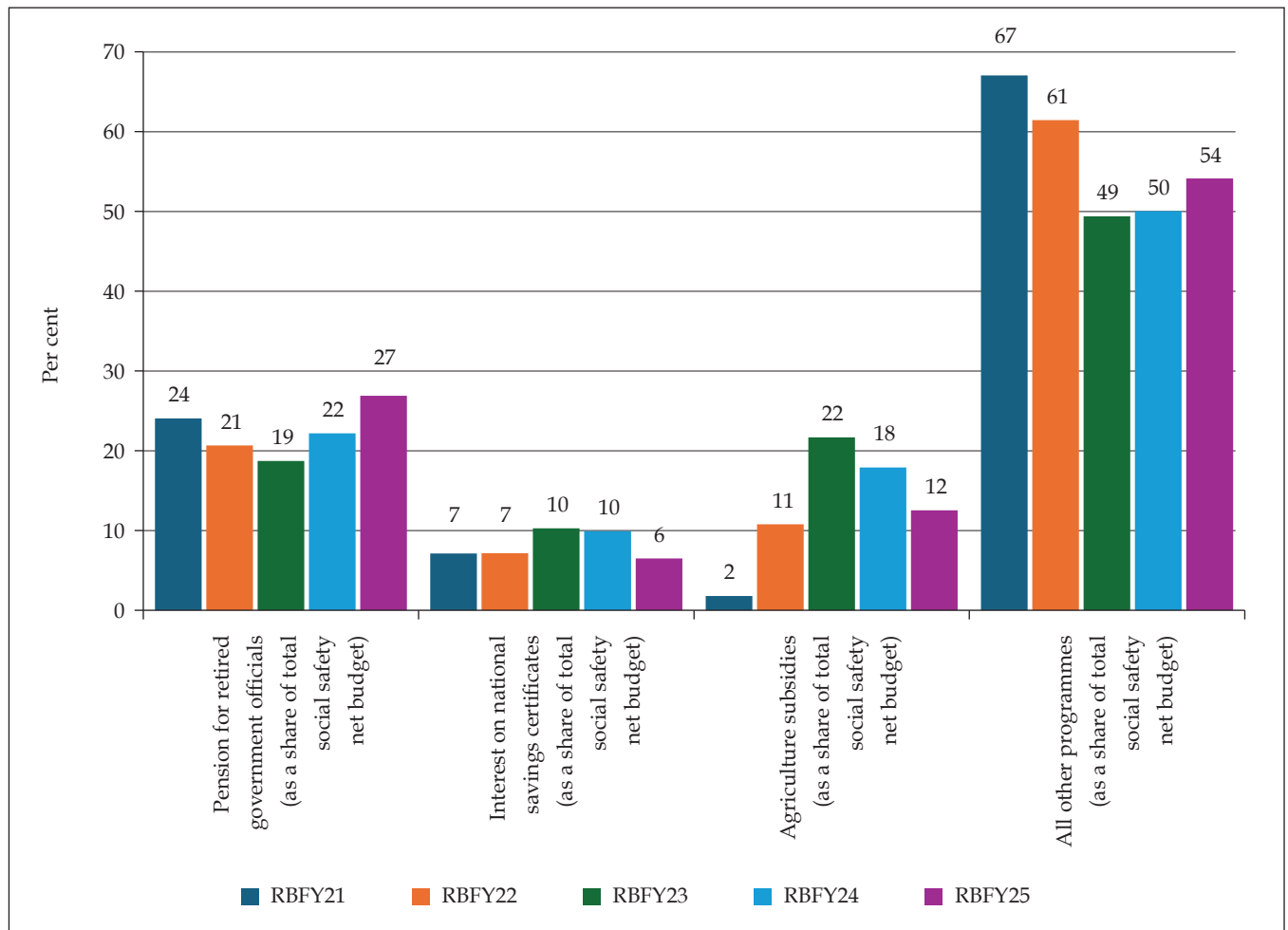


Figure 2: Distribution of Social Safety Net Allocation (as a share of total social safety net budget)



Source: Authors' illustration based on data from the Ministry of Finance (MOF, 2024a).

on national saving certificates and agricultural subsidies, the allocation for all other programmes decreased from 74 per cent of the total safety net budget in RBFY2009 to 54 per cent of the total safety net budget in BFY2025 (MOF, 2024a). Hence, in the proposed budget for FY2025, 46 per cent of the budget allocation for social safety nets is not intended for the poor or vulnerable (MOF, 2024a).

Figure 3 shows that although the social safety net allocation as a share of the budget has increased from 15 per cent in RBFY2009 to 17 per cent in BFY2025, the social safety net allocation excluding pension, national savings certificate interest, and agricultural subsidy has decreased from 11 per cent in RBFY2009 to 9 per cent in BFY2009 (MOF, 2024a). Hence, the budget allocation for SSNPs for the poor and vulnerable has been steadily reduced over the years (MOF, 2024a). The social safety net budget, excluding pension,

national savings certificate interest, and agricultural subsidy, stood at 9 per cent of the budget in FY2025 (MOF, 2024a).

Figure 4 shows that the social safety net allocation as a share of GDP increased from 1.73 per cent in RBFY2016 to 2.43 per cent in BFY2025 (MOF, 2024a). However, social safety net allocation excluding pension, national savings certificate interest, and agricultural subsidy as a share of GDP experienced a more modest increase from 1.20 per cent in RBFY2016 to 1.32 per cent in BFY2025 (MOF, 2024a). Such low budget allocation for SSNPs indicates that protecting the welfare of the poor and vulnerable was never a big priority for the government. It is worth noting that the Eighth Five Year Plan of Bangladesh targeted to increase the budget allocation for social safety nets, excluding pensions for retired government officials, to 2 per cent of GDP by

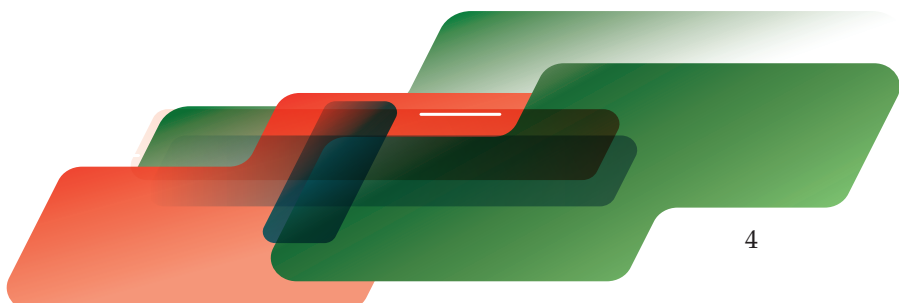
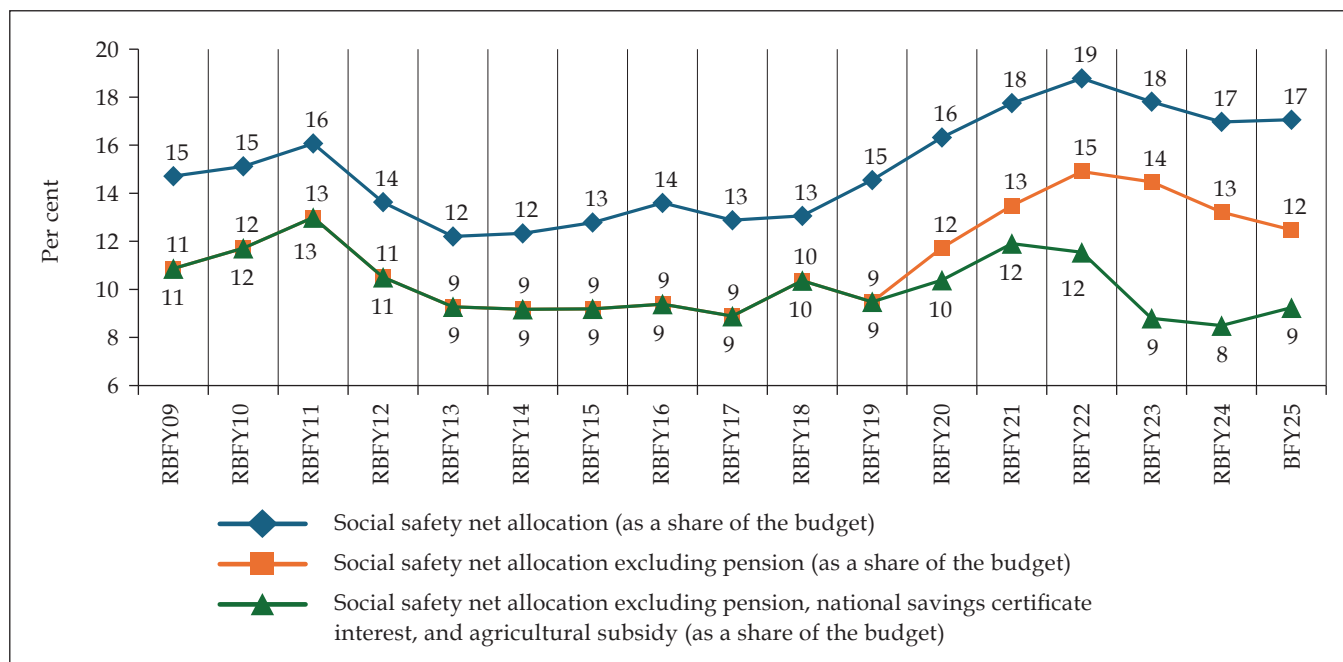
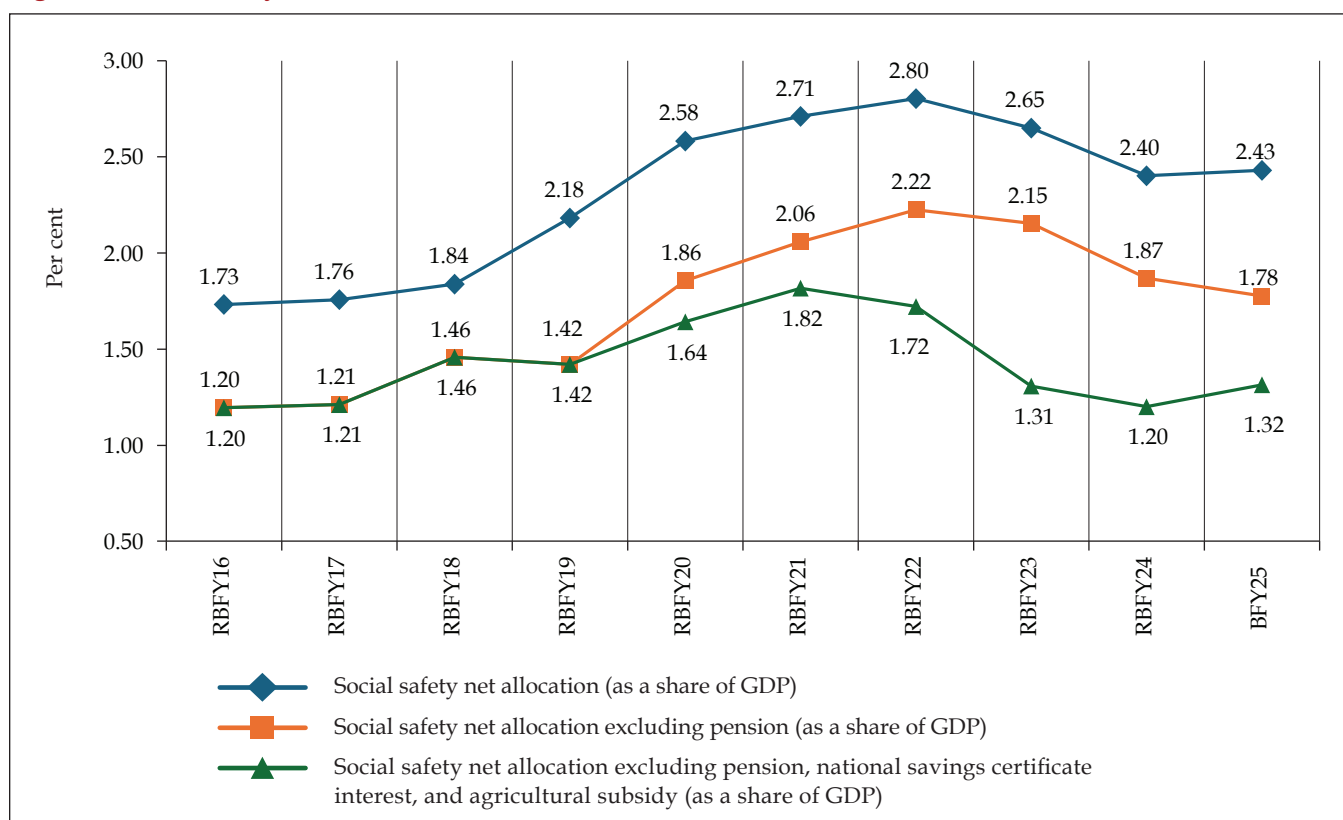


Figure 3: Social Safety Net Allocation as a Share of the Budget



Source: Authors' illustration based on data from the Ministry of Finance (MOF, 2024a).

Figure 4: Social Safety Net Allocation as a Share of the GDP



Source: Authors' illustration based on data from the Ministry of Finance (MOF, 2024a).

FY2025 (GED, 2020), although, in the proposed budget for FY2025, this allocation has been kept at only 1.78 per cent of GDP (MOF, 2024a).

3. Scope and Scale of SSNPs

Social protection may impact the extent of poverty by either preventing individuals from falling into poverty or by assisting them in escaping it. In Bangladesh, 5 per cent of the population, or 8.2 million people, were living below USD 2.15 per day, 30.03 per cent of the population, or 49.5 million people, were living below USD 3.65 per day, and 74.10 per cent of the population, or 122.3 million people were living below USD 6.85 per day in 2022 according to poverty estimates by the World Bank (World Bank, 2022) and population census by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) (BBS, 2022). The share of national income held by the poorest 5 per cent of the population in Bangladesh has decreased from 1.03 per cent in FY1992 to 0.37 per cent in 2022 (BBS, 2023). Moreover, the richest 5 per cent of the population in Bangladesh were 18 times richer than the poorest 5 per cent of the population in FY1992, but in 2022, the richest 5 per cent of the population in Bangladesh were 81 times richer than the poorest 5 per cent of the population (BBS, 2023). Hence, SSNPs are vital for supporting Bangladesh's vast number of poor and vulnerable people.

Bangladesh has grappled with high inflation for several years, largely due to policy and institutional failures. In April 2024, the general and food inflation rates were 10 per cent, and the non-food inflation rates were 9 per cent, indicating persistent and unyielding inflationary pressure. (Bangladesh Bank, 2024a). Analysis of the average daily prices of 34 essential food items in Dhaka from 1 January 2019 to 19 May 2024 shows that prices increased from 10 per cent to 310 per cent (TCB, 2024). The burden of high inflation falls disproportionately on the poor and low-income households. Due to hikes in prices of essential goods like

food and fuel, the purchasing power of ordinary people has eroded significantly. The suffering of the poor and low-income families, which began following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, has continued to date. The Ukraine war further worsened the situation in February 2022. In 2021, 73.9 per cent of Bangladesh's population, or 125.2 million people, could not afford a healthy diet, according to the Food Prices for Nutrition 2.1 database developed by the World Bank, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), and Tufts University (World Bank, 2024).

Given the prevailing high prices of essential items and the high inflation rate, it was critical that the budget for FY2025 provide some relief and support to the poor and vulnerable whose savings have been eroded and whose income has lost its purchasing power. Unfortunately, in the budget for FY2025, the allocation for Open Market Sales (OMS) was proposed to be reduced by 64 per cent, from BDT 5491.74 crore in RBFY2024 to BDT 2004.22 crore in BFY205 (MOF, 2024a). Although 140 SSNPs were listed in the budget for FY2025, the majority of such programmes were very small in scope and scale. Analysis of the allocations for several programmes revealed that beneficiaries were getting less than BDT 500 per month (MOF, 2024a), which can hardly be considered useful in this time of high prices and high inflation (Table 1).

The low allocation per beneficiary per month raises questions about the effectiveness of Bangladesh's overall social protection strategy. It remains unclear why Bangladesh has been pursuing a large number of small programmes spread out over many different ministries and divisions of the government, budget after budget. Such a policy reduces the ultimate impact of SSNPs on the beneficiaries and creates ample room for inefficiencies to flourish.

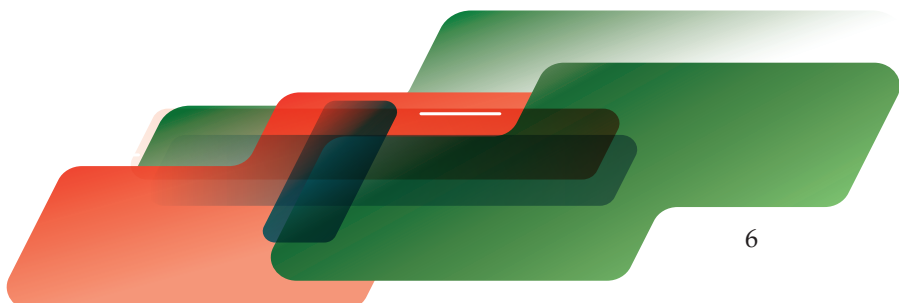


Table 1: Some Programmes with Allocation Less than BDT 500 per Beneficiary per Month in the Proposed Budget for FY2025

Name of programme	Allocation per beneficiary per year (in BDT)	Allocation per beneficiary per month (in BDT)
School Feeding Programmes in Poverty-stricken Areas	125	10
Tottho Apa: Empowering Women Through ICT towards Digital Bangladesh	298	25
Char Development and Settlement Project-bridging	642	54
Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF)	658	55
Service and Assistance Center for Disabled	669	56
Agricultural Rehabilitation	853	71
Trust for the Protection of the Persons with Neuro-developmental Disabilities	1257	105
National Legal Aid Assistance	1511	126
Student Stipend for Primary Education Level	1539	128
Open Market Sales (OMS)	1831	153
Rehabilitation and Alternative Employment/Generation for Beggars	3000	250
Stipend Under Technical and Madrasa Education Division	4072	339
Child Sensitive Social Protection in Bangladesh	4613	384

Source: Authors' compilation based on data from the Ministry of Finance (MOF, 2024a).

4. Estimated Cost of Social Protection Floors

It has been estimated that if historical trends continue business as usual, then 60 million children of primary school age will remain outside school, and 167 million children will live in poverty worldwide in 2030 (UNICEF, 2016). ILO's Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202), acknowledges income security for children as a core component of a national social protection floor. Yet only 35 per cent of children worldwide, 28 per cent of children in Asia, and 29.4 per cent of children in Bangladesh were covered by social protection benefits in 2017 (ILO, 2017). Calculations for Bangladesh, using ILO's Social Protection Floors Cost Calculator, reveal that the cost of providing cash benefits equal to 25 per cent of the national poverty line to all children less than five years old would be only 0.37 per cent of GDP (Table 2). On the other hand, providing United States Dollar (USD) 1 per day at purchasing power parity (PPP) to all children less than five years old in Bangladesh would cost 0.5 per cent of GDP (Table 2).

The world's orphan population is growing as a result of various crises, including natural catastrophes, armed conflicts, mass migration, poverty, and epidemics (NAR, 2020). Over the past 20 years, nearly 750,000 people have died due to natural calamities, thereby orphaning countless children (NAR, 2020). The majority of these deaths, about 79 per cent, occurred in poor Asian countries, such as Bangladesh, India, Philippines, Pakistan, and Indonesia (NAR, 2020). It was revealed in a high court decision that over 3.4 million children who were parentless and homeless in Bangladesh required birth certificates (UNICEF, 2024). Thus, according to this high court judgement, 3.4 million children are considered to be the lower range of the real number of children in Bangladesh who are currently living on the streets without parental supervision (UNICEF, 2024). Calculations for Bangladesh, using ILO's Social Protection Floors Cost Calculator, show that the cost of providing social benefits equal to 100 per cent of the national poverty line to orphans would be only 0.01 per cent of GDP (Table 3). Similarly, providing USD 2 per day PPP to orphans in Bangladesh would cost 0.01 per cent of GDP (Table 3).

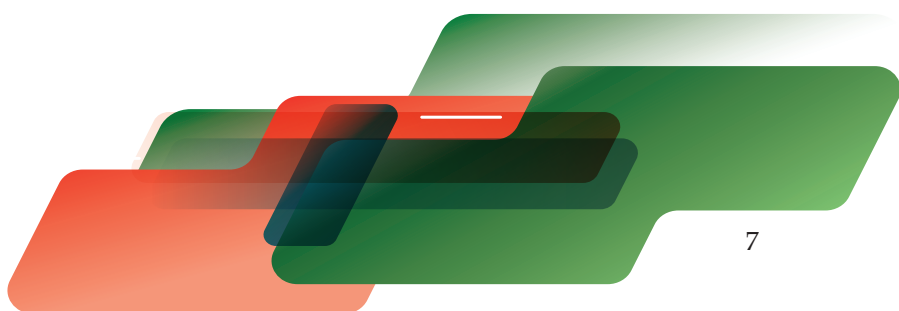


Table 2: Cost of Universal Child Benefits (as a percentage of GDP)

Age groups (in years)	Cost of universal child benefits (as a percentage of GDP)			
	0 - 4	5 - 9	10 - 14	0 - 14
Benefit level				
100 per cent of the national poverty line	1.50	1.49	1.92	4.91
75 per cent of the national poverty line	1.12	1.12	1.44	3.68
50 per cent of the national poverty line	0.75	0.75	0.96	2.46
25 per cent of the national poverty line	0.37	0.37	0.48	1.23
100 per cent of the minimum salary	0.06	0.06	0.08	0.21
75 per cent of the minimum salary	0.05	0.05	0.06	0.16
50 per cent of the minimum salary	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.11
25 per cent of the minimum salary	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.05
USD 2 PPP per day	1.00	1.00	1.29	3.29
USD 1 PPP per day	0.50	0.50	0.64	1.64

Source: Authors' calculations based on ILO's Social Protection Floors Cost Calculator (ILO, 2024).

Note: i) Calculations include only the cost of non-contributory social assistance benefits for the specified population but do not include social insurance; ii) Social insurance is financed by employers and workers' contributions and delivers higher benefits; iii) Child benefit consists of a cash transfer to families with children of the selected age groups; iv) Administration costs are included for all benefits and 3 per cent administrative costs are assumed for all universal benefits; v) Assuming that total population is 169,356,251, GDP per capita is BDT 208,447, national poverty line is BDT 35,021, minimum salary is BDT 1,500, the share of children in the population is 28.4 per cent, the share of orphans among children is 0.1 per cent, the share of older persons in the population is 5.8 per cent and total fertility rate is 2.0.

Table 3: Cost of Universal Social Benefits to Orphans (as a percentage of GDP)

	Cost of universal social benefits to orphans (as a percentage of GDP)
Benefit level	
100 per cent of the national poverty line	0.01
75 per cent of the national poverty line	0.01
50 per cent of the national poverty line	0.01
25 per cent of the national poverty line	0.00
100 per cent of the minimum salary	0.00
75 per cent of the minimum salary	0.00
50 per cent of the minimum salary	0.00
25 per cent of the minimum salary	0.00
USD 2 PPP per day	0.01
USD 1 PPP per day	0.00

Source: Authors' calculations based on ILO's Social Protection Floors Cost Calculator (ILO, 2024).

Note: i) Calculations include only the cost of non-contributory social assistance benefits for the specified population but do not include social insurance; ii) Social insurance is financed by employers and workers' contributions and delivers higher benefits; iii) Child benefit consists of a cash transfer to families with children of the selected age groups; iv) Administration costs are included for all benefits and 3 per cent administrative costs are assumed for all universal benefits; v) Assuming that total population is 169,356,251, GDP per capita is BDT 208,447, national poverty line is BDT 35,021, minimum salary is BDT 1,500, the share of children in the population is 28.4 per cent, the share of orphans among children is 0.1 per cent, the share of older persons in the population is 5.8 per cent and total fertility rate is 2.0.

Although pensions for the elderly are the most commonly provided form of social protection in the world, 32 per cent of the elderly population worldwide, and 66 per cent of the elderly population in Bangladesh, are still not covered by any social protection benefits (ILO, 2017). Bangladesh also has some of South Asia's most stringent legal requirements for obtaining old-age pensions. Calculations for Bangladesh, using ILO's Social Protection Floors Cost Calculator, show that the cost of providing cash benefits equal to 100 per cent of the national poverty line to all persons aged 65 years and above would be 1.01 per cent of GDP (Table 4). On the other hand, providing USD 2 per day

PPP to all persons aged 65 years and above in Bangladesh would cost 0.67 per cent of GDP (Table 4).

Using ILO's Social Protection Floors Cost Calculator, it can be shown that the cost of providing unemployment support, such as the 100-day Employment Generation Programme, equal to 100 per cent of the national poverty line for 100 days per year for one person at working age per vulnerable household would be 25.81 per cent of GDP (Table 5). On the other hand, providing USD 2 per day PPP for 100 days per year for one person of working age per vulnerable household would cost 17.27 per cent of GDP (Table 5).

Table 4: Cost of Universal Pensions (as a percentage of GDP)

	Cost of universal pensions (as a percentage of GDP)
Benefit level	
100 per cent of the national poverty line	1.01
75 per cent of the national poverty line	0.76
50 per cent of the national poverty line	0.50
25 per cent of the national poverty line	0.25
100 per cent of the minimum salary	0.04
75 per cent of the minimum salary	0.03
50 per cent of the minimum salary	0.02
25 per cent of the minimum salary	0.01
USD 2 per day at PPP	0.67
USD 1 per day at PPP	0.34

Source: Authors' calculations based on ILO's Social Protection Floors Cost Calculator (ILO, 2024).

Note: i) Calculations include only the cost of non-contributory social assistance benefits for the specified population but do not include social insurance; ii) Social insurance is financed by employers and workers' contributions and delivers higher benefits; iii) Child benefit consists of a cash transfer to families with children of the selected age groups; iv) Administration costs are included for all benefits and 3 per cent administrative costs are assumed for all universal benefits; v) Assuming that total population is 169,356,251, GDP per capita is BDT 208,447, national poverty line is BDT 35,021, minimum salary is BDT 1,500, the share of children in the population is 28.4 per cent, the share of orphans among children is 0.1 per cent, the share of older persons in the population is 5.8 per cent, total fertility rate is 2.0.

Table 5: Cost of Unemployment Support (as a percentage of GDP)

	Benefit duration			
	100 days	200 days	300 days	365 days
Benefit level				
100 per cent of the national poverty line	25.81	51.62	77.43	94.20
75 per cent of the national poverty line	19.36	38.71	58.07	70.65
50 per cent of the national poverty line	12.90	25.81	38.71	47.10
25 per cent of the national poverty line	6.45	12.90	19.36	23.55
100 per cent of the minimum salary	1.11	2.21	3.32	4.03
75 per cent of the minimum salary	0.83	1.66	2.49	3.03
50 per cent of the minimum salary	0.55	1.11	1.66	2.02
25 per cent of the minimum salary	0.28	0.55	0.83	1.01
USD 2 per day at PPP	17.27	34.54	51.81	63.03
USD 1 per day at PPP	8.63	17.27	25.90	31.51

Source: Authors' calculations based on ILO's Social Protection Floors Cost Calculator (ILO, 2024).

Note: i) Calculations include only the cost of non-contributory social assistance benefits for the specified population but do not include social insurance; ii) Social insurance is financed by employers and workers' contributions and delivers higher benefits; iii) Child benefit consists of a cash transfer to families with children of the selected age groups; iv) Administration costs are included for all benefits and 3 per cent administrative costs are assumed for all universal benefits; v) Assuming that total population is 169,356,251, GDP per capita is BDT 208,447, national poverty line is BDT 35,021, minimum salary is BDT 1,500, the share of children in the population is 28.4 per cent, the share of orphans among children is 0.1 per cent, the share of older persons in the population is 5.8 per cent, total fertility rate is 2.0.

5. Policy recommendations

In light of the analysis of the proposed social safety net budget for FY2025, this policy brief makes the following recommendations:

- Review SSNPs to properly determine intervention priorities as recipient families' economic and social profiles change over time.
- Re-evaluate existing SSNPs to focus on better targeting, avoiding overlaps, and introducing finite planning with exit strategies.
- Strategically prioritise consolidating processes reinforcing social protection floor goals, directing the NSSS towards universal goals.
- Extensively examine and scrutinise SSNP beneficiaries from programme and sector-level vulnerability perspectives.
- Comprehensively map the most vulnerable groups to build social safety net activities that satisfy the SDG ambition to 'leave no one behind'.
- Reallocate the skewed distribution of social safety net initiatives to ensure successful interventions and goal achievement.
- Rigorously monitor and analyse social safety net initiatives within a unified database and framework for future planning and budget allocation.
- Improve interministerial coordination and examine programme mergers to reduce administrative expenses and improve efficiency.
- Collaborate effectively for a collective goal by considering changes in poverty, employment, and fiscal space to realise the NSSS vision.

- Identify critical areas of extreme poverty, hunger, and the most vulnerable groups to realign SSNPs with the 2030 Agenda.
- Develop comprehensive policies and programmes for poverty alleviation strategies to guarantee food and income rights and access to employment, skills, and credit.
- Emphasise social protection measures and establish institutional, legal, and administrative frameworks to

support job creation and policy objectives as the economy grows.

- Assess social protection and safety nets to ensure policies and institutions safeguard employment and income stability, especially for disadvantaged populations.
- Expand fiscal space and optimise fiscal stance to support NSSS implementation and extend social insurance coverage in informal sectors and companies through financial incentives and subsidies.

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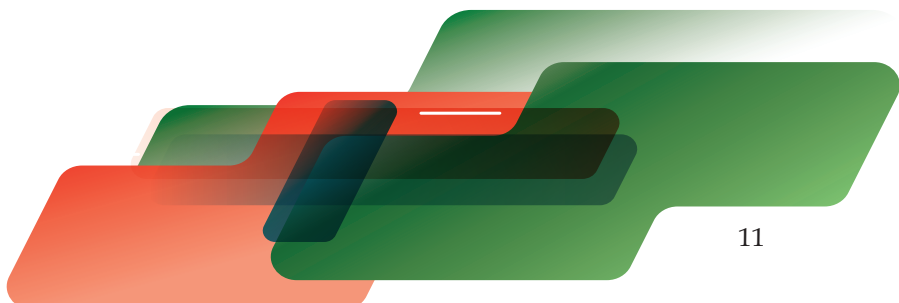
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