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**Executive Board  
Second Regular Session**

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## **OTHER BUSINESS**

**Agenda item 14**

*For information\**

# **E**

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## **REPORT ON THE FIELD VISIT TO BANGLADESH OF THE WFP EXECUTIVE BOARD**

\* In accordance with the Executive Board's decisions on governance, approved at the Annual and Third Regular Sessions, 2000, items for information should not be discussed unless a Board member specifically requests it, well in advance of the meeting, and the Chair accepts the request on the grounds that it is a proper use of the Board's time.

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## NOTE TO THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

**This document is submitted to the Executive Board for information**

The Secretariat invites members of the Board who may have questions of a technical nature with regard to this document to contact the WFP staff focal point indicated below, preferably well in advance of the Board's meeting.

Secretary to the Executive Board: Ms E. Joergensen tel.: 066513-2603

Should you have any questions regarding matters of dispatch of documentation for the Executive Board, please contact Ms I. Carpitella, Administrative Assistant, Conference Servicing Unit (tel.: 066513-2645).

## DRAFT DECISION\*



The Board takes note of “Report on the Field Visit to Bangladesh of the WFP Executive Board” (WFP/EB.2/2011/14).

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\* This is a draft decision. For the final decision adopted by the Board, please refer to the Decisions and Recommendations document issued at the end of the session.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1. The Executive Board delegation would like to extend its sincere appreciation to the WFP country team in Dhaka and the field, led by Country Director Ms Christa Rader, for its high professionalism, expertise and dedication, not to mention the very warm reception it gave us in Bangladesh. We are also grateful to Ms Erika Jorgensen, Secretary to the Executive Board, for excellent organization and coordination of the visit.

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## INTRODUCTION

2. WFP Executive Board members representing Burkina Faso, Denmark, France, Haiti, India and the Russian Federation visited Bangladesh from 18 to 23 September 2011. They were accompanied by the Secretary of the Board, Ms Erika Jorgensen.
3. Board members met the State Minister of Women and Children Affairs, the Minister of Food and Disaster Management, the Minister of Primary and Mass Education, the United Nations country team and WFP's main partners in Bangladesh, including those in the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local communities and donor country representatives. Board members attended a presentation on Project Laser Beam, together with representatives of the private sector. A wide range of projects were observed in the north of the country, including promotional cash-based safety net and mother-and-child nutrition activities, enhancing resilience/climate change adaptation activities and school feeding programmes. Lack of time and the ongoing floods prevented the mission from visiting WFP activities in southern Bangladesh, although the country office in Dhaka provided an informative video on these. The visit to school feeding for urban working children in Dhaka's Mohakhali slums was cancelled at the last moment owing to a national strike on 22 September 2011.
4. The main objectives of the visit were to observe:
  - the effectiveness of WFP field operations in the country;
  - WFP as a partner of the Government, particularly in capacity development, and the degree of cooperation with local partners; and
  - country-level coordination and partnership among WFP and other United Nations organizations.
5. Special emphasis was placed on preparations for implementing the new WFP country programme, to commence in January 2012, its strategic focus and expected added value in comparison with past WFP projects in Bangladesh.

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## SOCIAL-ECONOMIC AND FOOD SECURITY CONTEXT

6. Bangladesh's economy is rapidly developing and market-based, and has demonstrated sustainable and dynamic growth over recent years. Since 2004, gross domestic product has grown annually by 6 percent, and this high level is projected to be maintained for the coming five years. According to the International Monetary Fund, in 2010 Bangladesh ranked as the 57th largest economy in the world in nominal terms, and the 47th largest in purchasing power parity terms.

7. Nevertheless, Bangladesh remains a developing country with pervasive poverty, ranking 129th in the Human Development Index for 2010. The absolute number of food-insecure people remains high – of a total population of 150 million, about 60 million people in urban and rural areas do not consume the minimum daily food intake required for a healthy life – 2,122 kcal per person per day.<sup>1</sup> Overall, inequality in the distribution of wealth has increased. In addition, Bangladesh is at high risk of natural hazards and shocks, such as floods, storm surges, cyclones and droughts, and is recognized as one of the countries most affected by climate change. The World Risk Report 2011 ranked Bangladesh sixth among the countries most vulnerable to natural disasters.
8. Food security is one of the key pillars of the Government's social and economic strategy. The overarching goal is to create a sustainable macroeconomic environment that can maintain the current economic growth and reduce poverty and hunger further. Bangladesh has made significant progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, particularly in reducing poverty: since 1970, the proportion of people living in poverty has been reduced from 70 to 32 percent in 2010. Bangladesh's new commitment to achieving MDG 1 has been seriously considered in formulating the development agenda and is duly reflected in the National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction II for 2009–2011 (NSAPR-II). The Government considers social protection one of the critical components of NSAPR-II, and allocates almost US\$3 billion a year – 15 percent of the total budget – to safety net programmes.
9. However, despite strong Government commitment and drastic improvements in poverty reduction over the past decade, the projection is that Bangladesh is unlikely to halve the number of hungry people by 2015. Major challenges to improving household food security relate to lack of purchasing power, low resilience to frequent shocks among the food-insecure, inadequate access to land for cultivation, and shortages of food during the agricultural lean season. The food price crisis of 2008 continues to have a significant impact on food security. Rapid growth of urban poverty, and especially of undernutrition, due to dynamic urbanization and increasing population pressures, has become a new challenge. The rates of chronic and acute undernutrition are alarming and could undermine the progress in reducing poverty achieved so far.
10. Despite achievements in women's empowerment, the issue of *gender inequality* in Bangladesh remains one of the main factors to have negative effects on the nutrition status of women and children: early marriage is pervasive, with 64 percent of girls married before they are 18 years of age; 30 percent of mothers are underweight; and 46 percent of pregnant women suffer from iron-deficiency anaemia.

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<sup>1</sup> This estimate is based on the 2005 Household Income and Expenditure Survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Another HIES conducted in 2010 will provide new estimates.

## FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

### New Country Programme

11. The new country programme for 2012–2016 represents a strategic shift in WFP's approach to addressing the challenges of food insecurity, by contributing to national capacity development and leveraging WFP's expertise to strengthen and scale up government safety net programmes. It is not ambitious according to the country's needs, but is well prioritized, ensuring coherence among various components and projects and focusing mainly on the most vulnerable groups in the poorest geographical areas. More than 90 percent of the 4 million beneficiaries to be reached over the five-year period are women and children.
12. In the context of the new country programme, and in coordination with the Government and other development partners, WFP needs to refine the poverty mapping and targeting approach so that persisting pockets of extreme poverty at the local level below the sub-district (*upazila*) level can be identified.
13. Enhanced partnerships with all the stakeholders and development partners in the country, and convergence and synergies among programme components will be the main drivers for reaching the expected outcomes of the new country programme, increasing its impact and sustainability and achieving significant results in reducing hunger.
14. The Board representatives noted with satisfaction that WFP is planning to increase the incorporation of an evidence-based gender perspective into its new country programme 2012–2016, based on an earlier assessment of its work in this area in Bangladesh. This includes adjusting the country office's monitoring and evaluation system to improve the monitoring of women and girl beneficiaries and the expected increase in women's participation and decision-making power, but also the potential negative impacts at the household level.
15. In all the community-based projects that the Board members visited, they noted the importance given to elements such as training, education and awareness raising.

### Relationship with the Government

16. The team observed with appreciation that WFP is considered a strategic and reliable partner of the Government, and its activities on the ground appear to be aligned with national plans, policies and strategies. Representatives of line ministries expressed strong commitment to implementing hand-over strategies, developing capacity and increasing national ownership in food security programmes. The Government perceives WFP in two main roles – as an operational agency that delivers food assistance in alignment with national programmes, and as a technical partner in advocacy, expertise and knowledge sharing, and support to nationally owned programmes – depending on the context. Two WFP capacity support units have been established, in the Ministry for Women and Children Affairs, for the vulnerable group development programme, and in the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, for the school feeding programme.

## Relationship with the United Nations Country Team

17. The mission noted partners' high recognition of the excellent work done by WFP, and a high degree of cooperation and coordination between WFP and other United Nations agencies on the ground. Joint programmes with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) are well designed and based on a realistic, pragmatic approach. However, there is room for improvement, particularly by increasing the scope of cooperation with FAO, which implements one of its largest Asian programmes in Bangladesh, and by building new relations with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), which has recently established a field presence in Bangladesh. The Board members were unable to meet an IFAD representative, as a full IFAD country presence was not yet established.
18. WFP appears to be well integrated within the new United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) 2012–2016. The overall goal of UNDAF as a tool for supporting national efforts to achieve MDGs and reduce socio-economic inequalities is well recognized by the Government of Bangladesh. In the new UNDAF, WFP is designated as the lead agency responsible for one of the seven pillars – food security and nutrition.

## Mother-and-Child Nutrition

19. Improving mother-and-child nutrition (MCN) appears to be a major component of the new country programme: WFP will significantly extend the beneficiary coverage under MCN, from 140,000 beneficiaries in 2011 to 360,000 in 2012. The alarming rates of undernutrition among children and pregnant and lactating women justify this strategic choice. In particular, 48.6 percent of children under 5 remain chronically undernourished (stunted), which puts at risk the well-being and productivity of future generations. Children under 2 have been identified as the most vulnerable group, with a global acute undernutrition rate of 16.9 percent, and severe acute undernutrition of 6 percent. Bangladesh has the highest prevalence of underweight children in South Asia.
20. The Board representatives noted with satisfaction that owing to significant programmatic changes, WFP is advocating for its technical partners to take a lead role in the management of severe acute undernutrition. As yet however, complementary partnerships have not been established in all nutrition programme areas, only in the joint MDG project.
21. Advocacy and raising awareness of the importance of addressing mother-and-child undernutrition is still a challenge for WFP in Bangladesh. There are good opportunities for attracting wider political attention to nutrition in the context of the joint initiative for ending child undernutrition REACH (FAO/UNICEF/WFP/World Health Organization (WHO)) and the Scaling Up Nutrition movement, both of which are active in Bangladesh.
22. The presentation on Project Laser Beam showed a unique public-private partnership with a focus on eradicating child undernutrition, with Bangladesh as an example. Board representatives noted that there is much potential for enhanced collaboration with national and international private sector partners in this area.

## Safety Nets

23. The main lesson learned from observing promotional WFP-assisted safety nets under the Food Security for the Ultra-Poor Project was that mixing and sequencing different food assistance tools can provide added value in responding to food security needs. FSUP, which is implemented through local NGOs, comprises a series of efforts, with cash provided as a monthly allowance for 24 months to 30,000 ultra-poor households, to improve their food security and nutritional well-being. WFP's use of cash grants for asset creation in a country where micro-credit has been strongly promoted by NGOs is driven by the target group: the ultra-poor, especially women, including women heads of household. The Board group met beneficiaries who had benefited from the grant, of about US\$200. However, limited access to local and regional markets was recognized as one of the main challenges, and requires the building of more partnerships with local actors such as NGOs.
24. The absence in the Government of a coordinating ministry for safety nets has led to inefficiencies in implementing programmes. This aspect makes the convergence and complementarities between WFP-managed promotional safety nets and national safety nets less achievable. Another challenge is that the scale of most Government-supported safety net programmes is insufficient to address chronic hunger. The vulnerable group development programme – one of the largest Government-funded safety net interventions, which was started in 1975 as vulnerable group feeding and targets 750,000 ultra-poor women in a two-year cycle – is not sustainable owing to lack of funding, so cannot be expanded adequately to respond to the growing needs of beneficiaries in this social category.
25. The Board group noted with appreciation that the Minister of Women and Children Affairs included cash grants for asset creation in her ministry's vision for the vulnerable group development programme, building on experience gained by WFP and other agencies implementing promotional safety nets.

## School Feeding

26. While the Government claims an enrolment level of more than 90 percent, challenges facing the national education policy include the attendance level and the overall drop-out rate across the country, which remains high, at about 50 percent.
27. Among the most explicit indicators of the effectiveness of WFP-assisted school feeding are significant progress in primary enrolment and nutrition improvements. Overall enrolment in primary schools has increased by 16 percent over recent years. For instance, in Palashbari Pachchimpara Government Primary School (Kurigam district), visited by the mission, enrolment has increased from 72 percent in 2001 to 100 percent in 2011. Another benefit is the relatively low prevalence of iron-deficiency anaemia, of 10 percent, compared with 22 percent in non-assisted schools.
28. The Board representatives observed with satisfaction that Government representatives value school feeding as an effective tool with long-lasting benefits, affecting large numbers of beneficiaries and contributing to achievement of universal primary education (MDG 2). The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education is demonstrating increasing responsibility for school feeding: it has announced the ambitious goal of establishing a national school feeding programme in 2011, which in 2012 will be scaled up gradually to reach more than 1.2 million children in 34 sub-districts (*upazilas*) in 15 districts. Each child is to be provided with 75 g of fortified biscuits per day.

29. The Board representatives also observed the use of vegetable gardens as part of school feeding programmes, which helps raise awareness of the importance of nutrition in the lives of schoolchildren and their families.
30. With the Ministry for Primary and Mass Education, the Board team discussed the need for strengthened dialogue between its members and WFP, to coordinate the expected gradual phase-out of WFP and phase-in of the Government.
31. The first step will be necessary in two years' time, as it has been announced that in 2014 school feeding will be integrated into the World Bank-managed pool funding for Bangladesh's national education policy.

### **Enhancing Resilience to Disasters and the Effects of Climate Change**

32. The main lesson learned from WFP's enhancing resilience programme, in which the Government of Bangladesh pays 50 percent of labourers' wages in cash<sup>2</sup> and WFP 50 percent in food, was that such projects play an important role in capacity development among local communities, improving local-level preparedness and response to natural disasters and climate change challenges.
33. The embankment construction project in Gaibandha drew the Board members' particular interest. The enthusiasm of participants, 60 percent of whom were women, spoke for itself. As well as protecting crops and houses from floods, another achievement relates to improving communication and opening access to markets for agricultural production. A matter of concern is that workers involved in the project do not benefit sufficiently from the embankment, as the agricultural land protected from erosion and flooding belongs mainly to landowners, although they rent out a significant portion of land to sharecroppers from among the poor, and create wage employment opportunities.

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

34. WFP in Bangladesh should balance its operational activities in the field and its policy dialogue with national authorities at all levels, to ensure more sustainability of ongoing development projects and their gradual hand-over to the Government in the course of implementation of the new country programme 2012–2016. Well-defined and owned hand-over strategies can play a crucial role in this regard.
35. WFP should reinforce its partnerships with FAO, UNICEF and other United Nations agencies and focus its activities on areas where it adds value, to guarantee the most effective use of resources for development activities, based on the comparative advantages, strengths and unique mandate of each agency. Within these partnerships, a focus on collaboration among the Rome-based agencies, including IFAD, is required, to ensure collective and coherent responses for tackling food insecurity and hunger in Bangladesh.
36. Refined targeting is needed to identify the most poor, food-insecure and vulnerable areas, given the significant reduction in poverty to 32 percent over recent years. In particular, further research and qualitative assessment – by going down from the sub-district to the union level – will be essential in prioritizing needs.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2012 a total of US\$11 million is planned to come from government contributions.

37. By 2012, WFP should have fully coordinated the geographical areas of coverage of school feeding programmes with the Government, to ensure convergence between the planned phase-out and the Government's commitment to taking over. WFP should continue to provide technical and logistical assistance to nationally owned school feeding programmes and should enhance its advocacy role as requested by the Government.
38. In addition, in coordination with UNICEF and WHO, WFP should examine more closely such aspects as drinking-water consumption and hand-washing.
39. For cash-based safety nets, project evaluation/research is required to guide further implementation and possible scale-up and to observe the longer-term impacts of such innovative tools on household food security, agricultural development and nutrition in Bangladesh.
40. It also seems appropriate to bring the promotional safety net programmes into the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, with a view to identifying Government interest and linking the safety nets more closely to the national vulnerable group development programme.
41. WFP should continue to integrate its nutrition approaches into various components of the new country programme, aligning them closely with the priorities of the Government of Bangladesh and assisting the strengthening of multi-sectoral links among ministries. WFP should establish close cooperation with other United Nations agencies, especially FAO and UNICEF, on modeling innovative and comprehensive approaches to nutrition and more effective ways of raising awareness.
42. WFP should strengthen partnerships with the Government, NGOs and others on building comprehensive disaster resilience. WFP's role in these partnerships should be based on its comparative advantages such as strong food security expertise, analysis capabilities and disaster management at the local level with community-based organizations.

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## ACRONYMS USED IN THE DOCUMENT

FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	non-governmental organization
NSAPR-II	National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction II
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization