

The politics of what works: the case of
the Vulnerable Group Development
Programme in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper explores the political dimensions of the achievements of the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programme in Bangladesh, a large-scale programme of resource transfers and development interventions targeted at the poorest women, which has been in place since 1974. It focuses on documenting how political ideologies, interests and alliances at national and local levels have influenced the establishment, evolution and maintenance of the VGD programme. It also attempts to show how research and development ideologies and actors beyond the immediate domestic political scene have shaped the programme's successes.

The paper is based on a review of the programme literature, stakeholder interviews, and on other recent empirical research into the politics of poverty in rural Bangladesh.

Section 2 summarises how the VGD programme works and evidence of its impact. Section 3 looks at the political context in which the VGD programme emerged and evolved, and Section 4 at the ideological conditions and research and knowledge about poverty that shaped its origins and evolution. Section 5 discusses the roles of the Executive, donors, NGOs and local political leaders, while Section 6 looks more closely at the political dimensions of key features of how the programme works, focusing on corruption, leakage and bias in beneficiary selection. Section 7 concludes with a brief discussion of the extent to which the VGD has helped establish reasonable expectations among the population of official support for the ultra poor, as a form of social or political contract between the state and the poorest people.

Keywords: Bangladesh, women, gender, NGOs, ultra-poor, social protection, poverty reduction, patron-client relations, politics

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1 Introduction

This paper is an exploration of the political dimensions of the achievements of the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programme in Bangladesh, a large-scale programme of resource transfers and development interventions targeted at the poorest women, which has been in place since 1974. It focuses on documenting how political ideologies, interests and alliances at national and local levels have influenced the establishment, evolution and maintenance of the VGD programme. It also attempts to show how research and development ideologies and actors beyond the immediate domestic political scene have shaped the programme's successes.

The paper is based on a review of the programme literature, stakeholder interviews, and on other recent empirical research into the politics of poverty in rural Bangladesh. It is organised substantially around the analytical framework developed for the larger comparative study, which addresses the following questions:

- What was the political context in which the programme was established?
- Which actors were key 'drivers of change'?
- Within which policy spaces was the programme designed and formulated?
- How did data or analysis about poverty inform the programme design?
- Which forms of ideologies and discourses of development informed the interventions?
- Is there an important politics to how the programme was designed and implemented?
- To what extent does the programme contribute to the fulfilment of a 'social contract' between citizens and state?

Where evidence was found to evaluate the contribution of these factors to the success of the VGD programme, the paper explores each of these factors in turn. The main omission was that no evidence could be found of distinct 'policy spaces' in which the programme was designed or formulated. Section 2 summarises how the VGD programme works and evidence of its impact. Section 3 looks at the political context in which the VGD programme emerged and evolved, and Section 4 at the ideological conditions and research and knowledge about poverty that shaped its origins and evolution. Section 5 discusses the roles of the Executive, donors, NGOs and local political leaders, while Section 6 looks more closely at the political dimensions of key features of how the programme works, focusing on corruption, leakage and bias in beneficiary selection. Section 7 concludes with a brief discussion of the extent to which the VGD has helped establish reasonable expectations among the population of official support for the ultra poor, as a form of social or political contract between the state and its poorest.

2. Bangladesh's VGD programme in summary

The Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) Programme of Bangladesh emerged in more or less its present form - a food aid-supported development programme targeted at very poor women - in the mid-1980s. However, VGD originated in the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) Programme in 1975, after the famine of 1974.¹ In its initial form, the chief input of the programme was wheat grain provided by the World Food Program (WFP), distributed locally to selected participants by local government representatives. In the early 1980s, the then-

¹ A programme bearing the VGF title still exists, but it mainly provides food aid relief during crises or the lean season, and is not the focus of the analysis here. We refer here to both the original VGF programme as well as its later incarnation as the VGD programme.

VGF programme underwent a reorientation towards more developmental goals. After a period of piloting a number of different approaches, by the mid-1980s the programme was delivering a package of development inputs through NGO partners. Reviews in the 1990s and 2000s confirmed that the programme was effective, both in terms of targeting extremely poor women and in helping many of them make the transition – ‘graduation’ - from receiving relief to more sustainable and mainstream development activities such as micro-credit programme membership.

2.1 Programme facts

Since the 2000s, the programme has been reaching between 400,000 and 500,000 women in each programme cycle of 18 months, having gradually scaled up since the 1990s. If we ignore the phenomenon of repeat participation, a rough estimate of the total numbers of women reached would be around 2.5 million.² It is the largest programme of its kind exclusively targeting poor women, a fact in itself worth explaining (Ahmed *et al.*, 2004).

VGD is a national programme, spread across 296 upazilas (sub-districts; there are 464 in total) designated as food insecure regions, according to the Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping system. Today, the WFP, bilateral donors and the Government divide funding more or less equally between themselves. But while the WFP and other donors target their resources to areas designated ‘very highly’ or ‘highly’ food-insecure, some of the resources put in by Government go to areas which are less food-insecure. These are, however, targeted to women vulnerable to food insecurity. This difference in the way partners allocate their resources neatly summarises the major political differences between them: for donors, including the WFP, the goal is straightforwardly that of maximising poverty reduction and food security impacts. Government, by contrast, needs to maximise its influence with the local political class, as well as to enable them to reach as many very poor women as possible. These different goals frequently create tensions, not least over whether the resources being distributed are charity or developmental resources: governmental actors tend to treat them as the former, while donors and NGOs prefer the latter.

The target group is very poor rural women. Officially the target group should have the following features:

- Women who are widowed, separated/deserted, divorced or whose husbands are unable to work
- Own less than 50 decimals of land
- Have irregular or low income, of around Tk 300 (around \$5 per month at current rates)
- Are dependent on wage labour, at least 100 days per year
- Lack productive assets
- Are not members of any other NGO programme.

VGD cardholders are also not supposed to get a second chance at programme membership, although in practice many are repeat members. Other criteria for membership reflect the fact that the wheat distribution part of the programme (also known as the Union Parishad VGD or UPVGD) is partnered with BRAC’s Income Generation for Vulnerable Group Development (IGVGD) programme.³ Targeting criteria are also supposed to give preference to those who

² Some 1.8 million were to be covered in the 2000-5 period, and Hashemi (2001) claims over one million had been reached in the ten-year period till then.

³ Indeed, most reviews and discussion of VGD in fact refer to the VGD and the development inputs, that is, the IGVGD programme.

are physically and mentally able and willing to participate in training, income-generating activity, economic and social development and group activities. There have been some adjustments in recent years, so that since 2000, preference has also officially been given to women of childbearing age.

In programmes of this type, the process of targeting has the potential to be both costly to achieve from the centre, as well as providing the scope for considerable bias and corruption. The VGD programme, in common with similar programmes in other contexts, draws on the local knowledge and administrative arrangements of local government in the expectation that this will maximise the effectiveness and accuracy of targeting. This triangular relationship - between Government, local government officials, and the community's poor - is the central point in explaining the politics of what works in the VGD programme. This decentralised approach involves, as one World Bank assessment put it, a trade-off between the advantages of community insider knowledge, on the one hand, and the scope for unrestrained local elite capture of the programme resources, on the other. The effectiveness and long-term success of the programme depends on whether the balance is in favour of accountability to communities or corruption and bias to achieve the political goals of local Union Parishad elites. As we will see, corruption is not a major problem, but that does not rule out the possibilities of bias to feed local patronage systems. To a substantial degree, VGD works because it works with local patronage systems, rather than attempting to fight against them.

The inputs of the programme include a monthly ration of 30 kg of wheat (sometimes wheat and rice) and a savings facility and training programme. Of the entire VGD population, between 80 and 90 percent are then selected into NGO programmes, the vast majority into BRAC's IGVGD programme.⁴ This programme involves training and support in income-generating activities, mainly poultry rearing, and a carefully-designed sequence of small loans, leading up to 'graduation' into full NGO micro-credit programme membership.

VGD and IGVGD are not necessarily cheap antipoverty programmes, but together the programmes attempt to reach the ultra poor, and to provide them with a 'critical push' that helps them out of extreme poverty and into a position from which they can benefit from more mainstream (and cheaper) antipoverty and development programmes. The important issue is whether or not the VGD is cost-effective, and most assessments agree that it is.⁵ Also important with respect to cost is the extent to which leakage imposes additional costs, which detract from the resources going to the beneficiaries. This issue is dealt with in some detail in section 5; in summary, while there is leakage, comparatively little is lost to corruption.

2.2 Programme process

Programme membership involves receiving a VGD membership card, which cardholders are expected to keep with them. How many cards go to each sub-district (upazila or thana) is decided according to food insecurity and vulnerability maps prepared by the WFP with the Planning Commission, although the extent to which this is taken into account varies. To make the development package feasible, priority is given to very poor communities, to ensure there are at least five women in each village. If not all the villages in a single union can be covered in a particular cycle, the rest are covered in the following cycle (del Ninno, 2000). These provisions tend to be particularly important to local political competition.

To prevent against bias, a Union VGD women's selection committee and an Upazila VGD Implementation Committee are created. In the 2000s, Women Union Parishad Members

⁴ The other main NGO is Jagoroni Chakra, and there are also some smaller local NGOs involved.

⁵ The WFP costs the programme at \$50 for the food aid component and \$115 for the development component, a total of \$165. In 2001, Hashemi had calculated the programme's cost to be around \$135, which he viewed as worthwhile considering the high proportion of permanent 'graduates' from it.

have been charged with a more important role in selecting VGD beneficiaries. The Union committee prepares a list which then goes up the chain of command: to the upazila and then to the district VGD committee chair (who is the District Commissioner) and to the Relief and Rehabilitation Directorate. The process of selecting VGD cardholders is widely recognised to be sensitive, but it is also closely but informally scrutinised by the community as well as officially by all the relevant committees, NGO partners and monitors from WFP and the ministries. It is perhaps not so surprising, then, that there is little controversy about who gets selected into the programme – although there is always concern about who gets left out (see del Ninno, 2000 and Ahmed *et al.*, 2004).

A series of bureaucratic directives is delivered through the chain of command, from the coordinating Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs to the Directorate of Relief and Rehabilitation, down through to the upazila implementing officers. At this point the directive is sent for the grain to be delivered to the union distribution point, from where the Union Parishad takes over. Grain is typically delivered on the same day each month, usually the 15th, and it is always possible to see some hopeful poor people waiting around the UP offices on these days (on which more below). Officially, women are supposed to receive 30 kg of wheat grain each, for an 18 month period.

When the VGD selection is made, BRAC staff select around 80-90 percent of the VGD intake for their IGVDG programme. It is usually the older and less physically- and mentally-able women who are excluded by BRAC, setting up an enduring tension between the political and the developmental goals of the programme: it is difficult for VGD to fulfil local political goals involving the display of sympathy to the helpless elderly poor as well as achieve sustainability and high rates of 'graduation' into conventional development programmes. BRAC's programme then involves a series of carefully sequenced activities, designed to maximise the opportunity afforded these very poor women by their food ration, to enable them to save, train, and get started in a small way with loans towards income-generating activities, all with the support of BRAC staff. At the end of the programme cycle, the IGVDG members are expected to become full members of NGO micro-credit groups.

2.3 Impact

Impact assessment studies by BRAC researchers in the early 1990s uncovered some modest positive impact on income, as well as on nutrition and some social indicators. The most important impact was, however, that incomes had been diversified, suggesting reduced vulnerability. The women had also acquired some assets and goods, and considerably better awareness of rights and social issues, as well as noticeably more capacity to participate in NGO programmes, particularly among married women (see Halder and Mosley, 2004). Other qualitative studies found that social indicators had improved, and that there had been some positive impact on the intergenerational transmission of ultra poverty through a greater tendency to invest in children's education (Sattar *et al.*, 1999).

In the 2000s, impact assessment based on panel data (surveys of 400 VGD participants at the beginning of a cycle, in the middle, and three years after - 1994, 1996 and 1999) found the following positive changes in beneficiaries' lives and livelihoods:

- a decline in landlessness and increase in homestead land ownership;
- a decline in begging;
- a rise in dignity and social status within the community ;
- some savings had been made;
- increased ownership of basic household goods;
- slight rise in income (the highest point was immediately after the programme ended in 1996); and

- two-thirds of IGVGD graduates (note: a subset of around 90 per cent of all VGD beneficiaries) had joined micro-finance programmes.

It was not all good news, however:

- around one-quarter could not cope once the food aid part of the programme was over, and reaped no gains from the development part of the programme; they were hoping to re-enter the programme to receive food aid again
- around one-third of IGVGD graduates had not joined micro-finance programmes.

In a survey that is not nationally representative or representative of later cycles, but which reflects actual conditions in survey areas, Webb *et al.* (2002) found that a majority of IGVGD participants neither a) take up all parts of the package nor b) intend to participate in all parts of the programme when they join. They find a significant gap between the hopes and constraints of participants and the expectations of programme planners on the other. This gap once again highlights the differences in attitude towards the programme by local government officials and programme beneficiaries on one side, and NGO and donor agency staff on the other. For the first, the programme is first and foremost about feeding the very poor: it is the free nature of the wheat resources which gives the programme its high value and political importance in the community. For the second, the free wheat is to be used to provide a safety net, making involvement in development activities possible.

The creative linking of micro-finance to a safety net is the most innovative thing about IGVGD: an estimated 600,000 destitute women accessed micro-finance services who would probably not otherwise have done so (Hashemi, 2001).

3. The political context

3.1 Programme origins: famine and political crisis

The programme was established under military rule in late 1975, immediately following a period of extreme political turbulence. The background, in brief, is that the Prime Minister, Sheikh Mujib, who had led the country to liberation from Pakistan in 1971 after a popular nationalist movement, had rejected multiparty democracy in favour of single-party rule early in 1975. A state of emergency had been declared amid political and economic crisis, including the 1974 famine that affected millions. Disillusionment with Mujib was complete, and his assassination in August sparked off a series of coups. The last installed the military leader Zia Rahman in power in late 1975, where he remained until his assassination, in 1981.

In its original form, VGD was very much the product of its time. The political conditions in place that helped produce it in that form included:

- The vulnerability of poor women had recently come to public awareness and entered political discourse. Many thousands of women were known to have been raped, and many thousands more had lost customary sources of male protection during the 1971 war (Kabeer, 1989).
- The 1974 famine had been implicated in the spectacular loss of popularity and legitimacy by those who had led the independence struggle only years earlier.
- The famine taught donors that a) Government food stocks were precarious and in need of further donor support and b) food aid needed to be targeted to the poor.

The new regime was not on the left, but the particular political context and constraints lent it a definite pro-poor tendency. Zia had come to power on the back of a leftist coup, but he was himself a pragmatist rather than an ideologue, and he prioritised security over radical policy

agendas.⁶ The international donor community applied similar pressures, and economic and social policies were accordingly reoriented in directions favoured by aid donors (Sobhan, 1982). These directions included market-orientation, against the domination of the economy by the state that had characterised Awami League 'socialism'. However, this also meant more interventions targeted to the poor, as opposed to the populist universalist programmes associated with that 'socialism', which typically favoured the non-poor. The VGF was part of this wider reorientation. In food policy terms, it reflects the beginnings of a move away from universalist rations programmes which, despite their rhetoric, had favoured the politically organised urban middle classes at the expense of the rural poor (see Chowdhury and Haggblade, 2000).

3.2 From relief to development

By 1980, donors were impatient with the slow pace of reforms under Zia, and aid flows declined. The Public Food Distribution System (PFDS) which continued to subsidise the middle classes was a particular concern, and donors argued for its replacement with programmes targeted to the poor (Barry, 1988). By 1982, the liberalising military leader Ershad had taken power. It was on his watch that VGF became VGD – a reorientation from relief to a focus on development (see Atwood *et al.*, 2000).

Changes to the VGD programme in the 1980s closely reflected the changing realities of the institutional politics of poverty in that period. By the end of the 1990s, the programme had changed from a relief programme in which donor resources were straightforwardly distributed by government relief agencies to one in which food aid was leveraged to engage very poor women in economic and social development, through partnerships between central and local Government, donors, and NGOs. Three related political conditions in place in the 1980s included:

- Continuing aid dependence and growing donor emphasis on progressing from relief to development
- A growing space for NGO activity, in part the impact of donor dependence, as it was during this period donors began to push successfully for a larger role for NGOs (see Sanyal, 1991).
- The emergence of development programmes targeting poor women, including the new technology of micro-credit.

We will look more at these conditions below.

3.3 Democratic politics and the VGD

3.3.1 National and party politics

In the 2000s there is still little, if any, competition over the VGD programme at the level of national politics. In part this reflects the centrist character of party politics and in part the effective political consensus on poverty between the main parties (see Hossain, 2005a: chapter 1). There is limited organisational strength or popular support for the right, occupied by comparatively moderate Islamic parties, and the left, where mere splinters remain of the liberation era radical political groups. The two main parties, the slightly left-of-centre Awami League and the slightly right-of-centre Bangladesh National Party (BNP) have alternated in power since the return to multiparty rule in 1991 (BNP, 1991-6; Awami League, 1996-2001;

⁶ One reason for the more conservative social and economic agenda of the Zia regime was that he returned experienced top-ranking bureaucrats from the Pakistan era to senior administrative posts. On the political colour of this regime and its historical significance see Lifschultz (1979); Maniruzzaman (1980); Jahan (1980); Franda (1982).

BNP, 2001- the present) and enjoy a growing share of the popular vote. Arguably, neither of the main parties is identifiably more 'pro-poor', in terms of efforts to pitch to the poor or obvious success in cornering a majority share of their votes. Indeed, programmatically and ideologically, the two parties converge on poverty policy more than they diverge, and more than they do on all other issues. There are two explanations for this convergence. First, political discourse treats poverty as a unifying moral issue somehow above the squalid competition of party politics. The major political parties tend to toe this line – possibly it suits their interests. Second, enduring aid dependence has undeniably depoliticised poverty in Bangladesh, ensuring that important decisions about who receives what are removed from the unappealing competition between parties, and delegated instead to technical experts, aid bureaucrats and, to a degree, to the supposed altruism of development NGOs.

On this point it is also worth noting that VGD is a rural programme, and only operates in areas defined as such. It is possible that this reflects the political consensus that poverty is substantially a rural issue, and possibly also the treatment of the rural poor in political discourse as more moral or 'deserving' than the urban poor (Hossain, 2005a). An additional factor was the perception that urban rationing programmes had attracted the rural poor to the cities, an undesirable consequence implicated in the withdrawal of statutory rationing in the 1980s, as well as in sustained urban support for programmes such as the VGD (see Afsar, 2002).

That there is little basis for national partisan competition over the programme reflects its history. The quantity, kind or recipients of the resources distributed are rarely subject to lobbying or discussion centrally. This is not surprising given that the programme was developed under a military regime dependent on aid: parliamentary constituencies were not important at that time and the major resource distributed by the programme remains food aid, rather than domestically-generated resources. But this does not mean that national partisan politics over the programme will necessarily remain unimportant. Observers note the general rise in constituency-based politics, seen in rising competition for national resources and local activism among constituency MPs. This may in future create pressure on the poverty focus of the VGD programme. To date, the programme has been somewhat insulated against these potential pressures because the selection of areas (upazilas or thanas)⁷ for the implementation of the programme has been set centrally and through a technical process: on the basis of (somewhat dated) WFP and Planning Commission maps of food-insecure areas.⁸

It is once upazilas or thanas have been selected that the politics of selection and distribution really start: the process of allocating numbers of VGD cards at union⁹ and village levels, and

⁷ Upazila and thana refer to an administrative unit governed by a single police station (thana; upazila literally means sub-district). Although commonly used interchangeably, the existence of the two terms reflects the fact that they are conceptually different units, reflecting different political experiments with local government and administration. Which ever model has been used, upazilas or thanas have generally been the lowest level of the administration and arguably the most important point in terms of implementing programmes and policies, particularly those relating to poverty – district and divisional levels play a less visible role. There are 464 rural thanas and around 500 upazilas (including those in urban centres), each containing around one quarter of a million people.

⁸ Closer targeting by region would yield higher impact on poverty, however. It seems that political considerations – it is difficult to withdraw a programme once it has been in an area – do operate to prevent this (see World Bank, 2002).

⁹ Union is the lowest political unit, and there are around nine unions under each thana. There are 4800 unions in total, each of which usually contains nine wards, and each of which elects a representative to the Union Parishad, the lowest tier of local government. In addition, every three wards sends one woman member, so every Union Parishad Council has at least three women members. In turn, there are roughly two villages in each ward. Villages tend to be geographical and social units without any particular administrative function.

that of identifying beneficiaries, both tend to be subject to considerably more direct competitive pressure. Once the number of cards at the union level has been fixed, the process of selecting recipients from within the community is deemed to be generally quite fair (see below; also del Ninno 2000).

3.3.2 *Local and community politics*

The aspect of political context that is most vital in supporting the VGD is the unusually close and direct relationship between the state and rural elites, and its implications for antipoverty programmes. Unlike in other developing countries, this relationship actually became closer since decolonisation, as intermediaries between the state and the rural peasant population were removed and the position of the rural rich with respect to the state became stronger (van Schendel, 1982). Bangladeshi state support for programmes for the chronically poor should be understood in this context: more than in other countries, those responsible for face-to-face governance at the community level are in reasonably close contact with those who operate from the centre. If state safety net programmes, which are relatively unpopular with national elites, appear to enjoy considerable political protection, it may be because the state depends to such a significant degree on semi-formal governance by these local elites (see Hossain, 2005b).

This is significant for the VGD programme because local social and political leadership is demonstrated and judged on the capacity to attract resources to the community, including to provide for the poor. Over the decades, the power to distribute VGD cards – as well as other resources targeted to the poor and distributed through Union Parishads - has come to be seen as a valuable resource in local politics, the judicious use of which can, on the one hand, be used to reward clients, or on the other, to demonstrate compassion or honesty. The distribution of VGD cards undeniably provides local elites with the resources necessary to behave as patrons, partly because there is a degree of discretion in their allocation, and partly also because merely gaining access to state resources for the poor marks one out as a useful and important person in the community. But this does not mean that the resources are not going to those for whom they are intended: they merely fit into and support a pre-existing system (see Matin and Hulme, 2003; CARE, 2002; Hossain, 2005b for different perspectives on how VGD interacts with patronage systems).

It is helpful to understand that tendencies among the local political leadership that have the appearance of civic virtue are motivated also by the fact that there may be unusually strong normative pressures on local leaders to continually re-earn their support through practical actions. For reasons specific to the Bengal context, leadership in this region has historically been based more on mundane and practical politics than on inherited privilege, religious or ritual power. In areas of high concentrations of poverty, this can put programmes like VGD under intense community scrutiny. The vital factor here may well be proximity: the local elites in charge are just close enough to those they are supposed to serve for the face-to-face relationships that enable possibly genuine sympathy to be combined with the important political gains of support from the poor and a reputation for honesty and compassion.

4. Political ideology, knowledge about poverty

4.1 Ideologies of gender and poverty

4.1.1 The 'destitute mothers' card'

It is frequently the case that politicians and other policy-makers require hard data that dramatically highlight the scale of the problem – preferably showing that it is on the rise – before they can be shocked into taking new action on poverty. This is not the case in Bangladesh, where the scale of the problem has long been known, including by policy-makers. However, the gender dimensions of rural poverty, particularly in the post-war scenario, did emerge as a new problem, galvanising both relief and development activity.

The new problem of destitute women emerged because old certainties about womanhood had been swept away by the war and the period of chaos that followed. The rape of an estimated 200,000 women during the liberation war provided the graphic backdrop for an ideology of 'political motherhood'. The political context resonated with Bengali culture to produce great sympathy for 'destitute mothers' as symbols of the sacrifices made to give birth to the new nation. (It is still possible in the present day to hear the VGD programme described as the '*dustho mata*' or 'destitute mothers' card' (see also Matin and Hulme, 2003.)) Destitute mothers were presented unambiguously as the deserving poor within nationalist politics. But 'political motherhood' was also cast as a progressive and emancipatory ideology, in line with the politics of the regime, and to a degree it was (Mookherjee, 2003). An important enduring element of the original VGF programme was that these 'destitute' women had been targeted at all. This was unusual at a time and in a society in which there was little recognition that poor women frequently headed their households, and were often the most desperately poor and vulnerable. Poor rural women had to date chiefly been constructed as most appropriately the objects of charity, rather than as economic actors in their own right (Lindenbaum, 1974).

The VGF programme was not the most forward-looking programme of its time, and already in 1975, there were programmes attempting to draw destitute women into development activities, ignoring common perceptions that relief was the only way of working with this group. The seeds of subsequent programme evolution were in place. Again, this drew on new conceptions of womanhood, based on what development practitioners were able to see for themselves. During the famine of that period, poor women had left their homes and the respectability of their *purdah* to seek work. UNICEF started food-for-work programmes through local government at this time, when their staff observed poor women begging in Jamalpur. The latent demand for such programmes was clear from the fact that instead of the expected 100 women, 840 turned up (Chen, 1986).

4.1.2 *Grassroots capitalism*

In the 1980s, 'political motherhood' began to give way to a new gender ideology favoured by donors, government and NGOs: that of a distinctly feminised grassroots capitalism. This involved a conception of poverty in which credit constraints loomed large, and in which the provision of micro-credit services tailored to the requirements of the rural poor was the single best means of making serious and financially sustainable inroads into rural poverty. The success of micro-credit as a large-scale antipoverty technology involved an entire nexus of socio-political beliefs about women and poverty, including that

- dependence on moneylenders connected to local powerful groups led to deeper impoverishment, which micro-credit could help avoid
- groups of poor women exert peer pressure on each other with respect to loan repayments in a form of social collateral
- their role as household managers made poor women better credit risks and meant they had more entrepreneurial potential than poor men.

This change in perceptions of poor women from destitute mothers in need of public support to grassroots entrepreneurs helped create the conditions for the shift in programme goals in the 1980s, which in turn brought BRAC into partnership with the VGD programme.

4.2 **Research and knowledge about the ultra poor**

Early on in the process of expanding micro-credit provision, it became clear that the absolute or extreme poor in Bangladesh were not being effectively reached by targeted programmes. Knowledge about poverty that contributed to this awareness of the existence of a group of the ultra poor included income-consumption survey data (see Rahman and Hossain, 1995), as well as donor- and NGO-sponsored research initiatives and impact assessments

indicating that the poorest were not being reached by standard, broad-based development programmes, including the by now large scale micro-finance model (see Halder and Mosley, 2004). Reasons for this included that the ultra poor frequently exclude themselves out of concern they will be unable to make loan repayments; are excluded by staff or group members as poor credit risks; or they default or drop out.

Already by the mid-1980s BRAC had become aware that standard micro-credit models worked less well for the ultrapoor. They were looking for another way of working with the poorest. BRAC's IGVGD model emerged from the perception that chronic food insecurity leads to vulnerability among the ultra poor. Halder and Mosley note the 'creative' use of this insight by senior BRAC programme staff to deploy the food ration from the WFP to create a 'springboard for a conditional sequence of actions': ultra poor beneficiaries would need to use the food aid to save, then to receive training in income-generating activities, followed by which they would receive small loans to finance those activities; if successful, these would be scaled up until the VGD participant could 'graduate' into regular BRAC micro-finance programmes, i.e. to move up into the ranks of the merely poor, the good credit risks (Halder and Mosley, 2004: 394-5).

However, despite generally positive reviews of IGVGD, it seemed that a) the very poorest and most vulnerable were most likely to drop out of VGD without having entered or made use of the full range of inputs, including the micro-finance programme;¹⁰ and b) the most disadvantaged were not necessarily selected in the first place (see Section 6.2). Reviews and studies of the IGVGD have contributed to knowledge about how to work with the ultra poor, feeding into the design of BRAC's CFPR-TUP programme, in particular the Special Investment Programme portion, which attempts to target those VGD leaves out, and to avoid the problems that cause VGD participants to drop out before they graduate into an NGO micro-finance programme proper (Matin, 2004; Matin and Yasmin, 2004).

5. 'Drivers of change' behind the intervention

Next we briefly outline the roles played by key 'drivers of change' who supported the establishment, maintenance or evolution of the programme.

5.1 The Executive: the ambiguous effects of authoritarian rule

Arguably, the presence of an authoritarian executive was a factor in support of the VGD programme. There are three reasons why this appears to have been true. First, because the regime was sufficiently insulated against the demands of the politically organised urban middle classes to be able to accord some priority in food aid disbursement to very poor women. This trade-off was unlikely to have been achieved under popular democratic rule, as the politically powerful urban middle class resisted the narrowing of food rations programmes that made targeted interventions possible (see Atwood *et al.*, 2000).

Second, lacking legitimacy of the kind conferred by democratic process, the national leaders of this period typically attempted to attain popular legitimacy by efforts to reach directly down to the rural poor. One way they attempted to achieve this was by building direct relationships with rural elites, who play the all-important role of safeguarding the social peace – no easy task in a country where a weak state attempts to govern a strong society (see White, 1999). Both main military rulers took the goal of building relationships with local elites most seriously, as the various decentralisation efforts under military rule demonstrate (Crook and Manor, 1998).

¹⁰ See for example Sattar *et al.*, 1999; Webb *et al.*, 2002; Matin, 2004.

Third, some aid donors found it difficult to tolerate authoritarian rule, and the price of this to the regime at times involved support for pro-poor interventions. The gradual reorientation of food policy towards more targeting of the poor is one example. Another is the comparative latitude granted the NGOs and micro-finance organisations; these were gradually gathering donor support through the 1980s, as aid agencies sought means of redirecting resources in a context of otherwise disappointing public performance on social policy and poverty reduction.

Of course, we do not know whether or not the VGD programme would have happened under popular multiparty democracy. However, it seems plausible to argue that it may have been difficult for a popular government at that time to have taken the decision to prioritise the food needs of a specific 'vulnerable group' of the population at the expense of a large, coherent and vociferous minority. In addition, the dominant party, the Awami League, had amply demonstrated its incapacity to control the venal excesses of its own partymen among the rural elite, many of whom appeared to view relief goods as the rewards of their loyalty. By contrast, the military were – indeed, still are - associated with tackling corruption in the distribution of relief.

5.2 Donors: consistent pressure for women's development

The most important part played by donors has been the consistent exertion of pressure for programmes to a) target poor women and b) move from relief to development for poor women. While the wisdom of targeting poor women directly seems obvious in the present day, this was not always conventional thinking, particularly in a society where it is easily assumed that women are protected by extended families. Again, we see that it was under the military regimes of Zia and Ershad, rather than that of the popularly elected Mujib, that 'Women in Development' approaches were embraced, almost certainly in bids to appease donors (Kabeer, 1989). Again, as we saw above, donors were able to champion politically difficult policy changes, some of which policy-makers from within Government were themselves able to recognise but unable to act upon. As is sometimes the case in aid dependent contexts such as this, donor pressure was sufficient to tip the balance in favour of taking politically difficult action in favour of the poor.

The WFP had also consistently lobbied for more developmental impact of the programme, when Government would have been content for it to continue as a relief or feeding programme. One implication of this has been the involvement of NGO partners. Again, it seems that Government partners would at first have preferred not to include NGO partners. But there have been multiple benefits and synergies from the partnerships that resulted – which have benefited both the NGO and agencies of Government. The strong donor emphasis on promoting women's development has at times come at a cost to the programme, however, as we see below.

5.3 NGOs: innovation and pro-poor activism

The part played by NGOs in the programme typifies the unique qualities of these organisations in Bangladesh: they are unusually large in scale and highly effective in innovations that permit the extension of programmes to groups that are otherwise hard to involve in development activities. The importance of the role of NGOs – primarily BRAC - is in the evolution of VGD into its developmental programme form. Through the partnership with BRAC, VGD participants have been enabled to become involved in income-generating activities that they lacked the opportunity to enter before, and would not have been able to do under the original VGF-relief programme model. BRAC's role in the VGD programme inevitably also served to further its own organisational goals of expansion, as a good proportion of the VGD women go on to become regular clients of BRAC's main credit programme. BRAC's reputation and reach were also enhanced through the programme,

despite the fact that the partnership between different layers of Government and the big NGO have not always been smooth.¹¹

The manner in which BRAC's involvement in the programme came about also presents an instance of a peculiarity of pro-poor politics in Bangladesh, namely its highly personalised, social relationship-dependent character. It appears to be commonly through the personal connections of pro-poor activists with political clout – typically NGO leaders – that important policies with impact on the poor get made.¹² In the VGD case, Mr Abed of BRAC claims that it was through personal connections to a senior employee of the WFP that the possibility of BRAC working with the VGD programme was first broached.

Looking beyond the current period, and possibly even beyond the life of the VGD and the BRAC partnership, it is clear that the VGD experience has yielded vital lessons about working with the ultra poor. BRAC and other organisations have taken these lessons into account in their new efforts to reach even poorer and more marginalised social groups than those covered by VGD (Matin, 2004).

5.4 Union Parishad leaders: elite capture or accountability to the community?

The single most important group in the implementation of VGD is the local political elite. Through committees set up for the purpose, they are responsible for the selection of beneficiaries, allocation of cards, and delivery and disbursal of grain. The scope for corruption by this group is thus wide. At the same time, if the local political class were unsupportive of the programme and unwilling or unable to deliver the wheat fairly, the programme could only operate with great difficulty. This is because there are no realistic alternatives to this political class at the local level, nor is there an effective administrative apparatus that reaches this far down into society.¹³ What is left in a decentralised programme of the VGD type, is, as the World Bank's 2002 poverty assessment argued, a 'trade-off between the informational advantage of communities [a point about targeting efficiency] and an accountability disadvantage'. On the one hand, there may be more accountability to local communities because local politics takes a lead; on the other, it may merely result in easier theft by local elites. The question is whether the balance is in favour of elite capture or accountability to the community, and why.

Section 6 on the implementation of VGD explores in more detail the common assumption that local politicians are primarily interested in the programme because of the scope for corruption or to use the power to select beneficiaries for political ends.

6. Design and implementation

Assumptions of corruption and bias in beneficiary selection are widespread. If generally true, rather than predictable and exceptional, the programme cannot be a success. We look first at the evidence about a tangible issue, the theft of wheat grain resources, and later at the point

¹¹ Relations with the Department of Livestock have been particularly good, however. Livestock officials are known to have appreciated IGVD because it enabled them to attain greater coverage and better local information through poultry workers (Sattar *et al.*, 1999).

¹² Professor Yunus of the Grameen Bank narrates how the legislation that made Grameen Bank possible came about when a pro-poor champion within Government introduced him to then-President Ershad (Yunus, 1999).

¹³ Tellingly, BRAC's CFPR-TUP programme, another large-scale development programme for ultra poor women integrates work with community elites to ensure local political support and involvement in the programme (see Hossain and Matin, 2007. This is not altogether surprising given that CFPR-TUP draws heavily on BRAC's experiences with VGD (Matin and Yasmin 2004).

that the programme is used to reward political supporters through the misallocation of cards, an issue about the accuracy of targeting.

6.1 Corruption in the wheat distribution

Faith that corruption is endemic in the VGD is strong, no doubt supported by the many assessments of leakage in the VGD programme which themselves rely on perceptions and self-reporting by VGD beneficiaries. The best available evidence on the scale and nature of corruption is somewhat more complex, however: above all, it indicates that there is less 'leakage' from corruption than is popularly perceived.

There are five potential sources of leakage in the VGD programme which are well-documented:¹⁴

- a. Through smaller quantities arriving at the union distribution point, indicating **illicit sales at or en route to the sub-district local supply depot (LSD)**. Leakage here may implicate relief ministry officials. Upazila officials believe it is here that most leakage occurs (del Ninno 2000), and Union Parishad officials appear to agree, as most of those surveyed for the IFPRI study of leakage in the VGD claimed to receive less from the LSD than allotted, although the shortfall amounted to little, most of which was accounted for as measurement inaccuracy and other factors unrelated to theft (see Ahmed *et al.*, 2004; del Ninno, 2000).
- b. **Grains are sold by Union Parishad leaders themselves**. This is in fact a common practice to cover transport and handling costs, for which official provision is usually inadequate and frequently delayed (Ahmed *et al.*, 2004).
- c. **Undercoverage, when fewer VGD cards are distributed than reported**. Ahmed *et al.* (2004) find this problem to be negligible overall and nonexistent in most districts they studied. Even the World Bank study (2002), which estimates dramatically higher overall rates of leakage than the IFPRI study, notes that more of the leakage in their findings has to do with short rations than undercoverage.¹⁵
- d. **Sale of VGD cards**. The claim that VGD beneficiaries often have to pay for programme membership is commonly heard in rural society, and over eight per cent of beneficiaries surveyed for the IFPRI study claimed to have paid for their card, although the practice was not found in all sites (Ahmed *et al.*, 2004). Other studies comment that the practice occurs but do not quantify it.
- e. **Short rations**, i.e. the gap between what the programme officially distributes and what recipients in practice receive. All studies have found this to be the most significant source of systems loss. The IFPRI survey found that while almost all beneficiaries knew of their entitlements, almost all also reported not having received the full amount. On average, wheat receipts were reported in the IFPRI study to be around 21 percent lower than the official allocation, the same figure arrived at in the survey by Webb *et al.* (2002), while del Ninno estimated the shortfall at around 15 percent. While this is lower than the estimates made by the World Bank study, it is nevertheless an intolerably

¹⁴ Some specialists suggest that a sixth and potentially large source of leakage occurs at or *en route* from the port. However, the magnitude and processes by which leakage occurs at this stage are not documented.

¹⁵ Ahmed *et al.* list a number of good reasons to believe the estimates of leakage in the World Bank study are inaccurately high (2004: 119-20). Note also that the World Bank's previous poverty assessment, in 1998, commented that leakage did not add much to the cost of safety nets in Bangladesh, and that they were comparatively cost-effective (1998: 41-2).

large loss.¹⁶ So how are the spoils from giving VGD recipients short rations divided up? Who gets what, and how does the system of corruption work?

Some of this shortfall occurs at the local supply depots and a small percentage goes to local handlers at the union distribution point. A portion is also lost because, against programme rules set by the centre, some recipients are required by Union Parishad officials to share their cards. Estimates suggest something between 16 (del Ninno, 2000) and 10 (Ahmed *et al.*, 2004) per cent of women share cards. Ahmed *et al.* found that recipients overwhelmingly felt the people they shared with were also poor: although clearly leakage, then, this is not evidence of corruption as such. An additional, similar form of leakage that is not corruption occurs when a small proportion (del Ninno calculates it to be around 7 percent) of grain is distributed to other poor people who gather at the union distribution point on the delivery day.

The IFPRI study attempted to triangulate findings about self-reported wheat receipts. From this it seems that some reported short rations come from errors and false information: beneficiaries rely on the local wheat traders to whom they sell grain to weigh their grain, and they have a clear interest in reporting lower weights. Overall, of the 7.5 percent by which rations are short, half never reaches the union officials from the LSD, and half is pilfered or distributed to the poor at the distribution point (Ahmed *et al.*, 2004).

In sum: the wheat distribution system leaks, and there are routinised means of diverting resources away from the beneficiaries targeted by policies at the centre. However, very little of the overall leakage at this level could be described as corruption, in the sense of distorting the meta-goals of the programme, at a highly generalised level – poverty reduction. Instead, it seems that the programme's importance to local political leaders is closely linked to the scope it gives them for patronage of the poor. Overall, del Ninno calculates that around 94 percent of grains go to poor women, even if they are not all the intended beneficiaries. Webb *et al.* (2002: 20) describe it thus: 'Given the political channels through which the wheat is distributed, it is not surprising that there are pressures on local leaders to satisfy as much of their constituency as possible with this valuable resource.' Even if some of the precise rules and mechanisms are fudged, then, the overall goals of the programme are met, after having been reinterpreted to fit with local needs and perceptions.

Let us look now at whether instead the programme serves political goals, by looking at whether, or the extent to which, the programme rewards supporters of local political leaders.

6.2 Selection of beneficiaries

The process of selecting beneficiaries is also plagued by perceptions of bias and corruption, but there is more agreement that VGD is reasonably effectively targeted to very poor women. Possibly local politicians must keep selection processes fair because programme mechanisms of accountability promote this. Possibly, too, a more generalised imperative based on accountability to the local community with respect to poverty programmes operates.¹⁷ Strong sympathies for young widowed mothers, for example, may support the selection process (see Matin and Hulme, 2003). And to the extent that local politicians are judged on how well they deliver for the poor, honesty in antipoverty programmes may make

¹⁶ The World Bank estimate was that around 41 per cent of all resources for the VGD programme do not reach households. However, a number of methodological problems with that study make this a likely overestimate, as we saw above.

¹⁷ It is worth recalling that these are communities with high proportions of food insecure households, so that the population as a whole is more likely than average to scrutinise programmes claiming to benefit the poor.

good political sense, even for those happy to steal from road-building or other lucrative projects.¹⁸

But while the women selected for VGD are almost all eligible, many more are necessarily excluded – perhaps even 90 percent - despite their eligibility (World Bank 2002; Matin and Hulme, 2003). There are many very poor women in Bangladesh. This means that political competition and selective patronage are possible even without much formal corruption or bias against the poor.¹⁹

Under these conditions, then, there is still a politics of selection, even if it does not necessarily involve venality or unfair bias. It is a situation in which prospective beneficiaries have a greater chance of joining the programme if they raise their profile and make it politically costly for them to be excluded. It is thus the vociferous and articulate poor who have the greatest chance of selection. There is a tension here between the political needs of Union Parishad leaders and the practical requirements of NGO staff. For UP leaders, prospective beneficiaries would ideally be morally 'deserving', worthy of sympathy. But these characteristics do not necessarily appeal to BRAC staff, who select between 80 and 90 percent of VGD beneficiaries for the IGVGD component. For them, the elderly, the disabled, and others unable to benefit from extended training and development activities are not deemed worth the investment of scarce resources (and see Matin and Hulme, 2003).

It is important and interesting to note that the poor women participants of the VGD programme tend to exert considerable agency: Matin and Hulme (2003) found women actively lobbying local elites and NGO staff to be selected, while Ahmed *et al.* (2004: 96) found more than two-thirds who attempted but failed to join were told their turn would come: 'persistent expression of demand by applicants played a very important role'. At least part of the politics of the VGD programme is a politics of claims – most likely framed not as rights but as moral and customary obligations - made on local representatives under face-to-face conditions. The programme thus builds on key social characteristics of hierarchy and patronage to help meet its objectives. This becomes clearest when it is recognised that many Union Parishad officials actually keep the cards that entitle the recipients to programme membership; this means they retain overall control, and the resources of the programme remain in their gift.

So to address the question raised in the previous section, does the important role played by local political leaders lead to more elite capture (corruption and biased selection for political ends) or to effective accountability to the community? The more robust evidence, which does not rely solely on perceptions and self-reporting, suggests that leakage is a problem, but that it does not amount to much corruption. Bias in beneficiary selection is a more complex issue: members of the selected group are of the right profile. But the process may be biased to reward political support without compromising programme goals, particularly in areas with a high concentration of eligible poor people. It is firmly part of the local political-patronage system. But perhaps this is why VGD works with so little corruption: its goals are reinforced by this system. Of course there are also the programme mechanisms for tackling corruption: a) fictitious beneficiaries would easily be picked up by external monitors and b) the list is routinely cross-checked by the NGOs who deliver the development package. But when observers call for even more stringent targeting and even less discretion in selection processes, they may fail to recognise that this would take the political advantages of the

¹⁸ Research by the author on expectations of government, recently completed for the Bangladesh partner of CPRC, strongly suggests that political culture in Bangladesh requires that politicians at least make the gestures of assisting the poor (Ali and Hossain, 2005; see also Hossain, 2005b)

¹⁹ Staff on BRAC's CFPR-TUP programme, which aims to target an even poorer group than that reached by VGD, think that the difference between the two social categories is that those who do not manage to join the VGD programme seem to have weaker social capital and political connections, rather than necessarily being materially less poor.

programme away from those who implement it, therefore reducing their incentives to prevent leakage or to implement it properly.

6.3 Tensions and conflict between programme stakeholders

6.3.1 Donor-Government tensions

The strong donor emphasis on promoting women's development at times suggests the programme may suffer from weak domestic ownership, particularly by central Government. Under pressure from the WFP to commit more to the women's development angle of the programme, the coordination and overall planning was shifted from the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation to the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (MOWCA) in 1998. This caused problems and delays because the new ministry lacked staff at upazila level in a majority of the programme sites. MOWCA is generally acknowledged to be less effective and well-resourced than most other ministries, and one observer suggested that MOWCA's role in implementing VGD is nominal. It is true that, in practice, the Directorate of Relief and Rehabilitation continues to implement the programme under the direction of MOWCA.

The practical implications of this shift aside, it suggests that the direction of the programme remains strongly determined by donors. Previously, this may have mattered less, when Government was heavily dependent on donors to finance their antipoverty programmes and in no position to reject their agendas. But the GoB depends far less on aid in the 2000s than it did in the 1970s and 1980s. It may, then, be less willing to submit to what it might reasonably view as donor whims. Other implications of the shift to what is acknowledged to be a weaker ministry include that VGD may be declining in importance to the Government. In this context it is worth noting that the GoB has established a number of its own pensions programmes, which are gradually being extended to cover an ever growing population (the poor elderly, disabled, widowed). These have considerable potential to replace the political role to date played by the VGD.

6.3.2 NGO-local elite tensions

The assumption of hostility between NGOs and local elites at the grassroots level tends to be overstated, and in practice, these groups have reached a workable compromise on their roles in rural society. But that is true of NGO programmes proper, whereas the IGVGD component of VGD seems to usurp what is seen as the patronage terrain of local elites. This emerged quite clearly when the WFP shifted management of VGD beneficiaries' savings from Union Parishads to BRAC in 1998. Some councils became obstructive and refused to implement this change in policy. The obvious implication was that Union Parishad leaders were reluctant to lose control of this cash resource, and it is true that many VGD graduates do not get their savings back after the programme end, although whether this amounts to outright theft as opposed to more patronage mechanisms is not clear. Management of VGD beneficiary savings was finally handed over to BRAC. But BRAC has also been reluctant to relinquish VGD beneficiaries' savings at the end of the cycle. The reasoning behind this is that BRAC's entire development approach treats savings as central, because these are understood to 'unleash the entrepreneurial imagination', and to build a relationship between institution and saver. When savings are returned, that relationship tends to be viewed as over (Matin and Yasmin, 2004). So ultimately, both sides attempt to hold on to savings, and to do so in order to maintain close relationships with their clients. This highlights the fact that NGOs occupy a space close to that of the local elites, thereby presenting a competitive threat to the local political class and the public administration.

Collaborating with Government is not something NGOs take on lightly, or which they expect to be easy. Matin and Yasmin record that in the pilot phase of the IGVGD programme, a newspaper broke a story about BRAC taking money from VGD women and making them work for their wheat. While initially at least, a public relations disaster for BRAC, in the end this forced them into closer interaction with the relevant ministries, finally resulting in a

stronger relationship with the Relief Ministry (then in charge of VGD). But it is clear that BRAC still finds collaboration with Government at all levels difficult on this programme, and its new CFPR-TUP programme is an attempt to develop a programme with ultra poor women over which they have more control (Matin and Yasmin, 2004).

7. Conclusions: VGD and the social/political contract

This paper has attempted to document the political dimensions of the achievements of Bangladesh's VGD programme since its inception in the 1970s. It describes how the programme has evolved and responded to new ideas and ideologies relating to gender and development over time, and sketches out the main political relationships and interests supporting its establishment, its evolution and continuing support.

The central argument of the paper is that the VGD works in large part because the programme works with existing political interests and imperatives, rather than attempting to work against them. This is not the conventional view of the role of politics in development within Bangladesh. Scholarly and development discourse within Bangladesh typically treats as fact that politics does not generally produce pro-poor outcomes, part of which belief is that resources targeted to the poor are inevitably and easily captured by local elites. This belief may be well-founded under some conditions, particularly in which a) there is little political capital to be gained in pro-poor distribution and b) pressures for accountability are too weak to ensure even a minimum standard of performance. However, in the case of rural Bangladesh, and under the particular arrangements of the VGD programme, these conditions do not hold, at least not in general or constantly. Instead, this paper has presented evidence and analysis to show that the enduring successes of the VGD programme have had clear political dimensions. Specifically, one reason programme resources reach the poorest reasonably effectively is that the programme responds to the need for local political elites to continually rebuild their political capital through support for the vulnerable poorest within their communities. At the same time, the local nature of the final selection process leaves it open to some scrutiny and pressure from programme partners and community members. It is, in brief, a case in which the imperatives and pressures of local political competition have been supportive of pro-poor outcomes.

One reason the view that political competition can yield pro-poor outcomes fails to convince many observers is the near-universal expectation that political affiliation or factional loyalty determine who benefits from programmes like the VGD. This is a well-founded view. However, partisan bias in beneficiary selection is consistent with another key finding of the literature: namely that most beneficiaries are indeed among the poorest. The facts are that the VGD programme covers only a small proportion of the total potential beneficiary population, so that a 'political' selection of beneficiaries is likely to be possible even while maintaining a focus on the poorest. Part of this story of inclusion and exclusion appears to relate to the political capacities of the ultra poor women who form the programme's target group. The well-connected poorest are included, but so are those who lobby actively on their own behalf for inclusion.

To what extent do these findings suggest that the VGD has contributed to a social contract between the state and its poorest citizens? In Bangladesh, at least, the 'contract' appears to be in two parts. VGD emerged out of a political context in which efforts to ensure food security for destitute rural women had attained high priority. But the nature of the 'contract' between food insecure women-headed households and the Government was not direct or simple. This was because the programme was not the first fruit of the political settlement that emerged out of independence from Pakistan, but the later offering of a precarious state reeling from political crisis and social instability. Arguably, it was only possible because an initially popular democratic government, dependent on, and responsive to, its organised supporters, failed spectacularly to provide food security to the very poorest and most

vulnerable – poor women household heads. It was the authoritarian government that followed, strongly led by donor pressures to do so, which took action in its wake.

If the story of the VGD is not a salutary tale of the benefits to the poor of a democratic political settlement, it does highlight the importance of local democratic pressures. In the first instance, the contract is more social than political, enforceable and most meaningful at the level of the community. It is not clear whether it invokes rights or customary obligations,²⁰ but it is the local elites, the community political leadership, who bear responsibility for taking action on poverty - and the immediate brunt of failures to do so. At least at the outset, direct accountability to a voting public was not a major concern of the executive, although other factors may have created similar pressures. One part of the contract thus connects the very poor to the community, requiring effective political leaders to attract the resources necessary to address the local problem. The second part of the contract connects the local elite to the central Government and the institutions and organisations that implement its programmes, including its partners among the donors and NGOs.

How effective is the contract in ensuring that this large but particularly vulnerable section of the poor population has access to food grains and (for most) other development inputs? Not all of the eligible group are likely to benefit, and as we have seen, those who fail to do so tend to be the most vulnerable of all. But the programme has set up an important political dynamic: the programme's enduring quality – it is almost as old as the nation itself – means that there is, arguably, something of an established norm that the government is - at the very least - responsible for supporting the poorest and most vulnerable with food aid. Vitally, Government has demonstrated that it can manage this important task.

The second interesting political dynamic of the 'contract' is that very poor and vulnerable women must engage actively and lobby on their own behalf to enforce it. Much depends on their willingness and ability to articulate and assert need – a highly political act – in a context of patriarchy and social hierarchy. This may help to reduce the possibility that the ineligible will be selected, and creates incentives for local elites to maintain pressure on central Government to disburse the necessary resources.

Since the mid-1990s, the VGD programme has no longer been the sole source of official support to poor women, as the Government has introduced a number of cash pension schemes targeted towards these and similar poor vulnerable groups. Many of these schemes follow a process of identifying and reaching beneficiaries similar to that used in the VGD programme, despite having emerged from under a very different political context, of multiparty democratic rule. This significant development adds confirmation that decentralised targeted poverty reduction programmes can simultaneously serve both political and poverty reduction ends in the Bangladesh context.

²⁰ It helps to remember that relief and feeding programmes have a long history in Bengal, thanks to the long, grim list of famines that have afflicted the region. The Famine Codes under British rule, for example, emerged from experiences of food insecurity in the region.

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