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Programme
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World
Food
Programme

Programa
Mundial
de Alimentos

**Executive Board
Third Regular Session**

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INFORMATION NOTES

REPORT OF EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS' VISIT TO BANGLADESH

24-28 MAY 1999



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INTRODUCTION

1. Members of the WFP Executive Board from Haiti, Jordan, Lesotho, Pakistan, the Slovak Republic, Sudan and the United Kingdom visited Bangladesh—where WFP has its largest ongoing Country Programme—from 24 to 28 May 1999. Members were accompanied by the Deputy Regional Director of the Asia and CIS Bureau, Ms Angela Van Rynbach. The list of participants is provided in Annex I.
2. The purpose of the visit was to give Board Members an opportunity to see for themselves the way WFP project activities (mostly development) are executed, with a view to improving the Board's understanding of WFP's activities in the field. Although the visit was not intended to be an evaluation of WFP's activities, it offered a useful opportunity to relate the development food aid consultations held recently in Rome—and the policy objectives which flowed from those discussions—to what WFP is doing in the field.

KEY MEETINGS: GOVERNMENT OF BANGLADESH AUTHORITIES, UNITED NATIONS AGENCY HEADS, BILATERAL DONORS, NGOs

3. Board Members met with the Ministers of Finance and of Food and Agriculture, the State Minister of Women and Children's Affairs, the Secretary of the Economic Relations Division, Ministry of Finance, and the senior officials of these Ministries. In addition, Board Members met with the representatives of the United Nations agencies, of major bilateral donor countries (Canada, the Netherlands and the United States of America), and of the European Community, as well as those of several major NGOs operating in Bangladesh. There are a large number of NGOs which operate in Bangladesh; Board Members met representatives of several, including the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), which is one of the largest and most active. The programme of the visit is provided in Annex II.
4. Government officials, especially those of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, pointed out that WFP assistance was a great help in providing support in emergencies after the recent floods which had affected two thirds of the country. The Government regards development food aid as a vital element in the fight against poverty in the country; the recent recommendation by the European Community to move towards cash interventions has disappointed senior Government officials in Bangladesh.
5. The Government considered that, through its development programmes, WFP played an important role as a key partner. WFP's approach to building community assets through its food-for-work programmes is strongly supported both in principle and in action in the food/cash mix of wages received by beneficiaries; the Government's commitment is reflected in its provision of the cash component, currently around US\$10 million. Officials also underlined the role played by food aid in improving the nutritional status of vulnerable groups and rehabilitating community infrastructure.
6. United Nations agency representatives emphasized the importance of joint efforts in rehabilitation and development activities in order to achieve a stronger impact. Board Members perceived a sense of good coordination and cooperation among the agencies and noted that local consultative groups, formed to encourage regular policy dialogue within the United Nations agencies, are active. Board Members were pleased to learn that UNDP,



WFP and UNICEF have harmonized their planning cycles. WFP co-chairs with FAO the Thematic Group on Food Security, and UNICEF works with WFP in evolving policies on supplementary feeding. Board Members encouraged further strengthening of such a linkage. It is envisaged that the Bangladesh United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) process will include UNFPA in this arrangement. A second working draft of the Common Country Assessment, leading to an UNDAF agreement, was scheduled for completion in June 1999.

7. The commitment of Government authorities at all levels was evident. The WFP programme has a high level of support and involvement of the NGO community and is integrated into the National Development Plans. The Government is working on establishing and implementing a National Nutrition Plan. This plan would be important in addressing the concerns of certain bilateral donors, who were of the view that the Government focused too much on food aid rather than on food security. Donors were unanimous in praising the Government for its handling of the flood relief effort, commending its efforts to encourage and enhance the role of the private sector in facilitating food deliveries to stricken regions.

PARTNERSHIP WITH NGOS

8. Strong and successful partnerships have been formed with several NGOs. Here the role played by food aid in “graduating” the poorest into income-generating activities was evident. Meetings with several NGOs, including the Chief Executive and field staff of BRAC (active in all districts), highlighted the role food aid played in providing a vital “passport” for access to the poorest people. Several NGOs stressed that improving the social and human capital base was an essential precursor to improving the financial welfare of the poor. NGOs thought that food aid played a valuable role in social mobilization and empowerment.
9. In this respect, WFP was considered instrumental, enabling women to come together and allowing them a significant degree of participation and control. Several NGOs underlined the importance of this “enabling” quality of food aid and regarded it as a very useful entry point for their activities. Women moving on from WFP programmes have developed the “savings habit” engendered by participation in WFP projects, and are able to gain access to NGO training and take on larger loans (the repayment record is excellent). There is constructive dialogue between the Government, NGOs and WFP in development, implementation and monitoring of the programmes. There is little doubt that the commitment and dedication of the NGOs is a key factor in the management and success of these activities.

FIELD VISITS

10. Board Members visited the following rural development projects in the Phulpur and Trisal Thanas of Mymensingh District: Growth Centre Connecting Road (GCCR) project; “Amuakanda-Balia Road”; Post-Flood Rehabilitation Work, Wheat Distribution and Training Session for the beneficiaries of routine maintenance schemes and Fisheries and Afforestation schemes. Members also visited nine projects under the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) Programme in Deduer Thana, Tangail.



OBSERVATIONS FROM VISITS TO PROJECT AREAS

11. Site visits were useful in showing Board Members how interventions are managed and implemented. An increasing proportion of beneficiaries (currently around 50 percent) are chosen by peer groups. The neediest households—often headed by women, mostly landless, with regular monthly incomes of less than Tk 300 (approximately US\$6) per month—are given priority: an encouraging measure to enhance targeting efficiency. Board Members did, however, hear that at the local level, there were instances of political resistance to the trend towards self-selection among beneficiaries. WFP will need to track carefully developments in this regard and the extent to which these compromise effectiveness and efficiency.
12. Board Members had the opportunity to see and interview beneficiaries. There was a marked difference in terms of health and general well-being between women beneficiaries at the start of WFP programmes and those who had completed them (especially the VGD beneficiaries). The programmes seemed to be achieving good results in improving income levels, especially in the VGD groups. Several women who had realized increases in their asset base had graduated from WFP activities more than five years ago, following NGO support and training. This supports the views of the Chief Executive of BRAC, who stated that experience showed that the poorest depended on NGO assistance and support for up to 10 years before “graduating” completely into sustainable livelihoods.
13. Board Members noted the large number of beneficiaries taking part in WFP programmes. Currently, 500,000 women participate in each 18-month cycle. Given an average household size of 4.6 persons, this means that each cycle benefits more than 2 million individuals. Nevertheless, this represents barely 8 percent of the “hard-core” poor. Substantial pockets of poverty therefore remain untouched by these programmes.
14. The Government provides US\$10 million as cash contribution to WFP programmes, permitting a 70:30 food/cash wage ratio for beneficiaries. There would, however, seem to be scope for increasing the cash component of this ratio, since many beneficiaries monetized some part of the food package received. The Government accepts the need to alter the ratio in favour of cash, but budgetary constraints do not allow such a shift in the near future. WFP will need to be watchful of trends in this respect.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

15. Given the right conditions, food aid can make a valuable contribution to development. It maintains balanced price levels through market stabilization at times of emergencies and provides a safety net for vulnerable groups who are not covered by the free market. Food aid provides an immediate input for repairing and reconstructing the infrastructure damaged by floods, which have affected two thirds of the country. Cash-based projects were thought to be relatively inefficient in attracting the participation of vulnerable groups and in being administered properly. The Government strongly supports the Programme as a mechanism which enables poor people to approach developmental activities.
16. The visit was extremely useful and corroborated many of the findings contained in the mid-term review of the Bangladesh Country Programme presented to the Executive Board at the Second Regular Session in May 1999. Mission participants would encourage other Executive Board Members to take part in future Board visits.



17. The mission's programme was very well structured. The support received, including briefing material and presentations provided by the WFP country office and headquarters, was excellent.
18. Board Members appreciated the dedication and enthusiasm of the WFP country office team regarding the very real challenges faced in the practical implementation of WFP's policies and programmes. Board Members thank them for the tremendous support they gave, which made the visit extremely useful. Members also thank the Government of Bangladesh and the many officials who gave freely of their time and experience to help improve Members' understanding of the opportunities of contributing towards national efforts to achieve food security.



ANNEX I**MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD'S VISIT TO BANGLADESH**

List A	Mr Tieiso KHALEMA Counsellor Embassy of the Kingdom of Lesotho
	Prof. Mohamed Said Mohamed AL HARBI Counsellor (Agricultural Affairs) Embassy of the Republic of the Sudan
List B	HE Mr Arif AYUB Ambassador Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan
	Mr Slaiman Al-ARABIAT First Secretary Embassy of the Hasemite Kingdom of Jordan
List C	Ms Suze PERCY Counsellor Embassy of the Republic of Haiti
List D	Mr Thomas KELLY Deputy Permanent Representative to FAO and WFP Embassy of the United Kingdom
List E	Mr Lubomir MICEK Permanent Representative of the Slovak Republic to FAO and WFP Embassy of the Slovak Republic
WFP	Ms Angela Van RYNBACH Deputy Regional Director, OAC



ANNEX II**SCHEDULE OF EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS' VISIT TO BANGLADESH,
23–28 MAY 1999**

Sunday 23 May	Departure Rome
12.15	Arrival Dhaka (accommodation at Sheraton Hotel)
19.00	Reception with WFP staff at Sheraton
Monday 24 May	
08.10	Pick up from the Sheraton Hotel
08.30–09.30	Briefing on WFP-assisted programmes in Bangladesh (Venue: WFP office)
09.30–10.15	Follow-up discussions with WFP staff
10.30–11.10	Meeting with Mr David Lockwood, UN Resident Coordinator, at UNDP
11.15–12.15	Follow-up meeting with WFP
12.30	Lunch at SANTOOR
Courtesy Calls:	
14.30	HE Mrs Matia Chowdhury, Minister of Food/Agriculture Building No. 4, 1 st Floor, Conference Room, Bangladesh Secretariat, Dhaka
15.30	HE Prof. Zinatunnesa Talukder, State Minister of Women and Children's Affairs Building No. 6, Room 320 3 rd Floor of Bangladesh Secretariat, Dhaka
16.30	HE Mr S.A.M.S. Kibria, Minister of Finance, Ministry of Finance, Building No. 7, Room No. 334, 3 rd Floor, Bangladesh Secretariat, Dhaka
18.45	Meeting with Dr A.K.M. Masihur Rahman, Secretary, Economic Relations Division (ERD), Ministry of Finance at Hotel Sonargaon
19.00–21.00	Briefing on food-assisted development by the Government, followed by Dinner hosted by the Government at Hotel Sonargaon—Room Nirala
Tuesday 25 May	
08.30	Pick up from Sheraton Hotel
09.00–10.30	Meeting with NGO Representatives (New UN Premises)
10.40–12.30	Meeting with Donor Representatives on Food Security and Nutrition (New UN Premises)
13.00–14.30	Buffet Lunch at new UN Premises
14.30–15.30	Meeting with the Representatives of the UN agencies Open for individualized programme Field Visit Programme
Wednesday 26 May	
07.00	Leave Dhaka for Mymensingh (Rural Development Programme)—visit to projects
19.00	Back to Hotel



ANNEX II (Cont.)

Thursday 27 May	Open
19.00	Reception at Sheraton hosted by WFP Representative for the Delegation, Government officials, donor representatives, UN officials, NGO representatives and senior WFP/Bangladesh staff
Friday 28 May	
07.00	Leave Dhaka for Tangali (VGD Programme)— Visit to projects
19.00	Back to hotel
Saturday 29 May	
10.00–10.30	Debriefing with the Secretary, ERD (Sheraton)
10.45–11.30	Press Conference at Sheraton, attended by Minister of Finance

