



**NETZ**  
বাংলাদেশ



## EXTREME POOR ADIVASIS AND THE PROBLEM OF ACCESSING SOCIAL SAFETY NETS

### BRIEFING PAPER

October 2011<sup>1</sup>

NETZ Bangladesh

For the detailed report: [www.shiree.org](http://www.shiree.org).

### OVERVIEW

Under the auspices of AMADER Project, this study was conducted in two unions of the high Barind area in Naogaon District in Bangladesh. Efforts were made to explore the factors behind the extremely poor Adivasis' (meaning indigenous people) scarce access to government-funded social safety nets (SSNs). Our quantitative analysis reveals that the number of recipients of SSNs is small in the two studied Unions – Shapahar and Goala – standing at 3 out of 74 deserving BHHs and 4 out of 65 deserving BHHs respectively.

Three key problems define Adivasis' exclusion from SSNs – their exclusion from information, the fact that they are not considered politically important, and the on-going cultural labelling of Adivasis as 'underdeserving poor'. It was found that the Adivasi communities do not receive information on SSNs disseminated by the state system. This is in part because they are not

<sup>1</sup> This is based on NETZ's working paper number 4, produced by NETZ Partnership for Development and Justice, Bangladesh.

The paper has been peer reviewed by colleagues in either the Chars Livelihood Programme (CLP), the UNDP Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction (UPPR) and BRAC's Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction – Targeting the Ultra Poor (CFPR-TUP) programmes – all part of the DFID/UKAID extreme poverty portfolio in Bangladesh.

accustomed to modern dissemination processes but also because information is rarely disseminated to their locality. Moreover, non-Adivasi people are reluctant to pass accurate information to Adivasis. In addition, Adivasis' literacy rate is very low compared to non-Adivasi beneficiaries (the former have a school attendance of only 17% and 11% for boys and girls respectively).



Adivasis face continued social exclusion and discrimination

Despite these difficulties, some recipients were able to access information on SSNs. However, this happened only in areas where rising labour scarcity, resulting from tube-well development, encouraged elites to maintain better relationships with labourers by offering to connect them political elites who could offer their families safety nets. In exchange, Adivasis are expected to offer political loyalty to their patrons. Thus, there were two costs for these who managed to receive SSNs: lower wages and their vote.

The political problem surrounding Adivasis' access to SSNs is two-fold – generic and specific. One of the generic problems is constant reports that Ward Commissioners (WCs) cover certain recipients across each para under his/her ward since this helps to increase their support base for future political gain. However, the number of potential recipients is not same in all paras. So, a highly deserving person might be excluded in this highly politicized selection process. Another problem relates to recorded age in voter ID cards which is regarded as the benchmark for old aged

allowance, VGD cards, and the 40 days' work programme. However, with incorrect ages recorded on ID cards, many Adivasis cannot claim their SSNs, even though the actual age of many Adivasi is appropriate for obtaining safety net measures.

A specific problem identified was the poor representation of extremely poor Adivasis in the SSN selection committee and their weak political participation. There were no elected political ward commissioners (UP Members) or chairpersons (UP Chairmen) from Adivasi communities in the study area.

The practice of cultural labelling to justify the exclusion of Adivasis is prevalent. Extremely poor Adivasis are excluded from SSN coverage because they are culturally stigmatized. Accusations of drunkenness, women moving freely around, and of Adivasis being a displaced community are common. Behind these labels stand a political objective: poor non-Adivasis and rich alike simply do not want Adivasis to gain access to SSNs. Competition between Adivasis and non-Adivasis intensifies in a situation of resource scarcity created by the state. Moreover, wealthy non-Adivasis – who are not patron-employers - fear that giving Adivasis access to SSNs will discourage extremely poor Adivasis from migrating, thus leaving them less scope to capture abandoned homesteads and land left in their absence. Such land has more value as a result of the homestead gardening interventions of NETZ.

This study attempted to address some of the gaps in knowledge through a detailed qualitative look at the economic, social and political causes of the extremely poor Adivasis' exclusion from the available SSN packages.

## SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of the research were to generate knowledge about:

- a) The numbers of SSN receivers among the beneficiaries from the two selected unions.
- b) Characteristics of the SSN recipients from the Adivasi communities.
- c) Contributing factors to the exclusion of Adivasis from safety net supports.
- d) Effectiveness of the efforts made at the group and individual level to increase accessibility to SSNs.

## IMPORTANCE

This study attempted to unravel the dynamics behind the exclusion of extremely poor Adivasis to government SSN programmes particularly in AMADER Project areas. It is anticipated that the findings will be helpful in adopting fruitful steps to increase the safety net coverage rate in general. The present study aims to identify relevant advocacy issues that can impact on policy formulation and address the root causes of limited accessibility. Lastly, the findings will further strengthen project activities, which eventually improve beneficiaries' access to SSNs.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology drew on case studies, informal interviews and focus group discussions with a wide variety of actors including extremely poor Adivasis and non-Adivasis; Government Officials and key gate keepers. See the full paper for details.

## KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed that social safety net measures play a crucial role in securing the livelihoods of extremely poor Adivasis. Respondents of the study confirmed that SSN support contributes to increased food intake and helps bridge hunger gaps during periods of distress. This decreases the need to sell or give up productive assets and increases the ability to invest in human capital building. This explains why extremely poor Adivasis are keen to secure access to SSNs.

The process of accessing SSN support was found to be quite challenging - especially for extremely poor Adivasis. A number of factors come into play. The unavailability of information and the difficulties encountered in securing SSN-related information is a major reason why Adivasis in the study area felt they could not access SSNs. On the one hand the consequences of the Adivasis' marginalization (e.g. unfamiliarity with modern means of communication, high rates of illiteracy etc.) and inadequate arrangements to disseminate information to Adivasis prevent access to SSNs. In most cases, the lack of effort to disseminate is deliberate – information is actively concealed.

The most serious problem lies in the politics which underpin the selection process. Many eligible Adivasis were excluded from SSN support while less eligible non-Adivasis were able to access the same support. This overall scenario is not helped by the fact that Adivasis do not have representation on the committees responsible for the selection of beneficiaries and distribution of SSN support. Furthermore, the non-selection of Adivasis is further justified by a number of prejudices and cultural labels which reinforce the marginalization of Adivasis.

Overall there is no panacea to stop the Adivasis' exclusion from social safety net measures - except the gradual creation of a more inclusive society. Based on the selection criteria of the AMADER project framework, all BHHs are eligible for at least one kind of social support. The gatekeepers tracked in this study were of the opinion that Adivasis are more vulnerable and at least half of them should receive social safety net support. However this remains a long-term challenge. In the meantime, short-term measures are required. These should include:

- More budgetary allocation to capture the excluded extreme poor;
- Corrections to Voter ID Cards to make sure these reflect people's actual ages;

- The involvement of NGOs in the selection and distribution system;
- A proper information dissemination system in all villages.

Long term measures call for:

- An increase in the literacy rate;
- Education-related supports for Adivasi students to decrease drop-out rates;
- Strengthening of local government to be freed from the influence of political parties;
- Fighting corruption;
- Employment generation through the installation of small industries.

However, in the long run it is imperative that more pivotal issues be addressed, which foster the development of a model of inclusive citizenship.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### REFLECTIONS ON POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Reflections on potential solutions have been drawn on the basis of the interviews with the gatekeepers and the studied cases. From a general point of view it can be stated that a proper allocation of SSN programmes is not only a matter of qualitative factors (as laid out below), but also of quantitative factors: more public funds need to be spent on SSN support and this needs to be extended to all eligible extremely poor.

The following points were drawn from the interviews as solutions towards a better qualitative coverage of the extremely poor Adivasis:

### SURVEY TO CALCULATE THE EXACT NUMBER OF ADIVASIS

The Bangladeshi population census of 1991 does not provide sufficient information on the correct number of Adivasis in Bangladesh. No clear differentiation between religion and ethnicity was drawn in this census. With regard to the total

Adivasi population, the numbers of the census do not coincide with the numbers provided by the Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, a formal association of Adivasis working to achieve their rights. As a first step for the proper rollout of SSN programmes, a survey needs to be conducted in Adivasi areas to capture their exact number, locations and other socio-economic data. The information on the Adivasi population then can be used to formulate a more comprehensive policy for SSN support distribution.

### NEEDS ASSESSMENT BEFORE DISTRIBUTION OF ALLOCATION

Currently the Upazila Committee, which is above the UP committee, allocates the total number of SSN supports for every Union. In order to make a Union wide allocation the UP committee analyses the Union-wise population and area size. In most cases, the allocation is carried out without any needs assessment or assessment of the exact requirements of the extremely poor segment of the population, and thus doesn't consider the demand side. However, the consequent consideration of requirements of the extremely poor would enable the local government authorities to rollout demand-oriented SSN programmes, which avoid mis-targeting and which will then be better tailored for the needs of the population and minorities in particular. Needs assessments could be commissioned to an independent agency together with the participation of the local government. This will also contribute to the capacity building of the UP.

### INCLUSION OF ADIVASIS IN SELECTION COMMITTEES

Four committees formed at Upazila, UP and Ward level are entrusted with the distribution of SSN measures. The representation of extremely poor Adivasis was not observed anywhere in these committees. The inclusion of representatives from minority groups including Adivasis could lead to a fairer and minority-oriented allocation of SSN

support, as well as highlight minority-specific issues in the distribution process.

### NON-PARTISAN SELECTION COMMITTEES

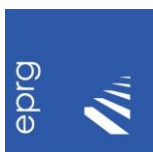
In the present structure of the selection committees, political persons are included in the guise of a so called respectable person. The presence of political personalities can easily result in the exclusive allocation of SSN support to politically likeminded people. Furthermore, their position and political ties to forces of the local power structure can prevent the rigorous exposure of mismanagement within the committee. The independence and impartiality of all committee members should be stressed. Selection committees truly need to be formed comprising of non-partisan and honest persons.

### SELECTION VALIDATION BY COMMUNITIES

In the current system only the selected beneficiaries are notified by village watchmen, leaving other support seekers uninformed. This leaves the scope of mis-targeting unaddressed. The introduction of a validation of prepared recipient lists by the community will not only enhance the transparency of the selection process for the population, but also utilize the knowledge of the communities in regard to their member's socio-economic situation. Thus, the targeting process could be seriously improved and the participation and acceptance of the whole community could be increased.

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**The Extreme Poverty Research Group (EPRG)** develops and disseminates knowledge about the nature of extreme poverty and the effectiveness of measures to address it. It initiates and oversees research and brings together a mix of thinkers and practitioners to actively feed knowledge into practice through interventions taking place in real time. It is an evolving forum for the shiree family to both design and share research findings.

The data used in this publication comes from the Economic Empowerment of the Poorest Programme ([www.shiree.org](http://www.shiree.org)), an initiative established by the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) to help 1 million people lift themselves out of extreme poverty. The views expressed here are entirely those of the author(s).