

# **Governance in Beneficiary Selection of Vulnerable Women Benefit (VWB) Programme**

## **Executive Summary**

**14 September 2023**

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### **Acknowledgement**

We are sincerely grateful to the members of Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC) and Youth Engagement and Support (YES) group who proactively initiated this verification process and have been continuing the verification of the list of beneficiaries of Vulnerable Women Benefit (VWB) formerly known as Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programme since 2015. We are immensely thankful to all the concerned colleagues of TIB's Civic Engagement division in Dhaka and field level involved in this beneficiary verification process as well as the present report preparation. Our special thanks and gratitude to the Executive Director, Dr. Iftekharuzzaman; Advisor, Executive Management Prof. Sumaiya Khair and Director of Research and Policy Division, Muhammad Badiuzzaman for their valuable guidance and feedback at various stages of data analysis and report writing. We are immensely benefitted from the comments and suggestions received from Senior Researcher Fellow, Mahfuzul Haque; and other members of Research and Policy Division; Director of Civic Engagement (CE) Division, Ferhana Ferdous; Coordinators of CE division namely Kazi Shafiqur Rahman, Md. Atiqur Rahman, Nurul Islam, and Coordinator of Outreach and Communication Division, Mohammad Tauhidul Islam and other colleagues on the presentation of this review report.

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## 1. Background

Poverty alleviation is one of the priorities of the Bangladesh Government. The Perspective Plan (2021-2041) of Bangladesh Government targeting on poverty and inequality have pledged to eradicate extreme poverty and reduce the poverty rate to a minimum level by 2041. In order to achieve this, social safety net programme is considered as a priority intervention among various activities undertaken by the government. In addition, poor women are more vulnerable than others in general and suffering from multiple vulnerabilities. To address such adversities, various social safety net programme have been taken to alleviate the poverty of the poor women. Among them, the Vulnerable Women Benefit (VWB) programme is one of the most important social safety net programme which was previously known as Vulnerable Group Development (VGD).

Although there are various studies related to impact, inclusion and distribution of the VGD programme, there is a need for specific field-level verification on the issue of compliance of the inclusion and exclusion criteria followed in the selection of VWB beneficiaries. In this context, TIB first took the initiative to verify the list of selected beneficiaries in 2015. The purpose of this verification is to play a supportive role to bring positive changes by involving the relevant stakeholders to ensure greater transparency and accountability in beneficiary selection. Youth Engagement and Support (YES) group with the support of TIB-inspired Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC) completed the verification of beneficiary list in a total of 101 Upazilas under 43 districts in the last three cycles (2019-2020, 2021-2022, 2022-2023). In this review report, the results of the analysis using the verification data of VWB beneficiaries of last three cycles.

## 2. Objectives, Analysis Methods and Scope

### *Objectives:*

- To analyse the limitations and practical challenges in the reality of the circular regarding the various selection criteria of beneficiaries of the VWB programme;
- To assess and analyse the effectiveness of the beneficiary list verification process conducted by TIB;
- To propose strategic and policy recommendations for the concerned authorities based on the analysis and findings.

### *Analysis Methods:*

This is mainly a quantitative review report in which the relevant documents were reviewed and the analysis of the data of the verification of beneficiary list of VWB/VGD conducted by YES members under the supervision of CCC is used in this report.

### *Scope:*

Two conditions of ineligibility for inclusion in the VWB/VGD programme; (1) whether any beneficiary has received the same benefit in the previous one/two cycles in case of new enrollment and (2) has any member of the new list received widow allowance or old age allowance under government provided social safety net programmes were used in this verification process. The current analysis has used verification of beneficiary lists of 3,774,455 individuals across 948 unions of 101 upazilas under 43 districts in three cycles.

## 3. Governance in Beneficiary Selection: Realities and Challenges

### 3.1 Deviation or Challenges in the Beneficiary Selection Process

- Selection of actual beneficiary is at risk as bribery, political influence, nepotism, hope of getting votes, etc. continue in the enrollment of beneficiaries under the VWB programme.
- Lack of publicity has led to many disadvantaged women not knowing about the programme. Therefore, many disadvantaged women are not applying and, in some cases, ineligible women are applying and being included.

- The amount of housing and cultivable land as well as the maximum monthly income for the household are not mentioned in the eligibility criteria, and this information is also not collected through the application form.
- Although the Ward Committee is primarily responsible for screening the applicant's information, representatives of the Department of Social Services, civil society members, professional groups and representatives of the poor and marginalised groups are absent as members.
- The designation and criteria of the members of the investigation committee for complaint resolution have not been specified in the circular.

### 3.2 Verification of List of Beneficiaries by TIB: Errors and Corrections

In 2019-2020 cycle, the maximum error (3.63 per cent) was identified by scrutinizing the list of 1,87,963 beneficiaries from 901 unions under 96 upazilas of 43 districts. The number of errors identified in the verification of beneficiaries decreases gradually which indicates a positive effect or impact of TIB conducted verification programme. The percentage of listed beneficiaries received Widow and Old Age Allowance and VGD Allowance in the 2023-2024 cycle also decreases as compared to previous two cycles (Table 1).

**Table 1: Status of errors identified in the verification process of VWB beneficiary list by cycles**

Cycle	Different types of error rate (%)			
	Percentage of error (ineligible member) in the list of total beneficiaries (number)	Percentage of beneficiaries received VGD card in the previous cycle (number)	Percentage of the beneficiaries received widow allowance in the same cycle	Percentage of the beneficiaries received Old Age Allowance in the same cycle (number)
2019-2020 (n=1,87,963)	3.63 (6,823)	3.34 (6,272)	0.19 (362)	0.10 (189)
2021-2022 (n=95,773)	3.02 (2,892)	2.66 (2,544)	0.24 (234)	0.12 (114)
2023-2024 (n=93,719)	2.41 (2,259)	2.20 (2,062)	0.20 (191)	0.01 (6)
'n' refers to the total number of beneficiaries listed				

By assessing the corrections against errors in different cycles of verification, it has been found that the highest number of corrections made in 2023-2024 cycle which shows the acceptability of TIB's verification programme. In this cycle, the error in the list of beneficiaries was 2.41 per cent of which 92.61 per cent was rectified against the error (Table 2).

**Table 2: Corrections made against the error identified in beneficiary list by cycles (%)**

Cycle	Number of Ineligible Beneficiaries in the total Beneficiary List	Number of New Beneficiaries Inclusion by the Authority correcting against total error received*	Percentage of Inclusion of New Beneficiaries by Authority by Correcting Errors
2019-2020	6,823	4,910	71.96
2021-2022	2,892	1,902	65.77
2023-2024	2,259	2,092	92.61
Total	11,974	8,904	-
*Correction against total errors received – Inclusion of new beneficiaries from the waiting list by the exclusion of ineligible beneficiaries by the authority			

### **3.3 Some positive impacts of different cycles of verification and error correction**

- In the past three cycles, as per the request from local administration (UNO) and relevant stakeholders, the verification of beneficiaries has been conducted in 26 upazilas.
- 51 upazilas out of 96 upazilas in 2019–2020 cycle, 22 out of 50 upazilas in 2021–2022 cycle, and 40 out of 49 upazilas in 2023–2024 cycle had corrected all errors and replaced the ineligible beneficiaries with eligible from the waiting list.
- As a result of verification of three cycles by TIB a 6,410.88 (estimated) Metric tons of rice reached to or distributed among the beneficiaries who were being included through an error correction process.
- In three cycles, 8,904 replaced beneficiary women got the opportunity of receiving various skills, self-reliance, and empowerment related training.

### **4. Overall observation**

- A total of 3,77,455 listed beneficiary were verified in three cycles and 11,974 ineligible beneficiaries were identified, out of which 8,904 were replaced by beneficiaries from the waiting list.
- The rate of correcting the error identified through verification of beneficiary list is encouraging (92.61 per cent in the cycle 2023–2024).
- Among the two exclusion criteria for enrolment in VWB programme, the condition of 'obtaining the same benefits in the previous one/two cycles' was not followed in many cases. In the current cycle, this criterion was not followed for selecting 2.20 per cent beneficiaries.
- Due to the lack of a Single Registry Management Information System (MIS), effective screening and coordination among respective offices are hampering the efficient implementation of the VWB programme.
- The absence of specific mention of the amount of cultivatable land and maximum income of a household or family per month as priority condition under eligibility criteria for inclusion has created the opportunity to select relatively well-off women as beneficiaries.
- Corruption, political influence, nepotism, the hope of getting votes, etc., are behind the ineffectiveness of the concerned committee, which causes errors in the selection of VWB beneficiaries.
- In order to make the field level verification process effective, it is necessary to consider the terms and conditions of ineligibility for selection of beneficiaries and the priority conditions of inclusion in the programme.

### **5. Recommendations**

#### **Circular revision related**

1. The priority conditions/criteria for inclusion should include the total amount of household or family dwelling and cultivable land, and the family's total monthly income. This two information; amount of land owned and amount of monthly income earned should also be mentioned in the application form.
2. To achieve more accuracy in beneficiary selection, ensure the participation of citizens, professionals, and representatives of the poor and marginalised population in Ward Committee.
3. Eligibility criteria for the appointment of the investigation committee members (entrusted to address complaints about beneficiary selection) should be clearer in the circular. Specific information on who will be the eligible member and qualification; jurisdiction; process of committee formation; timeline for report submission; and actions to be taken should be mentioned in the terms of reference of the committee.

### **Capacity related**

4. Orientation and direction should be provided to all concerned officials, people representatives, and committee members in the light of the circular for proper implementation of the programme.
5. A Single Registry Management Information System (SRMIS) must be established through coordination of all social safety net programmes implementing authorities, and it needs to be implemented urgently. Land ownership information based on National Identity (NID) Card should be attached and updated periodically to single MIS.
6. Union wise list of disadvantaged women with NID cards should be made and updated regularly and allocation of Union wise VWB beneficiaries should be determined accordingly.
7. To make the online application process more accessible and easier, the concerned offices should ensure a conducive environment including capacity building of disadvantaged women.

### **Transparency and Accountability related**

8. Prior to the application process, mass campaigning should be made among the poor people in the villages.
9. To make Grievance Redress System (GRS) simple and effective, the following measures should be taken:
  - Service recipients should be informed about the grievance redress system, and encouraged to file complaints.
  - Any type of easily available ways/methods of complaints submission (e.g., boxes, email, websites, hotline numbers, and others) should be given to the potential beneficiary.
  - Upazila Women Affairs Offices' website and notice board should routinely (monthly) disseminate information about the actions taken against complaint to gain trust of the service recipients.
10. Third parties (representatives of civil society, professionals and marginalised populations) should be involved in the verification process.
11. Beneficiaries should be selected following rules and regulations prescribed in the circulars and good practice of 100% correction should be followed in those areas where error in beneficiary selection is found.
12. The final list of beneficiaries should be published on the notice board and website of the Union Parishad.

### **Prevention of Corruption and Integrity related**

13. As per law accountability should be ensured for those involved in corruption irrespective of their positions and identities. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has to play an active role in addition to departmental actions where applicable.
14. Code of Conduct for all the concerned officials and employees at all levels must be developed and enforced in line with the National Integrity Strategy 2012 and with the 'Spirit of Zero Tolerance to Corruption'.
15. Rewards and punishments should be in place based on the performance of the concerned officials and employees involved in providing services. Individuals accused of corruption should be refrained from various forms of protection, including awards of integrity, incentives and promotions.