

Assessing the Open Market Sale (OMS) as an Urban Food Safety Net in Bangladesh: Policy and Practice Gaps

*Journal of Asian
Social Science Research*
2025, Vol. 7, No. 2: 293-320
<https://cassr.net/jassr/>
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Abstract

Public food distribution programmes are central to social protection efforts, yet their performance often falls short of their stated goals. This study evaluates the service quality of the Open Market Sale (OMS) programme, which provides subsidised food grains to low-income urban residents, and examines how institutional and political factors shape its outcomes. Using a qualitative design informed by critical realism, the research draws on 20 in-depth interviews with purposefully selected beneficiaries and 10 key informant interviews with programme administrators, dealers and community leaders, complemented by documentary analysis of policy and evaluation reports. The findings show that, although OMS offers short-term price relief, its service quality is undermined by long queues, uncertain access, inadequate ration sizes, poor food quality and weak responsiveness to complaints. Targeting errors, institutional capacity gaps, chronic underfunding and pervasive corruption, including political influence over dealer selection and outlet locations, further distort benefit distribution and generate significant leakages and losses along the supply chain. The study concludes that the programme only partially protects food-insecure households and requires substantial reform in both design and implementation. Empirically, it contributes fine-grained evidence on how front-line practices and local power relations shape the

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performance of food-based safety nets. Policy implications include the need to strengthen data-driven targeting, increase transparency and accountability, invest in storage and monitoring systems, and integrate OMS within a broader, more coherent social protection strategy.

Keywords

Food security, public service delivery, safety nets, service quality, social protection, food program, Open Market Sale

Introduction

The right to food, recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), affirms that all individuals are entitled to adequate nourishment and freedom from hunger regardless of social identity or status (Ayoola 2021). For states, this is not only a moral and legal commitment but also a practical necessity: food insecurity can undermine productivity and economic growth, and in severe cases trigger social and political instability (Rahaman et al. 2021). Bangladesh's post-independence trajectory reflects this tension. Since 1971, the country has made notable progress in food production and poverty reduction (Junayed, Mubasshir, and Sen 2025). Yet food insecurity persists, particularly as rising food prices have increasingly outpaced the purchasing power of low-income households. This vulnerability is intensified by rapid population growth, political instability, recurring natural disasters, and global price shocks that affect rice and other essential crops (Islam et al. 2022; Azimi and Rahman 2024). In this context, safety net programs remain essential for protecting poor and at-risk populations and for advancing the right to food in practical terms (Panezai et al. 2022; Osmani 2021).

Globally, social safety net programs have long been used to mitigate hunger and economic shocks, from early historical precedents to contemporary systems of social protection and empowerment (Ferdous and Ullah 2023). Modern approaches

typically encompass social insurance, social assistance, and labor market or pension-related measures, with social assistance often delivered through food subsidies, workfare, or conditional transfers (Ghorpade, Franco Restrepo, and Castellanos Rodriguez 2024). International experiences, from the United States' large-scale food assistance model to consumer price subsidy programs in parts of the Middle East and targeted voucher systems in Europe, demonstrate the enduring policy appeal of interventions that stabilize household access to basic food items (Gentilini 2022; Arafat 2024; Bardazzi et al. 2024). Still, the literature also cautions that design quality, targeting accuracy, governance, and accountability largely determine whether such programs can deliver intended outcomes.

Bangladesh has steadily expanded its safety net architecture over the last three decades, with the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) 2015 introducing a lifecycle approach that emphasizes a long-term, risk-responsive vision (Kaiser, Uddin, and Yaqub 2023). Among food-focused interventions, Open Market Sale (OMS) has played a particularly visible role. Initiated in the 1980s, OMS sought to stabilize food prices and provide subsidized staples for vulnerable groups (Asma, Misu, and Islam 2023). Over time, it has gained renewed importance in urban areas where poverty and rapid urbanization have increased the demand for affordable food support (Hossain and Simi 2024). These directions align with the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (NFNSP) 2020 and broader commitments linked to the SDGs (Hossain, Hossain, and Tortajada 2024). Conceptually, the program also speaks to the widely used four-dimensional framework of food security, namely availability, access, utilization, and stability over time, first consolidated in global policy discussions such as the World Food Summit (Al-Zabir et al. 2021).

However, the state of the art on Bangladesh's safety nets consistently points to implementation gaps, especially around delivery efficiency and governance. Studies highlight persistent weaknesses such as limited resources, inadequate monitoring, weak

grievance mechanisms, administrative complexity, and high risks of leakages, mistargeting, and political capture (Kaiser, Uddin, and Yaqub 2023; Ahmed et al. 2025). Political instability, policy fragmentation, and budget constraints further complicate program performance (Rahman, Hossain, and Rahaman 2025). Beneficiary perspectives echo these concerns, with dissatisfaction often linked to monitoring practices and operational weaknesses that reduce trust in program fairness and reliability (Ali et al. 2023; Salam, Masrur, and Bhuiyan 2024). While OMS implementation has expanded widely covering hundreds of upazilas and operating through a large distribution network (Mustafa et al. 2024), the literature tends to discuss these issues at the level of the broader SSNP landscape. As a result, detailed, program-specific evidence on how OMS service delivery functions in practice, particularly in urban settings, remains limited.

This study responds to that gap by focusing on the service delivery mechanism of the OMS program in urban Bangladesh. The research problem guiding this article is the evident mismatch between OMS's stated objectives, namely price stabilization and accessible subsidized staples for the vulnerable, and the operational challenges that may constrain its service quality and beneficiary satisfaction. Accordingly, the study aims to (1) examine how OMS service delivery is organized and experienced in urban contexts; (2) identify key bottlenecks related to access, transparency, monitoring, and food grain quality; and (3) analyze beneficiary assessments of the program's effectiveness in addressing urban food insecurity.

By centering OMS as a distinct case rather than a generic component of the safety net system, this article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it adds nuanced evidence on the everyday governance and service-quality dimensions of a major food subsidy program. Second, it strengthens the policy discussion on how urbanization reshapes vulnerability and alters the operational demands placed on food-based safety nets. Third, it offers practical

insights for reform aimed at improving transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in OMS delivery. In doing so, the study seeks to support more adaptive and beneficiary-centered approaches to safeguarding the right to food in Bangladesh's rapidly evolving urban landscape.

This study employs the SERVQUAL model to assess the service quality of Bangladesh's Open Market Sale (OMS) program. Developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), SERVQUAL is a widely used framework for evaluating service quality and capturing changes within service processes (Chen et al. 2022). It has been applied across public service settings to identify performance gaps and inform policy improvements. Given that social safety net programs such as OMS aim to protect economically disadvantaged groups, assessing their service performance through SERVQUAL is appropriate and necessary (Reyes et al. 2023).

SERVQUAL measures service quality across five dimensions: reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy, and responsiveness. In this study, these dimensions are defined as (1) Reliability: the ability to deliver services accurately and consistently; (2) Assurance: the competence and professionalism of providers and their ability to build trust; (3) Tangibility: the physical condition and visibility of facilities, products, and equipment; (4) Empathy: the extent of individualized attention and care given to beneficiaries; and (5) Responsiveness: the promptness and willingness to provide services (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985)

Beneficiary's levels of satisfaction are significantly influenced by the quality of the services they receive specially in the public service programme (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985). Moreover, it is vital for policymakers to possess the knowledge of effectively quantifying the beneficiary's viewpoint in order to gain a deeper understanding of their requirements and subsequently fulfill them as quality of service may boost satisfaction, profitability, cost savings, loyalty, and retention of the beneficiaries (Saad 2022). This

model is used by Talukder et al. (2024) to evaluate the standard of eco-tourism services, Rumi et al. (2021) to assess patients' satisfaction with the service quality provided by Upazila Health Complex, and Hoque et al. (2023) to evaluate education of higher education.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design, using a critical realist approach to understanding the service quality of the OMS program, focusing on gaining unique insights into the citizens' perceptions of its operation. Dhaka, located in the central region of Bangladesh, serves as the capital of the country. The capital city has the highest number of urban populations living below the poverty line, and they are considered the main beneficiaries of the OMS program. Therefore, the researchers selected Dhaka as the study area purposively. Data were collected between February 2022- May 2022.

Primary data were collected using purposive sampling technique which ensures representation from diverse stakeholders including beneficiaries, program administrator, local vendors, and community leaders. It also allows us to identify participants who have experience regarding the service of OMS program. This study was supposed to conduct 30 in-depth interviews (IDI), but after taking 20 in-depth interviews (IDI) the findings came in a similar pattern. So, 20 in-depth interviews were taken through open-ended questions and prompted to elicit detailed responses regarding program effectiveness, accessibility, affordability, and customer satisfaction from the beneficiaries. Also, five government officials from ministry of food, and 10 other crucial stakeholders (journalists, academicians, local Leader, NGO activists) were interviewed as Key Informant Interview (KII). Average time of conversation for each interview was 30-40 mins. Two respondents disagree to continue interview due to time constraints which is almost 5% of the total respondents. Four additional participants were interviewed to check the validity of the information and explore emerging themes. Data were gathered from several sources, including government

offices, selling locations, and community centers. This approach aims to enhance accessibility for participants and foster open and constructive conversations pertaining to service delivery of the program. Data collectors discouraged nonparticipant's presence for ensuring smooth participation of the respondents and privacy of information. Audio recording and field notes were utilized with the consent of the participants to capture the actual interview. Field notes were provided to the participants for checking the accuracy of the information and offer additional information. This study also analyzed content related to social safety net program and open market sale (OMS) which provide valuable insights into various aspects of socio-economic policies, government interventions, market dynamics, and their impacts on different stakeholders from government reports, published journal articles, NGO reports and credible website sources etc.

Thematic analysis had been used for analyzing qualitative data gathered through the interviews. The interview transcripts were systematically examined for recurrent themes, patterns, and categories as part of this procedure. Text fragments had been labeled by data coding, and these codes had been arranged into broader themes to finally draw the findings of the study. Ethical considerations were fully maintained throughout the entire data collection process, and every effort was made to ensure the anonymity of the respondents. The research was granted ethical clearance by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Exeter (ERC/07/2022).

Results

This section presents the empirical findings on the design and operation of the OMS program, its service quality, targeting performance, institutional and political economy factors, and leakages in the supply chain. The results are drawn from in-depth interviews with beneficiaries (IDIs), key informant interviews with government officials and community leaders (KIIs), and a review of relevant policy and program documents.

The OMS program is a government-funded initiative intended to provide essential food grains to underprivileged populations. The implementation follows a multi-stage process: (1) Program approval and budgeting: the government approves the program and allocates a budget. The assessment team identifies the highest-priced products in the market, and the Directorate of Food estimates the required budget and invites bidders; (2) Procurement and storage: the Food Directorate proposes partner stakeholders to co-run the program and contracts rural suppliers through the Upazila Food Office. The Upazila Food Office collects and tests the crops, which are then stored and transferred by the Food Directorate to the Food Ministry's warehouses; (3) Dealer selection and registration: the program then moves to the distribution stage through local dealers. Dealers must register using a 300 TK non-judicial stamp and are formally authorized to receive and sell OMS food grains; and 4) Local distribution: dealers receive food grains and distribute them through fixed shops, trucks, and temporary outlets. In practice, OMS trucks are deployed mainly in underdeveloped urban areas, where poor households line up to purchase subsidized food. This formal chain, from procurement to local distribution, provides the institutional framework within which the subsequent service quality, targeting, and leakage issues occur.

Service Quality and Access

The study finds that the service quality of the OMS program is below the expectations of beneficiaries. Beneficiaries consistently reported long queues in front of OMS trucks. Many respondents described arriving early in the morning and still failing to secure food grains if they joined the queue late. As one beneficiary put it:

The OMS trucks are evenly dispersed in the underdeveloped section of the urban area ... however, there is no guarantee of obtaining products from there if you arrive late in the queue in the early hours of the morning (Participant 8, personal communication, March 2022).

For daily wage earners and those with unstable incomes, the time spent queuing represents a significant burden. The quantity of goods available per household is reported as insufficient, especially for larger families. Many households continue to depend on regular market purchases, which undermines the protective function of the program. Some respondents reported having to reduce consumption or buy food on credit as a participant said:

We are a big family, and the amount of goods we get from the OMS truck isn't enough for us. There is huge corruption in the overall OMS distribution channel... Local politicians have a lot of power over what we get and how it gets delivered (Participant 5, personal communication, 10 March 2022).

Beneficiaries also described a lack of individual care and attention from officials involved in the OMS cycle. They perceived weak oversight from warehousing through to distribution, delays in program delivery, and slow responses to complaints. A government official acknowledged both the government's role and the constraints:

We are diligently striving to mitigate inflation and cater to the underprivileged segment of the urban population. With numerous constraints in the field, we consistently monitor the market and intervene as needed to dismantle the corrupt syndicate operating in the local market (Participant 2, personal communication, 8 February 2022).

Together, these findings suggest that the program provides only temporary relief. Its service quality and reliability still fall short of meeting the needs of many urban poor.

Targeting Performance

The study finds substantial targeting errors in the OMS program. Targeting in principle should ensure that only eligible, poor households receive subsidized food. However, respondents frequently reported that better-off or politically connected individuals gain access, while some of the poorest are excluded. These patterns correspond to both

inclusion errors (non-poor receiving benefits) and exclusion errors (eligible poor being left out).

Beneficiaries and community leaders repeatedly mentioned corruption, favouritism, and the influence of local elites in determining who benefits from the program. One government official highlighted that tackling corruption involves multiple actors:

The control of corruption is not a single-handed job of the government rather it's a team effort for all the important stakeholders in the market. Awareness of the consumers and strict monitoring by the government will be the key to ensure equitable distribution of OMS products to the citizens who actually need this social protection (Participant 8, personal communication, 5 April 2022).

These reports suggest that the program's targeting mechanisms are not functioning as intended. This issue is particularly evident in urban Dhaka.

Institutional Factors and Funding Constraints

The findings show that institutional weaknesses and budget constraints significantly shape OMS coverage and performance. The Food Planning and Monitoring Unit (FPMU), the specialized research unit of the Directorate of Food, has not conducted extensive research on OMS coverage needs, program duration, or operational constraints. Respondents indicated that the unit lacks accurate information on the number of people eligible for OMS or on the specific implementation difficulties faced on the ground.

Government allocations for OMS are typically made on the basis of macroeconomic conditions and budgetary assumptions rather than detailed needs assessments. In years with larger budgets, OMS activities and store numbers expand; in leaner years, coverage is scaled back. Beneficiaries and local leaders reported that many eligible households are excluded when supplies are reduced.

Community leaders described a strong “syndicate” that influences market operations and program implementation:

A strong syndicate is running the whole market and also controls the supply and distribution of food grains through OMS. Government officials, Ministers and businessmen create a power triangle among them and control fate of the millions of poor people in Bangladesh (Participant 7, personal communication, 15 April 2022).

Respondents also stressed that OMS, despite being one of the more extensive urban social protection instruments, suffers from insufficient funding and supply relative to demand. Many poor households for whom the program was originally designed are unable to benefit because stock is limited and competition is high.

Political Economy of Implementation

The study reveals that local political dynamics play a critical role in dealer appointments and shop locations. Formally, OMS operations at the local level are managed by committees composed mainly of government officials, who are legally expected to act neutrally. In practice, interviewees reported that many committee members are affiliated with the ruling party and respond to local political leaders’ preferences.

Official guidelines recommend appointing experienced businesspeople or those with designated shops as OMS dealers. However, respondents indicated that dealers are often local political figures or individuals recommended by them. Complaints about dealers’ misconduct, such as reducing opening hours, under-weighting products, or diverting goods, are typically managed informally through political mediation rather than formal sanctions.

Shop locations were perceived as being chosen based on political considerations rather than poverty or need. Beneficiaries felt that areas loyal to the ruling party were more likely to host OMS outlets. As a result, some poor neighbourhoods remain underserved.

Many beneficiaries reported being reluctant to complain about irregularities due to fear of retaliation from politically powerful dealers:

Local people get easily frightened to complain against the local distributor as most of them are politically powerful and can do harm to us. There are projected a number in the food truck to call for remedy but mostly the number is found off or out of reach (Participant 4, personal communication, 09 May 2022)

These findings underscore the influence of political patronage. They show how it shapes the way the program is delivered.

Leakage, Food quality, and Loss of Food Grains

The study identifies significant leakages and quality problems in the OMS food grain supply chain. Most beneficiaries expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of OMS food grains. Many reported that grains were old, discoloured, or of inferior quality, even though they purchased them because of lower prices. Respondents noted that food grains are often stored for long periods in warehouses with structural deficiencies, which likely contributes to quality deterioration. A participant said:

The government distributors provide low quality products or delay in loading the trucks whom they didn't get any illegal money. Sometimes they also cheat in weighting the food grains and we had to bear the loss of that evil deed (Participant 10, personal communication, 14 April 2022).

Officially, food grains allocated to PFDS programs are tested at the Institute of Food Science and Technology (IFST) of the Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR), including physical and chemical analyses. However, according to dealers and officials, many of these standards are not consistently upheld in practice at later stages of the distribution chain.

The study finds evidence, based on beneficiary accounts and key informant interviews, that some dealers underweigh food at

point of sale and divert a portion of subsidized grains to the black market at higher prices. Manual or faulty weighing scales facilitate this practice.

Previous research cited by respondents indicates that dealers often receive less than their officially authorized quotas from depots, and that the cumulative effect of such practices is that beneficiaries receive less than their entitled share. It was noted that for every taka spent by the government on PFDS, only about 0.88 taka effectively reaches intended beneficiaries.

A government official emphasized that some monitoring mechanisms exist:

We immediately take actions from the central offices whenever we get news of irregularities at local distribution or in the local food storage. A computerized system is developed here so that we can easily track, monitor and resolve the grievances as soon as possible (Participant 5, personal communication, 3 May 2022).

Nevertheless, at the beneficiary level, perceptions of leakages and unfair practices remain widespread. Many beneficiaries continue to believe that such problems are common.

Taken together, the results show that The OMS program follows a clear formal chain from procurement to local distribution, but significant implementation gaps occur along this chain. Service quality and access are compromised by long queues, limited quantities, and a lack of responsiveness. Targeting errors are common, with both exclusion of eligible poor and inclusion of better-off or politically connected groups.

Institutional weaknesses and budget-driven coverage fluctuations limit the program's ability to respond to actual needs. Local political economy strongly shapes dealer appointments and shop locations, often to the disadvantage of the poorest. Leakages and quality problems in the supply chain erode the real value of benefits and undermine trust in the program.

Discussion

This section interprets the findings in light of existing literature, synthesizes the main themes, and discusses theoretical and practical implications as well as limitations and directions for future research.

Service Quality, Access, and Adequacy

The results show that OMS provides only partial and often unreliable protection for urban poor households. Long queues, uncertainty of obtaining food, and insufficient quantities per household limit the program's effectiveness. This resonates with previous studies that have highlighted the controversial operational performance of food transfer and public distribution programs, including in Bangladesh (e.g., Mustafa et al., 2024; Hossain & Simi 2024).

Theoretically, these findings speak to the concept of “effective coverage” in social protection: it is not enough to have nominal access; the benefit must be adequate, predictable, and timely. In practice, the need to spend hours queuing undermines the program's value for daily wage earners, who may lose income while waiting. The insufficiency of rations relative to household size forces families to continue relying on regular markets, sometimes through debt, which weakens the program's ability to reduce food insecurity.

This suggests that future policy design should not only aim to expand the number of OMS outlets but also to adjust ration sizes, distribution schedules, and queuing arrangements to better match the realities of urban livelihoods.

Targeting, Institutions, and Political Economy

The evidence of inclusion and exclusion errors mirrors extensive empirical work documenting targeting failures in the OMS program and other food-based safety net schemes in Bangladesh (Hebbar, Muhit, & Marzi 2021; Rashid et al. 2024). Our study adds qualitative depth by showing how corruption and nepotism are experienced at the local level and how beneficiaries understand them.

Institutionally, the limited analytical capacity of the FPMU and the reliance on assumption-based budgeting reinforce these targeting problems (Ahmed, Islam, & Mujeri 2021). Without accurate data on the number and characteristics of eligible urban poor, coverage decisions are inevitably rough and vulnerable to political manipulation.

The results also highlight the political economy of implementation. Local committees that should function as neutral administrative bodies appear deeply embedded in partisan networks. This corroborates studies arguing that social protection programs in Bangladesh are often shaped by local patron–client relationships and electoral incentives (e.g., Begum et al. 2021; Rahman & Ferdousee 2023). When shop locations and dealer appointments are influenced by electoral considerations rather than poverty mapping, program benefits are skewed toward politically strategic constituencies, and many of the poorest are left out.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings underscore classic principal–agent problems in public service delivery: central authorities may design relatively sound policies, but local agents operating under weak monitoring and strong political pressures reallocate benefits to their own networks. Improving OMS targeting thus requires not only better data and formulas, but also stronger accountability mechanisms and insulation from partisan interference.

Leakage, Food Quality, and Trust in Social Protection

Our findings on leakage and food quality are consistent with earlier work documenting losses and diversions across public food distribution systems in South Asia (Banerjee et al. 2024; Hossain and Simi 2024; Ayoola 2021; Tabassum 2016; Chowdhury et al. 2024). Although formal testing procedures by IFST and BCSIR exist, implementation breaks down further along the chain. Grains are stored for long periods in substandard warehouses; dealers reportedly under-weigh rations and divert part of the stock to black

markets; and beneficiaries often receive less than their official entitlements, both in quantity and quality.

The estimate that only 0.88 taka of every taka spent effectively reaches beneficiaries illustrates the scale of these leakages. Such losses have at least three implications: First, welfare impact: the protective effect of OMS against food insecurity is diminished, especially when poor households also bear the cost of poor-quality food; second, efficiency: scarce public resources are wasted, raising the fiscal cost per unit of effective benefit; and third, trust and legitimacy: repeated experiences of under-weighting and poor quality can erode trust in government programs, making households less willing to participate or to cooperate with authorities.

In policy terms, the findings reinforce calls in the literature to strengthen monitoring systems, modernize storage facilities, and introduce more transparent weighing and tracking mechanisms (e.g., digital scales, e-receipts, computerized tracking of stock movements).

Funding Constraints and Competing Social Protection Priorities

Consistent with Grosh et al. (2022), our study confirms that OMS operates under chronic funding shortages. While the program is one of the most extensive urban social protection interventions, its budget remains insufficient relative to needs, leading to rationing and overcrowding. Earlier work by Mahmuda (2015) showed high levels of beneficiary dissatisfaction with both targeting and quantity, and our findings echo these concerns.

At the same time, OMS coexists with multiple other social protection schemes, none of which is fully funded. This reinforces the argument by Rahaman et al. (2021) and Ferdous & Ullah (2023) that better prioritization, improved targeting, and reduction of leakages could significantly increase the real impact of existing budgets. Our results support these conclusions and suggest that, unless the structural leakages and political capture of OMS are addressed, simply increasing the budget will yield diminishing returns.

Practical Implications

Drawing together the above themes, several practical implications emerge as follows.

First, improve targeting and coverage planning: develop a robust urban poverty database to guide OMS coverage and ration size decisions; use transparent criteria for beneficiary eligibility and dealer selection, with mechanisms for public verification and appeals; and strengthen accountability and reduce political capture: introduce clear, enforceable sanctions for dealers and officials involved in malpractice; separate technical oversight from partisan influence by including independent members (e.g., civil society representatives) in local committees; and enhance citizen voice through accessible complaints channels that are actually monitored and acted upon.

Second, enhance service quality and adequacy: adjust ration sizes for larger households or introduce a per-capita allocation where administratively feasible; improve scheduling and crowd management at trucks and shops, potentially through token systems or staggered distribution times.

Third, reduce leakages and improve food quality: upgrade storage infrastructure and adhere to stricter warehouse management standards; mandate digital weighing scales and real-time recording of transactions to minimize under-weighing; and extend quality assurance beyond initial testing to periodic checks at intermediate and final distribution points;

Fourth, integrate OMS within a broader urban social protection strategy: position OMS as part of a coordinated package that may include cash transfers, digital vouchers, and employment programs, thereby enhancing resilience rather than providing only short-term relief.

Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

First, the geographic scope is limited to Dhaka, even though the OMS program operates nationwide. Service quality, political dynamics, and corruption may differ in rural areas and smaller cities, which limits the generalizability of the results.

Second, the study relies heavily on self-reported data from beneficiaries, government officials, and community leaders. These accounts can be affected by recall bias, personal interests, or social desirability. While triangulation across different respondent groups was used to mitigate this, the potential for bias remains.

Third, the analysis is primarily qualitative. The integration of robust quantitative methods, such as household surveys, regression models, or econometric analysis of administrative data, could strengthen the validity of the findings and help estimate the magnitude of targeting errors and leakages more precisely.

Fourth, data access constraints limited the ability to verify some claims. Restricted access to official documents, detailed administrative data, and high-ranking officials made it difficult to fully document the extent of corruption, leakage, and mismanagement.

Finally, the study was conducted over a relatively short period, which limits the capacity to capture seasonal variations in OMS operations or the longer-term effects of policy adjustments.

Future research could address these limitations by (1) extending the analysis to rural and secondary urban areas; (2) combining qualitative insights with large-scale quantitative surveys and administrative data; (3) conducting longitudinal or panel studies to track changes in program performance over time; and (4) experimenting with or evaluating specific reforms (e.g., digital targeting, e-vouchers, or new complaint mechanisms) to identify scalable solutions.

By tackling these gaps, subsequent studies can provide a more comprehensive and rigorous understanding of OMS and similar programs. This will help identify how these initiatives can more effectively protect the food security and dignity of the urban poor.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how far the Open Market Sale (OMS) program fulfils its objective of providing subsidized food grains to disadvantaged urban residents, and to identify the key service quality, targeting, institutional, and political–economic factors that shape its performance. The findings show that, despite its pro-poor intent, the program falls short of its goals. Beneficiaries face long queues, uncertain access, and rations that are too small for many households. Targeting is weakened by both inclusion and exclusion errors, limited data on eligible recipients, and institutional shortcomings, so that subsidies often reach better-off or politically connected groups rather than the poorest. Political influence further distorts implementation through biased dealer selection, strategic shop placement, and the protection of corrupt actors, while leakages and poor storage conditions reduce both the quality and quantity of grains that ultimately reach beneficiaries. Chronic underfunding and fluctuating budget allocations constrain coverage in the face of high demand. Taken together, these results indicate that the current OMS system only partially protects urban poor households from food insecurity and requires substantial redesign if it is to achieve its stated objectives.

These conclusions should, however, be read in light of several limitations and used to guide future research. The study focuses on Dhaka and relies mainly on qualitative, self-reported data collected over a relatively short period, with constrained access to detailed administrative records and high-level decision-makers. As a result, the patterns observed may not fully capture regional variation, seasonal dynamics, or the precise scale of targeting errors and leakages. Future research could address these gaps by extending the analysis to rural and secondary urban areas, combining qualitative insights with large-scale household surveys and administrative data, and employing rigorous statistical or econometric methods to quantify program performance and welfare impacts. Longitudinal studies following the same communities across seasons and policy

cycles, as well as in-depth institutional and political ethnographies of implementing agencies and local committees, would further clarify how incentives, informal networks, and power relations shape everyday decisions in the OMS system. Such work would provide a stronger empirical basis for designing and testing concrete reforms, such as improved poverty mapping, digital targeting, transparent dealer selection, enhanced grievance mechanisms, and upgraded storage and monitoring systems, so that OMS and related social protection programs can more reliably reach and protect those they are intended to serve.

Acknowledgement

Authors would like to thank Md Limon Bhuiyan and Md. Akram Hossain for helping in proofreading and referencing process in manuscript development.

Conflicts of Interest of each author/ contributor

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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