

Sustainable Development Goals and Social Service Programs in Bangladesh: An Analysis

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Abstract

Inspired by the success of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), like other member states of the United Nations (UN), Bangladesh has committed to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 for eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity. As the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) in Bangladesh is mandated to render social services to the country's people, the ministry identifies its relevance to the SDGs and tries to connect programs to achieve the respective Goals. This study aims to analyse how social service programs are relevant to achieving the SDGs and the problems and challenges faced while implementing the Goals. The study collects data from secondary sources, including journal articles, government reports, reports of national and international organisations, etc., and is based on qualitative content analysis. The study deploys thematic analysis to analyse the data. The findings suggest that though social service programs are linked to the Goals and targets of the SDGs, the programs are not appropriately designed in line with the SDGs. The programs also encounter many challenges, such as identifying beneficiaries, inadequate funds, limited coverage, leakage of funds, etc. Even the nature of the services remains unchanged since the SDGs were adopted. For example, the MoSW identifies itself as the leading ministry to achieve Goal 5, but they are implementing programs designed and adopted long before the SDGs. The study emphasises designing programs focusing on the targets of the SDGs by including social service experts, as well as graduate social workers. It is expected that the study results will help policymakers and social service agencies introduce or redesign social service programs consistent with Agenda 2030.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Social Services; Sustainable Development; Implementation; Bangladesh

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Introduction

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 Goals adopted by the UN member states in 2015 for eradicating poverty, protecting the world, and ensuring prosperity by 2016-2030 (Nasrullah, 2021). The Goals were set and approved in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) implemented between 2000-2015. The Goals known as the agenda 2030 range from ending poverty to establishing a global alliance for sustainable development to address five areas of critical importance (UN, 2015) such as people (6 Goals), planet (3 Goals), prosperity (6 Goals), peace, and partnership (2 Goals) (Morton et al., 2017). Focusing on the five 'P's, the 17 Goals identified 169 targets that need to be achieved within the timeframe. As a member state of the UN, Bangladesh has committed to attaining the Goals as well as respective targets and has taken various initiatives highlighting them. Apart from that, Bangladesh has been implementing an array of social service programs through different ministries and divisions to ensure the well-being of people. These programs are often called social protection, social security, and social safety net programs. Social protection programs are essential for achieving global Goals (UNDP World Centre for Sustainable Development, 2016). Soares and Satyro (2009, cited in UNDP, 2016) found that social protection programs like cash transfer programs support people to develop their condition resulting in relief from poverty. Realising its importance, Bangladesh has increased its allocation for social protection from 1.3% in 1998 to 2.3% of GDP in 2011 (GED, 2015). However, many studies revealed that the above social service programs face enormous challenges while delivering services to the target groups. Involving several ministries and divisions for the same purpose, difficulties in selecting target groups, low coverages and inadequate funds, etc., limit the programs' success and reaching SDG Goals and targets (Rahman et al., 2021). Though a gamut of studies has been conducted focusing on assessing SDGs' achievement, a few emphasise

the role of social services, including social protection, social security, or social safety net programs, in achieving SDGs. None of the studies explores how Bangladesh's social service programs align with the SDGs. The present study aims to understand the social service programs' relevance to the SDGs and the problems and challenges faced while implementing programs. Furthermore, the study outcome will help policymakers address gaps and strengthen social service programs aiming to materialise the SDGs successfully. The research will also be a part of the in-depth research initiatives on the role of public sector programs in achieving SDGs (Rahman, 2020).

This study aims to analyse how Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are linked with social service programs in Bangladesh. In doing so, the study seeks to examine the specific objectives.

- To identify social service programs connected to the SDGs;
- To analyse how social service programs contribute to achieving the SDGs;
- To explore problems and challenges encountered while implementing programs.

Focusing on the above objectives, this study begins by reviewing the literature on SDGs, social service programs, and the nexus between SDGs and social services. It also highlights the gaps in the literature by reviewing previous research. Then, following the research methodology, the study presents the findings, followed by a discussion. Finally, the study concludes by making some suggestions and, before this, adds a description of the noble contribution of the present research.

Literature Review

Resulting in the grand success of the MDGs, representatives of the member states of the UN attended a summit titled 'UN Sustainable Development Summit' held in New York in 2015 and agreed to a document entitled "Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" which is also known as the Agenda 2030 comprising 17 global Goals or

'Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) (UN, 2015). These 17 Goals, including 169 targets, are a universal call to end poverty, save the planet and ensure prosperity aiming at combating multifarious challenges encountered by people worldwide (Pradhan et al., 2017; Rahman, 2021; Kroll et al., 2019). The 17 Goals were formulated after the successful implementation and achievement of millennium development Goals (MDGs). According to UNDP (2015, cited in Calabrese et al., 2021), the Goals mainly focus on promoting global well-being through reducing poverty to establishing global alliances for sustainable development.

Social Services

Social services can be defined as services or programs that are typically associated with the well-being of human beings. The term 'social services' has been used interchangeably with the terms like social welfare, social protection, social assistance, social care and social work (Munday, 2003). Zastrow (2017) differentiated social work from other disciplines as the social work profession has a role and approval to render social services to the members of society. However, he mentioned human services that encompass social welfare programs and other services like the execution of laws, enforcement of housing codes, protecting consumers or buyers, etc. In the USA, social service programs have been defined as programs that are taken by the federal government or by a state or local government with the assistance of the federal government, aiming at eradicating poverty, and increasing opportunity, particularly for the people in need (Legal Information Institute, 1992). Likewise, social services are delivered in Bangladesh by government and non-government organisations to achieve the aforementioned objectives. Sifat (2020) identified social services as social safety net programs rendered to underprivileged and affected groups.

Social Service Programs in Bangladesh

Social services are delivered to ensure the well-being of people, particularly disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. In Bangladesh, several ministries and departments render social

services to deserving groups. According to the statistics, 23 ministries and divisions deliver 145 programs to provide social and economic benefits for improving social, economic, community and cultural development (GED, 2015). These programs range from social assistance, social insurance, and institutional services to mental support. To achieve the objectives, the present study only considers the programs adopted and implemented by the department of social services under the Ministry of Social Welfare in Bangladesh.

Relationship between SDGs and Social Service Programs

One of the components of social services, social protection, has been accepted as an important instrument for achieving sustainable development Goals (UNDP World Centre for Sustainable Development, 2016). Social protection covers social assistance, insurance, and justice (Hasan, 2017). Rahman et al. (2021) find that social protection has a direct and indirect connection with the Goals and targets of SDGs. They identify eradication of poverty (Goal 1), establishing gender equality (Goal 5), and decreasing inequality (Goal 10), which are directly connected to social protection programs. On the other hand, good health and well-being (Goal 3) and decent work and economic growth (Goal 8) are indirectly linked to the programs (Rahman et al., 2021). However, they claim that the role of social protection programs is not restricted only to the Goals mentioned above. Moreover, designing and perceiving social protection as a tool can contribute more to attaining all the Goals of the SDGs. Similarly, UNDP World Centre for Sustainable Development (2016) argued that social protection can be an important tool to achieve all three aspects: the economic, social, and environmental of the Agenda 2030.

Several studies illustrated a clear nexus between the Goals and social protection programs (notably Skoufias et al., 2001; Soares et al., 2010; Giribabu et al., 2019). After assessing the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme in India (Roy, 2015), Giribabu et al. (2019) argued that

the scheme has been contributing to achieving the entire Goals of the SDGs. Murshed (2021) furthermore supported the view as he revealed that social protection programs play a pivotal role in attaining the SDGs in developing countries. Earlier, Soares et al. (2010) found that a social protection program, namely the Bolsa Familia program, contributed to reducing income inequality in Brazil.

Despite the nexus between social service programs and SDGs, the programs often face multifarious challenges in achieving their targets in Bangladesh (Rahman et al., 2021, Nasrullah, 2021). The challenges include mobilising resources, selecting appropriate beneficiaries, inadequate coverage, leakages, repetition, etc.

From the above discussion, it is evident that there is a consistent relationship that exists between the SDGs and social protection programs. Though the above studies could not disclose the elaborate relationship, the researcher tries to analyse the relationship. Hence, the study attempts to review social service programs, including social protection programs of the Ministry of Social Welfare in Bangladesh, as they implement most social protection or social security schemes. The study also focuses on how much social service programs are linked with SDGs in Bangladesh, their contribution, and what challenges they face.

Methodology

Basically, the study is descriptive and analytic (Nasrullah, 2021) as it aims to analyse the relationship between SDGs and social service programs. For analysing social service programs, the researcher only considers the programs implemented by the Department of Social Service (DSS) under the MoSW. The study collects data from several secondary sources, including journal articles, organisational reports (national and international), public documents, government websites, and newspaper reports. As a part of the initiative, the researcher gathers data from the above sources and uses thematic analysis (Ahmed and Karim, 2022) to develop several themes based on qualitative content analysis (Islam, 2020). Subsequently, the

researcher accumulates data under the specific theme and presents findings through various themes discussed below.

Findings

The study finds that the government of Bangladesh has mapped its ministries and divisions based on the 17 Goals and 169 targets of the SDGs. In addition, the government identified policies, acts and strategies related to the SDGs (Nasrullah, 2021). For example, Goals 2, 13, 14 and 15 have been linked with Bangladesh Delta Plan-2100. Not only the Delta Plan, several public policies, including national education policy, national women's development policy-2011, national social security strategy-2015, national labour policy-2012, etc., are identified that are closely related to achieving the SDGs. Along with these, General Economic Division (GED) has made the National Action Plan for implementing the Goals (GED, 2018).

Apart from the policies, acts and strategies, social service programs, including social protection programs, have been identified by the MoSW that are connected to several Goals and targets of SDGs.

Social service programs are delivered mainly by the Department of Social Services under the Ministry of Social Welfare. According to the mapping of the Planning Commission of Bangladesh, the MoSW is the leading ministry in achieving a Goal (Goal 5) (GED, 2018). It also acts as an associate ministry to achieve eight Goals (1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, and 16) (MoSW, 2022). Moreover, the Ministry is responsible for attaining 25 targets of SDGs.

Reviewing the social service programs of the MoSW, the study reveals the linkage between the programs and SDGs. The following findings illustrate the relationship between the SDGs and social service programs and the problems and challenges faced in implementing the programs.

Too Many Social Service Programs

As an associate ministry to achieve Goal 1, titled end poverty in all its forms everywhere, several social services have been implemented (MoSW, 2022), for example, Rural Social

Services(RSS), Rural Mother Centre, Urban Community Development Program(UCD), Rehabilitation program for Brunt and Disabled, and Micro Finance of 'Ashrayan Program'.¹

Moreover, different allowances like old age allowances, allowances for the disabled, widows, and livelihood development programs for *Hizra*², Dalit³ and *Harijan*⁴ are also being provided as social security measures.

Not only to Goal 1, but the above-mentioned programs have contributed to Goal 2, titled end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture (MoSW, 2022).

After analysing the program, it is evident that these programs were related to the Goal-1 and 2. However, too many programs were introduced long before the adoption of the Agenda-2030. For example, RSS was established in 1974, UCD was started in 1955, and some allowances have been given since the last decade of twenty century (Murshed, 2021).

An Absence of Diversity, a Lower Speed, and Problems in Beneficiary Selection

Social service programs cover various groups and targets of the SDGs, particularly older adults, disabled persons, pregnant women, widows, the poor, marginalised groups, etc., and have been included under various social protection programs. These programs aim to provide small loans without any interest, vocational and skill-improving training, raise awareness through education and family planning programs and ensure social security (MoSW, 2022). However, the programs are not adequate to reach the milestone. In this context, Khatun and Saadat (2021) claimed that the rate of eradicating poverty has been slowing down over the years from 2010 to 2016 as compared to the period between 2005 and 2010. In addition, the

programs have faced problems in selecting the target beneficiaries as two-thirds of the receivers of social protection programs did not belong to the poor group. Still, they received most of the benefits (GoB, 2020).

Poor Presence of Social Service Programs to Attain Goal 3

Achieving Goal 3 titled ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all ages, the DSS helps the patients through hospital social services. It also offers financial support to poor patients, physical and occupational therapy to the disabled, and counselling services to the guardians of patients with Autism (MoSW, 2022). On the other hand, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare plays the leading role in achieving Goal 3(GED, 2018), and serves most of the people in Bangladesh. However, they face multifarious challenges regarding access to healthcare facilities, providing quality services and ensuring equity in delivering services to all (Nasrullah, 2021).

Inadequate Coverage, Limited Programs Focusing on Diverse Characteristics of Disability and a Lack of Professional Social Workers in the Program

Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and expanding learning opportunities throughout life (Goal 4), social services have an education program for distressed and orphan children, training facilities for disabled persons and stipends for disabled students (MoSW, 2022). They also distribute textbooks free of cost using Brail press. However, the coverage of the programs is less than expected as persons with disabilities living in rural areas lack education and training facilities. More importantly, programs are less focused on the various types of disabilities and vulnerable groups in our

¹ *Ashrayan* is a Bengali word that refers to 'house' or 'accommodation'. The public-funded program aims to build houses for the landless and homeless people.

² *Hijra* is a Bengali word that indicates transgender people who are socially excluded.

³ Dalit people are known as the untouchables who live in different parts of South Asia, face widespread

discrimination, and belong to underprivileged and marginalised groups.

⁴ *Harijans* belong to a lower caste of the Hindu religion and face untouchability and discrimination. They have been struggling to fulfil their basic needs.

society. Furthermore, no social worker is found to be engaged in delivering these services.

Leading Ministry vs Fewer Programs of the DSS to Attain Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

According to the mapping (GED, 2018), the MoSW is primarily responsible (leading ministry) for achieving Goal 5, gender equality and women's empowerment. However, the study did not find any specific programs aiming at the Goal. Like other Goals, social service programs such as RSS, UCD, rehabilitation programs and microfinance of the 'Ashrayan Program' have been provided to establish gender equality and empower women and girls (MoSW, 2022). But the country faces challenges in reaching the Goal as women represent a poor part of political leadership, they become the victims of physical and sexual violence, and child marriage is still a concern (Nasrullah, 2021).

The Nature of the Programs Remains the Same to Achieve the Goals like SDG—8, 10, 11 & 16

Along with the above-mentioned programs, social services have been delivered to ensure decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), reduce inequalities prevailing within and among countries (Goal 10), make a sustainable society (Goal 11), and establish peace, justice and institution (Goal 16) (MoSW, 2022). However, the nature of the programs remains almost the same since the programs like RSS, UCD, Rural mother centres, and rehabilitation and training programs have been connected to achieve the above Goals. In addition, to achieve the Goal of SDG-17, DSS implements a partnership program with various NGOs and INGOs.

From the above findings, it is clear that the ministry has linked social service activities to several Goals of SDGs, but the programs are not adequately aligned with the Goals. However, social services, particularly social protection or social security programs, help reduce various dimensions of poverty and the extreme poverty (DSS, 2022). Khatun et al. (2020) ranked the Goals based on achievement and found that SDG 13 was at the bottom. Similar to this, SDG 5's performance was minimised while SDG 3's and

SDG 10's were excessively exaggerated. Against the view of Khatun et al. (2020), some studies (notably, Khatun and Saadat, 2021; Murshed, 2021) found that the progress of some SDGs is on track, such as reducing extreme poverty and hunger, whereas some need more attention, such as Goals 5 and 8.

Discussion

The study aims to analyse how social service programs are linked with the SDGs. The findings reveal that several ministries have delivered social service programs and contributed to achieving the Goals. However, the study reviewed the programs of MoSW and found that social service programs of the ministry have been connected with Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, and 16. Eradicating poverty (Goal 1) and ending hunger (Goal 2), various types of allowances, micro-credit and skill development programs are being implemented that reduce the extreme poverty rate and improve the condition of the people. Giribabu et al. (2019) and Murshed(2021) illustrated similar findings and claimed that social protection programs help decrease poverty. Social service programs have been implemented in Bangladesh in the name of social protection, social security or social welfare programs (Munday, 2003) that work as a crucial tool for implementing the SDGs. Not only Goals 1 and 2, but the programs of MoSW also play a role in achieving other SDG Goals. The Social Welfare Ministry plays the leading role in achieving Goal 5. However, fewer programs of the Ministry are connected to Goal 5, and the study did not identify any specific programs aiming at Goal 5. Despite the limitations of the social protection programs, several Goals of SDGs are on track, particularly reducing extreme poverty, decreasing hunger, gender disparity, etc. The progress of the programs validates the findings presented by Soares et al. (2010) and Giribabu et al. (2019). Moreover, Rahman et al. (2021) found that social protection programs contributed to achieving all the Goals.

Though several programs are linked to the SDGs and contribute to achieving the Goals, the study reveals an array of programs that started long before the adoption of the SDGs. In addition,

nothing is found about how the old programs like RSS and UCD contributed to achieving the Goals. The study also revealed problems and challenges in implementing programs, such as an absence of diversity, inadequate coverage, issues in selecting beneficiaries and so on (Nasrullah, 2021; Rahman et al., 2021). In addition, the study found that similar programs have been delivered to achieve several Goals of the SDGs.

The study revealed that social services, particularly various allowances, micro-credit, and awareness programs, are exclusively related to the SDGs, and these programs contributed to achieving progress in Bangladesh. For example, Bangladesh achieved significant success in reducing extreme poverty as the population living under the poverty line declined from 21.8% in 2018 to 20.5% in 2019 (GoB, 2020). However, a number of programs have been delivered that were taken before adopting the MDGs and SDGs. Therefore, the programs need to be redesigned and restructured.

Conclusion

Unlike other sectors, social service programs are closely connected to the achievement of the Goals and targets of the SDGs. Thus, Bangladesh's government has emphasised the SDGs' implementation and taken several initiatives to materialise the Goals. The government has mapped its machinery and integrated the Goals with national plans like Delta Plan 2100, the seventh and eighth five-year plans, various public policies and so on. The Ministry of Social Welfare has also conducted mapping and identified programs linked with the Goals and targets of the SDGs. Reviewing the programs implemented by the DSS under the MoSW, the study identifies that social service programs are very much consistent with the Goals and contribute to achieving the targets of the respective Goals. It also finds that the progress of several Goals is on a track that proves the existence of a nexus between social service programs and the SDGs. However, several programs were introduced before adopting the Agenda 2030, and very few

programs of the MoSW were found to achieve Goal 5.

Apart from that, social service programs have encountered various challenges, including difficulties in beneficiary selection, leakage, a shortage of funds, poor coverage, an absence of diversity, etc. The study recommends expediting the implementation of the SDGs; social service programs need to be redesigned considering the present situation and introduce services that are more consistent with the SDGs. To ensure effectiveness, social service experts, including graduate social workers should be included in the designing and implementation stages of the programs. The study further suggests empirical research on specific social service programs' contributions to achieving the SDGs.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in relation to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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