

# Advancing the interests of Bangladesh's children in Covid times through the SSNPs



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সেন্টার ফর পলিসি ডায়ালগ (সিপিডি)  
Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)



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# CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgement</b>	3
<b>Key Messages</b>	4
<b>Recommendations</b>	5
<b>Section 1: Motivation and Context</b>	6
Motivation .....	6
Background and Context .....	6
Objectives .....	9
Methodology .....	9
<b>Section 2: Impact of the Covid Pandemic on Children</b>	10
<b>Section 3: Review of the SSNPs from Child-centric and Covid Perspectives</b>	14
<b>Section 4: Going Forward: A Strengthened Child-focused SSNP System in view of the Covid-induced Multi-dimensional Deprivations</b>	26
<b>References</b>	31
<b>Table 1:</b> Selected Findings Based on Surveys Conducted During the Pandemic	12
<b>Table 2:</b> Selected Stimulus Packages that had Positive Impact on Children's Welfare	17
<b>Table 3:</b> Number and Allocations of SSNPs for Children in FY 2021-22 Budget	20
<b>Table 4:</b> Child-centric SSNPs (Pre-Covid Period Budget Vs. Covid Period Budget) Excluding Pension and Interest on Savings Certificates	20
<b>Table 5:</b> Allocations for Child-centric SSNPs without Covid Response	21
<b>Table 6:</b> Number of Beneficiaries of Selected SSNPs for Children	22
<b>Table 7:</b> Vertical and Horizontal Expansion of Early Year's Programmes	23
<b>Figure 1:</b> Relationship between Investment in Children and Its Return	7
<b>Figure 2:</b> Multidimensional Deprivation Indicators as Applied to Children	10
<b>Figure 3(a):</b> SSNPs' Budget as Percentage of GDP	15
<b>Figure 3(b):</b> SSNPs' Budget as Percentage of Government Expenditure	16
<b>Figure 4:</b> Direct Child-centric SSNPs as Share of National Budget	21



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# Key Messages

- Effectiveness of the SSNPs to meet the demands of children should be seen from a dynamic perspective, taking into cognisance their shifting needs.
- The needs of children ought to be considered from the perspective of the multi-dimensional nature of deprivations they experience, the shocks they are subjected to, the violence they suffer, the adjustments they have to make, and the evolving socio-economic scenario in which they live.
- During the pandemic, children were affected as family members, when their families suffered from loss of jobs and earning opportunities, resultant accentuated poverty, and lack of adequate access to food and nutrition, which led to deterioration in their living conditions.
- Children were also impacted by the pandemic directly, when they suffered from lack of schooling and learning losses, missed mid-day feeding at schools (where this was available), and were subjected to domestic violence and forced into the labour market as well as early marriage.
- While 28 stimulus packages were put in place by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) to deal with the pandemic impacts, none of these were targeted specifically for children.
- In FY 2021-22, only 19 safety net programmes of the 120 SSNPs, with an allocation of Tk 8.83 thousand crore, were targeted directly towards child-centric areas. This was equivalent to only 8.2 per cent of the total SSNP allocation for the year. If the allocations benefitting children indirectly are added to this, then also the share would rise to only 15.9 per cent.
- Although children constituted about two-fifths of the population in Bangladesh, allocation for them was only about 14.1 per cent of the total national budget for FY 2018-19 and 15.3 per cent in the budget for FY 2019-20. To recall, the GoB's Blooming Children Report 2018 had set a target of raising this share to 20.0 per cent by 2020. The corresponding share was found to be about 15.05 per cent in FY 2021-22 (Rahman & Islam, 2022).
- Over the years between FY 2019-20 and FY 2021-22, the number of beneficiaries of selected SSNPs for children has remained more or less unchanged, although the Covid pandemic has added many new faces to the list of potential beneficiaries. This implies that the social protection measures, particularly for children, are not geared to responding to the demands originating from shocks such as the Covid pandemic.

# Recommendations

- Make social protection programmes shock-responsive by including provisions for vertical and/or horizontal expansion (through increased coverage and/or benefits) during a shock.
- Gradually universalise the Mother and Child Benefit Programme (MCBP), which will require an additional Tk 9.50 thousand crore, and is equivalent to 8.83 per cent of the social protection budget and 0.27 per cent of the GDP (in FY 2021-22 terms).
- Realise allocation for children in public expenditure to the level of 20.0 per cent- as proposed in the Blooming Children Report 2018 of the GoB and also stated in the budget speech for FY 2018-19.
- Introduce mid-day meal programme in schools for children in view of their nutritional status.
- Prioritise child issues in the Medium Term Macroeconomic Policy Statement (MTMPS) and the Medium Term Budgetary Framework (MTBF).
- Establish a separate child directorate with adequate institutional capacity to deal with the child-centric issues in a comprehensive manner.
- Activate the union parishad committees on women and children to ensure better grassroots-level monitoring of child-centric SSNPs.
- Design a targeted programme for the Covid orphans to address their specific needs.
- Bring all the children with disability under a dedicated SSNP.
- Align the child-related issues with implementation of the SDGs in Bangladesh and ensure that these are included in the priority targets of the GoB.

# 1

## Section

# Motivation and Context

## Motivation

The ongoing Covid pandemic has visibly exposed the need to accord special attention to the demands of the vulnerable sections of Bangladesh society, who tend to be the most adversely impacted by shocks and disasters of similar types. However, the interests of these groups are often not adequately reflected in the policy initiatives that are taken to address the attendant and emerging concerns associated with such shocks. Nowhere is this gap between the shifting demands and what was on offer so manifestly apparent than in case of the children, particularly from the marginalised communities, whose needs tend to be specific and contextual, and often remain hidden and unspoken. Against this backdrop, it is the responsibility of all the stakeholders concerned to raise voice, and take appropriate actions to address the concerns and advance the interests of the children with the urgency that they deserve.

In the light of the above, the motivation of the present Policy Brief is to promote the cause of welfare of Bangladesh's children by examining particularly the Social Safety Net Programmes (SSNPs), implemented by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), through the lens of Covid-induced deprivations suffered by the children. The idea is to come up with suggestions towards improving well-being of the children of Bangladesh, through the SSNPs, in consideration of the accentuated multidimensional deprivations originating from the Covid pandemic and future shocks of this type that can afflict the interests of these children.

## Background and Context

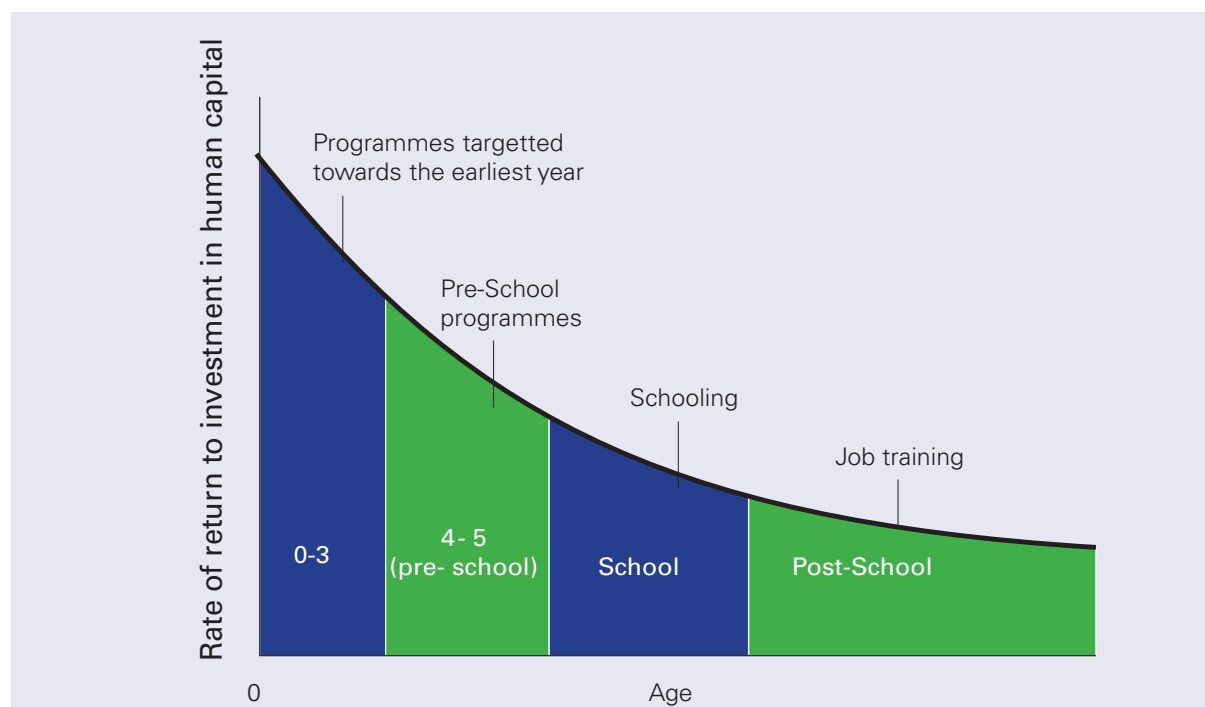
Bangladesh's unique opportunity to reap the benefits of the demographic dividend is rooted in the significant share of her children in the total population, which currently stands at about two-fifths. It goes without saying that a healthy, educated and skilled workforce will be crucial to realising



Bangladesh's development vision in going forward, particularly in view of ensuring sustainable dual transitions of the country – the middle-income country transition and the LDC graduation. The likelihood of achieving the aspirations, reflected in the SDGs and Bangladesh's successive plan documents and the Bangladesh Vision 2041, will also critically hinge on whether Bangladesh's children are able to grow into adulthood as productive human resources.

The issues of concern and interests to children, and their rights, including the rights to mental and physical welfare and safe childhood, and secured access to quality education and health care, have been articulated in various important national documents of Bangladesh. These include the constitution of the country, the Bangladesh Vision 2041 (Perspective Plan) and the ongoing 8th Five-Year Plan of Bangladesh. The National Children Policy 2011 and the Children Act 2013 were formulated by the present government with the objectives of helping the children grow as healthy, well-endowed and well-equipped future citizens of the country, capable of realising the development aspirations. As may be recalled, the GoB's Blooming Children Report 2018 has called for additional resources, to be allocated to the programmes earmarked for children, and for gradually raising the public expenditure on children as a share of the total national budget to 20.0 per cent by 2020. Also, the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) of Bangladesh is informed by the lifecycle approach and it mentions undertaking specific programmes to secure the interests of the children, particularly those from vulnerable families, marginalised communities and those coming from disadvantaged background. To note in this connection, the SDGs, with the core message of leaving no one behind, obligate Bangladesh to do the needful to attain the 17 goals and 169 targets in a manner that caters to the specific needs of the children. As it is, 13 of the 169 targets and 16 of the 243 indicators are directly connected with children's issues, including their education, health, nutrition and security. Indeed, without catering to the needs of today's children it will not be possible to attain the SDGs by 2030 in Bangladesh.

**Figure 1** Relationship between Investment in Children and Its Return



Source: Heckman & Masterov, 2007

Global literature evinces clear evidence as regards the crucial importance of investing in children. As Figure 1 shows, the earlier the interventions, the greater the benefits and returns to investment. A more recent study (Moodley, et al., 2018) found that there is a strong positive relationship between child benefit and spending on children's health, education, nutrition and protection. Based on a simulation exercise, another study (ODI & UNICEF, 2020) finds that an additional one per cent of GDP spent on child benefit programmes could potentially reduce child poverty by as much as 20.0 per cent.

While the aforesaid strategic and policy documents do provide some broad guidelines to promote the cause of children's advancement and address their concerns, concrete activities on the ground are underwritten by budgetary allocations and public expenditures in child welfare-related areas and programmes as well as the extent to which the expected outputs, outcomes and impacts are delivered. It needs to be noted in this connection that in Bangladesh many components of public expenditure are targeted to benefit the children, directly and indirectly. A large part of such interventions are made through various SSNPs undertaken by the government, which are implemented by several ministries and departments. An in-depth examination of these SSNPs from child-centric perspectives is expected to provide many useful insights as regards targeting, modalities of implementation and impacts arising from these programmes in terms of securing interests of Bangladesh's children.

Effectiveness of the SSNPs to meet the demands of the children should be seen from a dynamic perspective, taking cognisance of their shifting needs, the multi-dimensional deprivations they experience, the shocks they are subjected to, the violence they suffer, the adjustments they have to make, and the evolving socio-economic scenario in which they live. There is no denying the fact that in the present context, the ongoing Covid pandemic has accentuated many of the deprivations experienced by Bangladesh's children, particularly by those who were already afflicted by various embedded vulnerabilities. Thus, the pre-existing difficulties faced by the children have been added by new ones originating from the Covid, which have further complicated their situation and made life more challenging for a large number of children. The Covid-induced multi-dimensional deprivations of children were manifested in health and food-related deprivations, rise in the number of Covid orphans, the large number of children suffering from acute malnutrition and mental distress, and in the number of children who were subjected to domestic violence and were compelled to leave school, join the labour market and forced into marriage. Many children could not get enrolled in schools during the Covid times.

In view of the emergent scenario, it is important to have a deeper understanding as regards whether the current SSNPs, geared to addressing the children's welfare, are adequately equipped to address the Covid-induced challenges faced by Bangladesh's children and whether these are fit for purpose when considered from a child-centric lens. By any measure, these questions have high policy relevance and practical significance in the current context of Bangladesh.

## Objectives

The overarching objective of the Policy Brief is to advance the interests of Bangladesh's children, affected by the Covid pandemic, through the SSNPs, and to raise awareness about the relevant issues among the key stakeholders with a view to trigger policy actions and initiatives against this backdrop. Concrete objectives of the exercise are to- (a) document the multi-dimensional child deprivations originating from the pandemic, (b) undertake a review of the SSNPs from a child-centric focus, with a special focus on early-year (0-4 years) programmes, in order to understand their adequacy to deal with the Covid-induced vulnerabilities, and (c) come up with policy recommendations to improve coverage, depth and entitlement of the SSNPs towards better and improved delivery of child welfare in Bangladesh, against the backdrop of the Covid, as an integral part of building forward from the pandemic, and in view of attaining the SDG aspirations.

## Methodology

Methodology of the study includes a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches. As was noted, child deprivations have assumed new dimensions, in both scale and depth, in view of the pandemic. The Brief draws insights from various published sources and surveys. Information sources include relevant websites dealing with child-focused programmes in Bangladesh, secondary surveys conducted by the government, various organisations and think-tanks, and reports prepared by international organisations (e.g., UNICEF, World Bank, ILO). The Brief presents the findings of analysis of the SSNPs that was carried out as part of the present study. The SSNPs were analysed by juxtaposing the emergent needs of children to the SSNPs in place with a view to identifying gaps and proposing measures to address the attendant concerns. A quantitative exercise was undertaken to find out the share of the SSNP budget that was earmarked for the child-relevant programmes. This was done by taking into account allocations for children in view of the SSNPs (having both direct and indirect implications for children) and its share in the total budgetary allocations. The budget for FY 2021-22 and FY 2019-20 served as the basis for purposes of comparison.

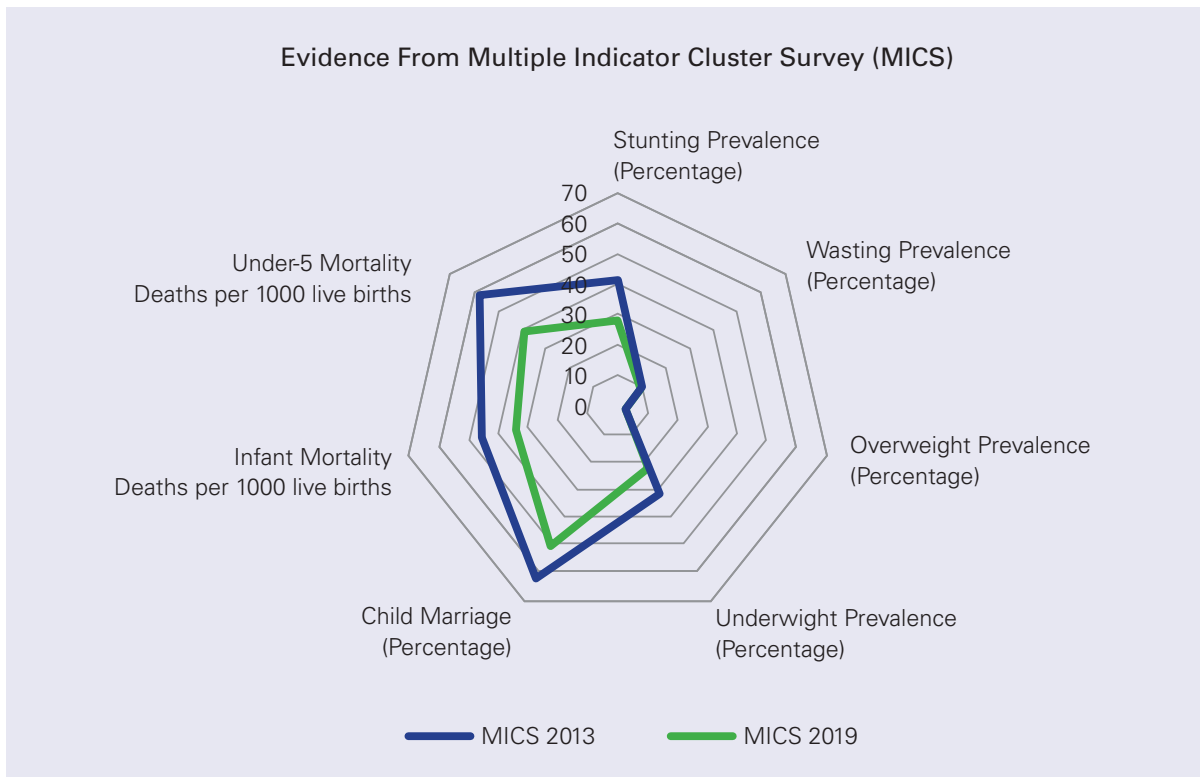
# 2

## Section

# Impact of the Covid Pandemic on Children

Over the years, Bangladesh has made impressive progress in terms of many of the multidimensional child deprivation indicators. As Figure 2 shows,

**Figure 2** Multidimensional Deprivation Indicators as Applied to Children



Source: Authors' presentation, based on MICS 2013 & 2019.

between 2013 and 2019 there was notable improvement as regards several child welfare indicators, including reduction in the stunting rate and the child mortality rate. On the other hand, progress was stalled, and even reversed, in case of some indicators, because of the Covid-induced shocks.

The Covid-type shocks may be classified into two groups: Covariate (that affect substantive percentage of people simultaneously) and *Idiosyncratic* (that affect only certain individuals or groups). Children tend to be impacted by both types of deprivations when shocks such as the Covid pandemic strike. Children were affected when their families suffered from loss of jobs and earning opportunities and resultant accentuated poverty as also because of lack of adequate access to food and nutrition.

However, studies show that rural areas appear to have relatively more resilience than urban areas. According to a survey (BIGD, 2020a), the percentage of household members, which were able to eat three meals a day, came down more in urban areas (24.0 per cent) than in rural areas (14.0 per cent). Yet another survey by the BIGD (BIGD, 2021) shows that the percentage of households, having less than three meals a day, was higher in urban areas (12.0 per cent) than in rural areas (6.0 per cent). A study by the CPD (Rahman, et al., 2021a) found that in rural areas drop in income (7.9 per cent) was lower than in urban areas (9.2 per cent); in terms of reducing expenditure, rural areas (5.6 per cent) did better than urban areas (1.3 per cent). The growth in loans taken by households was lower in rural areas (102.5 per cent) compared to urban areas (213.0 per cent). The study also found that during the Covid there was higher incremental employment in rural areas than in urban areas, particularly for women. Higher degree of economic resilience in rural areas could be because of transfers between households, strong social network, support of extended families, and growth in agricultural production.

Children were adversely impacted when they suffered from lack of schooling and loss of learning. Children, who were benefitting from the school feeding programme (fortified biscuits) in 104 upazilas and the mid-day meal (khichuri) programme piloted in 16 upazilas, were deprived of these crucial supports when schools remained closed for the protracted period. As many global studies indicate (Cohen, et al., 2021), children, who lack proper nutritional intake, find it difficult to concentrate in classes. Indeed, the National School Meal Policy 2019 had planned to gradually bring all primary schools under the mid-day meal programme. In view of recovering from the Covid-induced deprivations, the time has now come to take concrete steps and design a roadmap to implement this policy.

Surveys indicate that a significantly large number of children were subjected to domestic violence; many were forced into the labour market. Many children were given in marriage as part of the coping strategy of households during the pandemic. A survey (MJF, 2021) found instances of about 14 thousand child marriages in 21 districts during April-October period of 2020. Majority of these children did not continue their education once schools were open. Children also suffered from mental and psychological trauma when they lost parents, guardians and caregivers during the pandemic times. These multidimensional deprivations are not only having detrimental effects, including mental-psychological, on the welfare of children in the present time, but also leaving negative footprints on their future prospects and potentials as citizens.

It is only to be expected that the children had to share a large part of the Covid-induced deprivations, experienced by their households. The number of children, who were adversely

affected, went up when income of households fell below the poverty line. As is estimated, about 21.0 per cent of households joined the *old poors as new poors* (in addition to the already existing 20.0 per cent of households that were living below the poverty line in pre-Covid times). Children were also affected when 30.0 per cent of urban households were forced to cope with the pandemic by reducing consumption. Drop in the per capita food expenditure during the Covid was estimated to be about 28.0 per cent in urban areas and about 23.0 per cent in rural areas (BIGD, 2020a). Even when the economy started to recover from the worst impacts of the pandemic, some of the negative footprints have continued to persist. There is indeed a long way to get back to the pre-pandemic level.

As was noted, many elements of child deprivations were present even before the pandemic hit the country: prevalence of high under-five stunting and malnourishment rates (28 per cent and 9.8 per cent respectively of the child population); relatively low participation rate in organised pre-primary learning, i.e., one year before the government determined entry age for primary education (only 77.5 per cent of children were covered in 2019); only 25.9 per cent students of Grade 2 and Grade 3 met the required standard for reading Bangla with the corresponding figure for mathematics being 13.0 per cent (BBS MICS Survey, 2019).

Surveys conducted during the pandemic period by various organisations have drawn attention to a range of the Covid-induced adverse impacts on children. Table 1 captures some of these.

**Table 1** Selected Findings Based on Surveys Conducted During the Pandemic

Surveys	Findings
(BIGD, 2020a)	Drop in per capita food expenditure during the Covid was estimated to be about 28.0 per cent in urban areas and about 23.0 per cent rural areas
(BIGD, 2020b)	About 59.0 per cent students had lower protein intake and 34.0 per cent of the households were compelled to reduce food expenses for adolescents
(BRAC, 2020)	About 56.0 per cent children failed to take part in classes due to logistics barriers during the Covid times and their study time declined by 80.0 per cent after the schools were closed
(SANEM, 2020)	Nationally, only about 21.0 per cent of students participated in online or TV classes
(Sujon, 2021)	Only 15.0 per cent secondary schools had conducted online classes, and about 94.0 per cent of rural students remained outside of online classes, according to a survey by BANBEIS
(World Bank, 2021)	About 76 per cent of children of Grade 5 will not achieve minimum reading efficiency due to school closure (comparable figure was 58.0 per cent previously)
(MJF, 2020)	About 10.0 per cent of sample children reported that they had to join work during the Covid times because of financial problems faced by their families, and about 15.0 per cent children became victims of various types of violence

Surveys	Findings
(APSC, 2022)	The number of teachers came down by 83,268 and students by 14,61,634 between 2020 and 2021 (excluding English-medium schools and Qawmi madrasas). A total of 14,111 privately run primary schools (kindergartens and NGO-runs schools) closed down permanently

Source: Authors' compilation from the websites of the relevant organisations.

Indeed, the Covid-originated child deprivations covered all three dimensions of multi-dimensional poverty: education, health, and standard of living.<sup>1</sup>

According to a survey (MJF, 2020), about 10.0 per cent of sample children reported that they had to join work during the Covid times because of financial problems faced by their families; about 15.0 per cent children became victims of various types of violence. According to government data, the number of severely malnourished children seeking treatment in hospitals increased by 72.0 per cent when compared to the preceding year.<sup>2</sup>

According to the *Covid-19 orphanhood tool*, developed by the Imperial College London, estimates of children losing primary or secondary caregivers in Bangladesh during the Covid period was more than ten thousand. Of these, more than half had lost one or both parents.<sup>3</sup>

All the above impacts are likely to have negative implications on all the ten indicators of child deprivations, covered by the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). The above discussion and evidence bear out the validity of observations made earlier as regards accentuation and scaling up of old forms, and addition of new forms, of child deprivations during the Covid times. In view of this, the efficacy of policy interventions to address and mitigate the impacts of various deprivations calls for heightened policy attention and commensurate resource allocation. Indeed, addressing the issues of interests and concern that relate to children should not be considered in a reactive manner. These should be dealt with proactively and should be embedded organically in the government plans and policies, more so in operational documents. Against this backdrop, there should be adequate attention to child-related issues in the Medium Term Macroeconomic Policy Statement (MTMPS) and the Medium Term Budgetary Framework (MTBF), so that budgetary allocations are tuned to the needs of children.

The next section examines the SSNPs in place in Bangladesh with the lens of Covid-impact on children against the backdrop of the evidence of deprivations presented above.

1 Following the global definition of Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) of Oxford Poverty and Human Initiative (OPHI, 2021).

2 To note, the risk of a child dying from severe malnourishment is about twelve times higher than is the case for a normal child.

3 Data is up to February, 2022.

# 3

## Section

# Review of the SSNPs from Child-centric and Covid Perspectives

A number of the SSNPs in Bangladesh are geared specifically to addressing the needs of children; at the same time children also benefit indirectly from some of the other SSNPs that target families in which children are members of the households. It is reckoned that both merit consideration for purposes of analysis.

The SSNPs could be put under scrutiny from four perspectives if their efficacy are to be examined from the two vantage points that are the focus of this Brief, i.e., children and Covid: (a) to what extent the SSNPs were able to address the adverse impacts on children (*adequacy issue*), (b) whether the SSNPs were able to cover the enhanced demand of children during the Covid times (*scale issue*), (c) whether the SSNP system in place was geared to addressing new forms of child deprivations (*additionality issue*), and (d) were the SSNPs being implemented in a way that generated the best outcomes for children (*delivery issue*).

The idea here is that a general approach to the SSNPs could potentially miss the special and specific dimensions of children's needs. A key weakness of the social protection schemes targeted for children is that such programmes were not built as an *investment model* that is geared to development of children as productive adults, with secured childhood and greater resilience capacity. The SSNPs primarily tend to focus on women's empowerment, nutrition, and poverty alleviation. The SSNPs in Bangladesh are also not geared to addressing and adjusting to deal with the pandemic-induced types of shocks faced by children. It is from this vantage point that there is a need to undertake a *child audit* (*similar to poverty audit and gender audit*), keeping the above considerations in the perspective. Indeed, such an approach is also aligned with the spirit of the Blooming Children report of the GoB, which emphasised the need to undertake an examination of public expenditure in Bangladesh to assess if adequate resources are being allocated and apportioned to activities that are integral to children's welfare.

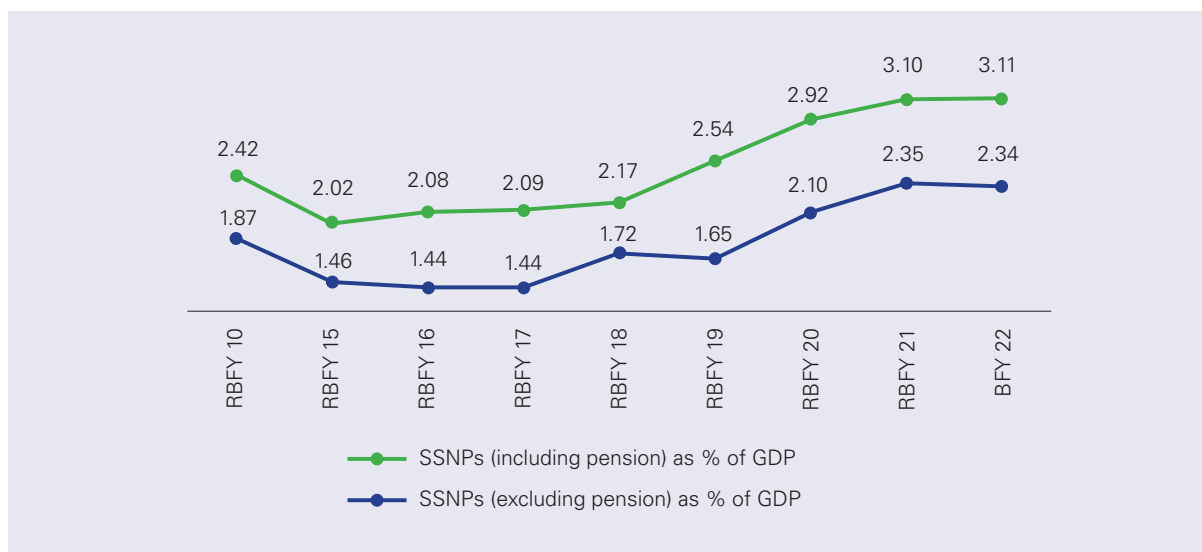


The Bangladesh *National Social Security Strategy* (2015) envisages a *life-cycle* approach that recognises the need to provide targeted support to children early on and cater to their specific needs from the very beginning (starting with the SSNPs targeting expecting mothers). This is informed by the fact that effective early childhood interventions would reduce the need for subsequent support when children grow up to be adults. Also this is crucial to realising the potential benefits originating from Bangladesh’s *demographic dividends*.

However, a close scrutiny of the SSNPs indicates that Bangladesh has a long way to go in terms of the three dimensions embedded in the MPI, if the emergent pandemic-induced needs of children are taken into cognisance.

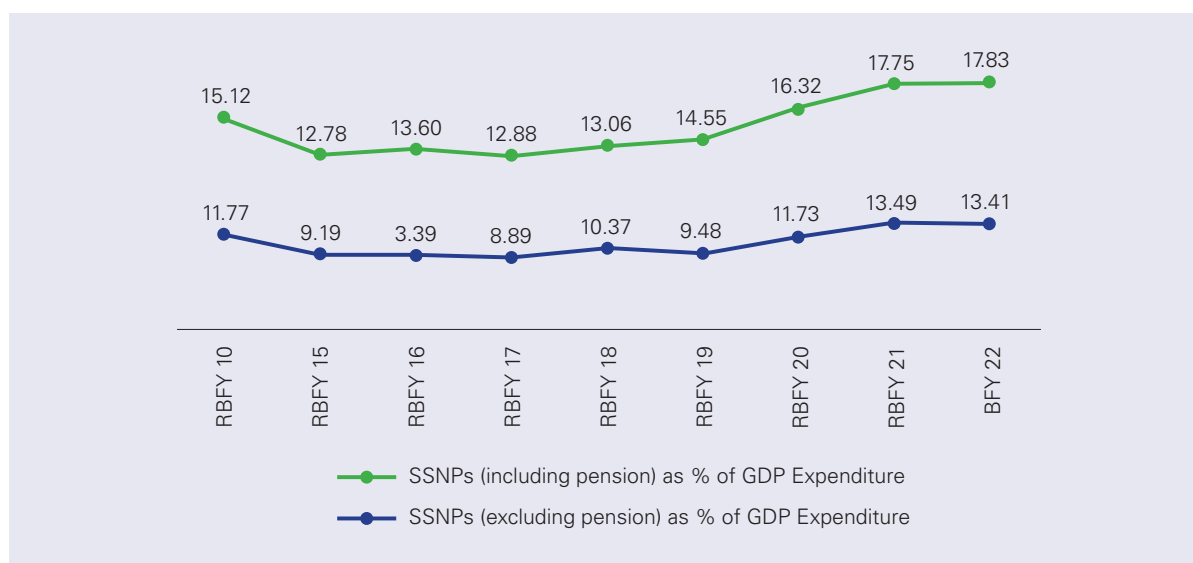
Although children constituted about two-fifths of the population, allocation for them was estimated to be only about 14.1 per cent of total national budget for FY 2018-19 (Blooming Children Report, 2018); the corresponding figure was 15.3 per cent for FY 2019-20 (Ministry of Finance, GoB). The budget speech for FY 2018-19, for the first time, had set a target for child budget allocation: “Our goal is to allocate 20.0 per cent of total budget for children by 2020,” the statement said (MoF, 2019). Our estimates carried out in collaboration with UNICEF, for another study, found that for FY 2021-22 the corresponding figure was 15.05 per cent (Rahman & Islam, 2022).

**Figure 3(a)** SSNPs’ Budget as Percentage of GDP



Source: Authors’ analysis based on SSNP budgets for various years (Finance Division, Ministry of Finance)

**Figure 3(b) SSNPs' Budget as Percentage of Government Expenditure**



Source: Authors' analysis based on SSNP budgets for various years (Finance Division, Ministry of Finance)

Note: RBFY – Revised budget amount of particular fiscal year; BFY – Budgeted amount in fiscal year 2021-22

As Figure 3a indicates, the SSNP budget's shares (excluding pension) in the GDP have seen a tangible rise from 1.65 per cent in FY 19 to 2.35 per cent FY 21. However, there has been no tangible change thereafter (2.34 per cent in FY 22). The pattern was similar with respect to the share in government expenditure, with the share rising from 9.48 per cent to 13.49 per cent over the corresponding period. The share experienced some decline (13.41 per cent) in FY 22. The movement in shares between FY 20 and FY 22 ought to be juxtaposed to the significant increase in terms of impact, scale, and dimensions of adverse Covid-induced affects. As was noted earlier, there was a significant rise in the number of households adversely affected by the Covid. This, as was pointed out, had implications for children as well. This had important ramifications as regards resource needs of children in view of the pandemic.

### Share of Child-focused Allocations in Stimulus Packages

A review of the stimulus packages also shows that none of these were targeted for children. Of the 28 programmes that were launched by the GoB, only eight could be identified as targeted directly to marginalised groups and, to that extent, having implications (indirectly) for the welfare of the children belonging to the households concerned.<sup>4</sup>

However, as was noted above, none of these packages were targeted specifically for the children. The eight stimulus packages, mentioned in Table 2, were earmarked for marginalised households. It

4 The stimulus packages were mainly channelled through the banking sector in the form of subsidised credit. To the extent that some of the credit were to be spent for wage purposes (in the RMG Sector), the SMEs etc., these benefitted the workers, and had positive implications for children belonging to the households.

was perhaps assumed that children would automatically benefit when their families would receive support under these programmes. Some of the other packages (mostly associated with extension of credit support) were likely to have benefitted labour market participants directly; some others through multiplier impacts on the economy. As would be expected, a large part of the marginalised children tend to belong to the families that are associated with CSME-related activities. The sluggishness in taking credit for the CSME sector meant that many involved families were deprived of timely support, and consequently children from these families suffered during the pandemic. However, the benefits accrued to the children from those programmes are difficult to calculate. This was thus left out of estimation.

**Table 2 Selected Stimulus Packages that had Positive Impact on Children’s Welfare**

Sl.	Name of the package	Allocation	Transfer size per beneficiary	Timeline of implementation	Disbursement status
1	Free food distribution	Tk 2,500 crore	--	April-May, 2020	Rice: 211,017 MT Relief: Tk 95 crore Baby food: Tk 27 crore
2	OMS of rice at 10 Tk/kg	Tk 770 crore	Tk 10 per kg	April-June, 2020	Tk 770 crore (100 per cent of allocation)
3	Cash transfer for the targeted poor people (Tk 2,500 per person for 3.5 million + 4.86 lakh fisheries and livestock farmers)	Tk 1,326 crore	Tk 2,500	--	Tk 1,258 crore (94.87 per cent of allocation)
4	Construction of home for homeless people	Tk 2,130 crore	800 sq. ft. home with two rooms, kitchen and toilet	FY 2020-21	Number of completed houses: 118,380
5	Second tranche cash transfer to 3.5 million poor people of Tk 2,500 per person + 1,00,000 Boro farmers affected by cyclone	Tk 930 crore	Tk 2,500	2021	Tk 830 crore (89.25 per cent of allocation)
6	Cash transfer to the targeted poor people (Tk 2,500 per person). Total beneficiary: 17,24,470 persons	Tk 450 crore	Tk 2,500	FY 2021-22	Tk 432 crore (96.00 per cent of allocation)

Sl.	Name of the package	Allocation	Transfer size per beneficiary	Timeline of implementation	Disbursement status
7	Special OMS in the city areas (Rice: 20,000 MT and Flour: 14,000 MT)	Tk 150 crore	--	July-August, 2021	Tk 150 crore (100 per cent of allocation)
8	Fund for deputy commissioners to provide food support to the vulnerable people reached through '333' phone number	Tk 100 crore	--	FY 2020-21	Tk 100 crore (100 per cent of allocation)
	<b>Total =</b>	<b>Tk 8,356 crore</b>			

Source: Information drawn primarily from (Bangladesh Bank, 2022)

However, as was noted above, none of these packages were targeted specifically for the children. The eight stimulus packages, mentioned in Table 2, were earmarked for marginalised households. It was perhaps assumed that children would automatically benefit when their families would receive support under these programmes. Some of the other packages (mostly associated with extension of credit support) were likely to have benefitted labour market participants directly; some others through multiplier impacts on the economy. As would be expected, a large part of the marginalised children tend to belong to the families that are associated with CSME-related activities. The sluggishness in taking credit for the CSME sector meant that many involved families were deprived of timely support, and consequently children from these families suffered during the pandemic. However, the benefits accrued to the children from those programmes are difficult to calculate. This was thus left out of estimation.

The resources for the aforesaid eight programmes, with allocation of Tk 8,356 crore, if apportioned to children (by taking two-fifths as their share in the total population), would be about Tk 3,342.4 crore. This was equivalent to only 1.8 per cent of the total allocation of resources earmarked for the stimulus packages (Tk 187.7 thousand crore).

Whilst there were no Covid-specific SSNPs for children, there was a general SSNP allocation in view of the Covid (Tk 11,075 crore). We have taken cognisance of this in the estimations presented in Table 4 (with Covid allocation) and Table 5 (without Covid allocation) later in the text.

## The SSNPs for Children

An analysis of the 120 SSNPs, which were being implemented with an allocation of Tk 107.6 thousand crore in the FY 2021-22 budget, was undertaken to estimate the share of total resources that are earmarked for children's welfare. *Two scenarios* have emerged from this analysis: (a) programmes

that were earmarked directly for children, and (b) programmes which benefit children indirectly, to various extent. As may be interpreted from Table 3, the analysis indicates the followings:

- A total of 19 safety net programmes with an allocation of Tk 8.83 thousand crore are targeted directly to child-centric areas. These included MCBP<sup>5</sup>, stipends for children, school feeding, capitation grants for orphan students, and maternal, neonatal, child and adolescent health. Shares of such SSNPs were 15.8 per cent in terms of the total number of programmes and 8.2 per cent in the total allocations, earmarked for the SSNPs.
- There are a number of SSNPs that benefit children as also other groups of the population. It is only logical to assume that only a part of the allocation goes to the children. Allocations going for children may be estimated in two ways:
  - Some SSNPs benefit children to the extent that children constitute a part of the beneficiaries. Allocations of such SSNPs can be estimated depending on share of the children in the cohort of beneficiaries.<sup>6</sup> Some of the examples are stipends for transgender, Bede and disadvantaged communities, special grants for teachers and students, National Academy for Autism and Neuro Development, development programmes and welfare fund for distressed and neglected women and children. The number of such SSNPs was found to be 28, and the allocation for children was estimated to be Tk 2.66 thousand crore. The corresponding shares would be 23.3 per cent of the total number of SSNPs and 2.5 per cent of the total SSNP allocations.
  - A broader definition of child-benefit can be considered, in view of which some SSNPs benefit the children. The broader definition includes the SSNPs that target families and communities. These benefit children as members of beneficiary families. Some of the examples are essential service delivery and community-based health care, construction of multiple disaster shelters, and rural infrastructure development. The number of such programmes is found to be 23. Since children are 40.0 per cent of the population, the share of allocation going for children for these SSNPs is estimated to be Tk 5.63 thousand crore.
- If both direct and indirect benefits are considered, the total number of SSNPs rises to 70 with an allocation of Tk 17.11 thousand crore. The corresponding share in the total number of SSNPs is 58.3 per cent, and the share in terms of the allocations to all SSNPs is 15.9 per cent. Per capita allocation for children is about one-third of the average per capita SSNP allocation for all population.<sup>7</sup> Thus 40.0 per cent of the population (children) is found to be receiving only 15.9 per cent of all SSNPs' allocations. This should not be the case, and merits a serious review and reconsideration.

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5 Two maternity allowance programmes are listed in the SSNPs till FY 2021-22. Only in the SSNP list for FY 2022-23 these two programmes have been shown as the merged MCBP (for the first time).

6 Allocations for children in these programmes were taken to be a certain percentage (in the range between 5-80 per cent) of relevant budgetary allocations. For example, percentage of children in the cohort of physically challenged is 15 per cent; so in this case allocation was apportioned to be 15 per cent. Where no such criteria could be used, the share was taken based on perception and intelligent guess.

7 Taking into cognisance that 40.0 per cent of the population received less than 15.9 per cent of SSNP allocations in FY 2021-22 budget.

**Table 3** Number and Allocations of SSNPs for Children in FY 2021-22 Budget

Scenario	No. of programmes <sup>8</sup>	% of total no. of programmes	Amount (in croreTk)	% of total amount
Direct	19	15.8	8826.5	8.2
Indirect	51	42.5	8286.3	7.7
Distribution apportioned based on perception	28	23.3	2661.4	2.5
Taking the proportion of children in population (40%)	23	19.2	5624.9	5.2
<b>Total (Direct+Indirect)</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>58.3</b>	<b>17112.8</b>	<b>15.9</b>

Source: Authors' estimation based on SSNP budgets for various years (Finance Division, Ministry of Finance).

An audit of SSNP allocations- presented in Table 4 below- indicates, if pensions for the government employees and interest on the savings certificates are excluded from the total SSNP budget, it is found that 23.1 per cent of the total SSNPs' allocations benefit the children of Bangladesh (directly and indirectly). It is also interesting to note that this is about 4.1 percentage points lower than the pre-pandemic share (27.2 per cent).

**Table 4** Child-centric SSNPs (Pre-Covid Period Budget Vs. Covid Period Budget) Excluding Pension and Interest on Savings Certificates

Scenario	No. of programmes		% of total no. programmes		Amount (in croreTk)		Nominal growth: BFY 22 VS. BFY 20	Real growth: BFY 22 VS. BFY 20	% of total (excl. pension and interest) amount	
	BFY 20	BFY 22	BFY 20	BFY 22	BFY 20	BFY 22			BFY 20	BFY 22
Direct	27	19	20.5	15.8	7138.1	8826.5	23.7	21.2	13.9	11.9
Indirect:	53	51	40.2	42.5	6850.0	8286.3	21.0	18.8	13.3	11.2
Distribution based on perception	28	28	21.2	23.3	2082.9	2661.4	27.8	24.9	4.1	3.6
Proportion of children in population (40%)	25	23	18.9	19.2	4767.2	5624.9	18.0	16.1	9.3	7.6
<b>Total (Direct+Indirect)</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>60.6</b>	<b>58.3</b>	<b>13988.1</b>	<b>17112.8</b>	<b>22.3</b>	<b>20.0</b>	<b>27.2</b>	<b>23.1</b>

Source: Authors' estimation based on SSNP budgets for various years (Finance Division, Ministry of Finance)

Note: BFY – Budget amount of particular fiscal year;

<sup>8</sup> There are a large number of programmes that could potentially benefit children indirectly. However, the allocations are low and only a small percentage of the allocated resources may be considered to be going to children. As a result, children's share in the total SSNPs' allocation is much lower than the respective share in the total number of programmes.

The total number of SSNPs in BFY 20 and BFY 22 were 132 and 120 respectively. The total amount allocated for the SSNPs for corresponding years were Tk 74,367 crore and Tk 107,614 crore.

**Table 5** Allocations for Child-centric SSNPs without Covid Response

Scenario	Amount (in crore Tk) <sup>a</sup>		Nominal growth: BFY 22 VS. BFY 20	% of total amount*	
	BFY 20	BFY 22		BFY 20	BFY 22
Direct	7138.1	8826.5	23.7	13.9	14.0
Indirect:	6850	5366.3	-21.7	13.3	8.5
Distribution based on perception	2082.9	2661.4	27.8	4.1	4.2
Proportion of children in population (40%)	4767.2	2704.9	-43.3	9.3	4.3
Total (Direct + Indirect)	13988.1	14192.8	1.5	27.2	22.5

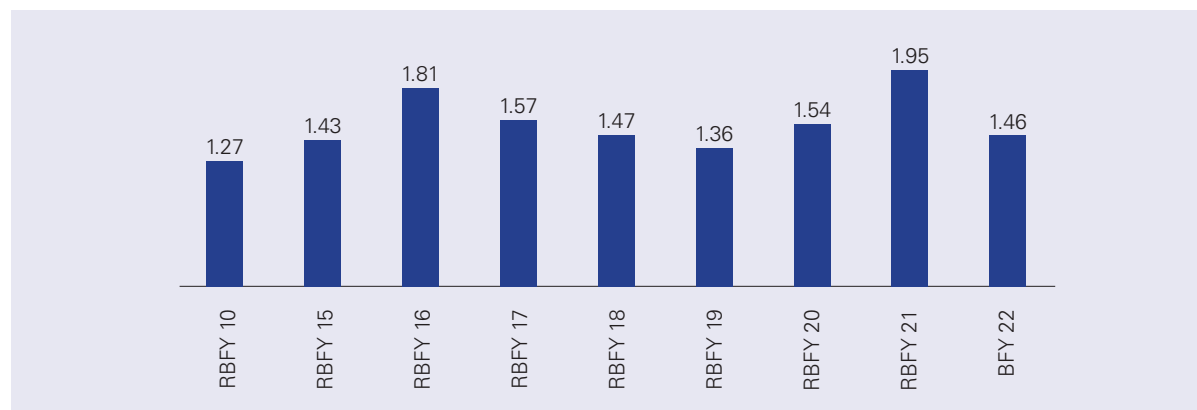
Source: Authors' estimation based on SSNP budgets for various years (Finance Division, Ministry of Finance)

Note: <sup>a</sup> Budget amount.

\* Does not include interest on savings certificates, pension and funds to combat coronavirus.

Table 5 indicates that if the four Covid-specific SSNPs are excluded from BFY 22 allocations, the allocations in BFY 20 and BFY 22 do not change significantly (nominal growth of only 1.5 per cent over two years).

**Figure 4** Direct Child-centric SSNPs as Share of National Budget<sup>9</sup>



Source: Authors' estimation based on SSNP budgets for various years (Finance Division, Ministry of Finance)

Note: RBFY – Revised Budget amount of particular Fiscal Year

BFY – Budgeted amount in Fiscal Year 2021-22. It may be noted, however, that the RBFY figure tends to be higher than the initial BFY figure.

<sup>9</sup> The declining share between RBFY 21 and BFY 22 is mainly on account of reduced allocation for primary and secondary level stipends (Tk 6,543.8 crore as against Tk 3,741.1 crore). This is somewhat unclear and needs further investigations. However, the government has increased the amount of stipend in the range of 50 per cent – 60 per cent and introduced a kids' allowance of Tk 1,000 per year for each of the primary students who are part of the stipend programme. The allocation for child-centric SSNPs in the revised national budget is thus expected to rise in FY 22.

**Table 6** Number of Beneficiaries of Selected SSNPs for Children (In Lac)

Sl.	Programme name	FY 19-20	FY 20-21	FY 21-22
1	Maternity Allowance Programme for the Poor Lactating Mothers	7.70	7.70	7.70
2	Assistance for Working Lactating Mothers	2.75	2.75	2.75
3	Stipends for Physically Challenged Students	1.00	1.00	1.00
4	Sheikh Russell Child Training and Rehabilitation Centre	Was not there	0.03	0.03
5	Cost of Foods for Residents in Government Orphanages and Other Institutions	0.21	0.18	0.19
6	Capitation Grants for Orphan Students to non-government institutions	1.16	1.00	1.02
7	Street Children Rehabilitation Programme and CDC	0.02	0.02	0.02
8	Sarkari Shishu Paribar and Baby Home	No info	0.02	0.03
9	Child Protection and Child Welfare		1.50	1.45
10	Child Sensitive Social Protection in Bangladesh	Launched in FY 2021-22		

Source: Compiled by authors based on SSNP budgets for various years (Finance Division, Ministry of Finance).

The share of number of SSNPs for children is relatively high, because we have also included the SSNPs which are not geared directly to children, but from which children benefit as part of the group-beneficiaries. However, when we estimate the total amount going for children on both these count, the share in total allocations turns out to be low. As Table 6 indicates, between FY 2019-20 and FY 2021-22, the number of beneficiaries remained more or less unchanged, although Covid has added many new faces to the list of potential beneficiaries. As the table shows, the number of beneficiaries has remained the same in case of maternity allowance programmes, stipends for physically disabled students, and programmes for street children. The number of beneficiaries for orphan-related programmes and those for child protection and child welfare has actually declined over the corresponding period. Same is the case with the baby home programme. However, Sheikh Russell Child Training and Rehabilitation Centre and Child Sensitive Social Protection are new programmes, introduced in FY 2021-22.

Since those with disabilities are a particularly vulnerable group among the children, their concerns and needs should deserve priority attention. At present, the GoB has in place multiple programmes for persons with disability. However, many eligible children remain out of the purview of these programmes. Also, these programmes do not include children with disabilities, who are below the age of six. Here, full coverage and a categorical universal approach should be considered by the policymakers.



**Table 7** Vertical and Horizontal Expansion of Early Year's Programmes

Programme name	Number of beneficiaries (in lac)		Total budget allocation (in lacTk)		Allocation per beneficiary per year (Tk.)		Inflation adjusted (Tk)
	FY 20	FY 22	FY 20	FY 22	FY 20	FY 22	FY 22
Maternity Allowance Programme for the Poor Pregnant and Lactating Mothers	7.7	7.7	76,327	76,439	9,913	9,927	8,901
Assistance for Working Lactating Mothers	2.75	2.75	27,311	27,665	9,931	10,060	9,020
H-Maternal, Neonatal, Child and Adolescent Health/ National Nutrition Services	697.95	688.22	102,469	145,716	147	212	190
H-Maternal, Child, Reproductive and Adolescent Health	746.09	332.12	23,500	26,480	31	80	72
H-Clinical Contraceptive Services Delivery/Family Planning Field Services Delivery	330.96	180	59,608	60,140	180	334	300
Income Support Programme for the Poorest (Care+ Dream)	10.81	6.03	77,810	57,199	7,198	9,486	8,506

Source: Authors' estimation based on SSNP budgets for various years (Finance Division, Ministry of Finance).

It is evident from Table 7 that there was hardly any vertical expansion (i.e., an increase in the value of benefit) or *horizontal expansion* (extending social protection support to new households or newer groups of children) in response to the Covid impacts on issues of concern and interest to children.

Many of the Covid-induced child deprivation indicators were not addressed, because either these were not adequately factored into policy decision, or funds allocated for the SSNPs were not adequate. For example, a significant number of the Covid orphans joined their pre-Covid cohorts.<sup>10</sup> However, the number of beneficiaries of government orphanages and other related institutions, under the coverage of relevant SSNPs, has increased only by one thousand between FY 2015-16 and FY 2021-22. Also, only 50 per cent of eligible recipients are covered by capitation grants for the orphan

<sup>10</sup> Previously an orphan was defined as a child whose father or both parents had passed away. According to the newly proposed definition, an improvement no doubt, a child will be considered as an orphan if her/his mother is deceased.

students in non-government institutions. It needs to be noted that allocation and stipend per student has seen some rise over the years. It needs, however, to be kept in mind that only the government primary schools' students are under universal stipend programme. A large number of eligible children from the non-government primary schools (private schools, NGO-run schools, and non-government qawmi madrasas) remain outside the purview of stipend programmes.

One reason behind this appears to be that no child audit of the SSNPs was carried out and there was no conscious effort to relate the Covid-induced deprivations to SSNP design and SSNP allocation. The SSNPs are managed by different ministries and directorates. These have in-built SSNPs in their respective portfolios and apart from an interest in allocations, seen as an incremental exercise, these disparate entities do not have an integral approach to the SSNPs. A comprehensive approach and design comes from the Planning Commission (as articulated in the life-cycle approach of the NSSS, where children have been considered to be an important stakeholder group). Other organs of the GoB also articulate the government's aspirations concerning children (e.g., The Blooming Children 2018 report of Ministry of Finance aspiring to take the share of allocations for children- child budget- to 20.0 per cent of the public expenditure). However, there is no dedicated body to ensure that the GoB's plans and strategies are implemented and monitored in a systematic manner. Absence of such a body also means that policies, initiatives and programmes are taken as ongoing programmes and redesigned in view of the emerging changes in demands, and worse still, shocks. The pandemic could serve as glaring example in view of the above. The preceding discussions in the text bear this out.

It is against this backdrop that the idea of a separate child directorate merits careful consideration. Such a body could be mandated to (a) deal with the SSNPs that concern children, (b) ensure alignment with the relevant GoB policies and strategies, (c) recommend fiscal-budgetary measures in view of (b) above, and (d) come up with appropriate measures to address shocks by redesigning the existing programmes and coming up with new ones.

Targeting errors also remain a concern. This refers to both cases of *inclusion* and *exclusion*. Barring programmes of universal type, this is an endemic problem that afflicts implementation of the SSNPs in Bangladesh. Children are adversely affected even when this concerns the SSNPs that are not targeted at children directly. For example, when an eligible family is excluded from the beneficiary list, children in those families are deprived. An interoperable Management and Information System (MIS) could reduce such mistargeting. MIS could also help in designing appropriate and timely response during the pandemic-like shocks. If such a system can have built-in mechanisms to incorporate information from the ground level on an ongoing basis, this can help implement the SSNPs and actions can be calibrated to emerging needs, in both rural and urban areas. It is here that union parishads (UPs) and local governments can play an important role. Particularly UP committees on women and children should be activated to play a more pro-active role in this connection. The GoB and the development partners can take up targeted programmes to raise capacities of these committees in this regard.

Whatever resources are being allocated for the SSNPs, data on the status of using the allotted resources remains elusive.<sup>11</sup> There is thus a need to collect and publish this data on a regular basis.<sup>12</sup> Data available from the GoB's Child Budget Report (FY 2019-20) mentions that the allocation for children in FY 2017-18 was 13.97 per cent of the total budget, whereas the actual expenditure was about 13.0 per cent. More intensive monitoring will be called for to ensure that the money allocated for the child-focused programmes are fully spent, by ensuring quality of delivery. For ongoing monitoring and proper assessment purposes, availability of detailed and timely data will be required.

As may be noted, the Out of School Programme came into being after the expiry of Reaching Out of School Children (ROSC) programme in FY 2021 when it was part of the SSNPs. This was then replaced by the Out of School Programme, which at present covers 0.90 million students in 331 upazilas. However, it is reckoned that the number of eligible children has increased significantly during the Covid. The programme has now been placed under the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP-4), being implemented by the Bureau of Non-Formal Education (BNFE). Taking the dropout rate, mentioned in the Annual Primary Census Report (APSC) 2020, it is estimated that 3.2 million children did not enrol in primary education or had dropped out subsequently.<sup>13</sup> A survey may be undertaken by the government to assess the actual number of students who have not enrolled in primary education during the Covid times with a view to taking up targeted programmes in view of this.

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11 Regrettably, figures for the actual expenditure of the SSNPs budgetary allocation are not published.

12 While the IBAS++ data captures the actual expenditures,

13 According to the APSC 2017 survey by the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE), the number of such students was 2.8 million.

# 4

## Section

# Going Forward: A Strengthened Child- focused SSNP System in view of the Covid-induced Multi-dimensional Deprivations

To realise the aspirations, voiced in the various strategic and policy documents, there is a need for rethinking on how to bridge the emerging gaps between the Covid-induced demands of Bangladesh's children and the SSNPs in place targeting the children. It is argued that the policymakers should undertake a review of the SSNPs to identify how to best enhance the welfare of Bangladesh's children, who have been suffering from multi-dimensional deprivations originating from the Covid pandemic. Some of these were mentioned in the preceding sections.

## The flagship mother and child benefit programme

### Issues of implementation and expansion

The Child Benefit Scheme (CBS) was envisaged to be a flagship initiative under the NSSS. The original idea was to bring half of the children between 0-4 years of age under social safety net programmes. As was noted, results of several studies indicate that extension of support very early on is crucially important for early childhood development. The idea floated in the NSSS was to cover 7.5 million children (i.e., about 50 per cent of the total population of 15 million in the age group).<sup>14</sup> An allocation

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<sup>14</sup> However, this number of children is coming down gradually. According to the Sample Vital Registration System (SVRS), the number of children is estimated to be 14 million at present.

of Tk 4,500 crore was planned towards implementation of the programme. According to the NSSS Action Plan, the programme was to be introduced in July 2019- following the implementation of the pilot programme in 2018.

According to the Midterm Progress Report (MTR, 2020) of the NSSS, the MoWCA initiated a pilot programme, titled Improved Maternity and Lactating Mother Allowance Programme (IM-LMA), by consolidating Maternity Allowance and Lactating Mothers' Allowance programmes. The MoWCA launched the IM-LMA programme in 64 upazilas in July 2019 with technical support from the World Food Programme (WFP). The programme was piloted in eight upazilas under eight divisions, and envisaged a monthly allocation of Tk 800 per beneficiary for three years. The results and the lessons learned were to serve as inputs for preparing the CBS in line with the strategies articulated in the NSSS.

However, according to the MTR, implementation of the programme remains significantly off-track. The report identified coordination failure among the line ministries concerned at the upazila level as a major problem in this regard. The two MoWCA programmes currently have only 1.04 million children under their coverage (0.77 million children under Maternity Allowance Programme for the Poor Lactating Mothers, and 0.27 million under the Assistance for Working Lactating Mothers Programme). This has now been raised to 1.25 million, but is still way below the initially envisaged 7.5 million beneficiaries mentioned earlier. A decision was taken in 2019 to consolidate these two programmes into a single one – the Mother and Child Benefit Programme (MCBP). However, this consolidated programme was reflected for the first time only in the budget for FY 2022-23. The MCBP may be redesigned in a way that consolidates all SSNPs that focus on mother and children.<sup>15</sup> As a recent ILO report (ILO, 2021) mentions, children covered by at least one social protection benefit (excluding health) was 29.4 per cent and the corresponding rate for mothers with newborns was 20.9 per cent.

### Selectivity vs. Universality approach

Selectivity-universality debate is a crucially important component in the discourse on implementing the MCBP. There are strong arguments favouring implementation of the MCBP based on the concept of universality. It is important to take measures to remove targeting-related bottlenecks to reduce targeting errors. This would reduce the administrative cost and would also take care of targeting errors. According to the MTR, programmes with selective, non-universal target generally tend to be costly. The MTR study has estimated exclusion error (the number of eligible people not covered in the SSNPs as proportion of the number of eligible individuals) and inclusion error (the number of ineligible recipients as proportion of total programme recipients) based on the Household Income Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016. The figures were 71.0 per cent and 46.5 per cent respectively. Keeping in mind the adequacy of government resources available, it is argued that the concept of categorical universality deserves careful consideration while selecting eligible beneficiaries.

Categorical universal could include a wide range of groups – for example, for a specific age group (e.g., 0-4 years) and for a specific area (poverty pockets, hard to reach area); or it could be,

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<sup>15</sup> These SSNPs have been elaborated in the next subsection.

all children of Bangladesh belonging to the 0-4 years cohort. Of course the choice would hinge on appropriateness of the particular targeting and resource availability. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that the cost of efforts in selecting beneficiaries eats up between 10 per cent and 15 per cent of the expenditure, not counting any waste from graft (The Economist, 2022). Taking into account the administrative cost and errors in beneficiary selection, Categorical Universality merits consideration for better implementation of child-support programmes. A study which looked at efficiency of delivery of social protection during Covid time (Rahman, et al., 2021b) also found that universal (all inclusive coverage) approach in beneficiary selection was the reason behind the relatively low number of complaints concerning selection, exclusion and inclusion in connection with the Primary Education Stipend Project (PESP).

The NSSS talks of smooth transition from one programme to another upon attaining certain age limit. Universality would ensure that all children of 0-4 years can be closely monitored, so that they are able to make the transition to primary education where they would be covered by the universal stipend scheme. A central database could be created to cover all children, who could then be subsequently monitored as part of the life cycle approach- envisaged in the NSSS.

### **Budgetary implications of universalisation of MCBP**

The NSSS proposed that all six children's programmes be brought under one child benefit scheme to strengthen early childhood development programme. These are: (a) Maternity Allowance Programme for the Poor Lactating Mothers, (b) Assistance for Working Lactating Mothers, (c) H-Maternal, Neonatal, Child and Adolescent Health/National Nutrition Services, (d) H-Maternal, Child, Reproductive and Adolescent Health, (e) H-Clinical Contraceptive Services Delivery/Family Planning Field Services Delivery, and (f) Income Support Programme for the Poorest (Care+ Dream). For monthly allocation of Tk 800 each for the envisaged 7.0 million children, the GoB will need Tk 6.72 thousand crore. An additional amount of Tk 2.78 thousand crore will thus be required (the current allocation for the six programmes is Tk 3.94 thousand). If all the 14.0 million children (at present between 0-4 years) are to be covered under the programme, the additional amount required will be (Tk 2.78 thousand crore + Tk 6.72 thousand crore =) Tk 9.50 thousand crore. For 80 per cent of those children (11.2 million), additional requirement will be Tk 6.81 thousand crore<sup>16</sup>, which is a dynamic number. Every year new pregnant mothers will join, while a significant number of children will graduate. Consequently, the projected birth rate needs to be taken into consideration in estimating the number of children belonging to the group. However, certain social services along with cash incentives are also crucial to ensure proper Early Childhood Development (ECD).

### **Introduce mid-day meal programme**

Cross-country experiences show that programmes such as mid-day meal at schools play an important role in terms of nutritional security of children at a critical juncture of their physical development. The issue needs urgent attention. Managing a universal mid-day meal programme will no doubt prove to be challenging in the Bangladesh context- as evidenced from the pilot schemes. More work will be

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<sup>16</sup> Eligible number of children (0-4 years) has been estimated based on the Sample Vital Registration System's (SVRS) data for 2020. The required budgeted amount has been estimated from the SSNP budget for FY 2021-22.

required to identify practical modalities of implementing the programme.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, such a programme has become even more necessary against the backdrop of the pandemic along with the attendant food and nutrition deprivations suffered by children.

### **Bring all children with disability under a dedicated SSNP**

According to the Disability Information System (DIS)- maintained by the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW), about 0.45 million children, suffering from various types of disabilities, have been registered in the country. A single and specifically defined programme is needed for these children (0-18 years). Financial support and catering to their various needs should be put at the centre of this programme, which should be designed with a universal categorical approach.

### **Prioritise child issues in MTMPS and MTBF**

As is known, the MTMPS of Bangladesh for the period ranging from FY 2022 to FY 2024 articulates the priorities of the GoB in managing the economy. It is felt that in view of the adverse impacts of the pandemic on children (e.g., learning loss of children, nutritional deprivation, and high levels of dropout), the MTMPS needs to prioritise these issues, which then could be reflected in the budgetary allocations for children as part of the MTBF as also in the design of the SSNPs. This is important also in view of the fact that a large part of Covid impacts will have protracted shadow on welfare of children, going beyond the pandemic times. The mid-term strategy should take these likely adverse footprints into consideration.

### **Involve local governments (LGs)**

There is also a need to involve the local government institutions more closely with implementation of the child-focused SSNPs. Indeed, the Standing Committee on Child Welfare is one of the 13 committees at the union parishad level. However, the work of this committee needs to be strengthened, and ought to be monitored on a regular basis.

### **Align child-related issues with implementation of the SDGs**

Of the indicators that are relevant to children, six have been included among the 40 (39+1) indicators that were identified as the National Priority Targets (NPTs) by the SDG Working Committee, set up by the Prime Minister's Office. These, included a number of SDG indicators, which the Covid pandemic has brought to the forefront (e.g., schools facilitated with internet, child marriage, and prevalence of stunting). In view of the pandemic experience, these need to be prioritised in the SSNPs as well in order for Bangladesh to attain all the SDGs by 2030.

### **Develop an interoperable MIS for children**

Policymaking in Bangladesh relating to the areas of concern and interest to children is severely constrained by lack of comprehensive data and information. This lacuna was clearly felt during the Covid times. There is a need to develop an interoperable MIS for children with information on key parameters of their development, and the programmes of which they are beneficiaries. This will help

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<sup>17</sup> However, School Feeding Programme of the GoB, being implemented in poverty-stricken areas (in 104 upazilas), is currently providing fortified biscuits to about 4.1 million students.

design child-centric programmes in an informed manner, and also enable policymakers to undertake prompt actions in support of children during the times of emergencies and shocks of the Covid type.

### **Establish a separate child directorate**

At present, the 19 programmes- exclusively dealing with the children's issues- are administered by eight ministries/divisions. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) manages 17 of the programmes, of which four are exclusively child-focused. The MoWCA's capacities are thus not fully geared to child-oriented issues. In order to ensure better targeting and greater coordination, to generate the expected outcomes and impacts, and also to ensure good value for money, a proposal has been floated to set up a separate child directorate. It is felt that such an entity, mandated to deal exclusively with issues of interest to children, will be better placed to manage and implement the child-focused SSNPs. The directorate should be able to design and adjust programmes in alignment with the evolving needs of the children, both from strategic medium- to long-term perspective, and also in response to shock-induced new demands- as were experienced during the Covid times. There is a need to embed flexibility in the SSNPs, so that these could respond to shifting demands of children in times of shocks and Covid-type crises. A separate directorate, equipped with needed resources, will be better placed for this. For example, a recent study (Hebbar & Shehab, 2020) mentioned that "alignment" (aligning some aspects of an emergency response with the current or possible future national social protection programmes) should be considered as an important strategy to respond to emergency needs or shocks along with vertical expansion (increasing the benefit value) and *horizontal expansion* (extending social protection support to new households). It is reckoned that a dedicated directorate will be better-equipped to address the challenges of both alignment and better coordination and implementation.

### **Design a targeted programme for the Covid orphans**

It was noted in the preceding discussions that several thousand children have lost their parents and caregivers to the Covid pandemic. These children are living in most vulnerable conditions. For the purpose of smooth implementation, the proposed programme should bring all the orphans under a universal dedicated scheme (categorical universality).

### **Recommendations for upcoming budgetary allocations**

The GoB should allocate adequate resources to bring children who have dropped out of schools and in support of Covid orphans- to restructure the MCBP and other early-year programmes, to establish a separate directorate for children, to introduce mid-day meal, and to develop a comprehensive database on children, among others. The GoB can also think of establishing a "contingency fund for children" to better deal with future Covid-type shocks (and natural disasters). Such a fund will help to take urgent measures for the well-being of the affected children. Earlier, UNICEF (2020) proposed the GoB to establish a system of emergency, lifecycle, universal transfers for all children, older people and people with disabilities, over a period of six months, in view of the pandemic. This would have cost about 2.0 per cent of the GDP. The proposed fund would allow the government to respond in a proactive manner whenever there was a shock. The GoB may allocate some resources in the next budget to set up such a fund, which can be developed gradually over time.



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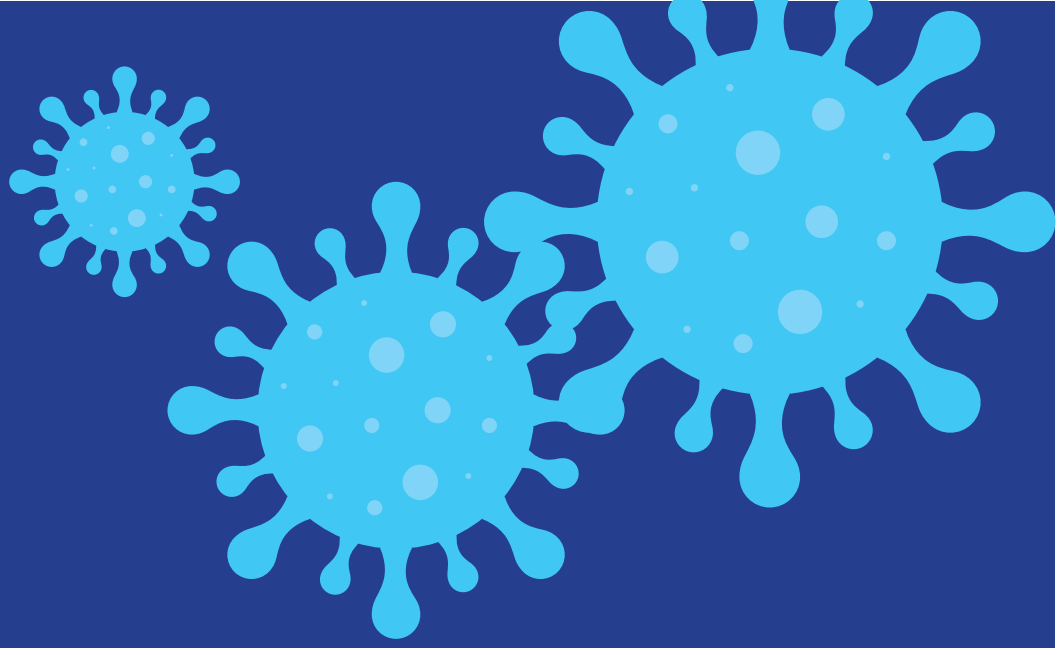
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