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COUNTRY PROGRAMME MID-TERM REVIEW— BANGLADESH

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NOTE TO THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

This document is submitted for consideration to the Executive Board.

Pursuant to the decisions taken on the methods of work by the Executive Board at its First Regular Session of 1996, the documentation prepared by the Secretariat for the Board has been kept brief and decision-oriented. The meetings of the Executive Board are to be conducted in a business-like manner, with increased dialogue and exchanges between delegations and the Secretariat. Efforts to promote these guiding principles will continue to be pursued by the Secretariat.

The Secretariat therefore invites members of the Board who may have questions of a technical nature with regard to this document, to contact the WFP staff member(s) listed below, preferably well in advance of the Board's meeting. This procedure is designed to facilitate the Board's consideration of the document in the plenary.

The WFP focal points for this document are:

Regional Director:	Ms. J. Cheng-Hopkins	tel.: 066513-2209
Programme Coordinator:	Ms. A. Asrat	tel.: 066513-2260

Should you have any questions regarding matters of dispatch of documentation for the Executive Board, please contact the Documentation and Meetings Clerk (tel.: 066513-2641).



INTRODUCTION

1. A Mid-Term Review (MTR) of the Bangladesh Country Programme was conducted by a mission in January 1999 to assess progress in achieving country programme objectives, register lessons learned and recommend possibilities for future reorientation of activities. A summary of the Mission's report follows.

THE COUNTRY PROGRAMME AND THE ROLE OF WFP

Background

2. Bangladesh is characterized by a high incidence of poverty and resulting food insecurity. Currently, about half of the population lives below the consumption-poverty line (less than 2,100 calories per capita per day); one quarter of them live in extreme poverty (1,800 calories per capita per day); and about one tenth of the population, some 13 million people, live in what may be called "ultra poverty", consuming less than 1,600 calories per capita per day. The prevalence of malnutrition is one of the highest in Asia, and higher than the average for sub-Saharan Africa. While there has been some progress in terms of human development in recent years, the overall outcome has been relatively modest: adult literacy barely reaches 50 percent, life expectancy is hovering around 57–58 years, the maternal mortality rate stands out as the highest in the region at 440 per 100,000, and infant mortality is still extremely high at 77 per 1,000 live births. These indicators point to the potential importance of food-assisted programmes in alleviating poverty and reducing malnutrition by improving the overall food security of the poor. Women in particular are caught in the grip of poverty and face many cultural and social barriers to empowerment and income-generating activities.
3. Since 1974, WFP has supported development projects and emergency operations in Bangladesh at a total cost of over one billion United States dollars. A Country Programme was formulated in 1996 covering the period 1997–2000, at a cost to WFP of 158.3 million dollars (or 640,000 tons.). This is supplemented by a contribution of 164.9 million dollars (in food) from bilateral donors and 185.8 million dollars (in food and cash) from the Government of Bangladesh. NGOs provide a further 13.6 million dollars.
4. Food aid will continue to play a critical role in implementing poverty alleviation programmes in Bangladesh. According to the Fifth Annual Development Plan of the Government, food aid in recent years has become an "important instrument for agricultural development, poverty alleviation, education, environmental protection and gender equality". Hence, the importance of food aid for addressing various dimensions of poverty alleviation is expected to rise in the medium term. Food aid has a comparative advantage in Bangladesh as a mechanism that enables poor people to approach development activities.



The Country Programme's goals and objectives, and WFP's vision

5. The Bangladesh Country Programme has two goals: a) building assets and promoting self-reliance among the poor; and b) mitigating the effects of natural disasters. The Country Programme attempts to achieve this through two activities: vulnerable group development (VGD) and rural development (RD). A series of inter-linked Country Programme objectives within these broad goals include the following:
- a) *Greater focus on the poorest people in the poorest areas of the country.* This has been successfully implemented under the Country Programme by reaching the target groups of unemployed, landless poor and destitute women. Improved "poverty mapping" applied to both activities, and the sharpening of targeting with respect to selection of beneficiaries, have ensured greater focus on the poorest. Selection criteria (no assets, woman-headed household, not an NGO member) for VGD and the self-targeting nature of RD work ensure that the programme reaches the poorest of the poor.
 - b) *Greater direct participation of poor women.* The implementation of the Country Programme activities ensures that the greatest percentage of WFP resources is directly targeted to poor women. This has already been successfully achieved: poor women have reached an average participation rate of 55 percent (30 percent for RD and 100 percent for VGD).
 - c) *A sustainable break in the cycle of poverty (from mere food consumption to investment in development).* WFP support leads to a short-term effect, (i.e. increased food consumption), which provides a platform for development. The longer-term effects in terms of overall socio-economic development are achieved through provision of a package of development services. This has been well integrated into VGD activities and has recently been introduced into RD activities. After graduation from food assistance, an increasing number of poor beneficiaries move on to participate in NGO programmes.
 - d) *Increased government participation.* The institutional strengthening aspects of the Country Programme refer to an increase in government responsibility, with special reference to its cash contribution to WFP-assisted activities. Progress has been made in bringing the RD food assistance component into the Government's planning process by including it in the Annual Development Plan. In this way, the Government assumes a more direct role in programme planning, thus ensuring more sustainable development through increased commitment at the national level. The WFP Country Programme fits well into the Government's policy for poverty alleviation. Attention is given to employment promotion, to the choice of appropriate technology and to the allocation of resources for relatively labour-intensive sectors. Simultaneously, poverty reduction programmes have been initiated to provide training and credit support to those without assets so that they can engage in income-generating activities.

COUNTRY PROGRAMME ACTIVITIES

Vulnerable group development (VGD)

6. VGD is the largest poverty-alleviation activity covering 500,000 poor rural women (1,072,000 beneficiaries), with new enrolments every 18 months. The activity fulfils WFP's global mission and the Country Programme goal of "building assets and



promoting self-reliance among the poor” by realizing each of the inter-linked objectives. This activity focuses on the direct participation of the poorest women, emphasizes sustainability, and expands access to credit to the poor. Currently, VGD targets women directly and plays a prominent role in improving household food security through a monthly provision of food. The food ration serves as a platform for participating in development activities. It also helps women achieve long-term food security by strengthening their marketable skills and providing them with access to small loans.

7. VGD has three components: income-generation, the largest component, covering 90 percent of the women; income-generation skills training; and training of group leaders. The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief and the Ministry of Women’s and Children’s Affairs share responsibility for administering the activities. NGOs such as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) play key roles in training and credit delivery.
8. Since the start of VGD in 1975, there has been a progressive reorientation from exclusive wheat distribution towards the provision of a package of development services. These services include training in income-generating skills, health and nutrition awareness-raising, and access to small loans. All participants receive food aid and are expected to deposit money to a savings account. Ninety percent of those who receive food have access to a development package, although not necessarily access to credit, while 75 percent receive this package plus small loans. The possibility of graduating into mainstream NGO programmes has become available to an increasing number of women. Impact assessments indicate that more than two thirds of women participating in VGD activities improve their economic status.

Rural Development (RD)

9. Nation-wide RD activity covers food-assisted undertakings in the water, roads, fisheries and forestry sectors. The water sector is most prominent, receiving 47 percent of WFP’s RD resources. RD activity has gradually evolved from a food-for-work employment project towards becoming an integrated development programme involving two Government departments as well as NGOs. To increase the potential of achieving sustainable development for the target group, implementing NGOs are providing an increasing number of beneficiaries with a package which includes training in income-generating skills, as well as access to credit. Until recently, workers received only food, but currently 30 percent of their wages is in the form of cash provided by the Government, although this is not always received in time.
10. The total number of RD workers in the 1997–98 fiscal year was 350,000 persons (or 1,750,000 beneficiaries), generating 45 million workdays annually. The percentage of women increased from 13 percent in 1996 to 30 percent in 1998. RD has a strong self-targeting mechanism; it reaches the poorest of the poor. RD is implemented by four government departments and over 100 NGOs. Schemes are proposed by government officials or NGOs at the sub-district level (approximately 100,000 people) and jointly reviewed by WFP and line agencies prior to approval. The schemes are usually implemented through a committee comprising locally elected officials and NGOs.
11. Improvement in water and road infrastructure plays an important role in a number of ways: increased agricultural production; improved public health; and better access to markets, health services, and educational or training opportunities. Public works activities contribute to poverty alleviation through the creation of physical infrastructure



such as roads, irrigation canals, drainage ditches, culverts and embankments, and through flood control. Apart from directly benefiting the poorest of the poor, who usually participate as labourers in rural works schemes, there are also indirect benefits upon which other segments of the poor population draw through labour and land-lease agreements. These are considered significant, although they often remain under-emphasized (recent studies show that the agricultural wage rate of labourers is substantially higher in villages with developed physical infrastructure, compared to villages with underdeveloped infrastructure, and that land tenancy markets in villages have become more dynamic, thus offering opportunities to lease land).

12. RD activities contribute to the Country Programme goals of building assets and promoting self-reliance among the poor, and mitigating the effects of natural disasters. They contribute to seasonal employment for the rural poor during periods of the year characterized by food insecurity, to the creation of infrastructure, and thus also to helping mitigate the effects of natural disasters. They provide income-generation opportunities through the development of fish ponds and forestry activities. Maintenance and rehabilitation activities are also performed under RD, e.g. 40 percent of all ponds are maintained through RD activities.
13. In the past, under RD activities, beneficiaries received their full entitlement in wheat, of which they sold about 50 percent to buy other necessities. This was recently changed to 70 percent food and 30 percent cash to be provided by the Government. There are delays, however, in the release of cash by the Government, so some workers still sell part of the wheat to meet immediate cash needs. Under maintenance activities, project participants are obliged to save their cash wages for the full two years of participation, thus pushing some of them to sell some of their wheat.
14. The two Country Programme activities have progressively converged: RD has substantially moved in the direction of providing a development package to an increasing number of women and more emphasis is being placed on household food security.

INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING AND PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

15. *Institutional strengthening.* A joint government–donor task force on “Strengthening Institutions for Food-Assisted Development” (SIFAD) concluded in 1989 that food–assisted management was carried out in isolation and not integrated with other national development efforts. This institutional weakness was reflected in the fact that programming and allocation of food resources were independent of programming of other resources. As a consequence, the SIFAD task force recommended a strategy of institutional change at all levels of the decision–making process to emphasize the development impact of food assistance. Ten years later, some elements of this process have been implemented, some have become redundant, and some are still not completed. The following achievements are worth noting: as of financial year 1997–98, food aid as a resource has been brought into the Annual Development Plan, indicating a stronger commitment by the Government; and in many ways, the Government has increased responsibility in implementation, management and supervision of WFP-assisted activities.
16. *Training.* Training activities for food-assisted development are an integral part of programme management in Bangladesh. The WFP country office offers various types of training for its staff, counterpart officials and beneficiaries. Most of the training focuses on



operational linkages which serve an important project-monitoring function. Since 1995, the Government has provided funds for almost 90 percent of the training activities under SIFAD.

17. *Targeting.* Since 1995, the poverty-mapping and targeting system, based on distress factors, has emphasized food insecurity indicators rather than distress levels only. The new system was renamed the Resource Allocation Map for Food-assisted Development to emphasize its use for development resource allocation - both for WFP and bilateral donor assistance - to sub-districts with the highest levels of food insecurity. Since these activities focus to a significant extent on poor rural women (especially women heads of households), two new indicators to help identify poor women were introduced into the system.
18. *Monitoring and evaluation.* Monitoring systems have been streamlined recently: indicators were evaluated, irrelevant indicators dropped, and new indicators added. The WFP/Dhaka office includes a section devoted to the design and implementation of impact-evaluation systems. Support has been received from the European Union (ECU 500,000) under the Integrated Food-assisted Development Project (IFADEP) to establish and implement these impact evaluation systems. A pilot scheme is being set up to monitor certain key performance indicators.

ASSESSMENT

19. The Country Programme fits well into the country's reality. However, some problems have been encountered. The WFP country office is tackling the following problems:
 - In the Country Programme document, goals and objectives are not sufficiently linked to development and disaster mitigation activities.
 - Potential relationships and collaboration with other channels of tackling poverty are not sufficiently explored.
 - Despite the change from 100 percent food to 70 percent food and 30 percent cash, and since the release of cash is often delayed, beneficiaries still sell some food because they also have immediate cash needs.
 - The complementarity between VGD and RD activities has not been sufficiently strengthened in organizational and institutional terms.
 - The gender focus in WFP-supported development activities has progressively been strengthened by putting in place some empowering structures, but is still incomplete.
 - WFP resources are not adequately complemented with other non-food resources and technical expertise from the Government, other United Nations agencies and NGOs to achieve an even greater developmental impact. Current capacity is characterized by institutional weaknesses, even though WFP has established many linkages with the Government, bilateral donors, United Nations agencies and NGOs. Some of these are weak and offer insignificant contributions. Increasing consideration is being given to strengthening linkages with the Economic Relations Department, line ministries, United Nations agencies, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and NGOs such as BRAC, Helen Keller International, CARE and others. A more manageable number of partnerships with strong commitment from all parties may be preferable. Some examples of movement in that direction are the current link with UNDP and



FAO for joint technical and financial support for the promotion of sustainable household food security in selected rural areas, and WFP's collaboration with the Ministry of Food for labour-intensive community-based activities under RD activities. The large number of activities, linkages and related constraints are a burden on WFP's management and monitoring capacity, and seriously jeopardize the effectiveness of the Country Programme.

- Inclusion of WFP-assisted food aid in the Annual Development Plan has not yet ensured the availability of sufficient complementary resources for project implementation.
- Despite continued efforts to improve institutional capacities and coordination, RD Government counterparts need further institutional strengthening. Other important issues are: the timely release of complementary funds by the Government; greater efficiency in other essential works to be implemented in combination with WFP activities (e.g. strengthening of embankments); and sufficient funds for training and follow-up activities by NGOs.
- The effectiveness of VGD is hampered by some of the same factors as those for RD, but also by the fact that not all women enrolled in the various activities are capable of becoming micro-entrepreneurs and there are not many other opportunities for income-generation. In addition, moving overall policy and coordination responsibility from the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief to the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs has not improved the efficiency and effectiveness of government involvement. The capacity of the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs remains limited.
- The participation of beneficiaries in the design, implementation and maintenance of activities is still limited.

FUTURE ORIENTATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

20. The following issues and recommendations are important for consideration in the next Country Programme.

Issues

21. *Role of food aid.* In the implementation of the WFP Country Programme in Bangladesh, WFP concentrates on those beneficiaries whose capacity to participate in mainstream development activities is hindered by the lack of food. They face trade-offs between consumption for good health and productivity and investments that enable longer-term self-sufficiency. Through its two activities, WFP ensures to a large extent that there is a direct link between food consumption and investment. Food aid, under VGD and RD, is the enabler: by covering a part of beneficiary consumption requirements, it enables recipients to engage in investment activities, thus opening access of the food-insecure to development opportunities. It also shifts the poor from temporary (lean season) employment towards gaining both individual and community/public assets.
22. *Focus on household food security and self-targeting.* As a major donor, WFP has a critical role to play in influencing food-security strategies. In fact, the Country Programme has come to focus more sharply on household food security. It has been very



successful in reaching the poorest of the poor through a mixed system of self-targeting under RD and effective local community-level targeting under VGD, through active involvement of local leaders. In this way, WFP reaches a large group of the poorest that is "missed" in other types of programmes.

23. *Empowerment of women.* VGD enhances the role of women in decision-making at home and in the community, since they are members of the VGD women's selection and project management committees. This is a step in the right direction. Field visits also showed that VGD women are well aware of their rights—how much wheat they should receive, how much savings they accumulate, and their legal rights, for example, in marriage. The programme is gradually changing attitudes on social, legal, education and health issues.
24. *Nutrition.* Malnutrition rates in Bangladesh are among the highest in the world. WFP, as a member of the Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project (BINP) working group, is endeavouring to integrate VGD activity into BINP initiatives. The targeting and implementation of BINP will be through BRAC, and will follow a similar approach to that adopted for VGD. Currently, the World Bank with the Government, bilateral donors, and United Nations agencies, is working on a ten-year National Nutrition Programme (NNP), with an approximate budget of one billion dollars. This programme will start in the year 2001 and will be based on the success of the BINP initiative. WFP's involvement in this collaboration is important and could be expanded in the future.
25. *Interrelationship between VGD and RD.* The Country Programme document brought the two main components—VGD and RD—together on paper, but full integration still has to take place. Since the approval of the Country Programme, some progress has been made in reshaping these two components into one programme. In this respect, RD activity has refocused to make household food security a key issue, but it has also maintained strong components of the original food-for-work activity, i.e. self-targeting. Further integration is possible, although WFP should not aim to merge VGD and RD, since both have their particular strengths.
26. *Maintenance.* Until recently maintenance was one of the most neglected development activities in Bangladesh. The re-orientation of water and road activities towards maintenance has substantially contributed to the sustainability of the assets created. Since maintenance activities are usually carried out by women, this re-orientation has enabled more women to participate in RD activities. Maintenance activities provide an excellent entry point for women to gain access to a development package.

Recommendations

- The idea of food aid as an enabler should be further implemented. The next WFP Country Programme should continue to concentrate on those beneficiaries whose capacity to participate in mainstream development activities is hindered by a lack of food, who face trade-offs between consumption adequate for good health and for productivity and investments which help them in the longer term.
- In consideration of the high malnutrition rates in Bangladesh and to fulfil WFP's policy guidelines, WFP should include a focus on the nutrition sector. WFP's involvement in the NNP initiative should not only be supported but expanded in the future by ensuring that any additional WFP resources are targeted towards strengthening this intervention.



- It would be useful to critically review the selection, performance and economic viability of the various RD schemes, particularly in the forestry and fisheries sectors.
- The SIFAD recommendation regarding the placement of VGD activity in the Government context may need to be reconsidered.
- Collaboration with NGOs in various development components should continue but the selection of NGOs should follow strict criteria. A more feasible number of NGOs should be associated with Country Programmes activities.
- The timely release of cash by the Government for the RD component is essential to reduce sales of WFP-provided wheat by participants. The “cash savings” scheme currently used in maintenance operations needs to be reviewed.
- Disaster mitigation activities, including prevention, preparedness and response, are crucial in the Bangladesh context since natural disasters hinder people’s ability to achieve food security. In this respect, the water sector will need to be a priority as disasters are closely related to water management. Disaster mitigation, through infrastructure construction and maintenance, will need to become an even more crucial component of the new Country Programme than is currently the case.
- For WFP assistance, consumption and investment are strongly related through the provision of complementary support from development packages. In future a more area-based approach, with a focus on disaster-prone areas and increased people's orientation, should be pursued. The Bangladesh Water Development Board may become just one of the players, instead of the only player, in the new Country Programme’s support for the water sector.
- In view of the importance of helping destitute women achieve more self-reliance, the scope and orientation of VGD should be maintained and priority should be given to increasing WFP’s support to it (over RD) in high-distress areas, if additional resources become available.
- Strengthening local-level, including beneficiary, participation in the design, implementation and evaluation of Country Programme activities is useful. One step in this direction is the planned awareness raising and empowerment through training of elected female members of the local implementation committees supported by the WFP Gender Action Fund.
- Over the years, food has proved to be an important instrument in Bangladesh to reach the poorest, especially women. It provides consumption support and thus enables investment at the household level that can break the “cycle of poverty”. This approach has been successful, as demonstrated by the longitudinal impact assessments conducted by the WFP Dhaka office with the assistance of external expertise. These studies, which are currently supported under the IFADEP of the European Union, should be continued. Their results need to be more widely shared with the donor community and the public in a structured and clear manner in order to ensure future support to the Country Programme.

