

Centre for International Health

**Neonatal Deaths in a Rural Area of Bangladesh: An Assessment of
Causes, Predictors and Health Care Seeking Using Verbal Autopsy**

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**This thesis is presented for the Degree of
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DECLARATION

“To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.”

Signed and Dated Declaration: _____

ABSTRACT

Poor neonatal health is a major contributor to mortality in under-five children in developing countries, accounting for more than two thirds of all deaths in the first year of life, and for about half of all deaths in children under-five. A major constraint to effective neonatal survival programmes in developing countries, such as Bangladesh, has been the lack of accurate epidemiological data on neonatal deaths. The current study aimed to (1) describe the causes of neonatal death in a rural sub-district of Bangladesh; (2) describe associated birth and obstetric characteristics of neonatal deaths; (3) describe the patterns of care-seeking practices during the fatal neonatal illness episode; (4) compare deaths and care-seeking patterns between the Maternal and Child Health and Family Planning (MCH-FP) service area of the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B) and the adjoining government service area; (5) identify the predictors of neonatal deaths; and (6) assess the accuracy in assigning causes of death from verbal autopsy data by comparing physician review with medical assistant review and computer-based algorithm.

This study was carried out during 2003 and 2004 in a demographic surveillance area in the Matlab rural sub-district of eastern Bangladesh. The surveillance system covers a population of ~220,000 and is maintained by ICDDR,B. Community health workers (CHRW) visit each household monthly to record vital demographic, morbidity and health care seeking data. Half of the surveillance population receives MCH-FP services from ICDDR,B (ICDDR,B service area) and the remaining half receives standard government services (government service area).

Verbal autopsies, consisting of retrospective interviews with caregivers of recently deceased neonates about the circumstances leading to their death, were carried out by the staff trained in verbal autopsy. The interviews were held with the mothers of all deceased neonates (n=365) who had died during 2003 and 2004. The verbal autopsy data were then independently reviewed by three physicians and a medical assistant to assign a direct cause of death and an originating cause of death. A computer algorithm using evidence-based clinical signs and/or symptoms was also

used for assigning cause of death. Agreement of at least two of the three physicians was used to determine direct causes of death. Diagnostic accuracy and reliability of medical assistant and algorithm in assigning direct cause of death were evaluated by comparing with the diagnoses provided by the physicians. Linked epidemiological data on all live births in the Matlab area during 2003 and 2004 were also analysed.

There were 365 deaths among the 11,291 live births recorded during 2003 and 2004, yielding a neonatal mortality rate (NMR) of 32.3 per 1000 live births. The NMR was lower in the ICDDR,B area compared to the government area. Of all neonatal deaths, 37% occurred within 24 hours, 76% within three days, 84% within seven days, and the remaining 16% between eight and 28 days of birth.

Five causes accounted for 85% of the deaths: birth asphyxia (45%), prematurity/low birth weight (LBW) (15%), sepsis/meningitis (12%), respiratory distress syndrome (7%), and pneumonia (6%). The majority of neonatal death cases were low birth weight (56%) and singleton births (82%). There were some differences in the distribution of causes of death between the ICDDR,B and government areas, the most notable being prematurity/LBW which was twice as common in the ICDDR,B area than in government area.

Strikingly, more than a third (37%) of the deceased neonates had not been taken to any source of health care for the fatal illness episode, and another quarter (25%) sought care from traditional healers or from unqualified practitioners. Only 37% sought modern biomedical care from a doctor or paramedic.

Among the 365 neonatal deaths, a much higher proportion (48.5%) of the deliveries occurred at a health facility in the ICDDR,B area, compared to 15.3% in the government area. Vaginal delivery was the commonest mode of delivery in both areas, with a higher proportion of caesarean sections in the ICDDR,B area (9.3%) compared with the comparison government area (1.6%).

The verbal autopsy method appears to be highly effective in that agreement on a direct cause of death was reached by at least two physicians in 339 (93%) cases. Using the physician review as the gold standard, the medical assistant review of

causes of death demonstrated a sensitivity ranging from 47.7% to 83.5% depending on the cause of death, a specificity ranging from 93.0% to 97.5%, and kappa values ranging from 0.51 to 0.77. Similarly, depending on the cause of death, algorithm demonstrated a sensitivity ranging from 35.6% to 77.4%, specificity ranging from 86.8% to 95.9%, and kappa values ranging from 0.24 to 0.69.

Independent predictors of neonatal mortality included lack of maternal education, single parity, and lack of antenatal care (ANC) during the last trimester. Male sex of the neonate, multiple births, and facility-based delivery were also significantly associated with excess neonatal mortality.

In conclusion, the study highlighted the central role of birth asphyxia, prematurity/LBW, and sepsis/meningitis in neonatal deaths, indicating that the core of interventional packages to prevent neonatal deaths in rural Bangladesh should incorporate these causes. Community awareness about early care seeking, skilled attendance at delivery, and training and integration into mainstream services of traditional/unqualified care practitioners are some of the approaches needed to reduce neonatal mortality further. Improving access to female education and antenatal care would also have beneficial effects on neonatal survival.

This study revealed the value of both review by medical assistant and computer-based algorithm to reliably assign major causes of neonatal deaths from verbal autopsy data. Further research could be undertaken to develop optimal combinations of the medical assistant and hierarchical algorithm for assigning major causes of death in low-resource settings such as Matlab.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	vi
Table of Contents	x
List of Tables	xvii
List of Figures	xxi
List of Appendices	xxii
List of Acronyms	xxiii
Map of Bangladesh	xxiv
CHAPTER 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Brief Background of the Research Context	6
1.3 Purpose/Goal of the Study	8
1.3.1 Specific objectives.....	8
1.4 Significance of the Study	8
1.5 Definition of Terms.....	9
1.6 Organization of Thesis	11
1.6.1 Chapter One.....	11
1.6.2 Chapter Two	12
1.6.3 Chapter Three	12
1.6.4 Chapter Four	12
1.6.5 Chapter Five	12
1.6.6 Chapter Six	12
1.6.7 Chapter Seven.....	13
CHAPTER 2: Literature Review.....	14
2.1 Introduction	14
2.2 Childhood Death Globally	15
2.3 The State of Neonatal Health Globally	16
2.4 Regional Perspectives of Neonatal Death	17

2.5	Millennium Development Goals (MDG).....	19
2.5.1	Fourth millennium development goal (MDG-4) and its progress.....	19
2.5.2	Global trends in child mortality.....	20
2.6	Causes of Under-five and Neonatal Death.....	21
2.7	Perinatal and Neonatal Mortality in Bangladesh	23
2.8	Causes of Neonatal Death and Use of VA in Bangladesh	25
2.9	Risk Factors Associated with Neonatal Death.....	31
2.9.1	Maternal factors.....	31
2.9.2	Newborn characteristics	35
2.9.3	Other risk factors	37
2.10	Maternal and Neonatal Health Care Seeking	39
2.11	What is Verbal Autopsy?	47
2.11.1	Evolution of VA at Matlab	48
2.11.2	Limitations in VA Method at Matlab prior to 2003	48
2.11.3	Factors influencing VA-based causes of death	49
2.11.4	Respondents.....	52
2.11.5	Recall period.....	52
2.11.6	Language and piloting.....	52
2.11.7	Structure of VA questionnaire.....	53
2.12	Methods for Assigning Causes of Death.....	54
2.12.1	Medics/physician review	54
2.12.2	Algorithms.....	57
2.13	Validation of Verbal Autopsy	61
2.13.1	Validation studies from developing countries.....	61
2.13.2	Comparison of methods for interpreting same VA interviews.....	65
2.14	Interventions for Reducing Perinatal and Neonatal Mortality	67
2.15	Interventions Targeted Through Mothers	69
2.15.1	Maternal education/schooling	69
2.15.2	Nutrition intervention in pregnancy	69
2.15.3	Micronutrient supplementation during pregnancy	71
2.15.4	Maternal immunization and management of infection.....	72
2.15.5	Antenatal care.....	72
2.15.6	Reproductive services during delivery	73
2.16	Intervention Through Neonates.....	76

2.16.1	Newborn resuscitation	76
2.16.2	Interventions against infection	79
2.16.3	Low birth weight and hypothermia management.....	81
2.16.4	Breastfeeding.....	82
2.17	Maternal and Child Health Care Programme.....	84
CHAPTER 3: Methodology		86
3.1	Introduction	86
3.2	Study Setting	86
3.2.1	Geography and study population.....	86
3.2.2	Research infrastructure.....	87
3.2.3	Health services in study population.....	88
3.3	Design of the Study	90
3.3.1	Sample size.....	91
3.4	Data Collection Instruments.....	91
3.4.1	Birth registration forms	93
3.4.2	Socio-demographic information.....	93
3.5	Staffing, Training, and Piloting of VA Questionnaire	93
3.5.1	Community Health Research Worker (CHRW).....	93
3.5.2	Recruitment of interviewers for verbal autopsy	93
3.6	Data Collection Procedure	94
3.7	Procedure for Assigning Cause of Death.....	95
3.7.1	Physician and medical assistant (MA) review	95
3.7.2	Expert (clinical) algorithms.....	95
3.8	Data Entry and Management.....	99
3.8.1	Management for verbal autopsy data	99
3.8.2	Management of HDSS database.....	100
3.9	Data Quality Control.....	101
3.10	Verbal Autopsy Data Analysis and Statistical Methods	101
3.10.1	Simple frequency statistics of neonatal death cases.....	101
3.10.2	Comparison of maternal and newborn's characteristics by service area.....	102
3.10.3	Health care.....	102
3.10.4	Cause of deaths and its differentials.....	102

3.10.5	Descriptive statistics on cause of death	103
3.10.6	Comparison of methods for assigning causes of death	103
3.11	Live Birth and Linked HDSS Variables Data Analysis	106
3.11.1	Descriptive statistic of individual variables	106
3.11.2	Bivariate and multivariate binary logistic regression.....	106
3.12	Model Statistics for Overall Results Fitting.....	108
3.13	Miscellaneous Data Management	108
3.14	Ethical Considerations	109
3.15	Data Storage	110

CHAPTER 4: Results - Neonatal Deaths, And Some Associated Factors And

Health Care.....	111	
4.1	Introduction	111
4.2	Relationship of Main Respondent to Deceased Neonate	111
4.3	Neonatal Death by Maternal Complications	112
4.4	Neonatal Signs and Symptoms During Fatal Illness Episode.....	113
4.5	Age at Neonatal Death	115
4.6	Early and Late Neonatal Mortality Rate by Service Area.....	115
4.7	Mode and Place of Delivery by Service Area.....	116
4.8	Neonatal Characteristics.....	117
4.8.1	Plurality of births.....	117
4.8.2	Birth weight.....	117
4.8.3	Death by low birth weight (LBW) and by service area.....	118
4.8.4	Perceived size of newborn at birth by service area	118
4.8.5	Relationship of perceived size with actual birth weight.....	119
4.9	Health Care Sought During Fatal Illness Episodes	120
4.9.1	Health care consultation by service areas.....	120
4.9.2	Health care consultation by sex of newborns.....	121
4.9.3	Health care consultation by early and late neonatal period.....	122
4.10	Multiple Consultations	123
4.10.1	Treatment visit by sex of newborn	123
4.10.2	Treatment visit by early and late neonatal period	123
4.10.3	Treatment visits by service area	124
4.11	Summary of the Chapter	124

CHAPTER 5: Results - Cause of Death and Comparison of the Three Methods for Assigning Cause	126
5.1 Introduction	126
Section One: Cause of Death.....	127
5.2 Cause of Death (at least two physicians agreed).....	127
5.3 Associations with Cause of Death.....	128
5.3.1 Causes of death by service area.....	128
5.3.2 Cause of death by sex of newborn.....	129
5.3.3 Cause of death by early and late neonatal period.....	130
5.4 Agreement between Physicians.....	131
Section Two: Comparison of Major Causes of Death by Methods	132
5.5 Comparison of Cause of Death According to Methods	132
5.5.1 Death due to prematurity/low birth weight	132
5.5.2 Death due to birth asphyxia.....	132
5.5.3 Death due to respiratory distress syndrome (RDS).....	133
5.5.4 Death due to pneumonia.....	133
5.5.5 Death due to meningitis/sepsis.....	133
5.6 Major Cause-specific Mortality Fraction of Methods.....	135
Section Three: Evaluation of Reliability and Accuracy	136
5.7 Agreement Between Three Physicians and MA	136
5.8 Reliability (kappa score) Between Individual Physician & MA.....	136
5.9 Reliability Between Individual Physician and Algorithm.....	137
5.10 Diagnostic Accuracy and Reliability of MA and Algorithm	138
5.10.1 Prematurity/low birth weight.....	139
5.10.2 Birth asphyxia.....	140
5.10.3 Respiratory distress syndrome (RDS).....	142
5.10.4 Pneumonia.....	143
5.10.5 Sepsis/Meningitis	145
5.11 Summary of Reliability and Accuracy Between Methods.....	147
5.12 Summary of the Chapter	148
CHAPTER 6: Results - Predictors of Neonatal Mortality	150
6.1 Introduction	150
6.2 Live Births and Incomplete Records.....	151

6.3	Neonatal Mortality Rate (NMR)	152
6.4	Analysis of Singleton Live Births	152
6.4.1	Covariates of mortality in singleton births	152
6.4.2	Maternal demographic covariates	153
6.4.3	Reproductive covariates	156
6.4.4	Birth characteristics	158
6.5	Coverage of ANC and Place of Delivery According to Service Area	160
6.6	NMR by Service Area According to ANC and Place of Delivery	160
6.7	Interaction Between ANC and Place of Delivery	161
6.8	Unadjusted Odds Ratios With or Without Interaction	162
6.9	Effects on Neonatal Mortality Without Interaction	162
6.10	Effects on Neonatal Mortality With Interaction	162
6.11	Adjusted Odds Ratios of Covariates for Singleton Births	163
6.11.1	Maternal demographic covariates	164
6.11.2	Maternal reproductive covariates	166
6.11.3	Birth characteristics	167
6.12	Important Significant Covariates	168
6.13	Adjusted Relationship Between ANC Use During Last Trimester and Place of Delivery	170
6.14	Model Statistics	171
6.14.1	Model statistic for singleton birth	171
6.15	Analysis of all Live Births	172
6.16	Crude Relationship Between use of ANC and Place of Delivery	173
6.17	Covariates of Mortality for all Live Births	174
6.18	Significant Predictors of Mortality	178
6.19	Adjusted Relationship Between Place of Delivery and ANC Last Trimester (final model)	180
6.20	Summary of the Chapter	180
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....		182
7.1	Discussion	182
7.1.1	Introduction	182
7.1.2	Neonatal Mortality Rate (NMR)	183
7.1.3	Neonatal deaths	183

7.1.4	Neonatal death according to place of birth and obstetric complications	184
7.1.5	Low birth weight	185
7.1.6	Multiple births	187
7.1.7	Health care seeking prior to death	187
7.1.8	Causes of neonatal death	190
7.1.9	Differentials of cause of death.....	193
7.1.10	Interventions to reduce perinatal deaths	195
7.1.11	Comparison of methods for assigning causes of death	198
7.1.12	Predictors of neonatal mortality among singleton births.....	201
7.1.13	Effect of other factors on neonatal mortality.....	205
7.1.14	Predictors of mortality among all live births.....	207
7.1.15	Study strengths	209
7.1.16	Study limitations.....	209
7.2	Conclusion, Recommendations and Future Research	211
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	217
	APPENDICES	251

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2-1.	Countries with largest numbers of neonatal death world wide	18
Table 2-2.	Required annual rate of reduction of child mortality to achieve MDG-4.....	21
Table 2-3.	Patterns of causes of death among neonates, various community-based studies, Bangladesh.....	29
Table 2-4.	Adjusted odds ratios for various risk factors for neonatal or perinatal death reported from population-based studies	33
Table 2-5.	Variation in health system coverage and capacity and functioning across settings with different NMRs (based on 192 countries)	41
Table 2-6.	Strengths and limitations of physician review and expert algorithm for coding VA.....	56
Table 2-7.	Strengths and limitations of data derived algorithm for coding VA	60
Table 2-8.	Evidence of efficacy for intervention at different time periods.....	68
Table 4-1.	Relationship of main respondent with deceased neonates.....	112
Table 4-2.	Experience of maternal complications during pregnancy or delivery.	113
Table 4-3.	Clinical signs and symptoms during the fatal neonatal illness episode	114
Table 4-4:	Maternal complications and signs of neonatal illnesses associated with neonatal death.	114
Table 4-5.	Early and late neonatal mortality by service area.....	116
Table 4-6.	Neonatal deaths by service area according to mode and place of delivery	117
Table 4-7.	Birth weight statistics of neonatal deaths by service area	118
Table 4-8.	Health care providers during neonatal fatal illness episodes.....	121
Table 4-9.	Health care providers according to sex of deceased neonate	122
Table 4-10.	Health care providers according to timing of death	123
Table 4-11.	Number of treatment visits according to timing of death, sex and service area.....	124
Table 5-1.	Physician assigned causes of neonatal death.....	128
Table 5-2.	Cause of death by service area in Matlab	129
Table 5-3.	Cause of death by sex of deceased neonate.....	130

Table 5-4.	Cause of death by early and late neonatal period	131
Table 5-5.	Agreement between physicians interpreting the same verbal autopsy reports	132
Table 5-6.	Major cause of death by different methods	134
Table 5-7.	Cause-specific mortality fraction of physician (at least two physicians agreed), medical assistant and algorithm approach	135
Table 5-8.	Agreement between MA and three physicians interpreting same VA reports	136
Table 5-9.	Agreement between physicians and MA for assigning cause of death	137
Table 5-10.	Agreement between individual physician and algorithm for assigning cause of death	138
Table 5-11.	Diagnostic accuracy and reliability of the medical assistant review compared to physician agreement for assigning cause of neonatal death as prematurity/LBW	139
Table 5-12.	Diagnostic accuracy and reliability of the algorithm compared to physician agreement for assigning cause of neonatal death as prematurity/LBW.....	140
Table 5-13.	Diagnostic accuracy and reliability of the medical assistant review compared to physician agreement for assigning cause of neonatal death as birth asphyxia	141
Table 5-14.	Diagnostic accuracy and reliability of the algorithm compared to physician agreement for assigning cause of neonatal death as birth asphyxia	141
Table 5-15.	Diagnostic accuracy and reliability of the medical assistant review compared to physician agreement for assigning cause of neonatal death as Respiratory Distress Syndrome (RDS).....	142
Table 5-16.	Diagnostic accuracy and reliability of algorithm approach compared to physician agreement for assigning cause of neonatal death as Respiratory Distress Syndrome (RDS).....	143
Table 5-17.	Diagnostic accuracy and reliability of the medical assistant review compared to physician agreement for assigning cause of neonatal death as pneumonia	144

Table 5-18. Diagnostic accuracy and reliability of the algorithm compared to physician agreement for assigning cause of neonatal death as pneumonia.....	144
Table 5-19. Diagnostic accuracy and reliability of the medical assistant review compared to physician agreement for assigning cause of neonatal death as sepsis/meningitis	145
Table 5-20. Diagnostic accuracy and reliability of the algorithm compared to physician agreement for assigning cause of neonatal death as sepsis/meningitis.....	146
Table 5-21. Summary diagnostic accuracy and reliability of medical assistant and algorithm compared to physician agreement for assigning major causes of death	147
Table 6-1. Completeness of live births and neonatal death records by plurality of births	151
Table 6-2. Neonatal mortality rate (NMR) by plurality of births	152
Table 6-3. Maternal demographic covariates of singleton live births and neonatal mortality.....	154
Table 6-4. Reproductive covariates of singleton live births and neonatal mortality	158
Table 6-5. Birth covariates of singleton live births and neonatal mortality.....	159
Table 6-6. Coverage of antenatal care (ANC) during last trimester and place of delivery according to service areas.....	160
Table 6-7: Neonatal mortality rate (NMR per thousand live births) by service area according to ANC during last trimester and place of delivery	161
Table 6-8. Unadjusted odds ratios (95%CI) of ANC use during the last trimester and place of delivery on the risk of neonatal death (singletons) with and without interaction	163
Table 6-9. Crude and adjusted odds ratios of maternal demographic covariates for neonatal mortality (full model).....	165
Table 6-10. Crude and adjusted odds ratios of maternal reproductive covariates for neonatal mortality (Full model cont'd).....	166
Table 6-11 Crude and adjusted odds ratios of birth covariates for neonatal mortality (Full model cont'd).....	167

Table 6-12. Crude and adjusted OR of selected covariates for predicting neonatal mortality.....	169
Table 6-13. Adjusted odds ratios (95%CI) of ANC use during the last trimester and place of delivery on the risks of neonatal death: without interaction (constraint model/final model)	170
Table 6-14. Statistics of logistic model for predicting neonatal mortality (singleton)	172
Table 6-15. Unadjusted odds ratios (95%CI) of ANC use during the last trimester and place of delivery on the risks of neonatal death (all live births): with and without interaction	174
Table 6-16. Adjusted odds ratios for maternal demographic covariates of neonatal mortality (all live births) in the full model	175
Table 6-17. Adjusted odds ratios for maternal reproductive covariates of neonatal mortality (all live births) in the full model	176
Table 6-18. Adjusted odds ratios for newborn birth covariates of neonatal mortality (all live births) in the full model	177
Table 6-19. Crude and adjusted odds ratios (OR) of covariates in final model for predicting neonatal mortality (standard logistic regression) in Matlab, Bangladesh.....	179
Table 6-20. Adjusted ^a -odds ratios (95%CI) of ANC use during the last trimester and place of delivery on the risk of neonatal death with and without interaction	180

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2-1. Proportion of deaths in children under-five years of age in the Southeast Asian (SEA) Region to global deaths, 1999	15
Figure 2-2. Relative contribution of neonatal mortality according to level of under-five mortality	16
Figure 2-3. Causes of under-5 and neonatal death (yearly average for 2000-03)....	22
Figure 2-4. Causes of neonatal death in WHO regions, estimates for 2000-2003...	23
Figure 2-5. VA process and factors influencing cause-specific mortality fractions	51
Figure 2-6. Methods for assigning cause of death using VA data	54
Figure 3-1. Map of Bangladesh and enlarged map of Matlab.	88
Figure 3-2. Flow chart showing hierarchical order of algorithm used for classifying cause of deaths	98
Figure 3-3. Estimation of agreement between two methods.....	104
Figure 3-4. Estimation of accuracy statistics between reference and evaluating method	105
Figure 4-1. Bar graph of age at death (day)	115
Figure 4-2: Distribution of newborn size at birth by service area	119
Figure 4-3: Relationship of perceived newborn size with actual birth weight	120

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A. Verbal Autopsy Questionnaire (Bangla)	242
Appendix B. Verbal Autopsy Questionnaire (English)	258
Appendix C. Curtin HREC Research Protocol Approval	266
Appendix D. ICDDR,B Research Protocol Approval.....	267

LIST OF ACRONYMS

Acronyms	Full name
ANC	Antenatal Care
BDHS	Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey
BDS	Bangladesh Demographic Survey
CHRW	Community Health Research Worker
CSMF	Cause-Specific Mortality Fraction
CI	Confidence Interval
DFID	Department for International Development
DSS	Demographic Surveillance System
FRA	Field Research Assistant
FWA	Family Welfare Assistant
FWV	Family Welfare Visitor
HDSS	Health and Demographic Surveillance System
ICDDR,B	International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases Research, Bangladesh
IMCI	Integrated Management of Childhood Illnesses
IMR	Infant Mortality Rate
INDEPTH	International Network of Field Sites with Continuous Demographic Evaluation and their Health
MA	Medical Assistant
MCH	Maternal and Child Health
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MHDSS	Matlab Health and Demographic Surveillance System
MMR	Maternal Mortality Ratio
NMR	Neonatal Mortality Rate
OR	Odds Ratio
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Programme
TBA	Traditional Birth Attendant
UNICEF	United Nation Children Emergency Fund
VA	Verbal Autopsy
VHW	Village Health Worker
WHO	World Health Organization

MAP OF BANGLADESH



Important Indicators of Bangladesh (NIPORT, 2003 & 2005)

- Population: 140 million
- Life Expectancy: 62
- Malnutrition: 52% of under-five children
- Infant Mortality Rate: 65/1000 live births
- Neonatal Mortality Rate: 41/1000 live births
- Under-Five Mortality Rate: 88/1000 live births
- Maternal Mortality Ratio: 320/100,000 live births
- Birth at home: 91%