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Bangladesh's Social Safety Net Budget FY2027 *The Promise of Protection*

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Key Findings

1. In the proposed budget for FY2027, the social safety net budget allocation, excluding pension and agricultural subsidy, stood at 8.7 per cent of the budget and 1.20 per cent of the GDP.
2. There are 48 programmes as 'Pro-Poor' in the FY2027 budget document with a total allocation of BDT 56,229.50 crore or 38.69 per cent of the total SSNP budget.
3. Both Family card and Farmer card programmes remain vulnerable to the politically driven targeting risks historically prevalent in Bangladesh's social protection system.

Key Policy Recommendations

1. Decouple pensions for retired government employees and agricultural subsidies from the SSNP budget to ensure more targeted and effective resource allocation in favour of the poor and vulnerable populations.
2. Shield the credit component of the Farmer Card from bureaucratic red tape, guarantor rules, and intermediary costs that dragged down India's Kisan Credit Card scheme by leveraging digital cash-transfer rails, and track uptake metrics separately.
3. Review and consolidate small and ineffective programmes under existing programmes to reduce fragmentation, while maintaining differentiated support for different vulnerability profiles.

1. Introduction

In principle, Bangladesh's social protection architecture is designed to address a broad range of vulnerabilities, including both covariate and idiosyncratic shocks, across all stages of the life cycle. The proposed budget of the Social Safety Net Programmes (SSNPs) for the FY2027 allocates BDT 1.44 trillion across 90 programmes, covering approximately 138.47 million beneficiaries, and equivalent to 2.11 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Ministry of Finance, 2026). Yet this scale of investment coexists with a targeting system that continues to exclude approximately 53.9 per cent of poor households while extending benefits to a significant share of approximately 63 per cent of non-poor households (Islam, 2026) (Table 1). This statistic points to a persistent gap between the comprehensiveness of Bangladesh's social safety net design and its practical delivery.

have proven to be effective in providing meaningful support to different vulnerable groups. For instance, an assessment of the Small-Scale Old Age and Widow Allowance in rural Bangladesh found that these benefits significantly improved recipients' economic and social well-being, leading to increased expenditure on foods high in protein and improved health-related quality of life (BRAC, 2008). However, gaps exist in targeting and selection processes, with evidence of corruption and exclusion of the most vulnerable (Khatun, Saadat, Mahbub, Islam, & Kamal, 2025) (Khatun et al., 2025). Against this backdrop of persistent targeting failures, the FY2027 budget's two flagship additions, the Family Card and Farmer Card programmes, merit further consideration. Given that these programmes are still in their early phase, their design provides an opportunity to assess whether the structural weaknesses that have undermined comparable pro-poor programmes can be anticipated and addressed, or whether they are likely to be replicated. This

Table 1: Key Indicators at a Glance

Indicator	Value
Total social protection budget allocation (FY2027)	BDT 1.44 trillion
Social protection as a percentage of GDP (FY2027)	2.11%
Population covered by life-cycle programmes (FY2027)	138.47 million beneficiaries
Poor households without access to any safety nets (HIES, 2022)	~ 53.9%
Extreme Poverty (as of 2025)	9.35%
Moderate poverty (as of 2025)	27.93%
Number of social safety net programmes (FY2027)	90 programmes
Inclusion error rate (non-poor included) (HIES, 2022)	~ 63%

Source: Authors' compilation from data from various sources (BBS, 2022) (PPRC, 2025) (Ministry of Finance, 2026) (Razzaque, et al., 2025).

Note: The figure for budget allocation, beneficiary number and SSNPs as a percentage of GDP are obtained from the proposed budget for FY2027.

According to a recent poverty and inequality survey conducted by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) in 2025, 27.93 per cent of Bangladesh's population lives below the upper poverty line, and 9.35 per cent lives below the lower poverty line (PPRC, 2025). In 2015, the government formulated the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) to reduce inefficiency and prioritise the most vulnerable groups (GED, 2015), aiming to establish a lifecycle-based social protection system that provides support across an individual's different life stages such as childhood, motherhood, working age, and old age, as well as against life risks such as disability, and covariate and climate shocks. However, overlapping programmes, resource leakages, and errors in exclusion and inclusion have continued to undermine these objectives, limiting the strategy's effectiveness in practice.

Programmes such as the Old Age Allowance (BRAC, 2008), the Vulnerable Women's Benefit, and the Disability Allowance

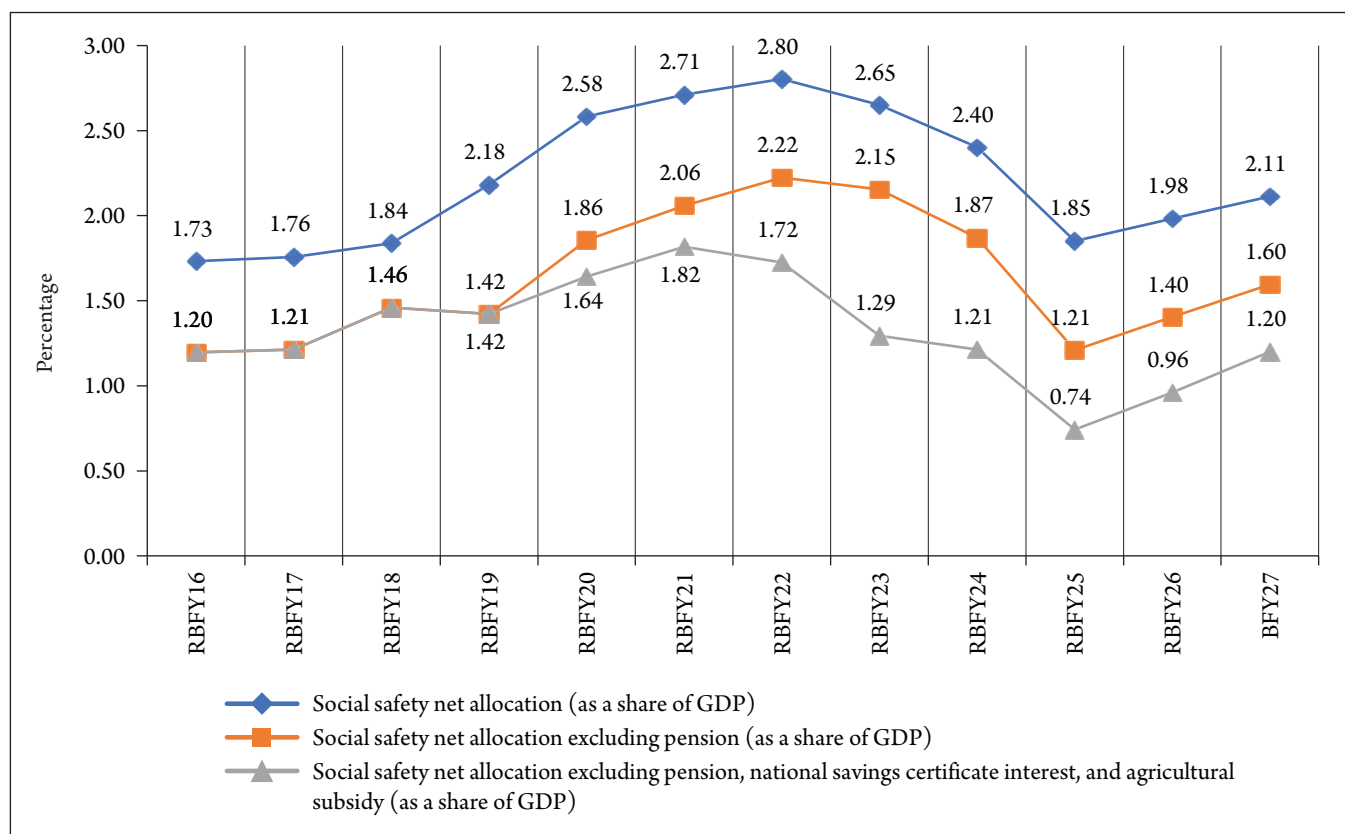
policy brief examines the FY2027 SSNPs budget through this lens, assessing trends in social protection budget allocation and utilisation, the composition of programmes classified as pro-poor, and the design and implementation risks associated with the Family Card and Farmer Card programmes.

2. Budget Allocation

2.1 Allocation as a Share of GDP

Social protection allocation as a percentage of GDP has increased from 1.85 per cent in the Revised Budget (RB) for the RBFY2025 to 1.98 per cent in the RBFY2026 (Figure 1). Notwithstanding this increase, the budget allocation for social protection, as a percentage of GDP, appears inflated due to the inclusion of pension management and agricultural subsidies. Previously, interest payment on national savings certificates was also included in the social protection budget, boosting the

Figure 1: Social Protection Allocation as a Percentage of GDP



Source: Authors' illustration based on data from the Ministry of Finance (Ministry of Finance, 2026).

total, but it was removed from the proposed FY2026 budget allocation. However, pension for government officials and agricultural subsidies still remain in the budget. The social safety net allocation, as a share of GDP, in the proposed FY2027 budget is 2.11 per cent. However, removing the pension decreases this share to 1.60 per cent, and removing the agricultural subsidy further reduces it to 1.20 per cent of GDP (Figure 1).

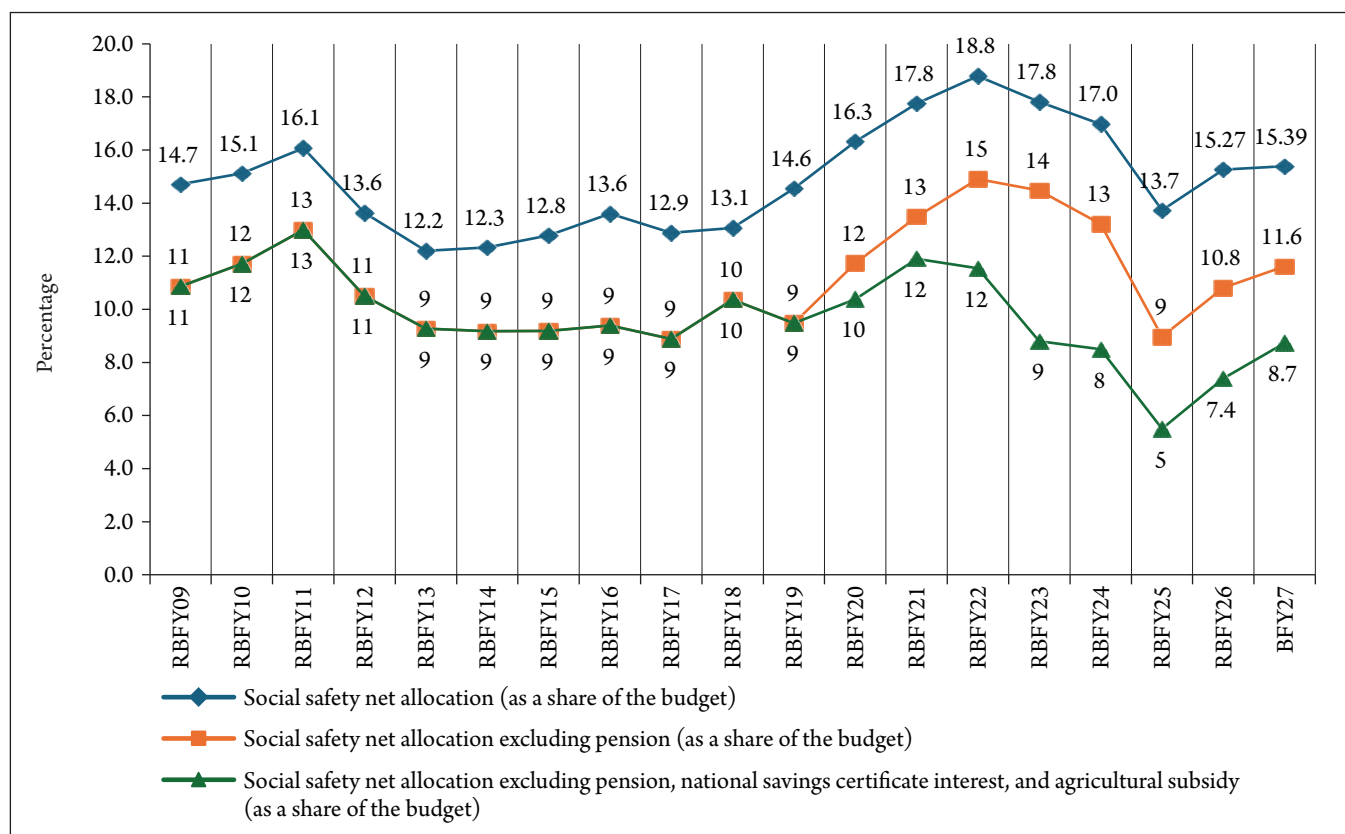
CPD has repeatedly recommended removing these programmes and redistributing the funds to other necessary programmes. While providing pensions to government officials who have dedicated their lives to the service of the nation and its people is of paramount importance, not all retired government officials are in a vulnerable state. 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 inflated even further by including the interest payments of National Savings Certificates and agricultural subsidies within the social safety net budget allocation. However, interest payments have finally been removed since the FY2026 budget. Similarly, the benefits of

agricultural subsidies accrue to all categories of farmers, ranging from small, poor, and landless farmers to large, affluent, and influential landowners. Therefore, agricultural subsidies are not intended exclusively for the vulnerable. Especially given the high targeting error, this programme is inefficient at providing adequate benefits to the country's poor farmers. Due to the presence of these two programmes, Bangladesh's social safety net budget allocation appears larger than it actually is.

2.2 Allocation as a Share of Total National Budget

The SSNPs proposed budget allocation increased by 13.9 per cent, from BDT 126 thousand crore in FY2026 to BDT 144 thousand crore in FY2027 (Ministry of Finance, 2026). The revised budget allocation as a percentage of the total national budget increased from 13.70 per cent in RBFY2025 to 15.27 per cent in RBFY2026. The share of social protection allocation in the proposed budget for FY2027 is 15.39 per cent (Figure 2). However, removing pension allocations for retired government officials decreases the proposed SSNPs budget allocation to 11.6 per cent of the total budget, and removing agricultural subsidy

Figure 2: Social Protection Allocation as a Percentage of Total National Budget



Source: Authors' illustration based on data from the Ministry of Finance (Ministry of Finance, 2026).

Note: Allocation for national savings certificate interests was removed from the SSNPs budget in FY2026.

management allocation further reduces this share to 8.7 per cent (Figure 2). This suggests that the overall SSNPs budget share may overstate the resources actually directed towards vulnerable and disadvantaged populations, as a significant portion of the allocation is attributable to these two programmes.

2.3 Allocation as a Share of Total SSNPs Budget

In FY2027, the proposed budget allocation, as a share of the total SSNPs budget, was 25 per cent for pensions and 19 per cent for agricultural subsidies (Figure 3). Collectively, they remain the top two programmes in terms of budget share. However, the budget allocation breakdown has shifted notably since FY2025, though pension and agricultural subsidy allocations continue to command the largest shares of the total SSNPs budget. The revised budget allocation for pensions decreased from 35 per cent of the total SSNPs revised budget in RBFY2025 to 29 per cent in RBFY2026. Conversely, the revised budget for agricultural subsidies increased from 17 per cent in RBFY2025 to 22 per cent in RBFY2026 (Figure 3).

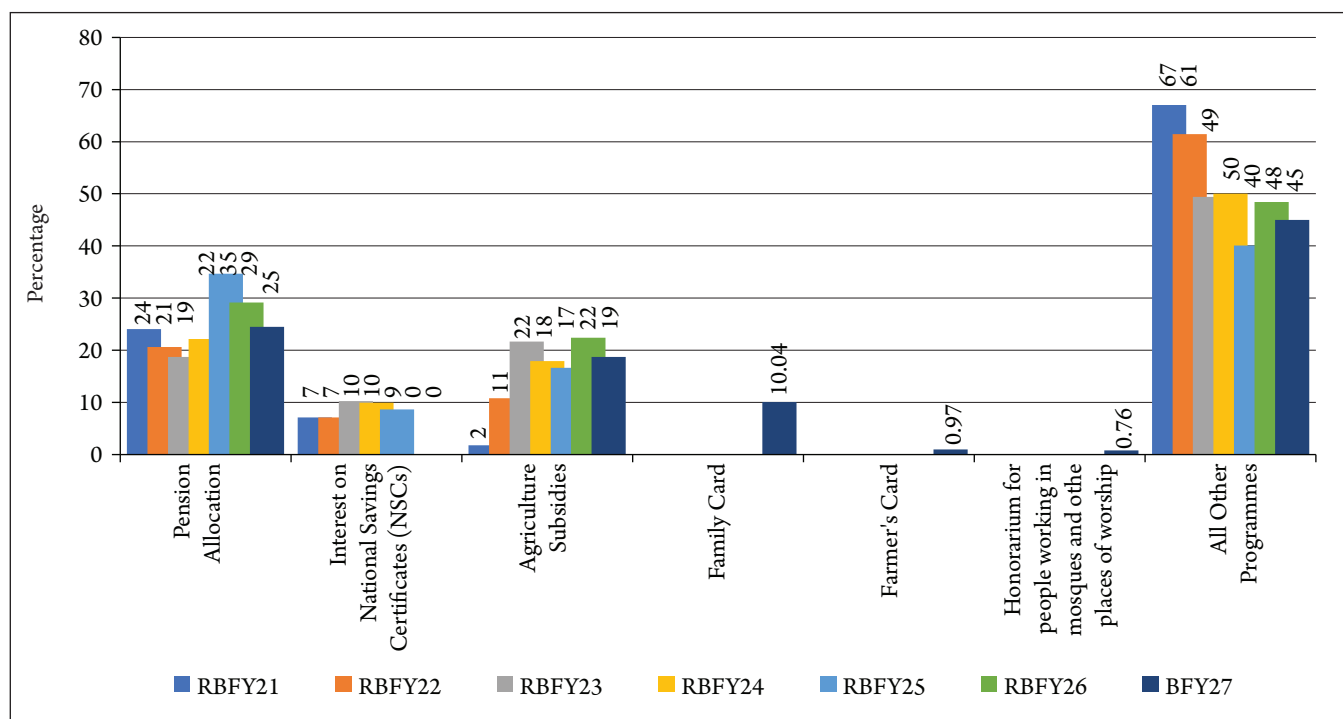
Other notable allocations in FY2027 include the Family Card, which accounts for 10.04 per cent of the SSNPs budget; the Farmer Card at 0.97 per cent of the SSNPs budget; and honoraria for individuals working in mosques and other religious institutions at 0.76 per cent of the SSNPs budget (Figure 3). These three nascent programmes are highlighted separately because they align directly with the incumbent government's election manifesto pledges.

However, the remaining 85 programmes in the SSNPs budget account for 45 per cent of the allocation. This translates to a simple average of just 0.53 per cent per programme. In reality, many of these individual programmes receive less than 0.1 per cent of the total budget (Figure 3).

3. Budget Utilisation

It is important to note that while the Ministry of Finance (MoF) publishes the proposed and revised budget allocations for SSNPs, actual expenditure data for SSNPs are never published. Various

Figure 3: Distribution of Social Protection Allocation (as a share of total SSNPs budget)



Source: Authors' illustration based on data from the Ministry of Finance (Ministry of Finance, 2026).

studies have highlighted many problems with Bangladesh's social safety net schemes, including 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 a lack of comprehensive information and insufficient competence within ministries to conduct internal audits that could uncover the underlying causes of irregularities in these programmes. Research has shown that the highest likelihood of errors, fraud, and corruption occurs during recipient selection (van Stolk & Tesliuc, 2010). Evidence indicates that accurately identifying the poor, as proposed in theoretical models to minimise both exclusion and inclusion errors, entails exceptionally high administrative costs and demands a level of institutional capacity that is often lacking in developing countries such as Bangladesh (Srivastava, 2004).

In Bangladesh, there is a widespread understanding that beneficiary selection for social security programmes is often flawed, resulting in high exclusion errors (eligible individuals not covered) and inclusion errors (ineligible individuals receiving benefits) (Razzaque & Rahman, 2025). Programme

eligibility is typically determined by measures of poverty and vulnerability with income level serving as a key criterion for beneficiary selection. However, a critical gap can emerge between poverty-based eligibility metrics and the actual needs and vulnerabilities of potential beneficiaries. Depending only on income or consumption-based standards for social protection, eligibility is insufficient since it ignores other important aspects of vulnerability and deprivation (Razzaque, et al., 2025). In some cases, income-based eligibility criteria may result in relatively better-off households being included while other vulnerable households are excluded, as rigid income thresholds may not fully capture differences in household vulnerability and access to essential resources (Razzaque, et al., 2025). Due to insufficient monitoring and assessment, these irregularities continue without being reduced or stopped. The fact that actual SSNP expenditure in Bangladesh is not publicly disclosed makes it difficult to determine how much is being spent, how many people are benefiting, and whether there are any anomalies in the expenditure.

4. Pro-poor Programmes in the Budget

A notable addition to the budget document for FY2027 is the separate breakdown of programmes identified by the government as 'pro-poor'. Of the 90 SSNPs, 48 programmes

have been designated as pro-poor by the implementing agencies, with allocation accounting for BDT 56229.50 crore or 38.69 per cent of the total SSNP budget (Ministry of Finance, 2026). This document is a positive step towards transparency from the authorities, as the breakdown aids analysis of truly pro-poor programmes. Amidst these pro-poor programmes is the most anticipated election pledge by the incumbent government: the introduction of the family card and farmer card programmes.

4.1 Family Card Programme

The Family Card programme, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW), is proposed to have a budget of BDT 14,500 crore, which is 10.05 per cent of the SSNP budget and 1.55 per cent of the total national budget, with 41 lakh beneficiaries for FY2027 (Ministry of Finance, 2026). The objective of the programme is to provide direct cash transfers of BDT 2,500 monthly to vulnerable and poor female-headed households to enhance economic empowerment (Ministry of Finance, 2026). Eligibility is determined based on household socio-economic assessment and Proxy Means Testing (PMT) scores, with priority given to female-headed households, landless households, day labourers and vulnerable households. PMT¹ is a scientific method in which observable household characteristics are used as a statistical proxy to predict people's incomes for targeting (Banerjee et al., 2024). Families with a PMT score of 0 to 814 out of 1,000 received the Family Card during the piloting phase (MSW, 2026). Additionally, to improve efficiency and transparency, Government-to-People (G2P) payments are being utilised. The programme's design also aims to reduce duplication among beneficiaries and errors in inclusion and exclusion. One of the ways this is intended to be implemented is by using a digitalised single registry system that is connected to the National Identity card (NID) of beneficiaries (MSW, 2026). Additionally, beneficiaries cannot simultaneously hold or receive support from the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) Smart Family Card, the Food Ministry's Food Friendly Programme, Vulnerable Women Benefit (VWB), old-age allowances, widow allowances, or disability stipends (MSW, 2026).

¹Proxy means-testing is a scientific method that uses observable and verifiable household or individual attributes in a formal algorithm to proxy household wellbeing. The factors are chosen based on their capacity to forecast welfare as determined, for example, by household consumption expenditures. Finding a weighted set of "proxy" factors or indicators that collectively identify or predict whether a household is impoverished is the first step in creating a proxy means test formula (PMTF). An eligibility cut-off line is then used to determine who will be eligible to receive benefits based on the weights assigned to these criteria. A household is considered poor and thus eligible to participate in a program if its predicted expenditure (or the PMT score) is less than the chosen cut-off line, also known as the targeting line (Sharif, 2009).

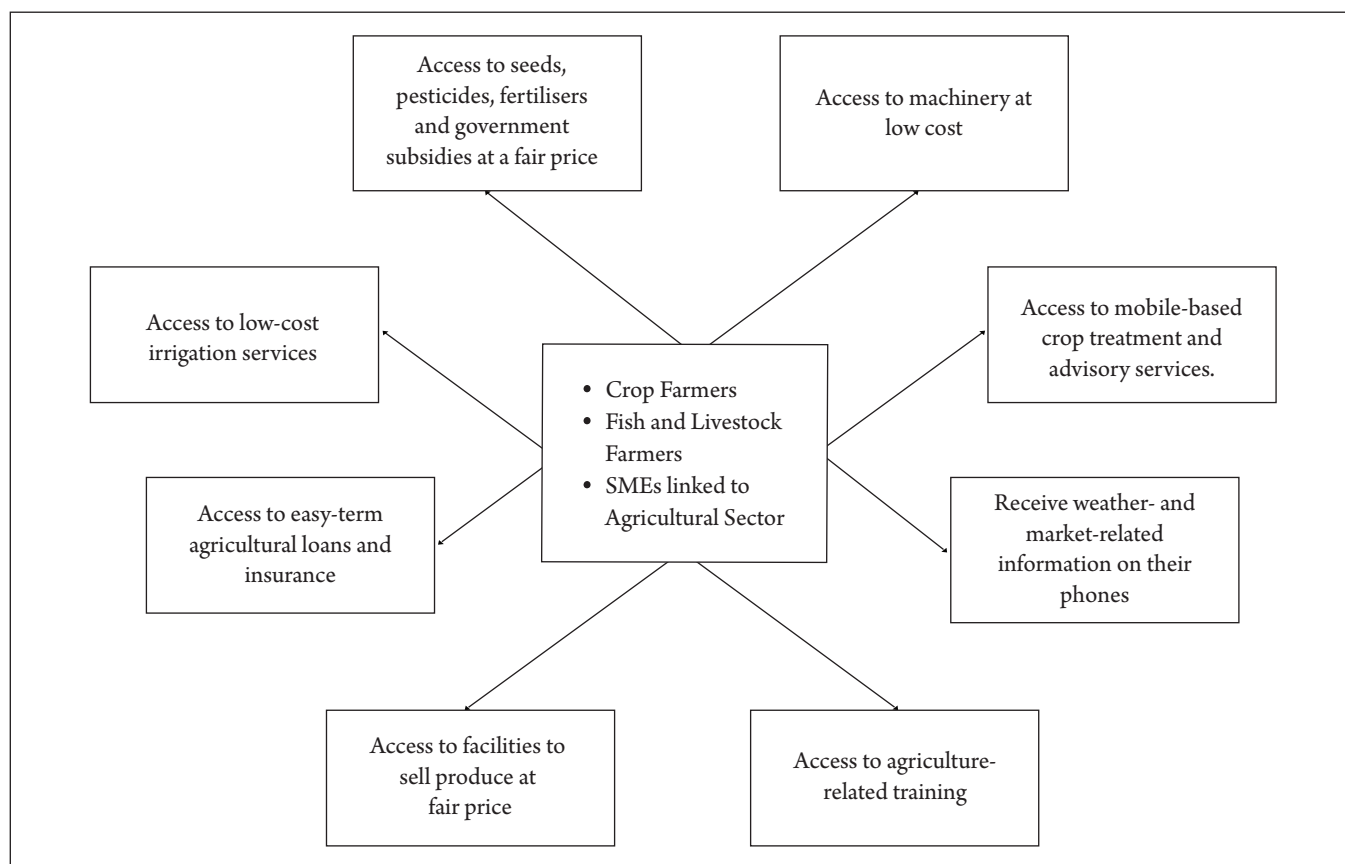
The Family Card programme is designed to target and support households as a whole, rather than individuals separately. The programme recognises that economic hardships in a family are experienced by all members of the family collectively rather than separately (MSW, 2026). Therefore, by targeting the family rather than an individual, the Family Card aims to provide a safety net that addresses shared vulnerability directly, rather than fragmenting a single household's hardship across multiple individually targeted, and potentially inconsistent, interventions. While this approach could, in principle, reduce duplication of beneficiaries across programmes, its effectiveness depends on beneficiary identification being objective and free from distortion. However, existing evidence on Bangladesh's social protection system raises concerns about whether this assumption holds in practice. A previous study finds that a district's poverty level bears no statistically significant relationship to its social protection coverage; instead, coverage is explained by swing vote share and electoral winning margins, indicating that resource allocation is governed by political patronage rather than welfare maximisation (Amin et al., 2023). This dynamic operates at the household level as well, where local government officials have substantial discretionary power to direct benefits towards households with whom they hold social, political, or economic ties. Elites tend to manipulate targeting processes through unannounced meetings, the exclusion of opposition supporters, and extortion in exchange for inclusion (Razzaque, et al., 2025).

Since the Family Card's beneficiary identification process similarly relies on local committees and ward-level verification, it replicates the institutional structure that has historically enabled capture, rather than departing from it. Whether family-wise targeting can plausibly reduce beneficiary fragmentation or duplication is, therefore, a separate question from whether the programme can reach the poorest households at all. The weight of existing evidence urges caution rather than confidence. A notable feature of the Family Card is its intent to strengthen digital payment infrastructure through G2P transfers, a meaningful step towards a more accountable delivery system. However, a stronger payment structure addresses leakage at the point of transfer but does not resolve inclusion and exclusion errors at the point of enrolment.

4.2 Farmer Card Programme

The proposed Farmer Card programme appears both comprehensive and strategically significant. The initiative is designed to strengthen the agricultural sector by enhancing support to farmers, who constitute a critical pillar of Bangladesh's economy. The proposed framework extends beyond the scope of existing social welfare programmes for farmers, namely,

Figure 4: Design of the Farmer Card



Source: Authors' illustration based on information from the government's election manifesto (BNP, 2026).

agricultural subsidy management and agricultural rehabilitation assistance.

In contrast to these earlier programmes, the Farmer Card initiative encompasses a broader range of beneficiaries. It includes not only crop farmers but also fish and livestock farmers, as well as small and medium enterprises (SMEs) linked to the agricultural value chain (BNP, 2026). The eligibility criterion targets landless, marginal, and small farmers; households engaged in fisheries and livestock farming; and registered farmers in selected programme areas (Ministry of Finance, 2026). Moreover, while previous SSNPs for farmers provided general subsidies and limited social assistance, the Farmer Card design outlines a more explicit and structured set of entitlements (Ministry of Finance, 2026).

Under the proposed scheme, eligible farmers would receive a one-off cash benefit of BDT 2,500 seasonally during Khariff-II and Rabi production cycles, and access to essential agricultural inputs, including seeds, pesticides, fertilisers, and government subsidies, at fair prices (BNP, 2026; Ministry of Finance, 2026)

(Figure 4). They would also be eligible to obtain machinery and irrigation services at reduced cost, thereby lowering overall production expenses (BNP, 2026; Ministry of Finance, 2026). In addition, the programme proposes the provision of short-term agricultural loans and insurance coverage to further safeguard farmers against financial vulnerabilities (BNP, 2026; Ministry of Finance, 2026).

The initiative also commits to ensuring fair prices for agricultural produce and expanding opportunities for agricultural training (BNP, 2026; Ministry of Finance, 2026). Complementing these measures, farmers would gain access to weather and market-related information delivered directly on their mobile phones, along with mobile-based crop treatment and advisory services (BNP, 2026; Ministry of Finance, 2026). Collectively, these interventions aim to enhance productivity, reduce risk, and strengthen farmers' resilience across the agricultural sector.

The proposed FY2027 budget for the Farmer Card programme allocates BDT 1,400 crore to support 42.50 lakh beneficiaries,

which is 0.97 per cent of the total SSNP budget and 0.15 per cent of the total national budget. Moreover, the government plans to scale coverage to 2.27 crore farming households across Bangladesh. The programme also aims to modernise and digitise the agricultural sector. However, an important point to note is that eligibility is determined along occupational and asset-based categories rather than against income or poverty thresholds (Ministry of Finance, 2026). This contrasts with the Family Card, where eligibility is determined through a continuous PMT score (MSW, 2026). The Farmer Card's eligibility criteria, by comparison, specify no equivalent income or poverty threshold within categories such as landless, marginal, or small farmers. The Farmer Card's eligibility rules are broad and leave important decisions to discretion. That creates a potential political economy risk, meaning that political interests, local influence, or administrative discretion could affect who actually receives the programme. A categorical eligibility criterion determines who, in principle, may qualify. It does not, by itself, determine which households will be prioritised for enrolment as the programme expands from its current 42.50 lakh beneficiaries towards the stated target of 2.27 crore farming households, nor does it specify which areas will be prioritised for the early phases of implementation. Given that district-level allocation of social protection resources has been shown to correlate with swing vote share and electoral winning margins rather than with poverty levels (Amin Masud Ali, Jui, & Satter, 2023). Therefore, the programme warrants the same scrutiny already extended to the Family Card's local committee and ward-level verification processes.

Moreover, previous comparable international experience shows many caveats exist during implementation of such a programme. For example, Indonesia's Independent Farmer Card Program (Kartu Petani Mandiri, KPM) encountered major operational and structural constraints, including limited administrative capacity, delayed aid delivery, weak outreach, registration difficulties, insufficient complaint-handling resources, and inaccurate beneficiary data (Rupiarsieh, Wulandari, Wahyunita, & Septiana, 2025). India's Kisan Credit Card (KCC) Scheme similarly encountered major implementation challenges, including cumbersome documentation requirements, excessive intermediaries, difficulties securing guarantors and no dues certificates, borrower illiteracy, diversion of sanctioned funds, large credit requirement gaps for medium and large farms, poor coordination among credit agencies, and low uptake due to fear of default (Singh & Sekhon, 2005).

These precedents offer important lessons for the Farmer Card while it is still in the pilot stage. Given that inaccurate beneficiary data and weak outreach undermined Indonesia's scheme,

beneficiary verification should be treated as a continuous process rather than a one-time exercise at registration. The verification process should be integrated with the digital platform's data infrastructure, and the programme should regularly track and publish anomaly rates as enrolment expands beyond its current 22,065 beneficiaries. Bangladesh's ongoing Dynamic Social Registry (DSR) initiative could, in principle, address this gap, but only if fully operational and integrated before the programme scales further. Moreover, lessons from India's KCC scheme suggest that the Farmer Card's credit component should bypass documentation burdens, guarantor requirements, and intermediary involvement by integrating credit delivery into the same digital infrastructure used for cash transfers and market access. Additionally, fear of default suppressed uptake in India's scheme despite credit being available. Therefore, take-up should be monitored as a distinct outcome, since low enrolment in the credit component specifically would signal that the same disincentive is recurring, even if cash-transfer enrolment looks healthy. Currently, the Farmer's Card is in its pilot stage, and 22,065 farmers are enrolled across 11 Upazilas and 10 Districts. A comprehensive assessment of the programme can be made once the results become available. But the caveats above are precisely the kind of structural risk that pilot-stage evidence can and should be used to test for.

5. Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the proposed FY2027 social safety net budget, this policy brief recommends the following measures:

- Decouple pension and agricultural subsidy allocations from the headline SSNP figure.
- Publish actual SSNP expenditure alongside budget allocation figures. As this brief notes, utilisation data is never made public, which forecloses any independent assessment of leakage, underspend, or programme performance against budget.
- Review small and ineffective programmes and consolidate them under existing programmes to reduce fragmentation while maintaining differentiated support for different vulnerability profiles.
- Introduce independent, arms-length verification mechanisms alongside local committee and ward-level processes.
- Track and publish duplication and cross-programme exclusion outcomes, not just enrolment numbers, given that avoiding beneficiary overlap (with VWB, TCB, old-age and disability allowances) is one of the programme's stated objectives. Measuring cards disbursed does not, on its own, confirm the objective is being met.

- Insulate the credit component from the documentation, guarantor, and intermediary burdens that suppressed uptake in India's Kisan Credit Card scheme, by routing it through the same digital infrastructure used for cash transfers and monitor credit-component take-up as a distinct metric.
- Track beneficiary verification as a continuous process tied to the digital platform, not a one-time registration check, with anomaly rates published as the programme scales past its current 22,065 enrollees.
- Closely monitor the implementation of the Family card and Farmer card programme to ensure that it does not contribute to further fragmentation within the SSNPs and that it effectively achieves its intended objectives.
- Periodically review and adjust benefit amount in line with inflation and existing market prices to retain the households' purchasing power.
- Regularly review SSNPs to properly determine intervention priorities as recipient families' economic and social profiles change over time.
- 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'.
- Improve interministerial coordination and examine programme mergers to reduce administrative expenses and improve efficiency.
- Identify areas of extreme poverty, food insecurity, and the most vulnerable groups to realign SSNPs with the 2030 Agenda.
- Emphasise social protection measures and establish institutional, legal, and administrative frameworks to support job creation and policy objectives as the economy grows.
- 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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