Midterm Progress Review on Implementation of the National Social Security Strategy

Background

The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS), adopted in 2015, reflects the Government of Bangladesh's resolute commitment towards reducing poverty and vulnerability. Building on past experience, the strategy seeks to streamline and strengthen the existing system of social protection with a view to achieving better result. It aims to put in place for all deserving Bangladeshis an inclusive system that effectively tackles lifecycle risks.

Research Objectives

- An assessment of the implementation of different reforms, programme performances, and achievements
- A review of the NSSS Action Plan and progress made on various tasks specified in it in the process of implementing the NSSS and the Gender Policy
- An analysis of institutional reforms put forth by the NSSS and evaluation of progress made
- A review of the progress of small programme consolidation proposed by the NSSS
- An assessment of the extent of integrating issues related to disability in the NSSS

Methodological approaches

- Desk research for literature review
- Qualitative methods
- Empirical approach using micro-econometrics
- Field survey for gathering first-hand information

Research Findings

Performance summary of programmatic reforms

Strengthening social security for children: Based on the success of the current Maternal Allowance Programme, the NSSS proposed to establish a scheme called the Child Benefit programme for young children up to the age of four. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) would prepare and submit a detailed implementation plan to the Cabinet Division for approval. A draft has been prepared with technical assistance from the UNICEF, which envisages combining features from both maternity allowance programme and lactating mother's allowance programmes. However, piloting of the programme missed the stated timeline and it is unlikely that the programme will be implemented within the stipulated timeline.

The coverage of Secondary Education Stipend Programme has fallen in recent years. Although the introduction of electronic transfer methods reducing leakages and ghost beneficiaries is attributed to for this decline, this issue calls for closer scrutiny. Despite NSSS recommendations of increasing transfer amount for all stipend programmes, the benefit amount remained unchanged.

Programmes for working age population: To expand vocational training facilities and other training programmes, the concerned ministries have taken several initiatives to expand existing training programmes, to enhance institutional capacity, identifying new sectors for employment and training.

An important recommendation of the NSSS was to transform all food-based workfare programmes into cash-based. The progress of this transformation is slow. Against the NSSS objective of consolidating workfare schemes, the review report on programme consolidation has not been prepared yet.

Programmes for vulnerable women: The NSSS called for the consolidation of two schemes: VGD and allowances for widowed, deserted and destitute women, into a new one to be called the Vulnerable Women's Benefit (VWB) programme. The concept note of the proposed consolidated programme has not been prepared yet and as such the piloting of the would-be VWB programme could not take place in due time. The rolling out of the VWB by July 2019, as envisaged in the Action Plan, is thus not possible.

Establishing a comprehensive pension system for the elderly: Against the NSSS objectives, the age eligibility criterion (60 years for both men and women) for the old-age allowance has not been revised yet. However, the programme has been able to achieve the suggested 15 per cent coverage growth annually while the transfer amount increased to Tk. 500 per month.

The MoLE was given the responsibility to undertake the study on a National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS). As of April 2019, the study has not been commissioned yet. Consequently, the piloting of the NSIS is being delayed. Therefore, chances of meeting the NSSS-stipulated deadlines of January 2020 for formulating NSIS law and January 2021 for rolling it nationally seem very slim. The NSSS-suggested study for Private Voluntary Pensions has not been undertaken yet. The FID organised several consultation workshops for it. While the Finance Division has already established the Central Accounts Office for Pension and Fund Management, keeping its primary mandate of work with government pension services only. The idea of the NSSS-proposed pension authority is in still at a conception stage.

Improving the Social Security system for the urban poor: The striking disparity in urban-rural coverage of SSPs necessitates revamped social security schemes for the urban poor and vulnerable people.However, very little progress has been achieved in terms of strengthening the social security system for the urban population as the NSSS-stated study on the need for specialised schemes for urban areas has not been commissioned yet.

Programmes for food security: The NSSS suggested discontinuing the Food For Work programme, although it emphasised on continuing food as disaster relief and expanding OMS and food friendly card programmes. Since 2016, the food-based Test Relief programme has been transformed into a cash-based scheme. There are concerns of transforming all food-based schemes into cash programmes i.e. natural disaster-led emergencies, disbursement of government procurement of rice and consistency of food stock policies etc. Therefore, a detailed study should be commissioned to identify all practical scopes of food transfer programme consolidation, the transformation of food-based programmes into cash schemes, and the consequent implications for the public food stock policy.

Consolidation of special programmes and small schemes: A mapping exercise enlisting all schemes as part of social security interventions (including 'dead'/phased-out initiatives) shows as many as 216 unique programmes that have been considered as SSPs since 2008-09. However, for any year a maximum number of programmes in operation was 138 (in 2014-15). The number of officially considered SSPs has then steadily fallen to 114 in 2018-19. But the evidence suggests not much progress being made on programme consolidation. The decline in the number of schemes is because of the fact that either some programmes ran their course without being renewed or there was no funding support available for them.

Figure 3.30: Implementation status of individual performance indicators: On-track, almost on-track, moderately of-track and seriously off-track
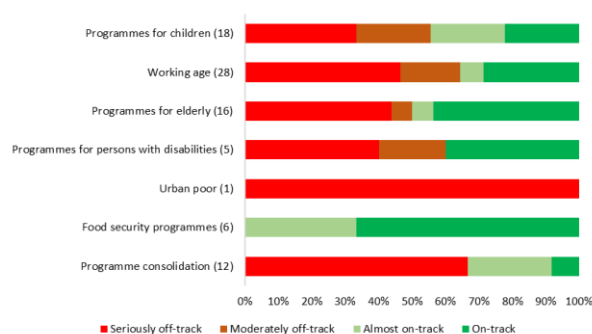
A scoring analysis of individual indicators provides a summary of performance evaluation of the aforementioned major programmatic reforms. The scores assigned to different indicators are used to consider if they are 'on-track' (i.e. when the performance indicators are fully achieved/operational as specified in the NSSS and Action Plan); 'almost on-track' (when significant progress has been made on the pre-specified performance indicators but there are some gaps); 'moderately off-track' (when some progress has been made but implementation is far behind the envisaged performance indicators); and finally, 'seriously off-track' (when very little or no progress has been made).

Most of the timely implementation has been observed in the reforms related to food security, programmes for elderly, and the persons with disabilities.
It turns out that of the 86 performance indicators, 26 (about 30 per cent) are on-track, while as many as 37 indicators (43 per cent) are seriously off-track and another 11 (about 13 per cent) are moderately off-track

Most of the timely implementation has been observed in the reforms related to food security, programmes for the elderly, and the persons with disabilities. The reforms related to urban poor saw the least progress. This is because the only indicator envisaged in the NSSS (commissioning a study) was not undertaken during the period of review. Amongst others, programme consolidation also falls far below the target set.

Review of Institutional arrangement reforms

The NSSS attached priority to several institutional arrangement reforms as a means for securing the effective implementation of various social security programmes.

CMC-led cluster-based approach: NSSS introduced a coordination approach based on thematic clusters of programmes to ensure coordination among the line ministries. . However, most of the clusters could not organise regular meetings if the secretary or the focal points are unavailable. There is no systematic mechanism to address the loss of "institutional memories" by changes of individuals in the roles.

Single registry Management and Information System First, most ministries are at a preliminary stage struggling with digitising their beneficiary list or in putting in place the MIS software, a lack of technical capacity to develop appropriate software following the guidelines provided by the Cabinet Division. Since most of the beneficiary lists were in paper-based registers, transforming them into a streamlined MIS appears to be a time-intensive process. National Household Database (NHD), covering 35 million households has been completed but the database is not operationalized yet.

The Finance Division has made, designed and developed an initiative called, the Social Protection Budget Management Unit (SPBMU MIS) which has been linked with eight major social protection schemes of a number of five line ministries which can ensure timely transfer of payments and track all transactions. Although the Finance Division aims to bring all cash-based programmes under the SPBMU by the end of December 2019, it is likely to take up to at least June 2020 to fully operationalise the system.

Strengthening Government to Person Payment (G2P) system

The Finance Division designed and developed an MIS-integrated G2P payment system for transferring allowances directly to the beneficiaries. Under the current structure, the MISs prepared by different line ministries are linked with the SPBMU MIS.

The recipients can choose the mode of receiving the allowances. The Finance Division successfully piloted several cash transfer programmes in 2018. Although the NSSS envisaged initiating the G2P systems for all cash transfers after the piloting, only 6 programmes, as of February 2019, from five ministries have been rolled out, that too in some selected areas only. Some ministries reported not having enough capacity in comprehending the technicalities of MIS and coupled with lack of clarification regarding NSSS's G2P modalities contributing to a delayed implementation process.

Strengthening the processes for selecting recipients of social security schemes: As has been analysed in the MTR, the inclusion errors are very high for different schemes directed to poor and vulnerable groups. The work on the formation of the cross-governmental advisory board has not been formed yet. The study on the existing selection procedures is yet to be commissioned. Furthermore, as the National Household Database, could not be launched, the application of the (PMT)-based selection procedure is lingered.

Strengthening the Grievance Redress System (GRS): Although the establishment of the updated GRS is commendable, however, the GRS software is not an end-in-itself. In the KIIs with most officials, the widespread recognition of a lack of awareness about registering grievances became apparent. More importantly, most poor and marginalised groups have a very low level of educational attainment along with less familiarity with and access to internet facilities which is likely to exclude them from accessing the online GRS portal.

Establishing a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Framework: Having recognised gaps in data availability, the NSSS suggests applying a wider range of evaluation tools including quantitative methods (e.g. experimental and quasi-experimental techniques), hybrid approaches (rapid assessments, fgds.), and qualitative investigations (like case-studies, participatory learning, etc.).

Following the NSSS suggestion, an M&E task force has already been formulated. The preliminary results-based framework has also been prepared by the GED. Despite the bounded timeframe of July 2018 as the completion deadline for establishing the digitized programme monitoring platform, the web portal has not been developed so far. As per the NSSS, the Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) of the Ministry of Planning is the apex body for carrying out the M&E exercise. However, the IMED cannot monitor and evaluate all the programmes enlisted in as SSPs since the *Allocation of Business* for IMED allows them to monitor and evaluate the SSPs under the ADP programmes only. Moreover, data unavailability of the M&E indicators has been identified as a severe constraint for effective operationalisation of this effort.
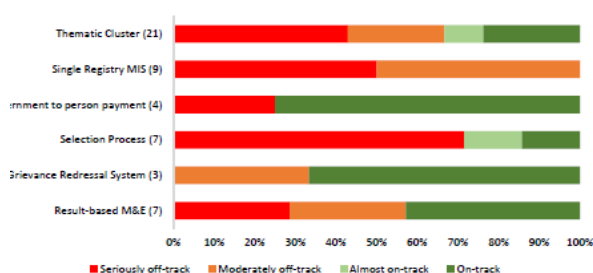
Based on the review, it is observed that, of the 50 identifiable indicators outlined in the NSSS and the Action Plan, 14 (28 per cent) are found on-track. On the other hand, a total of 21 indicators (42 per cent) are found to be seriously off-track, while another 12 (24 per cent) are moderately off-track. The relatively high proportion of on-track indicators is observed in the reforms related to the G2P and GRS

However, these two broad areas also have relatively fewer indicators to be assessed. The highest number of indicators are concentrated in the thematic cluster component.

Of the 21 indicators, five are on-track while another 14 are either seriously or moderately off-track. Among others, all indicators for single registry MIS are either moderately or seriously off-track. While six out of four indicators for strengthening the beneficiary selection process are seriously off-track.

Recommendations and Way Forward
- A reinvigorated approach is needed for the implementation of reforms.
- Making concrete progress on major/flagship programmes is important for the overall success of the NSSS.
- Implementing inflation-adjusted social security transfers should receive serious attention.
- Programme consolidation needs serious rethinking
- Strengthening in-house technical capacities of the ministries is important for advancing NSSS reforms.
- The cluster coordination must be strengthened for better programme reform results.
- Strengthened communications and the flow of information among the line ministries are critical ingredients in coordination and programme consolidation
- A faster implementation of the digitisation and updating the beneficiary list is needed.
- The opportunity cost of targeting errors is high and thus strengthening the processes for selecting the social security beneficiaries constitutes a key priority.
- The capacity of the IMED and other government bodies should be enhanced for M&E purposes.
- An enhanced GED engagement in sensitising the implementing ministries towards the NSSS goals and time-bound responsibilities can help revitalise the implementation process
- The need for embracing a participatory approach to NSSS implementation cannot be overlooked.
- Strengthening the social security system for the urban poor is a challenge that now must be confronted with given the accentuating urban poverty and vulnerability