

An Evaluation of Food Assistance Program for Rural Destitute Women in Bangladesh

Newaz Ahmed Chowdhury

Abstract Initiated in the wake of the 1974 famine, the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) Program was designed to reach those households/beneficiaries who were at the highest risk of hunger, the poorest and especially the female-headed households. The VGD program exclusively targets poor women and provides a monthly food ration over a period of twenty-four months. The general objective of the evaluation study was to assess the socio-economic impact of VGD activities on the beneficiaries. The present study is based on primary data collected through interviews/Focus Group Discussions (FGD) in each of the seven divisions of the country. In each division the sampling frame comprised of one district, two upazilas and four unions. Thus, a total of twenty-eight unions from seven divisions were selected as well as 420 VGD beneficiaries and 196 control group participants were covered under the study. It was found from the analysis that considering the income, land ownership, housing and sanitation condition the beneficiaries included in the VGD program belonged to very poor category of households. VGD activity was found to be very effective for reducing food insecurity among the beneficiaries' households. It is remarkable to mention that most the beneficiaries are relieved of uncertainty and tension due to cereal availability ensured through this program.

Key Words: Social Safety Net, Vulnerable Group Development, Food Security

INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, gender and rural poverty are inter-linked in many ways. Gender appears to be a principal criterion for the allocation of scarce resources in communities and households. In terms of access to social services, i.e., health and education and in terms of participation in the labor force, women are more disadvantaged than men. More women than men are falling into the poverty trap under the existing discriminatory socio-cultural values, norms and practices. Discrimination in employment and the notion

that women's income is secondary and complementary have not only aggravated the poverty situation in Bangladesh but also led to a sharp rise in the proportion of women among the poor.

Of the approximate fifty-five million Bangladeshis currently living below the poverty line (defined as 2,122 kilo calories/person/day), the 'poorest of the poor' and the most vulnerable are women, particularly – divorced, separated, abandoned and widowed women who are simultaneously and commonly head of sizeable households, come under this group. Poverty is not only a state of deprivation but also a state of vulnerability. For the female half of the population, vulnerability is perhaps, an even more central dimension of the poverty experience.

Safety nets are formal and informal ways of protecting people from food insecurity and vulnerability. Formal safety nets include various food or cash or both transfer programs designed to play both a redistributive and risk reduction role. The usual role of safety net programs is creation of an environment for transferring income and resources to the poor, so that the incidence of poverty reduces (Zahid et al. 2012). A more recently identified role of safety net programs are to help protect the poor persons, families, and communities from income and consumption uncertainty. During the last four decades, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB, 2011) has been implementing a variety of safety net programs, which include: (a) cash support program; (b) food aid program; (c) special program for poverty reduction; (d) self-employment through micro credit; and (e) some specific programs for poverty reduction (GoB, 2011). Safety net programs under implementation are expected to bring direct and indirect benefits to the poor and vulnerable groups through transfer of resource in cash or in kind. But, effectiveness of programs in reducing poverty and vulnerability is adversely affected due to inefficiency and corruption associated with selection of beneficiaries and distribution of benefits. Despite the positive implications of safety net programs in the country, the programs suffer from some weaknesses like inadequate coverage, inappropriate targeting and leakage (Zahid et al. 2012).

The Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) Program, which was initiated in the wake of the 1974 famine, was designed to reach those households/beneficiaries who were at the highest risk of hunger, the poorest and especially female headed households. This is the largest social safety net program of the country now (GoB, 2011). In recent times, this program for destitute women is trying to move from its role of relief provider to larger development role like providing training on life skills and income generating skills to women beneficiaries. The VGD program has evolved over time to focus on helping poor women for overcoming their poverty. Currently about 750,000 women participants (of about 3.75 million beneficiaries in total) from

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ultra-poor households receive a monthly food ration combined with a package of development services (GoB, 2011).

VGD is a multi-dimensional food aid program, which is quite different from Food for Work and Test Relief. The target group of the VGD program is mainly the destitute women. These include landless and asset-less women, who are widowed, divorced, abandoned, having under-nourished children, lactating mothers and women with handicapped husband, etc. The VGD program exclusively targets poor women and provides a monthly food ration over a period of twenty-four months (GoB, 2011). The concentration on mere food grain transfer, through providing two years of relief for the most vulnerable, was considered inadequate in sustaining such women at levels above poverty because of its failure to address the systemic basis of poverty and gender inequality.

The program currently attempts to improve the economic and social situation of VGD women so that they may graduate beyond their existing conditions and be able to sustain themselves above the hardcore level. More specifically the immediate objectives of the VGD program are as follows:

1. To increase the income earning capacities of women by:
 - providing training in marketable skills
 - encouraging the accumulation of seed capital through savings
 - providing access to credit
2. To increase functional knowledge, including literacy of women through training and participation in group activities
3. To increase the food intake of women and their family members

The VGD program is supposed to target the rural poorest and destitute women. The present evaluation also assess how far the targeting of beneficiaries adheres to the selection criteria i.e. landlessness, temporary and casual employment, female-headship, etc. Moreover, attempts were made to look into the fairness of the selection process (whether the targeting process was transparent and dependent on the relationship with the Ward Member/UP Chairman and to assess the extent of leakage in distribution, i.e. entitlement versus benefits actually received).

In assessing the project impact on VGD beneficiaries' data were analyzed not in terms of absolute change in the quality of life indicators, but in terms of relative change in comparison with the change experienced by the control group.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general objective of the evaluation study was to assess the socio-economic impact of VGD activities on the beneficiaries. The specific objectives of the evaluation study were to:

- identify the role of VGD program on livelihood front of the beneficiaries
- assess the benefits derived from VGD program
- review the targeting, selection and disbursement process of VGD program
- document appropriate lessons for further development of the program and suggest some policy recommendations

As per the scope of the study both, quantitative data and qualitative information were collected. Data were collected on the variables like geographical coverage of the program, beneficiaries' perceptions of the program, appropriateness of targeting, resource allocation, extent of the beneficiary reach, issues of leakage, impact at the beneficiary level, impact at the community level (affiliation in group/NGO, water use, mobility, rights, local level participation, monitoring and evaluation of community activities, etc.), social perceptions on these programs, women empowerment, successes, challenges, needs for further improvements, socio-economic characteristics, demographic characteristics (age, education, household size, land ownership, income, access to electricity, etc.), status of household food security, opinions regarding selection process, fairness in VGD beneficiary selection, improvement in housing condition, household income, food security, and perception of beneficiaries about their entitlement and actual amount of wheat/rice received, etc.

STUDY METHODS

In order to achieve the objectives, the study employed a three-track method:

1. The first track consisted of analysis of available statistics on program content, allocations and coverage. An indicative list of the sources of secondary data is given below:
 - Government documents/reports
 - Project documents/reports
 - Relevant reports of bilateral/multilateral agencies
 - Seminar/workshop proceedings
2. The second track consisted of a households and union-level survey to examine the impact of VGD program on the beneficiary and local perceptions on the program including how the program can be further improved and strengthened.
3. The third track consisted of in-depth interview/Key Informant Interview (KII) with service providers and local-level administration (UP

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Chairman/Members, upazila level government officials, etc.) to identify policy level gaps and linkages.

Sampling and Sample Size

The usual method in this kind of evaluative study is “before-after” comparison. If benchmark data on key variables prior to the initiation of the project are available, these are compared with the same set of variables after implementation of the project for several years. Since benchmark data were not available for evaluation of changes, the study followed the “with-without” comparison to evaluate the impact of VGD program on beneficiaries. In order to be able to assess the impact of VGD program on the beneficiary women, similar data were also collected from similar poor who did not receive VGD support and they were considered as the control group in this study. Comparison of beneficiaries/program participants were made with the control group (non-beneficiaries). For this purpose the ‘control’ groups were selected in such a way that the non-beneficiaries belong to similar socio-economic category as that of the VGD beneficiaries, who were not covered by any of the safety net programs.

The union is the lowest administrative unit in the VGD program. This evaluation study was based on collection of primary data collected through interviews in each of the seven divisions of the country. In each division the sampling frame comprised of one district, two upazilas and four unions. Thus, four unions from each division and a total of twenty-eight unions from seven divisions were selected in conducting the impact study.

Selection of Sample Districts, Upazilas and Unions

At the first stage, out of the total of seven divisions of Bangladesh, all the districts in each division were listed separately and one district was selected at random from each division. At the second stage, all the upazilas in the sample district were listed and two upazilas were selected purposively: one having ‘very high’ incidence of poverty and the other with relatively ‘low’ incidence of poverty. This gave a total of fourteen selected upazilas from the seven sample districts. At the third stage, from each sample upazila, two unions were selected randomly. This gave a total of twenty-eight selected unions from the seven divisions. At the final stage, from each union, fifteen beneficiaries were selected at random. Thus, a total of 420 VGD beneficiaries from twenty-eight unions were covered for the study.

Selection of Control Groups

The impact of a program on its beneficiaries may not be reflected accurately in a comparison of the relevant indicators of the beneficiaries after completion of the program due to some normal changes or interventions by other organizations that may affect the program beneficiary. Hence, non-participants in the program—the “control” households were selected. The

households were selected in such a way that the socio-economic background and age-sex structure of the control households were similar to those of the program beneficiary households. The rationale for selecting “control households” during the impact study was that it would better indicate the impact of the program on the beneficiary households relative to the control groups of people.

The control groups were selected from the same unions where the beneficiary households belong and they were selected in such a way that the non-beneficiaries belong to similar socio-economic category as that of the program beneficiaries, but having no involvement with any other safety net programs. Seven non-beneficiaries compared to fifteen beneficiaries were selected from each of the selected unions. As the number of non-beneficiaries was less for control group, utmost care was taken to ensure representativeness of sample of the population characteristics. The number of respondents from project and control groups by divisions is shown in Table 1, which shows that in the process of covering twenty-eight unions from the seven divisions, 420 program beneficiaries and 196 non-beneficiaries were covered in this study.

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF SAMPLE DISTRICTS, UPAZILAS AND UNIONS (DIVISION WISE)

Division	Sample District (No.)	Sample Upazila (No.)	Sample Union (No.)	No. of Respondents	
				Program	Control
Dhaka	1	2	4	4 x 15 = 60	4 x 7 = 28
Chittagong	1	2	4	4 x 15 = 60	4 x 7 = 28
Rajshahi	1	2	4	4 x 15 = 60	4 x 7 = 28
Khulna	1	2	4	4 x 15 = 60	4 x 7 = 28
Barisal	1	2	4	4 x 15 = 60	4 x 7 = 28
Sylhet	1	2	4	4 x 15 = 60	4 x 7 = 28
Rangpur	1	2	4	4 x 15 = 60	4 x 7 = 28
All	7	14	28	420	196

Data Collection and Analysis

The study employed three methods for data collection such as interview of VGD beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries using interview schedule, case studies and FGDs. Data collection was carried out in two different phases. In the first stage, a survey on the VGD beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries was conducted by the researchers in the sample unions using a pre-structured and pre-tested interview schedule with the help of seven trained investigators. Two case studies and few FGDs were made to substantiate the findings. The data were analyzed through MS Access and MS Excel as per tabulation design and the interpretations were made based on the findings of the study supplemented by observation of the researcher.

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Age of the Respondents

In Bangladesh, majority of the women are generally vulnerable in the society. Among many other factors, vulnerability of women mostly depends on age, marital status and socio-economic condition. According to the guidelines of VGD program the age of the women for getting VGD card should be between eighteen to forty-nine years. Table 2 presents the age distribution of both the VGD beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries.

TABLE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF THE RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO AGE

Age Group (Years)	Program		Control		Total	
	Number of Respondents	%	Number of Respondents	%	Number of Respondents	%
19-29	102	24.3	56	28.6	158	25.8
30-39	191	45.5	78	39.8	269	43.9
40- 49	109	26.0	49	25.0	158	25.8
Above 49	18	4.2	13	6.6	28	4.6
Total	420	100	196	100	613	100

Source: Zahid et al. 2012

Table 2 indicates that around 46% of VGD women were between the age of thirty to thirty-nine while about 4% were above fifty years of age. Among the non-VGD group about 40% were between the ages of thirty to thirty-nine years while about 7% were above the age of fifty years. The results indicate that majority of women under VGD program were physically active and capable to take part in IGA activities.

Educational Status

Education is one of the vital determinants of socio-economic status of people. In the study areas, the illiteracy rate was higher in case of both VGD and non-VGD members. Distribution of respondents according to their education levels is presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3
DISTRIBUTION OF THE RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION

Educational Qualification	Program		Control		Total	
	Number of Respondents	%	Number of Respondents	%	Number of Respondents	%
Illiterate	150	35.7	86	43.9	236	38.3
Can Sign Only	132	31.4	53	27.0	185	30.0
Class I-V	89	21.2	35	17.9	124	20.1
Class VI-IX	45	10.7	19	9.7	64	10.4
S.S.C/Equivalent	4	1.0	3	1.5	7	1.1
Total	420	100	196	100	616	99.9

Source: Zahid et al. 2012

Table 3 shows that among the total respondents of VGD members, about 36% were illiterate and 31.4% could sign only. Only 1% had Secondary School Certificate (SSC) level of education. Among the respondents of non-VGD group the highest proportion (43.9%) were illiterate and only 1.5% respondents had SSC level of education.

Household Size

The household size influences household expenditure and standards of living of the members of households in rural community. It also indicates the trend of awareness of the household members about family planning. Distribution of the respondents according to their various household sizes is shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4
DISTRIBUTION OF THE RESPONDENTS BY HOUSEHOLD SIZE

Household Size	Program		Control		Total	
	Number of Respondents	%	Number of Respondents	%	Number of Respondents	%
<=3	94	22.4	69	35.2	163	26.5
4-5	226	53.8	90	45.9	316	51.3
6-8	94	22.4	37	18.9	131	21.3
9+	6	1.4	--	--	6	1.0
Mean	4.52		4.15		4.40	

Source: Zahid et al. 2012

The survey results of Table 4 show that the mean household (HH) size of the respondents was 4.52, which was a little less than the national average household size 4.8 (BBS, 2003). In all, the highest numbers of households (53.8%) had the household size of 4-5 in case of VGD. The number of household with smallest size (<=3) was greater among the non-VGD people (34.5%). Number of households with larger household size (5-8) was found to be higher in the VGD beneficiaries' households. The mean of HH size is 4.15 in case of non-VGD respondents, whereas it is 4.52 in case of VGD beneficiaries.

Land Holding Status, Income and Access to Electricity

In the study areas it was found that 86% of VGD beneficiary households have less than 15 decimal (0.15 acre) of land while about 97% of non-VGD group have less than 15 decimal of land. Only 10% of VGD beneficiaries have 16 to 49 decimal (0.16-0.49 acre) of land. 3% have 50 to 150 decimal (0.50-01.50 acre) land. It is very interesting that one VGD beneficiary has even more than 150 decimal of land.

Considering the income, land ownership, housing and sanitation condition it was revealed that the beneficiaries included in the VGD program belonged to very poor category of households. Average monthly income of the household

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was Taka (Tk). 3,200.00 and per capita per month income was Tk. 750.00. Thus, it was clear that most of the beneficiaries belonged to vulnerable group of households. About 29% of the VGD beneficiaries have electricity connections while around 20% of non-VGD group have that facility. In case of overall situations, about three-fourth households have no electricity and one-fourth respondents are enjoying that facility.

Problems Related to Selection of Beneficiaries

Problems related to Service Providers are as follows:

1. *Upazila Parishad* (UP) played vital role in distribution of VGD cards according to the number of population. As there was no reliable information about poverty level at unions, it was very difficult to maintain instruction related to distribution of card according to the incidence of poverty.
2. During the selection of beneficiaries of this cycle there was no elected representative at the UP since election was not conducted. In most cases, the Transfer Assurance Guide (TAG) officer, representative of UP with the help of village police and elite persons prepared the list of probable VGD beneficiaries and sent those to the Upazila Committee for getting final approval. The elected representative of newly formed Union Parishad told that some irregularities were there in the selection processes.
3. Although there was a provision of displaying the list at the UP it was hardly practiced in the Union Parishad. During the FGD, it was articulated that such a wider dissemination could create misunderstanding as the number of beneficiaries was higher than the allotted number. In some cases, the cards were proportionately allocated to the UP functionaries who would then select the members through personal contact.
4. It was observed that there was lack of coordination among the NGO and Directorate of Women and Child Affairs offices. In most cases, the post of Upazila Women Officer was vacant. In such cases, one officer had to look after the activities of more than one Upazila and therefore it was very difficult for them to coordinate on the issue.
5. In some cases it was found that VGD cards were not distributed among the beneficiaries and these cards remained at the offices of Union Parishad. In some cases, list of beneficiaries was not available at the union-level.
6. Although there was a provision of an NGO representative, their role was minimal during the selection process. In most cases NGO workers were recruited locally. So, they had very little opinion/decision over the voices of elected representatives and government officials.
7. Number of beneficiaries was much lower than the potential number of beneficiaries. In such cases, elected representatives had to face difficulties to select appropriate candidates from the huge number of population.

Problems Faced by VGD Beneficiaries

The beneficiaries were asked about the problems related to selection process of beneficiaries. Only one-fifth of the beneficiaries told that there were some problems related to selection of beneficiaries. One-fourth of the respondents reported that information related to beneficiary selection was not disseminated widely. According to 14% respondents, Union VGD Committee did not work properly and according to two-thirds of the respondents Upazila Committee had little role in monitoring the selection process.

Food Procurement Procedures

It was found that the process of food procurement was properly followed in most of the upazilas. Generally, officials of the Directorate of Women and Child Affairs processed file for issuing demand order each month. After that Upazila Nirbahi Officer, chief executive at the sub-district level of Bangladesh (UNO) issue 'Demand Order' (DO) addressing to Upazila Food Controller (UFC) mentioning the name and amount of all unions under the Upazila and after that UFC issued 'Delivery Order' (DO) to the respective unions to procure food from respective Local Supply Depot (LSD) godown. Usually UP Chairman or his representative collected the food grain from the godown on the specified dates in every upazila. But it was reported that some UP Chairmen did not take delivery of the grain on the specified day showing various problems.

However, the major problems related to food grain distribution reported by respondents were that the amount in the bag was less than stipulated (85.7%), insufficient transportation cost provision (71.4%), absence of labor cost for loading and unloading of food grains (35.7%) and low quality of food grains (35.7%).

For addressing the problems raised in the FGDs at both union and upazila levels, a number of suggestive measures had been furnished by the respondents. The most promising ones were supply of food grains in thirty kilograms small packets, increase of transportation cost, ensuring actual weight at LSD godown and provision of better quality food grains amongst others.

Food Distribution to the VGD Beneficiaries

After procuring food from LSD godown, the Chairmen of UP selected a specific day for distributing the food to beneficiaries. Each beneficiary was entitled for thirty kilograms of food every month. It is mentioned that a date for a specific month would be decided upon consultation between officers of WAD and chairmen of UP for distribution of food.

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1. It was found that in most cases food was distributed every month and date was selected every month in consultation with TAG officer and elected representative of UP.
2. Respective TAG officer, representative of NGO and in some cases, officials of WAD remained present during the distribution of food among the beneficiaries.
3. TAG officer who remained present during the distribution of food did not get travel and daily allowances for performing their duties. In most cases, they found the responsibility to be an extra burden on them.
4. Representative of NGO officials collected savings from the beneficiaries at the time of distribution of food. In most cases role of NGOs were found limited to only performing savings activity.

Problems Related to Food Collection by the Beneficiaries

Four-fifths of the respondents told that they got less quantity of food than their entitlement and one-fifths of the respondents opined that quality of food was not good. 12% of the beneficiaries claimed that they were not getting food on the specific day every month. It was found that 19% of the beneficiaries had to spend more than five hours while 59% beneficiaries had to spend three-four hours in each month for collecting food. 21% of the beneficiaries who belong to nearby village of the food distribution centre had to spent on an average two hours for collecting food.

Targeting Efficiency

According to the work manual, women who belong to eighteen to forty-nine years of age, landless, female headed households and do not have regular flow of income are to be given priority. Criteria for selecting the beneficiaries included:

1. Consumes less than two full meals per day
2. Owns no land or less than 0.15 acre of land
3. Very poor housing conditions (construction material and sanitation facilities)
4. Extremely low and irregular family income from daily or casual labor, and
5. Household headed by a woman with no adult male income earner and no other source of income

The new criteria also included as exclusion criteria stating that no VGD card will be provided to women in any of the following categories:

1. Not between the eighteen to forty-nine years of age group
2. Already member of other food and or cash assistance programs, and
3. Were VGD cardholders at any time

In selecting the beneficiaries, priority was given to women who:

1. Are physically fit
2. Have the ability to develop their economic and social condition

3. Are interested to work in a group

During the FGDs it was observed that most of the beneficiaries were eligible to become beneficiary according to the work manual. But in most cases, it was found that more vulnerable women were left out to be the member of VGD program in future. So, the error in selection was mostly *exclusion* of more eligible beneficiaries. The participants of FGDs also agreed that it was very difficult for them to select most vulnerable women in absence of any reliable database. Most of the beneficiaries were selected from the very poor households following the guidelines of the manual. But in some areas more vulnerable women were excluded from this program (Zahid et al. 2012).

The study found evidences of the poor condition of the beneficiary households. Nearly cent percent of HHs reported facing some problems in having breakfast before participating in the program. Almost 91% of the household reported facing problems in having adequate lunch and while 95% households reported facing problems in having adequate dinner. Considering the income, land ownership, housing and sanitation condition it was revealed that the beneficiaries included in the VGD program belonged to very poor category of households. Average monthly income of the household was Tk. 3,200.00 and per capita per month income was Tk. 750.00. So it was clear that most of the beneficiaries belonged to vulnerable group of households.

TABLE 5
INCOME, LAND OWNERSHIP, SANITATION AND HOUSING CONDITION
OF BENEFICIARIES

Indicators	Number
Average HH Income (Tk.)	35696
Per Head Annual Income (Tk.)	8506
Land ownership <=0.15 acre (% of HH)	88.7
Land ownership 0.16-.49 acre (% of HH)	8.2
Households having poor sanitation (Latrine other than sanitary and ring slab) (% of HH)	54.6
Households having Poor Condition of Housing (Mud/ Bamboo Wall with Tin/straw roof) (% of HH)	55.4

Source: Zahid et al. 2012

88% of HHs had ownership of land less than or equal to 0.15 acres of land. Housing condition of 55% HHs was very poor and 54% of HHs did not have proper sanitation facility (Table 5). It may be mentioned here that some households of Patuakhlali district got assistance from the government and NGOs to build house after the natural disaster of cyclone Aila. Moreover, the UP was providing sanitary latrine to the vulnerable HHs. As a result sanitation coverage was found comparatively better in the poor HHs.

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Impact on Income and Food Security Level

The analysis reflected that the average household income of the VGD beneficiaries has increased from Tk. 29,832.00 to Tk. 39,930.00 resulting in increase in per head income from Tk. 6,773.00 to Tk. 9,068.00. Increase in average household income and per head income for non-VGD beneficiary has been reflected however, the same is lower than that of VGD beneficiary. The increase income was substantial from activities like petty business, handicrafts, selling surplus vegetables, crops, eggs, milk and labor in cash. Similar has been evidenced for VGD non-beneficiaries, but at lower rates. All these findings substantiate that VGD program has contributed to increase in income of the beneficiaries which is more than that of VGD non-beneficiaries.

It was found that in almost 53% of the poor households, the intake of breakfast was less than that needed for the household members. This has come down to 29.1% after being VGD beneficiaries, whereas for the poor in the control group the figure is still at 61%. In 52.2% cases all members of the households had to forego lunch before the VGD program. This has come down to 5.6% after being VGD beneficiaries, whereas this figure for the control group is presently at 38.1%. Before VGD program, in 44% cases at least one member of the poor households has to forego dinner. It has come down to 6.1% after being VGD beneficiaries, whereas this figure for the control group is still 62% at present (Zahid et al. 2012).

Problems and Suggestions for Overcoming the Problems

Several problems were identified by the respondents of VGD program. The problems were related to food distribution, capacity building and credit. One of the objectives of VGD program was to develop the capacity of beneficiaries for participating poverty alleviation program implemented by the government and NGOs.

TABLE 6
PROBLEMS OF VGD PROGRAM: OPINION OF THE RESPONDENTS

Problems	VGD Beneficiaries (N=420)	
	Number	Per cent
Less quantity than requirement	155	36.9
Duration of VGD Cycle in short	158	37.6
No scope for getting credit	93	22.1
Insufficient training program	22	5.2
Food support process is critical	2	0.4

Source: Zahid et al. 2012 (Note: Multiple responses were counted)

Less quantity of food than the requirement of the households and short duration of VGD cycle were identified as major drawbacks of the VGD program mentioned by 30% of the beneficiaries. Nearly two-fifths of the beneficiaries opined that there was very little scope to get loan for

undertaking Income Generating Activities (IGA) and 5% of the beneficiaries told that training program under VGD were not effective. It may be mentioned here that training and credit part of VGD program were supposed to be carried out by respective NGO. It was observed that most of the NGOs selected for supporting VGD program had no regular program in the project areas. After selection of the beneficiaries, some NGOs started their operation by hiring office and recruiting local field organizers. As they do not have micro credit program in the project area, it was not possible for the NGOs to provide micro credit to the VGD beneficiaries.

CONCLUSION

VGD activity was found very effective for reducing food insecurity among the households of the beneficiaries' households. It is worth mentioning that most of the beneficiaries were relieved of uncertainty and tension due to cereal availability ensured through this program. Mobility of VGD beneficiaries was found higher than that of control group. Vulnerable women specially divorced, widow and separated women were found to be the most benefitted group of the VGD program. Most of them considered the program as an important means for their survival. Beneficiaries of very poor households having husbands claimed that their status was increased in the household as they were contributing to the household's food intake. Findings showed evidence that VGD program has contributed to increase in income and access to food grain compared to their non-VGD counterparts. In conclusion, it may be mentioned here that all service providers and beneficiaries of the VGD program unanimously 'marked' it as a very effective program for the poorest of the poor households.

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Newaz Ahmed Chowdhury is currently working in Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD), Comilla as Joint Director (Research). His area of interest is forestry, natural resource management and rural development. He has been involved with rural development sector for more than the two decades.

Email: newazctg@gmail.com

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