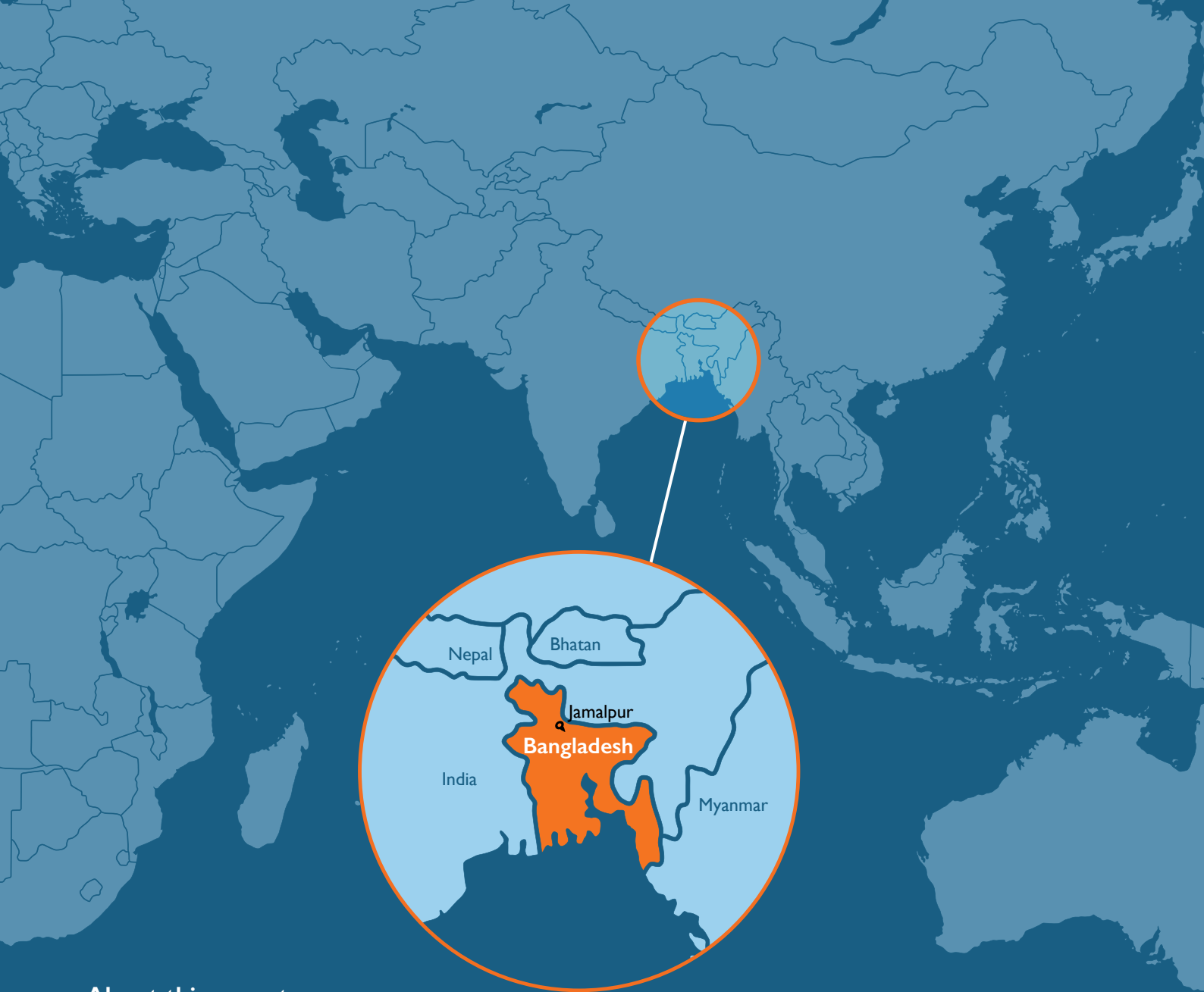




# Nutrition Sensitive Value Chains for Smallholder Farmers (NSVC), Bangladesh

Progress Brief: 2017-2023



## About this report

This brief summarises the results from a mid-term review of World Vision Bangladesh's NSVC project, completed by Data Management Aid. Additional data analysis was completed by Vincent Potier (WVA) and Julie Imron (external consultant). This Progress Brief was prepared by Julie Imron, Ellie Wong and Vincent Potier. For more information, contact Stephen Asim R. Chatterjee, NSVC Project Manager, World Vision Bangladesh ([asimchatterjee@wvi.org](mailto:asimchatterjee@wvi.org)) or Vincent Potier, Evidence Building Advisor - World Vision Australia ([Vincent.potier@worldvision.com.au](mailto:Vincent.potier@worldvision.com.au)).

The Nutrition Sensitive Value Chains for Smallholder Farmers (NSVC) project in Bangladesh was supported by the Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program.

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Cover photo caption: Khushi Begom, an Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) participant, has utilised the learning from cooking demonstrations in her everyday life. Since then, she has noticed a significant improvement in her daughter's eating habits and general health.

## Context

Despite making significant progress in poverty reduction in recent years, Bangladesh still has about 22 million people living below the poverty line. Close to 50% of Bangladesh's population is primarily employed in agriculture, with more than 70% of its land dedicated to growing crops. Poverty is concentrated in rural areas with a large majority of the country's poor dependent on agriculture. Bangladesh's rural poor still practice subsistence agriculture. As of 2017, 36.3% of women participate in the labour force compared to 81.7% of men, with the majority of these employed women (over

90%) working in the informal sector. Women often have vulnerable jobs in cottage industries, which is often underpaid or unpaid work. There are high gender wage gaps, and this is especially the case in agriculture.<sup>1</sup> Bangladesh also has one of the highest rates of child stunting and malnutrition in the world (36% of children under 5 years old are stunted),<sup>2</sup> and poor nutrition outcomes are closely linked to gender equality. Due to harmful social norms, women and girls often eat "last and less", with 46% of women of reproductive age suffering from anaemia.<sup>3</sup>



The project seeks to address interrelated challenges of low incomes and poverty, malnutrition and gender inequality. NSVC's Formative Research (2018) highlighted harmful prevailing social norms in Jamalpur like: "If women go to agricultural land, crop production will be less."

- 1 United Nations Development Program. 2019. 'Remove the policy and social barriers in women's economic empowerment to achieve SDGs', UNDP Bangladesh, April 25, available at: [https://www.bd.undp.org/content/bangladesh/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2019/04/25/Remove\\_barriers\\_in\\_womens\\_economic\\_empowerment.html](https://www.bd.undp.org/content/bangladesh/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2019/04/25/Remove_barriers_in_womens_economic_empowerment.html)
- 2 Shoba Suri. 2019. "Breakout Nation: The Nutrition Transformation of Bangladesh", ORF Issue Brief No. 323, Observer Research Foundation, available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/breakout-nation-the-nutrition-transformation-of-bangladesh-57408/>
- 3 Osmani, S. R. et. al. 2016. *Strategic review of food security and nutrition in Bangladesh*. World Food Program, available online: <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/strategic-review-food-security-and-nutrition-bangladesh>

## Project overview

To address the interrelated challenges of poverty and malnutrition, World Vision has implemented the Nutrition Sensitive Value Chains for Smallholder Farmers (NSVC) project (2017-2023) in Jamalpur, one of the least developed regions in north east Bangladesh. With the support of the Australian Government's NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP), NSVC is a 6-year USD 5.78 million livelihoods project implemented by World Vision Bangladesh, with co-funding from World Vision Australia and the Australian people.

**The project goal is to improve economic empowerment and nutrition of 20,000 smallholder male and female farmers and their households in Jamalpur district,** with a particular focus on women's economic empowerment (WEE). World Vision Bangladesh is working with its partner *Unnayan Sangha* (a local NGO) to cover a total of three sub-districts located in Jamalpur: Jamalpur Sadar, Islampur and Dewanganj. World Vision Australia provides technical support related to inclusive Market System Development (iMSD), WEE, monitoring and evaluation.

NSVC sought to respond to the global evidence linked to nutrition sensitive agriculture (NSA) on effective pathways to nutrition. Without compromising the sector goals, NSA aims to *"maximise the impact of nutrition outcomes for the poor, while minimising the unintended negative nutrition consequences of agricultural interventions and policies on the poor, especially women and young children"*.<sup>4</sup> There are several pathways: income, production, market, and women's empowerment. At the project's start, global and Bangladesh-specific evidence highlighted that women's empowerment was the pathway with the strongest evidence base. A 2018 evidence review of NSA programs found a strong correlation between nutrition outcomes, women's empowerment, and nutrition behaviour change, including working on household nutrition not solely on child stunting.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the project prioritised income and women's empowerment pathways, complemented with a focus on the production of nutritious foods at the household level.

### Outcome 1: Male and female farmers increase their income

Achieved through:

- the formation of 800 producer groups (PGs) with targeted efforts to improve their ability to

commercially produce five target crops: chili, rice, maize, eggplant, leafy vegetables

- linkage with input and output market actors, with a specific focus on collective buying and selling as an economic lever for the poor
- technical training and linkages with public actors, including agri-extension, to improve technical skills
- increased know-how in financial literacy, business management and disaster risk mitigation practices
- equitable participation of men and women in value chain activities through targeted selection of crops and interventions and the promotion of women entrepreneurs.

### Outcome 2: Farmer households improve utilisation and consumption of nutritious food

Achieved through:

- increased availability of self-grown nutritious crops (via home gardens) and purchased foods (via income generation under Outcome 1)
- increased understanding of nutrition, especially linked to dietary diversity and food groups
- equitable food distribution between men, women, boys and girls via education sessions and campaigns
- more (nutritious) food fed to younger children and pregnant women via Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) group sessions.

### Outcome 3: Farmer households have increased gender equitable relations

Achieved through:

- the facilitation of MenCare awareness sessions for MenCare "Changemaker" Groups selected from PGs to promote women's agency, including more gender equitable decision making linked to income generation and nutrition and more equitable distribution of the care work
- increased acceptance of gender equality by the community via the promotion of local male champions, women role models and large-scale community events such as folk songs.

4 DFAT. 2016. DFAT Operational Guidance in Nutrition Sensitive Agriculture. Available online: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/operational-guidance-note-nutrition-sensitive-agriculture.pdf>

5 Nutrition-sensitive agriculture: What have we learned so far? Global Food Review. Global Food Security Volume 17, June 2018, Pages 128-153 International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), USA, Oxford Policy Management, Oxford, UK

## Evaluation purpose and methodology

After three years of implementation, World Vision Bangladesh commissioned a Bangladeshi research consulting firm, Data Management Aid, to perform a mid-term evaluation (MTE) of the NSVC project. A review of the report and additional data analysis were later conducted by Julie Imron, an external M&E consultant, and World Vision Australia. Results were reviewed in light of services provided by the project and compared to baseline data. This enabled World Vision Bangladesh to re-calibrate interventions for the remainder of the project's life. The study followed a mixed method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, including:

- 37 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with PGs (22 female-only and 15 male-only): 6 for the rice value

chain, 5 for chili, 4 for eggplant, 4 for maize, 6 for leafy vegetables and 12 for specific interventions such as IYCF and MenCare

- 710 project beneficiary interviews
- 7 mini-FGDs with women entrepreneurs, community sales agents (CSAs), and community facilitators; and
- 20 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with market actors, project staff, partners, and government stakeholders.

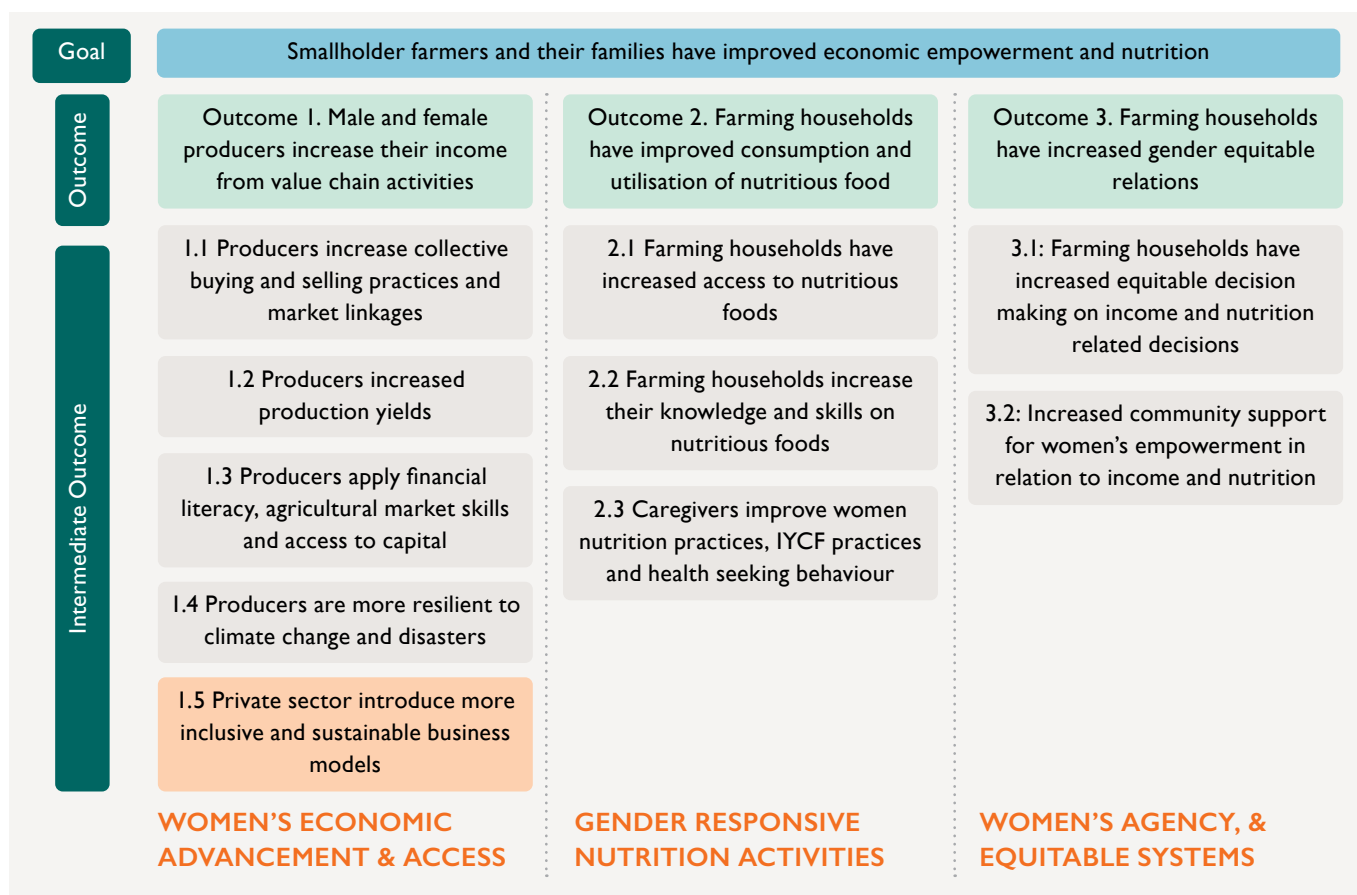
Data analysis, including testing of statistical significance, was conducted using SPSS 20 and findings were reported in comparison to baseline levels. Qualitative data was used to provide a more in-depth understanding of specific issues and to triangulate quantitative results.



“We used to cultivate local chili but the crop production was quite low. Now, since we can cultivate hybrid chili, the yield is two thirds times higher than before.”

The NSVC project is focusing on value chains where there are opportunities for both women and men to benefit. Chili was identified as a value chain with good opportunities for women as it can be grown close to home, there are lower input costs, and women were already working in post-harvest processing.

## Project technical approaches



Overall, NSVC seeks to promote a holistic approach to economic empowerment and nutrition sensitive agriculture. The project implements a holistic approach to realising WEE domains through a “twin-track” design. Outcome 1 focuses on women's economic advancement and access to opportunities and services via mainstreaming, while Outcome 3 focuses on targeted approaches to women's agency, including decision making, manageable workloads, and equitable systems, including social norms.

**Outcome 1:** This outcome implements World Vision's iMSD approach, which works with markets and households to improve the market system, helping to ensure people living in poverty can access, participate in and benefit from a stronger local economy. It is critical to work through market actors on gender inclusive and resilient business models and practices that productively engage poor women and men as producers, employees and consumers. However, recognising people at different poverty levels require different support, World Vision also integrates household interventions. NSVC worked at both these levels.

- *Market focused:* Responding to the lack of access to quality agri-inputs, new partnerships were developed between private companies and PGs, including agri-

input suppliers, especially those promoting hybrid seeds, such as Petrochem Bangladesh Limited and Ispahani Agro. The project also engaged the agri-extension services to provide training to PGs on improved production and post-harvest technologies. The project established CSAs to play an intermediary role between producers and market actors, such as selling agri-inputs to PGs.

- *Household focused:* NSVC also provided training on commercial farming and gender inclusive financial literacy, as well as establishing collection point centres. This has not only helped to create economies of scale with vulnerable groups to strengthen their engagement with market actors in a trade relationship, but also increased access to new skills and opportunities, including how to engage with market actors and how to increase production yields.

The project aims to achieve WEE under Outcome 1 through an intentional approach to promoting women's economic advancement and access.

- **Focus on value chains where there are opportunities and lower entry barriers for women.** For example, in addition to strong market demand and profitability potential, chili has strong WEE potential given women were already working and

accepted in this value chain. Women could more easily participate in chili given lower input costs and the ability to work close to home. NSVC has supported these women to take up new roles in the market system, including marketing. The project has also piloted a women's entrepreneurship initiative such as tillage, irrigation, threshing (service market) and mobile seed selling (input market) opportunities.

- **Focus on making the business case for women.**

In World Vision's assessments in 2018, World Vision found common negative perceptions in communities such as: "If women go to agricultural land, crop production will be less". Women's work in post-harvest processing was considered "easy", despite providing an important value addition to the final selling price of crops. The project has worked to make women visible and value their work. NSVC engaged agri-input companies on opportunities to expand their customer base in Jamalpur by highlighting that women can be good customers. Women's husbands were also engaged in the process.

**Outcome 2:** This outcome houses the project's nutrition specific interventions. Outcome 1 crops were not selected based on their nutritional value. Instead, the project is increasing access to nutritious food via micro-nutrient home gardens, with a specific focus on the dietary needs of women and girls. Furthermore, it is working to increase demand for nutritious food via nutrition awareness activities. There is a specific focus on improving Infant Young Child Feeding (IYCF) practices via IYCF groups. Given the inter-relationship between nutrition and water, hygiene and sanitation (WASH), there is also emphasis on integrating sessions on hygiene

for households. Outcome 2 mainstreamed messages on the need for gender equitable food distribution between women/girls and men/boys, highlighting the need for nutritious food for pregnant women given the links to newborn health.

**Outcome 3:** This outcome is focused on gender transformative programming, which seeks to address the root causes of gender inequality by redressing the unequal power dynamics and structures that serve to reinforce gendered inequalities, replacing them with equitable alternatives.

- The project has partnered with [Promundo](#) to engage men and boys as allies in WEE. Promundo has worked with World Vision to adapt Promundo's [MenCare](#)<sup>6</sup> approach, which seeks to promote gender equitable relations at the household level, including joint decision making and men taking on a greater share of the care work. The model trains couples over a 14-week period. World Vision and Promundo worked to adapt MenCare into a NSVC "Changemaker" version – which is the first time the curriculum has been adapted for an iMSD project and PGs. Specific adaptations looked at targeting decision making linked to income and nutrition (such as control of income and food distribution), as well as including mothers-in-law in some sessions.
- Recognising the importance of working at the community and household level, the MenCare model has been complemented by community level gender awareness raising activities, including folk songs, male champions, women role models and community dialogues.



NSVC has focused on both production and employment opportunities in the value chain like tilling. With women's work in agriculture often going under-valued in their communities, the project has sought to make women visible and value their work.

6 MenCare Program P has been adapted in at least 18 countries around the world. Results from a [randomized controlled trial \(RCT\)](#) of Program P in Rwanda, in 2018, reveal powerful impacts on health and violence outcomes.

## Summary of Findings

### Goal: Smallholder farmers and their families have improved economic empowerment and nutrition

The evaluation results demonstrate an improvement in beneficiaries' economic empowerment:

- 74.1% of the respondents reported income increase since they became members of PGs.
- This, in turn, supports children's well-being, as 65.8% of households are now able to afford health costs when their children are sick, compared to only 45.1% at baseline.

- Smallholder farmers are shifting to more rewarding and influential roles within agricultural value chains (such as dealing with buyers or selling at the market); for example, 90.4% for green leafy vegetable producers (5.6% at baseline) or 69.6% of chili producers (8.2% at baseline).

Improvement in nutrition is also striking among the younger children: 93.3% of children under 2 years old received the minimum required meals or more in the last 24 hours, versus 23.3% at baseline. Furthermore, 48.6% of children received at least the minimum dietary diversity, versus 12.7% at baseline.

### Outcome I: Male and female smallholder farmers increase their income

Indicators	Baseline value (2018)	Midline value (2020)
Proportion of household earning income from target crops	57.1%	76.1%
Reported median household income from sale of target crops (among those earning income)	10,500 BDT (approx. 172 AUD)	17,500 BDT (approx. 287 AUD)
Median monthly income from women entrepreneurs' small businesses	No income from own business prior to intervention	7,119 BDT (approx. 117 AUD)
Producers who sold products or purchased inputs/ services collectively in the past 12 months	Sold: 1.7% Purchased: 1.3%	Sold: 19.6% Purchased: 23.0%
Producers who adopted improved agricultural practices in the past 12 months for target crops	Rice: 24.3% Chili: 35.2%	Rice: 54.1% Chili: 70.4%
Producers who adopted non-structural disaster mitigation farming practices <sup>7</sup>	4+ practices: 1.7% 1-3 practices: 37.5%	4+ practices: 3.9% 1-3 practices: 67.6%
Producers who report using the financial accounting system promoted by the project	5.5%	8.9%

On average, project beneficiaries (63.5% women) have managed to increase incomes from target crops by 67% from baseline to midline. The MTE revealed that investing in farming business using savings or loans from an MFI or saving group jumped from 12.2% at baseline to 38%. This was made possible through a combination of collective buying and selling, aggregation, improved productivity, and market linkages.

By increasing farmers' knowledge in improved agricultural practices and facilitating access to quality inputs and services, the project has enabled outstanding increases in yields. To achieve this, the project partnered, formally and informally, with several agri-input companies. Having signed an MoU with NSVC, Petrochem has invested a lot of time to promote the use of improved inputs among farmers (demo plots, video shows, etc.), which has resulted in increased sales. This indicates the progress that

#### Chili value chain

The project selected chili as one of the target crops for several reasons:

1. Women's high involvement during processing
2. High commercial potential
3. Potential to improve agricultural practices.

Results at MTE are impressive:

- Adoption of improved agricultural practices (e.g. hybrid seed) increased by 100%
- Productivity increased by 197%
- Income from sales increased by 192%.

<sup>7</sup> Non-structural disaster mitigation farming practices are practices that can be applied by farmers to reduce the impact of climatic hazards on crops. These include resistant varieties, crop protection, soil preparation, etc.



the project has been able to achieve in making the business case for inclusion of marginal farmers, especially women, with its private sector partners through the creation of “share value”.

The project promoted collective buying and selling as a way to increase economies of scale, with substantial progress made from baseline to midline. The project has also successfully increased the ability of PGs to engage in markets, either directly by themselves or collectively as part of a group via identified collectors or CSAs.

The project also focused on financial literacy and business training. Overall, a significant proportion of households reported having savings (41.3%), which can be used for household needs (such as income generating activities, consumption, health or education). Producer groups do have written “business plans” where they record the group’s purchases and sales, though this does not seem to be translating down to individual producer group business plans. The MTE revealed that only 8.9% of the respondents use the financial accounting system promoted by the project (i.e., have a business plan and keep records).

The project has a strong focus on women’s economic empowerment, with Outcome 1 focusing on women’s economic advancement and access to opportunities, resources, and services. The strategy to WEE has been to work on value chain crops with low entry barriers to women’s participation, and more opportunities for women (e.g., chili and leafy green vegetables). At the time of the MTE, 63.5% of the PG members were women, and 61.8% of executive committee positions are held by women. Yet, some challenges remain. The opinions of women within PGs are still insufficiently recognised as women lack confidence and some feel less supported by other group members. Furthermore, male-only PGs were much more

likely to engage in collective sales (74.2%) than female-only PGs (21.9%), highlighting a clear distinction in the way different types of groups are functioning.

The project also sought to maximise opportunities for WEE by looking at business and service provision in the value chain. NSVC identified 28 women with entrepreneurial profiles willing to engage in agro-based micro-businesses such as mobile seed selling and service delivery (tillage, threshing, etc.). In their first 4 to 5 months of operation (two cropping seasons), they were able to generate an average monthly income of 7,119 BDT (equivalent to an annual income of 32,036 BDT, significantly more than Bangladesh’s annual minimum wage – 18,000 BDT).

In relation to climate change, there are still too few producers affected by natural disasters that have reported accessing timely and quality early warning information (8.1% vs. 5.4% at baseline). And the adoption of disaster-mitigation farming practices also remains under project expectations. Similarly, the uptake of financial literacy skills remains very limited, even though the planning of expenses is already being practised at group level.

**“Before joining the PGs, we didn’t have much involvement in crop cultivation. Only husbands used to buy inputs and sell the produce. Now we are also selling and buying sometimes. Before, we didn’t have any idea about collective buying and selling system.”**

FGD with women involved in eggplant cultivation

## Outcome 2: Farmer households have improved utilisation and consumption of nutritious foods

Indicators	Baseline value (2018)	Midline value (2020)
Average household dietary diversity score	7.8	7.0
Average frequency of household consumption of flesh food in the past 7 days	4.2	4.8
Knows what is the minimum number of food groups that should be consumed in a day to remain healthy	40.2%	76.1%
Agrees that women and girls should have a diverse diet, the same as men and boys.	No data	77.6%
Women who increase food consumption during most recent pregnancy	43.4%	56.3%
Mothers who report four or more antenatal visits while they were pregnant with their youngest child	13.2%	22.8%
Parents/caregivers with appropriate handwashing behaviour (5 critical times)	No data	20.6%

Outcome 2 sought to increase both the demand and supply of nutritious foods for producer groups. On one hand, access to self-grown nutritious foods was severely impacted in 2020 by prolonged floods that devastated most farmers' home gardens and rice fields, resulting in a low household dietary diversity score at the time of data collection. On the other hand, increased incomes are allowing farmers to purchase more expensive foods such as flesh foods.

In parallel, demand for healthier diets and balanced nutrition for men, women, boys and girls was fostered via education sessions and key nutritional messages addressing gender-based food discrimination. Results could already be observed as little difference was seen between boys' and girls' dietary diversity, while pregnant women reported consuming more food. Yet, inequitable food distribution remains a concern in a lot of families, as 22.4% of the respondents still did not agree that women and girls should have the same dietary diversity as men and boys.

Considering the significant challenges with stunting in Bangladesh, the project established 233 IYCF groups for households with children under 2 years old. While women report more frequent antenatal care visits, and

children are taken to health facilities more often when required (from 19.9% to 26.5% of households), levels at midline are still low and will need to increase by the end of the project. Similarly, handwashing practices with soap at five critical times and the proper treatment of diarrhoea are very limited.

Surprisingly, no significant difference between members of IYCF groups and others could be observed for most indicators related to nutrition and health (in general or specifically for mothers and children). Influence from other projects and government interventions could possibly explain this, as well as knowledge sharing between IYCF and non-IYCF groups.

**“Before I used to give my husband the head of the fish or two pieces of meat as he worked outside, earned money and did hard work. But now all of us share the food equally among every member of the house.”**

IYCF group member, Jamalpur Sadar

### Outcome 3: Farmer households have increased gender equitable relations

Indicators	Baseline value (2018)	Midline value (2020)
Report increased participation of men in domestic activities		M: 64.5% W: 54.7%
Report satisfaction over time use	M: 11.9% W: 17.6%	M: 27.5% W: 26.9%
Report high decision-making power over IGA related expenses	M: 37.0% W: 8.4%	M: 56.9% W: 6.0%
Report high decision-making power over non-IGA related expenses	M: 23.5% W: 14.0%	M: 34.6% W: 16.2%
Report frequent incidents of domestic violence in their community	12.1%	9.2%
Approve free mobility of female family members	M: 39.8% W: 50.0%	M: 49.8% W: 51.3%
Agree that:		
• husband allows wife to become involved in IGAs	M: 59.7% W: 63.6%	M: 46.0% W: 66.3%
• he/she can make the decision on what is important for themselves (what to do, where to go, who to meet)	M: 51.9% W: 47.6%	M: 64.9% W: 56.3%
• looking after house and children is a woman's responsibility	55.6%	60.0%
• it is okay for a man to beat his wife if she disobeys him	42.1%	51.5%
• it is okay for a man to beat his wife if she fails to perform her domestic duties	33.9%	39.4%

Under Outcome 3, the project focused on women's agency, including decision making, manageable workloads, well-being, and equitable systems, including social norms. This completed the focus on women's economic advancement and access under Outcome 1 and the key messages linked to gender equitable food distribution under Outcome 2.

While the project is being implemented in a challenging context, with several widely held prevailing social norms that are harmful to women, some interesting progress could already be observed against the envisioned outcomes.

Firstly, there was progress linked to women's agency, especially manageable workloads. Support from men in domestic activity and childcare has increased. Women and men also reported higher satisfaction over their time use.

However, there seemed to be mixed progress linked to women's decision making. While decision-making power increased for both women and men, men reported having significantly more decision-making power than women in all domains assessed: IGA and non-IGA related expenses, as well as saving and borrowing money. However, results under Outcome 2 also reveal more gender equitable practices related to food distribution between women/men and girls/boys.

It appears like there are also mixed results linked to women's well-being. One indicator suggested that the number of domestic violence incidents perceived by the community was decreasing. On the other hand, social norms linked to the acceptability of domestic violence persisted.

The project did have several indicators seeking to measure equitable systems, particularly social norms, which paint a complex picture, at times contradictory to progress made in other indicators linked to agency. There was an increase in men's approval or acceptance of women's free mobility; however, despite progress on perceived male engagement in care work, there was an increase in those who agreed "looking after house and children is a woman's responsibility". While there was limited progress on decision-making indicators, there appears to be progress on norms linked to decision making, with an increase in both women and men who said they "agree that he/she can make the decision on what is important for themselves."

The divergence between quantitative and qualitative results was recurrent. Indeed, impact from the MenCare approach was not obvious when looking at the household survey results (only two out of eight indicators show statistical difference between MenCare and non-MenCare groups: indicators on decision making

related to IGA and non-IGA expenses), even though qualitative feedback on learnings and changes was overall very positive and encouraging. Currently, there are 358 MenCare groups established, with a total 438 expected to be completed by the end of the project. The project has been seeking to promote key messages from MenCare for all the PG members by integrating key sessions into the financial literacy training and MenCare couples visiting PG meetings.

**"After coming from the field, if I see that my wife is busy with some other work, then I myself collect water from the well and serve my own food."**

Male FGD participant from Dewanganj

**"We have learned a lot from MenCare trainings, especially that it is our right to receive good behaviour from our husbands."**

Female FGD participant from Jamalpur Sadar

## Sustainability

The project is progressively laying the necessary groundwork to ensure the sustainability of its interventions. This is evidenced across the three outcomes.

Under Outcome 1, the project is engaging public and private market actors to ensure sustainable outcomes beyond the life of the project. For example, the project has facilitated linkages between the private sector and PGs via intermediaries, i.e., CSAs. It is envisioned that the relationships are sustainable as both parties find a mutual benefit in their commercial relationship (e.g., increase sales of agri-inputs, increase access to quality agri-inputs to increase production). CSAs help PGs to engage in collective buying and selling and can help ensure market linkages continue. However, these CSAs are currently not profitable which will require further attention from the project. Furthermore, the capacity of PGs themselves needs to be strong to be able to continue to operate after the life of the project. On the other hand, beneficiaries still appeared to be very vulnerable to climatic hazards (crops damaged twice by floods during the first half of the project) which could affect the sustainability of the results achieved under Outcome 1.

Under Outcome 2, the project staff facilitated education sessions within IYCF groups. Yet, interaction with the public health services remains limited which questions the sustainability of the project's intervention in this sector. Despite this, participants in FGDs expressed a lot of interest in the nutrition education sessions and indicated they would continue to apply what they learned. They also intend to continue vegetable production and poultry rearing after the project life as it helps diversify their families' meals.

Under Outcome 3, there has been a focus on engaging both households and communities. Given the challenges linked to social norms, the engagement of mothers-in-law within MenCare groups is also prioritised. However, other influential roles in the community, such as religious, community and government leaders, could be strengthened further.

### COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic swept Bangladesh during the third year of the NSVC project, leading to a two month countrywide lockdown (March to May 2020), followed by restrictions on public movement for three months (June to August 2020). While most participants of FGDs didn't express their concern regarding economic losses related to the pandemic, the results from individual interviews told a different story: 75.6% stated they earned less than usual, 12.4% had to sell their produce at lower prices, 10.8% were unable to perform all required farming activities,

and 9.9% could not sell their produce due to markets being closed. Rapid response from the project in the form of time-bound cash, vouchers and hygiene kits, was therefore needed and undertaken to overcome this situation, leading to a resumption of activities in a COVID-safe way.

### Disability Inclusion

A disability assessment was conducted to assess barriers of inclusion encountered by people with disabilities (PWD). As a result, the project adopted best practices to ensure the 4.7% of beneficiaries with disabilities are prioritised when it comes to participation in project activities. Access to facilities, distribution of inputs and grants, awareness and capacity-building events were organised, considering the specific needs of PWDs. A disability-disaggregated database is also used to track the number of PWDs participating in the project.

### Environment

The NSVC project encourages the use of biological and mechanical pest control such as bird perching or pheromone traps. However, with the focus on Integrated Pest Management still limited, there is little evidence to offer at this stage regarding any positive impacts to the environment. This is an area where the project may want to improve, especially as farmers become more commercially oriented, and may increase the use of chemical agro-inputs.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

In just about two years of implementation, the NSVC project has realised strong outcomes in income generation, nutrition, and gender equality. There has been remarkable progress in terms of increased incomes for women and men via improved agricultural production, collective buying and selling, and market linkages. Improved nutrition for infants, young children and pregnant women is also noticeable. While there is strong progress on women's economic advancement, and access to opportunities, services and resources, progress linked to women's agency and equitable systems including social norms showed mixed results. For example, while there was progress on women's decision making due to increased participation in leadership positions under Outcome 2, there was less progress on decision making at the household level. Harmful social norms remain a key constraint.

Based on the findings, the mid-term evaluation proposes several recommendations to guide the second half of the project.

### Outcome 1

- **Establish market linkages** at different stages, initially creating formal business relationships with the input dealers involving company representatives. Establish formal partnerships with companies that have a diverse range of seeds and links to CSAs.
- **Increase collaboration with Department of Agricultural Extension** and ensure more visits by sub-assistant agriculture officers to PGs.
- **Build the capacity of community sales agents** in improved market facilitation, business management and agricultural techniques.
- **Financial literacy and business skills:** Need to revisit the training curriculum to ensure it is adequate for beneficiaries' capacities and needs, especially in establishing a functional financial accounting system. It should also ensure post-training monitoring of PGs.
- **Savings Strategy:** Establish savings strategies within PGs to enable investment in crops and sustain PGs.
- **Producer Groups:** Build the capacity of PG leaders in relation to leadership and facilitation skills so that they can take care of their own groups without the help of the project.
- **Performance of female-only PGs:** Disaggregate PG business monitoring data by type of group to identify potential gaps. Improve collective activities and functioning of female-only PGs.

- **Adaptation to climate change:** Promote climate-smart agricultural practices, including introduction of climate resilient and short cycle varieties of different crops, and adjusting cropping calendars. Foster adoption of disaster mitigation practices, especially against prolonged floods.

### Outcome 2

- **Continuous education sessions on equitable food distribution and on nutritional needs** of pregnant women and children under 2 years old and exclusive breastfeeding for children under 6 months within IYCF groups.
- **Alternative technology for home gardens and micro-nutrient gardens** to help families produce even during heavy rains/floods.
- **Continue addressing basic hygiene and health seeking behaviours within IYCF groups**, such as handwashing at critical times, treatment of diarrhoea for children under 5 years old, and the importance of seeking treatment in health facilities for sick children.
- **Raise awareness on importance of ANC (4 or more visits)** to increase the number of visits.

### Outcome 3

- **Reinforce the impact from the MenCare approach** by conducting refresher MenCare courses for PGs, identifying successful MenCare groups to act as ambassadors in the community, involving key local stakeholders (religious leaders, local leaders) to become MenCare promoters.
- **Extensive community meetings** to raise awareness on 1) the importance of a household approach, where women and men work together on their livelihoods and share the decision making and the benefits; 2) prevention of domestic violence to 'do no harm'.
- **Monitoring MenCare sessions:** The project should strengthen the monitoring mechanism to further monitor effective implementation of the MenCare sessions.
- **Improve qualitative monitoring of project activities and their outcomes on women's empowerment.** For instance, it would help to better understand the barriers to women's involvement in IGAs, with specific attention to distribution of decision-making power and workload between husband and wife.



The NSVC project seeks to promote holistic economic empowerment outcomes for women and men for the well-being of their children. Key to the approach to benefiting smallholder farming families is a focus on interrelated empowerment domains: economic advancement, access, agency and equitable systems, including social norms.

## When you commit to humanity amazing things can happen!

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