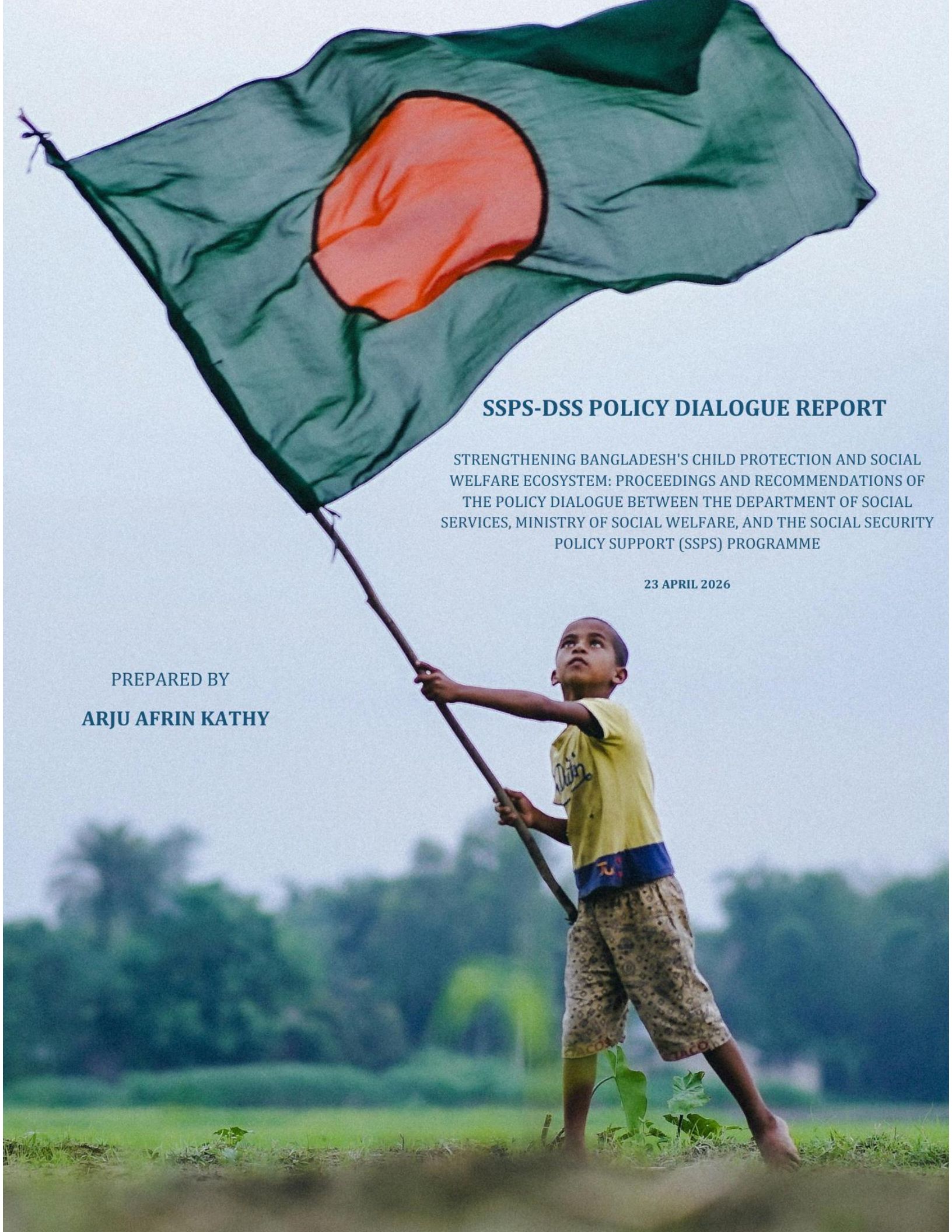

SSPS-DSS POLICY DIALOGUE REPORT

STRENGTHENING BANGLADESH'S CHILD PROTECTION AND SOCIAL WELFARE ECOSYSTEM: PROCEEDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE POLICY DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES, MINISTRY OF SOCIAL WELFARE, AND THE SOCIAL SECURITY POLICY SUPPORT (SSPS) PROGRAMME

23 APRIL 2026

PREPARED BY

ARJU AFRIN KATHY

Leaving No Child Behind

A Policy Dialogue between the Department of Social Services, Ministry of Social Welfare and the Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme on Child Protection, Social Welfare, and Inclusive Development in Bangladesh

SSPS-DSS Policy Dialogue Report: Strengthening Bangladesh's Child Protection and Social Welfare Ecosystem; Department of Social Services, Ministry of Social Welfare and the Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme, April 2026

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Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme
Cabinet Division and General Economics Division (GED) of Bangladesh Planning Commission
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
www.socialprotection.gov.bd

Introduction

The exploratory meeting on "Synergizing Child Protection and Social Protection Initiatives with the Department of Social Services (DSS), Ministry of Social Welfare" served as an important platform for dialogue on how Bangladesh can strengthen protection systems for vulnerable children through greater institutional coordination, policy coherence, and systems integration. Convened in the context of the Child Protection Wing's effort to establish a National Child Protection Platform (NCPP), the meeting brought together perspectives on the current architecture of child protection in Bangladesh, the evolving vision for a unified and digitally enabled protection platform, and the opportunities for linking child protection more systematically with broader social protection reforms.

The discussion underscored that Bangladesh already possesses a substantial legal, institutional, and programmatic foundation for child protection through DSS, including a wide range of interventions spanning institutional care, rehabilitation, justice pathways, disability inclusion, community-based protection, and governance mechanisms. At the same time, the dialogue highlighted persistent challenges of fragmentation, duplication, uneven geographic coverage, and disconnected data systems, all of which limit the overall effectiveness of investments in child well-being. Against this backdrop, the proposed NCPP emerged as a timely and strategic initiative to foster coordination among government agencies, UN entities, NGOs, and development partners while advancing standardized services, real-time data visibility, and integrated case management.

The meeting also created space for substantive reflection on how child protection can be embedded within Bangladesh's wider social protection agenda. Given the experience of the Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme in strengthening social protection systems, poverty targeting, and digital transformation, the exchange identified a strong convergence between DSS's child protection mandate and ongoing efforts to build a more inclusive, lifecycle-based social protection system. The deliberations therefore not only examined the architecture of the proposed NCPP, but also laid the groundwork for practical collaboration on research, programme integration, piloting, knowledge sharing, and institutional coordination. This report captures the key presentations, reflections, and emerging pathways for advancing a more coherent and child-sensitive social protection ecosystem in Bangladesh.

Context and Objective Setting

Arju Afrin Kathy, Research Officer, Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme, UNDP

Arju Afrin Kathy, Research Officer of the Social Security Policy Support Programme, opened the dialogue by warmly welcoming all participants and expressing her appreciation for their presence and engagement. She set the tone for the session by briefly contextualizing why this convening between the SSPS Programme and the Child Protection Wing, Department of Social Services, Ministry of Social Welfare; was both timely and strategically important.

She outlined two broad objectives that the dialogue was designed to achieve. The first was to listen from DSS; to create a genuine space for the Department to share its work, its priorities, and the areas where collaboration with UNDP and the SSPS Programme could be most meaningful and most

impactful. The second objective was the dissemination of two policy briefs that the SSPS Programme had prepared for DSS officials, focusing on two of Bangladesh's major social protection programmes: the Old Age Allowance and the Allowance for Persons with Disabilities. These briefs examined the expansion trajectories of both programmes, the systematic barriers that continue to impede their reach and effectiveness, and concrete recommendations for addressing those barriers; making them directly relevant to the work of DSS and the Ministry of Social Welfare.

Kathy then turned to what she described as a particularly exciting and strategically significant development within DSS; the Child Protection Wing's ongoing work to establish a centralized National Child Protection Platform. She explained to the room that the NCPP represents a landmark institutional initiative, one that aims to fundamentally transform how child protection is delivered in Bangladesh by eliminating the fragmented, siloed interventions that currently characterize the landscape, standardizing services across all state and non-state actors, and introducing a digital case management system that brings together government bodies, UN agencies, and NGOs under a single, coherent coordination architecture.

On the basis of this shared ground, Kathy proposed that the dialogue serve as the starting point for a more structured and ongoing engagement; specifically, an initial consultative meeting between the Child Protection Wing of DSS and the UNDP Social Protection Team, dedicated to exploring synergies and identifying concrete areas where the two institutions can work together to build an inclusive social protection system.

Child Protection in Bangladesh through the Department of Social Services (DSS)

Presentation by Harunur Rashid, Social Services Officer, Child Protection Wing, Department of Social Services

The Bedrock of Child Protection: Legal and Constitutional Framework

To understand how Bangladesh protects its children, one must first understand the legal soil from which the entire system grows. Harunur Rashid began his presentation by grounding the audience in this foundational architecture, making the point that child protection in Bangladesh is not a matter of goodwill or charity; it is a matter of legal obligation, constitutionally guaranteed and statutorily enforced at multiple levels.

The framework, as he explained, rests on three distinct but interconnected layers, each one built upon the strength of the one below it. Think of it, he suggested, like a building; you cannot have a strong structure without first having a solid foundation, and in Bangladesh, that foundation is the Constitution itself.

The deepest and most unshakeable layer is the Constitutional Mandate. Articles 15 and 28(4) of the Constitution of Bangladesh do not merely suggest that the state should care for its children; they command it. Article 15 obligates the state to ensure the provision of basic necessities of life for all citizens, and Article 28(4) goes further by carving out a specific and explicit space for children, authorizing the state to make special provisions for their protection and advancement. What this

means in practice is that no government, no administration, and no policy can legitimately ignore the welfare of children; because doing so would be a constitutional violation. This is the bedrock. Everything else rests on it.

Rising above that constitutional foundation is the Statutory Framework, most powerfully embodied in the Child Act of 2013. This landmark legislation, particularly through Sections 84 to 89, takes the broad constitutional promise and translates it into precise, enforceable legal language. It explicitly defines which children the state bears responsibility for and this is important, because it removes ambiguity. The state is legally responsible for disadvantaged children, for orphaned children, and for children who have come into conflict with the law. By naming these categories, the law closes the door on any argument that certain children are "not the state's problem." They are. The law says so.

The third and outermost layer comprises International Standards and Specific Acts, which situate Bangladesh's domestic framework within a broader, global commitment to child rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Bangladesh is a signatory, imposes international obligations that reinforce domestic law. Additionally, the Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act of 2013 ensures that children living with disabilities receive protections tailored to their specific needs and vulnerabilities. The Vagrant and Shelterless Person Act of 2011 similarly ensures that children who are homeless or living on the streets are not overlooked by the system. Together, these instruments create a comprehensive legal canopy under which no child should theoretically be left without protection.

The presenter's message here was clear and deliberate: before one can talk about programs, institutions, or numbers, one must appreciate that the entire child protection apparatus of Bangladesh is not discretionary; it is mandated. The state has no choice but to act. The question then becomes: how does it act, and how effectively?

Comprehensive Child Protection Ecosystem: The DSS Core Mandate

Having established the legal foundation, Harunur Rashid moved on to explain how the Department of Social Services translates those legal mandates into a living, functioning system of care. He described the DSS not as a single agency with a narrow focus, but as the coordinating hub of a comprehensive child protection ecosystem; one that reaches across every stage of a child's life and every form of vulnerability a child might face.

He was careful to point out that child vulnerability does not come in a single shape. A trafficked infant has completely different needs from a teenager who has dropped out of school. A child in conflict with the law requires a different institutional response than a child living with a visual impairment. A street child who has survived commercial sexual exploitation needs something different from an orphan who simply needs a home and an education. The DSS, he explained, has designed its mandate to address all of these realities simultaneously not through one program, but through an ecosystem of over thirty interlocking programs, organized under five major pillars.

The first pillar, Early Childhood and Alternative Care, addresses what happens when a child has no family to return to, or whose family situation is unsafe. Fostering arrangements, guardianship

placements, and institutional care facilities exist to ensure that even children without parents have a place where they are sheltered, loved, and given the opportunity to grow.

The second pillar, Empowerment and Inclusion, recognizes that children with disabilities are among the most marginalized and underserved in any society. DSS runs specialized educational institutions, therapy programs, and vocational training centers specifically designed for children with visual, hearing, and other impairments because inclusion is not just about being present in society, it is about being equipped to participate meaningfully in it.

The third pillar, Justice and Sanctuary, represents perhaps the most philosophically important shift in how Bangladesh thinks about children who break the law. Rather than treating them as criminals deserving punishment, DSS treats them as children deserving correction, counseling, and eventually reintegration. Safe custody, legal diversion, and probation services ensure that a youthful mistake does not become a life sentence.

The fourth pillar, Rescue and Reintegration, tackles some of the darkest realities children face; child labor, trafficking, and commercial sexual exploitation. DSS is not passive in the face of these crimes. It actively intervenes, rescues, and rehabilitates, working to rebuild the lives of children who have been subjected to the worst forms of exploitation.

The fifth pillar, Systemic Governance, may be less visible than the others, but it is what holds everything together. National data systems, institutional budgeting, community safety networks operating around the clock are the administrative muscles that keep the ecosystem alive and responsive. Without governance, even the best-designed programs collapse into chaos. DSS understands this and invests in the infrastructure of accountability.

The overall picture Rashid painted was one of a state that has moved beyond reactive charity toward proactive, systemic child protection; an ecosystem designed not just to respond to crises, but to prevent them.

Safety Net Architecture: Scale and Reach

Numbers, as Harunur Rashid reminded the audience, tell a story that words sometimes cannot. To convey the true scale of what DSS has built, he walked through a set of figures that speak to the breadth and depth of Bangladesh's child protection safety net.

More than 2.2 million Child Helpline interventions have been initiated to date. This figure deserves a moment of reflection. Each intervention represents a child, or someone concerned about a child reaching out in a moment of crisis. It represents the system working as it is supposed to: accessible, responsive, and available at any hour of the day or night. The sheer volume of these interactions tells us both how widespread child vulnerability is in Bangladesh, and how seriously the state has invested in being reachable.

More than 3.35 million beneficiaries fall under the disability allowance network; a figure that places Bangladesh among the more ambitious nations in the region in terms of social protection for persons with disabilities. This is not merely a financial transfer; it is a statement of recognition that disability does not disqualify a person from the right to a dignified life.

Over 100,000 vulnerable children are currently housed across more than 100 state-run facilities. Behind each of those 100,000 children is a story of abandonment, trafficking, conflict with the law, homelessness, or extreme poverty. The fact that the state is providing them with a roof, food, education, and care is the very embodiment of the constitutional mandate that was described in the opening slides.

These numbers do not exist in isolation. They are produced by a system organized under five operational command pillars: Core Institutional Care, which manages the day-to-day running of residential facilities; Justice and Crisis Intervention, which handles emergency and legal responses; Disability Empowerment, which drives the inclusion agenda; Marginalized Community Inclusion, which ensures the system reaches those furthest from the center; and Financial and Infrastructure Systems, which sustain the entire apparatus through funding, data, and logistics. Together, these pillars constitute what Rashid called the Safety Net Architecture not a collection of isolated programs, but a deliberately engineered national infrastructure designed to catch every child before they fall through the cracks.

Pillar 1 The Institutional Lifecycle: Rescue to Reintegration

One of the most compelling aspects of Bangladesh's child protection model, as presented by Rashid, is the way it thinks about childcare not as a single moment of intervention, but as a lifecycle; a continuum of support that adapts to the changing needs of a child as they grow from infancy into adulthood. Pillar 1 lays out this continuum in concrete institutional terms, spanning three distinct phases.

Chotomoni Nibash: Baby Homes (Ages 0-7)

The journey begins, in the most heartbreaking of circumstances, with children who are either abandoned at birth, found without identity, or rescued from trafficking networks before they are even old enough to understand what has happened to them. These are the most vulnerable human beings imaginable; infants and toddlers with no family, no identity, and no protection other than what the state provides. The Chotomoni Nibash centers, six with a combined capacity of 600, exist precisely for these children.

The moment a child enters a Chotomoni Nibash, the system springs into action. Round-the-clock rescue stabilization teams conduct immediate health screenings to identify any urgent medical needs. Once stable, the child enters a phase of early development receiving nutritional support calibrated to their age and health, immunizations to protect them from disease, and crucially, early childhood cognitive care, because the first seven years of a child's life are neurologically the most formative, and trauma and neglect during this period can have lifelong consequences if not addressed. The program understands this, and it responds accordingly.

As children approach the age of seven, the system plans their next step. For some, this means fostering or formal guardianship placement with a family that has been vetted and prepared to receive them. For others, it means a safe and supported transfer to a Sarkari Shishu Paribar facility, where they will continue their journey through childhood in a more structured institutional setting.

To date, 1,670 infants have been protected through this program; each one a life that could very easily have been lost to the streets, to trafficking networks, or to neglect.

Sarkari Shishu Paribar [Government Children's Families] (Ages 7-18)

If Chotomoni Nibash is the first chapter of a child's institutional journey, Sarkari Shishu Paribar is the long, formative middle chapter; the one where childhood is truly lived, where education takes root, where skills begin to form, and where the foundations of a productive adult life are laid. With 85 centers and a capacity of 10,300 seats, this is the flagship state orphanage system, and its scale reflects its central importance to the entire child protection architecture.

The program targets orphans and underprivileged children between the ages of 7 and 18, and it does not treat them merely as recipients of charity. Instead, it invests in them as future citizens. The four-phase model begins with Housing and Health; secure residential accommodation and access to medical support, because a child cannot learn or grow if their basic physical needs are unmet. Phase two delivers Education through enrollment in mainstream academic schools, ensuring that children in state care receive the same curriculum and qualifications as their peers in the wider society; no separate, inferior track, but genuine integration into the national education system.

As children move through adolescence, Phase three introduces Vocational Training, equipping them with practical trade skills that will enable them to earn a living independently when they leave state care. The final phase, Reintegration, is perhaps the most delicate; navigating either family reunification for those whose family situations have improved, or job placement for those who will be entering adult life on their own. The cumulative impact of this program stands at 68,698 beneficiaries empowered; a figure that represents not just children sheltered, but futures actively built.

Integrated Child Rehabilitation Centers and Destitute Children Training Centers (Ages 0-18 and 14-18)

For children whose experiences have been even more extreme; street children, child laborers, survivors of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation; the system provides Integrated Child Rehabilitation Centers. These 17 centers, with a capacity of 3,400, are designed to handle children who arrive with deep trauma, fractured identities, and in many cases no experience of formal education or stable living. The rehabilitation process moves deliberately through three stages: active rescue operations and 24/7 drop-in shelters for immediate intake; immediate psychosocial support and trauma counseling for stabilization; and eventual mainstreaming into formal education or vocational pathways for long-term rehabilitation. 19,424 vulnerable youth have been sheltered and rehabilitated through this system.

For the older subset of this population; teenagers between 14 and 18 who have dropped out of school and are entirely detached from formal education, the Destitute Children Training Centers provide a more targeted intervention. Three centers with a combined capacity of 750 take these young people through a step-by-step process: reaching them where they are, providing intensive trade-specific vocational training, and ultimately opening pathways to self-employment and economic participation. The philosophy driving this program is explicit and worth noting: the goal

is economic transformation, not traditional charity. DSS is not trying to create dependents; it is trying to create contributors.

Pillar 2 Justice Pathways: Reformation and Protection

When a child comes into conflict with the law, or when a child becomes a victim of crime and must navigate the justice system, the state faces a critical choice about how to respond. Harunur Rashid explained that Bangladesh, through DSS, has made a clear and deliberate philosophical choice: the justice system, when it comes to children, must prioritize reformation over punishment, and protection over exposure. Pillar 2 institutionalizes this choice.

Child Development Centers (Kishore Unnayan Kendra)

The name itself is instructive. These are not juvenile detention centers, not prisons for young people, not places of punishment. They are Child Development Centers, places where children who have made mistakes, or who have been pushed by circumstance into conflict with the law, are given the opportunity to develop into better versions of themselves. Three centers with 600 seats operate under the guiding philosophy of "Correction over Punishment."

The process begins with safe custody; housing that is explicitly and deliberately kept separate from the adult penal system. Placing a child in an adult prison is not only developmentally harmful; it is a fast track to deeper criminalization. DSS ensures this does not happen. From safe housing, children move into a program of general education and academic training, because many children in conflict with the law have had severely disrupted schooling, and re-engaging them with education is both rehabilitative and practically important for their futures. Alongside education, psychosocial counseling and behavioral modification programs address the underlying issues; trauma, family dysfunction, poverty, peer pressure; that contributed to the child's situation in the first place. And finally, supervised family reintegration ensures that when a child returns to society, they do so with a support structure around them, not in isolation. 65,225 youth have been historically managed and reformed through this system.

Probation and Aftercare Services

Not every child in conflict with the law needs to be placed in an institution. In many cases, the most effective intervention is one that keeps the child in their community while providing structured support and accountability. This is the logic behind the Probation and Aftercare Services; 72 units operating across all 64 districts of Bangladesh, reaching youth who are navigating social integration outside of formal institutional settings.

Probation Officers play a multifaceted role here. Through diversion, they steer young people away from formal judicial penalties and toward community service; keeping a youthful mistake from becoming a criminal record. Through family conferencing, they mediate between children and their families or communities, working to establish the kind of safe, stable home environment that reduces the likelihood of reoffending. And through social inquiry, they prepare detailed background reports that give courts the context they need to make compassionate, informed sentencing decisions rather than reflexive punitive ones. 22,790 youth have been reintegrated through this nationwide service.

Safe Homes for Victims and Witnesses

On the other side of the justice equation are children who are not perpetrators but victims; children who have been abused, trafficked, or exploited, and who must now navigate the deeply challenging experience of testifying in court or otherwise engaging with the legal system. These children face a particular kind of vulnerability: they have already been harmed once, and without protection, the justice process itself can become a source of further harm.

Safe Homes, six centers with 300 seats, exist to prevent this. They provide secure housing before, during, and after trial proceedings, ensuring that children are never left exposed or without shelter while their cases move through the courts. They provide dedicated legal aid and court navigation support, because a child facing a legal proceeding without guidance is a child at a severe disadvantage. And they provide trauma-informed care, recognizing that healing is not a one-time event but an ongoing process that must continue even as legal proceedings unfold. 16,776 children have been sheltered and protected through Safe Homes. A parallel facility; Safe Custody for Girls, four centers specifically designed for survivors of commercial sexual exploitation; has rehabilitated 1,101 girls.

Pillar 3 Disability Empowerment: Specialized Education and Vocational Rehabilitation

Children with disabilities represent one of the most consistently marginalized groups in any society, and Bangladesh is no exception. Harunur Rashid used this section of the presentation to make the case that empowerment for children with disabilities is not a secondary concern or an add-on to the main child protection agenda; it is a central pillar, supported by dedicated institutions, trained personnel, and a systematic approach that moves children from intake all the way through to independent living.

Specialized Education

For children with visual impairments, DSS operates a network of Blind Schools and Integrated Units. The methodology is built around Braille-based academics, ensuring that children who cannot see can still access the full range of educational content available to sighted peers. Five dedicated institutions with 390 seats serve children in specialized settings, while 76 integrated mainstream units with 760 seats allow visually impaired children to study alongside their sighted peers with appropriate support; a model that promotes inclusion without sacrificing specialized care. Critically, DSS also operates a dedicated Braille Press that produces textbooks because specialized education is meaningless without accessible learning materials. This Press has served 30,531 beneficiaries, and its existence reflects a depth of systemic thinking that goes beyond the obvious.

For children with speech and hearing impairments, eight dedicated institutions with 700 seats offer a methodology combining specialized therapies, sign language instruction, and technical training. The approach recognizes that communication disability does not imply cognitive disability, and that with the right tools and environment, children who are deaf or hard of hearing can achieve the same educational and vocational outcomes as hearing children. Across both streams, 2,661 direct beneficiaries have been served across 89 specialized units.

Vocational Rehabilitation and Ecosystem Cultivation

Education alone is not enough if it does not lead to economic self-sufficiency. Vocational Training Centers; six centers with 600 seats provide practical trade skills to orphans and disabled youth, with 3,746 having passed through the program. The ERCPH complements this with specialized physical and visual training for 4,369 youth. The pathway is intentional: Intake → Vocational Skills → Independent Living, with the entire loop designed to sustain itself over time.

Perhaps the most forward-thinking element of this pillar is the National Special Education Center, which offers Bachelor's and master's degrees in special education. This is DSS investing not just in the children it serves today, but in the teachers and caregivers who will serve the children of tomorrow. By training 3,033 special education teachers, DSS is building the human infrastructure that will keep this entire ecosystem functional and growing for decades to come.

Pillar 4 Community-Based Social Protection and Child Helpline 1098

Institutional care is essential, but institutions alone cannot protect every child. Many children in danger are not yet inside the system; they are in homes, in communities, on streets, in situations of abuse or neglect that have not yet been detected or reported. Pillar 4 addresses this reality by bringing child protection down to the community level, creating a grassroots early warning and response system that can identify vulnerable children before their situations become irreversible.

The centerpiece of this effort is Child Helpline 1098; a toll-free, round-the-clock national emergency line for children and those concerned about children. Whether a child is facing abuse, violence, or the threat of forced marriage, they or someone around them can pick up the phone and reach the system immediately, at no cost, at any hour. The impact of this single mechanism is staggering: 2.24 million interventions have been initiated through this helpline. Each call represents a moment when the system was accessible enough, and the community informed enough, to reach out for help.

Behind the helpline sits a Digital Case Management system that tracks each case online, ensuring consistent follow-up and preventing cases from falling through administrative cracks. 1.17 lakh cases have been managed digitally bringing accountability and traceability to what might otherwise be a chaotic and fragmented process.

At the ward level, Grassroots Mobilization deploys local protection committees' community members trained to recognize signs of child vulnerability and to connect families with DSS resources. 8,193 frontline child protection workers have been deployed through this mechanism, creating a human network of protection that reaches into neighborhoods and communities far beyond the physical footprint of any government institution.

Pillar 5 Financial and Infrastructure Systems: Capitation Grants and National Governance

Financial Grants for NGO Capabilities; Capitation Grant

The government alone, no matter how well-resourced, cannot build and run every facility that Bangladesh's children need. Recognizing this, DSS has designed a mechanism that leverages the capacity of private and non-governmental orphanages by providing them with a monthly capitation

grant of 2,000 BDT per child. This grant is not a handout; it is a partnership. It allows registered private orphanages to maintain the standards of care required by DSS while extending the overall safety net far beyond what the government could achieve on its own.

The scale of this mechanism is impressive: 4,186 orphanages are supported, benefiting 1,16,666 children annually. The philosophy behind this approach reflects a mature understanding of how large-scale social protection works through a combination of state leadership, private sector capacity, and civil society engagement, all aligned toward a common standard of care.

Systemic Monitoring and Governance

All of the programs described across all five pillars mean very little without a governance system that ensures they are running as designed, reaching the children they are supposed to reach, and maintaining the standards they are required to maintain. The governance architecture that DSS has built is both legally mandated and comprehensive in its reach.

At the apex sits the National Child Welfare Board, exercising supreme policy direction and budgetary oversight over the entire system. Below it, 64 District Child Welfare Boards handle regional coordination and institutional monitoring, ensuring that what works at the national level is being implemented faithfully at the district level. And at the base, 495 Upazila Child Welfare Boards carry the responsibility of grassroots implementation and alternative care determinations bringing governance all the way down to the sub-district level.

This oversight pyramid functions as a two-way communication channel: data and ground-level intelligence flow upward, while laws, directives, and policy decisions flow downward. The core functions of these boards determining alternative care pathways, monitoring institutions and safe homes, coordinating multi-agency responses are not voluntary or advisory. They are legally mandated under the Children Act 2013, Sections 7 through 12. The result is a fully integrated oversight net that, by design, spans 100% of the national territory.

Leaving No Child Behind

Harunur Rashid closed his presentation with perhaps its most powerful idea: that the real strength of Bangladesh's child protection system lies not in any single program or any single institution, but in the way all 33 programs work together as an integrated whole. To illustrate this, he walked the audience through the case of a single child; a physically disabled street child who is also a victim of trafficking and showed how the system responds.

This child, who sits at the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities, would first be reached through Ring 1; rescued via the 1098 Child Helpline, the community-level lifeline that ensures no child is too remote or too invisible to reach. Once identified, the child would enter Ring 2; housed safely at an Integrated Child Rehabilitation Center, where shelter, trauma counseling, and psychosocial support begin the healing process. Because this particular child also lives with a physical disability, Ring 3 activates the Artificial Limb Center provides medical rehabilitation, addressing the physical dimension of the child's vulnerability in parallel with the social and psychological. And looking to the long term, Ring 4 registers the child with a Suborno Nagorik Card, granting access to a lifelong

disability financial allowance that provides economic security long after the child has left institutional care.

This concentric ring model, Rashid emphasized, is the ultimate expression of a system designed around the child rather than around administrative convenience. No single program could have helped this child. Only the coordinated operation of multiple programs across multiple pillars each triggering the next, each filling a gap the others cannot could provide truly comprehensive protection.

His closing words captured the spirit of the entire presentation: the 33 programs of DSS are not siloed initiatives. They are a tightly woven, legally mandated mesh; ensuring that every child in Bangladesh, regardless of their circumstances, has a blueprint for survival, justice, and empowerment.

National Child Protection Platform (NCPP)

A Unified Ecosystem for Safeguarding the Children of Bangladesh

Introduction and Context

The second major presentation of the dialogue introduced what is perhaps one of the most ambitious and forward-looking proposals to emerge from Bangladesh's child protection sector in recent years; the National Child Protection Platform, or NCPP. Initiated by the Child Protection Wing of the Department of Social Services under the Ministry of Social Welfare, this concept note and strategic blueprint represents a decisive institutional response to a question that has quietly haunted Bangladesh's child protection landscape for years: if so many actors are doing so much work, why does the system still feel fragmented, uneven, and at times deeply inefficient?

The NCPP is not proposed as an entirely new institution or a new mandate imposed from above. Rather, the presenter was careful to frame it from the outset as an operational vehicle; a platform through which existing legal obligations, existing institutions, and existing actors can finally begin working together in a coordinated, coherent, and accountable way. It is the connective tissue that the system has been missing. And crucially, it is presented as being aligned with the Government's 180-Day Priority Action Plan, which gives not just institutional backing but political urgency.

The visual identity of the presentation itself; a glowing, interconnected shield against a deep blue background; speaks to the platform's core philosophy: protection that is networked, technologically informed, and stronger precisely because all its parts are linked together.

Deep Rooted in **National and International Commitments**

Before making the case for what the NCPP will do, the presenter grounded the audience firmly in why it must exist and the answer, as with the DSS presentation before it, lies in the law. The NCPP, the presenter argued, is not a policy experiment or a donor-driven initiative. It is the logical, necessary fulfillment of obligations that Bangladesh has already committed to, both domestically and internationally.

The slide used the powerful imagery of a classical temple; four pillars supporting a single roof; to convey the idea that the proposed platform rests on four distinct but mutually reinforcing legal and institutional foundations, all of which are built upon the bedrock of national sovereignty and international law.

The first pillar is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, specifically Articles 3 and 19. Article 3 establishes that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration. Article 19 obligates states to take all appropriate measures to protect children from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Together, these articles do not merely encourage a coordinated state response; they mandate it. Bangladesh ratified the UNCRC decades ago, and every year that passes without a fully coordinated national child protection system is, in a very real sense, a year of non-compliance with an international treaty obligation.

The second pillar is the **Children Act of 2013**, Bangladesh's landmark domestic child welfare legislation. Chapters 3 and 10 of this Act specifically mandate the establishment and functioning of National, District, and Upazila Child Welfare Boards, as well as coordinated alternative care arrangements. Section 96 goes further, empowering the government to take executive action to implement the Act's provisions. The Children Act, in other words, does not just create rights; it creates institutional structures through which those rights must be delivered. The NCPP is designed to activate those structures more fully and more effectively than the current fragmented landscape allows.

The **third pillar is the Allocation of Business**; the formal administrative document that defines the responsibilities of each ministry within the Bangladesh government. This document explicitly empowers the Ministry of Social Welfare to coordinate nationwide social welfare and child protection activities. This is not a vague aspiration; it is an administrative mandate. The Ministry of Social Welfare, and by extension DSS and its Child Protection Wing, have both the authority and the obligation to bring order and coherence to the child protection ecosystem. The NCPP is how they propose to exercise that authority.

The fourth and most recent pillar is the DSS Office Order of January 2026, which formally tasks the **Child Protection Wing with maintaining Multi-level Coordination Across Government ministries**, UNICEF, the World Bank, international NGOs, and national NGOs. This administrative order is particularly significant because it is current; it reflects the present government's understanding that coordination is not optional but essential, and it places that responsibility squarely with the CPU of DSS. The NCPP, therefore, is not something the Child Protection Wing is doing on its own initiative; it is something it has been formally instructed to do.

The closing message of this slide was delivered with deliberate clarity: the NCPP is not a new mandate. It is the operational vehicle through which Bangladesh will finally fulfill its existing legal and moral obligations to its children.

High Investment, Suboptimal Coordination: The Problem the NCPP Must Solve

Having established the legal and institutional case for the NCPP, the presenter then turned to perhaps the most important and honest part of the entire blueprint; a frank diagnosis of what is

currently going wrong. This slide, titled "High Investment, Suboptimal Coordination," is the crisis statement that gives the NCPP its urgency. The argument made here is both compelling and sobering: Bangladesh is not failing its children for lack of effort or investment. It is failing them or at least underserving them; because that effort and investment is poorly coordinated.

Structural Problems

The presenter identified four Structural Problems that afflict the current landscape.

The first is **Duplication of Interventions**. Across Bangladesh, multiple NGOs and INGOs are implementing virtually identical safeguarding programs in the same geographic areas, often without any awareness of each other's presence or programming. The result is deep redundancy; the same families being visited by multiple organizations running the same activities, the same training sessions being delivered multiple times to the same communities, the same funds being spent on the same outputs in the same places. This is not a failure of intent; these are organizations genuinely trying to help children. But without a coordination mechanism that tells everyone who is doing what and where, duplication is inevitable, and its cost; in money, time, and opportunity; is enormous.

The second problem is **Geographical Blind Spots**. If duplication is one face of the coordination failure, geographical inequality is the other. The current landscape is characterized by a massive and deeply problematic concentration of resources in a small number of high-visibility districts; Cox's Bazar and Dhaka being the most prominent examples while vast areas of the country, particularly the ecologically challenging haors and chars, are heavily neglected by non-state actors. These are the areas that are hardest to reach, most prone to seasonal flooding and displacement, and where child vulnerability is arguably most acute. Yet because they are difficult to access and less visible to donors and media, they attract the least attention. The children living in these areas are, in effect, invisible to large parts of the child protection system.

The third problem is **Siloed Operations**. Even within the state apparatus itself, the presenter noted a troubling lack of cross-ministry communication and collaboration. The Ministry of Education operates school-based safeguarding programs that are rarely, if ever, connected to DSS's community-based protection mechanisms. This means that a child who is identified as at-risk within the school system may never be referred to the social welfare system, and vice versa. Each ministry operates within its own institutional lane, and there is no established mechanism; no platform, no protocol, no shared system that enables them to work together on behalf of a child who moves across those institutional boundaries, as real children in real life inevitably do.

The fourth problem is **Data Fragmentation**. There is currently no centralized Management Information System that captures the aggregate impact of child protection work across all actors in Bangladesh. Every organization maintains its own data, in its own format, using its own definitions and indicators. The National Child Welfare Board; the body that is constitutionally mandated to provide policy oversight and direction lacks access to real-time, comprehensive data that would enable it to make evidence-based decisions. It cannot see where the gaps are, where the overlaps

are, where the system is working and where it is failing, because the information it needs simply does not exist in an accessible, consolidated form.

Taken together, these four failures constitute what the presenter described as a system that is making high investments but achieving suboptimal outcomes; a system that is working hard but not working smart.

Shifting from Fragmentation to Synergy: The NCPP's Transformative Promise

Having diagnosed the problem with unflinching honesty, the presenter then laid out the solution or more precisely, the transformation that the NCPP is designed to achieve. This slide used a simple but powerful comparative framework, mapping the current state of the system against the future state that the NCPP would create across four critical dimensions.

On the dimension of Visibility, the current state is one of opaque and fragmented data; no one has a complete picture of what is happening across the system. The future state, under the NCPP, would be a Centralized National Dashboard accessible to the National Child Welfare Board; a live, real-time, comprehensive view of child protection activities, outcomes, and gaps across the entire country. For the first time, decision-makers would be able to see the whole picture, not just the fragments that happen to land on their desks.

On the dimension of Coverage, the current state is defined by geographical overlaps in some areas and severe blind spots in others; the haors and chars being left behind while Cox's Bazar and Dhaka attract disproportionate attention. The future state would be 100% mapped coverage, achieved through the systematic application of the 3W methodology; Who does What, Where; which would create a dynamic, continuously updated map of all child protection activities across the country. This map would expose both the overlaps and the gaps, enabling resources to be redirected from areas of saturation toward areas of genuine need.

On the dimension of Standards, the current situation is one of ad-hoc methodologies applied inconsistently across a fragmented landscape of actors. Some organizations follow international best practices; others do not. Some have trained social workers; others rely on volunteers with minimal preparation. The quality of care and protection that a child receives depends too heavily on which organization happens to be operating in their area. The NCPP's future state would establish Unified Standard Operating Procedures SOPs developed by the CPU and applied consistently across all state and non-state actors ensuring that the quality of child protection is no longer a matter of geographic or organizational luck.

On the dimension of Funding, the current state is one of imbalanced, donor-driven resource allocation; funding goes where donors choose to direct it, which often means high-profile areas and well-connected organizations, rather than where need is greatest. The future state would be need-based, coordinated resource optimization; with the NCPP's mapping data informing where funds should go and the platform's coordination function ensuring they actually get there.

The closing statement of this slide captured the entire logic of the NCPP's value proposition in a single sentence: the NCPP eliminates friction, allowing capital and effort to flow exactly where vulnerable children need it most.

The Apex Coordination, Learning, and Monitoring Hub

With the problem diagnosed and the transformation articulated, the presenter moved on to describe precisely what the NCPP is and how it is designed to function. The platform is conceived as the apex coordination, learning, and monitoring hub for all child protection actors in Bangladesh; not a new implementing agency, not a competing institution, but a hub through which all existing actors connect, communicate, and align.

Four actors sit around the NCPP at the center: Government Ministries, UN Agencies, INGOs, and Local NGOs. Each of these actors currently operates in relative isolation. The NCPP would bring them into a structured, ongoing relationship centered on four core functions.

Strategic Alignment addresses the government ministries dimension. One of the platform's primary functions would be to synchronize the activities of INGOs and NGOs with national priorities and the requirements of the Children Act 2013. This means that organizations operating in Bangladesh would no longer be able to design and implement programs in isolation from the national legal and policy framework. Their activities would need to align with what the Act requires and what the government has identified as priority gaps; creating coherence between civil society energy and state direction.

Resource Optimization addresses the INGO dimension specifically. Through the systematic application of 3W mapping continuously tracking Who is doing What, Where across the entire country; the NCPP would create the information infrastructure necessary to eliminate duplication and redirect resources toward underserved areas. This is not about controlling NGOs or restricting their programming; it is about giving everyone a shared map so that collective effort is distributed rationally rather than historically or opportunistically.

Data Consolidation addresses the UN Agencies dimension, recognizing that organizations like UNICEF and WHO hold significant quantities of child protection data that currently sit in separate systems. The NCPP would create a mechanism for feeding this data into a holistic **National Child Protection Dashboard;** a single, unified data environment that gives the National Child Welfare Board the information it needs to govern the system effectively.

Service Standardization addresses the local NGO dimension; the hundreds of smaller, community-based organizations that deliver frontline child protection services across the country. The NCPP would enforce CPU-developed Standard Operating Procedures for Alternative Care and Case Management, ensuring that local NGOs, however small or resource-constrained, are delivering services that meet a consistent national standard. This protects children from receiving substandard care not because of malice but because of capacity gaps that standardized protocols can help bridge.

A Multi-Tiered Governance Structure

The NCPP is not merely a concept; it has a specific and carefully designed governance architecture that determines how it will be run, who will be accountable for its performance, and how decisions will be made. The presenter walked through this three-tiered structure in detail, making the point

that the governance design reflects the platform's ambition to be both high-level in its strategic direction and operationally grounded in its day-to-day execution.

At the apex of the governance structure sits the Strategic Steering Committee (SSC). This is the platform's highest decision-making body, responsible for ultimate governance, strategic direction, and alignment across all member organizations. Its leadership composition reflects the platform's state-led character: the Chairperson is the Secretary of the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Co-Chair is the Director General of DSS, and the Member Secretary is the Director of the Child Protection Unit within DSS. The membership of the SSC extends well beyond government, however, to include the Ministries of Women and Children's Affairs, Home Affairs, and Education; the heads of UNICEF Bangladesh; and the leadership of major INGOs including Save the Children and Plan International, as well as national NGO representatives. This composition ensures that the SSC is genuinely multi-stakeholder that the government is leading but not monopolizing, and that the voices of implementing organizations are present at the highest level of platform governance.

The middle tier is The Secretariat, described pointedly as the day-to-day engine of the platform, responsible for managing data and coordination on an ongoing basis. The Secretariat is operated jointly by the CPU of DSS, which serves as the Permanent Secretariat providing continuity, institutional memory, and legal authority, and by UNICEF Bangladesh, which brings technical expertise and the capacity to coordinate with development partners, INGOs, and NGOs. This joint operational model is significant; it embeds international technical partnership within a government-led institutional home, ensuring that the platform benefits from the best of both worlds: state legitimacy and civil society capacity.

At the base of the governance structure are the Thematic Working Groups (TWGs); the operational arms and specialized intervention units of the platform. These are the bodies where the real work of coordination, standard-setting, and problem-solving happens on a day-to-day basis. Each TWG is co-chaired by a DSS official and a lead representative from a development partner or INGO; a leadership model that deliberately combines state authority with sectoral expertise.

Specialized Focus, Collaborative Execution: The Five Thematic Working Groups

The five Thematic Working Groups represent the NCPP's operational heart. Each addresses a distinct domain of child protection, and together they cover the full spectrum of issues that Bangladesh's children face; from justice to care, from physical safety to digital security, from emergency response to evidence generation.

TWG 1: Legal Framework and Diversion focus on juvenile justice and the legal architecture of child protection. Its mandate includes strengthening the implementation of diversion mechanisms under Section 48 of the Children Act; the provision that allows children in conflict with the law to be diverted away from formal criminal proceedings; as well as improving access to legal aid under Section 55. The working group would bring together legal experts, probation officers, law enforcement representatives, and child rights advocates to identify gaps in the current implementation of the law and recommend practical solutions. The goal is to ensure that the legal system serves children's best interests, not just its own procedural efficiency.

TWG 2: Alternative Care and De-institutionalization take on one of the most complex and sensitive areas of child protection practice; the question of when and how children should be placed in institutional care, and how to build stronger alternatives. Its mandate includes standardizing Foster and Kinship Care arrangements developing the protocols, training, and support systems that would make family-based alternative care a genuine, quality-assured option for children who cannot live with their parents. It also includes monitoring the Child Development Centers under Section 84 of the Children Act, ensuring that these facilities are meeting their reform and rehabilitation mandate rather than simply warehousing young people.

TWG 3: Safeguarding and Violence Prevention addresses the most immediate and visceral forms of child harm; physical abuse, sexual abuse, child marriage, and violence within institutions and communities. Its work includes developing and enforcing safeguarding standards across all institutions that work with children, creating school social work programs that embed child protection within the education system, and supporting community-level prevention initiatives. This TWG would also address the vulnerability of children in institutional care; a population that is, by the nature of its circumstances, at heightened risk of abuse if oversight mechanisms are weak.

TWG 4: Digital Child Safety and Cybersecurity represent the NCPP's recognition that child protection in the 21st century cannot be confined to the physical world. As internet access expands rapidly across Bangladesh, children are increasingly vulnerable to online exploitation, cyberbullying, grooming, and exposure to harmful content. This TWG would develop a national framework for digital child safety; working with technology companies, law enforcement, educators, and parents to create an environment in which children can benefit from digital connectivity without being exposed to its dangers. This is described as a modern imperative, and its inclusion in the NCPP reflects a sophisticated understanding of the evolving landscape of child risk.

TWG 5: Data, Evidence, and Policy Advocacy is in many ways the enabling TWG, the one that makes all the others more effective by ensuring that their work is grounded in evidence and communicated to decision-makers. Its mandate includes developing a unified case management system that connects the 1098 Helpline data with DSS institutional data and NGO program data; integrating all of these streams into a single, comprehensive national dataset; and using that dataset to generate regular reports for the National Child Welfare Board. This TWG would author the annual State of Child Protection in Bangladesh report; a document that, if properly resourced and disseminated, could become the definitive reference for understanding the state of Bangladesh's children and the effectiveness of the national response.

Activating the Ecosystem: The Five Core Functions of the NCPP

Beyond the governance structure and the thematic working groups, the presenter outlined five core functions through which the NCPP would actively drive change in the child protection ecosystem. These functions are presented as an interconnected cycle; each one feeding into the next, creating a self-reinforcing loop of improvement centered on the National Child Welfare Board.

National Mapping (3W) is the foundation of everything else. By continuously tracking Who does What, where across all child protection actors in Bangladesh, the NCPP would create and maintain a

dynamic, living map of the ecosystem. This map would make overlaps visible, expose blind spots, and provide the empirical basis for all resource allocation decisions. Without this map, every other function is operating partially blind.

Unified Reporting builds mapping data to create a consolidated picture of the ecosystem's performance. By aggregating data from all member organizations; government institutions, UN agencies, INGOs, and local NGOs; into a single reporting framework, the NCPP would produce the annual State of Child Protection in Bangladesh report. This report would serve not just as an accountability document but as a learning tool helping all actors understand what is working, what is not, and where attention is most urgently needed.

Joint Need Assessments ensure that the platform is not just a peacetime coordination mechanism but a rapid-response capability for emergencies. Bangladesh is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, and floods and cyclones regularly create acute child protection crises; mass displacement, family separation, increased trafficking risk, disrupted schooling. The NCPP would establish the protocols and relationships necessary for all child protection actors to conduct coordinated rapid need assessments and deploy integrated responses when disaster strikes, rather than the current situation where each organization responds independently and the overall response is fragmented and duplicative.

Capacity Building addresses one of the most persistent weaknesses in Bangladesh's child protection system; the uneven skills and knowledge of the frontline workforce. Social workers, probation officers, and NGO staff across the country work with highly vulnerable children every day, often with limited training and minimal ongoing professional development. The NCPP would develop standardized training modules and deploy them systematically across the workforce, raising the floor of practice quality across the entire system. This is not about replacing local knowledge or imposing a one-size-fits-all approach; it is about ensuring that every child protection worker, regardless of where they work or who employs them, has access to the foundational knowledge and skills they need to do their job safely and effectively.

Policy Feedback Loop closes the cycle by ensuring that the lessons learned through mapping, reporting, assessments, and capacity building influence policy and law. The NCPP would establish a formal mechanism for identifying legal bottlenecks places where the current law is unclear, outdated, or creates unintended barriers to effective child protection and recommending amendments or new SOPs to the National Child Welfare Board. This transforms the NCPP from a coordination platform into a genuine driver of systemic improvement, one that can adapt the legal and policy environment to meet the evolving realities that children face.

The Horizon: A Standardized Protective Environment

Looking forward, the presenter articulated the vision of what the NCPP is ultimately working toward; a standardized protective environment for all children in Bangladesh, characterized by four qualities that the current system cannot fully claim.

Zero Duplication means that a fully functional, government-led coordination mechanism has been established that optimizes all donor and state funds. Every dollar, every taka, every hour of

professional time is directed where it is most needed and most likely to make a difference; not where historical relationships, donor preferences, or institutional visibility happen to point it. This is an ambitious target, but the argument is that it is achievable with the right coordination infrastructure.

100% Coverage means that critical child protection services have been extended to the most marginalized and previously neglected areas of the country; the haors, the chars, the remote coastal communities, the urban slums that fall between institutional cracks. No child's access to protection should depend on where they happen to live, and the NCPP's mapping and resource allocation functions are specifically designed to close the geographic gaps that currently leave millions of children underserved.

Real-Time Visibility means that a live, centralized data dashboard seamlessly empowers the National Child Welfare Board with the information it needs to govern the system effectively. No more relying on annual reports that are outdated by the time they are published, no more making policy decisions based on anecdote and partial data. The NCWB would have a real-time view of the ecosystem who is doing what, where, how many children are being served, what outcomes are being achieved, and where urgent action is needed.

Enhanced Capacity means that the CPU-DSS has been significantly empowered with the staff, the tools, the data, and the institutional authority; to lead, monitor, and regulate all non-state actors in the child protection space with absolute authority and efficiency. The presenter was clear that this is not about bureaucratic control for its own sake. It is about ensuring that the state can fulfill its constitutional and statutory obligation to guarantee the quality of care that every child in Bangladesh receives, regardless of whether that care is delivered by a government institution or a private organization.

Next Steps: Designing the Platform Together

The NCPP, as presented, is still a blueprint; a concept note and strategic framework that requires broad stakeholder endorsement and collaborative refinement before it becomes a functioning reality. The presenter outlined a clear and time-bound process for moving from blueprint to operation, centered on a one-day high-level consultative workshop to be attended by sixty to eighty key stakeholders from across the child protection ecosystem.

The workshop is designed in four sequential phases. Phase 1 is a Plenary Session in which DSS presents and validates the conceptual framework and legal mandate of the NCPP ensuring that all participants understand and accept the legal basis and institutional rationale for the platform. Phase 2 moves into a Panel Discussion in which representatives from ministries, UNICEF, and INGOs openly diagnose the coordination challenges they currently experience; creating a shared understanding of the problem that the NCPP is designed to solve, grounded in the lived experience of practitioners rather than in abstract analysis. Phase 3 breaks into working groups in which participants co-draft the specific Terms of Reference for each of the five Thematic Working Groups ensuring that the TWGs are designed collaboratively, with input from the organizations that will participate in them, rather than imposed from above. And Phase 4 concludes with The Resolution,

the official signing of a Joint Declaration by all participating organizations to immediately operationalize the NCPP.

The structure of this process is itself significant. Rather than asking stakeholders to endorse a fully formed institutional structure that has been designed without their input, the NCPP blueprint explicitly invites co-creation. The Terms of Reference for the working groups will be written in the room, together, by the people who will do the work. This approach is both practically wise; it generates buy-in, and philosophically consistent with the platform's own values of coordination and shared ownership.

Establishing a Legacy of Protection: The Closing Vision

The presentation closed not with data or architecture but with a statement of principle; a moment of moral clarity that stepped back from the mechanics of coordination platforms and governance structures to remind the audience why all of this matters.

The closing slide carries a message that deserves to be read in full and taken seriously: the protection of children cannot be achieved in silos. The NCPP is a critical step towards fulfilling the state's legal and moral obligation to its children; establishing a unified, robust, and synergistic child protection system in Bangladesh.

This statement is both a diagnosis and a call to action. It acknowledges that the current system, for all its genuine achievements and real investments, has been operating in silos and that the children of Bangladesh have paid a price for that fragmentation. It frames the NCPP not as an institutional preference or a bureaucratic convenience, but as a moral obligation; something the state owes its children by virtue of the laws it has passed, the conventions it has ratified, and the fundamental duty of care that any government bears toward its most vulnerable citizens.

The final line of the presentation is, “Initiated within the Government's 180-Day Priority Action Plan. Let us build it together." captures the spirit of the entire blueprint. This is an invitation, addressed equally to government ministries, to UN agencies, to international and local NGOs, and to all who care about the children of Bangladesh. The platform is being offered not as a fait accompli but as a shared project, one whose success depends on the collective commitment of every actor in the ecosystem. The government is taking the lead, as it must and should. But it is asking everyone else to walk alongside it.

Brief Presentation from the Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme Team

Presentation 1: The Old Age Allowance (OAA)

Presenter: Md. Nipun Afridi, Programme Assistant, SSPS Programme, UNDP

The SSPS team opened their presentation segment with an infographic on the Old Age Allowance; one of Bangladesh's oldest and most recognizable social protection instruments; framing it not merely as a historical programme but as a living, evolving mechanism that is steadily moving toward universality. The narrative arc of the infographic was deliberate and powerful: it told the

story of a programme that began modestly nearly three decades ago and has since grown into one of the most significant direct cash transfer systems in South Asia.

Then vs. Now: A Story of Scale and Modernization

The infographic opened with a stark and striking comparison between where the Old Age Allowance began and where it stands today; a before-and-after that captures the trajectory of the programme across nearly three decades.

When the OAA was launched in 1997, it served just 4 lakh beneficiaries; 400,000 elderly people receiving a monthly allowance of 100 BDT. By the standards of the time, this was a meaningful first step, but measured against the actual scale of elderly poverty in Bangladesh, it was a programme that barely scratched the surface. The benefit amount of 100 BDT was modest even at 1997 prices, and the coverage was a fraction of the elderly population that genuinely needed support.

Fast forward to 2026, and the transformation is dramatic. The programme now reaches 6.2 million beneficiaries; a more than fifteen-fold increase in coverage over the intervening years and the monthly allowance has grown to 700 BDT, reflecting successive upward revisions as successive governments have sought to make the benefit more meaningful in real terms. Perhaps most significantly, the payment mechanism has been completely modernized: 100% of OAA payments are now made through direct mobile payment, using a Government-to-Person (G2P) system that eliminates the need for beneficiaries to travel to collection points, removes the risk of payment diversion or leakage through intermediaries, and creates a fully auditable digital payment trail. This shift to G2P is not a minor administrative detail; it represents a fundamental improvement in the programme's integrity, efficiency, and reach, particularly for elderly people in remote areas who previously faced significant physical and logistical barriers to collecting their allowance.

The trajectory from 4 lakh to 6.2 million beneficiaries, and from 100 BDT to 700 BDT per month, tells the story of a programme that has been taken seriously and invested in consistently but also one that still has significant distance to travel before it can claim to be truly universal in its reach.

Core Objectives: What the OAA Is Designed to Achieve

The infographic articulated four core objectives that define the OAA's purpose; objectives that together constitute a comprehensive vision of what old age security means in the Bangladesh context.

The first and most fundamental objective is Socio-Economic Security; providing a reliable safety net for senior citizens who have aged out of the labour market and whose family-based support systems may be weakening under the pressures of urbanization, migration, and changing household structures. For millions of elderly Bangladeshis, particularly those who are widowed, living alone, or whose adult children have migrated to cities or abroad, the OAA allowance is not supplementary income; it is their primary or only source of regular cash. The programme's existence ensures that growing old in poverty does not automatically mean growing old without any financial resource whatsoever.

The second objective is Health and Nutrition; specifically, helping elderly beneficiaries meet the costs of medical care and proper food. This objective reflects a critical reality of ageing in a low-income context: elderly people have disproportionately high health expenditure needs at precisely the time in their lives when their earning capacity is lowest. Chronic illness, mobility limitations, and the general health vulnerabilities of advanced age create a financial burden that can quickly overwhelm a household without external support. The OAA helps to bridge this gap enabling beneficiaries to access medicine, medical consultations, and nutritionally adequate food that they might otherwise be unable to afford.

The third objective is Dignity and Respect; enhancing the status of elders within their families and communities through the provision of regular financial support. This objective recognizes something that purely economic analyses of social protection often miss: the social and psychological dimensions of receiving a regular income. An elderly person who contributes financially to their household; even a modest amount; occupies a different social position than one who is entirely dependent on the goodwill of family members. The OAA does not just put money in the hands of elderly people; it restores a measure of economic agency that is inseparable from dignity and respect within the family and community.

The fourth objective is Morale Strengthening; boosting the confidence and psychological wellbeing of elderly beneficiaries through regular financial assistance. The assurance of a predictable monthly payment knowing that it will come, that it is yours by right, and that you can plan around it; has a psychological impact that goes beyond the monetary value of the transfer itself. It signals to elderly people that the state has not forgotten them, that their years of work and contribution to society are recognized, and that they have a claim on public resources in their old age. For many beneficiaries, this recognition is as important as the money itself.

Identifying Structural Barriers: What Stands Between Eligible Elders and Their Allowance

Despite the programme's impressive growth, the infographic was honest about the structural barriers that continue to prevent many eligible elderly people from accessing the OAA. Four categories of barriers were identified, each reflecting a different dimension of the access challenge.

Institutional Barriers refer to the bureaucratic and administrative obstacles that make it difficult for elderly people particularly those who are illiterate, isolated, or without family support; to navigate the enrollment and verification processes that are required to access the programme. These may include complex paperwork requirements, the need for identity documents that many elderly people do not possess, or the physical inaccessibility of registration offices for people with limited mobility. When the programme's administrative design does not account for the specific vulnerabilities of the population it is meant to serve, the result is a gap between eligibility and access that falls most heavily on those who are already most disadvantaged.

Bias and Nepotism represent perhaps the most damaging barrier to programme integrity; the local-level capture of OAA beneficiary lists by individuals with political connections, personal relationships with union parishad members, or the social capital to advocate effectively for their own inclusion. When slots in the programme are allocated on the basis of relationships rather than need, the result is a double injustice: the most vulnerable elderly people are excluded while less

needy individuals with better connections receive the benefit. This is not a marginal problem; it is a systemic one that has been documented across multiple evaluations of Bangladesh's social protection programmes and that requires structural solutions rather than case-by-case correction.

Gender-Related Barriers reflect the intersection of gender inequality with programme access; the ways in which elderly women face specific disadvantages in enrolling in and retaining OAA benefits. These may include lack of mobile phone ownership or digital literacy needed to receive G2P payments, dependence on male family members to navigate administrative processes, or social norms that make it difficult for women to assert their entitlements publicly. Given that elderly women are often among the most economically vulnerable members of Bangladesh's elderly population; due to lifetime patterns of lower earnings, property exclusion, and widowhood; the fact that gender barriers impede their access to the OAA is a serious equity concern that demands targeted action.

Information Gaps speak to the reality that many elderly people, particularly in remote or isolated communities, simply do not know that the OAA exists, that they are eligible for it, or how to apply. In a context where literacy rates among the elderly are lower than among younger cohorts and where access to mass media and digital information is uneven, the state's obligation does not end with creating a programme; it extends to ensuring that intended beneficiaries actually know about it and can access it. Information gaps are among the most addressable of the structural barriers, but they require sustained, targeted outreach investment that has not always been forthcoming.

Recommendations: The Path Toward Universal Coverage

The infographic concluded with three strategic recommendations that together point toward the programme's ultimate aspiration; universal coverage for all elderly Bangladeshis.

The Universal Approach calls for a structural shift in the programme's design philosophy; from a targeted transfer that reaches only a fraction of the eligible elderly population to a universal benefit that covers all elderly citizens above a certain age threshold, regardless of their economic status or geographic location. The argument for universality is both principled and pragmatic: principled because the right to old age security should not depend on the luck of being selected through a targeting mechanism that is demonstrably imperfect, and pragmatic because universal programmes avoid the targeting errors, administrative costs, and political capture that afflict means-tested programmes. Moving toward universality is not a single step but a trajectory; one that requires sustained fiscal commitment and political will, but that the programme's three-decade history suggests is achievable.

Enhanced Awareness and Outreach recognize that expanding the programme's reach requires not just expanding its budget but also expanding the reach of information about it. This means investing in community-level outreach campaigns, leveraging Union Digital Centres and community health workers as information conduits, and designing awareness materials that are accessible to elderly people with low literacy. It also means proactively reaching out to isolated and marginalized elderly people rather than waiting for them to present themselves at administrative offices.

Addressing Gender Barriers calls for specific, targeted interventions to ensure that elderly women are not systematically excluded from the OAA due to gender-related access barriers. This could include ensuring that the G2P payment system is accessible to women who do not have their own mobile phones, providing gender-sensitive registration support, and monitoring enrollment data disaggregated by gender to identify and address disparities as they emerge.

Presentation 2: Empowering Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh

The SSPS team's second infographic presentation turned to one of the most complex and multidimensional challenges in Bangladesh's social protection landscape; the empowerment of persons with disabilities. This presentation was notably more expansive in its scope than the OAA infographic, reflecting the breadth and depth of the disability inclusion challenge and the fact that effective empowerment of persons with disabilities requires action across multiple sectors simultaneously; social protection, education, health, employment, and cultural norms.

The Vision: From Assistance to Guaranteed Rights

The infographic opened with a statement of vision that set the tone for everything that followed; and it was a vision rooted not in charity or benevolence but in rights and agency. Three elements defined the vision.

The first is the principle of "Nothing about us without us" — the foundational disability rights principle that persons with disabilities must be active participants in the design, implementation, and evaluation of all policies and programmes that affect them. This principle pushes back against a long history of disability policy being made by able-bodied officials, however well-intentioned, without the meaningful involvement of the people most affected. It asserts that persons with disabilities are not objects of intervention but agents of their own lives, and that their knowledge, experience, and preferences are indispensable to any effective response.

The second element is the explicit aspiration to move from "Assistance" to "Guaranteed Rights" a conceptual shift that is both semantic and deeply substantive. When disability support is framed as assistance, it is discretionary; it depends on the goodwill of providers, the availability of funds, and the political priorities of the moment. When it is framed as a guaranteed right, it is legally enforceable; something that persons with disabilities can claim, not beg for. This shift in framing has enormous practical implications for programme design, legal architecture, and institutional accountability.

The third element is the commitment to implementing the 2030 Agenda and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in pursuit of a truly inclusive Bangladesh. Both of these international frameworks situate disability inclusion within a broader vision of sustainable human development and equal citizenship, and both provide specific, actionable obligations for states that have endorsed them. Bangladesh's commitment to these frameworks is a legal and moral anchor for the entire disability empowerment agenda.

Types of Disabilities: The Full Spectrum of Experience

A significant portion of the infographic was devoted to cataloguing the full range of disability types that the empowerment agenda must address; a visual reminder that "persons with disabilities" is not a homogeneous category but a diverse population whose members have vastly different experiences, needs, and capabilities.

The twelve disability categories identified are Autism, Mental illness leading to disability, Visual disability, Hearing disability, Deaf-Blindness, Cerebral palsy, Physical disability, Speech disability, Intellectual disability, Down syndrome, Multiple disability, and Other disability. This taxonomy matters because effective empowerment requires differentiated responses; the needs of a child with autism are fundamentally different from those of a person with a physical disability acquired in adulthood, and a programme designed for one will not automatically serve the other. The infographic's inclusion of this full spectrum signals that the empowerment vision is genuinely comprehensive; it does not cherry-pick the most visible or most easily served disability types while ignoring others.

The Current Reality: A Crisis of Registration, Education, and Employment

The infographic was unflinching in its presentation of the current reality facing persons with disabilities in Bangladesh and the picture it painted is one of systemic exclusion across multiple life domains simultaneously.

On the question of registration and recognition, the data reveals a significant gap between official records and actual prevalence. Only 3.84 million persons with disabilities are currently registered with the government, against an estimated total population of 9.4 million; meaning that well over half of all persons with disabilities in Bangladesh are invisible to the formal system. This registration gap has cascading consequences: without being registered, persons with disabilities cannot access disability allowances, specialized services, or legal protections. They are, in administrative terms, non-existent and therefore unreachable by the programmes designed to serve them.

On education, the data tells a story of near-total exclusion from the mainstream system. Sixty percent of persons with disabilities are out of school entirely; not enrolled in any educational institution at any level. Of those who are enrolled, 81% are performing below the level expected for their age; a figure that reflects not the cognitive limitations of the students but the failure of an education system that was not designed with their needs in mind and has not been adequately adapted to include them. Together, these figures describe an education crisis of enormous proportions; one that locks persons with disabilities out of the human capital development pathway that is the primary route out of poverty in Bangladesh's rapidly developing economy.

On employment and economic participation, the situation is equally stark. Sixty-six percent of persons with disabilities are unemployed and for women with disabilities, this rises to a devastating 87%. Only 0.75 million persons with disabilities across the entire country are currently in employment of any kind. These figures are not simply the product of disability itself; they are the product of a labour market that has not made the accommodations, built the accessibility

infrastructure, or developed the inclusive hiring practices necessary to enable persons with disabilities to participate on equal terms.

Critical Barriers to Inclusion: Why the Gap Persists

The infographic identified four critical barriers that together explain why, despite legal frameworks, international commitments, and programme investments, the inclusion of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh's social, educational, and economic life remains so far short of the vision.

Stigma is the most pervasive and most deeply rooted of the four barriers. In many communities across Bangladesh, disability is still associated with shame, divine punishment, or personal failure attitudes that lead to social exclusion, family concealment, and the internalization of inferiority by persons with disabilities themselves. Stigma is not merely a cultural problem; it has direct practical consequences for whether children with disabilities are enrolled in school, whether adults with disabilities are considered for employment, and whether families come forward to register their disabled members with government programmes. Addressing stigma requires sustained, community-level behaviour change communication; a long-term investment that does not produce quick results but whose absence makes all other interventions less effective.

Gender-Related Barriers compound the already significant disadvantages faced by women and girls with disabilities. In a social context where women already face structural inequalities in education, employment, and decision-making, disability adds additional layers of vulnerability and exclusion. Girls with disabilities are less likely than boys with disabilities to be enrolled in school, less likely to be registered with disability programmes, and far less likely to be employed. The 87% unemployment rate among women with disabilities is not an anomaly; it is the predictable outcome of compounding inequalities that must be addressed both through specific gender-sensitive interventions and through the broader transformation of social norms around gender and disability.

Institutional Barriers refer to the ways in which the design and culture of Bangladesh's public institutions; schools, healthcare facilities, government offices, workplaces, and public spaces; fail to accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities. Physical inaccessibility, the absence of sign language interpretation, the lack of Braille materials, rigid procedural requirements that disadvantage people with cognitive or communication disabilities, and the general absence of disability-competent staff all combine to make institutions that are theoretically open to everyone functionally inaccessible to many persons with disabilities. These are not small, easily fixed problems; they reflect deeply embedded design choices and institutional cultures that will require sustained effort to change.

Lack of Awareness operates at multiple levels simultaneously; among the general public, which may not understand disability rights or the capacities of persons with disabilities; among government officials, who may not be familiar with the legal frameworks and programmatic obligations that apply to disability inclusion; and among persons with disabilities and their families themselves, who may not know what rights they have, what programmes are available to them, or how to access them. Awareness is the precondition for everything else; without it, rights go unclaimed, programmes go unused, and the gap between legal commitments and lived reality persists indefinitely.

Strategic Recommendations for Action: Four Pathways to Empowerment

The infographic concluded with four strategic recommendations that together constitute a comprehensive agenda for transforming the disability inclusion landscape in Bangladesh.

Firstly, universal Support for the Most Vulnerable calls for expanding the social protection floor for persons with disabilities; ensuring that every person with a disability who needs economic support has access to it, regardless of their geographic location, registration status, or disability type. This means addressing the registration gap as a matter of urgency, expanding the disability allowance programme to reach the estimated 9.4 million persons with disabilities rather than just the 3.84 million currently registered, and designing support mechanisms that are genuinely accessible to the full diversity of disability types and circumstances.

Secondly, economic Empowerment addresses the 66% unemployment rate by calling for a comprehensive strategy to increase the economic participation of persons with disabilities. This includes employer incentives for inclusive hiring, skills training programmes adapted for different disability types, supported employment models that provide job coaching and workplace accommodation support, and the development of accessible entrepreneurship and micro-enterprise pathways for persons with disabilities who cannot access formal employment. Economic empowerment is not just a welfare objective; it is a recognition of the productive potential that is currently being wasted because the economy has not made the accommodations necessary to harness it.

Thirdly, inclusive Education and Health addresses the dual crises of educational exclusion and health access. On education, the recommendation calls for a comprehensive inclusive education strategy that goes beyond the physical enrollment of children with disabilities in mainstream schools to address the pedagogical, infrastructural, and attitudinal changes necessary to make those schools genuinely welcoming and effective for all learners. On health, it calls for the development of disability-competent health services that can meet the specific and often complex health needs of persons with different disability types, including rehabilitation services, assistive technology, and mental health support.

And lastly, national Awareness and Advocacy recognizes that lasting change in the situation of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh requires not just programme expansion but a fundamental shift in public attitudes, institutional cultures, and political priorities. This means investing in sustained, multi-channel awareness campaigns that challenge stigma and promote the rights and capabilities of persons with disabilities; building the advocacy capacity of Disabled People's Organizations so that they can effectively represent their members' interests in policy processes; and creating regular, high-visibility platforms such as the IDPD celebrations mentioned earlier in the dialogue; that celebrate the contributions and potential of persons with disabilities and keep disability inclusion on the national agenda.

SSPS Programme: Proposed Areas of Collaboration with DSS

Remarks from Aminul Arifeen, National Program Manager, Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme

Aminul Arifeen, National Program Manager of the Social Security Policy Support Programme, offered what was arguably the most expansive and analytically rich response of the entire dialogue session. Speaking from a position of deep familiarity with Bangladesh's social protection architecture, he moved fluidly between systemic critique, practical recommendation, and forward-looking vision; weaving together nearly three decades of accumulated institutional knowledge into a set of remarks that were at once affirming of the work presented and challenging of its gaps. His contribution was not a simple endorsement of the DSS presentation or the NCPP blueprint; it was a substantive intellectual engagement that pushed both beyond their current boundaries.

The 54 Programmes and the Case for a Unified GO-NGO Platform

Arifeen began by noting that the Child Protection Wing of DSS is currently administering 54 programmes; a figure that underscores both the breadth of the state's commitment to child welfare and the complexity of managing such a diverse portfolio. He observed that this sheer scale makes the case for the National Child Protection Platform even more compelling than the blueprint itself had articulated. With 54 programmes running simultaneously, often across overlapping institutional mandates and geographic footprints, the risk of redundancy and inefficiency is not theoretical, it is structural.

He proposed that the NCPP could and should evolve into a single, unified Government-NGO platform; a space where state programmes and civil society interventions are not merely catalogued but actively integrated. The first and most urgent step in this direction, he suggested, is a comprehensive mapping exercise. Before any new programming decisions are made, before any new funding is sought, all actors need to know what already exists, where it exists, and what it is achieving. This mapping would serve a dual purpose: it would identify the geographical and thematic gaps where additional donor investment is genuinely needed, and it would provide the evidence base for developing targeted, credible funding proposals to fill those gaps. The logic here is straightforward but profound if you do not know what you already have, you cannot know what you still need. And if you cannot articulate what you need with precision, you cannot make a compelling case for investment. Good mapping is, in this sense, both an accountability tool and a fundraising strategy.

Strengthening Volunteerism as a Pillar of Child Protection

Arifeen raised the question of volunteerism; specifically, how it can be more meaningfully developed and sustained within the child protection ecosystem. He made the observation that community-level volunteer networks represent one of the most cost-effective and contextually embedded mechanisms for early identification and response to child vulnerability, but that Bangladesh has not yet fully realized this potential. The question he posed was not rhetorical but practical: how can volunteer systems be strengthened, structured, and supported so that they become a genuine asset to the formal child protection system rather than an afterthought? He suggested this deserves dedicated attention in the NCPP's design, including consideration of how

volunteers are recruited, trained, supervised, and recognized; because a volunteer network without structure is not a safety net; it is a collection of well-meaning individuals without the tools or authority to act effectively.

Dropout and Street Children: From Vulnerability to Human Capital

One of Arifeen's most impassioned observations concerned the population of school dropouts and street children; a group that, he argued, must be viewed not merely as a welfare concern but as an economic imperative. He was direct: these children are not a burden on the state; they are future human capital whose potential is being squandered. Every child who drops out of school and disappears into the informal economy or onto the streets represents not just a personal tragedy but a national loss; a future skilled worker, entrepreneur, or professional who never materialized.

The question he pressed the room to confront is whether the current system is doing enough not just to shelter and protect these children in the immediate term, but to invest in them in a way that genuinely transforms their trajectories. He argued that the framing needs to shift from rescue and welfare to development and empowerment and that programming for dropouts and street children should be designed with their long-term economic integration explicitly in mind. Care without pathway is not enough. The goal is human capital formation, and every programme targeting this population should be evaluated against that standard.

Age-Based Cohort Analysis: Are We Covering Every Stage of Childhood?

Arifeen introduced a methodological recommendation that has significant implications for how Bangladesh designs, monitors, and evaluates its child protection and welfare programmes: the systematic organization of all interventions by age-group cohort. His argument was that different institutions; the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, DSS, and others may be serving children at similar age ranges with programmes that either overlap substantially or, conversely, leave certain age groups entirely unserved. Without a cohort-based analytical framework, these overlaps and gaps are invisible.

He pressed a set of critical questions: Are MOWCA and DSS doing the same things for the same age groups? If so, is that duplication or is there a genuine rationale for both? And if they are doing different things, are those differences grounded in a coherent division of labour, or are they historical accidents? He also raised the question of orientation whether different programmes serving similar populations are fundamentally welfare-oriented, providing relief and support, or development-oriented, building capabilities and enabling participation. Both orientations have their place, but they should be applied deliberately and consistently, not by default. A cohort analysis would bring all of this into the open and enable genuinely strategic programme design.

The Vietnam Model: Universal Nutritional Provision as a Reference Point

In a moment that broadened the conversation beyond Bangladesh's borders, Arifeen referenced the Vietnam model of universal nutritional provision for children; a programme through which the Vietnamese state ensures that children across all socioeconomic backgrounds have access to adequate, nutritious food, delivered through a unified institutional mechanism. He proposed that this model deserves serious consideration as a reference point for Bangladesh, and suggested that a

similar approach providing nutritional support for children under a single institutional roof could address some of the fragmentation and inequity that currently characterizes Bangladesh's early childhood nutrition landscape.

The spirit of this recommendation is not simply about food; it is about universality and integration. A universal provision, by definition, reaches every child regardless of their family's economic status, geographic location, or administrative classification removing the filtering mechanisms that inevitably leave some children behind. Arifeen was not prescribing a specific design, but he was making a strong case for Bangladesh to look outward at international models that have achieved scale and equity in child-focused social provision, and to ask seriously what lessons can be adapted to the local context.

Engagement with the Education Ministry: AI, Skills, and Madrasa Reform

Arifeen turned his attention to what he described as a critical but insufficiently explored frontier the relationship between child protection and the education system. He called for much deeper and more structured engagement between DSS and the Ministry of Education, arguing that child protection cannot be fully achieved outside the school gate. The two systems need to be actively connected, with shared protocols, shared data, and shared accountability for children who fall between them.

He was particularly interested in the potential role of technology and skills-based education including the integration of Artificial Intelligence literacy in preparing children for the labour market of the future. But he also raised a concern that is often overlooked in formal sector discussions: the Madrasa system. Bangladesh has thousands of Madrasas educating millions of children, and Arifeen was blunt in his assessment that many of them are in urgent need of modernization both in terms of curriculum, to include vocational and general education alongside religious instruction, and in terms of outcomes tracking. He posed a question that he clearly felt had not been adequately answered: how many graduates of the Madrasa system are successfully entering the labour market, and how many are dropping out without the skills or qualifications to do so? Without this data, it is impossible to design effective interventions. He called for a serious assessment of Madrasa outcomes as part of any comprehensive child protection and human capital development strategy.

Is DSS Coordinating or Duplicating? The Centrality Question

Perhaps the sharpest challenge Arifeen issued to the room was encapsulated in a single, pointed question: is DSS coordinating, or is it duplicating? He made the case that coordination must become the absolute centrality of DSS's institutional identity and operational culture, not one activity among many, but the defining purpose around which everything else is organized. The risk, he implied, is that DSS becomes yet another implementing actor competing for space and resources with the NGOs and INGOs it is supposed to be coordinating adding to the fragmentation rather than reducing it.

He also drew the room's attention to the Family Card initiative, which is currently being implemented at the ward level, as a promising example of a mechanism that could serve coordination and identification functions if properly integrated into the broader child protection

architecture. The Family Card, he suggested, could become an important data point in the national mapping effort helping to identify which families and which children are already within reach of the social protection system and which are not.

SSPS Engagement in Orientation Programmes for National Coordination

Arifeen committed explicitly that the SSPS Programme will engage in orientation programmes designed to strengthen national coordination from the bottom up specifically from field-level offices. This is a significant commitment because it speaks to one of the most persistent weaknesses of top-down coordination platforms: the gap between national-level agreements and district and upazila-level implementation. The NCPP can have the most sophisticated governance architecture imaginable, but if the frontline officers who are supposed to implement its protocols have never been properly oriented to what those protocols are or why they matter, the platform will remain a paper exercise. SSPS's commitment to engage at the field level is therefore a critical contribution to making the NCPP real rather than rhetorical.

The Proxy Means Test and Targeting Reform: A Partnership Opportunity

Arifeen raised the technically important question of targeting how the social protection system identifies who is poor and therefore eligible for benefits. He acknowledged honestly that the current approach, which relies on the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) for calculating poverty thresholds, has a significant gap: it identifies poor households at the aggregate level but does not necessarily ensure that benefits reach the specific individuals within those households who are most vulnerable. The result is a targeting system that is better than nothing but considerably less precise than it could and should be.

He announced that SSPS, in its next phase, will strongly begin piloting the Proxy Means Test; a more sophisticated targeting methodology that uses observable household characteristics as proxies for income, enabling more accurate identification of the poorest individuals even in the absence of reliable income data. He extended a specific and concrete invitation to DSS and its wings to become partners in this piloting process an opportunity that, if taken up, could significantly improve the precision with which child protection and social welfare benefits are directed toward those who need them most.

Violence Against Children: Sexual Harassment as a Priority Concern

Arifeen flagged Violence Against Children and specifically sexual harassment as a domain requiring urgent and specific programmatic attention within the NCPP framework. Without elaborating into extensive detail, his inclusion of this point in his remarks sent a clear signal: the platform's work on safeguarding and violence prevention, currently envisioned under TWG 3, must not shy away from the most sensitive and difficult forms of child harm. Sexual harassment and exploitation are among the most underreported and least addressed forms of violence against children in Bangladesh, and any serious child protection platform must have a clear, operational response to them not just policy language, but concrete mechanisms for prevention, reporting, response, and survivor support.

The Missing Cohort: Children Aged Four to Six

In what was one of the most practically specific and immediately actionable observations of the entire session, Arifeen identified a critical gap in Bangladesh's current social protection programming: children between the ages of four and six are effectively missing from the system. They are too old for the infant-focused interventions that target the zero-to-three age group, and too young for the school-based programmes that begin at age seven. This window; the years of early childhood that developmental science tells us are among the most neurologically formative and therefore consequential for long-term outcomes is currently without dedicated social protection coverage.

Arifeen's recommendation was both cautious and ambitious: start with a carefully designed pilot programme targeting this age cohort, evaluate its outcomes rigorously, and then scale nationally based on evidence. The "think big, start small, act now" philosophy he would articulate later in his remarks is entirely applicable here. The cost of inaction is not zero; it is the developmental potential of millions of children during the years when investment yields its highest returns. A pilot is not a full solution, but it is an honest and practical starting point.

Integration of Children from Safe Homes: Making Them Exemplary

Arifeen made a strong and somewhat aspirational point about the children currently living in Safe Homes, the DSS facilities that shelter children who are victims or witnesses of abuse and who are navigating the justice system. He argued that the ultimate goal for these children should not merely be their safe exit from the system, but their transformation into examples of what effective state care and investment can produce. If the system does its job well providing trauma-informed care, education, skills development, legal support, and family reintegration then children who pass through Safe Homes should be able to go on to live full, productive, and dignified lives. Making their stories visible; appropriately and with their consent; could serve both as evidence of the system's effectiveness and as a powerful counter-narrative to the stigma that often attaches to children who have been through institutional care.

The Disability Foundation: Governance Lapse Must Be Addressed

Arifeen did not shy away from delivering some of the most direct institutional criticism of the session when he turned to the Disability Foundation. He made two points that were uncomfortable but important. First, he observed that postings to the Disability Foundation are widely perceived; within the bureaucratic culture; as punishment postings: assignments given to officials who have fallen out of favour or who are being sidelined. This perception, he argued, is deeply damaging because it means that one of the most important institutions in Bangladesh's disability ecosystem is chronically underserved by its human resources. If capable, motivated officials do not want to be posted there, and if the culture treats it as a place of diminishment rather than purpose, the Foundation will never perform at the level its mandate requires.

Second, and equally critically, he pointed out that the Disability Foundation's National Committees are not meeting as required by the National Action Plan. This is a governance failure of the most basic kind; the oversight bodies that are supposed to ensure the Foundation is accountable and effective are simply not convening. He called for immediate corrective action, framing this not as a

minor administrative matter but as a fundamental breach of institutional responsibility toward children and adults with disabilities.

EPZ Collaboration: Making Child Protection a Business Case

Arifeen introduced a creative and somewhat unconventional idea; the possibility of engaging Export Processing Zones and their associated businesses as partners in child protection and disability inclusion. His framing was deliberately economic: rather than approaching the private sector purely as donors or corporate social responsibility partners, he suggested constructing a genuine business case for EPZ collaboration; demonstrating that investing in the rehabilitation, education, and skills development of vulnerable children and young people with disabilities produces returns in the form of a more capable, diverse, and productive workforce. This reframes child protection from a purely humanitarian concern into a labour market investment, which may open doors with private sector actors who respond more readily to economic arguments than to moral ones.

Training of Trainers (ToTs) and Grassroots Institutional Development

Arifeen called for structured Training of Trainers programmes specifically targeting institution-based staff and community-level organizations, including those working under the 'Prantik Janagoshtir Jibon Man Unnayan' programme; a grassroots livelihood improvement initiative. His argument was that sustainable capacity development cannot rely on repeated external training inputs; it must build internal capacity to train, so that knowledge and skills continue to spread through the system long after the initial training event. ToT programmes, properly designed and resourced, create multipliers; each trained trainer goes on to build the capacity of many others, creating a geometric expansion of the workforce's collective capability.

Job Fairs for *Shishu Paribar* Graduates: Merging with IDPD 2026

In a particularly creative programmatic suggestion, Arifeen proposed organizing dedicated job fairs for young people graduating from the Sarkari Shishu Paribar system; the state's flagship orphanage programme. These young people, who have been raised within the state system and are now entering adult life, often lack the family networks, social connections, and practical job-seeking skills that their peers from family settings take for granted. A structured job fair, connecting them directly with employers who have been oriented to their circumstances and potential, could make a significant difference in their transition outcomes.

He went further, suggesting that this event could be merged with the International Day of Persons with Disabilities celebrations in 2026 and beyond; creating a single, high-visibility event that celebrates and promotes the economic inclusion of both care leavers and persons with disabilities simultaneously. He also noted that young people who have received micro-credit support should be included in such an event, creating a platform that showcases not just job seekers but also young entrepreneurs who have already begun building their economic futures.

Children in Prison and the Children of Sex Workers

In what was perhaps the most ethically charged moment of his remarks, Arifeen raised two populations of children that he argued are currently invisible to or at least inadequately addressed by Bangladesh's National Social Security Strategy: children who are living in prison alongside

incarcerated parents, and children born to mothers who are sex workers. He made the case, with evident conviction, that these children must be explicitly included in the next generation of the NSSS; not as footnotes or special cases, but as recognized populations with specific vulnerabilities and specific entitlements. These children did not choose their circumstances. They are among the most marginalized and stigmatized children in Bangladesh, and any social protection system that claims to leave no child behind must be able to see and serve them.

Household Child Labour: Reframing as an Investment Case

Arifeen raised the issue of children engaged in household domestic labour; a vast and largely invisible population of children working in private homes across Bangladesh, outside the reach of most child labour monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. He proposed a reframing that is both economically sophisticated and morally powerful: rather than addressing household child labour purely as a rights violation, he challenged the room to construct an investment case. What is the economic cost to Bangladesh of having these children in domestic labour rather than in school and eventually in skilled employment? If their labour is currently being treated as a household economic resource, what is the true cost of that resource measured not just in lost wages but in lost human capital, reduced productivity, and diminished national economic output over the long term? He argued that this kind of economic analysis could be transformative in shifting the political economy of child labour reform moving the conversation from one about rights and violations to one about national economic interest and human capital investment.

Safe Homes: Listening to Children's Aspirations

Arifeen recommended that was simple in its logic but profound in its implications: someone should go into the Safe Homes and talk to the children about what they want to be. Not what the system has decided they should become, not what vocational pathways are administratively convenient, but what they themselves aspire to; what professions interest them, what futures they can imagine for themselves. He argued that this kind of aspiration-based programming; designing vocational and educational pathways around children's own expressed interests and motivations; is likely to produce far better outcomes than imposing predetermined tracks. Children who are working toward something they have chosen are more motivated, more persistent, and more likely to complete their training and thrive in their chosen field. This is not just good ethics; it is good programme design.

Disability and Social Capital: Small Is Big

Arifeen articulated a philosophical principle that he clearly regards as foundational to effective social protection work: the idea that people with disabilities can and should be transformed into social capital through targeted, thoughtful intervention. He acknowledged the challenge of scale; Bangladesh has millions of people with disabilities, and the resources available for disability-focused programming are finite. But he pushed back firmly against the temptation to use scale as an excuse for inaction. His formulation was memorable: think big, start small, act now. Begin with a focused, well-designed intervention. Evaluate it rigorously. Scale what works. The worst response to the scale of the problem is paralysis or incrementalism disguised as realism. Disabled people have

enormous potential to contribute to their families, communities, and the national economy and the system's job is to create the conditions in which that potential can be realized.

National Dissemination Plan

Showcasing DSS and Social Welfare to the Highest Level

Arifeen proposed a national dissemination plan; a structured, high-visibility event in which the activities, achievements, and remaining gaps of DSS and the Ministry of Social Welfare are presented comprehensively and publicly. He suggested that this event, ideally organized for the following year, should showcase the full breadth of what the social welfare system is doing; its programmes, its scale, its impact data, and its honest assessment of where gaps remain. And he was specific about the level of political endorsement this event should carry: he proposed that it be organized in the presence of the Honourable Chief Adviser, a suggestion that would signal not just institutional pride but the highest-level political commitment to the social welfare agenda. Such an event could serve simultaneously as an accountability mechanism, a visibility platform, a fundraising opportunity, and a morale boost for the thousands of social welfare workers across the country whose work is rarely publicly celebrated.

Activating the Committee: The Call for a Meeting

Arifeen made what is, in the context of institutional governance, a deceptively simple but enormously important recommendation: call a meeting. He urged the immediate activation of the relevant coordination committees; bodies that exist on paper and in law but that have not been convening with the frequency or seriousness that their mandates require. He made the point with a directness that was characteristic of his entire contribution: structures that do not meet are not structures; they are administrative fictions. If the committees responsible for coordinating Bangladesh's child welfare system are not meeting, the coordination they are supposed to provide is simply not happening. The first step is the most basic one; convene the people who are supposed to be coordinating, and create the expectation that they will continue to do so regularly and accountably.

A Central Information Database and Mapping Board

Building on his earlier comments about data fragmentation, Arifeen called specifically for the creation of a central information database and a visual mapping board that captures the full landscape of child protection activities across Bangladesh. The mapping board; physical or digital; would provide a shared, accessible, real-time reference point for all stakeholders, making it immediately visible where programmes are concentrated, where they are absent, and where they overlap. This kind of visual representation of the ecosystem is, he argued, worth more than any number of written reports because it makes the information accessible and actionable for a wide range of users, from senior policymakers to district-level social welfare officers.

The Child Helpline: Pattern Analysis and Vulnerability Prevention

Arifeen expressed strong interest in deepening the analytical use of data generated by the Child Helpline 1098. He argued that the helpline is currently being used primarily as a reactive intervention tool; children in crisis call, the system responds but that the enormous volume of calls

it receives represents an untapped source of intelligence about the patterns and drivers of child vulnerability across Bangladesh. If data from 2.24 million interventions were systematically analyzed identifying which types of cases are most common in which geographic areas at which times of year; it would be possible to develop predictive, preventive programming rather than purely reactive responses. The helpline, in other words, could become not just a rescue line but a vulnerability surveillance system one that tells the country not just where children are in crisis right now, but where they are likely to be in crisis next.

Common Field Visits: Building Shared Understanding

Arifeen proposed the organization of common field visits; joint visits to child protection institutions and community-level programmes by representatives of different agencies, ministries, and organizations. The rationale is straightforward: people who have visited the same sites, seen the same realities, and met the same children are far better positioned to coordinate effectively than people who know each other only through meetings and memos. Shared experience creates shared understanding, and shared understanding is the foundation of genuine collaboration. Joint field visits would also serve an accountability function giving all stakeholders direct exposure to how programmes are actually running on the ground, rather than relying solely on reports and data.

Effective Research: The Evidence Foundation

Arifeen made a broad and important call for a strengthened research culture within the child protection sector encompassing diagnostics, working papers, and discussion papers across all areas of programming. He argued that Bangladesh's child protection system is currently operating with insufficient evidence; too many decisions are being made on the basis of assumption, historical practice, or anecdote rather than rigorous analysis. Effective research, he contended, is not an academic luxury; it is a programmatic necessity. Without good diagnostics, you cannot accurately identify what is wrong. Without working papers that test ideas and build knowledge, you cannot develop better approaches. And without discussion papers that bring evidence into policy conversations, you cannot influence the decisions that shape the system. He called for a systematic investment in generating and using research across the entire child protection ecosystem.

Care Standards: Fine-Tuning the Current Framework

Arifeen addressed the quality of care in Safe Homes and other residential facilities, calling for a systematic process of fine-tuning the current care standards. He was careful to acknowledge that standards exist, the current framework is not without foundation, but he argued that standards that are not regularly reviewed, updated, and enforced become obsolete. Child protection practice evolves; what was considered adequate care a decade ago may not meet today's understanding of what children need to thrive. He called for a structured review process that brings practitioners, researchers, and children themselves; where possible; into conversation about what good care looks like in 2026 and beyond.

An Operational Room for Social Welfare

In a recommendation that spoke to the need for dedicated physical and institutional infrastructure, Arifeen called for the establishment of an operational room within the Ministry of Social Welfare; a dedicated coordination and monitoring space equipped with the data systems, communication tools, and human resources necessary to manage the NCPP's activities on a day-to-day basis. Such a room would serve as the nerve centre of the national child protection coordination effort; the place where data flows in, decisions are made, and directives flow out. Without a dedicated physical and human infrastructure for coordination, even the best-designed platform risks becoming a periodic event rather than a continuous process.

Child Protection Wing and Public-Private Partnership

Arifeen closed his remarks with two final commitments that signal SSPS's ongoing engagement with the NCPP process. First, he confirmed that SSPS will provide structured feedback on the planned design of the Child Protection Wing contributing the programme's analytical expertise and field experience to the institutional strengthening process. Second, and perhaps most ambitiously, he flagged the question of whether a Public-Private Partnership model could be developed for the NCPP; a question that, if explored seriously, could open new and significant streams of technical and financial support for the platform's activities. He did not commit to a specific design for such a partnership, but his willingness to raise the question publicly was itself a meaningful signal of intent.

Taken as a whole, Aminul Arifeen's remarks constituted a masterclass in engaged, expert dialogue affirmative where the system has achieved real progress, honest where it has fallen short, and generative in its identification of specific, actionable pathways forward. His contribution significantly enriched the dialogue and provided the NCPP and DSS with a substantive and demanding agenda for the work ahead.

Way Forward: Strengthening Synergy between Child Protection and Social Protection

1. Convening a High-Level Technical Consultation with DSS

A follow-up meeting will be organized with senior officials from the Department of Social Services to transition from initial exploratory discussions to deeper technical alignment. This consultation will focus on identifying convergence between the proposed National Child Protection Platform (NCPP) and existing social protection delivery systems, including MIS, beneficiary registries, and case management practices. It will also clarify institutional roles across national and sub-national levels, particularly how DSS field structures can operationalize child-sensitive social protection. In addition, the discussion will explore how child protection can be more systematically integrated within the lifecycle-based framework of the National Social Security Strategy.

2. Preparation and Circulation of a Joint Meeting Report

A concise yet analytical meeting report will be developed and shared with DSS and relevant stakeholders to ensure continuity and accountability. The report will synthesize key discussion points, highlight agreed priorities, and outline practical entry points for collaboration. It will also map overlaps between ongoing child protection interventions and existing social safety net

programmes, while proposing an initial framework for integrating child protection dimensions; such as vulnerability targeting, shock-responsiveness, and referral mechanisms, into broader social protection programming.

3. Identification of Research and Diagnostic Priorities

A joint diagnostic exercise will be undertaken to generate evidence on gaps in programme design and service delivery within DSS-managed interventions. This will include assessing the adequacy and quality of existing programmes in addressing child-specific vulnerabilities, examining inclusion and exclusion errors in reaching the most vulnerable children, and identifying fragmentation between cash transfers and social services. The exercise will also explore the digital readiness of current systems and the feasibility of integrating the NCPP with existing MIS and social registries. The findings will serve as a foundation for evidence-based policy reform and future pilot initiatives.

4. Programme Upgradation and Piloting Opportunities

Building on diagnostic findings, selected DSS programmes will be identified for piloting integrated and upgraded service delivery models. This will involve introducing child protection-sensitive approaches within social protection programmes, particularly by linking cash-based support with social services such as case management, psychosocial support, and referral systems. The piloting phase will also test the applicability of digital case management solutions under the NCPP within existing DSS service delivery structures, with the aim of demonstrating scalable and system-integrated models.

5. Knowledge Sharing and Dissemination (June-July)

A dissemination event is tentatively planned for June-July to present key findings, emerging lessons, and policy recommendations to a broader set of stakeholders. A detailed concept note will be developed to define the objectives, expected outcomes, and engagement strategy for the event. A sub-committee, comprising DSS, United Nations Development Programme, and other key partners, will be formed to guide the process and ensure coherence in messaging. The event will aim to position child-sensitive social protection as a critical component of Bangladesh's evolving social protection reform agenda.

6. Institutionalizing Collaboration Mechanisms

To ensure sustainability beyond discrete engagements, efforts will be made to establish structured coordination mechanisms between child protection and social protection actors. This will involve fostering regular technical exchanges, strengthening joint planning and monitoring processes, and aligning collaboration with ongoing reform initiatives supported by United Nations Development Programme. The objective is to move towards a more integrated, systems-based approach that embeds child protection considerations within the broader social protection framework.

Conclusion

The meeting demonstrated that the intersection between child protection and social protection is not peripheral, but central to building an effective and inclusive welfare system in Bangladesh. The presentations from DSS illustrated both the scale of existing state commitment and the breadth of the current child protection ecosystem, while the concept of the National Child Protection Platform offered a compelling response to long-standing coordination gaps across actors, programmes, and geographies. Together, these discussions made clear that the next phase of reform must move beyond isolated interventions toward an integrated systems approach that connects legal mandates, institutional mechanisms, service delivery, financing, and digital infrastructure around the needs of the child.

The reflections shared by SSPS further enriched this agenda by emphasizing that stronger coordination must be matched by sharper targeting, better evidence, lifecycle-based programme design, and deeper engagement with communities, education systems, and labour market pathways. The discussion reinforced that vulnerable children cannot be adequately protected through stand-alone welfare responses alone; rather, they require a holistic safety net that combines cash and in-kind support, case management, referral pathways, psychosocial services, disability inclusion, and preventive community-based mechanisms. In this sense, the proposed collaboration between DSS and social protection actors presents a significant opportunity to align child protection priorities with broader reform efforts in social registries, MIS development, digital case management, and shock-responsive social protection.

Looking ahead, the meeting established a strong foundation for continued technical engagement and practical cooperation. The agreed way forward, including a high-level technical consultation, preparation of a joint report, diagnostic work, pilot initiatives, and broader knowledge dissemination, provides a clear pathway for translating dialogue into action. If pursued with sustained commitment, these steps can help institutionalize collaboration between child protection and social protection actors and contribute to a more unified, responsive, and evidence-driven system. Ultimately, the meeting reaffirmed a shared principle: that protecting vulnerable children requires not only programmes, but partnership; not only investment, but integration; and not only vision but coordinated implementation across the whole of government and society.

Dialogue in Pictures


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