



**Mid-Term Evaluation of Social Security Policy
Support (SSPS) Programme
July 2021–June 2023**

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List of Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
APA	Annual Performance Agreement
AUD	Australian Dollar
AWP	Annual Work Plan
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
CDD	Centre for Disability in Development
CMC	Central Management Committee
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CODI	Core Diagnostics Instruments
CPD	Country Programme Document
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DEX	Direct Execution
DPs	Development Partners
EIS	Employment Injury Insurance
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GED	General Economics Division
GO	Government Organisations
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
HIES	Household Income and Expenditure Survey
ICT	Information Communication and Technology
MBO	Management by Objective
MCBP	Mother and Child Benefit Programme
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MIS	Management Information System
M&E	Monitoring & Evaluation
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MoHFW	Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
MoLE	Ministry of Labour and Employment
MoSW	Ministry of Social Welfare
NEX	National Execution
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
NHD	National Household Database
NPD	National Project Director
NSIS	National Social Insurance Scheme
NSSS	National Social Security Strategy
OAA	Old Age Allowance
OPDs	Organisation of Persons with Disabilities
PIC	Project Implementation Committee
PMT	Proxy Means Testing
PMU	Project Management Unit

PvP	Private Voluntary Pension
PwDs	Persons with Disabilities
PSC	Programme/Project Steering Committee
SDF	Social Development Framework
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SID	Statistics and Information Division
SPPS	Social Protection Policy Support
SSPs	Social Security Programmes
SSPS	Social Security Policy Support
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
USD	United States Dollar
VGD	Vulnerable Group Development
VfM	Value for Money
VWB	Vulnerable Women Benefits
WFP	World Food Programme
8FYP	8 th Five-Year Plan

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) project is a major program for the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with financial assistance from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) fund of the Australian Government. The overarching goal of the SSPS project is to build an inclusive social security system that effectively addresses poverty and inequality, promotes human development, employment, and economic growth, and enhances stability and resilience in Bangladesh. Throughout the process of the formulation of the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) 2015 and its implementation, the SSPS project has been playing a key role, becoming a flagship institutional support mechanism for the Cabinet Division and the General Economics Division (GED) of the Planning Commission. The ongoing phase of DFAT support to the SSPS programme is designed for a period of five years in two phases: the first phase from 2021 to 2022, and the latter phase scheduled to continue until December 2025. This evaluation, commissioned by UNDP, provides an assessment of the performance of the project delivery against its planned outputs and results since July 2021.

Relevance and Strategic Fit of the Project

The SSPS project in Bangladesh is aligned with the constitutional provisions and national policy vision of the country, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2021–2041. It is also supported by the direction provided in the 8th Five-Year Plan (8FYP). The project's research and knowledge base have informed national strategic policy documents, and its engagement methods are well-suited to its goals. The project is also aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) and UNDP's Country Programme Document (CPD) for Bangladesh 2022-2026 and has assisted various stakeholders in devising or refining social protection interventions.

Validity of the project design

The SPPS project is implementing a Theory of Change (ToC) model over a five-year period (2021-2025) divided into two phases. The SPPS project is delivering outputs and is effective in achieving its broad objectives. However, there is room for improvement in the design and clarity of the ToC and logframe. Suggestions for improvement include using consistent and clear terminologies, framing the overall goal as a long-term outcome, and using SMART indicators for measuring outputs. It is important to ensure that indicators used are well-defined and specific. Refining indicators can make them more measurable and tracking progress towards outcomes easier. The intervention areas are well-specified, which is a positive aspect of the project. Enhancing the design and clarity of the ToC and logframe can improve the overall effectiveness of the SPPS project in achieving its objectives.

Project Progress and Effectiveness

This evaluation exercise assesses the project's progress of various outcomes and outputs against their targets as articulated in the project document.

Outcome 1: Established systems of universal pension, entitlements for persons with disabilities, and social insurance scheme

The SPPS project aimed to expand social protection programs for the elderly and persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. Considerable progress has been made, with OAA allowance increasing by 29.5% and PwD coverage only increasing by 11.55% by the end of 2022, against the target of 30 per cent each. The project aims to universalise the OAA and programme for PwDs by 2025. The project supported the development of a framework for introducing National Social Insurance Schemes (NSIS) in Bangladesh. As part of the NSIS framework developed by the project, the Universal Pension Management Bill 2022 was passed by the National Parliament on 25 January 2023, but further technical work is needed before implementation.

Output 1: Develop three policy proposals (OAA, Persons with Disabilities, and NISIS) and draft NSSF 2026+: In line with the objective of the SPPS project, gender-responsive policies for universal old age and PwD allowances have been developed, with MoSW responsible for implementation by 2024. The new framework for NSIS is targeted to be completed by June 2023, while unemployment insurance is supposed to be ready for piloting by July 2024 and rolled out nationally by July 2025. The employment injury scheme (EIS) is now being piloted, and progress has been made on maternity insurance. Covid-19 policies for the action plan have been developed, a study on climate-induced disaster-resilient social protection is planned, and a draft study is underway for urban poor, to integrate adaptive social protection programming into the NSSF 2026.

Output 2: Conduct research and pilot for policy innovation on inclusive social security systems:

The SPPS project supported undertaking several studies to develop evidence-based recommendations to strengthen social protection policies, which have contributed to the preparation of the GoB's 8th Five-Year Plan. Concept notes have been developed to pilot universal OAA and universal coverage for PwDs.

Outcome 2: Improved governance and fiscal space to manage a universal, lifecycle-based social security system

The SPPS project assisted the formulation of the NSSF Action Plan Phase II, by organising workshops and consultations collaborating with the stakeholders. The Core Diagnostics Instrument (CODI) has been incorporated to monitor and evaluate the efficient implementation of social protection reforms. In line with the objective of the SPPS project, the OAA expenditure increased from 0.08 per cent of GDP in 2018-19 to 0.086 per cent in 2021-22. During the same time, the expenditure for PwDs rose from 0.028 per cent of GDP to 0.0458 per cent.

Output 3: Ensure gender-responsive policy advice and accountability tools for sustaining reform efforts and pace: With support from the SSPS project, a study has been implemented to devise a results-based M&E dashboard for social security programmes. A prototype dashboard was expected to be in place on a trial basis by the end of 2022 and be fully functional by mid-2023. However, it is being delayed. In order to strengthen the capacity for gender-responsive social protection decision-making, several studies have been implemented which assisted the development of the NSSS Action Plan Phase II. The SPPS project arranges orientation sessions on different aspects of NSSS and its progress for the newly posted CMC focal points, alternative focal points, and secretaries of 39 ministries/divisions which have been contributing to increasing knowledge about the reform priorities of the key line ministries.

Output 4: Enable NGOs/DPOs to include the priorities of marginalised and excluded groups, including persons with disabilities, in social protection policies and decision-making: The SPPS project supported several meetings and workshops on GO-NGO collaboration, which engaged OPDs, UN organisations, and civil society groups, to strengthen inclusive social protection with broader participation from marginalised and excluded groups. A non-state actors' citizen report is in progress to suggest policies to strengthen inclusive social protection programmes.

Efficiency of Resource Use

The effectiveness of resource use in a project implies its ability to utilise resources/inputs (funds, expertise, and time) effectively and optimally to achieve the expected outcomes and outputs within the specified timeframe and budget. Such assessment can be conducted in two ways: (i) financial progress disbursement against budgetary allocation and spending; and (ii) value for money (VfM). Between period July 2021 to June 2023, the SSPS project received a total budget of AUD 3,960,396/ USD 2,935,078. The expenditure up to December 2022 was 66 per cent of total funds received. Resources are mainly allocated in the areas of human resources; knowledge and policy innovation for advancing social protection reforms; and technical units to support 5 line ministries to implement the reform plans. Measuring Value for Money (VfM) involves assessing the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of a project/programme in relation to its cost. The SSPS project aims at improved effectiveness of social protection policy, innovative approaches based on the international practices, as well as better coordination and integration. The project is delivering activities as specified in the project document and Annual Work Plan (AWP). The project has also built-in features to proactively explore efficiency gains. The project's VfM proposition also benefits from UNDP procurement policies and procedures with support from UNDP's relevant department. All procured goods and services are managed by the UNDP Country Office Procurement Unit to ensure competitive and cost-effective procuring consistent with the UNDP rules (i.e., high degree of transparency and fiduciary practices). The government is also contributing to the SSPS project through facilitating office accommodation including essential utilities.

Effectiveness of Management Arrangements

The SSPS project has established a robust management structure, reflecting the level of ownership it enjoys and the kind of oversight required for the complex and highly ambitious task of

implementing the NSSS reform agenda. The Central Management Committee (CMC), a high-level body led by the Cabinet Secretary, oversees the implementation of the SSPS project. The support to CMC comes from the SSPS Project Steering Committee (PSC), co-chaired by the Cabinet Division and the General Economics Division (GED), which works on policy guidance and maintain coordination between all institutions and groups involved in social protection programmes. A Project Board/Project Implementation Committee (PIC) is responsible for project-related decision-making including approval of the project plans and any revisions when required. While making decisions, it works closely with the National Project Director and UNDP Project Assurance representative. The Project Management Unit (PMU) prepares and presents annual reviews, work plans, and budgets to the Executive and other members of the Board/PIC for review and approval. The project currently employs fewer than the number of allotted positions with the objective of saving money to be used for project-related activities and thereby maximising the value for money. Technical specialists from the GED and Cabinet Division are supporting the key line ministries in implementing their designated plans and programmes. While implementing the project, there might arise different types of risks such as political, organisational, and financial. For the emerged risks, the project has adopted adequate mitigation measures.

Gender and Persons with Disabilities

The SSPS project has prioritised gender and disability as key focus areas in its design. Creating and implementing social security programs with a gender focus can play a crucial role in addressing poverty and vulnerabilities faced by women. The SSPS has supported the development of the NSSS Gender Policy, Gender Strategy, and Action Plan which directly fed into the NSSS Action Plan Phase II (2021–2026). The Action Plan duly acknowledges the unique challenges faced by women and carefully consider their specific needs at different stages of their lives. The commitment to gender equality is reflected in the project’s resource allocation, with slightly over 3 per cent of the total SSPS budget allocated for gender mainstreaming social protection reforms. The project is also supporting to establish an M&E dashboard for age and sex-disaggregated data. It is expected that a prototype M&E dashboard will be in place on a trial basis and fully functional by mid-2023. The SSPS project has undertaken activities (e.g., preparing background studies for national plans and strategies; organising series of workshops/dialogues/consultations in both rural and urban areas with the objective of awareness building amongst relevant stakeholders etc.) for strengthening PwDs inclusion in the social protection system. The project is also collaborating Organisation of Persons with Disabilities (OPDS) and Centre of Disability in Development (CDD) to enhance their capacities and augment their engagement with governments and mobilise targeted and concrete commitments on disability inclusion and inclusive development.

Impact orientation and Sustainability of the Project

While achieving tangible results in the short to intermediate term for a complex social sector project may be challenging, it is possible to identify several immediate positive impacts. Some key impacts of the project are as follows: formulation and adoption of the NSSS Action Plan Phase II (2021–2026) by government-owned exercise drawing inputs from all the relevant ministries and departments

responsible for implementation; special emphasis on gender and PwDs; adoption of the Washington Consensus indicators as the eligibility criteria for PwDs; facilitation in the approval of the Universal Pension Management Bill, 2023 by designing the framework; developing a results-oriented M&E dashboard; creation of a knowledge base and capacity building of various stakeholders; and finally raising awareness about a more structured and well-coordinated social protection system. Moreover, the SSPS project has successfully assisted the government in laying the foundations for an integrated social protection system in the country. Such indicates the project's continued relevance and potential contribution in successive phases until the NSSS objectives are fully achieved. The SSPS project's most significant strength lies in the strong commitment and ownership of the government. Major durable impact is expected from the National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS), championed by the SSPS project through research and practical recommendations for implementation. In terms of financial sustainability, the resources allocated to the SSPS project have been relatively modest, considering its high-level policy traction, wide-ranging scope of engagement with multiple ministries and partners, and its alignment with national strategies and aspirations. However, achieving true sustainability relies heavily on the government's unwavering ownership and effective leadership.

Lessons learned and Policy Recommendations

Lessons learned from the SSPS project in Bangladesh emphasize the significance of government commitment, stakeholder engagement, innovative analytical work, addressing institutional challenges, policy approval efficiency, financing alignment, and data generation for successful social protection implementation. These factors should be considered in future social protection initiatives to improve outcomes and promote effective policy implementation.

Major recommendations

In the social security landscape of Bangladesh, the SSPS project has emerged as a flagship initiative for sustaining the momentum of the reform process underlying the NSSS. This evaluation exercise provides several recommendations to enhance the project's impact and effectiveness in advancing the reform agenda.

- Complete the current work programme effectively and prepare for the next phase of the NSSS beyond 2025, commission a review NSSS implementation, and coordinating with stakeholders for future strategy development.
- Ensure regular monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of NSSS Action Plan Phase II to identify gaps, adjust measures, and achieve desired outcomes. SSPS project should play a critical role in helping ministries report progress on a quarterly basis.
- Assess fiscal space for social protection, explore options for tax-financing, social insurance schemes, and development partners' assistance to create adequate fiscal space, and provide informed assessment to support policy direction for resource requirements in line with the ambition of social protection support.
- The SSPS project can help develop a proper M&E framework for NSSS implementation. It should partner with the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) to conduct a survey on social protection to assess the shortcomings of various programme coverage, and pilot proxy

means testing, and gather SDG-related data to generate externalities effects for informed policy analysis.

- Develop a clear roadmap outlining the current situation, progress, and next steps for establishing a fully functioning single registry Management Information System (MIS) for social protection and consider conducting a dedicated survey to assess eligibility verification methods and pilot Proxy Means Testing (PMT) exercise complemented by local-level verification.
- Finalize the draft strategy on urban social protection and develop a practical action plan through extensive consultations to strengthen social protection for the urban poor, which can contribute to the development of a national social protection strategy for the post-2025 period.
- Set realistic timelines for implementation of social protection schemes, taking into account the need for awareness building, training of officials, database development, and planning for eventualities to ensure effective and sustainable implementation, as rushing the process without addressing challenges can result in the programme being unsustainable.
- Reinvigorate the capacity-building role of the SSPS by providing support to various ministries, departments, and stakeholders in developing skills, knowledge, and a knowledgebase for effective implementation of social protection programs, based on a robust assessment of capacity needs.
- Strengthening the capacity of the Ministry of Social Welfare should be one key consideration, as it will be the lead ministry by 2026 for all lifecycle programmes. Boosting the in-house capacity of the SSPS project is also critical.
- Commission high-level policy engagement initiatives on specific issues by forming expert groups consisting of respected personalities to prepare concise notes and facilitate discussions with senior policymakers, aiming to provide clear policy directions on technical issues related to social protection, and make the inputs widely available to promote a knowledgebase.
- Improve the project design and results framework by carefully planning and specifying short-term and/or intermediate outcomes and outputs, establishing a proper and SMART Results Framework, and developing concrete impact stories to complement the reporting of activities and demonstrate the project's impact.
- Foster efficient information exchange with relevant stakeholders enhancing communication channels, and facilitating a robust feedback mechanism to improve coordination, avoid duplication of efforts, and enhance collaboration among stakeholders.
- Deepen collaboration with development partners and other stakeholders through joint work, coordinated efforts, regular coordination meetings, and consultations, seeking technical expertise and support, and develop medium- to long-term interventions.

I. Introduction

The Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) project, also known as Social Protection Policy Support (SPPS), is a major program for the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with financial assistance from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) fund of the Australian Government. The overarching goal of the SSPS project is to build an inclusive social security system that effectively addresses poverty and inequality, promotes human development, employment, and economic growth, and enhances stability and resilience in Bangladesh. The SSPS project has been instrumental in supporting the government's commitment to social protection reforms, as outlined in the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) adopted in 2015. Some of these reforms are targeted towards the efficiency of individual social protection programmes (known as programmatic reforms), while others are aimed at reforming the institutions to streamline the operational activities promoting efficiency and strengthening the overall social protection architecture.

Throughout the process of the formulation of the NSSS and its implementation, the SSPS project has been playing a key role, becoming a flagship institutional support mechanism for the Cabinet Division and the General Economics Division (GED) of the Planning Commission, both of which direct the project activities. The project has undertaken research and analyses to provide evidence-based policy inputs to strengthen the social protection schemes and support the reform agenda, and actively engaged in capacity building efforts across various ministries and implementation agencies.

The ongoing phase of DFAT support to the SSPS programme is designed for a period of five years in two phases: the first phase from 2021 to 2022, and the latter phase scheduled to continue until December 2025. The anticipated outcomes in the first phase focus on establishing universal protection systems, disability benefits, and social insurance schemes, as well as improving governance and fiscal space for a comprehensive social security system (UNDP, 2020a; p. 31). The current DFAT support builds on the progress made during 2017–2020 and aligns with the government's renewed commitment to social protection reforms in the 8th Five-Year Plan, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This evaluation, commissioned by UNDP, provides an assessment of the performance of the project delivery against its planned outputs and results since July 2021. The major objectives of this evaluation are as follows:

- To conduct a midterm evaluation to assess and evaluate the performance of the SSPS project delivery against its planned outputs and results.
- To examine the project's delivery of objectives in relation to the project document and its intended purpose, as well as how activities have contributed to advancing the reforms and implementation of the NSSS.
- To prepare a set of recommendations based on the evaluation results and lessons learned to make the project deliverables more effective.

The evaluation exercise has been undertaken using the five criteria, as specified in Table 1, namely, relevance and strategic fit of the project, validity of the project design, project progress and effectiveness, efficiency of resource use, effectiveness in management arrangements, and impact orientation and sustainability of the project.

Table 1: Evaluation criteria and their description

Evaluation criteria	Description of the indicators used
Relevance and strategic fit of the project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The extent to which the objectives are consistent with beneficiary requirements and country needs. • The extent to which the approach is strategic, and UNDP uses its comparative advantage. • Whether the modality continues to be appropriate to achieve the intended outcomes.
Validity of project design	The extent to which the project design is logical and coherent.
Project progress and effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The extent to which the project’s immediate objectives and end of project outcomes were achieved or are expected to be achieved. • The evidence that demonstrates the outputs being delivered are contributing to the intended end-of-program outcomes, or intermediate outcomes. • If there is an M&E arrangement is in place and is used for decision making.
Efficiency of resource use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An assessment of how resources/inputs are utilised based on the total expenditure of the project. • To assess if M&E information supports the assessment of efficiency through monitoring both expenditure and the delivery of outputs.
Effectiveness of management arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The extent to which management capacities, governance and arrangements are put in place to achieve results. • To assess the adequacy project personnel in achieving the intended outcomes.
Impact orientation and sustainability of the project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The strategic orientation of the project towards making a significant contribution to broader, long-term, sustainable development changes. • An assessment of the ownership of the project • The likelihood that the results of the project are durable and can be maintained after major assistance has been completed. • The extent to which the project supports alignment of work with other donors and the government’s initiatives for the achievement of outcomes.

Source: Based on the terms of reference (ToR) of the assignment and discussion with the SSPS project management.

Considering the nature and scope of the assignment, qualitative research methods were deemed the most appropriate approach to achieve the evaluation objectives. These included:

- Thorough review of relevant policy documents pertaining to the Bangladesh social protection system, including the National Social Security Strategy 2015, NSSS Action Plan 2016-2020, Midterm Implementation Review of NSSS, NSSS Action Plan 2021-2026, 7th Five-Year Plan, 8th Five-Year Plan, etc.
- Comprehensive review of various outputs and documents from the SSPS project, such as project design documents, publications, and annual reports, to gather insights into project operations and activities.
- Two rounds of meetings with the project management team were conducted to discuss and clarify the scope of the evaluation and gain further insights into the project's functioning.
- Key informant interviews were conducted with representatives of various stakeholders who possess first-hand knowledge of social protection activities in Bangladesh. The key

informants included former and current senior policymakers, officials involved in the implementation of various social protection schemes, representatives from development partners, as well as academics and researchers from think tanks.

This evaluation report is organised as follows: after this introduction, Section II explains the relevance and strategic fit of the project; Section III highlights the validity of the project; Section IV analyses project progress and effectiveness; Section V sheds light on project management arrangements; Section VI assesses the efficiency of resource use; Section VII stocktakes the SSPS's emphasis on gender and Persons with Disabilities (PwDs); Section VIII assesses the impact orientation and sustainability of the project; Section IX highlights some lessons learned and provides recommendations; Section X concludes the report.

II. Relevance and Strategic Fit of The Project

In the aftermath of COVID-19, the need for a well-designed and effectively functioning social protection system has become more prominent than ever. Although Bangladesh possessed a long track record of social safety net interventions, the Covid-19 pandemic had exposed their fault lines rooted in the lack of a well-developed system as the implementation of various National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) reforms were underway with a pace slower than envisaged. The recovery from the pandemic has been marked by further shocks including the Russia-Ukraine war causing the global food and fuel prices to rise and a depreciating taka to arrest the depletion of foreign reserves arising from massive import surges—partly due to the pent-up demand accumulated during Covid-19—contributing to inflationary pressures in the domestic economy. The rapidly rising cost of living phenomenon has brought a renewed attention to social protection interventions in addressing poverty and vulnerability. In this backdrop, by working closely with the Government of Bangladesh in pushing forward the agenda of NSSS implementation, the SSPS programme continues to maintain its strong relevance. The strategic fit of the programme is much deeper and rooted in various national vision documents and development plans. Even within the overall architecture of the Bangladesh social protection system, SSPS is strategically located to work, coordinate, and collaborate with all other stakeholders including development partners and various line ministries and agencies.




SSPS project's strategic relevance in the national policy landscape

The SSPS project is in complete accordance with the overarching national policy vision of Bangladesh. Article 15(d) of the country's constitution states for its citizens "The right to social security, that is to say, to public assistance in cases of underserved, want arising from unemployment, illness, or suffered by widows or orphans or in old age, or in other such cases." Various national strategies and policy documents, especially over the past decade, have provided direction in achieving this broad constitutional ambition. The formulation of the NSSS 2015 acknowledged that the previous state of social protection was incompatible with the Government of Bangladesh's commitment to reducing

poverty and inequality while promoting inclusive growth, as strongly articulated in national policy documents such as Vision 2021, the Perspective Plan of Bangladesh (2010-21), the 6th Five-Year Plan 2011-15, and the 7th Five-Year Plan 2016-20. Following an impressive performance in achieving most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the government was determined to pursue the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which recognize the importance of a nationally appropriate social protection system to attain associated development targets such as ending hunger, eradicating extreme poverty, ensuring access to healthcare and quality education, achieving gender equality, securing economic growth with decent employment opportunities, and reducing inequality.

The project is also well-aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) (Table 2). The specific targets under the mentioned SDGs are: (i) SDG 1.3: "Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and vulnerable"; (ii) SDG 5.4: "Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally representative"; and (iii) SDG 10.4: "Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage, and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality" (UNDP, 2021a).

Table 2: SDG Goals and Targets relevant to SSPS Project

	SDG Goal	SDG Target
	SDG 1: No Poverty	SDG 1.3: Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and vulnerable
	SDG 5: Gender Equality	SDG 5.4: Recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally representative.
	SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities	SDG 10.4: Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality

Source: UNDP (2020).

The SSPS project fits well in the context of the policy pronouncement of the Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2021–2041. In one of its aspiration targets, the perspective plan states: “poverty will become a thing of the past in Sonar Bangladesh. The transition – indeed transformation – can be realised through a process of rapid inclusive growth leading to the elimination of poverty while increasing the productive capacity, building innovative knowledge economy and protecting the environment” (GED, 2020a; p.i).

The 7th Five-Year Plan (2016-20) articulated the government's vision by stating that "In the long term, the objective should be to move towards building a social security system that is available to all Bangladeshis who are in need of support, providing them with a guaranteed minimum income but also a comprehensive safety net for those who suffer shocks and crises that may push them into poverty. The long-term vision for social security is to build an inclusive social security system for all

deserving Bangladeshis that effectively tackles and prevents poverty and inequality and contributes to broader human development, employment, and economic growth."

The direction provided in the 8th Five-Year Plan (8FYP) further adds to the relevance and strategic fit of the SSPS project. The fact that the phrase 'National Social Security Strategy (NSSS)' has been mentioned directly 74 times shows the sheer importance that has been given to social protection. The Plan document incorporates three different chapters (i.e., chapters 2 and 4 of part I and chapter 14 of Part II) to discuss various issues related to social protection, inclusive growth, and social protection. It mentions, "Implementation of the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) will be fast-tracked to provide comprehensive social protection to all poor and vulnerable citizens based on a modern Life Cycle based approach" (GED 2020b; p. xlvi). On the implementation of the NSSS, the 8FYP states that "Renewed efforts will be made to strengthen implementation of the NSSS" (GED 2020b; p.79) while providing specific direction:

"Strengthening the implementation of NSSS: A well thought out social protection strategy is extremely important for supporting poverty reduction based on the above strategies and policies. While Bangladesh has a strong commitment and rich experience with implementing a wide range of social safety nets, there are many concerns with the effectiveness and poverty focus of the safety net system. The experience of COVID-19 also exposed some of the inherent limitations of the present social protection system. For the 8FYP, two major initiatives will be taken. First, the implementation of the NSSS will be fast-tracked. All efforts will be made to consolidate the multiple schemes into the core Life-Cycle risk-based programmes suggested in the NSSS, move away from in-kind to cash-based transfers on-line transfers, establish Single Registry MIS of beneficiaries based on eligibility criteria identified in the NSSS, and establish an on-line Grievance Redressal System. Second, the financing of a reformed social protection system will be given a high priority. This is built in the Fiscal Policy Framework of the 8FYP described in chapter 5 that allows for the increase in social protection spending (excluding civil service pensions that are not poverty-targeted) as a share of GDP from 1.2% in FY2019 to 2.0% by FY2025" (GED 2020b; p.104).

SSPS project's strategic fit from other perspectives

The project's strategic fit can be understood from a number of different angles as discussed below:

- The studies/research conducted as part of the SSPS project are sources of informed and evidence-based inputs. These studies have been used as background papers for formulating various national strategic policy documents.¹ The NSSS Action Plan Phase-II (2021-2026) incorporated COVID-19 policy and plans based on a study named 'A brief analysis of social protection programme response to COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh' conducted by the SSPS project (UNDP, 2021b). In fact, the project has now established a track record of bringing out analyses of social protection issues that feed into other studies and policy documents. The background studies prepared under the project and included in the compendium titled

¹ A SSPS 2020 study titled 'Rethinking Social Protection Responses to the Covid-19 Crisis: Issues and Policy Priorities for Bangladesh' was developed as input for the preparation of the 8th Five-Year Plan.

'Exploring the Evidence: Background Research Papers for Preparing the National Social Security Strategy of Bangladesh' played an instrumental role in formulating the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) in 2015 (GED, 2017).²

- This knowledgebase developed by the SSPS project has also assisted in devising or refining the interventions within the domain of social protection. Examples include an earlier pilot study on digital payments in Kurigram influencing the Ministry of Finance to implement a digital cash transfer program and the NSSS Action Plan also guiding the Ministry of Education in implementing digital payments for student stipends, leading to improved transparency (Khan, 2020). More recently, the SSPS project has helped the government expand the coverage of old age allowance. The analytical work conducted from the project influenced and provided inputs in the government's deciding to introduce a voluntary private pension scheme.³ The SSPS project has also provided reform assistance to several other ministries and divisions including the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Social Welfare, and the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Statistics and Informatics Division, Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and overseas Employment, and Information Communication and Technology (ICT) Division (UNDP, 2022).
- The studies and documents generated by the SSPS project are valuable for development partners (DPs) as they conduct horizon scanning of existing schemes to support social protection interventions or related programs. The project has facilitated DPs in aligning their support with the government's priorities and the ongoing reforms of the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS). Amongst others, the SSPS project was consulted by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to offer a policy-based lending to the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) in expanding two social protection schemes namely the old-age allowances, and allowances for the widowed and deserted women.

Strategic fit strengthened by UNDP's involvement in the SSPS project and DFAT's financial assistance

UNDP's comparative advantage in implementing the SSPS project stems from its neutrality, independence, and strong partnership with the government. UNDP programmes on poverty reduction, governance, environmental protection, disaster management, and climate change have allowed it to access government bodies at various levels. Its close working relationship with the GoB and access to the wider government machinery, including at the high level political, civil administration and local level administrative networks eventually helped to the formulation of the

² The compendium includes nine different chapters on social protection issues. See <https://socialprotection.gov.bd/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/NSSS-Background-Papers-for-Website.pdf> for detailed discussion.

³ The Universal Pension Management Bill, 2023 was passed on 24 January 2023 in the National Parliament. According to the bill, all Bangladeshi citizens including expatriate workers aged between 18 and 50 years can participate in the universal pension based on their voluntary contributions.

NSSS, its associated Action Plan, and a series of knowledge documents which were the result of a partnership between the government and UNDP (Khan, 2020).

As per the UNDP's Country Programme Document (CPD) for Bangladesh 2022–2026, the SSPS project is also aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF). The activities within the SSPS project directly address Outcome 1 of the UNSDCF: 'Pathway to inclusive and sustainable economic development, envisions that by 2026, more people in Bangladesh, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalised from all gender and social groups and those from lagging districts, benefit from sustainable and decent work opportunities resulting from responsible, inclusive, sustainable, green and equitable economic development' (UN, 2021). Activities specifically respond to Output 1.3: 'Policy and regulatory frameworks enabling greater access to and utilisation of inclusive, gender-responsive and resilient basic social and protection services are strengthened'.

UNDP's approach to strengthening the partnerships with various bilateral and multilateral development partners has also helped attract support for the SSPS project, which is currently supported by the DFAT. The project is strongly backed by DFAT development priorities for building economic resilience and improving social inclusion. In supporting the project, DFAT's objective was to advance and intensify the social protection reform efforts undertaken by the GoB. This is similar to that of the Common Narrative developed by the DPs. Under the Common Narrative, strengthening support to social protection is considered as a critical tool to respond to poverty, vulnerability and inequality, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19. It also calls for the DPs continued support to the GoB's Central Management Committee (for social protection governance) which is crucial for driving effective governance, monitoring, and accountability within the social protection system.

The current approaches and methods of engagement employed by the SSPS project seem to be well-suited to the project's goals and objectives. One key factor is the close collaboration between the SSPS project and the government machinery, which is critical for implementing such a complex project. The high-level government buy-in and ownership makes the SSPS project as a vehicle for generating informed and evidence-based inputs and regular reviews, not only through analytical studies but also CMC meetings and other workshops. The formulation and adoption of the NSSS Action Plan 2021-26 is a great example of the government's proactive initiative to continue with NSSS reforms. By securing ownership, the SSPS project has facilitated the process. The SSPS project's knowledge management support has been instrumental in providing an overarching overview of the backgrounds of the reforms and the progress made on those. The project has given tremendous support in continuing with the reform process. Of course, there is room for improvement in terms of project activities and making the support more effective—some of which are discussed later in this report—but the modalities of engagement in retaining the strategic fit seem to be functioning well.

III. Validity of the Project Design

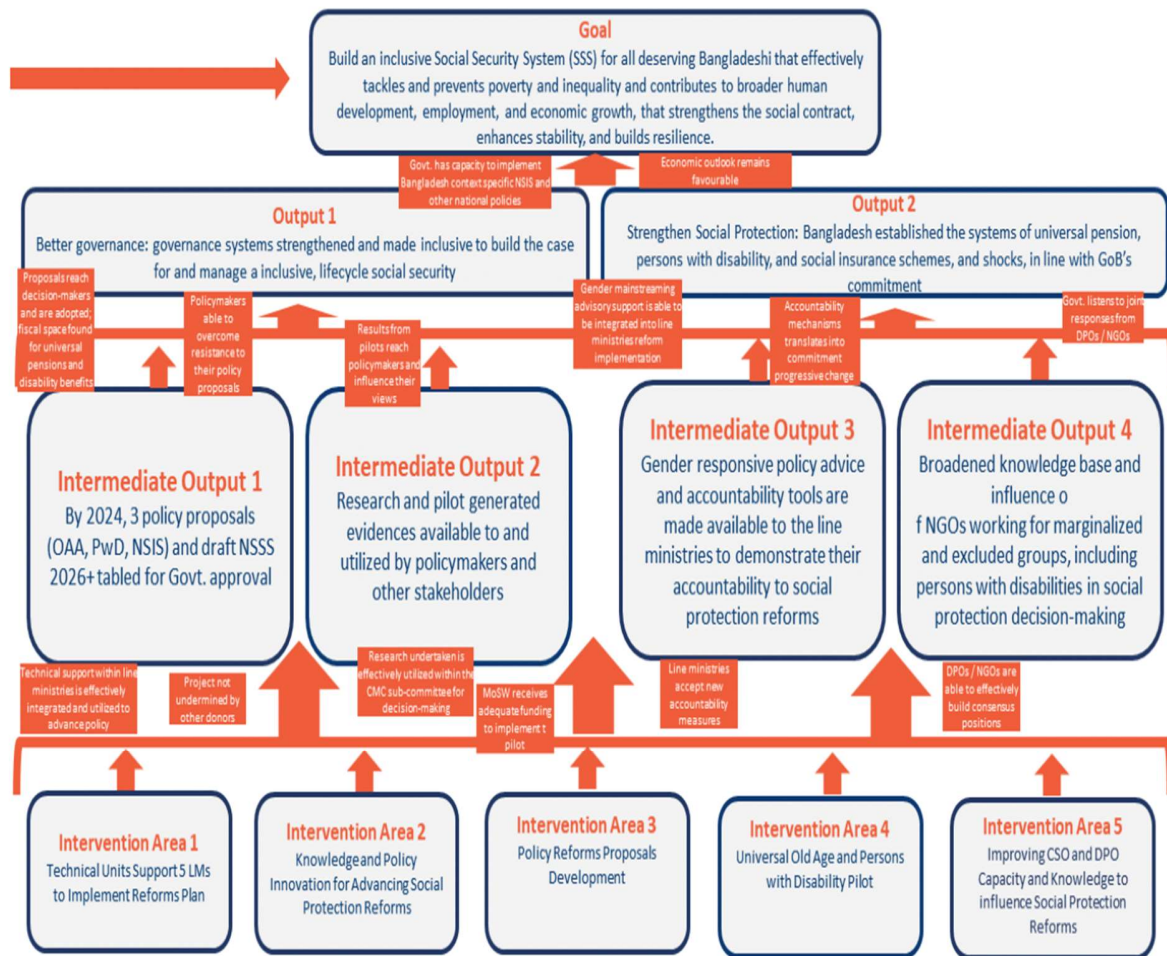
As stated in the design document, the central idea of the project is to address the limitations of the existing social protection system by pushing the reform measures suggested in the NSSS. The project rationale is clearly laid out in the document with the activities undertaken fitting the overall purpose. While from an operational point of view the project is delivering relevant activities, there is room for improving the project design to connect the outputs with more realistic high-level outcomes. The SSPS objectives are clearly highlighted in the project document but the high-level outcomes (denoted as outputs 1 and 2) appear to be much broader than the activities being considered.

The project is developed within the purview of a Theory of Change (ToC) model for a period of five years (2021–2025) (Figure 1). The project's timeframe is divided between two phases: first phase (2021–2022) and second phase (2023–2025). The overall ToC and logframe is kept same for the entire five year and specific deliverables are tailored for the first phase only. The ToC is further supported by a logical framework detailing underlying sub-outputs. Although the SSPS project objectives are not difficult to understand, its Theory of Change and accompanying logical framework could benefit from improved design and further clarity. Directly under the overall goal, there are two outputs followed by four intermediate outputs. A more effective approach would be to use more appropriate terminologies consistently. The 'goal' should be viewed as a long-term outcome or result, which should be approached with intermediate outcomes. Outputs and activities would then be designed to make progress towards achieving intermediate outcomes, and SMART indicators could be used to measure outputs. Under the current setup, intermediate outputs include both quantifiable (e.g., intermediate output 1) and broad indicators (for the other three outputs). However, intervention areas are well-designated. The ToC model makes a number of assumptions at three different levels (from intervention area to intermediate outputs; from intermediate outputs to outputs and finally from outputs to overall goals). These assumptions include, amongst others, technical assistance being effectively, building consensus amongst stakeholders, obtaining adequate fiscal space, ability to overcome any resistance to reform proposals, gender mainstreaming, and economic outlook remaining favourable). The project design should have been more realistic about these assumptions given that those are very demanding preconditions. In the context of Bangladesh, there is already enough information about the difficulties associated with such issues as securing adequate fiscal space, awareness building, and implementation difficulties of social insurance schemes. Intermediate outcomes (denotes as outputs in the project design) thus could be more reasonably defined. It is not difficult to infer that it will be extremely challenging to achieve the project's anticipated results and outcomes within the stipulated time frame. Consequently, the intermediate outcomes (specified as outputs) could be more realistic. Clearly, e.g., Output 1 defined as "governance system strengthened and made inclusive to build the case for and manage an inclusive, lifecycle social security" would be regarded far-fetched.

As mentioned, under the broad goal, the design of the project is founded on two components (being regarded as outputs): (a) established systems of universal pension, entitlements for persons with disabilities, social insurance and shock-responsive schemes, in line with GoB commitment to human

rights and the right to social protection; and (b) governance systems strengthened and made inclusive to build the case for and manage universal lifecycle-based social security (Figure 1). While some of the activities under each output can be measured with quantifiable indicators, the rest cannot be done so. There are however targets set for different years throughout the project implementation period, which can be yardsticks for project progress at the activity level.

Figure 1: The Theory of Change (ToC) and SSPS project



Source: UNDP (2020a).⁴

Despite the inherent limitations in the project design, the SSPS project persists in carrying out tasks and activities aimed at delivering the intended outputs as delineated in the Theory of Change (ToC). This is achieved through adherence to the overarching objectives, rationale, and framework laid out in the project document. Additionally, the SSPS project consistently develops annual work plans and

⁴ SSPS project document. See <https://info.undp.org/docs/pdc/Documents/BGD/ProDoc%20Signed-DEC%202025.pdf> for details.

implementation strategies that align with the overall project framework, showcasing their flexibility and commitment to the broader intent of the project.

IV. Project Progress and Effectiveness

This evaluation exercise assesses the project's progress of various outcomes and outputs against their targets as articulated in the project document.

- **Progress on Outcome 1: Established systems of universal pension, entitlements for persons with disabilities, and social insurance scheme**

Progress on outcome 1 are assessed based on the indicators provided in Box 1.

Box 1: Indicator used to measure progress

- By 2025, the government has significantly increased social security coverage of old age persons and persons with disabilities by adopting a universal approach.
- By 2025, the government has adopted gender and disability inclusive NSIS.
- By 2025, the NSSS 2026+ adopted a gender and disability responsive universal social security approach

Coverage of old age persons and persons with disabilities

The SSPS project has been supporting the expansion of social protection programmes for the elderly and persons with disabilities (PwDs) in Bangladesh. According to the project document, the baseline (2019) coverage for Old Age Allowance (OAA) and PwDs was 4.4 million and 1.8 million respectively (UNDP, 2020a). The target was to increase coverage (in term of the number of beneficiaries) by 30 per cent from the baseline for both OAA and PwDs by the end of 2022. However, progress has been modest, with OAA coverage increasing by 29.5 per cent and PwD coverage only increasing by 11.55 per cent. In the fiscal year 2020-21, allowances were extended to all eligible senior citizens and widows in 112 Upazilas, and this was expanded to another 150 Upazilas in the following fiscal year. The SSPS project is working towards universalising the OAA, with the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) slated to implement universal OAA coverage from 2025. Coverage for PwDs has remained low, largely due to identification issues. Recently, the government has adopted the Washington Group definition indicators in its census to determine persons with disabilities, which is expected to increase coverage in the coming years.

The state of the NSIS

Social insurance is another key working area of the SSPS project. Previously, the project supported to develop a framework for introducing National Social Insurance Schemes (NSIS), comprising sickness, maternity, unemployment, and employment injury schemes. However, the draft framework was not compatible with the international social security standards and global best practices. Consequently, the project commissioned another study titled 'Reviewing the National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS) Framework and Towards a Feasible Model for Bangladesh'. As part of the

NSIS framework developed by the SSPS project, the Universal Pension Management Bill 2022 was passed by the National Parliament on 25 January 2023. This will allow all Bangladeshi nationals aged between 18 and 50 to participate in the pension scheme. However, as the Bill has not provided modalities, operational framework, more technical work will be needed before the pension scheme can be made operationalised.

Output 1: Develop three policy proposals (OAA, Persons with Disabilities, and NSIS) and draft NSSS 2026+

Box 2: Indicator used to measure progress

- By 2024, the government has gender-responsive universal old age and person with disabilities policy proposals
- By 2024, there will be gender and disability responsive National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS) proposals
- COVID-19 social protection policy responses with a focus on PwDs and marginalised groups including urban poor and climate change responsive social protection

As part of the gender-responsive universal old age and PwD policies, the concept notes on these issues have been developed and shared with Cabinet Division and General Economics Division. The MoSW is given the responsibility to operationalise the universal OAA and PwD allowances by 2024. It will also be responsible for outlining a suitable framework and financing options to roll those out.

Given the importance of NSIS, the NSSS Action Plan Phase II has placed special emphasis on social insurance front. As per the plan, the new framework is expected to be completed by June 2023, while one branch of NSIS – unemployment insurance is supposed to be ready for piloting by July 2024 and rolled out nationally by July 2025. This is indeed an ambitious plan given the lack of visible preparatory work and awareness level among the key stakeholders remaining low. On the other hand, the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE) is now piloting the employment injury scheme (EIS). and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) is working on piloting maternity insurance.

In the wake of COVID-19, developing and implementing shock-responsive social protection programs has gained prominence. The SSPS project conducted studies on social protection response to COVID-19, informing the development of COVID-19 policies for Action Plan Phase II. A Standard Letter of Agreement has been signed between the United Nations Development Programme and the Department of Disaster Science and Climate Resilience for the implementation of the Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme. The partnership aims to conduct a study on Climate-induced Shock Responsive Disaster Resilience Mapping for Adaptive Social Protection Programming in the Sylhet Division of Bangladesh. The study's objectives are to determine the frequency of future shocks in the region and develop climate-induced disaster-responsive social protection models/programming to safeguard vulnerable populations during disasters, as well as to integrate adaptive social protection programming into the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) 2026. Recognising the vulnerabilities of urban poor people, a draft study is underway based on the WFP and UNDP's urban intervention programmes. The strategic direction of urban social protection is to learn from rural programmes to see what can be expanded to urban areas, to introduce social insurance, and to devise measures to support the livelihoods of urban slum dwellers. The document provides specific action plans for different ministries having direct or indirect involvement in urban

social protection The project objective is to develop three proposals (rather than achieve implementation), as mentioned above, and it seem the progress is satisfactory.

Output 2: Conduct research and pilot for policy innovation on inclusive social security systems

Box 3: Indicators used to measure progress

- Incorporation of research recommendations into social protection policy (PwDs accessing social protection, targeting and selection, examination of options for expanding the fiscal space for universal allowances for old age, PwDs, and social insurance)
- Availability, incorporation into policy and dissemination of case studies for developing an evidence base for universal allowances for old age and PwDs social protection policies in Bangladesh

The SSPS project is supporting the government in developing evidence-based recommendations to strengthen social protection policies in Bangladesh. In line with this, two concept notes have been developed to pilot universal old-age allowance (OAA) and universal coverage for persons with disabilities (PwDs) in Bangladesh. Studies will be conducted to address design and implementation issues of these schemes. The SSPS Programme's research and diagnostic studies, as well as the NSSS Midterm Review of Implementation, compiled as a Compendium of Social Protection, have been published and disseminated after receiving final approval from the government in the first quarter of 2021. The findings from the compendium have directly contributed to the preparation of the GoB's 8th Five-Year Plan and the CMC coordination structure committees for policy review and decision-making.

- **Progress on Outcome 2: Improved governance and fiscal space to manage a universal, lifecycle based social security system.**

The indicators used to measure the progress on outcome 2 are presented in Box 4.

Box 4: Indicators used to measure progress

- Dedicated NSSS CMC sub-committees activated with fit-for-purpose of composition and scope for efficient implementation of reform plans.
- Percentage of OAA and PwDs allowance expenditures against GDP

Efficient implementation of social protection reform plans

The CMC conducted NSSS thematic clusters and sub-national level coordination meetings at regular intervals with the concerned ministries to identify the priority reform areas. While doing this, stakeholder engagements took place involving the ministries, subordinate offices, development partners, and NGOs.

In order to formulate and finalize the NSSS Action Plan Phase II, the Cabinet Division, with the support of the SSPS project, conducted a series of workshops and consultations with different focal points of concerned ministries. The objective of these consultations was to develop a broader consensus about

their tasks and responsibilities in line with the NSSS objectives and to assist them in preparing the draft action plan. Based on the workshops, the focal points, alternative focal points, and other relevant officials of the ministries prepared their respective action plans. The action plan incorporates social security actions of five thematic clusters and 39 ministries for 2021-2026. The draft plan was shared with the DPs and NGOs for their suggestions and recommendations before being finalized and approved. One further key achievement was to integrate the social protection reform plans into the Annual Performance Agreement (APA) of the government ministries. The APA is based on the broader framework of the Management by Objective (MBO) model of results-based performance management system. The main purposes of introducing APA are: (i) moving the focus of the ministry from process-orientation to result-orientation; and (ii) providing an objective and fair basis to evaluate the overall performance of the ministry/division at the end of the year.

For monitoring and evaluation of the efficient implementation of the social protection reforms, the Core Diagnostics Instrument (CODI) has been introduced. There are ten broader areas or criteria for assessing the progress of social protection programs (e.g., adequacy, inclusiveness, appropriateness, respect for rights & dignity, governance & institutional capacity, financial & fiscal sustainability, coherence & integration, responsiveness, cost-effectiveness, and incentive compatibility). The CODI evaluation exercise has been done by all implementing agencies. The average CODI evaluation score stood at 3.11 on a scale of 4 (or 77.63%) which is considered decent. The CODI workshop report will be part of the Bangladesh Social Protection Monitoring Report in 2023, and part of the mid-term review of NSSS Action Plan Phase II. Another key issue in the social protection reform plan is the development partners' engagement and accountability, for which a dedicated meeting was organized.

Percentage of Old Age Allowance (OAA) and Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) allowance expenditure against GDP

The SSPS project is assisting in expanding the coverage of the old-age and PwDs allowances. The coverage of OAA (in terms of the number of beneficiaries) increased from 4 million in 2018-19 to 5.7 million in 2022-23, an increment of 43 per cent. The total expenditure on the scheme grew by 44 per cent, rising from Tk 24 billion in 2018-19 to Tk 34.4 billion in 2022-23. The OAA expenditure as a percentage of GDP stood at 0.086 per cent in 2021-22. As mentioned earlier, over the past two years of 2020-21 and 2021-22, Bangladesh introduced comprehensive OAA coverage in 262 most poverty-stricken Upazilas.

Between 2018-19 and 2022-23, the coverage of the Allowances for the Financially Insolvent Disabled more than doubled from 1 million to 2.365 million. During the same time, the total expenditure for this scheme almost tripled from Tk 8.4 billion to Tk 24.3 billion. As a percentage of GDP, the expenditure for this scheme rose from 0.028 per cent in 2018-19 to 0.0458 per cent in 2021-22. The increasing expenditure in OAA and PwDs and the government's effort to support these vulnerable groups is commendable. However, achieving universal coverage for these schemes has not been possible. The allocation for OAA needs to be increased significantly to make it universal. On the other

hand, a significant number of PwDs are currently out of the social protection programmes due to eligibility criteria issues, as mentioned earlier.

The beneficiaries of OAA and PwDs are currently getting a monthly transfer of Tk 500 and Tk 750, respectively, which are considered very low. The allowances have not been adjusted for inflation, causing their real value to fall significantly. For Bangladesh, increasing the amount of monthly transfers for both schemes will remain an important consideration.

- **Output 3: Ensure gender-responsive policy advice and accountability tools for sustaining reform efforts and pace.**

Box 5 presents indicators to measure progress under output 3.

Box 5: Indicators used to measure progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Functional and utilised web-based social protection dashboard for improved monitoring of social protection reforms incorporated in the Annual Performance Agreement (APA)• Strengthened key line ministries/divisions (Cabinet Division, GED, MoSW, MoF, MoLE) capacity for gender responsive social protection decision-making• Increased knowledge about reform priorities of 5 key line ministries /divisions (Cabinet Division, GED, MoSW, MoF, MoLE) with evidence of support from senior leadership to implement them

Current status of M&E dashboard

The CMC focal point group assigned the General Economics Division (GED) of the Planning Commission to devise a results-based M&E dashboard for social security programmes (UNDP, 2021). The SSPS assisted in developing the ToR for the underlying technical work. The M&E dashboard is expected to mirror the NSSS Action Plans, with users having the ability to update the status of any programme, upload evidence, search reforms by tags and categories, and generate dynamic reports. The dashboard should have features to be linked to other modules, including any revised M&E framework, integrated MIS data, reflecting the real-time quantitative and qualitative data, reform progresses and annual reports. The CMC, sub-committees, and the focal points of each ministry/division will be able to use the dashboard.

Based on the ToR, a study titled 'Assessment, Scope and a Framework for Introducing NSSS, M&E Dashboard Development' has been implemented (UNDP, n.d.). It was expected that a prototype dashboard will be in place on a trial basis by the end of 2022 and be fully functional by mid-2023. However, it is being delayed. Social protection monitoring data need to be collected on a regular basis for a purposeful M&E dashboard. Staff at various levels of monitoring data collection require adequate training on results-based data management. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and the Statistics and Information Division (SID) will need to be strengthened to effectively contribute to data collection, monitoring and evaluation. An appropriate and feasible set of data collection tools will need to be developed in order to support M&E dashboard to produce evaluation reports (Winstanley & Islam, n.d.).

Strengthening capacity for gender-responsive social protection decision-making

The SSPS project supported the Cabinet Division and the General Economics Division (GED) in developing the 'NSSS Gender Policy 2018' and the 'Gender Diagnostics, Policy, Strategy and Action Plan for National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) of Bangladesh.' The project also commissioned a study titled 'Gender Diagnostics of Social Protection Issues'. All these background studies are important resources for the line ministries to gain a comprehensive understanding of the significance of gender in social protection decision-making. The NSSS Action Plan Phase II has incorporated gender-inclusive social protection programmes for all ministries. The dissemination workshop of the Action Plan Phase II also emphasised gender-related social protection programmes. Around two dozen social security programmes in Bangladesh have a primary focus on women, either directly or indirectly (NSSS Action Plan Phase II). The action plan has a specific section on gender-responsive social security and gender-focused actions. Almost all implementing ministries/divisions have actions for gender inclusiveness. These actions are exclusively related to the social protection of women and girls, but other programmes also deal with both genders, with embedded principles of ensuring gender equality in the delivery system. However, achieving social protection that aims for gender equality requires multi-dimensional initiatives and cannot be accomplished solely by pursuing economic gains for women and girls. Additionally, lack of awareness among the line ministries about contributory social protection programmes targeting women (such as maternity insurance) is partly responsible for slow decision-making and implementation.

Increased knowledge about reform priorities of key line ministries

The knowledgebase (comprising background studies, discussion papers, policy briefs, data dashboard) created by the SSPS project has served as a platform for disseminating essential analysis and information on various social protection programmes. Job transfers have been a common phenomenon among government officials, resulting in loss of official/institutional memory. In this context, these documents provide important inputs to the concerned implementing personnel in different ministries/divisions to identify reform priorities and foster implementation. The SSPS project also arranges orientation sessions on NSSS, lifecycle approach, Action Plan, social protection's link with the SDGs, and implementation progress based on midterm implementation review of NSSS for the newly posted CMC focal points, alternative focal points, and secretaries of 39 ministries/divisions. The workshops and consultations organized by the SSPS project have contributed to increasing knowledge about the reform priorities of the key line ministries.

- **Output 4: Enable NGOs/DPOs to include the priorities of marginalised and excluded groups, including persons with disabilities, in social protection policies and decision-making.**

The indicator used to measure the progress under output 4 is presented in Box 6. The assigned indicator is very broad and thus the progress to be measured is not straightforward.

Box 6: Indicator used to measure progress

Influence non-state actors working for marginalised and excluded groups, including PwDs in the social protection decision-making

The SSPS project has been actively involved in supporting the Cabinet Division in organising a meeting on GO-NGO collaboration, with the aim of generating practical recommendations on how to engage non-state actors in the social security reform process. The meeting also served as a platform for the Organisation of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). NGOs, OPDs, and other civil society organisations provided valuable suggestions and recommendations for strengthening inclusive social protection with broader participation from marginalised and excluded groups. Many of these recommendations were incorporated into the Action Plan Phase II.

In addition, the SSPS project has been collaborating with the Disability Alliance on SDGs, Bangladesh, in organising national seminars, which have seen participation from various UN organisations such as UNICEF, UNFPA, UN Women, and UNRC's office. These seminars have highlighted the importance of making progress on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and addressing issues related to social protection.⁵

Furthermore, the SSPS project has conducted workshops with thirteen OPDs to gather inputs on the mapping of social protection programmes for OPDs. Additionally, a series of workshops have been organised with non-state actors in Dhaka and other locations, involving diverse groups such as transgender individuals, youth, marginalised populations, and Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). These workshops aimed at identifying major gaps in engaging all stakeholders on issues pertaining to marginalised groups.

Currently, a non-state actors' citizen report is in progress, which is expected to identify challenges and suggest policies to strengthen inclusive social protection programmes. However, the absence of a comprehensive strategy for non-state actors' involvement in social protection decision-making has been a cause for concern, resulting in slow progress in their participation in social protection decision-making processes. Efforts are being made to address this issue and ensure meaningful engagement of non-state actors in shaping social protection policies and programmes.

V. Efficiency of Resource Use

The effectiveness of resource use in a project implies its ability to utilise resources/inputs (funds, expertise, and time) effectively and optimally to achieve the expected outcomes and outputs within the specified timeframe and budget. In the current evaluation, it is assessed in two ways: (i) financial progress disbursement against budgetary allocation and spending, and (ii) value for money (VfM) analysis. As mentioned earlier, the current SSPS project will be completed in two phases: first phase (2021 – 2022) and second phase (2023–2025). In the first phase, the project received funding in two

⁵ The UNCRPD is a global partnership where governments, civil society, person with disabilities, Organisations of people with disabilities, and the UN agencies work together to accelerate CRPD.

instalments: first instalment (AUD 2,210,396/USD 1,712,158) on 16 June 2021 and second instalment (AUD 1,750,000/ USD 1,222,921) on 1 August 2021. The total budget for July 2021–June 2023 is AUD 3,960,396/ USD 2,935,078 (Table 3). The expenditure up to December 2021 was 23 per cent of total funds received while the corresponding figure was 43 per cent for January–December 2022. The cumulative total expenditure was around 66 per cent of total funds received. Resources are mainly allocated in the following areas: human resources (23%); knowledge and policy innovation for advancing social protection reforms (10%); technical units to support 5-line ministries to implement the reforms plan (10%); research fund (9%); improving NSSS M&E (7%); Stakeholder engagement and dissemination on research and evidence (6%). Together all these components account for 65 per cent of the total budget.

Table 3: Budgetary allocation by DFAT and expenditure

Item	Budget		Expenditure				Budget	
	2021 - 2023	2021 - 2023	July - December 2021		January - December 2022		January - December 2023	
	AUD	USD	AUD	USD	AUD	USD	AUD	USD
1.1: Technical Units to Support 5 LMs to Implement the Reforms Plan	407,447	301,962	82,849	61,400	196,411	145,562	128,187	95,000
1.2: Knowledge and Policy Innovation for Advancing Social Protection Reforms	409,536	303,510	52,354	38,800	229,323	169,953	127,859	94,757
1.3: COVID-19 Policy Response	141,553	104,906	10,525	7,800	66,530	49,306	64,498	47,800
Subtotal	958,536	710,378	145,728	108,000	492,265	364,821	320,543	237,557
2.1: Research Fund	362,819	268,888	61,664	45,700	193,208	143,188	107,947	80,000
2.2: Stakeholder Engagement and Dissemination on Research and Evidence	220,598	163,487	21,050	15,600	132,082	97,887	67,467	50,000
2.3: Pilot on Old Age Allowance and Persons with Disabilities		.			0	0		
Subtotal	583,417	432,374	82,714	61,300	325,290	241,075	175,413	130,000
3.1: Improving NSSS M&E	276,265	204,742	49,925	37,000	121,440	90,000	104,900	77,742
3.2: Gender Mainstreaming Social Protection Reforms	124,457	92,236	14,168	10,500	67,467	50,000	42,822	31,736
3.3: Support to CMC Coordination for Strengthening Accountability	160,563	118,994	19,700	14,600	80,960	60,000	59,902	44,394
3.4: Stakeholder Engagement on Development of NSSS 2026+	144,865	107,361	4,048	3,000	94,453	70,000	46,364	34,361
Subtotal	706,150	523,333	87,842	65,100	364,320	270,000	253,989	188,233

4.1: CSO / DPO Platform for Influencing Social Protection	116,420	86,280	13,493	10,000	60,720	45,000	42,207	31,280
Subtotal	116,420	86,280	13,493	10,000	60,720	45,000	42,207	31,280
Human Resources	902,223	668,644	111,279	82,470	499,253	370,000	291,690	216,174
Operations	191,825	142,163	31,709	23,500	102,549	76,000	57,567	42,663
Subtotal	1,094,047	810,807	142,989	105,970	601,802	446,000	349,257	258,837
Project Monitoring	168,181	124,640	26,987	20,000	89,919	66,640	51,275	38,000
Project Evaluation	40,282	29,853			0	0	40,282	29853
All Subtotal	3,667,032	2,717,665	499,752	370,370	1,934,316	1,433,536	1,232,965	913,760
GMS Subtotal	293,364	217,413	39,981	29,630	154,745	114,683	98,636	73,100

Source: UNDP (2022).

Value for Money (VfM)

Measuring Value for Money (VfM) involves assessing the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of a project/programme in relation to its cost. The main impact of a social protection strategy in generating cost-effectiveness and value for money emanates from the promotion of efficiency and effectiveness. Integrated and comprehensive policy frameworks are more likely to achieve complex policy objectives. They can also minimise the required financial costs as well. Social protection strategies can harmonise government processes, helping to reduce duplication and inefficiency. National strategies can build cross-cutting delivery systems for programme registration, targeting, management information and delivery. These systems not only reduce input costs but also enable more effective coordination, improving efficiency and strengthening positive outcomes (effectiveness). The SSPS project aims at improved effectiveness of social protection policy, innovative approaches based on the best international practices, as well as better coordination and integration. Achieving these issues can result in strengthened national capacity to develop and implement an effective social protection system. The maximum VfM accrues to individual social protection programme from improving the system and reforming policies. Better accounting and management systems (i.e., quality assurance, audit schemes, rolling out MIS and M&E system etc.) can also result in direct gains.

A previous evaluation found the SSPS project consistently maintaining close to 100 per cent delivery rate every year while maintaining strong Value for Money (VfM) by utilizing UNDP's global procurement system and entering into negotiations for service providers offering competitive prices. These positive aspects are found to be maintained in this review as well. Table 4 presents an assessment of VfM for the SSPS project from different dimensions. The project is delivering activities as specified in the project document and annual work plan (AWP). Up to December 2022, the project delivery rate was around 66 per cent of the total fund received. Given the budget for 2023, it is expected that the project resources will be fully utilized (100% delivery rate) (Table 4).

Table 4: An assessment of value for money

Indicator	Evidence
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Total budget for July 2021–June 2023: AUD 3,960396 or USD 2,935,078 Expenditure up to the end of December 2022: AUD 2,628,794 or USD 1,948,219 Expenditure - 66% of total funds received
Committed to eliminating inefficiency and duplication and applying lessons learned to enhance VfM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular review of personnel structure by the project manager to guide staff on their expected deliverables and ensure each team member has specific duties related to the project No duplication role exists Internally, every UNDP project has a mid-year and end-year review

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lessons learned from the reviews are recorded and analysed • Learned lessons are considered for planning the subsequent Annual Work Plan in every January
Delivers defined services within budget (predicted budgets compared well to actual expenditure)	Same as mentioned in the first indicator
Scrutinises costs to pursue the most cost-effective options and considers proportionality in planning and allocating resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project Annual Work Plan - developed at the beginning of the year and budgets are allocated based on the level of service delivery required under each output based on the previous contracts issued by UNDP • Revision of the Annual Work Plan throughout the year (when required) • All expenses are planned for in line-by-line budgets to ensure every component of an output expenditure in in line or below market rates
Robust systems and procedures in place to monitor and manage VfM during implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All procured goods and services run through the UNDP Country Office Procurement Unit ensuring competitive and cost-effective procuring. • UNDP Country Office conducts annual audits ensuring compliance and proper record/receipt keeping. • Project considers VfM via economy (ensuring the right procurement), efficiency (monitoring economy against achieving results), and effectiveness (effect of all inputs toward achieving results).

Source: UNDP (2022).

In its design, the SSPS has built-in features to proactively explore efficiency gains.

- The project manager is supposed to review the personnel structure at a regular interval to guide the staff members on their expected deliverables and ensure that each team member has specific tasks.
- Besides, the project has provisions for half yearly reviews to track financial progress, Annual Work Plans (reviewed and approved by UNDP and Project Steering Committee), as well as mid- and end-line project evaluations (Q3 2022 and Q4 2025) as part of its monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system.
- The reviews consist of UNDP’s annual review mechanism and annual reflection workshops based on monitoring, evaluation, research, learning and adaptation (MERLA). At the reflection workshops, facilitated by UNDP’s M&E officer, project progress is discussed against the performance indicators as per the logframe, lessons learned presented from the previous year’s work, and recommendations considered for adjusting certain approaches to achieve the logframe targets (Khan, 2020). The government counterparts and donors are invited to attend the workshops.

- The PMU records agreed lessons learned and action points discussed in the workshop. Those issues are presented to the National Project Director, donor representative(s), and the UNDP Country Office representative for endorsement or revision. Upon from all three parties, the PMU develops the AWP for the next year.
- Moreover, the project inputs are monitored throughout the year by using standard monitoring formats and the available USNP systems to observe if the activities are on track or not.

Discussions with the project manager and staff members seem to suggest that activities of the project are well-monitored. Making the annual reports available publishing project activities appears to be a good practice. This can be a more effective exercise if some of the activities are elaborated with more concrete information to better appreciate their depth and effectiveness rather than just using the annual reports as promotional instrument.

The project's VfM proposition also benefits from UNDP procurement policies and procedures with support from UNDP's relevant department. The previous review of the SSPS project (Khan, 2020) highlighted the salient feature of procurement practices and those continue to be maintained. The budgets for SSPS activities are based on the internal estimates of the market rates based on the previous contracts issued by UNDP. The project manager informs that all expenses are planned are in line or below the market rates. The project maintains all expenditure records with reference to the budget line items and related annual outputs for auditing purposes. The UNDP Procurement Unit is reportedly to have gone back to the vendors regularly requesting explanations on various quoted expenses if found higher than usual. It has also been mentioned that additional negotiations with competitive bids are undertaken with the objective of obtaining further competitive costs without compromising on quality.

All procured goods and services are managed by the UNDP Country Office Procurement Unit to ensure competitive and cost-effective procuring consistent with the UNDP rules (e.g., high degree of transparency and fiduciary practices). The Country Office conducts annual audits.

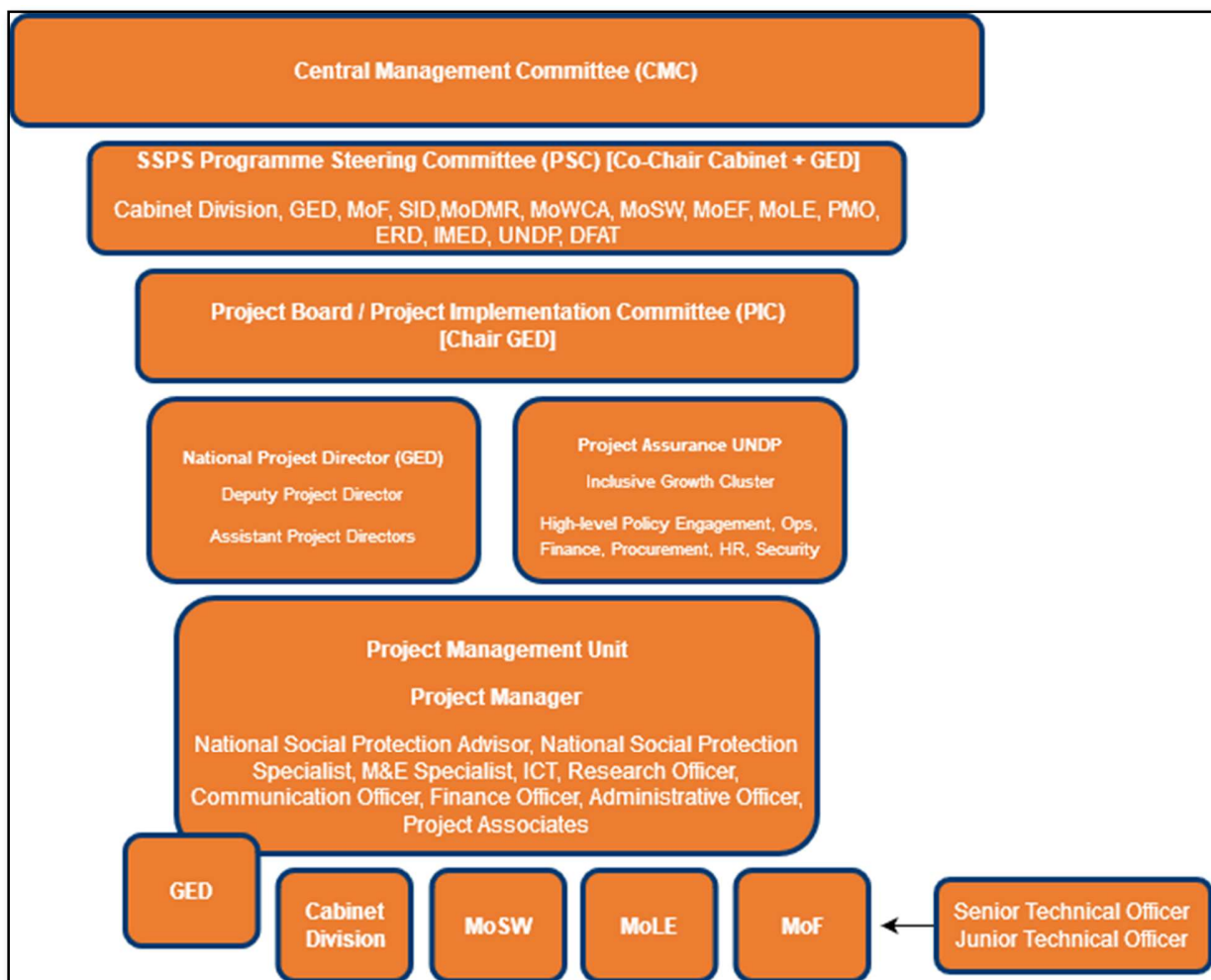
The government is also contributing to the SSPS project through facilitating office accommodation including essential utilities. The main project office that houses the project team is located in the Planning Commission under the Ministry of Planning. For training and workshop venues related to the NSSS activities, the project relies on GoB facilities whenever possible within and outside Dhaka particularly at the local level to train the local GoB representatives. The support provided by GoB is assisting substantially to reduce project costs (Khan, 2020), enhancing the VfM for the project.

VI. Effectiveness of Management Arrangements

The SSPS project has established a robust management structure, reflecting the level of ownership it enjoys and the kind of oversight required for the complex and highly ambitious task of implementing the NSSS reform agenda.

The Central Management Committee (CMC) oversees the implementation of the SSPS project (Figure 2). The CMC is a high-level body, led by Cabinet Secretary, oversees the implementation of the SSPS project. With a mandate to coordinate all social security reforms and ensure inter-ministerial coordination, and crisis mitigation, the CMC is entrusted with the task of driving the implementation of the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS). The CMC is responsible for making consensus-based decisions and approving project plans, including revisions when necessary. Its main objectives are to ensure accountability, transparency, effective project management, and the optimal utilization of resources. The technical support to CMC comes from the SSPS Programme Steering Committee (PSC), co-chaired by Cabinet Division and General Economics Division of the Planning Commission. The PSC work on policy guidance and maintains coordination between all institutions and groups involved in the social protection programmes. The committee reports to the Cabinet Division Inter-Ministerial Committee on Social Protection.

Figure 2: Programme Management and Implementation Structure



Source: SSPS Programme documents.

A project Board/Project Implementation Committee (PIC) is responsible for project-related decision-making including approval of the project plans and any revisions when required. It also organises annual meetings, chaired by the Member GED, and bi-monthly project meetings chaired by the National Project Director. While making the decisions, it works closely with the National Project Director (NPD) and UNDP Project Assurance representative. The NPD works with support from the Deputy Project Director and Assistant Project Directors. The UNDP Project Assurance is embedded within its Country Office structure where the SSPS is one of the portfolios of the Resilience and Inclusive Growth thematic cluster. The other areas (Finance, Procurement, Human Resources, M&E) of UNDP supports the project. At the operational level, the project is being implemented by UNDP under the UNDP-DFAT project management arrangements, utilizing UNDP’s National Execution (NEX) modality and aligning with the Strategic Partnership Framework between the Government of Australia and UNDP for 2016-2020. UNDP is responsible for ensuring project quality, financial integrity, and operational support through its existing mechanisms. Regular meetings are held

between UNDP and DFAT to review progress, risk management, and explore opportunities for joint efforts.

The Project Management Unit (PMU) prepares and presents annual reviews, work plans, and budgets to the Executive and other members of the Board/PIC for review and approval. The PMU has provisions for personnel with various positions i.e., National Project Manager; National Social Protection Advisor; Financial Officer; Administrative Officer; Information, Communications, and Technology Officer; Project Associate; Monitoring & Evaluation Officer; and National Social Protection Specialist (Annex 1). However, some of the staff positions remain vacant. The Project Manager is responsible for preparing 6-monthly reports under the guidance of the National Project Director and submitting the reports to UNDP. The UNDP shares the narratives and financial reports with the co-funding development partners (the DFAT).

The project currently employs fewer than the number of allotted positions. The SSPS project management is of the view that the resources saved out of not have all the posts recruited were being used for project-related activities and thereby maximising the value for money. However, several stakeholder representatives interviewed as part of this evaluation seemed to suggest that by disseminating project outputs more widely and by communicating research findings and lessons learnt in a manner comprehensible to non-technical readers the impact of the project can be magnified further. Communications from a complex project like the SSPS, which works with very senior officials and numerous ministries and divisions can be quite challenging. That is why some of the interviewees suggested to consider only a seasoned expert to promote SSPS communications using both regular and social media.

As the research-based outputs are generally commissioned, the use of project outputs is of limited use beyond the contractual period of the consultants/firms engaged to undertake those. Some in-house research capacity would enable the project to make use of the relevant findings from the studies and analysis in customised manners for different workshops and policy dialogues for awareness building. Commissioned research are usually long and involve technical contents, while it is often more important to develop short papers targeting senior officials and policymakers. Using key findings from different outputs to develop issues paper on specific subject matters can greatly help raise the awareness and level of understanding of all stakeholders involved include the officials of the line ministries with transferable jobs. Strengthening in-house capacity of the SSPS project will also help develop knowledge materials in Bangla, which many stakeholders will find helpful.

There is scope for making the CMC discussions/meetings more focused as pointed out by several interviewees during the evaluation exercise. This can be attributed to lack of technical support as well as informed/evidence-based inputs in setting agendas of the CMC meetings. As a result, it becomes difficult to draw attention of the CMC members to important emerging issues and burning questions pertaining to social protection. In the previous evaluation (Khan, 2020), inter-ministerial coordination was mentioned as a concern along with long-time lag in the approval process of the minutes of these meetings, which was recommended to be addressed for faster implementation of

CMC decisions. Given the very short project time frame, for which this evaluation is carried out, this issue could not be verified with mixed views obtained from the stakeholders.

Technical Units of SSPS project

Technical specialists from the GED and Cabinet Division are supporting the key line ministries in implementing their designated plans and programmes. From the end of the 2022, three other key line ministries (MoSW, MoF, and MoLE) are getting additional technical support. In light of the COVID-19, the technical support in the first two years were a combination of in-ministry and digital-based support. Three additional technical units are in place in the MoSW, MoF, and MoLE from 2023. Each technical unit comprises of two (1 senior and 1 junior) technical staffs, including office operations. The PMU at the GED is supposed to provide technical support to the GED through technical units. It guides all technical units.

Risk analysis role of SSPS project management

Given the likelihood of different types of risks arising, such as political, organisational, and financial risks, the project document includes a sub-section on 'Risks and Assumptions' (UNDP, 2021; p. 54-56) along with potential mitigation measures to ensure smooth project implementation.

The risks that have emerged and the mitigation measures adopted by the SSPS (Social Protection Policy Support) project are presented in Table 5. In the beginning of 2021, conducting regular meetings and activities was challenging due to the impact of COVID-19. In response, the SSPS project took initiatives to shift meetings and activities to online platforms such as Zoom wherever possible. The project also developed a contingency plan to address uncertain events, particularly political instability, and carefully observed and reviewed the ongoing national security situations to develop strategies for uninterrupted project activities. A strong coordination mechanism has been established to prevent institutional memory loss among focal points of different ministries, departments, and divisions. The CMC (Core Management Committee) approves alternative modalities for DEX (Direct Execution) of different tasks. The project has also developed a knowledgebase and training tools, such as the Social Protection Policy Toolkit, for government officials, and organises regular meetings, workshops, and consultations to strengthen coordination and collaboration within and between ministries. However, lack of coordination continues to be a challenge, and frequent transfers of government officials sometimes cause problems that could be avoided or minimised with proactive actions by the CMC, PIC (Project Implementation Committee), and PSC (Project Steering Committee).

The National Project Manager organises monthly meetings with the UNDP Inclusive Growth Cluster Head and different government officials working with social protection programmes to address delays in policy initiatives. Irregularity in obtaining and disseminating data for policymakers on social protection is one of the significant risks associated with the SSPS project. For example, the MoSW's (Ministry of Social Welfare) national budget report relies heavily on manual entries and multiple sources, making the process cumbersome and resulting in difficulties in generating regular and

disaggregated data by age, sex, region, and other relevant categories. To address this data unavailability issue, the SSPS project has attempted to identify sub-level indicators and proxy indicators that do not require national data. Overall, the project has planned for risks, and the mitigation strategies have generally worked well. However, there is a need for continued assessment of risks.

Table 5: Risks emerged and mitigation measures

Risk	Impact	Update on controls/mitigation strategy
COVID-19 situation and reforms	Slow implementation of different reforms Delay in preparing the NSSS Action Plan Phase II (2021-2026) Hindrances in policy discussions and managing internal administrative issues	Shifting activities to Zoom wherever and whenever possible
Political/National instability/unrest	Security Delay in programme implementation	Development of a contingency plan to deal with such situations, with cautious observations of the political/national security situation and ensuring approval of key programme activities before major events
Key government officials' transfer posting, promotion and deployment with inordinate delay	Envisaged coordination and consolidation of programmes and reformed institutional arrangements will be delayed or non-implemented Slower data dissemination process Depletion of capacity within the ministries Loss of institutional memory of focal points of the concerned ministries/divisions	Already initiated alternate modality for DEX (Direct Execution) of activities under approval of the NPD and established strong coordination mechanism through approved reforms by the CMC Developed an induction toolkit 'Development of Social Protection Policy Toolkit' for Government Officials consisting of references and learning materials to guide the mainstreaming of NSSS Action Plan (Phase 2) to mitigate the change in leadership challenges. It is available on the website and user-friendly as suggested in 2021's reflection meeting by DFAT
Lack of coordination and cooperation between ministries	The goal of a fully functional social protection system cannot be achieved unless ministries coordinate and cooperate.	Organise the Cross-ministerial CMC Focal Points' meetings Organise frequent meetings and dialogues to address coordination challenges Regular consultation workshops with thematic focal points including orientations and social security knowledge sharing tours Developing a toolkit or guideline for the officers can be helpful for new and transferred officers to get oriented on the topics Building a sustainable capacity within the government agencies in knowledge management and M&E and perhaps stretching it to MEAL (Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning) Ensuring easy access to learning materials by the relevant people and institutions including think tanks
Delay from government in implementing policy initiatives		Established a regular process to monitor risks National Project Manager's monthly meeting with UNDP's corresponding Cluster head, regular meetings with the key officials of the Cabinet Division and other key officials of social security implementation of the NSSS Action Plans implementing by concerned ministries Regular maintenance of M&E plan as well as project reports and Risk logs are updated and maintained close liaison with DFAT counterparts.
Irregularly in obtaining and disseminating data for policymakers on social protection		Identification of data requirements Regular update of the M&E framework Finding ways and means to expand nationally available data at a frequency higher than the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) Identification of sub-level indicators including proxy indicators that do not require national data

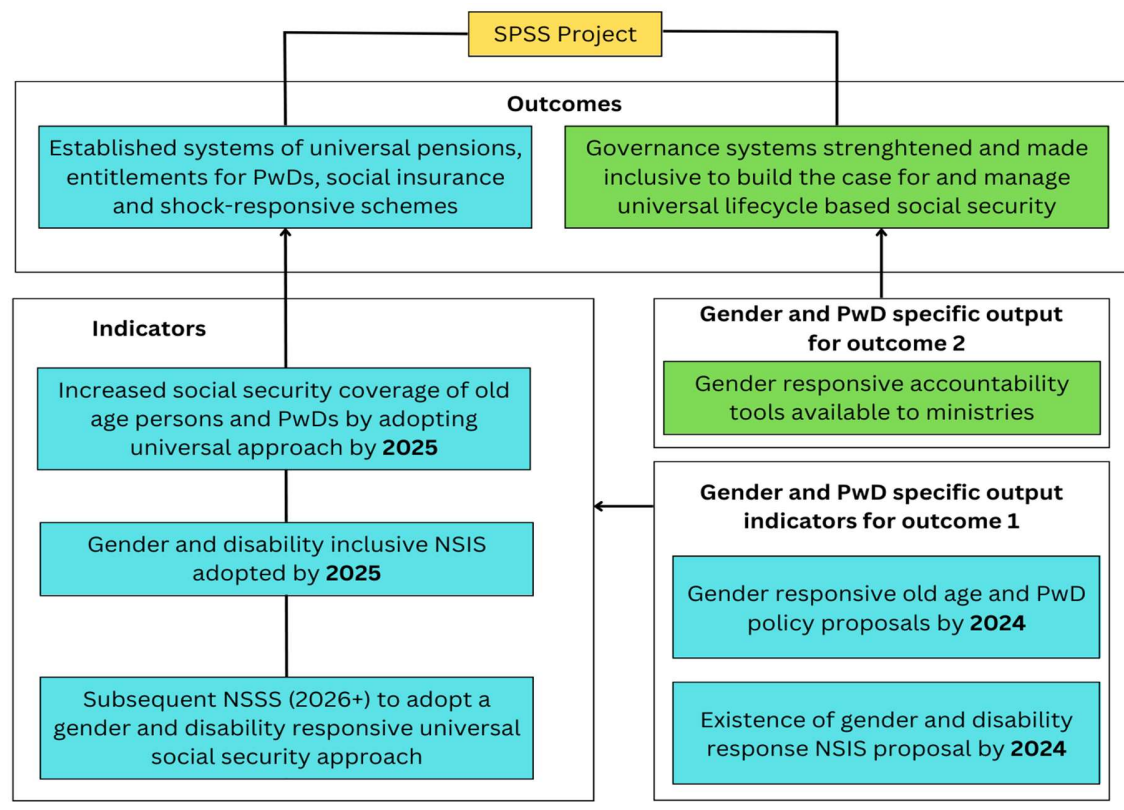
Source: UNDP (2021b & 2022).

VII. Gender and Persons with Disabilities (PwDs)

Provisions for gender and PwDs in the SSPS project

The SSPS project has prioritised gender and disability as key focus areas in its design. One of the intermediate outcomes (referred to as outputs) of the project explicitly focuses on social security systems with specific provisions for persons with disabilities (PwDs), as highlighted (along with gender) in all three indicators for this outcome. The gendered approach is further supported through a specific intermediate output that is linked to strengthening governance systems. The project has identified deliverables, including gender and PwD-sensitive reforms, necessary to achieve these outcomes. Additionally, the project aims to develop accountability tools that are responsive to gender considerations as part of its outputs. A summary of the outputs, outcomes, and indicators related to gender and PwDs can be found in Figure 3 under the SSPS project.

Figure 3: Gender and PwD provisions in the SSPS project



Source: UNDP (2022).

Promoting gender equality and women empowerment in the context of SSPS project

Creating and implementing social security programs with a gender focus can play a crucial role in addressing poverty and vulnerabilities faced by women, as highlighted in the National Women's Development Policy 2011. These social protection programs encompass targeted initiatives such as food security, social empowerment, and livelihood programs. The NSSS, as part of the Social Development Framework (SDF), also prioritizes gender and women's empowerment to promote equity and social justice. Thus, it recommends comprehensive measures to tackle all forms of gender-based socio-economic discrimination.

The SSPS has supported the development of the NSSS Gender Policy, which was approved by the CMC in 2018.⁶ This policy is formulated based on the gender diagnostics of the NSSS and aims to address women's empowerment and gender responsiveness in all stages of NSSS, from design to implementation and evaluation, using a gender lens. A Gender Strategy and an Action Plan have also been developed in alignment with the NSSS and accompanying action plan to operationalize the Gender Policy. This policy includes commitments to address challenges faced by women at individual, household, societal, and national levels, in line with the National Women's Development Policy 2011, the Eight Five Year Plan (8FYP), and relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. To implement the NSSS Gender Policy, appropriate guidelines and gender-focused indicators need to be developed to assess gender equality outcomes of various social security programs in different sectoral contexts.

The NSSS Action Plan Phase II (2021–2026) acknowledges the unique challenges faced by women and considers their specific needs at different stages of their lives. Due to women's lower participation in formal employment, they often have limited access to contributory social protection systems compared to men. To address this, approximately two dozen social security programs in FY2022–23 have a primary focus on women, either directly or indirectly. Additionally, the commitment to gender equality is reflected in the resource allocation for the project, with slightly over 3% of the total SSPS budget allocated for gender mainstreaming social protection reforms (UNDP, 2022). While some may argue about the relative significance of this allocation, it is reasonable to conclude that the SSPS project and the overall social protection architecture in the country prioritize addressing the needs of women.

⁶ There are concerns regarding the implementation of the Gender Policy. Such concerns include: (i) as there are so many actors involved, it would be difficult to implement the policy through a concerted and harmonised process; (ii) still, there is absence of a robust data collection system which is a prerequisite for reliable gender, age and geographically disaggregated data; and (iii) there is lack of a targeted and practical capacity building and sensitisation exercise targeting the local government level amongst union parishads to effectively and efficiently manage and supervise pro-poor and gender sensitive safety-net programmes

Focus areas of gender equality and women empowerment

To address gender perspectives, key focus areas include strengthening support for vulnerable women, introducing programs such as the Mother and Child Benefit Programme (MCBP) and Vulnerable Women's Benefits (VWB), workplace childcare services, maternal health care, maternity insurance, empowering workfare programs, addressing social norms, expanding social allowance, and skills enhancement programs. An assessment of the current state shows significant progress in these areas. For example, the MCBP has already been incorporated into the social safety net budget data for FY 2021-22 by merging Maternity Allowance for rural poor women and Lactating Mother Allowance for urban working women. As per the NSSS Action Plan Phase I (2016-2021) recommendation, Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) has been renamed as Vulnerable Women's Benefits (VWB) starting from FY 2022-23. The NSSS National Action Plan Phase II (2021-2026) includes activities such as maternity insurance and strengthening social allowance for migrant workers and their family members, particularly women, to address gender issues within the domain of social protection. While most of these programs/activities are exclusively focused on social protection for women and girls, some also embed principles of gender equality. The SSPS project also supports programs to eliminate gender-based violence, including providing financial support for national dialogues, theater performances, and training as part of observing the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence under the theme 'UNiTE! Activism to End Violence against Women & Girls'⁷ (UNDP, 2022).

Analysing sex-disaggregated data and reporting on gender equality outcomes

The successful implementation of the Gender Strategy and NSSS Action Plan Phase II (2021-2026) is largely dependent on how the strategy will be translated into actions by each ministry/department/division. Besides, collection of age, sex and geographically disaggregated data, adequate use of gender analyses, and gender-focused indicators for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as well as reporting need to be conducted at regular intervals to measure the impact and effectiveness of social security programmes on gender equality and women's empowerment. These issues have also been prioritised in the NSSS Action Plan Phase II (2021-2026).

The SSPS project is supporting to establish an M&E dashboard for age and sex-disaggregated data. Previously, the project assisted in developing the ToR for 'Development of a Web-based National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) Monitoring & Evaluation Dashboard'. The CMC will supervise the collection of disaggregated data by cluster member ministries/divisions. Different ministries/departments/divisions will use the gender-based result indicators into the M&E framework both for communication and implementation. The SSPS project has allocated resources for making the M&E dashboard operational. Around 7 per cent (AUD 0.28 million or USD 0.20 million) of the project's total budget are directed towards improving NSSS M&E (UNDP, 2022). During the project implementation period (July 2021-June 2023), the M&E framework has made progress. It is

⁷ The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence is an international campaign observed every year with the objective of raising visibility around the call for the elimination of all forms of gender-based violence.

expected that a prototype M&E dashboard will be in place on a trial basis and be fully functional by mid 2023 (UNDP, 2022).

Addressing social protection for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs)

Bangladesh enacted the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013 to empower PwDs through social protection programmes.⁸ The Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) would create a system of monitoring the development of children with disabilities and to consolidate complementary programmes for vocational education, enterprise support, and anti-discrimination in the job market (Cabinet Division, 2022). Currently, more than two million PwDs receive a monthly disability allowance at a rate of Tk 800 from the MoSW (Table 6).

Table 6: Beneficiaries and budgetary allocation for programmes targeting PwDs in FY22

Programme name	Beneficiaries in lakh	Budget in Crore Taka
Allowances for the Financially insolvent disabled	18.00	1,620.00
Stipend for disabled students	1.00	95.64
Grants for the schools for the disabled	0.37	29.68
Fund for the welfare of acid burnt women and disabled	0.33	1.82
Trust for the protection of the persons with neurodevelopmental disabilities	-	29.15
Welfare trust for physical disabilities	-	15.00
Service and assistance centre for disabled	3.99	68.90

Source: UNDP (2022).

The SSPS project has undertaken activities for strengthening PwDs inclusion. Along with preparing background studies for national plans and strategies, it has been organising series of workshops/dialogues/consultations in both rural and urban areas with the objectives of awareness building amongst the relevant stakeholders, especially the Organisation of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). It has also been working closely with Disability Alliance on SDGs Bangladesh, a network of 27 national and international organisations working for promoting disability rights in Bangladesh. Amongst those 27 organisations, the Sight Savers is the Secretariat to call on the government of Bangladesh for ensuring wider disability inclusion. The SSPS also partnered with the Centre for Disability in Development (CDD) for long term collaboration for reforming existing system and policies to enhance disability inclusion. It is also working to strengthen the capacity of the OPDS and their engagement with governments and mobilise targeted and concrete commitments on disability inclusion and inclusive development.

⁸ The WHO views disabilities as an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), disability is a concept that results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. As per the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013, disability means the results from the interaction between persons with long-term and/or permanent physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments and the attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in the society on an equal basis with others. Some common types of disability are autism or autism of spectrum disorders, visual disability, speech disability, intellectual disability, hearing disability, physical impairment, and multiple disabilities.

There are also consultations on building an Employment Platform for PwDs with support from the National Disability Foundation. The key specific objectives are: (i) designing and promoting evidence-based policies and programme addressing 'Leaving no one behind' and Inclusive growth in the context of Bangladesh; and (ii) creating a joint sharing platform and scaling up, where relevant, existing livelihood programmes to augment social protection system to be more inclusive and comprehensive in Bangladesh.

VIII. Impact Orientation and Sustainability of the Project

Strategic orientation and impact

The strategic orientation of the SSPS project is quite strong in making a significant contribution to broader, long-term impact. It is evident through its relevance and strategic fit that was discussed earlier in this report. There are three further factors that make this project extremely relevant. First and foremost, it has developed strong ownership of the government by supporting Cabinet Division and the General Economics Division of the Planning Commission. Second, it undertakes policy and advocacy work to support largely government-initiated reforms. And finally, the project can also help with implementation of activities while reaching out to and/or in collaboration with so many other ministries. In a way, the SSPS project has become inseparable from the ongoing social protection architecture of Bangladesh. It is widely acknowledged that this project has played a catalytic role to build awareness among the central and local level administrative machinery regarding the purpose, usefulness, and potential impact of social security measures towards poverty alleviation, economic security, and social right of the citizens (Khan, 2020).

Evaluating the impact of a long-standing project like SSPS within the designated timeframe (July 2021-June 2023) presents some challenges due to the requirement for visible outcomes. Achieving tangible results in the short to intermediate term for a complex social sector project may be challenging. However, despite the broad and high-level ambitions outlined in the project design, it is possible to identify several immediate positive impacts of the project.

- One of the most significant impacts of the SSPS project has been the formulation and adoption of the NSSS Action Plan Phase II (2021–2026). This action plan outlines detailed key actions that will be undertaken by 39 concerned ministries/departments/divisions during the implementation period, addressing the challenges faced in the NSSS reforms so far. Furthermore, the action plan presents new opportunities for strategic dialogues with a wide range of stakeholders, aligning with the government's and development partners' policies and priorities for reforming the social protection sector in Bangladesh. A critical significance of the NSSS Action Plan Phase II is the continuity that it provides to the reform process. This

action plan has taken into consideration the recommendations of the NSSS Mid-Term Implementation Review and aims to complete the unfinished reform agenda.

- The Action Plan was a fully government-owned exercise drawing on inputs from all the relevant ministries and departments responsible for its implementation. Such a home-grown and comprehensive approach to undertaking reforms is encouraging and shows a deep commitment to social protection.
- In formulating the action plan, the issues of gender, persons with disabilities, and inclusivity have been given due consideration as evident from various specific measures listed. In each of these areas, the SSPS project has worked extensively. It originally developed the NSSS gender policy and strategy, which has been reflected in the NSSS Action Plan 2021-26.
- As part of the NSSS Action Plan 2021-26, the structured presentation of the tasks to be undertaken by various ministries and departments prepared by the government will remain a reference document for future follow-up strategy development. This should be recognised as a critical ingredient of policy continuity.
- Beyond the Action Plan Phase II, the SSPS project-commissioned studies on the social protection response to COVID-19 have provided useful inputs to the preparation of the 8th Five-Year Plan. Findings from other research published by the SSPS project, namely the midterm review of NSSS implementation, urban social protection diagnostic exercise, and programme harmonisation assessment have been cited and referred to in the 8th Five-Year Plan.
- In the sphere of social protection, the 8th Five-Year Plan specifies certain tasks for the General Economics Division of the Planning Commission. These include, amongst others, strengthening M&E of social protection interventions and undertaking a dedicated nationwide survey of social protection. This shows the significance of SSPS activities for GED.
- In recent times, the gender and PwDs related social protection programmes have experienced an increased coverage and budgetary allocation as well (as mentioned in an earlier section).
- While the government declared the universal disability benefits in 2019 based on the Disability Act 2013, the determination of eligibility has been one issue. Very recently, the government has recognised the Washington Consensus indicators as the eligibility criteria for PwDs. The SSPS project's research and analysis played a role in this regard. The latest Bangladesh Population and Housing Census 2022 incorporated these indicators in the survey. It is likely that the coverage in social protection programmes for the PwDs will increase in the coming years.

- The SSPS project undertook a detailed study in designing the framework for introducing the National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS) including the private voluntary pension (PvP) scheme for the working-age population. The facilitated the government's approving a PvP scheme and the relevant Universal Pension Management Bill 2023 was subsequently approved by the Parliament.
- Strengthening social protection delivery through a Single Registry MIS is one area of the SSPS project's work. It has provided technical and logistical support in organising national level consultative dialogues and has prepared a roadmap for developing the Single Registry MIS.
- The SSPS project has been working on developing a results-oriented M&E dashboard. Recently, a prototype design for the dashboard was approved based on a technical study commissioned. The prototype dashboard is expected to be trialled on a pilot basis soon. The objective is to present social protection beneficiary information disaggregated by age, gender, region, and interventions.
- The overwhelming majority of the individuals interviewed as part of this evaluation believe that various activities (including policy dialogues, workshops, M&E committee meetings, high-level consultative meetings, dissemination of studies and analysis, etc.) undertaken and/or facilitated by the SSPS project have made important contributions to building the knowledge base and capacity of ministry officials and other stakeholder representatives (including NGOs/civil society organisations). They pointed out that social protection has now been mainstreamed into the policy discourse on the economy of Bangladesh with the SSPS project, among others, playing a supportive role in it.
- The SSPS project's continued focus on programme consolidation has raised awareness about the importance of a more structured and well-coordinated social protection system. A major study commissioned by the SSPS project provided a detailed assessment of programme harmonisation issues. While this remains a challenging area of work, the number of social protection schemes has gradually declined to 120 since the adoption of the NSSS. Most recently, two major programmes, Maternity Allowance and Lactating Mothers' Allowance programmes, have been merged into a single programme named Mother and Child Benefit Programme (MCBP).

Sustainability of the Project

Sustainability is being considered in terms of whether the project can continue to achieve its intended goals and objectives in the long term, beyond the funding period of the project. It involves assessing whether the SSPS project, embedded within existing institutional structures, policies, and governance systems, has the capacity to sustain its operations and deliver its intended outcomes even after the project is completed.

The SSPS Programme has successfully assisted the Government in laying the foundations for an integrated social security system in the country. While there is room for improvement in implementation and resource allocation, the SSPS project has helped establish a modality for how different government ministries can collaborate to progress towards the overarching goal of establishing a comprehensive social protection support system in Bangladesh. There appears to be a strong consensus among all relevant stakeholders about the need to strengthen the social protection system, which should be recognised as an enabler for sustainability. The successful support of the SSPS Programme so far indicates its continued relevance and potential contribution in successive phases until the NSSS objectives are fully achieved.

The SSPS project's most significant strength lies in the strong commitment and ownership of the government. With the NSSS Action Plan 2021-26 in place, it is highly likely that the implementation of NSSS will remain a policy focus. The Government of Bangladesh regularly formulates medium-term national development strategies (i.e., the five-year plans), which will almost certainly continue to prioritize social protection issues. Through delivering key research outputs, the SSPS project has established a work pattern for the General Economics Division of the Planning Commission, which is expected to have a legacy in terms of the nature of policy inputs that GED should be preparing.

At the ministry/implementation level, there is now increased awareness about the tasks that need to be performed as part of the NSSS reform agenda. The ministries/departments were closely involved in the preparation of the NSSS Action Plan, which gives rise to the prospect of more effective implementation and sustained impact. Implementing ministries and departments have become more proactive in exploring opportunities for their own capacity-building.

The lessons learned during the course of the project and awareness-building efforts are also expected to have a long-term impact. For instance, the use of digital/mobile financial systems has become the primary means of transferring allowances directly to beneficiaries, with more than two-thirds of cash allowances being sent through this system. Increasing coverage of vulnerable groups such as the elderly, destitute women, and persons with disabilities now occupies a central place in discussions due to sustained interventions of the SSPS project. In highly technical areas such as pension schemes, the lessons learned through the SSPS project have culminated in the enactment of national laws on private voluntary pension schemes.

There is a strong likelihood that the project's results will be durable and can be maintained or even scaled up. The successful implementation of the M&E prototype dashboard is expected to be an important means for results reporting. A Single Registry MIS and M&E dashboard may have strong relevance in addressing duplication, targeting errors, leakages, and inefficiency. Specific program interventions, such as lifecycle-based interventions, are expected to continue expanding depending on the fiscal situation of the government.

Another major durable impact is expected from the National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS), championed by the SSPS project through research and practical recommendations for

implementation. Pilot projects on social insurance schemes, such as maternity and injury insurance, are likely to yield positive results, paving the way for their expansion.

Reporting of social protection activities, budgetary allocation by projects, and availability of the SSPS project management for consultation have improved coordination amongst activities supported by different stakeholders including the development partners. This will also help with impact sustainability. Discussions with several key informants during this project evaluation seemed to suggest that development partners are now more aware of interventions supported by various partners. The prominent development partners take into consideration the state of NSSS implementation and how their supported intervention fit into the overall system. In general, the role of the SSPS project was valued and considered supportive and the development partners' representatives consulted as part of this evaluation expressed their general awareness about SSPS project activities. Development partners' coordination meetings also provide opportunities for interactions. However, some key informants suggested sharing information more effectively.

In terms of financial sustainability, feedback from various stakeholders indicates that the resources allocated to the SSPS (Social Safety Nets Policy Support) project have been relatively modest, considering its high-level policy traction, wide-ranging scope of engagement with multiple ministries and partners, and its alignment with national strategies and aspirations. Some key informants even suggested that there could be other donors interested in supporting the project. However, opinions were mixed when asked if the project could continue solely with the support of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), without development partners. Some key informants, who had experience working as senior government officials, believe that while physical infrastructure projects can easily attract government resources due to their visible nature, social sector policy projects like SSPS should benefit from the support of development partners to ensure sustainability.

It is crucial to note that achieving true sustainability in Bangladesh relies heavily on the government's unwavering ownership and effective leadership. The government's commitment to driving social protection reforms is paramount in ensuring that sustainability goals are met. Without sustained commitment backed by adequate resources, the progress made in reforms and the expanded social protection coverage may stagnate or fail to reach its full potential. The government's role in providing clear policies, regulations, and guidelines, as well as implementing and monitoring social protection programs, is vital for their success. Only through sustained government ownership and effective leadership can Bangladesh continue its journey towards long-term sustainability and inclusive development for all its citizens.

IX. Lessons Learned and Policy Recommendations

Lessons learned

The implementation of the SSPS project has yielded valuable lessons that can offer crucial insights, knowledge, and experience to enhance social protection programmes and effectively achieve desired goals and objectives. Several lessons are learned from different perspectives as part of the current evaluation exercise:

- One crucial lesson from the SSPS project is the significance of government commitment and ownership in the development and delivery of programs aligned with policy documents. The government's strong commitment and ownership are essential for initiating successfully implementing programmes that align with strategic pronouncements. The SSPS project stands out as a prominent illustration of this principle, and it can be extrapolated to other developmental endeavours with the goal of improving economic and human development standards in Bangladesh.
- The strong ownership has contributed to the continuity of the reform process as reflected in the adoption of the NSSS Action Plan 2021-26. The midterm review of the NSSS did suggest various reform targets not being achieved in the backdrop of which the Action Plan for 2021-26 has now incorporated revised and updated timeframes.
- The SSPS project has been recognized by senior policymakers as a prudent investment, thanks in part to its proactive approach and open interaction with ministry officials. The project's association with UNDP, known for its extensive experience in Bangladesh and track record of working with the government in policy reforms in governance, human development, and poverty alleviation, has further bolstered its credibility.
- The SSPS project has exemplified the value of convening diverse stakeholders, leading to improved outcomes. Workshops, consultation meetings, and dissemination events brought together a wide array of participants, including senior government officials, policymakers, non-state actors, marginalized groups, development partners, and NGOs. This inclusive approach has fostered meaningful discussions on social protection issues, avoiding a disjointed approach to research and analysis. The project's success in bringing together stakeholders from various sectors and backgrounds underscores the importance of inclusive engagement in similar initiatives. This lesson underscores the power of collaboration and inclusive decision-making in driving positive outcomes in social protection efforts.
- Another major lesson learned from the SSPS project is the significance of undertaking innovative analytical work. This is exemplified by the recent passage of the Universal Pension Management Bill 2022 by the Parliament. The background work for the bill was facilitated by a comprehensive study conducted by the SSPS project in the area of social insurance, on

which the existing knowledgebase in Bangladesh is limited. The insights gained from this process can be applied to inform the development of other social protection policies and bills, highlighting the project's role in driving evidence-based policymaking and shaping national social protection strategies. This lesson emphasizes the value of rigorous research and analysis in informing policy decisions and underscores the importance of leveraging innovative approaches to address social protection challenges effectively.

- While progress has been made in expanding coverage for allowances for the elderly and persons with disabilities (PwDs), areas such as NSIS, M&E framework establishment, and development of a single registry MIS have faced lackluster progress. These reforms require technical knowledge and discussions to address barriers effectively. Many key informants have reported that discussions among senior members in high-level committees have often been unfocused, resulting in unresolved issues. Additionally, designated focal points have sometimes lacked substantive knowledge on the inputs required from them. Thematic cluster ministries have also not met regularly or as frequently as needed. To address these challenges, building capacity of relevant officials could be a potential intervention area for the SSPS project. This lesson underscores the importance of addressing institutional challenges and capacity building for effective implementation of social protection reforms.
- Another key lesson from the SSPS project is the challenge of policy approval delays. Many public officials perceive social protection strategy and plan development as additional responsibilities on top of their regular assignments, resulting in overburdening and time management challenges. This often leads to social protection-related assignments being given on short notice, with officials having to attend multiple policy meetings without dedicated attention. As a result, timelines for policy approvals are often extended, as seen in the example of the NSSS Action Plan Phase II, which was initially supposed to be approved before July 2021 but was eventually approved in February 2022 and launched in October 2022. This lesson highlights the need for effective coordination and timely decision-making to address policy approval delays and ensure the smooth implementation of social protection initiatives.
- It is becoming clear that financing could be a major issue in further fulfilling the social protection objectives. While policy pronouncements remain strong, they are not backed by adequate budgetary resources. The NSSS Action Plan 2021 projects only a modest change in resource allocation until 2026. This can be problematic for increasing coverage, let alone raising the amount of allowances or providing inflation adjustments. The SSPS project should sensitize senior policymakers about this apparent mismatch between policy intent and inadequate resources.
- The recent experience further suggests that generating meaningful data has proven to be more challenging than previously anticipated. The non-materialization of the National Household Database is an example. Furthermore, while the SSPS project has commissioned

an M&E dashboard, it is not certain that there will be enough meaningful data to make the dashboard effective. It is high time for the SSPS project to work closely with BBS and other relevant agencies and departments to build capacity to generate data and explore financial resources.

Policy Recommendations

In the social security landscape of Bangladesh, the SSPS project has emerged as a flagship initiative for sustaining the momentum of the reform process underlying the National Social Security Strategy. The SSPS Programme's role in generating evidence-based analysis for providing thought leadership and policy inputs on the relevant issues focusing on the current state of the social protection schemes and emerging challenges that need to be addressed going forward is well acknowledged by the government and external stakeholders. Its contribution to the capacity development and facilitation of governance practices involving high-level policymakers is widely regarded as exemplary for home-grown reform mechanisms within Bangladesh. Nevertheless, after engaging in discussions with various stakeholder representatives as part of this evaluation exercise and considering the assessment presented above, this section offers several recommendations to enhance the project's impact and effectiveness in advancing the reform agenda.

1. Completing the current work programme effectively while preparing for national strategy development beyond 2025

The SSPS Programme is currently focused on capacity building of the stakeholders, increasing the beneficiary coverage especially in programmes such as Old Age Allowance, Person with Disability, promoting social insurance and contributory pension, etc. The project is also closely working with over 30 implementing ministries and departments. To support the work programme, several specific activities are currently underway. In addition to completing these activities effectively, the SSPS project should start preparing for developing the next phase of the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) as its original 10-year tenure will come to an end in 2025. This will be an opportune moment to reflect holistically on what worked well and where improvements must be made. Any gaps between the reform measures as envisaged and actually achieved must be taken into consideration in developing the next phase of the NSSS. The SSPS project should commission a major implementation review of the NSSS to assess its overall progress and gaps, and thus develop a baseline for a future strategy. Given its deep involvement, work experience and institutional memory, the SSPS project is ideally suited to coordinate the endeavour for post-2025 strategy development in collaboration with all stakeholders including implementing ministries and development partners.

2. Monitoring and reporting the progress on the Action Plan Phase II

One of the major achievements of the SSPS project has been the formulation of the NSSS Action Plan Phase II. This has been a monumental undertaking to which 39 ministries contributed, outlining the specific measures they would be undertaking as part of NSSS reforms. Regular monitoring of the

progress made on the proposed actions is crucial for ensuring the effectiveness of social security programmes. The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) Action Plan itself recognises the importance of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) exercises to ensure their success. Regular monitoring of progress is necessary to identify any gaps or shortcomings and thus should enable the ministries to take corrective measures and make necessary adjustments to achieve the desired outcomes. Monitoring can help in identifying best practices and lessons learned that can be applied to future programmes to enhance their effectiveness. The SSPS project should play a critical role in helping the ministries report on the progress on a regular basis (e.g. on a quarterly basis). This can also be incorporated as an activity for the project aimed at contributing to achieving the broader objective of the project.

3. Assessing the fiscal space need in line with the social protection ambition of the country

One critical analytical work that the SSPS project should undertake to support high-level policy direction is to establish a reasonable relationship between the expressed policy objectives of social security support and the resources that would be available. Low budgetary allocation has become major challenge in expanding the coverage. Although social protection spending in absolute terms is on the rise, it remains low in proportion to GDP, at just around 3 per cent. The projected allocations for the next five years as presented in the NSSS Action Plan Phase II seem to suggest the spending remaining at this level. This relatively small budget is manifested in allocations being too thinly spread over too many social security programmes (SSPs), resulting in many eligible beneficiaries' not being included in the programmes.⁹ The benefit amount from various social security programmes is extremely low. For example, the regular monthly transfers for beneficiaries such as the elderly population, persons with disabilities, widow and destitute women, and pregnant women including those receiving maternity allowances are just between 3.7 per cent and 6 per cent of Bangladesh's per capita income. Inflation adjustments are not considered, leading to the value of the benefit falling in real terms and having a rather small impact on poverty reduction from SSP spending.

Therefore, creating adequate fiscal space is critically important for the apparently ambitious objectives being set out for the SSPS project. There can be a combination of tax-financing, social insurance schemes, and development partners' assistance in sourcing additional resources.¹⁰ Given a serious political commitment to social protection, creating fiscal space should be possible. The required fiscal measures should be popular as well, given that a large number of poor and vulnerable households will be brought under the coverage. Notwithstanding, the bottom line for the SSPS project is to provide an informed assessment and thus help support the policy direction for resource requirements against the level of ambition of social protection support is being envisaged.

4. Developing an M&E framework for the NSSS

⁹ There is also the problem of ineligible beneficiaries being part of the programme, either due to difficulties associated with determining eligibility or malpractices.

¹⁰ Enhanced domestic resource mobilisation efforts through raising the tax-GDP ratio can be a sustainable approach. This is particularly appropriate for Bangladesh, given its current tax-GDP ratio is one of the lowest among global economies (8 per cent vis-à-vis 18 per cent for the lower-middle-income country average).

Since the adoption of the NSSS, it has not been possible to develop a proper M&E framework. The NSSS suggested applying a wider range of evaluation tools including quantitative methods, hybrid approaches (including rapid assessments and/or reviews incorporating interviews, focus group discussions, etc.), and qualitative investigations (like case-studies, participatory learning, etc.). Along with the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), the NSSS also considered supplementary annual panel surveys for more in-depth insights into poverty dynamics and vulnerability. However, capacity issues mean no concrete progress could be made. The 8th Five-Year Plan has raised the importance of M&E again suggesting that implementing ministries/divisions will monitor progress of their respective programmes with the General Economics Division of the Planning Commission evaluating the performance of NSSS implementation in a holistic approach. Considering the importance of a comprehensive data base for the social protection system, the 8th Five-Year Plan calls for a dedicated survey of social protection system may be carried out under the aegis of the General Economics Division.

In the line with the above direction of the 8FYP, the SSPS programme can initiate the survey in collaboration with the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). The newly released BBS Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2022 can help in define the scope of the survey on social protection. The SSPS project, in partnership with the BBS, can also explore local level data collection in assessing the shortcomings of various programme coverage, resulting in exclusion and inclusion errors in social protection targeting; in piloting proxy means testing for social protection targeting given that the BBS National Household Database did never come into operation for undertaking such a nationwide exercise; and in gathering SDG related data to generate externalities effects for informed policy analysis.

5. Establishing a single registry management information system

Bangladesh has not been able to develop a social registry for its social protection system. The NSSS emphasized the need to establish a fully functioning single registry Management Information System (MIS) to strengthen beneficiary selection, consolidate programmatic interventions, reduce corruption and malpractices, and enhance coordination among the thematic cluster ministries. However, most ministries are still in the process of digitizing their beneficiary lists. In addition, there is a lack of clarity about the purpose of an integrated registry and how eligibility can be verified, given that the preparation of the National Household Database (NHD), which was supposed to help with Proxy Means Testing (PMT) for eligibility, has not been operationalized despite several years of planning and data collection.

To address these issues, the SSPS project should develop a clear roadmap that outlines the current situation, progress, and next steps for developing a social registry. The project can also consider conducting a dedicated survey on social protection in line with the suggestion of the 8th Five-Year Plan and pilot a PMT exercise complemented by local-level verification to assess the strengths and weaknesses of eligibility verification using household-level information.

6. Strengthening the social protection system for the urban poor

Expanding social protection for the urban poor is a critical issue facing Bangladesh's social protection system. Although the headcount poverty incidence in urban areas (14.7 per cent in 2022) is lower than in rural areas (20.5 per cent), the urban poor face severe vulnerabilities related to housing and living conditions, health, sanitation, nutritional status, exposure to risks such as violence, and more. However, the coverage of social protection programs in urban areas is grossly inadequate.¹¹ The NSSS has identified this as an area needing further study to develop a strategy.

Recently, the SSPS project has prepared a draft strategy on urban social protection, which is a timely initiative. The project should now engage in extensive consultations to finalize the study and develop a practical action plan. This can be a significant contribution to the development of a national social protection strategy for the post-2025 period.

7. Setting up realistic timelines

In some cases, working with a more realistic timeframe can be beneficial for effective implementation of specific schemes. The experience of the implementation of the National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS) under the NSSS Action Plan 2016-2020 can be considered as an example. The lack of awareness about individual schemes under the NSIS (i.e., unemployment insurance, sickness, maternity, and employment injury) is an important hurdle for making progress. Effective legal and administrative frameworks will also be needed for these schemes to operate. Rushing the process without addressing challenges can result in the programme being unsustainable. A tight timeline can make the strategy seem implausible. A more prudent approach would be to set out a realistic roadmap by allowing sufficient time for awareness building, training the officials in different departments about the implementation modalities, developing a functional and electronic database of workers, and planning for other eventual realities, e.g., which formal sectors to be included in the design and how this can later be extended, etc.

8. Reinvigorating the capacity-building role of the SSPS

Capacity-building is essential for delivering effective social protection support as it involves developing the skills and knowledge to design, implement, and manage social protection programmes efficiently. It also helps in monitoring and evaluating programme performance, making data-driven or evidence-based decisions, and adapting programmes to changing circumstances. The SSPS project already plays a vital role in providing capacity-building support to various ministries, departments, and other stakeholders. This component of SSPS work programme should be reinvigorated further as felt by many stakeholder representatives who were interviewed as part of this evaluation. While there is a lack of familiarity on various conceptual issues related to social

¹¹ According to the information provided in the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016, only about 12 per cent urban of households received benefit from at least one of the social protection schemes while the corresponding figure for rural areas was estimated at 32 per cent. The HIES 2022 data providing such detailed information is expected to be released soon.

protection and social insurance, and current mechanisms in place for NSSS implementation along with the fact that the implementing ministries/departments keep encountering the challenge of developing a knowledgebase partly due to the transferable jobs of the officials. It is also important that capacity building priorities are set based on a robust assessment (of capacity needs), which is currently lacking. This should be an area for SSPS Programme support.

9. Strengthening the capacity for the Ministry of Social Welfare should be one key consideration

According to the NSSS 2015, the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW), will be the lead ministry by 2026 for all lifecycle programmes. The NSSS provided specific guidelines in this regard, including, amongst others, for the MoSW to establish reformed structures at national and local levels that enable the effective delivery of Social Security transfers to recipients; build trained high-performing staff at both central and local levels; ensure the selection of recipients according to the guidelines of each scheme; ensure that list of eligible recipients are up to date and provide regular and accurate payment lists to the payment service providers; manage a high quality MIS; and provide high quality monitoring of the implementation of all Social Security schemes. It is thus important to allocate dedicated capacity building support for the MoSW.

10. Commissioning high-level policy engagement initiatives on specific issues

While the engagement of very senior policymakers through the Central Management Committee (CMC) is a major strength of the SSPS project, stakeholders interviewed during this evaluation believe that a more focused engagement at the senior level could have a greater impact on the reform process. The conceptual and implementation-related issues, such as social insurance, single-registry system, financing, etc., are often technical in nature, which hinders in-depth discussions and clear policy directions. The studies and research prepared by the SSPS project are generally lengthy and technical, making it difficult to facilitate conversations at a high level.

In this context, the SSPS project can take a proactive role by commissioning policy engagement initiatives aimed at facilitating high-level discussions on specific issues, with inputs prepared by a small group of respected personalities, such as former secretaries and senior officials, reputed researchers, and analysts who can effectively reach out to senior policymakers. For each specific topic, a 3-4 persons expert group can be formed, and the group with support from the SSPS project, can prepare concise notes on the relevant issues. The SSPS project should then facilitate discussions between CMC members and the expert groups. The inputs prepared by the expert group can be made widely available as well to promote a good knowledgebase. Potential topics for such high-level engagements could include social protection coverage issues, fiscal space, single registry for social protection, unemployment insurance, urban social protection, etc.

11. Improving the project design and results framework

There is room for improving the project design and results framework. As mentioned above, SSPS activities remain extremely relevant to the overall objective of the project, the design document needs more careful planning in specifying short-term and/or intermediate outcomes and outputs. Establishing a proper and SMART Results Framework is also important. The project should consider developing concrete impact stories. Many activities are listed in annual reports prepared by the SSPS project. The activities clearly show a wide range of useful work being undertaken. However, the reporting of activities should be complemented by impact stories or results.

12. Boosting in-house capacity of the SSPS project

The SSPS project has been productive in terms of developing research outputs and analyses, which have been utilized in national strategies, as well as undertaking various capacity-building initiatives.¹² However, there is potential for even greater impact by reviewing its staffing arrangements to further enhance its in-house capacity. In the past, resources saved from unfilled vacancies have been utilized for project activities. Based on the evaluation, it is evident that the project could benefit from the addition of a communications adviser to effectively articulate the project activities and their impact. A communications specialist can act as a liaison between the project team and various ministries, facilitating clear and consistent communication channels, managing stakeholder expectations, and addressing potential conflicts or challenges. They can also craft and disseminate key messages, coordinate outreach efforts, and manage communication strategies to ensure that all parties are informed, engaged, and aligned. It is important to recruit a seasoned adviser who can appreciate the sensitivities and complexities of working with different government ministries.

In addition, the SSPS project should consider recruiting a statistician/econometrician to undertake timely data analysis work relevant to the project. Hiring an in-house statistician can generate prompt insights that can make SSPS engagements more productive, as opposed to relying on time-consuming recruitment of external consultants. While the project is generating numerous commissioned technical reports and analyses, staffing arrangements should also include the development of capacities to generate concise papers, including those based on commissioned research, that can be used for workshops and informative meetings.

13. Fostering efficient information exchange

A few interviewed stakeholder representatives suggested improved information sharing by the SSPS project with relevant stakeholders. Given the SSPS project's playing a significant role in the overall social protection architecture of the country, stakeholders working in the relevant spheres need information and guidance for better coordination and to avoid duplication. Effective information sharing ensures that all stakeholders are well-informed, aligned, and working towards the same goals, thereby minimizing duplication of efforts and resources. Additionally, it facilitates a robust feedback mechanism, allowing for timely input, which can help improve the performance and

¹² Most recently, the 8th Five-Year Plan has referred to SSPS project outputs.

outcomes of the activities of all stakeholders involved. Regular and transparent information sharing promotes accountability, enhances communication channels, and fosters collaboration.

14. Deepening collaboration with the development partners and other stakeholders

Almost all stakeholder representatives interviewed as part of this evaluation consider the SSPS project a useful resource for Bangladesh's social protection system, and they believe its significance can be further amplified. To deepen collaboration with other development partners, the SSPS project can proactively explore opportunities for joint work with the objective of strengthening certain social protection schemes. This can include coordinating efforts to gather potential technical contributions, along with developing concrete action plans that can be used for formulating the next phase of the social protection strategy.

Furthermore, the SSPS project can work closely with development partners to develop medium- to long-term interventions targeting specific components of social protection. This can involve joint initiatives on capacity-building, dissemination of knowledge products, and undertaking specialized surveys, among others. Regular coordination meetings, joint workshops, and consultations can be organized to facilitate dialogue and the exchange of ideas. The SSPS project can also actively seek technical expertise and support from development partners. Deepening collaboration can contribute to the further success of the SSPS project and the overall advancement of social protection in Bangladesh.

X. Conclusion

Bangladesh has made significant socio-economic progress in recent decades, with sustained economic growth resulting in its classification as a lower-middle income country by the World Bank since 2015. Despite the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, Bangladesh has demonstrated impressive growth compared to many other countries. This economic growth has also contributed to a reduction in poverty, with the proportion of the population living below the poverty line declining from 24.6% in 2016 to 18.7% in 2022, and extreme poverty falling from 12% to 5.6% according to the latest Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) data.

However, it is important to note that while progress has been made in poverty reduction, inequality in Bangladesh has worsened. The distribution of growth gains has been uneven, highlighting the need for strengthened social protection support. As countries continue to develop, the importance of social security intensifies. Social protection plays a crucial role in addressing poverty, inequality, exclusion, vulnerability, and promoting economic stability, health, well-being, social cohesion, and stability in society. It ensures that the basic needs and rights of individuals and communities are met, and therefore cannot be overstated in its significance for Bangladesh's continued progress.

Bangladesh formulated and adopted the National Social Security Strategy with the aim of building a modern society that promotes inclusive growth and recognizes the need for support for all citizens at different stages of life. This requires reforming the previous fragmented system of social safety nets and establishing a modern, comprehensive system. The social protection reform agenda has

continued to receive strong policy commitment, as evident from the adoption of the current NSSS Action Plan 2021-26 after the completion of the first phase of the NSSS Action Plan 2016-2020.

However, acknowledging that the implementation of NSSS during the 7th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020) was not satisfactory, the 8th Five-Year Plan reiterates the long-term objective of building an inclusive social security system for all deserving Bangladeshis that effectively tackles and prevents poverty and inequality, and contributes to broader human development, employment, and economic growth. The plan also emphasizes the need to build the foundations of a progressive and inclusive system during 2021-25, through more efficient and effective use of resources, strengthened delivery systems, and progress towards a more inclusive form of social security that effectively addresses lifecycle risks, with a priority on the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. A basic objective for the next five years should be to seek to eliminate, as much as possible, the incidence of hard-core/extreme poverty.

The SSPS project has been instrumental in the development and execution of the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) 2015, serving as a prominent institutional support mechanism for the Cabinet Division and the General Economics Division (GED) of the Planning Commission. Its pivotal role has been prominent throughout the formulation and implementation of NSSS, making it a flagship project directed by these divisions. This evaluation confirms that the SSPS project continues to align with Bangladesh's national policy vision and SDGs. It informs policy documents, supports stakeholders, and follows effective approaches.

The SSPS project is delivering outputs and is effective in achieving its broad objectives. However, there is room for improvement in project design and indicator selection for better progress tracking. Enhancing design and clarity will improve understanding and monitoring of objectives. Project progress in terms of outcomes and outputs appear to be in line with the targets as articulated in the project document. The project's financial resources are allocated to human resources, knowledge and policy innovation, and technical units to support line ministries. The value for money (VfM) is ensured through project activities, proactive efficiency gains, and UNDP procurement policies. The government also provides office accommodation and utilities support to the project, adding to the VfM proposition.

The SSPS project has a robust management structure with the CMC overseeing implementation. There is a Project Steering Committee providing policy guidance and coordination. The PIC makes project decisions with the National Project Director and UNDP. The Project Management Unit prepares reviews, work plans, budgets, and manages the activities. Risk mitigation measures are adopted. The SSPS project has shown several immediate positive impacts during the phase under evaluation. These include the adoption of the NSSS Action Plan Phase II, special emphasis on gender and PwDs, adoption of Washington Consensus indicators in the identification of PwDs, facilitation of the Universal Pension Management Bill, development of a results-oriented M&E dashboard and raising awareness about a more structured social protection system. Major durable impact is expected from the National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS), championed by the SSPS project through research and practical recommendations for implementation. Given its significant policy

traction, extensive engagement with ministries and partners, and alignment with national strategies and aspirations backed by strong policy commitment, the resources allocated to the SSPS project have been relatively modest.

This evaluation identifies several lessons from the SSPS project including the importance of government commitment and ownership, stakeholder engagement, evidence-based policymaking, addressing institutional challenges, and capacity building for successful implementation of social protection programmes. Delays in policy approval, lack of technical capacity, financing alignment with policy intent, and generating meaningful data for monitoring and evaluation are identified challenges. Several recommendations have been put forward in making the SSPS project more effective and impactful in advancing the NSSF reform agenda.

In conclusion, the SSPS project has been instrumental in supporting the NSSF implementation, securing strong government buy-in. It continues to deliver positive impacts with the adoption of NSSF Action Plan Phase II and emphasis on the elderly, gender, and persons with disabilities being important features during the evaluation period. The project's effectiveness, timely research and analysis, and capacity-building initiatives are well-acknowledged by the relevant stakeholders.

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Annex

Annex 1: Various staff positions in the Project Management Unit (PMU)

Staff position	Responsibilities
National Project Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure project's management effectively and in an accountable manner complying with UNDP guidelines and reporting requirements • Ensure that critical project information is monitored and updated in UNDP corporate systems • Monitor operational performances • Review transition arrangements, national ownership and sustainability plan and document at least annually; • Assess risks and implementation of risk management at least annually
National Social Protection Advisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide expert advisory services on annual work plan, key policy proposals development, coordination efforts between line ministries and relevant GoB decision-makers • Support the technical units and line ministries on revising their action plans • Serve as high-level liason between project and GoB at critical moments of delivery • Support to the development of the web-based NSSS dashboard • Provide advisory support on updating NSSS M&E framework
Financial Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide services on finance and human resources management, • Facilitate budgeting and expenditure tracking • Prepare financial reports and payments to staffs and vendors
Administrative Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide services on procurement and logistics • Manage UNDP corporate reporting requirements • Support preliminary preparations for donor and Government reporting
Information, Communications, and Technology Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide services on GRS support to the Cabinet Division • Support to develop web-based NSSS dashboard, • Backend maintenance of project website
Project Associate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide support to the project manager, finance officer, and administrative officer on day-to-day procurement, logistics, finances, reporting and documentation record keeping
Monitoring & Evaluation Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead the tracking of project's performance • Provide services on project reporting on activities and progress under the logframe • Ensure that project is in compliance with HACT assurance activities: programme monitoring to verify output progress, spot checks etc.
National Social Protection Specialist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide services on social protection to the Cabinet Division as the lead Technical Unit member • Serve as coordinator between technical units and the Cabinet Division • Support the project's activities through assistance of the Cabinet Division in coordination and cooperation of different ministries/departments, including inter-sectoral coordination • Lead core activities related to the NSSS Action Plans • Develop policy proposals in support to the technical units • Ensure a feedback loop of project experience and actively engage in feeding information to UNDP and government on project lessons with implications for social protection strategy and policy

Source: UNDP (2021).