

Social protection profile: Bangladesh¹

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Since 2018, the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) has partnered with the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia and its respective Country Offices to develop a series of comparative papers on social protection (SP) in the region, covering social expenditure, legal frameworks, design of flagship national non-contributory SP programmes—including their child- and gender-sensitive features—the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and the SP responses deployed, and findings from quasi-experimental impact evaluations. All the studies listed, except the last one, were published in 2020. This One Pager highlights key findings for Bangladesh.

From a legal perspective, the right to SP is enshrined in the country's Constitution, but only as a policy principle, not a judiciable right. Cross-cutting legislation on SP is limited to governing the main stakeholders and does not regulate specific programmes. Although Bangladesh has possessed a Children's Act since 2013, in 2015 the Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended expediting the adoption of child-related laws, ensuring their full compatibility with the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Worryingly, only one of the 11 national flagship programmes mapped by the IPC-IG is grounded in specific statutory legislation.

Concerning social expenditure, Bangladesh has the lowest government expenditure on health, education and SP in South Asia. While the country's literacy and school enrolment rates exceed the regional averages, the low level of social expenditure represents a heavy burden for households. Bangladesh's tax revenue in 2017 was below 15 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP)—considered the minimum required to provide basic public services. Increasing tax collection is needed to finance social policies, which the country could achieve through tax reform.

A total of 11 flagship national non-contributory SP programmes were mapped. They vary in their typology, with food distribution programmes playing a central role (such as the School Feeding Programme in Poverty-Prone Areas, and the umbrella Public Food Distribution System—PFDS). There are also cash transfers targeting different vulnerable groups, such as the Allowance for Financially Insolvent Persons with Disabilities, the Husband-Deserted, Widowed and Destitute Women's Allowance, the Maternity Allowance for Poor Lactating Mothers (MAPLM) and the Old-age Allowance Programme, an unconditional cash transfer benefiting poor elderly people. Furthermore, there are conditional cash transfers provided through the Primary, Secondary and Higher-Secondary Educational Stipend Programmes (respectively, PESP, SESP and HSSP). Finally, there is a cash-for-work programme, the Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest (EGPP). Many of these programmes are characterised by strong child- and gender-sensitive features, including the MAPLM, the EGPP's preferential quota for women, and the SESP and HSSP, which both have preferential coverage for girls.

Four of the programmes (EGPP, PESP, SESP and MAPLM) have been subjected to impact evaluations. The EGPP was found to be widely used as a cushion against adverse shocks, suggesting the need for more loan-

based and shock-responsive mechanisms in the country. The MAPLM—although increasing ante- and post-natal care visits—was found not to affect institutional delivery rates, indicating a need to top up the cash transfer with behavioural components and to improve the overall supply of health-care services. The Female Secondary School Stipend Programme (FSSP) recorded desirable impacts on educational attainment and performance, as well as the type of employment pursued, while showing stronger impacts for girls exposed to the programme for longer periods. There was, however, no impact on actual labour force participation, suggesting the need to also introduce policies promoting it. While not demonstrating impacts on most education outcomes, the PESP was found to have an adverse effect on boys' grade progression, potentially due to the relative disincentive of the FSSP being only available to girls (however, in 2009, the FSSP changed into the SESP, which covers both boys and girls).

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, Bangladesh has expanded the coverage and benefit values distributed via the PFDS. A new database uniting the beneficiaries of five different PFDS components and potential beneficiaries has been developed to avoid duplications and mitigate corruption. Social insurance and labour market/employment protection benefits have also been introduced, including subsidised credit to pay the wages of workers of export-oriented industries, and subsidised credit for self-employed people.

Given this background, key policy recommendations include the following:

- Expand the legal coverage of SP and promote a human rights-based approach.
- Explore options to expand spending on SP, health and education. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of building a strong health-care system. Expand the system's coverage with a view to including the following groups: children who are not covered by newborn or educational benefits, informal workers (the 'missing middle') and the urban population, particularly those living in urban slums.
- Adapt the design of cash benefits, linking them with additional interventions and removing conditionalities that affect the agency of beneficiaries.

References:

Alim, Abdul, Fabio Veras, Rafael Osório, and Pedro Arruda. 2020a. "UNICEF and IPC-IG paper series on Regular Social Protection Landscapes in South Asia." Social Protection blog post, 9 September. <<https://bit.ly/3ftQDq2>>. Accessed 22 October 2021.

Alim, Abdul, Fabio Veras, Rafael Osório, and Pedro Arruda. 2020b. "UNICEF and IPC-IG paper series on Covid-responsive Social Protection Landscapes in South Asia." Social Protection blog post, 9 September. <<https://bit.ly/3A6RswJ>>. Accessed 22 October 2021.

Note:

1. Full references for the data cited in this One Pager can be found in the list of reports available in the blog posts listed above.