

## Food Security through Vulnerable Group Feeding Program: Lessons from Union Parishads' of Bagerhat Sadar Upazila

Rani Sultana<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Public Administration, University of Barishal, Kornokathi, Barishal-8254, Bangladesh*

**Abstract:** Food is one of the basic needs of human being. Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) program aims at ensuring food security for vulnerable people in Bangladesh. This paper aims to explore the status of food security through VGF program at Bagerhat Sadar Upazila. The result of this study is presented based on independent variables. Here dependent variable is food security and independent variables are accessibility, food quality and food utilization. The study found that beneficiary accessibility to this program is high, food quality of this program is moderate and the ratio of food utilization is high among the beneficiaries. At the same time there are some allegations regarding quality of provided foods. It is also found that the government employees are very much apathy towards the quality of goods provided under VGF program. Sometimes appropriate food reservation system is not maintained properly that is why those provided goods easily become spoiled. Finally, this study identifies the few gaps to be studied in further research. The involvement of this study lies in its finding out a real scenario of food security through Vulnerable Group Feeding Program under Social Safety Net.

**Keywords:** *Food Security; Vulnerable Group Feeding; Accessibility; Food Quality; Utilization.*

**Introduction:** Food security is one of the basic needs of human being. The constitution of Bangladesh also stipulates about the food security by its 15(a) number article. Article 15(d) of constitution states that- state will provide necessary assistance to the people having insecurity from unemployment, old age, widowhood, loss of parents or physical and mental disabilities [1]. To address these sections of people the government of Bangladesh has initiated Social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) in various forms. Khuda [2] termed Social Safety Net Program as a set of public measures, which a society provides for its members to protect them from various types of economic and social hardships, resulting from a substantial decline in income due to various types of contingencies such as loss of cultivable land, crop failure, land and homestead loss due to river erosion, unemployment, sickness, maternity, invalidity, old age or death of earning household members. Food based safety net programs in the form of targeted food transfers and ration, supplementary feeding program, school feeding programs, food for work program (FFW), emergency food distribution, food stamps, vouchers and coupons have variously been used by most developing countries during recent years [3]. Barkat [4] stated that the main objective of food-based programs is to provide for adequate food consumption and thus help poor consumers achieve and maintain better nutritional status when, in the absence of the intervention, people would be likely to curtail their food consumption, resulting in malnutrition, morbidity, and possibly death. The World Food Program in the wake of the 1974 famine in Bangladesh initiated the Vulnerable Group Feeding Program in 1975. The VGF program primarily aimed at feeding those people who were at highest risk of hunger, the poorest and especially women-headed households [5]. It is an unconditional humanitarian assistance program for which in-kinds benefits (rice or wheat) is provided to support food security for the poorest people affected by disasters like floods, cyclones, riverbank erosion and other natural calamities. VGF's main objective is ensuring food security for poor and destitute people. To date, VGF continues to be a humanitarian program that provides food transfers to the poor during disasters and major religious festivals [6]. In the budget of 2021-2022 total allocation for VGF program is 1455.54 crore tk and the number of beneficiary is about 200.17 lac [7]. In the guideline of VGF program there is the mention of 70% women beneficiary selection as the government of Bangladesh is very much sensitive for gender issues. The research area of this study is Bagerhat Sadar Upazila. It has nine upazilas. For geographical location natural calamities are constant companion of this district. In Bagerhat Sadar Upazila the number of allocated card is 13,532, in Fakirhat Upazila the number of allocated card is 17,825, in Kachua Upazila the number of allocated card is 5,575, in Mollahat Upazila the number of allocated card is 6,148, in Morelgonj Upazila the number of allocated card is 57,163, in Rampal Upazila the number of allocated card is 8,199, in Shoronkhola Upazila the number of allocated card is 22,362, in Chiltolmari Upazila the number of allocated card is 6,298 and in Mongla Upazila the number of allocated card is 21,934. Total allocated VGF card in Bagerhat district is 1,59,036. And this number of card becomes more or less according to need.

**Rationale behind the Study:** The notion of social safety net is not new at all. Alderman & Hoddinott [8] stated that free food distribution was a feature of Egypt in the time of the Pharaohs and of Rome during its Imperial age. England had a succession of

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**Corresponding author details:** Rani Sultana

*E-mail address:* [rani.sultana1992@gmail.com](mailto:rani.sultana1992@gmail.com)

*Tel:* +8801748901111

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“Poor Laws” dating from the 16th century that provided assistance to those unable to work, while Germany inaugurated components of the modern welfare state in the late 19th century. These programs typically referred to as social safety nets or social protection programs. Bangladesh has a wide spectrum of Social Safety Net Programs. VGF program is one of the biggest food assistance programs of our government under SSNs. There are 30 specifically designed social safety net programs directly operated by the Government of Bangladesh. At least a number of 13 ministries are engaged in the planning and implementation of these projects [9]. SSNs have a good contribution to food security, economic growth of the beneficiaries to maintain a minimum standard of living. VGF program is conducted by Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief. It acts as a safety net for those vulnerable people by securing their food consumption, income etc [10]. Vivian [11] opined that many of the food-based safety nets in developing countries were instituted as a temporary response to a short-term crisis, such as the economic shock of structural adjustment measures, yet they have remained in place as a result of permanent structural change. Rogers & Coates [12] found in their findings that food-based safety net interventions often implemented to serve purposes other than improving nutritional status or increasing household food security. Government of Bangladesh has allocated tk 1.1 trillion in fiscal year 2021-22 for social protection which is 3.11 percent of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product). A study of Ninno and Dorosh [13] found some inconsistencies regarding VGF program during 1998’s flood in Bangladesh. About 20 per cent of the households not affected by the then flood received transfers for leakage in the system. They found the then ongoing SSNs were reaching the poor but not all the poor [14]. Nath [15] in his study focused on exploring nutritional food security situation in Bangladesh. There emphasis has been given on production, international trade, food stocks, price stability, safety nets and public food distribution system to address food availability. He analyzed food and nutrition security by socio economic strata of the population. In another article Sultan, Afrad and Prodhan [16] found out food security status of the women of Kapasia upazila under Gazipur district associated with Food for Work Program (FWP) in terms of access to food (meals/day/person) and intake of energy (kilo calorie). There are many works in the field of food security concern but how food security is ensured through VGF program is a matter of study especially in Bagerhat district because Bagerhat is a disaster prone area in terms of natural calamities. Natural disasters are constant companion of this area. In Bangladesh there are some food transfer programs to address disaster induced food insecurity. That is why this area is much more relevant to undertake research purpose. In this area this kind of study focused on food security concern has not been conducted earlier. Sometimes it is known from the print and electronic media that the quality of provided food under VGF program is not well enough to eat for the beneficiary, the actual needy persons exclude from the program. So it is very much pertinent to find out a real scenario of food security concern through VGF program at Bagerhat Sadar Upazila.

**Review of Literature:** The report of the Asian Human Right Commission (AHRC) [17] reveals the performance bottlenecks of various food aid program. The Commission reported to the Government of Bangladesh about one of their findings on VGF program. In the district of Gaibandha, VGF program failed to reach at the actual poor. In Mohonpur union under Palasbari upazila, out of 13 villages 1000 families were enlisted into the program from only seven villages and six villages were excluded from it. Local level political leaders picked up 600 VGF cards of families who are enlisted beneficiaries but never received any food subsidy. Some of them received only 3 Kilograms of rice instead of 15 Kilograms. After taking VGF cards, the public representatives and the VGF committee members who belong to the political party distribute the cards among themselves to enlist beneficiaries by their own choice.

The 1996 World Food Summit defined food security as “a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious foods that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for a healthy life. Barrett [18] opined food security is commonly conceptualized as resting on three pillars: availability, access, and utilization. Havas and Salman [19] pointed that first issues of food security are availability and accessibility. Four dimensions of food security have been identified by Peng and Berry [20] that in line with different levels 1) Availability- National, 2) Accessibility- Household, 3) Utilization- Individual, 4) Stability – may be considered as a time dimension that affects all the levels. All four of these dimensions must be intact for full food security. For recent time emphasis is given to sustainability another long-term (fifth) dimension of food security.

The study of Ahmed and Islam [21] revealed some malpractices in the form of nepotism, bribe and bias in case of beneficiary selection criteria, at the same time they found bribes taking by the Union Parishad members/chairman at the time of beneficiary selection. Political affiliation and nepotism play a major role in selecting SSNP beneficiaries. The study found that almost all the VGD beneficiaries received 20-25 KG instead of 30 KG rice or wheat while the VGF beneficiaries received 6-8 KG aids only. The study shows an imbalance in distribution of SSNs in some of the study areas, for example, a very discriminative picture of distributing old age pension was noticed in Mogdhara Union under Swandip Upazila of Chittagong District. The study reveals that monitoring from Upazila Parishad is inadequate due to shortage of manpower and resources. No enthusiastic verification and supervision from Upazila Parishad is carried out unless any complaint regarding beneficiary selection is filed.

#### **Objectives of the Study:**

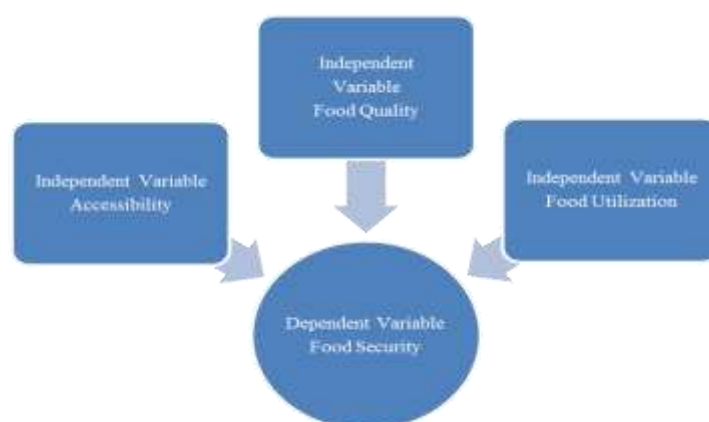
- Find out accessibility of the concerned area people to VGF program.
- Find out beneficiary opinion regarding the quality of VGF food.
- Sort out utilization scenario of provided food.

**Research Question:**

- How is the condition of beneficiaries' accessibility to the program?
- What are the reasons for providing low (if the quality is below the standard) quality goods?
- What is the utilization scenario of provided food?

**Methodology:** Food Security through Vulnerable Group Feeding Program is a matter of quantitative judgment. Therefore, a combination of qualitative and quantitative approach has been used to attain the objectives of this study. Bagerhat sadar upazila is composed of ten Union Parishad (UP) named Karapara, Bamorta, Gotapara, Bishnupur, Baruipara, Jatharapur, Shatgombuj, Khanpur, Rakhalgachi, Dema. All data were collected from these ten union parishads. Total 350 beneficiaries and 50 non-beneficiaries were brought under Focused Group Discussion (FGD). To get some data interview of chairman and members of concerned Union Parishad, interview of employees of upazila food control office and employees of Upazila Parishad concerned with VGF program was conducted.

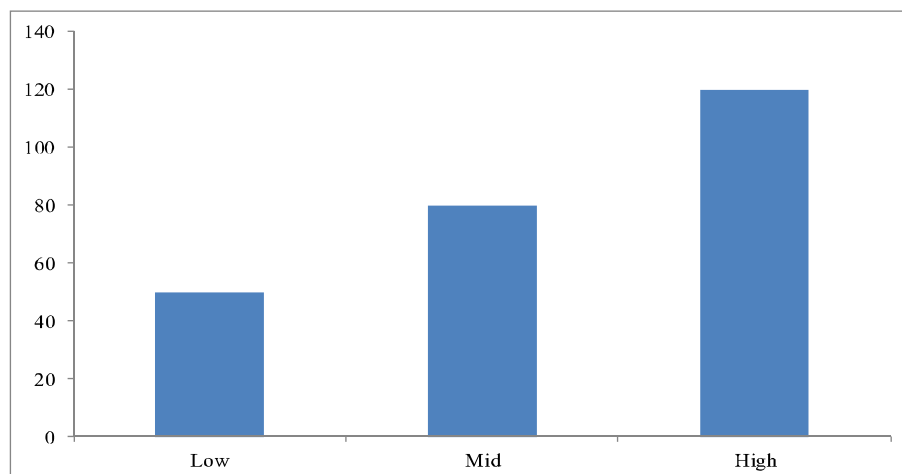
**Analytical Framework:** To collect data Focused Group Discussion (FGD) and interview method have been used. All the used data were collected from April 2021 to April 2022. Here, dependent variable is food security and independent variables are accessibility, food quality and food utilization.



**Fig. 1.** Variables.

**Findings:**

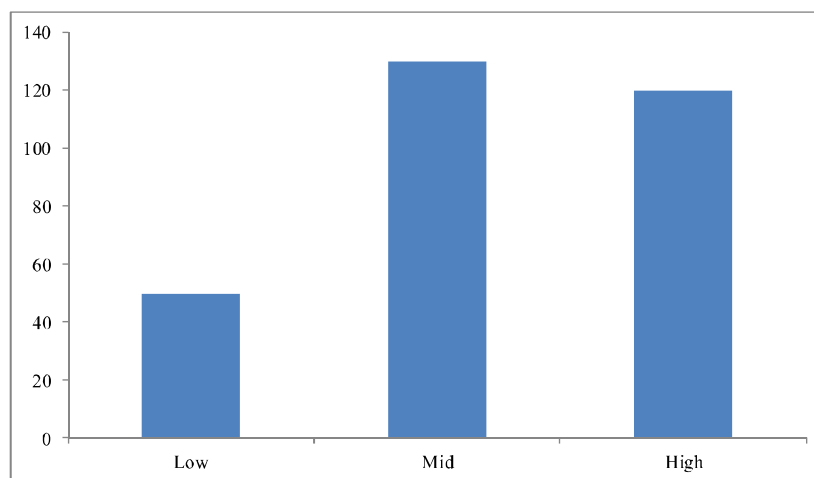
**Accessibility:** To assess the accessibility to this program FGD of 200 beneficiaries and 50 non beneficiaries was conducted. They were asked about several questions on their accessibility to this program. They were asked questions regarding any kind of obstacles or problems they faced to get access to this program. In the following figure vertical line indicates the number of respondents and in horizontal line there is the extent of measurement result in the form of low, mid and high.



**Fig. 2.** Accessibility.

It is apparent from the above figure that accessibility of this program is high as 120 out of 250 respondents were in favor of high accessibility. 80 respondents opined on moderate accessibility as to some extent they had to face hindrance to get access to this program. These 80 beneficiaries had to face some difficulties in case of getting VGF card. For example- 7 beneficiaries of Jathrapur union claimed not to be included to VGF program. Then they make allegations to Upazila parishad. On the basis of their allegations an investigation was held by Upazila administration and finally they got accessibility to this program. On the other hand 50 respondents opined on low accessibility on this program. Here it is mentionable that those 50 respondents in favor of low accessibility are non-beneficiaries who claimed themselves as eligible beneficiary for this program. Those 50 non-beneficiaries were from ten 10 union parishad and they were taken as five from each UP.

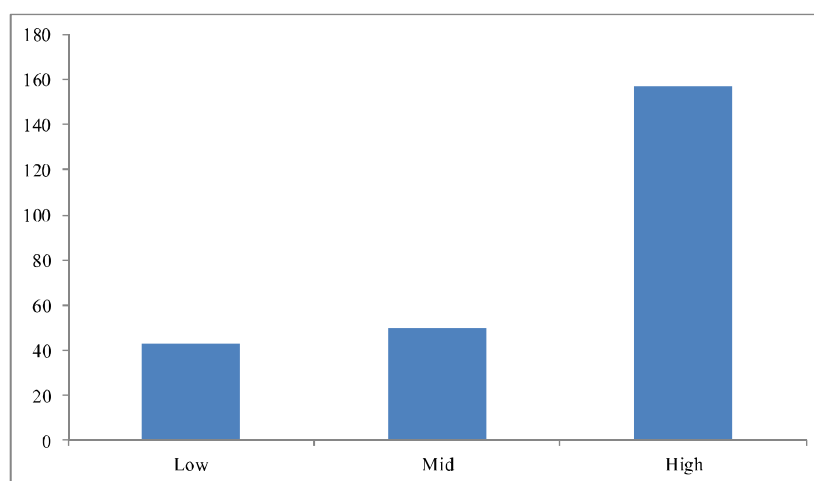
**Food Quality:** To assess the food quality provided by VGF program FGD of 300 beneficiaries was conducted. They were asked about several questions regarding quality of food of this program. They were asked to give their opinion regarding quality of provided food based on the extent of low, mid and high. If the quality is well then it is termed as high, if the quality is moderate then it is termed as mid and if the quality is not good then it is termed as low.



**Fig. 3 Food Quality.**

Above figure reveals the moderate food quality as 130 out of 300 beneficiaries opined on this category. They opined on average quality of provided foods. 120 respondents were in favor of high quality of provided foods. Only 50 respondents opined on low quality of provided food. These 50 respondents claimed presence of insects and bad smell after cooking the provided food.

**Food Utilization:** To find out food utilization scenario FGD of 250 beneficiaries was conducted. They were asked about in which purposes they use VGF provided food. Here the extent of utilization is categorized as low, mid and high.



**Figure 4. Food Utilization.**

It is noticed from the above figure that food utilization is high as 157 respondents out of 250 opined on high food utilization as they use whole provided food to eat. 50 respondents were in favor of moderate food utilization as sometimes they use provided food to eat and sometimes they do not. And only 43 respondents opined on low food utilization as they never eat the provided food rather they sell it. It is found from field study that all beneficiaries taste is different. The beneficiary cannot eat the VGF provided food for several reasons- bad smell, presence of insects. Sometimes they sale it for not habituated with boiled or atop rice. Some beneficiaries use it to feed the domestic animals as well. Some beneficiary expression was like that we the poor people can eat whatever we get.

**Inconsistencies in Beneficiary Selection Procedure:** Beneficiary selection procedure has a strong guideline from the concerned authority. But there found some allegations from the studied area. Union Humanitarian Assistance Program Implementation Committee is to some extent non functional. Sometimes Union Parishad's chairman and member select the beneficiary with their own judgment; here they show favoritism or nepotism in case of beneficiary selection. It is also found that poor eligible people not having the card have no idea regarding making allegations. They are so illiterate that they have no knowledge how to make allegations.

#### **Reasons for Providing Low Quality Foods:**

- Sometimes the left foods of others program (Food for work) is allocated for VGF program as it is a small program under Social Safety Net Program.
- Actually there is a huge gap between buying and distribution of VGF foods. There is exchange of hands of foods but lack due time distribution.
- The owner of rice mill is to some extent responsible for providing low quality foods to the local Food Control Office.
- Sometimes chairman of the Union Parishad makes delay to distribute the food among the beneficiaries.
- The preservation system of Upazila Food Control Office is obsolete and they do not get preservation medicine timely and there is lack of skilled officers and worker who have proper knowledge on food preservation.

#### **Way Forward:**

- Actually there is the provision of buying locally grown rice for every year to be distributed for VGF program but the owner of rice mills contracted for this program do not follow this rule. So there is the need for proper monitoring.
- There is the existence of some middleman in case of buying this food. They exchanged that food for several times before distribution. Concerned authority should have to mark them.
- Some beneficiary demand to get monetary assistance instead of food assistance as well as the chairman and member claim on the same tune.
- Proper food preservation can minimize the damage of food so modern technology should have to be used to preserve the food.
- Selection of beneficiary should have to be more inclusive and open. And the concerned authorities of selection committee have to show publicly all the enlisted names to be sent for final approval to the Upazila Parishad. For doing this UP has to publicly announce the prepared list. By following this general people can know about it.

**Conclusion:** Regardless of having some inconsistencies the above findings reveal a positive picture regarding food security at Bagerhat sadar upazila under VGF program. Major inconsistency found in case of beneficiary selection. It is apparent from the above study that accessibility of this program is high, food quality is moderate and food utilization level is high as well. Food quality scenario drew to some extent a moderate figure but utilization picture is satisfactory. Actually food security entails a huge concept. Only rice or wheat is not enough for ensuring food security for the vulnerable section of the society. The provided food only can meet short term demand but to fill the long term demand VGF initiative is scanty in nature. The volume of allocation or provided items should be increased. So, there is the need to diversify on provided food items. Concerned authority can think about other necessary nutritious foods that can easily preserve like- oil, lentil, puffed rice, flattened rice, barley, date, chickpeas, soya nuggets etc. This mentioned food is very much beneficial to health. To ensure food security there is no alternative to diversify provided food for this program. This program will be more vibrant if actual beneficiary and proper food reservation can be ensured.

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